

*The Rise and Fall (and Rise and Fall) of Transgender Narratives
in Mainstream American Comics*

Queer identity has floated in the periphery of American mass media as long as there has been an American mass media, and comic books are no exception to this phenomenon. Since their rise to popularity in the 1930's, comics have provided a medium for creators to explore matters of queer identity, occasionally allowing these matters to openly bob to the surface, more often forcing them to remain shrouded in implication and suggestion. The rise and fall of institutionalized self-censoring structures within the comics industry have played a large role in keeping queerness to the margins of mainstream comics, particularly when it has come to matters of transgender and gender-variant identities. Questions about gender identity were only lightly touched upon by the mainstream comics industry in the first half of the nineteenth century, and outright banned under the restrictive self-censorship of the Comics Codes of 1954 and 1971. After these regulations were lifted in 1989, some comics creators seized the opportunity to explore more complex issues of non-binary identity and gender as performance or a social construction, but over the past two decades the industry seems to have once again restricted its discussion of transgender and gender-variant characters, this time to firmly binary "coming out" narratives.

Comics remained largely unregulated for the first half of the twentieth century, the time period often coined the Golden Age of comics. This deregulation gave creators the freedom to experiment with characters of different backgrounds, characteristics, and even gender expressions. This era is home to multiple examples of cross-dressing

superheroes, such as Maxine “Ma” Hunkel, a.k.a. the Red Tornado, from *All-American Comics* in 1939, or Richard Stanton, a.k.a. Madame Fatal, from *Crack Comics* in 1940 (“A Little History...Part 1”).

A particularly interesting story from this era can be found in *Space Adventures* #7, published in July 1953. The first story from this issue, titled “Transformation,” tells the story of a group who flee to another planet to start a colony because Earth faces the imminent destruction of nuclear annihilation. Upon arrival, however, their rocket crashes, stranding the only two surviving crewmembers – Lars and Betty, who were previously lovers – miles apart. Convinced that he is the only survivor, Lars discovers among the wreckage some research materials on “Sex conversion ... the transformation of the human being from male to female of the human being by medical science” (Giordano 7). He decides to try to perform the procedure on himself – not for any reasons of personal identity, but simply to pass the time, as an “obstacle to insanity” (8). As Lars states, “Might provide an interesting experiment...take a long time to accomplish...but *I’ve got a lot of time!*” (7). His experiment is completely successful. The only problem evoked by this success occurs when the protagonist discovers that there was in fact a second survivor of the crash, and that survivor is Betty. Both characters are devastated at the news, presumably because, as two women, they are no longer able to be lovers, and furthermore are unable to have children to create a viable colony.

It is intriguing, from a modern perspective, to observe these characters’ attitudes towards what might be interpreted today as a transgender narrative: the protagonist undergoes the process solely out of boredom and scientific curiosity, and while Betty’s

reaction comes across as homophobic, it is not the actual transformation itself, but the loss of her previously male lover, that upsets her. But to assume that characters or readers from the 1950's would react in the same manner as audiences today falls prey to what Judith Halberstam describes as "presentism," the attempt to explain the past using the knowledge we possess in the present. Or, as David Halperin discussed in his work *Is There a History of Sexuality?*,

[Histories] of "sexuality" ... they are doomed to fail as *histories* (Foucault himself taught us that much), unless they also include as an essential part of their proper enterprise the task of demonstrating the historicity, conditions of emergence, modes of construction, and ideological contingencies of the very categories of analysis that undergird their own practice. (426)

Just as his words apply to any attempts at creating a cohesive history of sexuality, the same concepts apply to any attempt to trace a history of transgender identity in comics. Without taking into account the time period in which they were written and the medium in which they were told when studying stories such as "Transformation," it is impossible to understand the evolving attitudes towards transgender and non-binary narratives in comics.

"Transformation" may appear to a modern audience as a transgender narrative, but the year it was published, in 1953, was decades before the term *transgender* entered the popular lexicon in the 1990's, and still well before figures such as Virginia Prince began using terms such as *transgenderal* or *transgenderist* in the late 1960's and 1970's (Williams). Less than a year before, in December of 1952, newspapers across America ran the thrilling headline "EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY: OPERATIONS TRANSFORM BRONX YOUTH" to announce the story of Christine Jorgensen, who had undergone a series of extensive, experimental gender-reassignment surgeries

(*Christine Jorgenson*). While not the first patient to do so, her story became one of the most well known of her time. Jorgenson's narrative brought the concept of gender-reassignment to the forefront of the American imagination as an object of curiosity and speculation, from newspapers to comic books.

Unfortunately, the freedom to explore questions about gender via comics did not last indefinitely, and by the mid-1950's the Golden Age of comics came to an end. From their first debut, comics were targeted by educators, religious groups, civic organizations and mental health professionals for their alleged negative effects on the education, behavior and health of children. Perhaps the most famous figure in this counter-comics movement was the psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, who advocated for legislation regulating the content of comics and, after the publication of his book *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, was able to start a federal investigation by the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency on the effects of comics as mass media (Nyberg). The result of this investigation very closely mirrored the results of the pressure applied to the film industry by the Catholic Legion of Decency in the 1930's: while the cinematic Production Code Association was formed to self-censor the film industry, major comics publishers came together to form the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) as a self-regulating body in 1954 (White 218, Nyberg).

The codes produced by these two organizations, the Hays Code of 1930 and the Comics Code of 1954, are similarly parallel documents. While the Hays Code discusses the "moral importance of entertainment" ("The Production Code...") the Comics Code declares the industry's desire to "make a positive contribution to contemporary life...developing sound, wholesome entertainment" ("The Comics Code of 1954"). Both

codes restrict depictions of violence, nudity, crime, profanity, religion, and sex. The clauses restricting material related to “abnormal” sexuality, in particular, are virtually identical: the Hays Code states that “SEX PERVERSION or any inference to it is forbidden,” while the Comics Code, reproducing its predecessor nearly word for word, declares “Sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.” With two such extremely similar texts, it is clear that the CMAA relied heavily on their only contemporary organization for self-censorship as a template when drawing their own standards.

The Comics Code proved highly effective at limiting overt portrayals of “perverted” sexualities or gender identities in mainstream comics, just as the Hays Code prevented overt portrayals of these identities on the screen. But the effectiveness of these codes waned over time: by the 1960’s, the regulations imposed on films began a slow process of loosening and revision, and by the end of the decade the Hays code was thrown out entirely in favor of a rating system which, with slight modifications, is still used today. In a similar manner, though over a decade later, the Comics Code was revised in 1971 when large publishers such as Marvel and DC began pushing the boundaries of acceptable publication. The new code was mostly unrevised on matters such as crime, nudity, and sexuality – the phrase “sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden” remained unedited – but it did expand the Code to allow for tasteful depictions of issues such as drug use, or of previously banned horror elements such as “vampires, ghouls and werewolves” (“Comics Code Revision of 1971”).

It was not until 1989 that the Comics Code saw any major change. By that point comics distribution had shifted away from wholesalers, who had a monopoly on what

was sold to stores and thus could effectively enforce the Code, to a direct distribution model, which allowed independent publishers outside of the CMAA to sell their comics directly to retailers. They were thus able to avoid needing approval from the Comics Code Authority in order to secure sales (Nyberg). It was perhaps because of the CMAA's loss of power, paired with increasing protests from large publishers that the old code was falling behind the times, that the organization agreed to such a drastic change as the 1989 revisions. Entirely removing the prohibition on "sex perversion," the revised code instead argued for characters that show "sensitivity to national, ethnic, religious, sexual, political and socioeconomic orientations." Furthermore, the revised Code stated:

If it is dramatically appropriate for one character to demean another because of his or her sex, ethnicity, religion, sexual preference, political orientation, socioeconomic disadvantages should never assign ultimate responsibility for these conditions to the character themselves. Heroes should be role models and should reflect the prevailing social attitudes. ("Comics Code Revision of 1989")

In a complete reversal of its previous attitude, the new Code not only permitted the portrayal of what it had previously labeled "perversion," but even demanded its respectful treatment.

With this new freedom, writers in all major publishing houses started to state what had before been only implied via omission. Queer characters had been haunting the periphery of comics since the Golden Age. Several mainstream superheroes, such as Northstar of Marvel's *Alpha Flight*, were openly described as gay by their writers before 1989, even if the creative teams were not allowed to explicitly state their sexuality in the comics without losing CMAA approval. But beginning in the early 1990's, an increasing number of characters in mainstream comics, including Northstar, Maggie Sawyer from *Superman* and later *Gotham Central*, and Mystique from *Uncanny X-Men*,

began coming out as gay, or bisexual, or some undefined nebulous state of queer (“A Little History...Part 2”).

Some of the most interesting examples of how this new freedom was used in the early 1990’s actually occurred outside the influence of the Comics Code and the CMAA. Reflecting the change in attitude towards censorship, in 1989 DC launched Vertigo, its adult-only imprint that did not carry the CMAA’s seal. As it was meant for adult readers only, Vertigo was able to depict acts of violence, nudity or sexuality without reprisal from the institution censors. And as such, series printed under the Vertigo imprint were more openly able to explore matters of gender identity and sexuality. Perhaps the most famous comic series that debuted in 1989 is *Sandman*, written by Neil Gaiman. This title ran for seven years and encompassed an enormous cast of varied characters, including many characters of different sexualities and gender identities. Two characters in particular are worth study: the character of Desire, one of the seven siblings of the Endless around whom the series revolves, and Wanda, a transgender woman who stars in *Sandman*’s fifth volume, *A Game of You*.

Desire’s gender is never stated in the comic, aside from the fact that it is constantly changing. Specifically, Desire becomes whatever the person with whom they are interacting desires most – so depending on the situation, Desire may be male, female, both, or neither. While the other six of the Endless refer to each other as “brother” or “sister,” Desire is referred to as “sibling” (*Season of Mists* 28), and at one point is described as “him-, her-, or it-self. (Desire has never been satisfied with just one sex.)” (*The Doll’s House* 40). Like all of the Endless, Desire is an immortal being unconstrained by human social norms or binaries. But their explicit gender-fluidity

serves as a very effective study of social constructionist theories of gender; in essence, their identity represents West and Zimmerman's theory of gender as a "routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment" taken to the extreme (West and Zimmerman 126). Instead of repeating the same actions to maintain a constant gender performance, Desire re-creates their gender to suit their needs in any given social situation. So at a particular moment, their gender does not reflect their personal identity but a construct formed by both Desire and those with whom they interact. As West and Zimmerman describe, "participants in interaction organize their various and manifold activities to reflect or express gender, and they are disposed to perceive the behavior of others in a similar light" (127). Desire routinely takes advantage of that disposition to generate whatever gender they wish to portray, and in doing so expose how easily gender identity may be constructed and manipulated.

Examined in a different light, Desire provides the perfect tool to illustrate Judith Butler's idea of gender as performance – with such a fluid presentation and no fixed gender identity, Desire lives in a state of continuous drag. In Butler's words, "gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original" (Butler 313); Desire becomes whatever their beholder desires, without any "single" or "true" personal identity underneath.

To counterbalance this example of extreme social construction *Sandman* also provides the character of Wanda, who appears to be a champion for a more essentialist view of gender. Wanda, a transgender woman, is good friends with and companion to Barbie, the main character of *A Game of You*. Throughout the comic, Wanda struggles with her identity, particularly the fact that she does not want to have sex-reassignment surgery. Because of this, she faces constant invalidation from others: other characters

call Wanda a guy or ask if she is a man or woman. When three other female characters have to enter the Moon's realm, Wanda is forced to stay behind. As a spirit explains to her, "It's because you're a **man**. That stuff they did with the uh moon. That was a **women** thing" (*A Game of You* 93). All of these comments play into the phenomenon described by Julia Serano as *trans-facsimilation*, whereby the gender identity of a trans individual is viewed as nothing more than a fake performance meant to mask their "true" gender (Serano 170). Here then, we see the inverse of Desire: while Desire, who has no "real" gender, may successfully present as any gender they choose, Wanda is unable to pass in accordance with her identity because that identity differs from what other people read as her "real" gender.

Wanda's narrative does little to dispel an essentialist view of gender, although she fights literally until after her death to prove that her "true" gender is, in fact, female. After the spirit mentioned above, George, states that Wanda could not follow her friends because she is "a man," she is quick to retort:

Wanda: Listen: I've had electrolysis. I'm taking hormones. All that's left is just a little lump of flesh, but all that doesn't matter... *inside* I'm a woman.

George: [The Moon] doesn't think so...and to be *honest* uh well even if you had uh had the operation it wouldn't make much difference to the uh *moon*. It's *chromosomes* as much as anything...it's like uh gender isn't something you can pick and choose as uh far as *gods* are concerned.

Wanda: Well, *that's* something the gods can take and stuff up their sacred recta. I know what I am. (*A Game of You* 93)

Here, Wanda directly challenges the biological assumptions behind essentialist theories of gender, while still affirming that her gender is a fixed, immutable part of her identity. This stance is reaffirmed after her eventual death, when her spirit/soul is shown to be a

beautiful woman. By visually representing Wanda's soul, her "essential self," as female, the distinction is made between Wanda's physical appearance and her "true" self-defined gender: while biology does not dictate her identity, Wanda's gender still reflects some essential part of who she is.

Between these two characters, *Sandman* is able to represent both highly constructionist and highly essentialist views of gender in parallel. Moving beyond the simple curiosity of the Golden Age, comics written after the Comics Code reform of 1989 were given more freedom, either directly via lessened censorship or indirectly through loosened standards of "acceptable" material, and where thus able to begin exploring more complex representations of gender and gender identity.

This looser, reformed Code remained in place for two decades, although its power over the actual industry was dwindling quickly. As comic books sales moved from general retailers to more specialized comic book shops, comic retailers became increasingly willing to purchase from independent publishers regardless of whether or not they carried the Comic Code Authority's seal. Even more importantly, Marvel comics, one of the largest comic publishers, decided to leave the CMAA to use its own in-house rating system in 2001. Eventually, in 2011, the last large publishing houses of the CMAA, DC and Archie, disbanded for good (Nyberg). Since then, publishing houses have regulated their own comics without an external code or standard.

Although this complete abolition of institutionalized censorship promised the potential of a wider range of representation and exploration of queer identities in mainstream comics, the actual results have been somewhat mixed. On the one hand, there has been an indisputable increase in the number of openly queer characters in

mainstream comics over the past decade. Popular series such as *Archie Comics*, *Astonishing X-Men*, *Batwoman*, *Catwoman*, *Green Arrow*, *Teen Titans* and *Young Avengers* have starred gay, lesbian, and bisexual heroes over the past few years (“A Little History...Part 2”). But in terms of gender-variant characters, the range has been somewhat more limited.

Yet trans and non-binary characters have not been completely absent: since 2005, there have been at least three notable non-cisgender characters in mainstream comics, including Xavin from the series *Runaways*, Sir Ystin from *Demon Knights*, and Alysia from *Batgirl*. Xavin was introduced in 2005 as an alien Skrull who came to Earth in search of his fiancée, another alien on the *Runaways* team. After learning that Karolina, his fiancée, identifies as lesbian, Xavin begins to use a female form and feminine pronouns. As she explains, “Skrulls are shape-shifters. For us, changing gender...is no different from changing eye color.” Later in the series, she compares staying the same gender to wearing the same hat every day, and continues to shift between male and female forms (“Xavin (Earth 616)”). While these traits could suggest a gender-fluid or non-binary identity, Xavin’s teammates, Karolina in particular, insist that being female is her “natural” form. From their commentary and attitudes, it is clear that Xavin’s companions expect her to have a fixed, unchanging gender identity, a “true” gender from which she can change form, but will eventually revert back to. Instead of opening up the possibility of a non-binary gender identity, the creative team behind *Runaways* chooses instead to ignore all possibilities save that of a fixed, binary, essential gender identity.

Another recent case of a character forced to fit into a binary identity comes from the series *Demon Knights*, which ran from 2011 to 2013. Sir Ystin, a.k.a. the Shining

Knight, presents as male and uses male pronouns, but the validity of that identity is placed under such heavy scrutiny as to become a running gag. In the third issue of the series, when one teammate explains, “She says she’s a lad” when speaking about Sir Ystin, a local villager replies, “If she is, I’m a sheep” (“First Sacrifices 17). Aside from reiterating that he does not consider himself female, Sir Ystin makes no overt statement about his gender until a female teammate proposes to him in issue #14. He replies, to his companion’s shock: “You have to know...I think you like...one aspect of who I am. But I’m the *other*, too. I was born this way. I’ve kept *saying*, whenever anyone asks. I’m not just a man or a woman. I’m *both*.” This statement in of itself is ambiguous, and sparked multiple debates about whether Ystin could be intersex, bigender, or non-binary. Paul Cornell, the writer of *Demon Knights*, initially attempted to preserve this ambiguity. As he stated in a tweet shortly after the issue’s release, “I think [Sir Ystin’s identity is] down to what each individual reader wants from that exchange, or most identifies with. Why shut down any of the possibilities?” But two days later, he revised this statement, tweeting “It’s great that a DC character can come out as transgender and it not excite much comment” (“SHINING KNIGHT ‘OUTED’...”). By applying the explicit term “transgender” to Sir Ystin, Cornell did in fact “shut down” many of those interpretations he claimed to wish to preserve, by fixing Sir Ystin’s identity firmly within the gender binary. Once again, a character whose statements could be interpreted to represent a wide range of gender identities is restricted to a binary transgender narrative.

Another troubling aspect of Sir Ystin’s treatment in *Demon Knights* occurs in the issue before his “coming out” statement. In that issue, he is confronted by a demon that demands, “Too long have you refused to declare your sex – reveal yourself before

everyone! Now!” In this conflict we see Sedgwick’s double bind of staying in the closet/coming out, and Bettcher’s double bind of passing/not passing. To stay in the closet is just as dangerous as it is to come out: in the first case, one is accused of holding back an important secret, while on the other hand one faces rejection or punishment for sharing unnecessary personal information. When he refuses to come out, Ystin is ridiculed by his teammates, accused of being a deceiver, and is hounded by demon; when he does come out, he is treated as a fraud and faces shock from a woman who previously showed interest in him (“SHINING KNIGHT ‘OUTED’...”).

Before his “coming out” arc, Sir Ystin was a reasonably unknown character in comics; and he is not the only character to have broken into comics fame for stepping out of the closet. In fact, perhaps the best way to understand the shift in how gender-variant characters have been portrayed in comics since the fall of the Comics Code is to examine the way comics published in the past few have placed such an emphasis on the “coming out” storyline, and this closeted/out dualism. In April 2013, Gail Simone revealed that Barbara Gordon’s (Batgirl’s) roommate Alysia is a transgender woman. In *Batgirl* #19, Alysia shares this fact with Barbara immediately after Barbara discloses her history with the Joker (“DC Reveals Transgender...”). The two “coming out” stories form an interesting parallel, and evoke Sedgwick’s description of the closet as the defining image shaping the modern queer experience: both character’s lives, as a transgender woman or an undercover superhero, are shaped by their concern about being either “in” or “out” of the closet to each other (Sedgwick).

Beyond the image of the closet, this double coming-out reinforces Foucault’s concept of “the obligation to confess” that has been written so strongly into our culture

(Foucault 60). According to Foucault, society teaches us that keeping secrets is shameful, and it is our duty to reveal them: Alysia prefaces her statement by saying, “There’s something I’ve been trying to tell you for a while,” as if to excuse the fact that she had been keeping it a secret until then. Secrets are, of course, a vital part of the superhero genre; almost every superhero has their own “secret identity,” which they must struggle with sharing or not sharing to those close to them. To share that secret provides “a kind of liberation” (60), as Foucault explains, while being forced to keep it is a burden. As illustrated by this exchange between Barbara and Alysia, or the way in which Sir Ystin is hounded by both his teammates and enemies to “reveal himself,” societal pressures and our personal desires work together to compel us to confess, whether that secret has to do with superheroes or gender identity.

On the one hand, to compare coming out as transgender to coming out as a superhero can be seen as a flattering comparison. But if there is a problem with this frame of reference for treating gender-variant characters, it is this: by narrowing down the entire trans and non-binary experience to the process of coming out, comic creators are simply lending power to “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century” (48), in the words of Sedgwick. Reinforcing the binary structures of in/out and ignorance/knowledge serves to reinforce a whole host of other binaries, such as heterosexual/homosexual, masculine/feminine, and cisgender/transgender, which only increase the isolation and oppression felt by each minority group. And by limiting discussions of gender identity to the matter of being closeted versus being out, it becomes impossible to examine more complex issues of gender identity such as gender fluidity or constructivism versus essentialism.

Between the Golden Age of comics in the first half of the twentieth century and today, the comics industry has gone through many changes in its modes of censorship, and subsequently its ability to grapple with ideas of gender identity. Before the Comics Code of 1954, most comic creators treated ideas of mutable gender with curiosity. During this era, the idea of gender variance was explored as an interesting plot device in stories like “Transformation,” but not as the defining characteristic of a character’s identity. After the Code was put into place, the ability of mainstream comics creators to explore gender identity at all was severely limited, until the code was lessened in 1989 and large publishers such as DC began marketing titles towards an older audience. In these “mature” titles, where sexual and violent material was more openly presented, creators like Neil Gaiman were able to delve more deeply into questions of gender identity, such as the difference between social construction and essentialist theories of gender, or the possibility of identities falling outside of the traditional male/female binary. However, as the Code was dropped altogether and large publishers began to diversify their own casts, this in-depth study seems to have been traded in for a more superficial take on gender identity. Modern mainstream comics have, instead of delving into more complex issues surrounding gender, focused instead on a “coming out” narrative that declares a character safely as a member of one of the two binary gender categories: according to modern comics, all heroes are either male or female, regardless of how they get there.

While this regression may be somewhat discouraging, there is still hope. Comics have only been a part of the American Mass Media for less than a century, and both the art form and its content have continued to develop rapidly since their start in the 1930’s. In a similar manner, queer theory and public opinion about queer, and specifically

gender-variant, identities has been only increasing in its rate of development over the past few decades. As both the art form and the subject matter continue to change, the potential for their interaction does as well. The face of transgender and non-binary characters in mainstream comics has changed dramatically over the past eighty years – and while there is still plenty of room for improvement, there is plenty of momentum for that improvement to occur.

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