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"Gay" Sidekicks: Queer Anxiety and the Narrative Straightening of the Superhero

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Abstract

In comic book and movie narratives that are dominated by figures of heroic masculinity, the male superhero sidekick is typically a sexually ambiguous character who performs alternative modes of masculinity. This article argues that these alternative masculinities serve primarily to obscure the anxiety that is endemic to the superhero's own problematic identity and sexuality, effectively "straightening" the central narrative and preserving the superhero as a beacon of heteronormativity by projecting queer desire or fear entirely on to the "gay" sidekick. Ironically, the seemingly straightened primary narrative—and hero—remains beholden to the same "gay" sidekick that it marginalizes. The efficacy of these sidekicks is further discussed and detailed with specific reference to the popular superhero sidekicks Robin (sidekick to Batman) and Jimmy Olsen (sidekick to Superman).

Keywords

masculinity, queer, gay, superhero, sidekick

As typified by the iconic tales of characters like Captain America or Superman and teams of super beings like the Avengers and the Justice League, the mainstream superhero narrative is often surprisingly conservative, aimed at legitimating normative ideologies and containing that which threatens them just as easily the heroes

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would contain an evil madman bent on world domination. As a crime fighter, the typical superhero is a reactionary whose concern is with the maintenance of the law and the status quo rather than with changing the world—he or she battles criminals and terrorists but rarely takes proactive or progressive action to stamp out the political and economic roots of crime and terror. However, as a being whose very existence disrupts the status quo and exceeds the normative, the superhero may have good reason to display this sort of conservatism. Kevin J. Maroney (2006) loosely defines the superhero narrative as one "featuring characters who have special abilities that set them apart from their peers and usually featuring conflict between sets of such individuals and each other or 'normal' society" (p. 3), and this conflict between the normal and abnormal—where the superhero occupies both spaces at once and feels like an outsider in each—gestures toward an unavoidable anxiety within the superhero narrative. To quote the ubiquitous Superman motto, the superhero represents "truth, justice, and the American way," but his or her existence often seems antithetical to those values—Superman himself is an alien who wears a disguise to shield his "true" identity.

Thus, while the superhero aims to redress conflict and reify "normal society," his or her status as a "special" or spectacular person within that same field of normativity jeopardizes their ability to *belong* to it. As Vicki Karaminas (2006) describes this tension, "[t]he dressed super body is always positioned in the in-between space of self and identity, continually vacillating between the human persona and the *Other* side, never living a full existence in either one" (p. 506). Although superheroes save the world from certain destruction on a regular basis, their exceptional Otherness stands in direct contradiction to the liberal democratic discourse of equality and liberty that they defend. These superheroes preserve the normative—the dominant discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, race, and ability, among others—even as their very presence threatens to collapse the very boundaries of those same normative fields.

That these boundaries have remained largely intact and the ideological function of the superhero is more or less the same in the seventy years since Superman's debut is due, in no small part, to the discursive work performed by the superhero's sidekick. The teen-sidekick, a staple of the superhero genre since Robin's first appearance in the Batman comic books of the 1940s, has often been regarded with suspicion by observers outside of its target demographic—a mostly young and white male audience. Often an untrained crime fighter, the sidekick is nonetheless thrown into mortal combat by the more experienced hero. Just as often an orphan or runaway, the sidekick is also typically under the legal guardianship of the hero, and the ambiguity of this rather intimate relationship—is the hero a parent or a pederast?—has lent itself to fifty years of casual and critical speculation. Judith Halberstam (1998) notes that the dominance of "'heroic masculinities' depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities" if they are to retain their self-evidence and "appear to be the real thing" (p. 1). As such, while this article will by necessity interrogate the dominant figures of heroic masculinity (the superheroes), it will give

considerably more space to the figures of alternative masculinities (the sidekicks) that are subordinated to them, as well as provide an analysis of the process by which the inclusion of these alternative masculinities serve to obscure and diffuse—to varying degrees of success—the anxiety that is endemic to the superhero's identity and sexuality, allowing them to appear to be unproblematically hetero, masculine, and "real."

The Queer Childhood of the Sidekick

The scholarly analysis of the literary sidekick's role or function has, to a significant degree, relied on the structural or psychoanalytic modes of criticism that were dominant when superheroes first caught the attention of academics in the 1950s and 1960s. Joseph Campbell's (1949) Jungian analysis of the hero narrative's structure, for example, is one particularly well-worn reference, as he classifies the sidekick archetype as a sort of "helper" who aids in the hero's passage through an unfamiliar world. While key to the plot, such characters are hardly central to the story and they are relegated to brief, instrumental appearances. However, the sidekick might also be said to aid the *reader's* passage through an unfamiliar world. Although they seem marginal to the adventure, comic book author Neil Gaiman (2003) suggests that the adolescent sidekick bridges the gap between the predominately teen and preteen comic book readers and the admirable but noticeably older and less relatable superhero. Gaiman suggests that the sidekick makes the superhero more familiar and understandable through the reader's identification with his or her younger counterpart, as well as giving the hero "someone to explain the plot to" (p. 2).

But while Gaiman's suggestion seems reasonable, his claim that young readers identify with sidekicks have been vigorously refuted. As comic book critic Joel Grineau (1998) indicates, young readers are still more apt to identify with the hero than the helper, desiring to be like the figure of masculine power that the mostly male readership idolizes in the superhero rather than the teen or preteen assistant that is more often in need of rescue. Indeed, given the sidekick's relative weakness, inexperience, and youth, as well as their often sillier names and costumes, it seems unlikely that readers would choose to identify with, for example, the diminutive Robin rather than the stronger, wiser, and more respected Batman. As Grineau sarcastically muses, "Is there a teenaged sidekick in comic book history that has ever made a villain cower in fear? *'Oh no, it's Robin*! *I've got to hide*! *Why God, why?*!'"

But if the sidekick is not there to attract more, younger readers, what function *do* they fill? Michael Bronski (1984) assigns another important distinction to the hero and sidekick relationship, specifically with regard to romance. Implicitly harking back to the "helper" function that Campbell describes, Bronski explains that the sidekick is a supplement *to* or enabler *of* the hero's romantic quest, rarely enjoying the opportunity for romance himself or herself. Always the bridesmaid to the hero's bride, the ideal sidekick sacrifices or defers sexual and romantic desire so that the

hero can realize his or her own; instead, "sidekicks had to settle for being funnier than everybody else" (p. 12). Given the lack of options, the sidekick is made to seem either asexual or, by default, attracted to the same-sexed hero whose company and happiness the sidekick evidently privileges above that of all others—even his own. Whichever is the case, the young sidekick's sexual desire becomes an ambiguous and elusive subject, and it has also been historically a source of anxiety and concern for the parents and psychologists of young readers—a topic that will be revisited and expanded upon later in this article.

In fact, the delaying, denying, and displacing of the sidekick's sexual desire from view might be best understood with reference to Kathryn Bond Stockton's (2004) notion of "the queer child". According to Stockton, the figure of the child in literature is indicative of intergenerational change and growth, as well as the anxieties that these changes bring to the parents who seek to control its effects, as "the child, from the standpoint of 'normal' adults, is always queer" (p. 283). "Queer," as Stockton deploys it here and subsequently explains, implies both of the word's popular meanings: "strange" and "homosexual"—or at least "not-yet-straight." The "not-yet-straight" qualifier is important, as it implies the inevitability of coming into normative heterosexuality while also subtly acknowledging the widespread discomfort with applying *any* "adult" sexual labels to children. Indeed, Stockton notes a contradiction in "the tendency to treat all children as straight while we culturally consider them asexual" (p. 283). In particular, the sidekick embodies the model of childhood that Stockton characterizes as "the child queered by innocence," most often in fiction a white and middle class youth who "on its path to normativity, seems safe to us and whom we, consequently, seek to safeguard at all cost" (p. 296). Within this model, adulthood and sexuality are carefully managed and only very gradually attained. As mentor and protector, the superhero is then closely associated with the benevolent agents of heteronormative control. The young sidekick, however, is always somewhat estranged from the process. Although ostensibly *growing into* full-fledged heterosexual and hero status, he or she is presently too weak, too innocent, and in need of a particular sort of guidance: at once both *like* and *unlike* the heteronormative hero.

Of course, the process of ushering an adolescent into heterosexual and/or superheroic practice and protecting the ideal psychosexual growth of a child or not "not-yet-straight" sidekick may easily go awry. In "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" (1953), Freud suggests that the adult sexual instinct is synthetic and has its origins in a number of desires, the disruption of which may have any number of unpredictable effects. While in an adult heterosexual psyche, these instincts are oriented in unity toward a single aim, Freud suggests that, in cases of perversion or deviance, the various components of sexual instinct may fail to coalesce and remain open to options that are otherwise foreclosed to (hetero)normative individuals. This is precisely the danger that lurks in the indeterminacy of the sidekick, a hero-in-the-making who is nonetheless a child whose heterosexuality has not yet materialized and may fail to coalesce.

The Freudian conception of a child's psychosexual development implies a sort of narrative, and literary critic Judith Roof likewise reads sexual development and the possibility for sexual indeterminacy or deviance on to narrative forms. In describing a literary function that seems very much in tune with Bronski's queer reading of the sidekick archetype, Roof (2002) suggests that the elements of the perverse are most abundant within the narrative middle, where confusion—pertaining to the plot and otherwise—is both produced and sorted and where anxieties of character and plot both threaten to destroy the story and are subsequently resolved in anticipation of the story's conclusion. It is within this narrative middle that the helper or sidekick figure appears and fulfills their purpose—that is, aiding in the resolution of confusion—before often disappearing once the threat of the perverse has otherwise been contained. "What we think of as the perverse," writes Roof, are "the elements of a story that lead to the wrong end or the wrong object and thus threaten premature satisfaction" (p. 7). Although the middle is *always* buttressed by a beginning and end that offers closure, Roof contends that it is still useful insofar as it offers a glimpse of alternative possibilities.

In contrast, the superhero's victory at the narrative's conclusion tends to express the "right" ends, as his or her moral reward represents the right object and elicits normalized satisfaction from the reader. Ironically, this conventional assumption of the hero's equation with normative values is further reinforced when critics like Roof and Bronski privilege the middle and the sidekick as the exemplary location of queer desire or sexual perversion—if the middle provides the *only* queer space, then the beginning and end *must* by default be otherwise. In establishing, more or less, a binary relation between the queer/perverse/sidekick and the heterosexual/normative/hero, the space for resistance that may otherwise be present within the figure of the hero or narrative beginnings and ends are often ignored entirely. That is, as the sidekick's ambiguous relation to norms are highlighted, the heteronormativity of the hero with whom he or she is unavoidably compared and contrasted is reified. The queered sidekick, then, presents the audience of the superhero narrative with a middle location onto which their hidden—or, indeed, not so hidden—queer or perverse desires and fears can be relocated with the simultaneous effect of straightening the central narrative and preserving the superhero as a beacon of heteronormativity. However, it must be noted that the particularities and success of these strategies vary from instance to instance.

I will add a few notes on terminology and methodology before I discuss particular superheroes and sidekicks. If the definitions and deployments of terms like queer and gay appear ambiguous or imprecise at this juncture—variously "strange," "homosexual," "wrong," "hidden," "perverse," and so on—this is intentional. This essay is an exercise in "queer methodology," what Halberstam (1998) describes as "a scavenger methodology" that purposely resists the sort of totalizing terminological coherence that is deployed by that which it critiques (p. 13). Such a queer methodology foregrounds the overdetermination of "gay" sidekicks, and in embracing the slippage between one meaning of gay and another aims to frustrate

the supposed coherence of (heteronormative) language in much the same way that this analysis of particular gay sidekicks is aimed at disrupting the coherence of the larger superhero tradition.

As well, a highly selective "scavenger methodology" is perhaps the only approach appropriate to excavating comic book characters, given that the body of texts depicting any one superhero or sidekick—much less the millions of stories that comprise the whole body of superhero literature—is vast and typically authored by dozens, if not hundreds, of different writers and graphic artists. For this reason, and at the risk of charges of methodological incoherence, this article also references the film and TV versions of the characters with the understanding that these versions—moreso than perhaps any comic book version—are more recognizable, resonant, and function as "nodal points," the most privileged representations against which all other interpretations are positioned and measured (Doty 1996, 10). Like the superhero, the privileged and seemingly unproblematic position of a nodal point in a discourse is naturalized through the marginalization of alternative meanings and contradictory representations—and like the sidekick, these contradictions cannot be wholly effaced.

Finally, this article will be restricted to a discussion of white male heroes and their white male sidekicks. Given that all-female, male–female, and interracial all-male superhero and sidekick pairs have historically been represented and written in markedly different ways, their discussion would require an entirely different theoretical framework. For example, perhaps because the majority of superhero creators and their audience *have been* and *continue to be* male, the female equivalent of the male superhero and sidekick combinations are more explicitly and nonnormatively sexualized and nearly always already suspect.

Homosexuality/Homosociality and the Superhero

The most (in)famous and widely read book of superhero criticism, Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1953) was the first to propose that superheroes had a perverse nature. A Freudian clinical psychologist, Wertham believed that comic books—the superhero, horror, and crime genres in particular, though such genre categories were far less well defined at the time—stimulated children's sexual fantasies during the formative latency period and consequently disrupted their sexual development. During the latency period, Wertham suggested that prepubescent boys express "vague fears that they might be homosexual," a fear that might be confirmed through the "psychologically homosexual" brand of homosociality that is offered by superhero comic books (p. 189). Consequently, Wertham argues, children who read comic books will become anguished and confused adolescents, leading to increases in teen delinquency and sexual deviance. Hilde L. Mosse (1966), Wertham's lead research assistant on *Seduction* and whom subsequently became a mass media critic, similarly compares superheroes to "the type of muscle men many homosexuals find so attractive" and seek to emulate or partner with (p. 33).

According to Mosse (1966), a number of her "adolescent patients with homosexual problems" first masturbated in response to the images in superhero comics, as she reports that "they and many other boys collected and traded these comic books with sexual purpose in mind" (p. 33).

Written during the height of the Cold War era, Leonard Rifas (2006) notes that Wertham's book was greeted enthusiastically by politicians and parents who were concerned about men "becoming too soft to defeat Communism or too hard to be safe companions within their homes" (p. 26). Following the publication of Wertham's book, the United States Senate Judiciary formed a Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, with comic books and their content at the fore. With their graphic and unregulated depictions of violence, gore, and sexual innuendo, the industry-dominating horror and crime genres were offered by publishers as a pariah. Anticipating government regulation and the possibility of censorship, the Comics Magazine Association of America—a lobby group representing the largest comic book publishers in the industry—created a self-regulating Comics Code Authority to ban any content that stimulated the "lower and baser emotions" (Comics Magazine Association of America 1959). In contrast to the horror and crime comics, superhero comic books at least offered a morally certain world in which good always wins, evil always loses, and a patriotic Protestant morality is celebrated.

However, while the superhero is expected to obey and uphold the laws of society, he or she is always somewhat outside *of* or marginalized *within* that same community. The superhero is typically a loner with a secret, leading a double life that must remain secret to protect those closest to him or her from the supervillains that the he or she has previously defeated, incarcerated, and/or humiliated. Although the precise nature of the hero's secret remains unknown even to many of his or her closest friends, it is a running joke in most superhero comic books—or at least those published before the 1970s, after which stories aimed for greater realism—that all of the hero's family, friends, and coworkers know that the hero is hiding *something*. As a result, the hero does not risk getting too close to anyone—especially potential love interests—for risk of endangering them, and those same friends can never bring themselves to wholly trust the hero. A typical example is Peter Parker/Spider-man. A wise-cracking crime fighter while costumed, Parker is otherwise a "loveable loser," feigning incompetence and frailty to dissuade women's interest and ever-protective of his last living-relative, his elderly Aunt May. Although he keeps his identity secret for fear that his enemies will strike at him through his aunt, his hasty exits and poor excuses lead May, Parker's dates, and his boss with the impression that he is immature and unreliable.

In the context of such isolation, the sidekick serves as a best friend and/or trusted confidante to the hero and asserts the importance of human contact in an otherwise alienating world. Typical superhero and sidekick teams include Batman and Robin, as well as Batman's butler Alfred Pennyworth; Superman and coworker Jimmy Olsen; Daredevil and his law-partner Foggy Nelson; and the Green Arrow and his ward Speedy. I would further subdivide this list into two distinct types of

superhero-sidekick teams—those in which the sidekick is a costumed crime fighter and those in which he is not. While crime fighting partnerships like Batman and Robin or Green Arrow and Speedy were the standard through the early decades of the superhero narratives in the 1940s and 1950s, this is no longer the case and the alternative sort of partnership is now the norm. Despite the current dearth of super-sidekicks, I would contend that no superhero is without a sidekick of *some* sort, and characters like Alfred Pennyworth and Foggy Nelson, though not costumed, are nevertheless narrative "helpers." Certainly, while these non-super and non-costumed sidekicks are often coworkers or friends in the hero's civilian life, their function is much the same as that of a costumed sidekick—to call the hero in times of emergency, to help the hero when and where they can, and to be kidnapped by the villain and used as bait when the plot demands it. However, it should be noted that there are significant differences in the straightening effect produced by the costumed and non-costumed sidekick, and these differences will be explored in detail later in this article.

Such male friendships or partnerships—even between two ostensible equals, like the lawyers Matt Murdock, the aforementioned Daredevil, and Foggy Nelson—are not without their own sexual ambiguities and sources of queer anxiety, even if they have gone unnoticed by critics like Wertham. As Eve Sedgwick (1985) writes, "[f]or a man to be a man's man is separated only by an invisible, carefully blurred, always-already-crossed line from being 'interested in men'" (p. 89). Sedgwick uses the term homosociality to describe a social force of same-sex bonding that is aimed—in the case of two men—toward solidarity and an interdependence of men that allows for their continued domination of women. Although the practice of homosociality alludes homophonically and linguistically to homosexuality, they are not equivalent and cannot simply be substituted for one another. However, as the homosocial represents a continuum of same-sex relationships, homosexuality always resides there as an option—though the homosocial and homosexual are *not* identical, they do *imply* one another. Indeed, the boundaries between the male sexual and the male social are blurry and even fluid at points, and the continuum's ambiguity explains how it is that Wertham and Mosse could so easily pathologize the close male friendships that are a common element of superhero stories.

A superhero homosociality is implied visually by the convention of the costume or uniform, an outfit that is often brightly colored and adorned with identifying symbols. The costume functions to distinguish its wearer from normal society and also presents heroes with the opportunity to identify one another when it might otherwise be impossible—though it is certainly possible that, in emphasizing the hero's Otherness, the costume also further alienates the superhero from those he protects. Teams or associations of heroes often wear common attire or symbols: the Fantastic Four wear matching costumes at all times, the Avengers sometimes accessorize with identical bomber jackets, and all X-Men have an "X" on either their belt or chest. As if the homosocial/homosexual distinction were not already an ambiguous and problematic one, the garish costumes and symbolic systems associated with this superhero

homosociality may even collapse the distinction altogether. Andy Medhurst (1991) notes that there is considerable historical precedent for the identification of homosexual men through a common dress code and that "such codes originate as semiotic systems adopted by gay people themselves, as a way of signalling the otherwise invisible fact of sexual preference" (p. 151). The X-Men are a particularly apt example to be read in this way: as humans who are born with a genetic mutation that grants them "mutant" superpowers around the time of puberty, their publisher contends that the X-Men and their fellow mutants represent "*every* oppressed minority and disenfranchised subculture" (Casey 2006, 16). Fittingly, the X-Men's dress code seems to function in much the manner that Medhurst ascribes to the dress code of certain gay communities. In the comic books, if not the films, the "X" is often the only common costume element among the various characters, and it is worn by the X-Men's Wolverine, for example, even when he serves as a member of the nonmutant Avengers team. Perhaps more importantly, the "X" has also been adopted as a generic symbol of mutantcy by mutants who have no direct connection to the X-Men themselves, as by the unaffiliated mutant superheroes of X-Statix.

As the superhero costume has typically been made from brightly colored fabrics—originally cloth in the comics, though TV and film productions prefer spandex and leather—and often includes a mask and cape, it often bears more than a passing similarity to those costumes worn in masquerades or sadomasochistic play—a similarity that Wertham also addresses. As well, just as the boundary between the performance and the performer's "real" self in sadomasochistic role playing is often drawn arbitrarily—that is, if it can be drawn at all—the boundary between costumed hero and clothed civilian is complex and even troubling. In performing a queer reading of superheroes, Catherine Williamson (1997) suggests that the costume is a particularly good analytic site because it troubles any attempt to privilege either of the superhero's costumed or civilian identities. "The first difficulty in exploring 'secret identities' is deciding which identity is the secret one, the superhero or the 'ordinary' counterpart," writes Williamson. "The answer is, they both are, or, rather, each is the other's secret: Clark masks Superman, Superman masks Clark" (p. 6). Part of the difficulty inherent in theorizing the costume, then, is that it always implies at least *two* costumes or masks: the superhero that conceals the civilian and the civilian that conceals the superhero.

Not only are the superhero's various masks then mutually concealing, but it should also be emphasized that they are incredibly effective. That the passive and oafish Clark Kent could ever be the gallant Superman and vice versa—even though their faces are only differentiated by Clark's glasses and the single lock of hair that falls over Superman's forehead—is evidence of the superhero's near limitless ability to exploit the codes that differentiate self and other, problematizing such a distinction altogether. Williamson describes Clark and Superman as "masks," and Bakhtin (1984) notes that the concept of the mask suggests a troubled relationship between reality and the image, as it is suggestive of "transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries" (p. 40). The mask need not be taken literally, but Bakhtin's

language of "violation" evokes yet more anxiety with regard to the exceptionalism of the superhero, who can so easily fool the public and their closest friends—and, as Williamson seems to suggest, even fool or confuse the reader who is looking for the "real" person under the various masks.

The example of Superman and other superheroes who are *figuratively masked* even though they are *literally unmasked* serves to illustrate another key facet of the supercostume: that is, that it may conceal something important *even* and *especially* as it appears to be revealing its subject fully. Likewise, whether hanging in the wardrobe of a secret lair, layered beneath a less auspicious outfit, or laying folded in a drawer, the closeted supercostume—the need to keep it closeted and the fear of its discovery—carries symbolic power in excess of its function as the hero's personal sign. Sedgwick (1990) describes the "relations of the closet" as a mode of thinking where the "relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public," and the superhero's reliance on a literal closet and the figurative act of closeting implicate him in these relations (p. 71). As the relations of the closet "are critically problematical for the gender, sexual, and economic structures of the heterosexist culture at large," so too is the superhero's active and admitted—even if only tacitly, with a mask—disregard for normative identarian practices (p. 71). The costume invokes a queer textuality that is in excess of itself, spilling on to the hero's supposedly normal identity and implicating the seeming divide between the private and the public. However, while this seems to imply that the superhero and sidekick are Dionysian, this is not the case: as official or unofficial figures of law and authority, they are obliged to uphold the dominant moral and social order. How is it, then, that the disruptive potential of the superhero is contained and superheroes are relegated to the function of what Williamson dubs "cultural 'spot cleaners,'" agents of order rather than chaos?

The superhero is able to remain a cultural spot cleaner because the sidekick becomes a sort of spot cleaner for the *hero*. Sedgwick writes that "sexual desire is an unpredictably powerful solvent of stable identities," and it is sexual desire that is at the core of queer textuality (1985, 85). As such, a coherent heteronormative practice and heterosexual identity must confine and restrict desire to limit this destabilizing potential. While any such action is contingent and its coherence ultimately illusory, Sedgwick suggests that heteronormativity "requires for maintenance the scapegoating crystallization of a same-sex male desire" that, while present in the heterosexual, is denied and transferred elsewhere (p. 85). As an unexperienced crime fighter who often admits and expresses discomfort over his double life and the complications and confusions that are the result of superperson's need to transition and metamorphose, the "queer" sidekick is able to carry the scapegoating mark of sexual ambivalence and inscrutability that would be unacceptable if applied to the hero. Part of this ambivalence is derived from the sidekick's sexual identity, which—since he is always aiding the hero's sexual pursuits before engaging in his own—is underdeveloped or incomplete.

While the homosocial bond of hero and sidekick also seems to gesture toward the homo*sexual* end of the continuum—that is, an ambiguously gay or asexual sidekick

would seem to imply an ambiguously gay superhero—it is important to note that the hero is actually *empowered* through this scapegoating process and is therefore still recognizably and hegemonically masculine. For example, Matt Murdock/Daredevil, a blind hero with four superhuman senses, has only a single lasting relationship: the one with his law partner, Foggy Nelson. "Seeing eye dogs bond for life. Yours ran away," Nelson tells Murdock in the *Daredevil* (2003) film. "What does that tell you about how emotionally available you are?" When Murdock finds himself intrigued by a mysterious woman, the bumbling Nelson must help him arrange a meeting and provide a moment of levity so that the two can share a laugh at Foggy's expense. As effective as Nelson is at playing the sidekick role, his skills at helping Murdock attract women cannot aid Foggy himself and he does a significantly worse job as the lead player in a relationship of his own. Although, in the comic books, he lives happily with his common-law wife and her son, Nelson hires a sex worker and kills her when he hallucinates that she is a monster. Nelson's spouse throws him out and he is arrested for murder, leaving Murdock to restore some degree of his status and dignity when he secures an acquittal with evidence that Nelson had been manipulated by the villain Mysterio. Crucially, Murdock learns, Nelson's hallucination resulted from a form of sensory trickery that could never have worked on Murdock himself, as Mysterio is a *visual* illusionist.

Although the hero may have also been conflicted about his own sexual desire, he is nonetheless made to seem more potent, masculine, and unassailable—he is straightened—through this contrast with his sexually indeterminate or pathologized sidekick. The transgressions of the sidekick are possible and even acceptable because the sidekick, as a hero-in-training or non-hero, is never totally familiar with the conventions of heroism and often deviates from the conventionally correct course of action in a way that the hero never would or could. As suggested above, it is meaningful that Daredevil's blindness would have made it impossible for Mysterio's ploy to turn *him* into an adulterer and murderer as it had Nelson. While his blindness might invite its own anxieties, it is refigured here as that which additionally differentiates Murdock from the unfortunate and criminal Nelson, as Daredevil is not simply more moral or ethical than his partner but is even biologically different.

Indeed, for all of the similarities that may exist between hero and sidekick, a "gay" sidekick represents the superhero's abject. According to Kristeva (1982), abjection is the process by which boundaries of self and the Other are realized conceptually through the identification of that which is "not me." Abjection describes the process by which boundaries of self and the Other are realized through the repression and oppression of the Other, the means by which a subject is formed in its identification and refusal of that which is exterior to it. Within this logic, Daredevil's blindness is not treated as a disability or cause for anxiety so much as yet another means of distancing him from Foggy Nelson, a step toward establishing the conceptual boundary that separates superhero and not superhero. Similarly, Barbara Creed (1993) describes the abject as "the place where I am not," that which threatens the existence of the self and must be radically excluded, "deposited on the

other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (p. 65). The "gay" sidekick, then, represents a degree of uncertainty and disruptive potentiality that the superhero cannot admit to seeing in himself and which threatens the coherence of the category of superhero altogether, but whose presence is necessary—albeit, at a removal—to guarantee that the hero is understood as a unified and heteronormatively masculine whole.

Crucially, this act of displacement is often complicated by the presence or absence of the sidekick's costume. The non-costumed sidekick—a civilian or non-hero like the aforementioned Foggy Nelson and Jimmy Olsen—is often visually and spatially dissociated from the superhero. As such, the abjection of Nelson and Olsen—the recognition that they are not the superhero—is accomplished with much less difficulty than it is with the costumed sidekick. Conversely, costumed characters such as Robin and Speedy are linked visually and professionally to their superheroes, and so what marks the one is only avoided by the other with great difficulty—and, even then, not entirely. Although Daredevil escapes the implication that he too is capable of adultery and murder through his association to Foggy Nelson, the Green Arrow, for example, is not so lucky. When the Green Arrow—a playboy modeled on Robin Hood who becomes a political activist—finds his sidekick, Speedy, shooting heroin, Speedy's drug abuse speaks directly to the hypocrisy of the Arrow's self-congratulatory posturing and moral certainty. Although the Arrow attempts to absolve himself of blame and throws Speedy out of his home, he ultimately fails to render his sidekick abject: "I guess I blamed him at the time, but drugs are funny like that. You blame everyone but yourself" (O'Neill and Adams 1971, 5). Over the remaining pages of this article, I will provide more detailed readings of perhaps the two most famous American superhero sidekicks—"Superman's Pal" Jimmy Olsen and Robin, "The Boy Wonder"—and consider how they function as exemplars of these two varieties of sidekick.

Two "Gay" Sidekicks: Jimmy Olsen and Robin

The antecedent to Foggy Nelson—and all superhero sidekicks—is James "Jimmy" Olsen, a photographer and "cub reporter" at the Metropolis Daily Planet newspaper. A colleague and friend to Clark Kent since 1939, Olsen is also known as "Superman's pal" as a result of the dozens of times that Superman has had to save Jimmy from the mobsters and monsters that he inevitably runs afoul of while pursuing a story. As the Daily Planet's cub reporter in the DC comics—a patronizing, albeit affectionate, job title—Olsen's major responsibility is the Sunday Edition's "For A Day" column, which requires him to assume the position or lifestyle of another person for twenty-four hours. Often, as in the case of his "I was America's sweetheart for a day" piece, Jimmy is required to work undercover as a woman (Morrison and Quitely 2006). Jenny North (2002), webmaster of the *Transgender Graphics and Fiction Archive* and a cataloguer of Olsen's missions as a woman, remarks that "given his 'master of disguise' talents, I suppose it was inevitable that he'd

masquerade as a girl a time or two. On the other hand, he's done it more than a few times, he keeps a stash of women's clothes with a few different outfits, and he passes as a girl so well that he gets hit on by guys." Indeed, it is clear from his editor's praise of the "America's sweetheart" piece that Olsen's performance is a masterful one.

The frequency with which Olsen transgresses the naturalized boundaries of gender, as well as the *success* with which he transgresses them, lays bare the performative construction of gender. Olsen did not simply imitate or impersonate America's sweetheart—he *was* America's sweetheart, and both the success of his drag performance and the ease with which he assumes and discards it problematizes the ostensible reality of gender. Judith Butler (1990) describes gender as a collective set of cultural fictions that obscure their own construction and contingency, beliefs perpetuated by the credibility of the repetitions and rituals that reify those fictions, and the reprimands that are accorded to deviations from them (p. xvi). However, Olsen's drag allows him to convincingly inhabit a variety of seemingly contradictory identities and so disturbs those same fictions of gender and desire, fashioning him as a focal point for queer readings—both inside and outside the text. "I have to hand it to you, Olsen," explains his editor, Perry White. "Half the guys in the country hate you, the other half wanna be you. And let's not forget the half that wants to date you" (Morrison and Quitely 2006, 2). Although Olsen is oblivious to White's joking (or sincere?) suggestion that Jimmy is a gay icon—"That's three halfs, Chief. And so far they're all guys" —Olsen's numerous successes at embodying *a woman* and repeated failure to capture the interest of *women*—save his often comedic on-again, off-again relationship with Lucy Lane—stand in stark contrast to the metaphors of virile heteronormative attached to Superman. Indeed, Olsen's failure to meet the expectations of normative American masculinity and heterosexuality allow the reader to more easily dismiss Clark Kent's own comparatively minor failures in light of Superman's obvious masculine successes.

For his part, Superman is a superstrong, superfast, flying humanoid from the planet Krypton, an alien refugee who was found as a baby and raised as Clark Kent by the Kansan couple that found his ship in a cornfield. While Patrick L. Eagan's (1987) description of Superman may seem hyperbolic, it is in fact a fair indication of just how invested Superman is with values of American nationalism and heroic masculinity:

> In his concentrated gaze, the strong silence of Gary Cooper is fused with the pure heart of Jimmy Stewart—in one stroke Robert Jordan in the last scene of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* preparing to meet the enemy onslaught alone and Lindbergh in *The Spirit of St. Louis* staring out across the blue Atlantic—and all the while Old Glory, the same flag that flew over Fort McHenry, yes, and Iwo Jima, rippling confidently at his back. (p. 89)

Kent, a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter for the Daily Planet, is no slouch himself. But despite these performative successes, Superman also fears that

he is ultimately too alien to ever truly fit in. In the 1990s television series *Lois & Clark*, Kent explains to his colleague and girlfriend, Lois Lane, that "Superman is what I can do. Clark is who I am" (Bagdonas 2008). Of course, it can easily be suggested that Clark is either wrong or being disingenuous and that the reverse is actually true. As Bill memorably argues in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* (2004), "Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak. He's unsure of himself. He's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race." Although Clark and Superman are literally the same person, the way in which one or the other is often conceptualized as the *true* identity and the other as the *disguise* that he wears is a hopelessly reductive process, indicating that such terms are likely useless in any discussion of superheroes and their various identities.

Clearly, then, Superman's alienness, split-personality, deception, and self-enforced bachelorhood—nearly six decades worth before his wedding to Lois Lane, on both TV and in the comic books, during the 1990s—do not seem to prevent him from successfully passing as a singular and coherent model of normativity. In light of Superman's status as an alien, the readers' inability to arrive at the "true" identity underlying his costumes—and his troubling treatment of Lois Lane, who found herself courted by both personae for decades—it is perhaps surprising that Eagan so easily and unselfconsciously elevates Superman to near-mythic status. However, as I suggested earlier, Superman is able to project this unified and unproblematic self precisely because of the distracting spectacle provided by Jimmy Olsen when he inevitably fails to perform the same.

As Superman's sidekick, Olsen also typically finds himself manipulated by villains or the inheritor of mysterious and often dangerous abilities that require Superman's intervention. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Olsen routinely transformed into a variety of strange creatures and monsters, including Giant Turtle Boy, Elastic Lad, Speed Demon, a gorilla, an alien, a wolf-man, a Viking, a genie, and a porcupine. When Olsen's Elastic Lad powers cause him to accidentally pierce the barrier between the living world and the otherworldly "Phantom Zone," he is urged by the villainous Kryptonians who are trapped there to learn and expose Superman's secret identity (Swan and Klein 1962). Upon Olsen's return, Lois Lane tells Clark Kent that the cub reporter is writing a story about his trip to the Phantom Zone, leading Kent to imagine that "My career as Clark Kent is finished! I'll have to leave here and start anew elsewhere!"(p. 8). Olsen eventually refuses to write the story, telling his coworkers that the superpowers are too dangerous a temptation and too great a responsibility: "Once you had the information, any criminal might force it from you, by hypnosis or by using a truth serum!" (p. 9). Ultimately, he discards the Elastic Lad potion that gave him his superabilities, thereby preserving Clark Kent's identity from any future potential travelers to the Phantom Zone.

While it seems reasonable for Jimmy and the readers to question whether any person should bear the responsibility of such powers, the reader is not led to question whether there is anything amiss with Superman's ownership of such abilities or the

way in which *he* uses them. Instead, all worry about the naturalness or ethics of superhuman power and behavior are placed solely upon Jimmy Olsen as Elastic Lad. As well, the suggestion that Elastic Lad's existence might compromise Superman's, as well as Olsen's belief that superpowers are too risky and he *should not* have them, appears to likewise imply that Superman's powers carry less risk and that he *should* have them. Although this particular story seems to problematize the matter of Clark Kent's dual identity—after all, Olsen admits that the secret would endanger anyone who knew it, which is most likely to be Superman's family and friends—the focus on Jimmy Olsen's personal dilemma appears to ask the reader to excuse or ignore this aspect of the issue, as it is implied that the fault would lie with Olsen for having looked for the truth rather than Kent for having lied and hidden his identity in the first place. However, even though Superman is, in the end, able to continue his existence as Clark and returned to the status quo, Olsen's foray into superheroics as Elastic Lad nevertheless produces an anxiety about Superman's dangerous and deceptive identarian practices—an anxiety that is not similarly produced when Olsen dresses as "Leslie Lowe, girl reporter" or America's sweetheart. Unlike his more conventional undercover work, Olsen's flirtations with costumed superheroics threaten to expose the fraud underlying Superman's identity performances; unsurprisingly, then, Olsen's superadventures serve as rare breaks in an otherwise non-superpowered career.

This same difficulty is posed by Robin, the teenaged sidekick to Batman, though with one major difference: while Jimmy Olsen is only very rarely a costumed hero, superheroics are Dick Grayson's sole occupation. The son of murdered acrobats, Dick Grayson—and later, Jason Todd and Tim Drake, the second and third Robins—becomes the "ward" of Bruce Wayne, a billionaire socialite and orphan himself who seeks to avenge his own parents' murder as the crime fighting Batman. Robin's traditional costume is as *impractical* as Batman's black, full-bodied costume is *functional*, as it features bright reds, yellows, and greens, and leaves his arms, head, and legs almost fully exposed—it seems that the brightly colored Robin must be intended to serve as a distraction. Although superhero narratives demand a certain suspension of disbelief, it is additionally difficult to make sense of Batman's decision to fight alongside an adolescent. Danny Fingeroth (2004) is similarly mystified by the convention: "[I]t's hard to rationalize why an adult obsessed with preventing harm being done to innocents would take a minor—heck, a kid barely in the double digits—into life-and-death battle on a regular basis" (p. 145). For Wertham and Mosse, at least, it seems that the only possible explanation must involve sex, and the mark of some sexual deviancy remains with Batman and Robin in popular discourse even as Wertham and Mosse have themselves fallen into disrepute. Ever since the publication of Wertham's book, suggests comic book columnist Barb Lien-Cooper (2001), no hero and sidekick team has been beyond doubt, as "the concept of man and boy fighting crime as a team was invariably tainted by the 'ambiguously gay duo' rumors surrounding the dynamic duo."

Like Superman, Batman's identities are separate and their connection secret. But while Superman has a consistent romantic interest in Lois Lane, Batman's most

enduring relationships with women are the antagonistic ones that he shares with two supervillains: Catwoman and Poison Ivy. However, Batman's closest friends are his ward and his butler, both of whom are male and, in most versions of the Batman narrative, are also the only other people who are aware of Batman's secret identity. Clearly, intimate homosocial bonds are key to Batman's survival in an otherwise lonely and isolating life, but it is precisely this reliance on same-sex relationships—as well as the absence of any non-villainous female cast members—that Wertham found so terribly suspect in the 1950s. "The feeling is conveyed that we men must stick together because there are so many villainous creatures who have to be exterminated," writes Wertham. "Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature 'Batman' and his young friend 'Robin'" (p. 193). The qualification of Batman as "mature" and Robin as "young" also appears to imply some sort of pederastic relationship between the two, though Wertham never explicitly says this much.

Importantly, Batman's butler, Alfred Pennyworth is entirely ignored by Wertham. Despite the fact that Pennyworth raised Bruce Wayne in much the same way Wayne does Robin—Michael Caine, who played the butler in *Batman Begins*, describes him as "Batman's batman" (Tilley 2005)—and that Pennyworth is himself a lifelong bachelor, critics and readers have rarely expressed an anxiety over Pennyworth and Wayne's relationship that is in any way comparable to the queer speculation generated by Batman and Robin. However, recalling my argument that Jimmy Olsen's antics did more to unsettle Superman's claim to normative status when Olsen was himself costumed, Batman's relationship with Pennyworth may escape suspicion because Alfred does not fight crime with his employer or wear a costume. Indeed, the "subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism" that Wertham identifies is premised mostly on those details that would not apply to Pennyworth—that is, Batman and Robin's professional relationship and their superhero outfits. Wertham suggestively labels the duo's superhero attire "special uniforms" and implies that they signify a connection in excess of superhero and sidekick. Strange, then, that Pennyworth's obsession with cleanliness and impeccable fashion sense—qualities that been long associated with gay men—have rarely earned even the slightest mention.

Bill Boichel (1991) explains that Robin was created in 1940 for entirely economic reasons and with two explicit purposes in mind: to make Batman younger without changing Bruce Wayne himself and to provide a character with whom the mostly preteen readership could more easily identify. Just as Jimmy Olsen's success inspired the expansion of the imperiled coworker sidekick, so too was Robin the first of many oft imperiled *costumed* protégés. Often, Robin is more of a hindrance than a help, overestimating his own abilities in an impetuous attempt to prove his masculine might and getting himself captured, beaten, or otherwise embarrassed in the process. In a story chronicling Dick Grayson's first year as Batman's sidekick, a 12-year-old Robin challenges the schizophrenic Two Face—whose every decision

must be arrived at by a coin toss—to flip a coin to determine whether the kidnapped Judge Watkins will be hanged or not (Dixon and Pulido 2002). Although Two Face loses the toss, he outwits Robin, instead drowning the judge and capturing the despondent sidekick. In a further cruel twist of fate, Robin's failure to beat Two Face affords Batman the time needed to break free of his own deathtrap and pounce on the villain without warning. Thus, while this story at first inverts the more common scenario in which the sidekick is captured and used to entrap the hero, Robin fails and the two eventually revert to form. However, that Robin is occasionally successful in his superheroics further complicates the matter of his relationship—professional or otherwise—with Batman. Simon Watney (1987) writes that "the gay man is truly polymorphous: he may fuck and be fucked" (p. 28), and this variability with regard to Robin's gendered narrative function suggests that the costumed sidekick adds an unpredictable and queer dimension to the superhero story. "Above all," Watney continues, "homosexuality problematises the casual identification of primary power with the figure of the biological male as masterful penetrator. It equally problematies the parallel identification of powerlessness and passivity with the figure of the biological female as submissive and penetrated" (p. 28). As such, Robin's occasional successes not only disturb Batman's particular claim to heteronormative status through his ability to invert, albeit temporarily, who "may fuck" and who can "be fucked," but they also disturb the usually invisible artifice of the "master penetrator" discourse and reveal its logics.

In fact, the polymorphous gendered narrative function of the sidekick comes to be a superpower of its own. As Dick Grayson, Robin is a pitied and lonely orphan, but one who can transform into the wise-cracking and envied assistant to Batman. As well, Robin is able, at least for the duration of the narrative middle, to become like a full-fledged superhero in confronting Two Face only because he is being trained *as* a superhero, *by* a superhero, in the first place. My point is simply this: Robin does not simply cast doubt upon the sexuality of sidekicks or even upon sidekicks and the superheroes who train them. Rather, Robin's costumed "gay" sidekick status—predicated as it is upon uniforms, secret identities, unusual abilities, isolation, and superhero homosociality—implicates the *entire* tradition of masked superheroes.

Conclusions: Dead Sidekicks and the Mark of the Other

It is probably not surprising to learn that Robin has disappeared entirely from the Batman narrative at various times over the course of his textual and cinematic existences. Indeed, Medhurst suggests that, "[i]f one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin" (1991, 159). DC Comics seemed to realize as much in 1969—shortly after the campy 1960s Batman television show that costarred Robin was cancelled—by sending Dick Grayson to college after twenty-nine years and nearly 1,000 issues of Batman and Robin stories. Although Grayson was replaced in 1983 by a street orphan named Jason Todd, the

new Robin would never have the chance to equal his predecessor's career longevity. In a 1989 story titled "A Death in the Family" (1989), DC allowed readers to determine whether Todd would live or die via participation in a 1-900 telephone poll. The votes in favor of his murder at the hands of the Joker were slim—a mere 50.33 percent of the total—but the margin was decisive enough for the publishers, and Todd was killed in a trap laid by the Joker. For Medhurst, the vote was expressive of the anxiety that Robin's presence in Bruce Wayne's home and as Batman's partner provoked, "It's intriguing to speculate how much latent (or blatant) homophobia lay behind that vote. Did the fans decide to kill off Jason Todd so as to redeem Batman for unproblematic heterosexuality?"(p. 160). It is entirely possible that Jason Todd's death is indicative of a desire in some readers of Batman comic books to erase or repress the possibility of non-heteronormative sexuality by eliminating its most obvious signifier in Robin.

Although Robin has since been recast a second time, the Boy Wonder no longer lives in Wayne's home and the boundary between he and Batman is more clearly defined, as a more repressed and violent hero has followed from the 1989 Tim Burton *Batman* film. "His humorlessness, fondness for violence and obsessive monomania," notes Medhurst, "seem to me exemplary qualities for a heterosexual man" (p. 162). In this newest iteration of the Dynamic Duo, the homosociality enjoyed by previous Batman and Robin teams is tacitly admitted to have been in need of discipline and restriction. With the memory of the second Robin's death ever-present, these recent comic books warn of the dangers inherent in superhero partnerships and aim at separating Batman from the brightly colored world of Robin and his campy history. The heteronormative superhero is redefined as a sort of noir hero, enabling him to continue a solitary but less sexually problematic mission. Meanwhile, the queer potentiality of Robin is contained both symbolically and literally with the threat of death that is symbolized by Jason Todd's uniform, a ghostly presence under a glass case in Batman's headquarters.

In Foucault's (1986) description of friendship, the friend is considered one who calls our attention to the limits and boundaries that enclose us so as to allow us the chance to discover ways to exceed and free ourselves from those same limits. Friendship erases difference along the homosocial continuum and allows for a productive tension not unlike the queer anxiety generated by the "gay" sidekick and his "straight" superhero mentor. But while this understanding of friendship allows us to view superhero homosociality and the "gay" sidekick as offering potentially liberatory challenges to regimes of heteronormativity, it is important to note that a code of hegemonic masculine virtue is reinstated at the conclusion of many of these stories and made to seem all the more natural for having prevailed and reasserted itself in opposition to the more ambiguous and threatening alternatives. As such, the "gay" sidekick is typically useful only insofar as he allows these alternatives to be identified, contained, and marginalized so as to facilitate the advancement of the primary, heteronormative narrative.

Where the sidekick exceeds even *these* restraints, as he invariably does when he is given a costume like the hero's, the mere trace of his presence—Jason Todd's

costume displayed almost as a sort of trophy—can likewise serve as an effective disciplinary measure and safely straighten the superhero. However, this trace is itself an admission of the "gay" sidekick's pivotal role in defining and maintaining the unity of the heteronormative American male superhero, and while queer anxiety may be repressed in such instances, it can never be finally escaped. The contentious and anxious relationship of the superhero and sidekick reveal that the construction of normative values and the characters who embody them is always an incomplete and contested process in constant need of reinforcement. To Otherize certain forms of gendered and sexed/sexualized difference, those same differences and the characters who embody them must be recognized as potential alternatives to the established order—even if they are only recognized through the superhero's resistance *to* and refusal *of* them. As such, the seemingly straightened primary narrative remains beholden to the "gay" sidekick, who simultaneously undermines regimes of heteronormativity and so is afforded the opportunity to star in another sort of story altogether, even if only for the duration of that anxious middle act.

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Bio

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