

THE COMIC BOOK VILLAIN'S BODY: DEVIANT  
SEXUALITY AND GENDER-TRANSGRESSION

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Abstract: Oftentimes, superheroes are recognized in the fields of visual rhetoric, popular culture, and literature as means for persuading and influencing masculine identity. With the explosive popularity of comic books and the presence of them in varying media, comic books necessitate the exploration and investigation in regards to how they affect a mass consumerist audience and society. Despite this newfound attention to comic books as viable scholarly material, supervillains remain largely dismissed from the academic discourse regarding their influence on gender and sexuality under the umbrella of masculine identity and performance. By examining the first explicitly homosexual character in a comic book and his portrayal, along with a supervillain that has amassed considerable popularity and has changed drastically overtime, this paper intends to set the groundwork for future academic scholarship over identity, gender, sexuality, and comic books. Ultimately, it appears that comic books, whether explicitly or unintentionally, reiterate and reinforce a heteronormative agenda and social framework by having the supervillains embody gender-transgressive characteristics and deviant sexuality.

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## CHAPTER I

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THE LIMITED PRESENCE OF SUPERVILLAINS IN GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND IDENTITY STUDIES

Walking through any toy aisle in the United States will illustrate the resurgence of comic book popularity, especially of its superheroes; Ironman masks, Superman capes, and Batman gadgets line the shelves. The twenty-first century has seen an explosion of superheroes and their supervillain counterparts in comic books, on television, and on the silver screen. Much has been written about the portrayal of superheroes and the ideologies they either reinforce or dismantle. But what do we know about the supervillain? Their lack of presence in a consumerist society makes for a useful metaphor in academia, as do the marginalized figures they represent in sociohistorical and political contexts.

Many cultural theorists and scholars have noted that the consumption of popular culture oftentimes results in an ideological discourse that informs the observer of particular social “truths.” According to popular cultural forms, American cultural ideology rests on the principle of good and evil, right and wrong, correct and

incorrect, all of which are played out in the constructions of the comic book superhero and supervillain. Superheroes are typically superhuman with biological traits that have allowed them to transcend ordinary humanity, and their superhuman abilities have salvific purposes. The supervillain, on the other hand, hardly has any superhuman, biological traits outside of superior intellect. The differences between the superhero and the supervillain are most exemplified in the physical body of the two types of characters.

World War II saw the economic and cultural boom of the comic book. Comic book publishers knew that their largest consumers were soldiers serving abroad and adolescent boys in the United States. The ever-popular superheroes Superman and Captain America played into notions of American supremacy and patriotism, fighting the evil-doer and winning the victory. Oftentimes, the villains in these comic books reflected individuals, people, and ideologies that the majority of the United States saw as “real” threats, such as Hitler and the Nazi regime, communism and the Soviet Union, and any stereotype that went against the ideological values of the United States.

As Roger Sabine noted in his book *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*, around the end of the Second World War and the comic books’ boom into popularity, the villain’s body tended to take up significant space when compared to the superhero. Yet when we look at comic book characters post-Vietnam, the villain’s body tends to become more waif-like with features that are associated with the feminine, such as lack of facial hair and muscle definition, while the male superhero’s body tends to be hypermasculinized and take up more symbolic space than the villain’s body – a complete reversal of earlier comics.



The American superhero's physical presence tended to follow the needs of the masses during times of war. The beginnings of superheroes in the United States followed the David and Goliath myths; the hero was dwarfed by the physical presence of the enemy, but he would also prevail as the victor (Lang and Trimble 158, 160). For example, after WWI, "Superman was created to shore up the sagging spirits of a country that had lost its innocence" and restore the hope that the family and individual could triumph against an impressive enemy (Lang and Trimble 161). Arguably, the reversal of the enemy from a hypermasculine size to a waif appearance is due in large part to the change in the nature of the enemy for the United States from the Second World War to the Vietnam War. While the Nazis were a significant political and military force that could be spotted through uniform, the Vietnamese were small in stature and threat in large part due to Americans' inability to tell apart North and South Vietnamese. With the "demythification" of the superhero in the 1960s, in large part due to Stan Lee's involvement with Marvel, the supervillain had to follow suit and have "more human personalities" and "more complex personalities" (Lang and Trimble 165). In many ways, comic books not only reflected cultural identities, they also helped to create them by displaying characters with human frailties and more than one-dimensional personalities.

Comic books have become such an important cultural phenomenon that there are now many studies of the field. Although there are numerous directions within comic book studies for scholars to take politico-economic, cultural, historical, and character developmental appear to be the most prevalent<sup>1</sup>. Scott McCloud's research laid the

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Sabine, Scott McCloud, Jeffrey A. Brown, Danny Fingeroth, Matthew Pustz, Bradford Wright, Matt McAllister, Peter Coogan, and Hubert H. Crawford are some of the best known and most prolific scholars that focus on comic book studies

foundation for the vocabulary and theoretical framework necessary for understanding comics and examined the rhetorical capabilities of comics, comic books, and graphic novels. Comic book studies exploration became grounded and first seen as a legitimate and literary field when examined through a politico-economic lens. Not only did the politico-economic approach lay the groundwork for future comic book scholarship, this approach sought to understand how the self-consciously commercial industry of the comic book affected and was affected by historical and economic movements in the United States, namely the Second World War and the Vietnam War.

The politico-economic approach focuses on design or narrative development, and when they have focused on character development, these scholars almost exclusively focus on the superhero's development in relation to major economic and political events in the United States. Two examples are Jeffrey A. Brown's examination of how comic books function as a self-consciously commercial industry, and Peter Coogan's groundbreaking book on comic book studies, theory, and definition, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, which provides a foundation for comic book studies and discourse, explaining the minute and subtle differences between "super heroes," regular people who perform amazing tasks, and "superheroes," individuals who have superhuman abilities, and how the superhero character has evolved into its contemporary monomythic figure today. However, these studies do not examine the effects of comic books on their readers or as ideological models. Although these political and economic influences are necessary for understanding comic book studies and design changes in comic books, culture and historical approaches have also proven fruitful.

A historical approach to comic books examines how superheroes are created to reflect a culture's idealized national character and how superheroes may influence cultural development. In other words, scholars look at how superheroes and supervillains offer insight into the ways a culture sees itself and *wishes* to see itself<sup>2</sup>. One example is Bradford Wright's book, which provides a comprehensive historical and politico-economic view of comic books, but also inspects how these movements affected the youth of America at the time of these political movements, such as the Second World War, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War. He goes on to explain that comic books allowed for a subversive discourse to occur on a social level for the youth of America during times of crisis. Another example is Matthew Pustz's investigation on how comic book fandom continually influences the comic book industry, and how these consumers have produced a specific and unique culture. Unfortunately, limitations exist, and their focus does not take into account the ways in which the characters in these subversive or reader-influenced comics changed; rather, these scholars focus on the ultimate outcome and not the steps or progress of these changes.

In a similar vein, the cultural approach to comic book studies looks at how the superheroes and supervillains act as iconic receptacles for cultural values, fears, and aspirations. A comprehensive example is the book *Heroes & Villains* by Mike Alsford. He writes, "What a culture considers heroic and what it considers villainous says a lot about that culture's underlying attitudes – attitudes that many of us may be unaware that we have, and which present cultural currents that we may be equally unaware of being

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<sup>2</sup> Sabine, Fingerroth, and Crawford tend to focus on how superheroes and their comic books reiterate and reflect societal and cultural values, while also examining how comic books fit into a historical context

caught up in” (2). Alsford approaches heroes and villains using the functionalist approach, examining heroes and villains from a mythological and historical standpoint and how such approaches function on a cultural circuit. The limitations, however, are a lack of concentration on popular media forms. Instead, Alsford’s approach relies heavily on mythology, and he does not take into account the validity of comic books as modern-day forms of mythology, since only a few pages are dedicated to the examination of comic book figures.

The examination of character development is another approach that has had some success, and this approach looks at how characters have changed (or not changed) over time, and what these changes may signify. Superheroes and heroes traditionally have significant exposure in film and literary scholarship. However, the limitation of these studies is the villains and supervillains remain in the dusty corners of the fields, rarely examined and when they are, it is not comprehensively carried out. One example of the character development approach is Danny Fingeroth’s monograph, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society*. His work may come closer to examining character development in comic books and popular culture than other scholars, but continues to approach villainy with some distance and simplicity. Again, a limitation is the majority of the monograph reflects the title and focuses on the superhero character in terms of race, gender, and values. Sexuality is completely dismissed from the discussion, and the chapter dedicated to the superheroes’ counterparts analyzes the supervillain as simply functioning as the antithesis to the superheroes’ value systems. Unlike Alsford, who at least devotes a few pages to the examination of villainy through a cultural and character development lens, Fingeroth goes on to argue that

villains may not be worth scholarly examination because “the villains can be seen as having more well-defined values than the heroes,” and therefore do not provide much complexity (163). Fingeroth continues to explain that the supervillain simply represents the dark side of the superhero and functions as reaffirmation for the value system that the superhero exists to uphold<sup>3</sup>.<sup>8</sup> Fingeroth certainly is valid in his general estimation of the villain; however, such an argument suggests that villains are stagnant in their development through comic book history, which I contend is not the case.

When comic book superheroes are not being examined as cultural indicators, most scholars tend to explore how superheroes affect adolescents’ attitudes regarding moral and ethical understanding, working within concepts of character development and cultural studies. Jeff Martin explains in his article “Children’s Attitudes Toward Superheroes as a Potential Indicator of Their Moral Understanding” that when children imitate superheroes through role-playing, “the issues addressed by the students reflected larger social concerns regarding gender, race and class,” including social responsibility (242). Again, Martin’s work is useful when examining the influence and power of the superhero and comic book medium on adolescents’ moral outlook, yet his limitation is that there appears to be little to no scholarship on how these morals ultimately affect an adolescent’s view on gender, race, class, or sexuality.

Although much of the scholarship on comic book study tends to ignore or gloss over the villains, Alsford argues that such an examination is necessary, vital, and may be even more informative than a pure examination of the hero if we examine (super)heroes

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<sup>38</sup> Another notable source is: Hughes, Jamie A. “‘Who Watches the Watchmen?’: Ideology and ‘Real World’ Superheroes.” *Journal of Popular Culture*. 39.4 (2006): 546-557. Print.

and villains through a historical lens. Granted, Alsford spends the majority of his monograph focused on a historical exploration of how these heroes and superheroes *are not* villains, but this in turn allows him to draw a distinction between heroes, anti-heroes, and villains. He explains that a major reason villainy has not been examined in a popular culture field, including comic books, is because of the difficulty in defining villainy; as a society, we have few qualms with identifying our positive attributes, but our fears and prejudices may be more complicated. For Alsford, true villainy “has to do with the desire to dominate, to subsume the other within the individual self and without compunction. The villain would appear to lack empathy, the ability to feel for others, to see themselves as part of a larger whole. The villain uses the world and the people in it from a distance, as a pure resource” (120). This definition is a useful step in the right direction for an informative discourse on villains, but even with such a definition, villainy and its characters go significantly unexamined in popular culture. The villains that I examine in this thesis fall into the category of supervillains, although the argument can be made that they are anti-heroes given the particular characteristics of these villains, such as their ability to embody American counter-cultures in gender and sexuality, anti-heroes tend to be protagonists who lack conventional heroic attributes.

As an emerging field, comic book studies offers valuable insight into a culture’s value systems, beliefs, and anxieties. In the realm of American popular culture, comic books and graphic novels have emerged as influential media that both reflect and reiterate tensions within American society. Little argument can be made that superheroes are not dominant mediators in this discourse, yet it is odd that supervillains have gone largely overlooked. In fact, through the lens of gender, sexuality, and identity, superheroes have

had some examination, but supervillains remain on the outskirts of discussion or are completely omitted.

### **Gender and Sexuality**

One approach to studying character development and culture in comic books is through gender and sexuality, which focuses on the superheroes and their embodiment of a normative heterosexual masculine ideal. For example, Carol A. Stabile focuses on the continued, limited representation of females as superheroes in an American, post-September 11, 2001, militarized nation. She explains that we have an “inability to imagine women as anything but vulnerable and in the need of protection,” and that it is historically justified (89). Stabile’s article then moves on to explain the masculine ideal as it is represented in the heroes and rejected in their female counterparts. The idea that men maintain the authoritative and superheroic role in television and film and women remain in need of protection is an unfortunate one, but not necessarily a radical idea in Western popular culture. However valid this approach, most scholars have tended to treat gender and sexuality in rather simplistic ways by either focusing on how female characters are visually portrayed and interacted with in comics by other characters or limiting their focus on male character development to the superhero and his visual construction in a heteropatriarchal culture, dismissing the supervillain from discussion.

Furthering the gender and sexuality approach, most scholarship tends to focus on gender-transgression and sexuality in regards to the female superhero in comic books. One example is Carolyn Cocca, who discusses the relationship of gender and sexuality with superheroes, namely Wonder Woman in relation to third wave feminism. Cocca

considers how Wonder Woman has evolved from her first conception as a female superbody<sup>4</sup> to a female character that has created a space for the production of new gender possibilities as displayed in the body. She even argues that Wonder Woman takes on characteristically male attributes, such as control of her body and reproductive life, challenging heteropatriarchal notions of sexuality. However, the limitation with this approach is Cocca's article does not include the male superbody as possibly embodying progressive or alternative notions to gender and sexuality. Rather, like most scholars in this field, she argues that male superheroes are fixed and resolute in their gender performances in comic books, and that these performances are necessary in reinforcing and articulating the heteronormative, patriarchal ideal. This does ring true, but scholars may be looking in the wrong place for gender transgression in relation to male comic book characters.

Despite male and female superheroes receiving attention from the perspective of gender and sexuality, almost no one has examined the super-villain. Of those who have studied supervillains, most have tended to focus only on their role as obstacles to the fulfillment of the heroes' goals, as embodying American society's "darker desires," or as reaffirmation for the value system that the superhero exists to uphold. Attempting to bridge the gap between gender performance and identity are Kaysee Baker and Arthur A. Raney. They spotlight the impact of heroes and villains on adolescents in regards to gender performance, but focus their article further by examining the specific role of the

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<sup>4</sup> The superbody is the body that goes beyond the capabilities of "normal" human bodies or standard human capabilities



superhero<sup>5</sup> Although this article is unique and useful in its approach by examining the role of the superhero, their discourse is largely limited to discussions of how the male superhero impacts gender and identity-formation for female adolescents, and appears to dismiss the superhero's impact on male identity and altogether ignore the supervillain.

## **Identity**

Given the popularity of the American superhero image in popular culture and consumer market, superhero comic books may offer a glimpse into ideas surrounding gender performance and identity on a mass scale. When discussing gender performance, I rely on Judith Butler's<sup>6</sup> discussions surrounding gender performances and concepts of masculinity and femininity. Judith Butler explains that the "performativity" of gender is contingent upon language, symbolic social signs, and gesture that create the illusion of gender and the ways in which gender is understood socially. Diana Fuss argues that representation of gender identity, which is founded on Kenneth Burke's concepts of identification and persuasion, may cause physical change through persuasion (qtd. in Ratcliffe 62 ). Krista Ratcliffe contends that gender identification and disidentification are inextricably linked because disidentification is the identification that the individual is unable to deal with or the one he fears to make (Ratcliffe 193).

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<sup>5</sup> Notable in the realm of psychology, Victoria Ingalls has examined superheroes and female gender performance in her article, "Sex Differences in the Creation of Fictional Heroes with Particular Emphasis on Female Heroes and superheroes in Popular Culture: Insights from Evolutionary Psychology" from the *Review of General Psychology* (2012) Vol.16, No.2, pp. 208-221.

<sup>6</sup>See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter*

Other scholars have already acknowledged how superheroes embody idealistic representations of male gender construction, both as a performance and as an identity. Bronwyn T. Williams is one notable scholar in the field of identity and popular culture. Although he does not examine superheroes, he does examine the use of the hero, identity, and literacy. Williams explains, “In movies, including those in the action genre, reading and writing often fulfill established conventions in the narrative as well as serving as markers for the identities of the characters [...] if we look at the common portrayals of literacy in action movies and television programs we can begin to see patterns in the way power and literacy are used (or dismissed), as well as interesting portrayals of literacy and gender” (682). He goes on to explain that heroes tend to have literacy as part of their arsenal, but it is not the focus of their power, while villains tend to be highly literate and use this capability quite often in comparison to the hero (683). Ultimately, literacy is portrayed as unmasculine and unheroic because of its association with the villain.

Another example is Aaron Taylor, who focuses on the production and creation of the superhero body in a cultural field. He quotes Susan Wood by writing, “Superhero comics continue to be marketed according to ‘the old, old moulds, in which women are wenches, bitches, or weepy blond recreation equipment’ (Wood qtd. in Taylor), and men’s musculature reaches Schwarzeneggarian proportions” (346). He does admit that the superhero body in comic books, despite being largely drawn for a male, adolescent audience, contains some of the most complex representations of the body to be found anywhere (347). The complexity comes from the concept that the male body is physically portrayed on a musculature range from the “Schwarzeneggarian” to the waif. In addition, the bodies of superheroes embody an “otherness” because, by definition, these bodies

possess superhuman capabilities that run the gambit of the imagination. Also, Taylor does point out that the superhero comic and the bodies it portrays have the capacity to reconceptualize, undermine, and subvert the culturally enforced heterosexual masculine ideal. Unfortunately, Taylor does not elaborate on the subject, and fails to take into account the superheroes' counterparts, the villains, when examining culturally subversive bodies through the lens of sexuality and gender.

Despite addressing sexually and gender-subversive bodies in superhero comic books, Taylor focuses on the female superheroes, not the male superheroes, as embodying an emerging "superbody" that is androgynous (346). Although important in comic book studies, this examination fails to recognize the possibility of the superhero or supervillain body as overthrowing the visual emphasis of the gender binary so apparent in superhero comic books. Taylor also claims that "accoutrements of femininity are put on and rigorously policed," which suggests that androgyny cannot occur within a strictly male superbody because that would mean that said accoutrements and attributes were not policed (353). For example, Taylor explains that the revealing spandex suit and voluptuousness of the female comic book body is the standard, and musculature must be kept in check. Otherwise, the muscled female body can become too much like their male counterparts and "unsettle" the heteropatriarchy of Western society (353). Policing the comic book body implies that the bodies in question must conform to Western notions of gender performances as explained by Butler. Unfortunately, Taylor's broad claim fails to take into account the possibility that male superheroes or even supervillains may possess Western notions of feminine attributes and accoutrements.

Whereas Williams addresses the role of literacy and masculine identity, Megan Vokey with Bruce Teft and Chris Tysiaczny, and Jonathan E. Schroeder with Detlev Zwick examine how the male body is used in order to construct masculine identity and identification through the application of visual rhetoric and gender studies. However, both of their articles solely focus on its appearance in advertisements. Vokey, Teft, and Tysiaczny explain, “During adolescence, boys start to identify more strongly with the masculine stereotype” on a visual level, and conformity to the idealized masculine body is reinforced (564). On the other hand, they explain “Non-conforming males are often excluded, bullied, or labelled with terms implying the ‘inferior’ status of a homosexual or girl” (565). Schroeder and Zwick believe that advertisements as a popular cultural form “influence cultural and individual conceptions of identity” as well as “recent developments in representing masculinity” (24). What makes their argument useful in examining comic books, a medium dominated by male readers, is the concept of the male body becoming an object of the male gaze (26).

If we follow Burke’s argument and discussion of the gaze, it is typically the female body that is receptive of the male gaze. The concept of the male gaze refers to the framing of objects through a masculine viewpoint or lens, whether literally or metaphorically speaking, which often leads to females being the objects of the gaze in question. Because of this male-dominated point of view in a heteropatriarchal culture, Burke argues that women become objects of attraction and the male gaze because they are used as aesthetic *objects*. Though both articles offer insight into identity, masculinity, and the visual representation of the male body, neither considers the role of the popular visual medium of comic books nor looks at the reverse effects of portraying a physical,

masculine ideal. They do not examine how a non-conforming or non-idealized male body may affect identity formation for the male viewer.

Though briefly addressed by Williams, the villains' function in the realm of embodiment and identity appears to be glossed over or wholly dismissed from the discourse. Film critics Yvonne Tasker and Meredith Li-Vollmer with Mark E. LaPointe have addressed the visual rhetoric of villains and heroes in action cinema and animated film, respectively. Tasker argues that the appearance of "muscular cinema... inflects and redefines already existing cinematic and cultural discourses of race, class and sexuality," and that popular cinema "affirms gendered identities at the same times as it mobilizes identifications and desires which undermine the stability of such categories" (5). Tasker's critical and in-depth analysis of the action genre in the 1980s serves as a substantial sounding board for masculinity and identity analysis in comic books because of its roots in popular culture, but such critical examinations still dismiss the influence and proliferation of the comic book, especially on perceptions of masculinity and for young male readers, but the presence of villains is underexplored.

Popular culture continues to act as a platform for study regarding notions of identity, especially identification, in an era that is bombarded with technology and immediate accessibility. Henry Jenkins explores the impact that popular culture has on identity formation and emotional connection in *Wow Climax* and specifically his chapter on "Death-Defying Heroes." Jenkins explains that comics, unlike most popular-culture media forms, have an uncanny ability to be timeless despite their constant fluctuations to reflect current times. He claims that a reader "can go away for decades on end," find his way back to the comic book, "and get reintroduced to the protagonist more or less where

[he] left them” (67). Jenkins' focuses on the timelessness of the superheroes is noteworthy; however, his discourse is limited because he seems to leave out the perpetual transformations and shifting personalities of the villains. More importantly, he assumes villains are unavailable for identification or have no influence on identity formation.

Much like John Fiske's argument that cultural and social factors shape technology more significantly than technology shapes culture, Williams explains that as the public acknowledges acceptable forms of identity, it also reiterates societal expectations of gender performance, and for the limits of my study, of masculinity. Williams explains in his article, “'What *South Park* Character Are You': Popular Culture, Literacy, and Online Performances of Identity,” that popular culture content is used by young adults to compose their identities and read the identities of others (25). Because “mass popular culture has created common cultural references that are shared by millions of people who may have never met,” it reinforces social expectations (Williams 27). Just as all individuals construct an identity in the way they construct their virtual or real selves, so do comic book artists and writers when creating superheroes and villains.

McCloud makes the argument for comic books as a crucial medium for examining identity in his book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. Just like cartoons, McCloud explains that comic books have the ability “to focus our attention on an idea” because they allow space “into which our identity and awareness are pulled... We don't just observe the cartoon, we become it” (31, 36). Much like social networking sites use multiple platforms, images, texts, and other creations to construct identities, as Williams suggests, comic books use the juxtaposition of the villain with the superhero to construct a sense of identity that can be read both quickly and in relation to each other (32). By

creating two clearly opposed constructions of masculine identity and gender performance in the villain and superhero, misreadings and misunderstandings are least likely to occur when it comes to socially accepted constructions of masculinity for the reader. Heroes and superheroes may be our obvious choice for scholarly examination, but comic book villains should not be overlooked.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis is designed to redress the deficiencies in the scholarship with regard to the supervillain and the way in which his villainy has been associated with prominent discourses about gender, and sexuality, and identity. Rather than taking the categories of sex and gender for granted, I will be using feminist and queer theories, as well as cyborg theory, to show how gender and sexuality are “at stake” in the struggle between the super-heroes and super-villains. These theories are beneficial because of their application in and to popular cultural media.

Feminist theory helps to centralize the argument when discussing gender performance and identification, and its application in the realm of visual rhetoric helps to define and analyze what it means to be “feminine” or “female.” Feminism differentiates between sex (biological or anatomical categorization) and gender (the social construction and performance of a sex). By differentiating between the two, feminism sought to explain and demonstrate how being born as a female meant performing within the confines of that gender in a heteronormative framework. Of course, as the study of feminism expanded, other explorations disrupted this singular approach to gender, sex, and identity, such as Patricia Hill Collins’ theory of intersectionality (Collins qtd. in

Bieniek and Leavy). Whereas feminism examined being female and feminine – performing the gender binary – intersectionality introduced the concept that categories relating to sex and gender are anything but fixed or binary. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality within feminism incorporates interrelated systems of society, such as race and class, with gender identification in the oppressive system of heteropatriarchal dominance. For example, intersectional feminism goes beyond white, middle-class, cisgendered individuals, and proposes that the experience of male dominance is complicated through race, class, ethnicity, and able-bodiedness.

Branching from feminist studies, queer theory allows for critical discussion surrounding ideas about the queer or homosexual body when dealing with a typified male body. I use the term “queer” as a term to mark something as deviant, unconventional, or non-conforming to standards and norms that are socially accepted, especially within a heteropatriarchal framework. Succinctly, a queer identity or gender implies gender is an abstract and complex concept that suggests different things to different people, depending on the status quo of his or her culture or society. Such an interpretation of “queer” would propose that the relationship between gender and sex is artificial. Queer theory offers a great amount of utility when investigating concepts of gender roles, sexuality, and gender transgression. Since its inception in academic vernacular, “queer” has maintained multiple meanings, and it is in these broad and narrow definitions that I find tools for my argument and research. Queer theory encompasses lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual images and individuals, while also having applications to larger understandings of those existing outside the heteronormative ideal or the binary constructions of gender and gender performance within a heteropatriarchal society. I



utilize analytical queer theory in my essay because such an approach attempts to examine the correlation between sex, gender, and sexuality, specifically developed from lesbian and gay identity. Queer theory allows for the scholar to examine identity as an amalgamation of multiple and variable positions and identities. Essentially, queer theory troubles the gender binaries that feminist theory utilizes in its approach. In addition, in order to examine the “queered” body as artificial, I apply cyborg theory under the umbrella of queer theory.

Cyborg theory examines how the cybernetic organism embodies the rejection of rigid boundaries, most notably examined in Donna Haraway’s work, “A Cyborg Manifesto.” A fitting definition for my work, Haraway writes, “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity. In a sense, the cyborg has no origin story in the Western sense” (292). Cyborg theory posits the idea of a heteroglossic interpretation of the body, which has close ties with feminist and queer theory. Such an interpretation means that both conflicting and compatible ideas within a singular subject are viable. Although Haraway’s main point is about the relationship between technology and society, her argument highlights how cybernetic organisms both highlight, embody, and reiterate the differences and cohabitation of reality and artifice. Of course, the interpretation also rests on the prevailing categorization and ideology, and in a heteropatriarchal society, the cybernetic becomes the artifice, while the organism becomes the “natural” reality. When applied to queer theory, the cyborg becomes the means in which boundaries and bodies are “queered,” and given that many comic books

rely on cyborg characters or characters involved in technology and cybernetics, it offers a lens through which to explore how cyborgs and technology are used in the creation of the supervillain.

The genre of the superhero comic book is enormous in scope, so for my thesis, I limit my focus to two key supervillains and the ways in which their villainy reiterates and reinforces a heteronormative agenda, while at the same embodying and permitting a subversive perspective. In order to examine the evolution of the archetype of the queer body as undesirable, I look at Loki in the 2014 release of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*. In large part, I chose this character because of his significant increase in popularity in recent years and the dramatic change in how the artist conceptualized Loki's body from initial creation to current issues. By examining Loki, I am able to explore the evolution of the masculine body over the course of his development. Although the first appearance of Loki was in 1949, the character did not reach any sort of popularity until the work of John Buscema in the Bronze Age of comic books (1970-1983). Later, thanks to the explosive popularity of the Marvel movie franchise, Loki has seen a resurgence in popularity, and with his resurgence, and arguably some inspiration from Tom Hiddleston's portrayal of the character, he has undergone a physical transformation. It is this newfound and astounding popularity that makes this particular villain one of crucial importance. News and tabloid reports from *USA Today* to *BBC America* claim there is a worldwide "Loki Cult," where the supervillain is more popular than the superhero, venerated by die-hard comic book fans, teenage girls, and every individual in between. Loki's physical transformation comes charged with influence; how he has changed and his popularity may offer insight about our culture and the significance of the changes.

The second supervillain I examine is Samuel “Starr” Saxon, alias Machinesmith, who was the first explicitly gay comic book character and appears significantly in *Captain America* and *Daredevil* comics beginning in the late 1960s and up through 2012. In an interview, Barry Smith, who was the original creator and artist for the character admitted that Samuel “Starr” Saxon was meant to be the first gay comic book character and remained one of the few until the 1990s. Having the first gay comic book character as a supervillain provides an opportunity to examine gender and sexuality in relation to villainy and cultural perception. Plus, the visual rhetoric within comic books also lays the foundation for how gay characters will be viewed in a popular culture medium, and how the first explicitly gay character is visually constructed may indicate how a culture perceives homosexual individuals and the stereotypes related to them.

When organizing my thesis, I chose to place the newer supervillain, Loki, first because much of the discussion of identity and disidentity provides the framework for examining Saxon/Machinesmith. In addition, I chose to show how supervillains are currently queered by presenting my research on Loki in the following chapter. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate contemporary constructions of villains in comic books, and then turn attention to the past to show how queer identities were founded through Saxon/Machinesmith, the first explicitly gay comic book character. Notably, my research will also show how Saxon/Machinesmith transformed over time, and ultimately coinciding with some of the same depictions and constructions as Loki.

With Loki, the queering of the supervillain body continues, reinforcing an already damaging popular rhetoric of “queer as criminal” and “criminal as queer.” With the characters of Samuel “Starr” Saxon/Machinesmith and Loki, there are many avenues for

an exploration into this phenomenon that go beyond the scope of this thesis. In a culture that reinforces the ideological hierarchy of the heteronormative, it is necessary to study how popular means of communication and entertainment reiterate, reinforce, and complicate such ideological constructions of the queer body as criminal or in need of policing. Just as Machinesmith and Loki reflect a popular cultural rhetoric of queer culture as criminally dangerous, looking at the visual rhetoric of other supervillain bodies in their respective sociohistorical contexts can inform us of other cultural and political ideologies. Given the newfound popularity of comic books in mainstream entertainment, it seems necessary to critically examine the supervillain body as informative of social “truths.”

## CHAPTER II

### “WHAT A PRECIOUS LITTLE GIRL-CHILD I AM:” THE VILLAINOUS LOKI, DISIDENTIFICATION, AND THE GENDER TRANSGRESSIVE BODY

In 2006, my friends and I drove to Dallas to attend the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Comic Convention. Like true comic book fans, we each dressed as a favorite character. At most comic conventions, costumes are not out of the ordinary, and as we strolled through the convention center, costumes became the topic of conversation. I saw numerous couples in cosplay<sup>7</sup> as the superhero and villain: Thor and Loki, Joker and Batman, Spiderman and Venom, Captain America and Red Skull, and Wolverine and Magneto. And every time I saw a couple, the male in these heterosexual couplings always dressed as the superhero, while the female took on the role of the villain. Of course, that isn't to say men did not dress as villains, but they didn't dress as villains when they had a female companion. I began to wonder, “Why didn't men want to be the villain in these situations?”

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<sup>7</sup> The practice of dressing up as a character from a movie, book, or video game.

Male superheroes offer a way to highlight the ideal masculine identity, which suggests that this must mean that the male supervillain embodies traits that would be deemed undesirable in the significantly heteronormative Western society. Referring to American visual culture, Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detley Zwick expound, “Despite gender bending, queering, androgyny, gender remains a fundamental social, psychological and cultural category” that still reiterates “what is considered natural” and “appropriate for specific groups,” especially in the under-studied category of masculine identity (27-28). In the new series, *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki’s embodied figure vilifies gender-transgressive characteristics displayed by the male body, effectively vilifying men who participate in or embody socially constructed ideas of femininity and feminine traits. As feminist scholars like Judith Butler have shown, such criminalization and vilification is not unusual.

With her examination of Joan Riviere’s argument in her book, *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that the patriarchal structure of society has successfully created the concept of gender and its appropriate performances. Using Riviere’s term, “masquerade,” Butler highlights the artificiality of gender. Yet, those who perform their sex outside of their socially inscribed gender, tend to find themselves deemed deviant and dangerous, and in my estimation, effectively vilifying them. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler furthers her argument by specifically examining the body as a material and visual entity, and how the heterosexual hegemony informs and acts upon the body in matters of gender. Again, the body that goes against accepted displays of sex and corresponding gender faces social discrimination. In a highly visual and corporeal culture, the body is a privileged element, and as Moira Gatens and the visual rhetorician Aaron Taylor explain, corporeality

embodies meanings and contexts that are a result of its interactions with the environment, which includes society and the dominant culture (Taylor 345). Since bodies are affected and oftentimes regulated by the environment and reflect those interactions and regulations, the visual nature of the body becomes paramount in examining prevailing ideologies, including those that influence popular culture forms. In the popular culture platform of comic books, the visual nature of the medium makes it an ideal resource for analyzing the use and influence of heteropatriarchal ideologies on visual corporeality. Given that the majority of consumers of comic books are males, it is important to understand how these comic book supervillains' bodies reinforce a particular masculine identity. Not only do the male villains' bodies in comics offer a unique approach to masculine identity, they also represent cultural assumptions and beliefs that constrict and inform masculine identity.

### **Disidentity and Comic Books**

Comic books magnify the foundation for persuasion because they are self-consciously commercial in order to attract and retain as many readers as possible, especially male consumers. We cannot examine the persuasive abilities of comic books without examining to whom the industry owes its success – the young male adolescents purchasing these comic books and perpetuating the fandoms – and the cult following that has developed from it. Kenneth Burke adds to the building blocks of persuasion by suggesting that “people may be unconsciously persuaded, or socialized, into performing certain attitudes or acts via the discourses of other people, texts, and cultures” (Burke qtd. in Ratcliffe 4-5). According to Krista Ratcliffe's chapter, "Identifying Place of Rhetorical

Listening: Identification, Disidentification, and Non-Identification” in *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness*, disidentification from the supervillain effectively informs how the reader should physically look and act through rhetoric (Ratcliffe 50). Although Ratcliffe does not specifically address supervillains, she does address villains as deemed by society, such as convicted criminals or overtly violent individuals. She argues that the site for identification directs attention to outer forces that inform a person’s physical subjectivity, and that people are influenced by these identification categories.

Though identification is important and will vary to some degree for each individual, Ratcliffe claims that all identification is based on cultural assumptions that deal with disidentification – recognizing and internalizing differences that the individual refuse to embody. Ultimately, disidentification depends on resisting particular identities, no matter how faulty or stereotypical (Ratcliffe 62). John Fiske further explains this concept:

All social allegiances have not only a sense of with whom, but also of against whom: Indeed, I would argue that the sense of oppositionality, the sense of difference, is more determinant than that of similarity, or class identity, for it is shared antagonisms that produce the fluidity that is characteristic of the people in elaborated societies. (Fiske 20)

In other words, identifying *what I am not* appears to be a logically and psychologically prior connection to make than to identify *what I am*. Therefore, disidentification may be more fail-proof than attempting identification through comic books because, even if readers do not identify with the superhero, they will disidentify with the villain through



rejection of the criminal character. Identification and disidentification work inextricably together when it comes to visual rhetoric of the comic book literary medium, especially when it comes to expressing dominant and non-dominant ideologies that are embodied in the comic book superhero and villain, respectively.

Although much scholarship in the fields of visual rhetoric and gender studies has focused on the female body and gender performance within these cultural contexts<sup>8</sup>, there is a lack of focus on men, male bodies, and masculine gender roles in American society. Most of the focus in masculinity studies tends to critically examine the representation of male bodies in magazines and advertisements, and largely dismisses other forms of visual rhetoric, including the comic book. Nora Pecora is one of the few scholars who has examined the influence of comic book-superheroes on male readers, and even within this study, the influence of the male villain on readers remains largely ignored. As Schroeder and Zwick explain, male “[r]epresentations do not merely ‘express’ masculinity, rather, they play a central role in forming conceptions of masculinity” (22). Furthermore, Schroeder and Zwick note that these visual images in popular culture, like the comic book villain, “limit the ontological identity of the male by establishing a restrictive formation of masculine identity” (28). If the male superhero embodies the ideals of masculine identity, then the villain effectively embodies the traits that are vilified and rejected.

Applying Krista Ratcliffe’s argument to the comic book industry, a masculine representation of gender identity in a character “directs attention to outer forces that inform a person’s subjectivity,” and in our case, the reader (49). Kenneth Burke made the

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<sup>8</sup> See Judith Butler, John Berger, Diane Torr with Stephen Bottoms, Allan G. Johnson, Sonja Foss, Chris Shilling, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jordynn Jack

point that identification necessarily preceded persuasion, and when a reader identifies with a comic book character or “disidentifies” with one, certain cultural ideologies are both created and reiterated simultaneously (55). More often than not, identification occurs between the reader and the protagonist, while “disidentification” occurs between the reader and the antagonist. While identification has strong roots in rhetoric amongst other academic discourses, my use of “disidentification” is borrowed from Ratcliffe’s chapter. She defines disidentification as disavowed or faulty identification, which requires the individual to first *identify* with an assumed identity, then refuse to embrace the identity that acts in opposition to the assumed identity. The example Ratcliffe gives is the social identification with hero figures like policemen and firefighters, while disidentifying with their opposites, serial killers and criminals (62). This identification with the superhero leading to the disidentification from the villain reflects what Taylor refers to as “reunification” (349). Reunification implies the cyclical notion of the villain’s body informing the reader’s understanding of his own body, while at the same time, the reader interacts cerebrally with the villain’s corporeality according to the reader’s understanding of his identity in his cultural context. Essentially, the cycle includes the reader reassembling the fractured body of the villain in the panels to form a complete yet objectified body, and then using the villainous, objectified body to inform his personal identity based upon cultural assumptions of what it means to be villainous as reinforced in the comic book.

### **The Male Readership**

Comic books were solidified as a commercial industry in the 1950s because of their commercial success among male consumers. Superhero comics followed a formulaic plot, and the characters appeared to defy time because they did not appear to age, and due to the majority of comic book consumers being young males, the characters were not necessarily complex. Changes in comic book superheroes most notably occurred in the 1960s. Despite the more gender-diverse superhero cast, women remained largely silent as consumers of superhero comics. Romance and humorous comic books had better success with female consumers, and the superhero market never quite got the leverage with female audiences it did with male audiences (Gabillet 31-32). Hence, the characters were created and marketed so as to appeal to comic books' largely male, adolescent readership (Wright 11). Tim Hanley and Mike Madrid, comic historians, believe that part of the reason men vastly outnumber women in the creation of comics is because publishers accurately perceive their audience to be largely male.<sup>9</sup> Comics were, therefore, designed for adolescent males and young adult males.

In a medium that utilizes both text and image geared towards young male readers, critically thinking about the male gaze in comic books is crucial to understanding masculine identification and disidentification. Because comic books are consciously targeting a male audience, the characters are conceptualized for the male gaze. Although Schroeder and Zwick discuss the general effect of the male gaze in a capitalist, consumer

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<sup>9</sup> Although it appears men tend to outnumber women in traditional, specialized comic book stores, comic book convention attendance appears to be even between genders, which may be due in large part to the creation of more female comic book characters and digital comic book availability. With most comic book stores being independently owned, it is difficult to obtain an exact and accurate statistic of which gender comprises what percentage of readers. *Comichron* is one site that attempts to monitor the sales of the comic book industry.

market, their analysis aptly applies to comic books. Superheroes and villains “as male bodies become objects of display subject to the male gaze” (26). The male gaze operates on two levels. One level is the literal interpretation - male readers reading and viewing male bodies - while the other interpretation suggests the male gaze is a structural feature of the representational apparatus created by men. Both interpretations are useful in my exploration. The visual images of superheroes and villains in the context of a consumer market reinforce what the visual rhetorician Anthea Callen describes as “potent mediators of the lived experience of the body, our own and others, giving us ways of conceptualizing and describing the body” (603). Comic books offer the historical and social backdrop for viewing, analyzing, embodying, and critiquing masculine identity and performance through a visual lens. To identify with the superhero means to differ from the villain, to be precisely not the same, and this relationship can inform the male reader on how to perform accepted masculinity and reinforce dominant American ideologies.

We utilize all our senses, including the mind, to form identity, but I argue that the gaze remains the most powerful medium. Controlled by its rational and argumentative limits, the gaze helps to order and constitute identity. Schroeder and Zwick explain that the world of comic books “largely reinforces these limits chiefly through its well documented, yet enduring... limiting images of men” (34). Heteronormative ideas about masculinity and masculine performance are constructed and limited by the male gaze on the male villain body. The villain’s body, unconsciously or consciously, is used to reinforce and reiterate dominant ideologies by showcasing and embodying the non-ideal. For Schroeder and Zwick, the male gaze involves men viewing male bodies, representing a visual shift from men as *only* producers to men as consumers, too (23). Given the lack

of attention on how the male gaze functions and leads to the embodying and performance of masculine identity, it is prudent to examine how mass-produced popular media such as the comic book construct, limit, reinforce, and reiterate cultural assumptions of ideal masculine behavior by depicting what not to identify with by demonizing gender-transgressive men.

Visual imagery often provides the quickest means of persuasion. Roland Barthes and other visual rhetoricians have discussed such theories. The proven effectiveness of visual persuasion in consumerist markets, such as advertising campaigns and magazines, also applies to comic books, which target a highly impressionable age group of male adolescents and young adults. Given that the majority of comic book readers are young males, the physical portrayal of the superhero and villain have an effect on how these readers view their own bodies and performances of masculinity. In “Male Body Image and Magazine Standards,” Donnalyn Pompper, Jorge Soto, and Lauren Piel quote Pecora explaining, “Boys emulate comic book superheroes like Batman and Superman, and their male action figure toys preserve the ideal male body in doll form” (Pecora qtd. in Pompper, et al. 527). Not only do young boys identify with the physical construction of the superhero body and reject the villain’s body, they also “perpetuate stereotypes and present behavioral norms for men” via this identification (Vokey, Teft, Tysiaczny 562). Visual cues appear to coincide with behavioral understandings of masculinity, reinforcing an embodied identity that is already socially acceptable and rejecting the embodied identity that is vilified through the villain. For example, an approved visual cue of a behavior would be a man with muscle definition, which would link him, not only to physical strength, but also to the ability to endure pain, control aggression, and discipline

emotional. A rejected visual cue for behavior would be a man who is lithe in physical appearance because his body would be associated with behaviors such as passivity and submission, key feminine traits (Vokey, Teft, Tysiaczny 563). Loki acts as an extreme of masculine behavior and physical appearance because he is either portrayed as hypermasculine or feminine. In *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Loki is vilified because he embodies gender-transgressive characteristics displayed through the visual rendering of his body, which vilifies men who participate or embody socially constructed ideas of femininity or feminine traits.

### **John Buscema's Loki and Lee Garbett's Reconceptualized Loki**

John Buscema's penciling is well known in the field of comic book studies. One of the most prolific and celebrated pencillers in the industry, he garnered most of his notoriety from his work in the *Thor* comics. He began penciling the comic book in 1970, but did not become a regular artist for the series until the late 1970s and continued throughout the 1980s into the early 1990s. His rendition of Loki became one of the most popular and recognizable depictions of the villain and has subsequently influenced all other renditions of the character even after his passing in 2002. Although the majority of comic book characters and their bodies are relatively immune to history and time when it comes to changes in their form, Loki's recent and drastic transformation shows what Taylor calls an interdependent relationship between form, fanship, and history when it comes to cultural ideologies as represented by the superbody, and, in our case, the villain's body (348).

Loki and Buscema's heyday occurred in the 1980s when superheroes were bigger and supervillains were "badder." Henry Giroux explains that the portrayal of hyper-masculinity reached its peak in the United States during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and although this time period "celebrated rogue warriors," it also showcased villains that were of mythic, physical proportions (21). In the 1980s, Buscema designed a Loki that was larger than life, embodying the concept of hypermasculinity. Buscema's Loki has bulging, defined muscles, angular facial features, and shows considerable age through wrinkles on the face. Physically, Loki is just as foreboding as his superhero counterpart, Thor.<sup>10</sup> With such characteristics, Loki's body not only embodies the physical traits of hypermasculinity, but also the associated behaviors, such as uncontrolled aggression and unnecessary violence. Buscema's influence on the villain construction continues today, even though the construction of the villainous body has shifted from one of hyper-masculinity to one of gender-transgression. In the new series penciled by Lee Garbett, Loki has grown up from being a "child," but he hasn't quite reached adulthood. As the writer of the series Al Ewing explains through Hawkeye, he appears "One-Directiony" (Ewing, Issue #1). He is trapped in a teenage, young adult body because of the Asgardian All-Mother's mystical ability<sup>11</sup>, which only further highlights the difference in age between the main heroic characters and the villain; the majority of the characters appear healthy and physically mature without sacrificing aesthetic appeal. For example, Loki's body appears pubescent and lean, having no facial hair, while the other male figures,

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>11</sup> The Asgardian All-Mother is a title given to the woman who took the place of Odin in the Marvel universe after his departure. In addition, she decides to form a congressional government that seeks to bring justice to those who have been wronged, and Loki is given his youthful body in order to serve as her spy on earth.

Thor and Hawkeye, have developed bodies with full muscle definition, along with some facial hair. In addition, Loki appears to be significantly shorter than Thor and Hawkeye when pictured in the same scene, which may suggest that he is younger than the two superheroes.

Also, both artists tend to draw Loki as a loner in panels by himself or in locations where he is the only figure present,<sup>12</sup> which may provide another aspect for disidentification. Oftentimes, the superheroes are drawn in pairs or in groups when pictured in a single panel, while it is rare that Loki, the villainous character, is drawn with another figure present in the same panel. Interestingly, in panels where Loki is having a conversation with one of the superheroes, he is still drawn in a separate panel from the individual he is conversing with, when most comics draw those having conversations within the same panels to help the reader understand who is speaking to whom. Williams argues that identification with certain celebrity figures fosters community and engagement, and such ideas are echoed in the use of Thor, Loki's heroic counterpart, who is frequently drawn amongst a group of people, typically the Avengers. We may be able to argue that by drawing the hero in group settings, the artist is unconsciously persuading the reader to identify with the hero because of his belonging to the community, while disidentifying with Loki because of his depicted status as an outcast; he is not a member of the accepted community.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B



## **The Phallic Symbol**

One of the most prevalent and potent visual cues for masculine identity in visual rhetoric is the phallic symbol, and the use of the phallic symbol should not be ignored in comic books, since it may provide valuable insight regarding masculine identity and disidentity between a male character and the reader. With regard to phallic symbols, Garbett kept the traditional headpiece seen in previous Loki renditions. Virility and symbols associated with such connotations typically play a role in the construction of an ideal masculinity in comic books, but the nearly absurd phallic symbol of Loki's headpiece transgresses socially accepted forms of masculine identity when it comes to displays of virility through the phallic symbol.<sup>13</sup> Buscema's Loki boasted a headpiece that had two horns coming out of the forehead. These horns were dramatic in length, nearly as long as the character's arm, and curved to a vicious point. Quoting Richard Reynolds, Taylor writes that male supervillain bodies "embody a corresponding exaggerated and kinky form of macho sex appeal. In a fictional universe in which any part of the anatomy has the potential to be super-powered, the superpenis is strictly taboo," so other visual cues are implemented (352-353). In two ways, Loki's phallic headpiece is used to portray a symbolic superpenis with the horns that provide an intimidating if not ridiculous image of a man's erect penis. Though arguably not as potent or obviously phallic as Buscema's horned headpiece, Garbett's design still maintains the same principle. The horns on the headpiece can be read as a phallic symbol that operates in two ways.

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<sup>13</sup> See Appendix C

In one way, the reader can interpret the horns as a compensation for a *lack* of virility. Young men who strive to meet the ideal masculine identity will read the explicitly phallic headpiece as a non-ideal masculine identity because it is embodied in the villain, while also understanding that such displays of compensation may cause others to see the same embodiment as suggestive of infertility. An ideal masculine identity would not require such visual compensation. As Carol Duncan explains, virility is intimately linked with male domination, which is the ideal in a patriarchal, heteronormative society (81). Rather, the infertile masculine body is ostracized and arguably vilified as deviant because of its impotency. And not only impotency is suggested. If the reader follows this line of logic, then his impotency and infertility may also suggest his lack of male genitals; he requires the horns in order to compensate for the physical lack of necessary, sexual, male parts, which cannot be seen or indicated through his clothing.

On the other hand, the phallic symbol can be read as a way for Loki to visually represent his overt sexuality, tying into ideas of hypermasculinity. In the second issue of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, the reader sees Loki speed dating, flirting with available women. At the end of the issue and night, he leaves the bar with an old accomplice, and the reader is given a flashback panel that shows Loki on top of her in bed, shirtless.<sup>14</sup> As a sexual creature, flirting with women, Loki's sexuality reflects Reynolds' notions of an exaggerated sex appeal. Such overt sexuality goes against the Western decorum of sexuality as analyzed by Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*. An ideal masculine identity would not *need* nor want to display such overt sexuality, and once again, overt

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix D

sexuality is vilified by being embodied in the villain, reinforcing Western, heteronormative censorship in dealing with sexuality. In addition, Giroux explains the dominant logic of male bonding is based on “the need to denigrate, and wage war against, all that is feminine,” including the company of women, in order to combat a society and culture where men are passive and domesticated (5). As noted by Jane Tompkins in her book, *West of Everything*, this renunciation of marriage and family allows for the male hero or heroes to focus on the mission given, which is usually selfless in nature, and requires that he or they battle against corruption and uncontrolled violence (31, 35, 217). By demonstrating Loki’s need for a female companion both sexually and otherwise, the authors feminize and vilify the character.

The visual representation is taken further in Garbett’s drawings by arguably implicating Loki as a character with homosexual tendencies. Unlike Buscema’s drawing of Loki who utilizes his own body and magic as a weapon, Garbett’s Loki uses a sword as a combat tool, which continues the phallic trope. In one scene, we can see Loki plunge a sword through Thor’s back.<sup>15</sup> The faces of both characters can be read as both one of violence and orgasm, with “violently homoerotic” tones (Kipniss 157). By going through the back, there is a suggestion of the “back door,” a popular euphemism for anal sex, and the connotation of deceit. Again, in a society that promotes heterosexuality as ideal, homosexuality is vilified by being embodied in the villain.

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix E

## Age and Masculinity

The third issue of *Loki: Agent of Asgard* provides a different view of Loki. In an issue that is dedicated to a flashback from a youthful Loki, the reader sees an older Loki.<sup>16</sup> Unlike his youthful renditions, this “flashback” Loki is obviously less physically appealing than the other characters because of his age. In the flashback, Loki is depicted as having a severely wrinkled face and sunken eyes with dark circles surrounding them. These features suggest an aggressively aged body when compared to the other superheroes in the panel. For example, Thor, who stands directly opposite of Loki, hardly appears to have aged when compared to the Thor outside of the flashback; neither of the renditions of Thor have any lines on the face to suggest wrinkles, nor do other characters show any real changes in physical appearance as dramatically as Loki. Depicting the villain as aged, the artist reinforces the “buff, beautiful, and ageless body ethic” embodied in comic book superheroes and idealized masculine identity as explained by Taylor (350). Although determining attraction is highly subjective and may not be the most effective use for analysis, we can certainly quantify the use of age in masculine imagery. Working within a heteronormative American society, the reader disidentifies with the villain Loki because of his agedness and criminal status as villain, thus associating mature age with the vilification, which emphasizes youth worship among American men. Pompper, Soto, and Piel reiterate that comic book consumerism “drives a youth-oriented master narrative,” which can also be seen in the way the villainous Loki slouches – a visual cue for tiredness – a body position associated with age and lack of strength.

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<sup>16</sup> See Appendix F

Notably, Loki appears older than his superhero counterparts, such as Odin in the flashback issue, and this is most noticeable in the panels that show close-ups of Loki's face.<sup>17</sup> Firstly, given that Odin is the father of Thor, adoptive father of Loki, and ruler of the Asgardian Empire, there is an excessive need to demonstrate and highlight Loki's decrepitude and age to the point of absurdity. Oftentimes in this issue, Loki refers to Odin as "young prince," highlighting Odin's youth and conversely bringing attention to his own age, while Odin refers to Loki as "old one" (Ewing, Issue #3). Secondly, when Garbett draws Odin and Loki in conversation, Loki's face is almost always drawn as closer to the reader, while Odin is depicted further away, with his full body captured in the panel.<sup>18</sup> Taylor writes, "Functioning in the same manner in comics as it often does in classical film, the facial close-up is usually an invitation into the emotional interiority of the character" (354). Loki's emotional interiority shows explicitly in dialogue and through inference on his face, which is consistently drawn with tense lines and wrinkles. Even when smiling, these straight rigid lines suggest not only age, but tie back into overtly violent tendencies. Hard-edged lines tend to have connotations of aggression; they certainly do not invoke thoughts of tranquility or compassion. Embodied and vilified in the villain is agedness and aggression that lacks control, which works in opposition of the dominant construction of masculine ideology and behavior. Through the contrast between the heroes and Loki, young adolescents are persuaded to view age as a non-ideal when constructing their own masculine identities and to cling to youthfulness for as long as possible.

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix G

<sup>18</sup> See Appendix F

## **Feminine Performance**

Because of comic books and graphic novels' visual nature, the use of color plays a central role in the perception and reception of the comic narrative. Comic artists tend to be deliberate in the application and choice of color (or the lack thereof), and oftentimes, the color influences how a reader is to interpret a scene or be persuaded by a character. The choice of green certainly has an impact on the reader in regards to Loki's clothing. In his article on the use of color as visual rhetoric, John Curtis notes that green "is seen objectively as cool, fresh, clear and pleasing but when illuminated on skin tones it becomes repulsive" (267). Loki's green costume repulses the reader, causing him to disidentify with the villain Loki and the ways he embodies masculinity. Again referencing Fuss, by disidentifying with the villain, the male reader takes a "detour through the other that defines the self" (qtd. in Ratcliffe 49). The male reader comes to understand through visual cues the masculine ideals because he chooses not to associate himself with what he sees as the criminal character. Loki is meant to be seen as "the other," the non-ideal masculine character when juxtaposed with his superhero counterpart, Thor. Thor's red cape mimics the cape seen on the most popular and iconic superhero, Superman, registering immediate connections to positive qualities, such as "Truth, Unity, and Justice." In addition, the color blue has widely been regarded as universally appealing and suggests the wearer is trustworthy with "optimistic" connotations associated with the wearer (Curtis 277).

The newest rendition of Loki wears a long green tunic with a high fur collar and fingerless black gloves. The tunic and high fur collar mimic women's clothing by

following similar outlines seen in women's dresses, given the length and shape of his tunic.<sup>19</sup> The tunic also boasts long sleeves, which effectively hide any muscle definition, and which contrasts with his superhero counterpart's sleeveless shirt that highlights his well-sculpted, upper body. The fingerless gloves do not cover the hands; rather, Garbett chose to leave the gloves open in order to highlight Loki's well-manicured nails that feature black nail polish. Though subtle, the nail polish on the fingers calls to mind a performance of femininity.<sup>20</sup> None of the other male characters wear such gender-transgressive clothing or adornments. Since the "accoutrements of femininity are put on and rigorously policed" (Taylor 353) in comic books, the villain's dress code violation for male comic book characters effectively exposes and reinforces an unconscious construction of masculine gender performance in a heteropatriarchal society. By associating transgressive gender performance and display with the villain, the reader is encouraged to disidentify with the character, ultimately reinforcing a heteronormative ideal and demonizing gender-transgression as "other." Also noteworthy, Loki is consistently portrayed in the shadows with his face darkened while the superheroes are usually drawn with some degree of light either on their bodies or faces.<sup>21</sup> The artistic use of light and dark reiterates classical notions of light and associations with good, and dark and associations with evil. Not only do his clothes harken to feminine identity, his body also displays gender-transgressive visuals.

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>20</sup> See Appendix C

<sup>21</sup> See Appendix H

Loki also embodies feminine traits when it comes to the construction of his facial features. Unlike Buscema's hypermasculine villain with exaggerated sharp and angular features, the new rendition of the youthful Loki has softer features that harken to those of a woman when compared to the strong jawlines of the superheroes. Loki's chin is rounded, and his lips are full and drawn like the female characters in the comic book, whereas the male superheroes and other male characters' mouths are only indicated by a line, and their jaws are square in design. Also, instead of the traditional short hair associated with masculine performance, he has long layers, and appears to have some form of darkening around the eyes, which alludes to both demonic intentions and women's eye shadow. The soft jawline tends to suggest femininity, and by having the villain possess such features, the feminization of the villain would suggest that the male reader disidentifies with the female performance and behavior when constructing his own masculine identity because the villain, as a criminal, is not to be idealized. Frequently, women and femininity are vilified within popular culture, as noted by Susan Jeffords and Tompkins.

Not unsurprising or new to scholarly studies, any feminine performance by a male that falls within the limits of masculinity, display, and identity is labeled as deviant, almost baffling, and discouraged. Loki's gender and sexual deviancy continues into the third issue when an older image of Loki views the self that we see in the first two issues and refers to his younger image as a "girl-child" (Ewing). Not only does it appear the writer and artist are consciously addressing the villain's gender and sexual transgression quite literally within the comic through physical depiction and dialogue, they are also utilizing the male gaze to feminize Loki. Also, Loki gazing upon himself mimics a



woman gazing on herself, suggesting feminized narcissism. For instance, in *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explains that the female role is to be gazed upon by a male and her body is inscribed within the framework of masculine heterosexuality, and the female object is not allowed to look back. The utilization of the male gaze on a male body may suggest that the character is now feminized because the male body has taken on the role the traditional role of the female body. As Jonathan Alexander writes in his article, “Transgender Rhetorics: (Re)Composing Narratives of the Gendered Body,” identity, gender, and performance are wrapped-up in the literal body and the ways in which that body is described. Loki embodies both the visual and written narrative of the transgressive masculine identity that the male reader is encouraged to disidentify with – claiming Loki, the villain, as the “other.”

### **Loki’s Body Language**

A trait carried on from Buscema’s popular rendering of Loki to Garbett’s is Loki’s slouch,<sup>22</sup> which acts as visual shorthand to depict indolence, lassitude, and corruption. All these traits lead to a visual representation of someone who is not in control of his own body, which goes against Western notions of ideal masculine behavior where the man is always in control. Lack of control may suggest ideas of violence – his inability to show self-restraint. Whereas Loki’s slouch relates to non-idealized Western behavior by physically showing signs of nonchalance and disinclination, the superhero body provides a corporeal rigidity, typified by “granite features and muscled body” (Boring qtd. in Taylor 351). By having granite-like features, the superhero’s body connotes ideas of

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<sup>22</sup> See Appendix F

stability, strength, and justice, and in a heteronormative Western culture, causing identification with the reader, leading to a disidentification with Loki. The suggestion of violent tendencies as mentioned earlier, coupled with an uncontrolled body, persuades young men to associate those behavioral traits with the villain, reinforcing socially accepted ideas of masculine behavior.

The members of the Avengers crew display traditional, ideal, embodied, masculine performances.<sup>23</sup> They all have broad shoulders with thick bodies that highlight (without exaggerating) their physical prowess, while Loki's body, seen in the juxtaposed panel, is long, lean, and lithe by comparison. Thor's body arguably embodies the "ideal of Western anatomical perfection" (Taylor 353). On the other hand, Loki has narrow shoulders and hips without any marked muscle definition. This type of body can be read in two ways; either he can be seen as having the body of an adolescent boy or as having the body of a young, prepubescent girl. Either way, neither body association fits the ideal masculine body. Fuss further explains how previously conceived and understood cultural rhetoric informs the reader through disidentification because "Disidentification is 'an identification that has already been made and denied in the unconscious,'" and "within this logic, disidentifications are dependent upon previous identifications however faulty or stereotypical," as demonstrated with Loki's non-ideal masculine body. He wears lithe, narrow-shouldered, clothing, and his lack of muscle definition is associated with weakness or femininity (qtd. in Ratcliffe 62). The male reader has already identified with the superheroes through social and cultural understanding of the ideal masculine body and associated behaviors, which, in this case, causes the male reader to disidentify with

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<sup>23</sup> See Appendix B

Loki because his body transgresses the cultural stereotype of what a male body should look like and how a male should behave.

In addition to Loki's gender-transgressive body in Garbett's depiction, his body is also subjected to a homoerotic gaze, compounding his gender-transgressive characteristics and hinting towards a homosexual orientation. Generally in visual studies, the male gaze usually turns and focuses on the female body that serves as a sexualized object. On the first page in the first issue of *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, the male reader is introduced immediately to a shift in the object's role when it comes to the male gaze. We encounter two panels of a nude Loki.<sup>24</sup> The first panel is suggestive of a female pin-up pose where Loki is in the shower with his hands resting on his head, and just enough steam to strategically cover his genitals. Notably, he averts his gaze. Then, in the next panel, we get a full-body view of a nude Loki, but this time the word bubbles act as strategic covers for his identifiably male parts. In this panel, Loki gazes into a mirror. The invisibility of the male genitals on his body, it removes much of his masculine identity. By averting the gaze downward or towards the mirror, the body of the character should be looked at as feminine by the readers. John Berger writes, "One might simplify this by saying *men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (47). Regarding the use of the mirror, Schroeder and Zwick note that mirrors are often associated with the female because the mirrors represent women preparing themselves for the male gaze, *to be looked at* (37). Taylor quotes Sam Fussell in explaining that Loki reverses the typical sex roles in regard to the gaze where Loki's

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<sup>24</sup> See Appendix I

“performance lies in being looked at, ogled, appraised” with the villain “taking a traditionally female role: body as object” (Fussell qtd. in Taylor 352).

Loki is drawn in such a way that he participates in a culture where the women are recipients of the gaze – either their own or from men. He is not challenging the reader’s gaze, but taking part in the subservient role usually delegated to the female body. In these nude panels, Loki is “caught in between the masculine and feminine,” embodying transgressive gender traits in the villainous body (Schroeder and Zwick 40). He has effectively embodied and taken on the role of the female as a sexualized object of the male gaze, subtly referencing homoeroticism and possible homosexuality, which is considered a deviant practice in a heteronormative and patriarchal society. In this way, the male reader is to see this transgression of the male’s body as a contemptible act, since it is embodied in the villain. The male reader who wishes to participate in the dominant discourse of the masculine heteropatriarchy would disavow such an identification – *that is not me* – in order to disidentify with the sexually deviant, gender-transgressive villain in a heteropatriarchal culture.

### **Holding Out for a Hero: Conclusion**

Some scholars contend that by creating a visual representation of a heteronormative non-conforming male character masculine identity is broadened for the male reader. Cynthia Barounis argues that in these types of narratives, “queer sexuality” and deviant masculine displays “are not just shown to be compatible with masculinity; they are, more fundamentally, celebrated as the logical extension of masculinity’s excess” (55). Although this may be true if and when gender-transgressive traits are

visually embodied in male protagonists, it fails to materialize when dealing with comic book villains, such as Loki, who are to be looked at as embodying criminality, therefore associating gender-transgression and femininity in a male character as villainous or criminal. Sam Fussell, a scholar who studies the practice and visual rhetoric of male body-building, argues that all viewed male bodies, including superheroes, play into the female role because they become objects of the male gaze as defined by John Berger (44). I agree that superheroes are certainly objects of the male gaze just as much as villains are in comic books, but the *ways* in which male readers are encouraged to view these objectified bodies are radically different. The superhero's body is meant to be appraised and imitated, showing the ideal masculine body and encoded ideal masculine behavior, (Fussell 45) while the supervillain's body and behavior is meant to be condemned within a heteronormative framework. Lastly, numerous scholars report the use of hypermasculine displays as ideal masculinity in some advertisements, especially during the 1980s thanks to such action stars as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger and the celebration of excess at this time<sup>25</sup>. My counterargument follows the same trajectory as the one used with the objectified bodies: male readers are to identify with the heroes and disidentify with the villains, so ideal masculine identity is constructed and displayed in opposition to what the villain's body exhibits.

Of course, not all critics and scholars view the comic book superboddy, whether villain or hero, as a tool for identification and disidentification. Max Faust, Richard Shuman, and Asa Berger propose that the comic book does not function as a means for reader identification. Faust and Shuman claim that comic characters "are equipped with

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<sup>25</sup> See Tasker, Thompkins, Jeffords.

only a bare minimum of psychological particularity. Evidently, the comics' aim is *not* to bring about identification of the reader with the hero" (200). Asa Berger follows up argument by claiming that even Superman is "rather ordinary" despite his superhuman powers (151). With comic books acting as cultural, political, and historical texts, I would respectfully disagree. Unlike most purely alphatext media, the comic book requires and necessitates reader participation: moving through panels, reassembling disassembled bodies, and continuing sequences of action. One of Scott McCloud's most significant claims is that, "As we continue to abstract and simplify our image, we are moving further and further from the 'real,'" (29) and "by stripping down an image to its essential 'meaning,' an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (30). This simplification allows for the comic book character to act as "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (36). While reading an imagistic and textual medium like the comic book, the reader will relate and identify his material self with the heroes while disidentifying his material body with the villain; he actively objectifies the body.

Not only does the comic book villain's body affect and influence the male consumer, much like the superhero embodying the ideals of its particular culture, the villain embodies sociohistorical and political fears of its culture. The transition from a hypermasculine, demonic villain to the visually gender-transgressive one may offer insight into social and political issues regarding gender performance and sexuality. One possible explanation may be that the heteropatriarchal social construction keeps traditional gender performances rigidly in their respective binary gender roles. I am by no means suggesting that American society is solely reducible to a patriarchal construction; rather, I contend that patriarchy exists as a powerful structure in American culture despite

progressive social transformations. I suggest that comic books offer evidence of the persistence of rigid binary thinking that works to confine men and women in certain roles regarding criminalization and gender performance.

In comic books, gender-transgression and deviant sexuality are implemented to vilify a male character and mark him as the villain and “other.” Characters that transgress gender-norms as established by a heteronormative patriarchy are stigmatized as criminal and demonic, which influences the ways in which a male readership constructs and displays its masculine identity. The characters that were drawn to adhere to traditional gender performances as discussed by Butler tended to be the superheroes. Although such broad claims cannot be proven through the examination of *one* comic book villain, analyzing one of the most popular comic book villains of all time and his visual renderings certainly prompts such a speculation. It also encourages scholars to examine comic books and comic book villains as sources reiterating and informing mass cultural ideologies in both rhetorical and literary studies.

## CHAPTER III

### SAXON/MACHINESMITH: DEVIANT SEXUALITY AND THE VILLIFICATION OF THE FIRST GAY COMIC BOOK CHARACTER

With the expansion of technology and use of visual media, there has been a shift in focus to representations of the body, especially in feminist and screen studies. Most of these representations fall into popular culture, images that circulate and reach the majority of a given population and are widely recognized by the masses. As part of the field of visual rhetoric, the comic book and the bodies of its supervillains and superheroes provide a fruitful ground for examining corporeal markers that signify and denote specific types of behaviors as acceptable, deviant, or even villainous. In order to facilitate this identification for readers, the supervillain visually embodied and portrayed many social fears or abhorrence when examined through a heteronormative framework. Cathy Cohen defines heteronormativity in her essay, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” as the system that prescribes dichotomous gendering and opposite-sex sexual practices for a functioning society, suggesting that anything outside of this framework is deviant in nature. Ultimately, the widespread acceptance of the heteronormative social framework made gay and effeminate male characters easy to portray as villainous.



Supervillains may offer significant insight regarding cultural fears, stigmas, and ideologies, especially in popular culture, and for many, few other icons are more recognizable than the comic book superheroes and supervillains. In fact, as the comic book scholars Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble explain in their article, “Whatever Happened to the man of Tomorrow,” superheroes are created to reflect a culture’s idealized national character; in other words, how a culture wishes to see itself. Mike Alsford supports this assertion and explains that superheroes and supervillains, more so than “real life” heroes and villains, act as iconic receptacles for a society’s values and fears, respectively, because of their fictional status offering a form of objective commentary. Basically, superheroes and supervillains allow for a society and a culture to examine itself without real consequences, while also providing possibilities for what a society or culture *can* be like, either positively or negatively. Superheroes and supervillains in comic books may reflect the ideological construction of society at the time of their publications.

Not widely known, the first explicitly gay character in a comic book was a supervillain, which opens the door to numerous interpretations with respect to cultural stigmas surrounding the sexually deviant body. Samuel “Starr” Saxon, later known as Machinesmith, became the first gay character in mainstream American comic books. Although Marvel published the first Saxon/Machinesmith comic book five months before the famous Stonewall Uprising, he was not a major character until June of that same

year<sup>26</sup>, oddly coinciding with the Uprising and national media attention on that event.

Created by Stan Lee and artistically conceptualized by Gene Colan, Saxon/Machinesmith made the majority of his appearances in the *Daredevil* and *Captain America* comic book series as Samuel “Starr” Saxon, a robotics engineer and cybernetist before he was revealed to be Machinesmith in *Marvel Two-In-One: The Thing* released January 1979. Interestingly, the artist, Gene Colan – and not the writer – admitted that he wanted the character to appear gay, which raises the question: what *does* “appearing gay” look like?

Because of Machinesmith’s gay and villainous nature, I assert that the supervillain may provide a better understanding about cultural ideology than the superhero regarding gender performance and sexuality regarding a hegemonic, heteropatriarchal, American society. Cultural studies, along with studies on sexual deviancy in popular culture, allow the reader to understand that queer representations in popular culture are powerful and conflicting. They are powerful and conflicting because comic book superheroes and supervillains embody ideological representations of normalcy versus deviancy, celebrating some expressions of abnormality while condemning others. And for my purposes, I use the term “queer” to define behavior, performance, or sexuality deemed unusual within the prevailing heteronormative framework. For example, superheroes are celebrated for their abnormality because it doesn’t contradict or counteract heteronormative ideology and usually works to uphold it. On the other hand, the

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<sup>26</sup> In the first issue, Saxon did not appear until the last page of the issue, and remained relatively unseen until after the Stonewall Uprisings occurred.

supervillain informs and reiterates negative cultural assumptions popular at its given time period. Saxon/Machinesmith embodies two types of marginalized figures that were and often continue to be vilified – the gay and the effeminate man. Sexual deviancy is vilified because the first gay comic book character is a supervillain, and also shown as being deviant through the feminization of a male character, perpetuating damaging stereotypes. Using feminist and queer theory, I examine how the portrayal of Saxon/Machinesmith as queer and effeminate perpetuates the ideology of a heteronormative society as ideal and reinforces negative stigmas regarding queer individuals, those who do not fit within the heteronormative framework, as inherently villainous and abnormal.

### **Sexual Deviancy in Popular Culture**

Although literature has incorporated queer or sexually "deviant" characters and has documented these trends, popular culture scholars remain relatively quiet in this exploration.<sup>27</sup> Sexually deviant characters have been present for most of literature's existence, and oftentimes, these characters were not used to demonstrate the depravity of sexual deviancy, but to invoke much more complex reflections. Especially in the twentieth century, popular media did not regularly include homosexual figures, and when these figures were utilized, it was rarely with positive connotations; rather, these sexually deviant or queered characters suggested some sort of moral corruption within the individual. One of the earliest examples of a same-sex couple occurred in the 1934 play

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<sup>27</sup> See Annamarie Jagose, Michael Warner, Tim Edwards, Adam Green, and Ian Barnard

*The Children's Hour*, where two female administrators of an all-girls school are lovers, and when their secret is exposed, it destroys their lives, offering a warning to women who would enter into a same-sex affair. Another example is the 1959 novel, *Advise and Consent* by Allen Drury, where the protagonist kills himself after it is revealed he had a brief homosexual liaison during WWII, again suggesting the damnability of sexual deviancy. The book was later turned into a movie in 1962.

In the late 1960s, in conjunction with the Civil Rights Movement, supervillains in comic books become more complex and layered than their predecessors. Most popular culture and comic book scholars agree that this shift occurred because the villain was not so easy to spot or identify thanks in large part due to the complexity of the Vietnam War and enemy identification. Essentially, the nature and definition of “villain” became convoluted. At this time, the reasons for the war and the question of villainy did not appear as clear as it once did during WWI and WWII. Alongside the controversy over the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement and the Compton Cafeteria Riot arguably helped to usher in the national Gay Rights Movement in the United States, and such a correlation between the Gay Rights Movement and more complex and feminine supervillains does not seem coincidental. Thanks to the Stonewall Uprising in New York City in 1969, which heightened public awareness of the Gay Rights Movement, issues of homophobic brutality and sex/gender-nonconforming discrimination shifted from the local stage to a national one. Rosemary Ricciardelli, Kimberley A. Clow, and Philip White claim that many of the positive male images in popular culture displayed

exaggerated physiques and characteristics of traditional masculine gender performance as a reaction to the gay movement's newfound notoriety and highlighted the femininity of negative male figures (65).

Because comic books lie at the crux of popular culture, they are useful for disentangling cultural ideologies that were upheld at the time of the comic books' publications. Although some queer and feminist theories have been applied to superheroes, supervillains appear significantly dismissed from discussion. Beginning in the early twentieth century, sexual deviancy and gender-nonconformity became linked with such terms as danger, degeneracy, disease, sexual predation, treachery, and violence (Mogul, Ritche, and Whitlock 23). During the Cold War, for instance, the navy manual warned sailors against sexual deviancy by linking it to promiscuity, despite popular media's celebration of promiscuity in straight men: "Practicing homosexuals are notoriously promiscuous and not very particular in whom they pick up, infected or otherwise" (Bérubé and D'Emilio 768). Casting the first explicitly gay comic book character as a supervillain simply reiterated the cultural perception and systematic prejudice of the late 1960s and early 1970s that queer sexual identification was *inherently* "wrong."

### **Masculinity and the Gay Character in Popular Culture**

As referenced previously, visual representations of male bodies play a central role in how the concept of masculinity is understood, and oftentimes the pervasiveness of

popular culture representations restrict masculine identity formation, dictating what is considered acceptable and what is to be vilified in a heavily heteropatriarchal society. We can examine how having the first openly and explicitly gay character as a supervillain in a comic book affects the portrayal of gay men, and analyze how they are systematically vilified and rejected in popular cultural forms. That is not to suggest that gay men were always vilified in popular culture before radical social movements adjusted such interpretations; rather, through an examination the first gay comic book character, I suggest that early renditions of gay characters in comic books helped to solidify a heteropatriarchal structure regarding gender performance and behavior.

Although examining the popularity and the implications of how the villains are portrayed in Disney films, Meredith Li-Vollmer and Mark E. LaPointe's argument can aptly apply to comic book villains. Summarizing the work of Joseph Jay Tobin, they explain that "Tobin's study articulated a fear of womanless, childless men presented within a variety of films" (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 96). We can apply these findings to the visual rhetoric of comic book supervillains and their bodies, and through speculation, we may claim that these associations with villains further a homophobic agenda. In addition, these damaging associations also work to construct an outline for the consistent portrayal of villains in popular culture as sexually deviant, impotent, and dangerous, which influences the hegemonic representation of a heteromascularity. Essentially, one informs the other in a vicious cycle of misrepresentation.

### **The Body: Samuel “Starr” Saxon and Gender Transgression**

One of the most visible markers of gender is the outward appearance and artistic depiction of the characters, making physical traits such as costuming, facial construction, and the body’s shape important cues for how gender should (or should not) be performed. Saxon’s physical representation is largely associated with the feminine in appearance, especially in the design of the character’s facial features and clothing. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe explain that villains are often visually portrayed to invoke traditional ideals of feminine beauty, which would cause a male reader to disidentify with the character, especially given the delicacy associated with the feminine (97). Reflective of this argument, Saxon is bald with flamboyantly (and unnaturally) neon pink eyebrows and matching, unusual facial hair.<sup>28</sup> The color pink tends to have associations with the feminine or female sex. In addition, Saxon’s facial features also allude to a female’s facial construction because the lines indicate a finer bone structure and high, prominent cheekbones. Also, looking at Saxon’s facial features, the artist drew the eyebrows reminiscent of early Hollywood actresses; the eyebrows appear plucked with high arches and are dramatically defined, whereas other male characters in the comic book have subtly defined eyebrows, simply indicated by a line above the eye. In some panels, the upward swoop at the end of his eyebrows almost appears like false eyelashes, again a subtle hint of feminine performance.

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<sup>28</sup> See Appendix J

Despite having facial hair, it is so sparse and oddly positioned on either side of his chin that it appears like upside down horns, possibly offering a subtle visual clue for a villainous disposition. Tying into the visual and effeminate construction of Saxon's face, gay men "[are] caught in a double bind where, expected to be effeminate, they [are] expected to exhibit themselves like women, while at the same time such exhibition was considered to be transgressive and its proscription highly policed" (Stratton182). Coupling pink hair with delicate facial features may encourage the reader to relate the supervillain with the effeminate, arousing a homosexual connotation to villainy, as Tobin suggested. In addition, Colon's Saxon plays into the pervasive cultural belief that men who exude feminine traits are gay while Colon's depiction of Saxon plays into the damaging, stereotypical trope that femininity is intrinsic in gay men.

Furthering the effeminate conception of Saxon and gay men as effeminate is the way his body is clothed. Popular in the late 1960s, the jumpsuit with a high waist and detailed collar was associated with women's fashion. Saxon's wardrobe mimics this fashion trend since he is drawn wearing a yellow jumpsuit with a dramatic collar that fits loosely enough to not show any muscle definition<sup>29</sup> and seems fit for a woman's fashion magazine, rather than a supervillain and evil mastermind. This artistic choice in his clothing alludes to cross-dressing, a stereotype of homosexual men. On the other hand, his consistent and most pervasive superhero counterpart, Captain America, wears a tight,

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<sup>29</sup> See Appendix L



patriotic uniform that reveals his extreme muscle definition and combat boots – masculine and visually powerful. Saxon’s slender hips, narrow shoulders, and waif-like body add to the visual rhetoric of the female form and transgress the socially acceptable male figure of broad shoulders and defined musculature that can be seen in his superhero counterparts that make up Marvel’s Avengers.

### **Gender Transgressive Behavior**

Oftentimes, as can be seen in cinematic villains, comic book supervillains embody deviant gender performance through their hand gestures and bodily movements, and this transgressive physical behavior is consistently seen in the first homosexual character, Samuel “Starr” Saxon. When drawn to show his entire body, he is often depicted standing with a hip cocked to one side with his hand resting on it.<sup>30</sup> Such body language brings to mind the female model that desires to show off a womanly figure through exaggerated hips. Jennifer Terry explains this demasculinization and feminization of the male, homosexual body recalls the misguided and long-held belief that “homosexuals would show physical characteristics of the opposite sex” (279). In this case, Saxon demonstrates female body characteristics, which automatically alert the reader to the stereotypical concept of a gay man as acting in accordance to the behavior of a woman in a predominantly heteropatriarchal society. As examined by Jocelyn

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<sup>30</sup> See Appendix K

Hollander and reinforced by Li-Vollmer and LaPointe's research, females perform what Judith Butler argued is "feminine gender" or "womanliness" through small and contained gestures, which also alludes to the lack of space that a woman is permitted to take up in society, whether literally or metaphorically. Saxon's movements and body positions reflect this constrained movement, and in many of the panels that depict his full body or the majority of his upper half, he keeps his elbows in and his arms pressed against his torso. Typically, the only part of his body showing movement is his wrist or hands, and his wrists tend to be limp. Such movements may compare to the movements of a conservative and proper lady while also subtly indicating that the gay man – our supervillain – must be contained and does not possess the same spatial presence as heterosexual men, again equating the gay man to the feminine.

Not only does Colon draw Saxon's body in positions largely associated with feminine performance and feminine visual markers, he takes advantage of Saxon's hands to demonstrate a more effeminate attitude. Saxon's hands are prominently featured in his movements and gestures within the panels. Like many animated Disney villains, he "engage[s] in excessive hand gesturing: [He] press[es] [his] fingertips together in contemplation" and "dismiss[es] people or comments with a wave of the hand" (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 101). Two of Saxon/Machinesmith's signature poses recall feminine affectations. One of them is when he stands with his hip cocked to the side, his left arm tightly across his chest, while his right arm has the elbow close to the body; his fingers are twirling his facial hair with a limp wrist as women are wont to do when

absent-mindedly playing with their hair. The second position mirrors the first, but this time the fingers gently rest across his lips in thought.<sup>31</sup> Not only does Colon utilize feminine behaviors to encourage readers to disidentify with Saxon, the lack of body mobility relates back to my previous discussion of the villains as lethargic and inactive, traits undesirable in traditional masculine performances. When combined, these traits vilify femininity and deviant sexuality in males while also marking the character as “other.”

A gender transgressive behavior consistently seen in villains is the preoccupation with appearance, and Saxon/Machinesmith is no exception. The use of mirrors to demonstrate vanity has a long history in literary studies and is also utilized in comic books with villains, as demonstrated in the previous chapter with Loki and mirrors (51). In one significant instance in *Captain America* issue #249, the reader understands how Saxon was able to live on as Machinesmith, his life preserved in a cybernetic world and cyborg body. In telling this story, we see Saxon as Machinesmith gazing into a mirror, and although this could be read as his primordial disbelief at and realization of being a “living robot,” it can also offer the reader understanding that Saxon’s looks were incredibly important to him, given his incredulity. Such a reading is further supported when it is revealed that Saxon is obviously so appalled by his robotic appearance that he eventually crafts a cyborg head that mimics his organic appearance when he was known

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<sup>31</sup> See Appendix J

as Saxon, down to the facial hair, though all in metal. As Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detley Zwick note in their study of masculine bodies in popular culture, mirrors are often associated with the female because the mirrors represent women preparing themselves *to be looked at*, and when men perform this act, it tends to be recognized as undesirable because of the association with the feminine (37), again encouraging males to disidentify with Machinesmith, a gay antagonist. This type of gender-transgressive behavior furthers the stereotype that gay men are more effeminate while also presenting “the incongruence of these behaviors with expectations for male gender performance implicitly making primping and grooming a deviant act” (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 102). Worth noting, there are no instances of Saxon viewing himself in the mirror, which may arguably be the way the artist accentuates Saxon’s deviancy; arguably, he is no longer a man but a cyborg, and therefore an imitation of masculinity.

### **Genitalia and Demasculinization**

In superhero mythology, representation of the penis and sexual prowess remain taboo, but they are also subtly utilized in order to form identification and disidentification between the reader, superheroes, and supervillains. Such coding on the body allows for the reader to make assumptions about the sexuality and sexual abilities of the characters, which determines how they fit into the heteronormative framework of masculinity. In most cultures, masculinity, virility, and sexual prowess are interconnected; one cannot be masculine if he does not possess the proper genitals, and there is an assumption

surrounding the penis that the larger the penis, the more masculine a man is considered. The artist's effective removal of male genital indicators from Saxon's body marked it immediately as feminine and allowed for the reader to understand Saxon's body as nonconforming to social laws about normative gender performance. This type of demasculinization – removing male indicators from the body – allowed for the character's body to be perceived as deviant. He was identifiably male, but lacked male parts.

As summarized in Kaysee Baker and Arthur A. Raney's study on gender-role stereotyping of superheroes, to be heroic means to be more masculine, regardless of gender, so feminizing Saxon by removing physical male indicators helped to prove his villainous character and reiterated concepts of sexual deviancy as nefarious (37). If we look at the most prominent superheroes in the Saxon/Machinesmith series, Daredevil and Captain America, there is a clear artistic intention to draw a bulge at the crotch in order to indicate male-associated genitals, such as a penis.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Samuel Saxon appears to lack any bulge, but rather is portrayed with a neat and tidy "V" suggesting the female vagina. This representation can be read in two ways. The first suggests that the gay villain, Saxon, is so gender transgressive that he lacks the necessary parts associated with ideal masculinity, again furthering a discourse that gay men are not and cannot be masculine. In fact, by applying Carol A. Stable's argument that superheroes are men that

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<sup>32</sup> See Appendix M

have the literal balls to lead, it would suggest that the converse argument – men without balls – would not be able to lead, but would be considered threatening to American heteronormative culture (87). The second reading may suggest impotency, another measuring trait for masculinity. By appearing to have female genitalia, Saxon did not conform to the binary construction of gender. He was not only feminized by not having the genital markers drawn, but gender-nonconforming by being a male without one of the most significant markers of “manliness” and “manhood.” Again, the male supervillain is effectively demasculinized through the lack of visible male genitalia.

As Tobin suggests, childless and womanless men are considered dangerous in a heteronormative patriarchy, so by depicting the first homosexual character as not only a villain, but a villain who appears biologically unable to produce children given his lack of male-genital indicators, sexual deviancy is poised as a threat. Erica Rand and Kath Weston explain that much of western ideology focuses on the “normalized” family; that is, the idea that there is some natural and universal law that familial and kinship ties *should* always relate to procreation (Rand 48, Weston 86-87). Therefore, sexual deviancy that does not follow the heteronormative framework of a reproductive couple would be a perceived threat, since it would upset the “natural law” of reproduction and procreation that has become normalized in American society. A male who either could not reproduce or did not have the necessary genitals to do so unsettled the heteropatriarchal standard. As mentioned in the previous chapter, virility and symbols associated with such connotations typically play a role in the construction of an ideal masculinity, especially in

comic books. Since having children or visually depicting this sexual ability and prowess would be strictly taboo, artists employ other visual cues, such as the bulge in between the legs at the crotch. Whether or not the superhero produces offspring, the bulge indicates the *ability* for a superhero to do so when and if he desires. The lack of a bulge implies the infertility of Saxon and demasculinizes the character. In addition, Saxon is rarely drawn in the company of women, and when he is, it is because the female is either a background addition or is with the superhero. My research has not found any instance where Saxon is drawn with female companionship; rather, there are numerous panels where he is among the company of men, alluding to his sexual preference.

In another approach, Saxon/Machinesmith sets out to demasculinize his superhero counterparts through dialogue, and this is also captured in the images of Machinesmith in order to highlight his deviant sexual preferences. On the one hand, as the human Saxon, his language was relatively gender-neutral, but as Machinesmith, he uses distinctly gendered language towards male characters. In *Captain America*, issue #354,<sup>33</sup> the reader can almost imagine the high-pitched inflection stereotypical of flamboyantly gay men in Machinesmith's dialogue to Captain America when he says, "Oh, Captain? Over HEEE-EEERE! [...] Of course Machinesmith, you ninny! [...] So Mr. Blue-britches, Machinesmith is back and you're going to be in big trouble!" The choice of language is not indicative of masculine behavior and sets out to demasculinize Captain America,

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<sup>33</sup> See Appendix N

especially with the use of the word “ninny,” which, though meaning “a foolish person,” possesses the connotations of being innocent, much like the stereotypical and popular perception of women in popular culture. Of course, the reader can imagine the flirtatious tone in which Machinesmith directed this dialogue towards Captain America. Also, by referencing Captain America’s lower body through the use of “britches,” the writers and artists subtly show Machinesmith’s attention to the area where the male sexual and reproductive organs are located. In many later issues involving Captain America, we see Machinesmith use dialogue to make sexual passes at Captain America, who clearly is meant to embody – both literally and figuratively - the ideals of a heterosexual, American society. By directing such flirtatious language to a character indoctrinated into the heterosexual American ideal of masculinity, there is a subtle reference to the possibility that homosexual individuals would attempt to taint and tempt the heterosexual through seduction, no matter how far-fetched the concern.

Other examples in comic series featuring Machinesmith utilize subversive dialogue and imagery to further Machinesmith’s homoeroticism and his attempt to seduce straight characters. In *The Avengers*, issue #325, Machinesmith also refers to the Avenger’s humanoid android, Vision, as a “gorgeous hunk of man-machine.” In addition, he is shown collapsed and entangled with Vision, and a remark is made by another character, Minister Blood, about his “perverted” sexuality.<sup>34</sup> In *Iron Man*, issue #320,

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<sup>34</sup> See Appendix O



Machinesmith makes a pass at Tony Stark, and when he is rejected, admits in a flirtatious voice that he is still holding out for Vision. Because we have a gay villain using language that demonstrates these overtly sexual desires for the same sex, it leaves the reader with the understanding that sexual deviancy is monstrous and undesirable within masculine performance. The heterosexual hero, Tony Stark, rejects the gay villain, Machinesmith, encouraging a rejection of the deviant body that exemplifies deviant sexuality. Yet, the presence and indication of a man-machine relationship also troubles some boundaries that it creates.

Machinesmith's villainy and explicitly deviant sexuality is not the only component that troubles same-sex relationships, but also the blurring of man-machine relations becomes a visual metaphor for blurring the boundary of identification. Given that Machinesmith's cyborg body appears identical to his original, human form (what some cyborg theorists term organic<sup>35</sup>), this doubling of the human body as a cyborg – a human artifice - with an actual human presents an uneasy reality; one's identity cannot be proven through the gaze, the means by which we typically evaluate ourselves and others (Telotte 57). J.P. Telotte explains, "The android threatens to unleash dangerous desires in the human community and thus bring about disaster" (57). And with this "dangerous desire" also comes a blurring of definitions; the machine began to be described in terms of human anatomy, and ultimately troubled ideas about how we came to separate the terms of man and machine (Jacob 253-254). Notably in the realm of bioengineering and

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<sup>35</sup> See *Liquid Metal: The Science Fiction Reader*, edited by Sean Redmond

biomedicine, the man-machine relationship and how we identify these terms and distinguish between them are not explicit, and identifying when technology becomes part of the biology remains uncertain. Arguably as an anthropomorphic cyborg, Machinesmith's attraction to man (read: organic humans) is his longing for human emotion and attachment that will create existential meaning for his artificial being.

### **The Threat of Deviant Sexuality and Infection**

The human artifice becomes a threat because it can appear human, yet cannot be identified through the visual, so behaviors must be enacted in order to demonstrate the "naturalness" or the "deviancy" of individuals. The artificiality of the cyborg highlights the "humanness" within man, "an absence or potential abdication from the human world which can only be made present or visualized in the mirror furnished by the doubling process" of an artificial body to a real one (Telotte 60). Ultimately, using Machinesmith in the comic books as an opposite to Captain America, Daredevil, and Iron Man, the artists and writers are arguing for the artificiality of homosexuality while advocating for the "normalcy" and "naturalness" of heterosexuality. Samuel Saxon becomes Machinesmith in the *Daredevil* series when Saxon falls, breaking his neck after a fight with the superhero, and he then transplants his mind in one of his own engineered, robotic bodies. Saxon's body became functionally useless and had to be exchanged for

an engineered one, but he continued to display the same feminine mannerisms.<sup>36</sup> The reader could assume that the homosexual is corporeally killed in order to demonstrate the inability for a society to accommodate the presence of a gay individual and that to live and participate in a gay lifestyle and culture would require that the individual in question be marked as queer or abnormal. Although he is queered in his natural body, the queering is taken further in his cyborg form because the cyborg form is no longer considered a “natural” body. In the case of Machinesmith, his automaton body is queered; the artist uses a visual marker to show the abnormality of the homosexual, both physically and in a larger metaphorical sense. Machinesmith’s body becomes a site of perversion in this context. As Robert McRuer explains, gay men have been “stigmatized in and by a culture that will not or cannot accommodate their presence,” (35). The comic book narratives focusing on Machinesmith, whether explicitly or not, epitomize this cultural problem by marking the first homosexual character as “other” through association with the cyborg body.

Arguably what makes the interpretation of the artificial body as posing a danger to society more intriguing is the fact that such subversive language and visuals didn’t become apparent and explicit until Saxon transformed into the cyborg, Machinesmith. Once he becomes a cyborg, the subversive language transitions from more than just flirtations banter from villain to hero, Machinesmith admits and continues to remind

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<sup>36</sup> See Appendix L

readers and other characters alike that he is romantically attracted to another cyborg, Vision, which is why the heroes should not take his comments as anything other than meaningless flirting. In fact, Vision becomes a sexual obsession for Machinesmith throughout the multiple series. When Vision was created, the writer and artist, Roy Thomas, made sure that he would not be confused with Machinesmith and claimed that he wanted Vision to have a romantic attraction to the Scarlet Witch (a human) in order to demonstrate Vision's attempt to become "more human" (Walker 60). Vision rejected Machinesmith's attempts and married Scarlet Witch, suggesting that to become "more human" means to be heterosexual. In fact, Karen Walker notes that the difference between Vision and Machinesmith is that Vision is portrayed as a "synthetic human" while Machinesmith is portrayed as an android – devoid of human connection, despite once being human, unlike Vision (64). Also, Vision and Scarlet Witch have twin boys through Scarlet Witch's magical powers, furthering the aforementioned argument of a procreative couple as an approved relationship. The comparison between Vision and Machinesmith suggests that the only way to redeem the cyborg or android body – the artificial existence – is through adhering to the heteronormative social framework. Since Machinesmith embodies deviant sexuality, his cyborg body is used to highlight his artificiality, whereas Vision may pass as a "synthetic human."

Machinesmith's body as an automaton perverted the natural human form into a grotesque one, seemingly mocking the procreative heterosexual body. He maintained the shape of a human but through a full-body cybernetic prosthetic. In this sense,

Machinesmith's body embodies the perversion of sexual deviancy. This transformation into a fully automated cyborg furthers the assumption of infertility, going against the conservative agenda of the nuclear family prevalent in 1979 American, the year that Saxon was revealed as Machinesmith. Machinesmith acts as a symbolic threat to the nuclear family and the importance of heteronormative reproduction by perverting procreation. In issue #47 of *Marvel Two-In-One*, when the reader sees Machinesmith's androids entering into the streets through the sewers. These faceless androids with clearly masculine upper bodies, but with the same lack of bulge near the crotch as Saxon/Machinesmith embody a visual rhetoric of heteronormative fear-mongering towards the homosexual body as one that can spread and infect the heterosexual one, corrupting neighborhoods, morals, sexuality, and the heteronormative society. Several pages are devoted to showing the androids battling hypermasculine characters, such as construction workers and men in suits, conjuring images of gay rights activists rebelling against police forces in New York City's Stonewall Uprising and, of course, the iconography of the gay singing group the Village People.<sup>37</sup> Terry argues, "It was both on the surfaces of perverse bodies and in their dark interiors that homosexual desire was presumed to originate and proliferate as a dyshygienic threat to the whole and wholesome organic body of the human" (274). The images of Machinesmith's androids filtering into the streets, affecting the heterosexual spatiality and turning it into one forced to

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<sup>37</sup> See Appendix P

accommodate the queer, can be read as the “disease” of sexual deviancy affecting heterosexuality. The image of androids fighting humans highlights the supposed-artificiality of sexual deviancy and the “naturalness” of heterosexuality. In effect, Machinesmith is biologically sterile and culturally diseased, fitting into the stigmata of degeneracy that coincided with ideas of the “unnatural” and perverted body of the homosexual.

Machinesmith’s use of androids is important for highlighting the supposed perversion of sexual deviancy because they represent unnatural and artificial reproduction, which threatens the sanctity of the nuclear, heterosexual family. In *Captain America* issue #248, the reader sees that Machinesmith has made an army of android Samuel Saxons in order to combat Captain America’s attempt to contain the villain.<sup>38</sup> Because Machinesmith cannot biologically produce children, he perverts this notion by *building* what could be considered his “offspring.” He then uses his androids and these cyborgs to infiltrate heterosexual spaces and individuals. Continuing the theme of a threatening homosexual body, not only does composing a gay body as a supervillain perpetuate a false ideology that gay equates to villainous or criminal, but the literal configuration of Machinesmith’s body as a weapon reinforces the idea that sexual deviancy is dangerous in its literal composition and application to a heteronormative society. Machinesmith’s body is equipped with a vast arsenal of weaponry and defense

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<sup>38</sup> See Appendix Q

systems, which threaten the normalized, organic bodies of the superheroes that combat him.<sup>39</sup> His body has literally become an agent for possible destructive forces. Into the mid-twentieth century, sexual deviancy was viewed in the psychological and medical field as symptomatic of a diseased lifestyle<sup>40</sup> in which “immaturity, deception, and even treason” made “sexual deviancy... dangerous to the nation’s security,” and these ideas pervaded popular thought well into the late twentieth century (Terry 277). Such a danger to the nation’s heteronormative security is both reflected and reinforced in Machinesmith’s weaponized body.

Machinesmith’s body becomes an extended weapon when he uses his technological superiority to target the heterosexual, and therefore healthy body of his antagonists. In 2005, in the wake of the first neuro-cybernaut human, the development of microscopic microbots, and the resurgence of AIDS research, the fifth volume of the *Captain America* series of that year employed cultural and current events to re-establish and reinforce the dangers of a queer community. In issue #10, Machinesmith creates a nanotech virus disguised as red blood cells and uses it to infect Captain America, which weakens him to his previous, unaltered body. Not only does there appear to be a relationship with the AIDS scare of the 1980s and 1990s, for both the gay and straight communities in the United States that propagated the belief that only gays were the ones

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<sup>39</sup> See Appendix R

<sup>40</sup> Most notably, psychotherapist Edmund Bergler published his book, *Sexual deviancy: Disease of Way of Life* in 1956, which Jennifer Terry cites in her article.

to spread it throughout the population, it also coincides with a viral *New York Times* article in 2005 that claimed cases of HIV/AIDS had declined in recent years. Such correlation between new and old reports might indicate the compulsion to continue the discourse surrounding the queer body as diseased.

Also, Machinesmith's use of androids furthers the concept of being homosexual as undesirable because Machinesmith rarely uses any physical prowess, whereas the Avengers team and Daredevil rely on physical strength and activity. The androids are essentially Machinesmith's henchmen; he does little manual labor, and he is usually bested by his superhero counterparts because of their superior strength. Given the focus on the musculature of the male superhero in visual rhetoric, the villain's lack of physical activity would be considered an undesirable trait, and when that is combined in the character of a villain who is also homosexual, the homosexual individual can be read as going against social norms of male gender performance. Again using Hollander's study, "Consistent with studies of gender roles in other media, real men are shown as active and physical," which suggests that an inactive villain may be grouped more with stereotypical views of women as being uninvolved and inactive (Hollander qtd. in Li-Voller and LaPointe 102). Supporting Hollander's argument, Alsford makes the point that heroes tend to be men who "[exhibit] a certain kind of aggressive power" while female superheroes tend to be "largely passive" (2). Arguably, such inactivity threatens the foundation of a heteronormative society, and promotes disidentification with



Saxon/Machinesmith because his sexual deviancy is a threat and an unwanted sexual orientation.

Because comic books often create multiple story-arcs in multiple comic book series, it is sometimes difficult to talk about the “death” of a character. For instance, Machinesmith has appeared to die multiple times, only to be brought back to life. His most recent death occurred in the sixth volume of the *Captain America* series released in 2012. In issue #10, Machinesmith is infected with a virus that causes his mechanical body to weaken and his memories to fade, resembling symptoms brought on by HIV/AIDS. Eventually, the virus wipes out his computer programming, eliminating him as a threat and effectively “killing” him. What makes this scene most unsettling is that the reader should be relieved by Machinesmith’s death at the hands of this virus given the praise given to Captain America by the president for destroying Machinesmith, reiterating disturbing propaganda that surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s that gay individuals deserved to die at the hands of AIDS because of sexual deviancy’s inherent criminality.

### **Conclusion: Ideological Counterstrike**

Before his final death in 2012 and throughout much of his appearances in *Captain America* and *Daredevil*, as a villain and as the first homosexual comic book character, Saxon/Machinesmith’s efforts are constantly being thwarted, which alludes to the degeneracy of sexual deviancy, the threat of the homosexual, and the need for homosexuality to be policed, just as the supervillain is policed by the superhero. Despite

the power of a pervasive heteronormative ideology, much of Saxon/Machinesmith's behavior and actions can be read as ideological counterstrikes. The forced entrance of the homosexual into heterosexual space, along with infiltrating the body through nanobots, may be read as the homosexual and queer community as reclaiming space that ought to include them. Dean Spade explains in his article, "Fighting to Win," that many individuals in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities face discrimination professionally, culturally, and socially. Oftentimes, these communities "have a difficult time accessing the entitlements that exist" for those that follow the heteronormative framework (33). By entering into the street, attacking a heterosexual body, and literally arming himself against destruction, Saxon/Machinesmith poses himself and metaphorically the homosexual community as not easily deterred from their objective of obtaining respect, legitimacy, and equality in a dominantly heterosexual culture.

Interestingly, since Saxon/Machinesmith many comic books have begun to employ homosexual characters. Unfortunately, these homosexual characters are still represented as supervillains or vilified counterparts to superheroes.<sup>41</sup> The role and portrayal of these characters go beyond the scope of this paper, but may offer an interesting point of investigation to see whether or not vilified views of homosexuals and

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<sup>41</sup> Although not comprehensive, the following is a list of Marvel supervillains that are professed by their creators, writers, or artists to be representative of the LGBTQ communities: Andreas VonStrucker, Electro, Man-Killer, Shinobi Shaw, Destiny, Daken, Mindmeld, and Superia.

the sexually deviant is being perpetuated today. In some issues, a few of these supervillains come together to combat their superhero counterparts, which may suggest “informal systems of mutual support” for the queer community, suggesting “the beginnings of political movements for justice” through subversive means by utilizing the supervillain, which may be the beginnings of a supervillain’s transformation into an anti-hero (O’Brien 280).

Within the structure and popular media of comic books, supervillains provide insight into cultural fears, stigmas, and ruling ideologies – namely the heteronormative framework – and may influence young male readers to believe that sexual deviancy is not only undesirable, but threatening to a stable society, and demonic. By positing the first explicitly gay character in a comic book through Samuel “Starr” Saxon who became Machinesmith, artists opened the critical examination of gays as villainous, reinforcing heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality for its largely male readership. Of course, a reading of a single supervillain will not prove a heteronormative ideal in comic books, but it does lay the groundwork for such exploration in comic book studies.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION: SUPERVILLAINS WANTED

In a consumerist society that functions largely using images as means of persuasion, comic books may provide a means for understanding how certain ideologies are implemented, reiterated, reinforced, and challenged, especially in the under-studied field of masculinity in regards to comic book studies. Because superheroes and supervillains have a rich history in the United States as being iconic receptacles for cultural assumptions and beliefs, how supervillains are visually portrayed in comic books may suggest means for understanding a culture's anxieties about masculine identity and embodiment within a heteronormative framework. In this thesis, I set out to explore the ways supervillains in comic books are portrayed as gender-transgressive and sexually deviant, which affects how the predominantly male readership inform their own physical and behavioral masculine identities.

Although I do not contend that my thesis is comprehensive in disentangling comic books' use of a patriarchal, heteronormative social conventions to influence its construction of masculine identity in its superheroes and feminize its supervillains, by examining the first explicitly gay comic book character, Samuel "Starr" Saxon, and one of the historically pervasive and popular supervillains, Loki, I intended to lay the

groundwork for further exploration of the supervillain's role in comic book studies, visual rhetoric, and gender studies. Carolynocca argues the male superheroes are fixed and resolute in their gender performances in comic books, and that these performances are necessary in reinforcing and articulating the heteronormative, patriarchal ideal. Because superheroes are fixed in their gender performances, supervillains provide insight into what a culture vilifies as gender-transgressive traits.

The intention of this thesis is to remedy some deficiencies in comic book studies as a form of criticism in regards to the ways in which supervillains and villainy are associated with discourses about gender, sexuality, and identity. Through gender and feminist theories, we have seen how comic artists may reinforce and reiterate heteronormative hegemony by having comic book supervillains embody deviant traits. Unfortunately, studies in masculinity are limited when it comes to popular representations of the male form, with most of the focus on female representations or male representations in advertisements.<sup>42</sup>

When superhero comic books were first introduced to American consumers, the villains were not "super"; rather the villains either were or represented real antagonists in American history, contemporary or otherwise. Then, with the Vietnam War and the nature of the "enemy" being called into question, the supervillain was born – becoming more complex and metaphorically reflective of ideologies that went against mainstream American thought, such as more effeminate and elusive villains. In essence, villains were no longer immediately identifiable, like the use of Nazis or Soviet Russians, as antagonists in comic books. Instead, comic book artists such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby

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<sup>42</sup> As seen in the work of Jonathan E. Schroeder and Detlev Zwick, Diane Torr and Stephen J. Bottoms, and Susan Jeffords

created villains that embodied socially transgressive traits and characteristics from the viewpoint of a patriarchal, heteronormative American society. The 1980s brought about the hypermasculine supervillain, which reflected a shift in societal values regarding masculine identity. At some point in the early 1990s, the comic book supervillain returned to the construction of supervillains in the Silver Age (1960s-1970s), and again began to demonstrate gender-transgressive characteristics while also reinforcing a conservative, heteronormative agenda.

It is important to consider mainstream and popular literary forms like the comic book when investigating gender, sexuality, and identity. Kaysee Baker and Arthur A. Raney have pushed for the validity of comic books as a means for persuading its readership of how to perform gender according to the standards of a predominantly patriarchal and heteronormative society, suggesting that the framework established by Joan Riviere and Judith Butler for gender performance holds true. Despite the artificiality of gender as proposed by Butler, comic book supervillains perform their sex outside of their socially inscribed gender, earning them the titles of dangerous, deviant, and of course, villainous. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler further argues that the body that displays deviant characteristics or traits in regards to its sex and corresponding gender is vilified and ostracized from society. Again, most scholarship on comic books, when it addresses gender and sexual identity-formation, focuses on the superhero – female or male – and its impact on adolescent readers. The supervillain’s role in this identity-formation remains largely unexamined.

The majority of contemporary supervillains in comic books tend to demonstrate gender ambiguity based on traditional Western assumptions of heteronormative gender

performances. Although comics have been used in discussion of composition and rhetoric as a pedagogical tool, comics also apply to the literature field in investigating historical and cultural constructions of gender and sexuality, and how these visual representations inform masculine identity. Arguably, examining the villain may reveal more about cultural constructions of gender in American society and culture than the superhero, and in the field of visual rhetoric and literature, comic books and their adaptations should not be overlooked. Although this is a preliminary study, Samuel “Starr” Saxon/Machinesmith and Loki are constructed, whether intentionally or not, to vilify males that deviate from accepted performances of masculinity through the visual construction of their bodies in comic books, and ultimately mark them as “other.”

Unfortunately, there are some limitations to the study of supervillains in comic books. One of these limitations is judging the basis for “deviant behavior,” and the significant lack – though not complete absence - of sexual behavior makes the presentation of sexuality necessarily coded as Foucault explains in *The History of Sexuality*.<sup>43</sup> Such judgments are predicated on stereotypes. In addition, artistic intention by either the writer or penciller may contradict some arguments formed, such as whether or not a character is meant to be portrayed as queer. Also, the changing nature of the supervillain can be both a benefit and an obstacle to studying gender, sexuality, and identity.

Given the changing nature of culture, readership, and *how* we read, the presentations of supervillains and the content of superhero comic books may alter either

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<sup>43</sup> Arguably, this relates to Jacques Lacan’s symbolic order that regulates desire and represses such sexual impulses as defined and contained within the paternal metaphor, the Phallus, or the Law. Though a simplistic summary, Lacan argues that desire aspires to possess what is always absent or repressed.

subtly or drastically. As a hindrance, this means scholarship can become outdated quickly, but it also means that new scholarship will always be available. Lastly, another major limitation to this study is that the comic book consumer base is definitively hard to estimate. As noted by the independently run site, *Comichron*, comic book conventions tend to be evenly attended between the two genders while marketing trends from independent comic book stores and publicly owned companies suggest men significantly outnumber women when it comes to purchasing and consuming comic books. Ultimately, obtaining an accurate statistic of which gender comprises what percentage of readers is highly unlikely; this can make arguments relating to identification and disidentification difficult to defend. In addition, a more consequential issue may be the difficulty of identifying the sexual preferences and identifications of comic book readers, and the argument may be made that queer readers might interpret these codes differently.

What troubles and opens up this discussion is the possibility that comic books may be read differently by different readers. By portraying “queer” villains, they may promote queer readings that challenge and resist heteropatriarchal and heteronormative ideologies, as well as straight ones that reinforce these ideologies. We can read the villains Loki and Saxon/Machinesmith as “camp,” an artistic style that intentionally exaggerates thematic elements and so may distance readers from the dominant reading. The queer reader may see the exaggerated visuals and dialogue of these villains as a form of camp pleasure, deriving amusement from the artifice and the devious cruelty that these characters tend to exhibit. In his book *Spectacular Passions*, Brett Farmer has attempted to examine this camp pleasure derived from villainous and queer characters by queer readers and explains many queer readers identify with the outcast because they recognize



the social forces that have caused this particular character to become the outcast and with whom readers are encouraged to disidentify.

Through this exaggeration, especially with Machinesmith, a self-satirical aspect is arguably achieved, which may deconstruct social criticism of such stereotyping of gay or queer culture and identity. Frederic Wertham was a significant opponent of comic books and argued that they were largely responsible for most of society's problems. His argument included that if boys and girls sympathized with the villains, that it would turn them gay or lesbian, respectively. His papers and arguments ultimately led to the Comic Code Authority, which banned sympathetic criminals until 2011. With this in mind, the "campiness" of villains like Loki and Saxon/Machinesmith could have been a subversive and ironic commentary of the superhero genre; read that way, they may seem like a positive attempt to include queer figures in comic books. Their self-satirical aspects challenge the absurdity of gay and queer identities as inherently dangerous, villainous, or criminal.

In addition, certain aspects of comic books reflect a queer consciousness for queer readers, but these aspects also challenge traditional readings and heteronormative readers. Loki and Saxon/Machinesmith may challenge the ideology of a heteronormative patriarchy because they confront the reader with queer identities; their storylines and visuals engage audiences, causing them to react – whether positively or negatively – to this imagined universe and situation. Plus, despite their villainous depictions, Loki and Saxon/Machinesmith are prominent and prevalent figures in the Marvel universe and their consistent combat against the superheroes that have come to represent a heteronormative agenda may act as an ideological counterstrike. Lastly, such characters,

whether positive or negative forces in the fictional universe of Marvel, allow queer readers to see and recognize representations of queer individuals in popular culture.

What may provide an interesting area and avenue for future research is a historical approach that investigates these shifts in villainous representations across time and in regard to female, as well as male, supervillains. With the emergence of a more egalitarian, consumerist society due to the increasing number of female comic book readers, the visual and dialogic reconstructions of the supervillain deserves attention. In fact, some news sources including *The Huffington Post*, *Comichron*, and *Comic Book Resources* have followed the emerging trend of more female artists and writers, along with female superheroes and villains whose bodies are realistically depicted. Such a transition from the outrageously curvaceous bodies of superwomen and supervillains to more realistic body proportions might indicate a change in readership and cultural ideologies. Not only have some female characters been given makeovers, but the emergence of more gay and lesbian comic book characters that are not villains could provide insight into, not only a changing readership, but an evolving society. One example is the “coming out” of Kyle Rayner, the best friend of Marvel’s Green Lantern. Perhaps examining the use of gender-transgressive and sexually deviant villains may produce and uncover alternative readings about gender performance and subsequent ideology.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

John Buscema's conceptualization of Loki in the 1980s.





Garbett's homage to Buscema's original Loki design





Appendix B  
Loki: Agent of Asgard, Issue #1



Appendix C

From Left to Right – Cover, *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #2; Cover, *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #1



Appendix D

Lorelei and Loki from *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #2

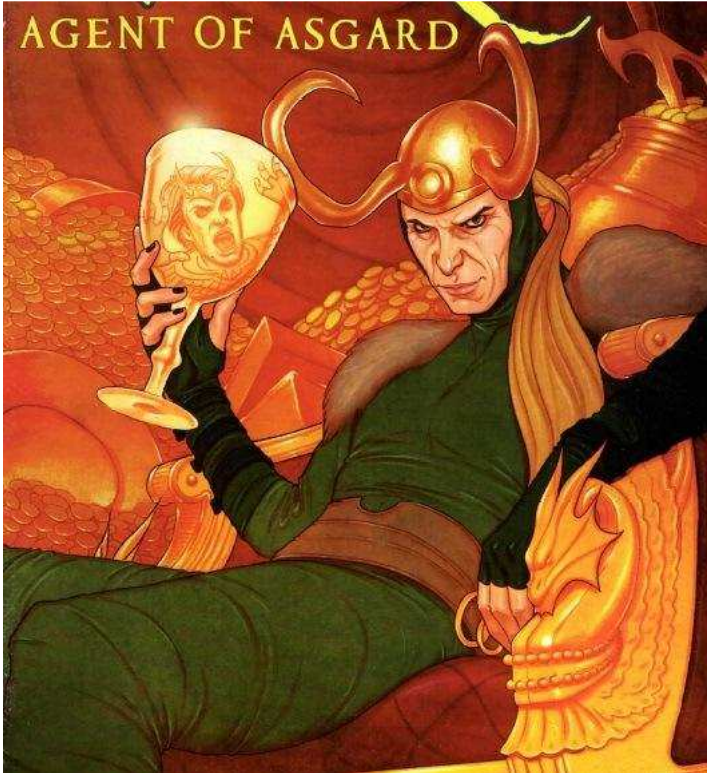




Appendix E  
From *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #1



Appendix F  
From *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #3





Appendix G  
From *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #3



Appendix H  
From *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #1

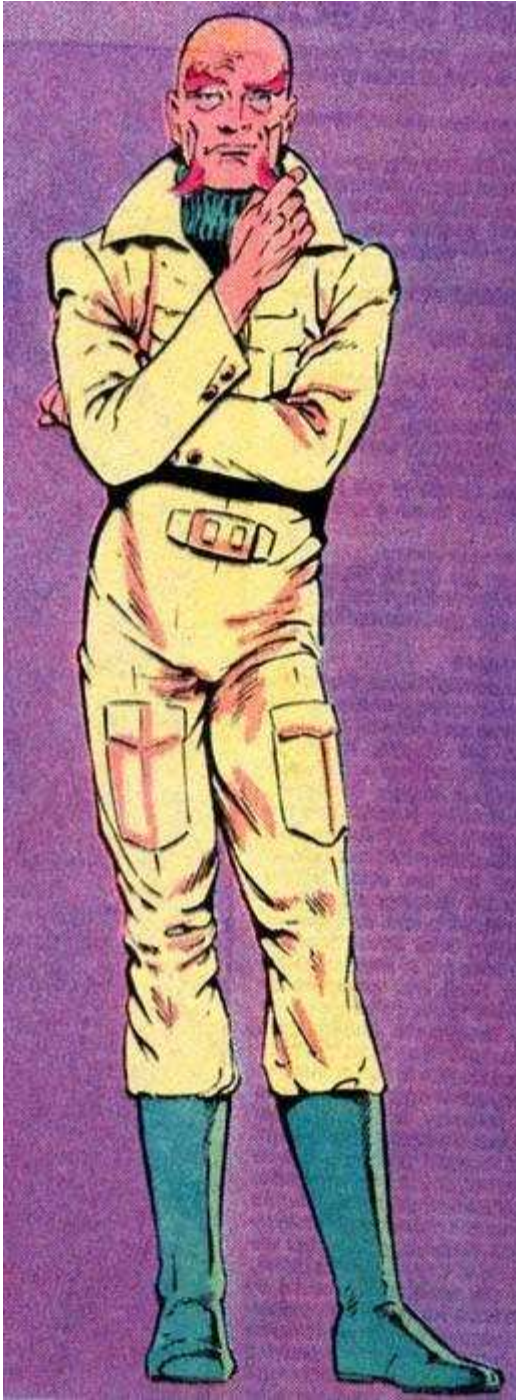


Appendix I  
From *Loki: Agent of Asgard*, Issue #1





Appendix J  
From *Daredevil*, Issue #49



Appendix K  
From *Captain America*, Issue #368





Appendix L  
From *Iron Man*, Issue #320





Appendix M  
From the Marvel archives online



Appendix N  
From *Captain America*, Issue #354





Appendix O  
From *The Avengers*, Issue #325





Appendix P  
 From *Marvel Two-In-One*, Issue #47



Appendix Q  
 From *Captain America*, Issue #248







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