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REGRESSION AND PROGRESSION:
PORTRAYALS OF MIDNIGHTER AND APOLLO FROM WILDSTORM AND DC
COMICS

by

Adam J. Yeich
B.A., Kent State University at Stark, 2015
M.F.A., Kent State University, 2018

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A Thesis Approved on

April 1, 2020

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ABSTRACT

REGRESSION AND PROGRESSION: PORTRAYALS OF MIDNIGHTER AND APOLLO FROM WILDSTORM AND DC COMICS

Adam J. Yeich

April 1, 2020

This project examines portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo, a gay couple, first published by WildStorm and by DC Comics. Analysis of these different portrayals reveals the manner in which WildStorm conveyed the characters in a homonormalized fashion as a means of making them acceptable to mainstream audiences via the perpetuation of homophobic ideas and negative stereotypes. The portrayals from DC Comics was a more natural representation of characters, without special attention paid to their orientation and the development of the relationship being present on the page for readers, conveying gay men as no different than anyone else. Analysis of the portrayals, combined with the publication history of those portrayals (12 years/over 100 issues from WildStorm; 6 years/less than 50 issues from DC), supports my argument that such progressive social statements as the DC portrayals are not sustainable in the mainstream pure-profit market within which comics are published.

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INTRODUCTION

The American comic book industry has evolved in many ways since the industry began around the outset of World War II (the Golden Age) when the first “superheroes” appeared in the pages of comic book titles, including such icons as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Captain America. After a period of stagnation in the 1950s, the industry was then revitalized in the early 1960s (the Silver Age), and the heroes were no longer infallible beings who inspired awe. They still inspired awe, but they were more “human” in the sense that they dealt with human problems such as bickering with friends and family, getting jobs, and paying rent. However, while those heroes were more “human,” the minority characters, when they were allowed to be portrayed—by the industry or by creators via editorial approval,¹ were often biased and stereotypical representations of that group, whether they were women, Black, Asian, or homosexual. A recent evolution in the industry (the Modern Age) involves the move away from heteronormative, homonormative, stereotypical, and racially biased character portrayals in favor of more progressive representations.

In showing this shift in character representations, I examine portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo, a gay couple. The two first appeared in WildStorm’s comics lines and were later incorporated into the DC Comics comic book lines after the 2011 reboot, which is known as the “New 52.” My argument is that this reboot acted as a means of

¹ The Comics Code Authority that regulated content for mainstream comic books until the early 1990s prohibited the inclusion of gay characters until the 1989 revision of the Comics Code (“Comics Code Revision of 1989”).

writing characters outside of binaries, stereotypes, and hetero- and homonormative lifestyles, which reflects a broader turn toward a more diverse portrayal of gendered and sexualized characters. Throughout the project, I use the examples of Midnighter and Apollo to show how DC Comics creators wrote more diverse and inclusive portrayals of homosexual characters and relationships. This analysis comes in two chapters: first, portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo's relationship from WildStorm before the 2011 reboot, and second, their relationship after the reboot, in which DC allowed the characters to break away from previous hetero- and homonormative representations. However, the larger purpose of the analysis is to support the argument that progressive ideals and representations are not always sustainable in the pure-profit economic environment of the mainstream superhero comic book culture. This point is revealed in the fact that the regressive portrayals from WildStorm thrived for over twelve years while the progressive portrayals from DC Comics survived for only six years, with a two-year period of no storylines focusing specifically on either Midnighter or Apollo individually or as a couple.

When Midnighter and Apollo first appeared in the late 1990s in WildStorm comics stories, they were homonormalized, to use a term popularized by Lisa Duggan in *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Homonormativity as it concerns media representation of homosexual characters involves the application of such concepts of monogamy, marriage, raising children—precepts of heterosexuality—to portrayals of homosexual characters to make them more acceptable to the heterosexual mainstream society (Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 50; Gross 256). The problem with conveying minority characters and cultures in a fashion

acceptable to the mainstream dominant culture is that the portrayals often align with dominant ideas of what those characters and culture should be and should look like, reinforcing negative conceptions and stereotypes, rather than what the characters and culture are actually like in and of themselves. Midnighter and Apollo were characterized in this manner with the long-term monogamous relationship, eventual marriage, and the adoption of a daughter. With DC Comics' New 52 reboot, the creators of the Midnighter and Apollo storylines conveyed more diversity and less mainstream normativity in their minority characters. While the argument could be made that the characters were still homonormalized in that they meet, fall in love, date monogamously, and eventually cohabitate in a homonormalized fashion, these examples do not convey a concept of either hetero- or homonormativity; rather, they convey the relationship as normative in general, without any special distinction between sexual orientations, especially when factoring in the page space granted for the characters to explore their feelings and orientation, the interactions explicitly shown rather than implied, and the fact that the characters do not remain monogamously committed to one another from their first appearance to their last. This portrayal from DC Comics moves away from the idea of homonormalization of the characters to fit into a heterosexual dichotomy and instead conveys the relationship as normalized, regardless of the gender identity of the members involved.

Through this analysis, I reveal that although the DC Comics portrayed a more natural and true-to-life example of a homosexual relationship than were the portrayals from WildStorm, such progressive statements about homosexual life are not sustainable within the economic environment of dominant mainstream comic book culture where

profit is the bottom-line, as is the case with most businesses. This argument is supported by the longevity of the WildStorm series and the short-lived series from DC Comics. The WildStorm series featuring Midnighter and Apollo were published continuously from the couple's first appearance in February 1998 through December 2010, shortly before DC Comics incorporated many of the characters from WildStorm into their comics universe in September 2011. The issues and guest appearances of Midnighter and Apollo in these combined series total over one hundred issues over the course of twelve years.

Comparatively, DC Comics published the characters in three series and only a few brief guest appearances in total. Stories from DC Comics featuring either Midnighter or Apollo, as a couple or individually, number fewer than sixty issues and their last appearance in the DC Comics universe was in the final issue of *Midnighter and Apollo* in March of 2017. The team comic book title the two appeared in, *Stormwatch*, ran for two and a half years, publishing thirty issues, before DC Comics cancelled the series. For two years, Midnighter—with a few brief appearances from Apollo—made guest appearances in *Grayson* (2015), a title in the Batman family of comic book stories, before DC published the *Midnighter* series in June 2015. That series only last twelve issues before DC cancelled it, wrapping up the storyline of Midnighter and Apollo's reconciliation in a six-issue miniseries titled *Midnighter and Apollo* (2017). While the hetero- and homonormative series from WildStorm lasted twelve years, the more progressive representation from DC Comics lasted just six years before the titles carrying them as characters were all cancelled. As of the writing of this paper, neither character has appeared again in the DC Comics universe.² In sum, while the DC Comics portrayals of

² For the sake of objectivity, the two characters do appear in the 2018 series *The Wild Storm* from DC Comics. In an attempt to revitalize the WildStorm universe after a lack of success from incorporating the

Midnighter and Apollo were as progressive in their representations as the WildStorm portrayals were regressive, such progression is not sustainable in the mainstream comics environment.

Literature Review

Primary Resources

My archive consists of the comic book storylines for Midnighter and Apollo. These serve as my primary literary sources. Midnighter and Apollo first appeared in *Stormwatch #4* (1998) from WildStorm, a subsidiary of DC Comics. They were introduced as a couple who had already been in a long-term relationship. They became main characters of WildStorm's *The Authority*,³ and as the couple progressed over the next twelve years of *The Authority*'s publication, they became married and adopted a daughter. In these earlier appearances as WildStorm characters, writers and artists (the creators) developed the characters in a homonormalized fashion, and the characters were not given the focus to develop both their relationship and their sexualities.

In 2011, DC Comics performed a company-wide reboot of their comics lines marketed as "The New 52." With this reboot, they altered the histories of many characters as a means of reinvigorating old characters and introducing new characters to

characters into the main DC universe, DC launched a four-part campaign to start the WildStorm universe up again under renowned writer Warren Ellis, the creator of many WildStorm characters, including Midnighter, Apollo, and the Authority. These stories were supposed to exist in a "universe" separate from the primary DC Comics universe. The campaign went under, however, due to an enormous lack in sales for the books. The flagship title of the campaign, *The Wild Storm* (2018), reintroduced many of the original WildStorm characters, including Midnighter and Apollo. In this iteration, the two have been dating for an undisclosed period before they first appear on the page, a backstep for DC's move toward diversity but keeping with WildStorm canon.

³ *The Authority* was a team-title published by WildStorm Productions and created by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, consisting of Jenny Sparks, Jack Hawksmoor, Shen Lin Min aka Swift, Angie Spica aka the Engineer, NAME aka the Doctor, Lucas Trent aka Midnighter, and Andrew NAME aka Apollo.

their “comic universe,” including characters for whom they gained publication rights from WildStorm, such as Midnighter and Apollo. Post-reboot, Midnighter and Apollo were included as members of Stormwatch,⁴ and creators gave them the space to meet each other and explore their emotions and sexualities, and they were allowed to do so both together and apart, allowing for a more realistic representation of a romantic relationship between two men. I analyze Midnighter and Apollo’s appearances in various titles such as *The Authority* (1999) (multiple volumes by varying titles), *Stormwatch* (2011), *Grayson* (2015), *Midnighter* (2016), and *Midnighter and Apollo* (2017). The appearances from this variety of texts show the development of the characters as sexual and romantic partners.

Key Secondary Resources

My secondary sources consist of literary theorists and comics’ theory scholars. From comics’ theory, I use the work of Scott McCloud, Morris E. Franklin III, Edward Sewell Jr., and Hillary Chute. McCloud, one of the most recognized names in recent comics’ theory, offers formal analysis of comic books and explains the way they function as a weaving together of both words and pictures to tell stories, express ideas, and make statements about the society within which they exist. He provides a vocabulary for the scholarly study of comics and for the examination of what the creators were expressing and how they were expressing it. Hillary Chute was one of the first scholars to raise the

⁴ *Stormwatch* was a team-title published by DC Comics beginning with the first month of the New 52 comics reboot. The titled included fan-favorites from the WildStorm days (the Engineer, Midnighter, Apollo, and Jenny Quantum) as well DC fan-favorite J’onn J’onzz aka the Martian Manhunter, in addition to new characters in the title including Harry Tanner aka the Eminence of Swords, Emma aka the Projectionist, and Adam One.

importance and value of the examination of gender and sexuality within graphic narrative, making her work essential to my analysis. Relating to the explication of how these comics universes developed, Chute writes about graphic narrative developing as a means of exploring social and political realities (456), which I examine in my reading of *Midnighter* and *Apollo*'s representations as characters related to the sustainability of socially progressive portrayals.

Franklin and Sewell partook in important analyses of early portrayals of homosexual characters in comics, and I draw on their work as I make my own examination of these more recent portrayals. Franklin examines early portrayals of homosexual characters within the realm of comic books as well as reader reactions to those portrayals and editor reactions to fan letters, which will provide a basis for my inquiry into the effect that readership has on the continued publication of certain comic book titles. Sewell describes the manner in which homosexual characters were included in newspaper comic strips, both of which relate to my examination of the manner in which *Midnighter* and *Apollo* were characterized and explanations behind possible reasonings.

The scholars of gender and sexuality studies who provide the means of my analysis include Stephen Valocchi, David Halperin, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, Larry Gross, and Lisa Duggan. I examine these scholars for their work in gender studies and queer theory, and in particular their interrogation of concepts of masculinity and femininity, and hetero- and homonormativity. Berlant and Warner explain conceptions of social regulations and stereotypes on relationships, relating heteronormativity to the mainstream culture of heterosexuality and the concept of a family and reproduction as the

goals of relationships in order to mediate and act as a metaphor for national existence (549). Such portrayals as the WildStorm stories of Midnighter and Apollo come from this focus on the “traditional family” and the forced homonormativity of homosexual portrayals to fit that model of romantic and familial behavior.

Building on the idea of heteronormativity, Stephen Valocchi refers to Steven Seidman’s analysis of the developments in portrayals of gay men and women in Hollywood, similar to the evidence I pull and examine from Larry Gross’s *Up from Invisibility*. While Valocchi and Seidman admit that a culture of heterosexual dominance still exists firmly in the American social consciousness, portrayals of homosexual men and women have developed from “polluting the gay” to the “normal gay,” in which rather than being either villain or victim, the characters are heteronormalized to appeal to the mainstream heterosexual audience. This distinction is one that the WildStorm portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo seem to straddle, sometimes pollutive and other times homonormative, as the conception of the normal gay still consisted of visible gays and lesbians, so long as they were gender conventional and linked sex to love and monogamous relationships (Valocchi 759-760). This idea of homonormativity was made prominent by Lisa Duggan whose work explains the movement within the LGBT community toward more conservative aims in a push for acceptance in mainstream society—the homonormalization of the community (Duggan, “The New Homonormativity,” 190). She explains the politics of gay activism and the concessions of assimilation that many in the community made in order to gain some of the same rights already enjoyed and taken advantage of by their heterosexual counterparts. These concessions come down to the concepts of heteronormativity—values, lifestyles, and

traditions associated with proper heterosexuality, including marriage and raising a family—and the assimilation of those concepts by the gay community, referred to as homonormativity—a homosexual couple’s efforts to enact those traditional heterosexual values in order to gain the chance at being marginally more acceptable to the dominant heterosexual society around them, the “heterosexual primacy and prestige” (Duggan, “The New Homonormativity,” 190). Thus, as a means of assimilating into the dominant heterosexual culture, homosexual couples began to prioritize heteronormative institutions in their relationships. There was a push and movement toward monogamy, marriage, and the having and raising of children.

Likewise, David Halperin historicizes homosexuality in his book, *How to Do the History of Homosexuality*, in order to “denaturalize heterosexuality” and “deprive it of its claims to be considered a ‘traditional value’” (10). He argues that homosexual relationships are not governed by prescriptions to large-scale social institutions; rather, “they function as principles of social organization in their own right and give rise to freestanding social institutions” (134). From this explanation, an analysis of DC’s portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo shows how the writers did not convey the characters in a manner that aligned with large-scale social institutions but to institutions that fit the nature of that specific relationship. The portrayals of the couple reveal a move away from these concepts of normalization into more diverse ideas of sexuality and varying kinds of relationships.

Value of the Project

With the completion of this project, I have the first stages of a larger project

showing how the comic book industry has moved away from stereotypical and social-normative ideas of minority groups and how some of those progressive movements are not sustainable in the current pure-profit economic environment of mainstream comic book culture. While this project reveals the successes of DC Comics to convey more diverse ideas of gendered bodies and alternative sexualities, the project can (and will be) expanded to include the examination of higher profile women heroes (those given their own titles), women assuming typically male roles, prominent Black, Latin, and Arabic heroes, and racial minority heroes assuming the roles of typically white heroes, examining which have been sustainable and which have not. The current project here, specifically the examination of Midnighter and Apollo's relationship from DC Comics, moves away from sometimes divisive rhetoric, and rather than look for what is "too queer," "not queer enough," "too normative," or "too antinormative," it simply reveals the way queer relationships can be conveyed in a manner that is true to the human condition instead of critiquing and analyzing the way the portrayals do or do not align with traditional and dominant (heterosexual) social institutions.

In addition, this project reveals the way that the mainstream profit-focused economy within which mainstream superhero comic books are published affects the manner of portraying minority characters in comic books, as shown by the longevity of the WildStorm publications and the lack of sustainability from the DC Comics lines. Scholars can read the comics for the way in which the visual and narrative elements illustrate theoretical ideas of diverse sexualities (specifically in men in this project) as well as the way this comic books expand ideas of how and why minority characters are portrayed for mainstream public audiences. This examination shows how DC Comics

provided a lesson on how minority group characters can and should be conveyed in a manner true their experience rather than forcing them to fit into models of dominant social standards while also revealing the lack of sustainability for such progressive inclusivity within the current comic book culture.

Methodology

In the first chapter of my analysis, I examine Midnighter and Apollo from WildStorm. I explain the attention paid to the characters and the relationship, from the writers, the villains of the story, and the teammates from the Authority. This examination provides the framework for my particular reading of the development of the relationship. From this framework, I provide examples of the development of their characters and their relationship over the twelve years before the transition to DC's comics universe. Accompanying these examples, I include observations culled from historical context and literary theory to explain and support my reading of the portrayal as homonormative in a manner that forces the relationship between the two men to fit into heteronormative social institutions, misrepresenting the diversity of relationships that can and do occur. This evidence comes in the form of quotes from the scholars that explain reading the relationship as something contrary to a step forward in the inclusion of gay characters in media and popular culture as well as specific panels embedded in the text to show what about the portrayals is perpetuating negative visibility for the homosexual community. Along with that analysis comes the evidence for why these negative portrayals were sustainable for such an extended period of time in their appeal to the ideologies of the audience of the mainstream superhero comic book industry.

In the second chapter of the project, I move on to the DC Comics portrayal of the relationship, where the creators developed a more diverse and inclusive representation of a romantic relationship between two men. I first differentiate the way DC creators allowed the characters the story time and space in the panels to develop as a normative couple without special attention to their sexual preferences and without the brand of homophobia clearly present in the WildStorm portrayals. I refer back to the gender and sexuality scholars whose work I argue supports my reading of the portrayal while also allowing for readings that differ from my own and explanations for the validity in my reading, framed by the differences in attention paid that exist in both readings. The culmination of these examinations and comparisons conveys the success with which DC portrayed the relationship between Midnighter and Apollo, treating them as lovers just like any other couple, refraining from undue focus on their gender or the gender of their romantic and sexual partners. However, the revelation of this success also reveals that such progressive portrayals are not sustainable in the current mainstream economic market in which comic books are published and sold, as their sustainability is wholly dependent upon a base of readers buying enough of the title to make it profitable for the company.

CHAPTER ONE:
A WILD STORM OF HOMONORMATIVITY

Introduction

The course of Midnighter and Apollo's relationship and the strict monogamy with which they are portrayed in these earlier stories are the definition of the idea of homonormativity in making gay relationships palatable to the larger mainstream community of readers. This socially acceptable portrayal constructs the relationship within the confines of heteronormative ideals and institutions, specifically in the era of the 1990s (Duggan, "The New Homonormativity," 177). The homonormativity

Figure 1: *Stormwatch* #4, cover art by Bryan Hitch.

of the relationship would have made the couple more acceptable to the mainstream audience of the superhero comic book industry, as the current social environment is often reflected in media representations. This acceptability would have been necessary to maintain sales of the book to turn a profit for WildStorm and make the title worth continuing to publish for twelve years. From their first appearance (*figure 1*), the relationship between the two characters was developed in a homonormalized fashion. The intimate relationship between the two is revealed in the course of the a few storylines. They have been in a relationship for a few years before they ever appear on the page.

Figure 2: *The Authority* cover art by Bryan Hitch.

Later in their time under WildStorm's comics lines, Midnighter and Apollo become integral members of *The Authority* (1999) (figure 2) a super-team assembled by Jenny Sparks,⁵ the team's leader (Ellis, *The Authority: Relentless*). Throughout the stories published over the next twelve years in the various *The Authority* books, Midnighter and Apollo get engaged and marry, adopt Jenny Quantum⁶ and raise her, become separated over differences of

opinion, and eventually get back together.

This homonormativity was also prevalent in other media portrayals as well, which reveals the need for such representations to keep the attention of the mainstream target audience and to keep the characters commercially viable. Larry Gross discusses the development of the visibility of gay men and lesbians on television and in movies, writing that "Gay people did not, however, ascend from the pariah status of criminal, sinner, and pervert to the respectable categories of voting bloc and market niche without playing the familiar American game of assimilation" (xvi). He goes on to explain that the

⁵ Jenny Sparks is a character referred to as a "century baby." She is born the first day of a new century and will die when the clock strikes midnight at the beginning of the next century. Jenny Sparks is the embodiment of the twentieth century. Each "Jenny" is endowed with the powers of that century's scientific revolution, which for Jenny Sparks was said to be electricity, even though electricity was utilized in the previous century.

⁶ Jenny Quantum, a completely separate character from that of Jenny Sparks, despite the concept of reincarnation, is the embodiment of the twenty-first century, born at midnight on January 1, 2000, after Jenny Sparks dies, to serve at this century's "century baby." She is called Jenny "Quantum" as her power set is supposed to be based on twenty-first century scientific advancement, namely quantum physics.

rules of the game required masking the distinctive characteristics of the community so that they might blend into the mainstream. In discussing LGBT activism from the turn of the 1990s, all of the major activist groups were led by “a professional woman, each partnered, with children, and presenting the face of middle-class normality and respectability” (xvi). Gross offers an example of this assimilation and normality with the network television show, *Will & Grace*. Will and Jack (both gay men) live in “an essentially straight society, not visibly engaged in a gay community” (Gross 180). After the first season, neither had been shown having any sort of love life, on or off screen. Similarly, Gay characters in comic books were rarely represented at all and almost never in any kind of romantic relationship. Creators homonormalized the depicted relationships, aligning with dominant heteronormative institutions, as seen in the portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship with their marriage, child adoption, and respectable nature as members of the Authority. While the two are shown as having a love life, a progressive development from the example of early portrayals of Will and Jack, the constraints by which that life was revealed were within heteronormative institutions and were given little page space for readers to see its development.

In this chapter, I examine the manner in which Apollo and Midnighter’s relationship developed in the WildStorm comic universe, including their marriage, adoption, child rearing, separation, and reconciliation to argue for the sustainability of such minority portrayals. I also address the attention paid to their relationship in relation to the various storylines in which they are involved, examining the manner of negative attention paid to the relationship. In exploring these elements, I draw upon the work of gender and sexuality theorists to provide the theoretical context for hetero- and

homonormativity. These examinations serve to show how WildStorm developed these characters in a fashion designed to reinforce and perpetuate heteronormative social institutions and stereotypes without giving the characters of a minority group the page space to develop as themselves and rather as socially acceptable, homonormative versions of gay men.

While scholars would likely not argue that the incorporation of gay characters onto a super-team in an ongoing, mainstream comic book is a negative progression for homosexual visibility, the manner in which those characters are treated by the other characters in the book—both teammates and villains—via the writers is a matter of concern in that WildStorm's portrayal perpetuated social stigma against the homosexual community. This comes across most clearly when looking at the level of constant, negative attention paid to the relationship (both hateful homophobia and distasteful or unnecessary gay jokes) in the pages of the various *The Authority* stories and the homonormative development of the relationship itself combined with the minimal page space within which readers can actually see the development itself.

Examination of the portrayals from WildStorm combined with the longevity of such material published in the pure-profit economic market of mainstream superhero comic books reveals the way in which such representations of minority characters are more economically sustainable. The comic books can only maintain publication if the reader base is such that the purchase of the published titles is high enough to turn large profits for the publisher (in this case, WildStorm). The twelve years of continued publication of comic book titles featuring Midnighter and Apollo shows the sustainability of such regressive, homonormative portrayals of gay men, especially when compared to

the progressive portrayals from DC Comics examined in Chapter Two and the lack of sustainability for those comic book lines.

WildStorm Universe Attention Shown

The negative attention villains, teammates, and creators pay to Midnighter and Apollo coincided with the revelation of their relationship, revealing how the creators aligned the knowledge of the relationship with socially acceptable opinions toward homosexuals in order to make the title marketable to the mainstream audience of the superhero comic book industry. No characters make gay jokes or homophobic remarks in reference to the men prior to confirmation of their orientation. These themes and scenes began with frequency in *The Authority: Under New Management*, with the relationship confirmation having come at the end of the previous volume. The instances of villains reverting to a variety of homophobic remarks and references became common occurrences. One team the Authority fights against refers to the “two sissies” on the team (Ellis, *The Authority: Under New Management*, n.p.), and another refers to the team as a whole as a “nest of perverts” (Millar, *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, n.p.). Another villain, a former Doctor of Earth,⁷ calls Midnighter and Apollo “poofs,” a generational term of derogation for gay men, linked to the older age of the villain, while a deceased teammate revived by the former Doctor calls the two “girls” and tells them how nauseous

⁷ The character of the Doctor is similar to the character of the Jenny in the story. The Doctor is a shaman of Earth, endowed with immeasurable power to heal and alter reality in a manner that best protects and ensures the continuation of life on Earth, concerning both human life and the lives of all other natural beings. Typically, the powers of the Doctor are bestowed upon another when the current Doctor dies. In the case of this villain, however, he was using the powers of the Doctor to eradicate human life and restart the world in his image via the use of his immense power. Because of this, the benevolent nature of the powers abandoned him and were instead bestowed upon the Doctor who serves as a member of the Authority.

they used to make her, presumably because of their sexual orientation (Millar, *The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, n.p.). Yet another villain refers to the Authority as a whole as a group of “fascist cocksuckers” (Casey, *Coup d’Etat*, n.p.). A third evil team gave a press conference during which they expressed disdain for the Authority, whom they claimed were wiping out American values with their “gay marriages” and a second member of that same team calls Midnighter and Apollo “cocksucking super-pricks” (Brubaker, *The Authority by Ed Brubaker & Dustin Nguyen*, n.p.). These remarks are peppered throughout nearly every story featuring the Authority, regardless of the title or the writer (*figure 3*).

More examples of homophobic language and actions come from the volume *Transfer of Power*, in which the negative attention continues to appease the target audience and make the title profitable for WildStorm. A team of villains replaces the Authority and spends significant time degrading homosexuals in a variety of ways. In this volume, the team is supposedly killed by a genetically engineered agent of the government, Seth (*figure 4*), and replaced with a handpicked team who would support the corrupt capitalist world governments.⁸ Seth attacks the Authority on their ship and

Figure 3: Panel from *The Authority* by Ed Brubaker & Dustin Nguyen, art by Dustin Nguyen.

⁸ The storyline reveals that the corporate leaders who really control the worlds’ governmental bodies are uncomfortable with an unaffiliated team with the power of the Authority protecting Earth, as that sometimes gets in the way of the corporations making money at the cost of basic humans rights to life and liberty. Because of this, these corporations create the monster of Seth and use him to supposedly kill the Authority so that the corporations can install a new Authority as the protector of Earth, an Authority that they can control and punish or kill if the team does not serve the corporate interests of the nations involved in the creation of the new team.

Figure 4: Seth, genetically engineered monster, art by Arthur Adams.

consistently calls both Midnighter and Apollo “faggots” (Millar n.p.). Seth is further made to be a negative portrayal as a representation of another minority group with his identifying as Appalachian and speaking in a stereotypical fashion often associated with Appalachia, raising a whole other problem of stereotyping communities, but that topic would need a whole other examination. Midnighter’s replacement on the “new” Authority team, Last Call, makes sure to emphasize that he is a heterosexual man with “A. Girl. Friend.”

Apollo’s replacement, Teuton, is an

emotionally expressive man, portrayed as rather effeminate but still heterosexual, while struggling with inferred homosexual desires, expressed as a detriment to his character and his placement on the team. The tension of being two straight men who replaced the gay couple on the team starts to wear on Last Call’s homophobic nature. At one point, Last Call has a stern talk with Teuton about his emotions, telling him that another team member, Chaplain Action, “thinks we’re queers like Apollo and Midnighter, just because we replaced them on the team” (Millar, *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, n.p.). This fear of guilt by association is a more understated example of homophobia conveyed through this volume of the publication.

Later, that homophobia becomes more visceral in a manner that has a direct effect

on the reader, crafted to place the reader there in the moment and showing a direct appeal to the audience with that message. This moment is presented to readers with a full-page of panel space devoted to a villain's homophobic attack on a shaman, depicted visually for readers to experience with the characters. The story reaches a point where Last Call beats a shaman who was trying to

Figure 5: Page from *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, art by Frank Quitely.

revive the original Authority to death for equating him to Midnighter. Last Call, in a full-page panel, exclaims that he could never be Midnighter, then assaults the shaman (figure 5). The attack takes place over three panels, each accentuated by a single word, stating, “I. Like. Girls,” and when the new Authority team is gathered on the Carrier afterward, the team leader, the Colonel, praises Last Call for killing the shaman, telling the man that his “homophobia saved the world,” congratulating such behavior in a manner that would be allowed and excuse it as a positive reaction (figure 6). The visual depiction of this homophobia is more startling than the other examples, as the pictures and the words combine to an effect on readers that before in the stories was one or the other. The way the panels are arranged add more effect to the portrayal as well. First, readers see the shaman’s bloody face, then an enraged Last Call swinging his fists with blood and even a

Figure 6: Later panel from *Transfer of Power*, art by Frank Quitely.

piece of the shaman's ear flying through the air from the force of the blows, then readers see the shaman's face again, further bloodied and barely recognizable.

The way these panels are drawn and arranged controls the readers'

perception of the scene displayed, making the homophobic nature of the depiction even more affective to the reader. The centering of these images conveys their importance to the reader. As Scott McCloud explains, "Readers will assign importance to characters and objects placed in the center" (McCloud, *Making Comics*, 24), referring to placement of content within the frame itself. Last Call's exclamation that he could never be Midnighter, the two images of the bloody shaman, and the image of Last Call assaulting him are all centered in the frame. This scene becomes a clearer example of negativity shown toward the gay community through this visual and narrative representation when considering McCloud's explanation of how compositional factors affect readers' perceptions of a scene. He explains that these factors control how the reader perceives this created world and also their position within that world (*Making Comics*, 19). McCloud discusses this concept as the choice of the frame to control the information conveyed to the reader. These panels of Last Call's attack on the shaman could have been pulled back to show the scene around the attack or to reveal reactions to the behavior, or

the action could have been implied in a variety of panel and frame choices. The centering of the action, and the shift from the bloody face, to Last Call's violence, and then the perceptible change in the face of the shaman, these have focused the readers on that moment and placed them there to experience it in a way they would not have in other forms of literature. The powerful combination of words and images here conveying this level of violence against perceived homosexuality puts readers from all sides of opinion in a position of reinforced negativity toward the gay community. Readers who identify as homosexual or who empathize with their minority position in society are placed right in the middle of an extreme moment of violent homophobia, while homophobic, presumably heterosexual, readers are seeing their most violent (possible) thoughts brought to life in front of them. The later statement of congratulations to the violence reinforces the message of this being acceptable action under the right circumstances.

This homophobia and negative attention characters pay to the relationship, while conveyed primarily by the villains of the story, were still a practice to which many readers would have related, especially considering portrayals of homosexual characters in other media, created in a manner less likely to alienate readers and risk the profits of the book's publication. For years, portrayals of gay men consisted of them characterized as either the villain of the story or the victim (Gross 254). The token gay man of a film or TV show would be conveyed as a serial killer, the victim of AIDS, or a victim of social or familial stigma, either being killed/incarcerated, dying from the disease, or else committing suicide as a result of his ostracization from family or society. In an instance where neither are the case, as with *Midnighter* and *Apollo*, they still fall into the "great American bargain," wherein minority characters are only acceptable if they play by the

rules and assimilate on society's terms (Gross 262). Jean Bessette summarizes this point when she explains that "bodies expressing same-sex intimacy and desire...have historically been rendered morally, mentally, and physically aberrant" (149-150). In this case, these statements of need and precedent mean appealing to the majority heterosexual audience who has to see homosexual characters in the comic book, but they can feel assuaged by the relatable homophobia and derogation, the constant addressing of aberration.

In relation to homosexuality in other forms of media, another aspect of negativity comes in the continuation of the stigmatized connection between gay men and AIDS that readers would have recognized as a social truth for that moment and would have helped them connect to the portrayal of gay characters on some level of familiarity. This time the negative attention shown to the characters comes from the writers themselves rather than specifically from characters within the story. In the 1980s, when AIDS spread rampantly and killed first thousands and then millions of primarily gay men, the two were inextricably linked and remain so to this day. This connection was established from the beginning of the outbreak when the disease was found in mostly gay men and was initially named Gay Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) (Gross 95). By the time the disease was found in other populations and was proven not to be unique to the gay community, it was too late. Despite the changing of the disease's moniker to Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), gay men and AIDS had been linked in a way that still has not faded away from the social consciousness.

There are two instances in the volume, *Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, where the writers wrote AIDS into the character of Midnighter in order to make him relatable to the

target audience. The first comes from the scene where the current Doctor needs a blood transfusion. Midnighter is in the hospital donating to him in hopes that his special blood will jumpstart the Doctor's recovery. Midnighter explains to Jack Hawksmoor that his blood is so special that he "beat AIDS in six weeks" (Millar, *The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, n.p.). The inclusion of a character who must have contracted AIDS (despite his ongoing, committed relationship to one man—presumably to the exclusion of all others) is a direct link to the equation of "gay" and "AIDS." In another instance later in the volume, Midnighter is trying to beat information out of a villain. When he figures out the information he is looking for, Midnighter asks if he wins a prize. The man replies, "All you win is AIDS." These references serve as further negative attention toward both the characters and toward the gay community as a whole as it persists the invalid stereotype that gay automatically means AIDS infection, yet one more instance of the WildStorm comics' non-normative and stereotype-reinforcing portrayals of the couple.

One of the most glaring examples of negative attention paid to homosexual relations reflects another concept with which readers would have been familiar and would not have turned them away, possibly even appealing to many of them. This example comes from the *Transfer of Power* storyline, in which the Colonel propositions a female team member for sex in a manner that builds to sexual assault. The interaction opens with the Colonel telling her to drop her pants. She refuses, telling him that she does not "do" guys. Her admission of being a lesbian does not deter the Colonel, as he exclaims, "Bollocks! You just haven't been wined and dined by the right kind of bloke." She still refuses and threatens to break his legs if he continues his attempts to force himself on her.

He tells her, “Don’t knock it ’til you’ve tried it, luv. You’re missing out on forty-eight percent of the population with this nob-phobia you’re clearly suffering from” (Millar, *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, n.p.). Luckily for both the character and the reader, another team member interrupts the Colonel’s attempted rape. The idea of homosexuality being the result of “not having found the right one” as well as the concept of engaging in heterosexual sexual intercourse to “fix” a homosexual’s supposedly abnormal desires are both remnant of religious and medical homophobia, concepts insulting to gay men and women, as though their preference of sexual partners is not natural or legitimate and can be “corrected” via one or another method of therapy.

Another instance of negative attention directed toward Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship comes in the form of media attention within the comic book lines, reflecting real-world media attention to gay relationships and once more appealing to readers with content familiar to them. Questions are raised over the legality and fitness of the couple to raise the child by politicians and religious leaders (figure 7) (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.). In another instance, corporate leaders are discussing the team, and when they get to Apollo, one member says Apollo could be the world’s greatest super

Figure 7: Panel from *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, art by Dwayne Turner.

hero, “if he didn’t make half the population want to keep their backs against the wall” (*The Authority: Harsh Realities* n.p.). This last comment is made as a reference to Apollo’s sexual position as the insertive partner in the sexual aspect of his relationship, a previously hinted and later established trait (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.; Orlando, *Midnighter and Apollo*, n.p.), though that villain likely would not have been privy to that specific information, a possible fourth wall slip of the creator.

Concerning religious attention, in the *Fractured Worlds* graphic novel, both Midnighter and Apollo experience first-hand the religious homophobia of mainstream culture that creators were appealing to and dependent upon. In the novel, the team is up against a religious zealot, Reverend John Clay, who can influence his constituents to do and believe as he says after they join his “Transcendence Movement,” with their faith enhancing his strength and vitality. Apollo confronts the reverend, and John Clay tries to convert Apollo over to the church. He tells Apollo, “My research has proved beyond a doubt that homosexuality--man-to-man love--is nothing more than a behavioral dysfunction. It won’t be easy, but the church can fix you...be strong and you can be straight” (Morrison, *The Authority: Fractured Worlds*, n.p.). This idea of religion and the god of one faith or another “curing” the dysfunction of homosexuality from followers and believers has been a mainstay of many religious denominations for years.

Later in the same volume, Midnighter physically experiences the church’s powers of “fixing” homosexuality, a religious message with which readers would have been familiar, preserving and retaining the audience through such portrayal. Midnighter has been captured by the Reverend and his “church,” and one of the Reverend’s superpowered followers, Sister Voice, is trying to torture Midnighter into making a

public confession to the sins of his orientation. John Clay plans to air Midnighter's confession to the world, and Sister Voice is practicing the confession with him in a torture room. She tries to get him to repeat the scripted confession, but he refuses. He is supposed to say, "I have lived a perverse, unnatural existence for the last ten years. Worst of all, an innocent child has been corrupted by exposure to that lifestyle. Reverend Clay has rescued me from my pit of sin. The transcendence movement offers redemption to all those who share my aberrant orientation." This example of the negative attention shown to the relationship between Midnighter and Apollo relates back to the concept of "family values" and the traditional, mainstream prestige offered to those who subscribe to the heteronormative family model, to the exclusion of all other "non-normative" forms of love and relationships. While the forced confession and other torments are enacted by villains of the story, readers could still believe in the idea of John Clay's research "fixing" homosexuality, reinforcing the medically disproven fact that homosexuality is some sort of abnormality. While Morrison could be writing this as a critique of the Christian institution of therapy to fix homosexuality, this point is never addressed one way or the other. The inclusion is a plot device drawing more unnecessary negative attention to the relationship. The scene is open to multiple readings from the audience, raising the question of intent behind the portrayal. As with the other examples of homophobia within the title, the words and actions are never explicitly stated or shown to be wrong or inappropriate opinions of the relationship, even when such negativity comes from within the Authority team as well.

Negativity directed at Midnighter and Apollo's relationship comes from their own teammates in a few instances, removing arguments of the homophobia only coming from

villains of the story and thus shown to be wrong and making the idea prevalent across all characters for readers to see. In one scene, the team is responding to a natural disaster in San Francisco where a fissure has opened in the ground and lava starts to flow into the city. While the rest of the team attempts to evacuate civilians and figure out the problem, Apollo dives into the lava to get down to the source and stem the flow. Angie and Shen are discussing whether or not even Apollo's durability can withstand the intense temperatures within the lava. Angie makes a joke about replacing Apollo if he cannot withstand the heat, saying, "If Apollo does end up as a big, gay kebab, we've still got Mr. Majestic's number somewhere, I think" (Millar, *The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, n.p.). Mentioning the character's sexuality in the joke about his burning up in the heat does not seem to be a necessary inclusion for the joke, but it was done anyway, as another instance of drawing attention to the character's non-normative lifestyle in a manner other than presenting it as normal or acceptable as it was not done throughout the time the characters existed in WildStorm comic books.

In another scene, from another volume a few years later, Jack Hawksmoor degrades Midnighter with a slur in the midst of an argument, a scene familiar and relatable to readers, especially the target mainstream audience. The team seems to be falling apart from the stress of dealing with their latest villainous uprising. Midnighter berates certain team members for their choices and mistakes. Jack Hawksmoor, still acting as team leader, tells Midnighter to calm down, so Midnighter rounds on him and goads his anger. Hawksmoor tells Midnighter, "Shut your cocksucking mouth." Midnighter replies, "Wow, right to the homophobia. Jenny Sparks [their deceased leader and founder of the team] would be ashamed of you" (Brubaker, *The Authority by Ed*

Brubaker & Dustin Nguyen, n.p.). From there, the two begin to fight. Later in the same volume, as the team engages in battle with a group of enemies, Midnighter takes off after one of the female villains, and Hawksmoor calls Midnighter a “pussy,” referring to him as a weak, feminine man, lesser than a normative man, an insult never levelled at heterosexual male members of the team. These references and instances of homophobic language and insults, even from the couple’s team members, show how the writers developed the relationship along a thin line between inclusion and heteronormative, mainstream values and opinions toward gay men.

Scott McCloud’s work expands the importance of the examined scenes in that McCloud explains the creation of the panels on the page and how readers interact with and interpret the conveyed information depending on the choices made by the creators. McCloud explains that the walls of ignorance can only be breached through communication (McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 198). For him, comics are one of many important modes of communication, important specifically for the unique nature in which comics combine words and pictures together in order to make meaning (152). He also makes sure to remind readers that communication occurs successfully only when we understand the forms that communication can take (198). With this vein of thought, the specific attention paid to the relationship in the pages of the WildStorm portrayals does nothing to move toward inclusivity of these gay characters; quite the contrary, I argue that the treatment of the characters serves to further alienate the gay characters from their heterosexual counterparts, and as a result, alienates the LGBT community from the dominant heterosexual culture around them. Explaining the manner in which this attention affects the reader, McCloud explains that comics storytelling can be either

additive or subtractive, depending on what the writers are trying to convey to their reader (85). Applying this difference to the attention paid to the characters in the two different portrayals is revealing in that the WildStorm creators were trying to convey the relationship between Midnighter and Apollo without showing too much to their readers, arguably a subtractive choice in their arrangement of the panels to tell the other surrounding stories. However, the number of times the characters are explicitly conveyed as being in a relationship is at least as equal—if not less than—the number of times the characters are degraded either by a teammate or one of their many villains. I would argue that this choice of so much homophobia was an additive element to the story, conveying the reality of that negative attention even more clearly to readers than the nature of the relationship itself. While the inclusion of gay characters moved against social norms at the time for media and popular culture, the alienation of these characters—and thereby the LGBT community as a whole—works against the idea of inclusion as a positive movement forward.

The focus here on forms of attention paid to the relationship serves as a frame and sets a tone by which the series as a whole can be read. There are multiple ways readers may see and read the storyline and development of Midnighter and Apollo's relationship from WildStorm. The inclusion of a gay couple does serve as a movement forward for the visibility and inclusivity of the LGBT community, however, as the previous section reveals, that movement forward was rife with homophobia and undue attention paid to the relationship (slurs and jokes) as well the continuation of harmful stereotypes (gay men and AIDS as synonymous). With this attention in mind, a reading of the development of the relationship along homonormative lines that continues the social

emphasis on such heteronormative institutions as monogamy, marriage, and child-rearing reveals the inclusion of gay super heroes in a comic book to have served as detrimental to the idea of visibility for the community as a whole.

The Relationship as Homonormative

When Midnighter and Apollo first appeared in a comic book, their relationship was not clear to readers, though hints were provided, and this allowed creators to ease readers into the knowledge in hopes of reducing the risk of lost readership. In the opening pages of the story premiering the couple, readers see Midnighter and Apollo naked in an abandoned building at night, preparing to dress and go out on a mission. Writers reveal later, when the characters are part of the Authority, that the two had lived on the streets in that manner for five years before their first appearance in *Stormwatch*. Readers get a sense that the characters have been through a lot together and have bonded through those experiences. However, this explication is the extent of their relationship that is given to

readers. Even later in the

same issue, when

Midnighter is trying to coax

information out of an

enemy combatant, he refers

to Apollo only as his

“colleague,” (figure 8) and

nothing more (Ellis,

Stormwatch, n.p.). While

Figure 8: Panel from *Stormwatch* #4, art by Michael Ryan.

there is no reason for the couple to reveal their relationship to the opponent, the choice of work-related reference can be seen here as an attempt to mask or at least portray the relationship in as little page-space as possible. Another clue to their bond as partners comes in two full-page panels of Apollo carrying Midnigher through the air on his back, with Midnigher's arms wrapped around his neck. The image is benign and reveals nothing about their relationship, as that would be the most convenient way for them to get around, especially when they were working on their own, as Apollo can fly and Midnigher cannot.

When Midnigher and Apollo are made integral members of *The Authority* (1999), readers are still not given any information about the intimate nature of their relationship an important choice by the creators to not risk lacking readers purchasing a new publication. Even when Midnigher reveals the length of time they have been together, he says, "We've been working together five years, but he never ceases to amaze me...or irritate me" (Ellis, *The Authority: Relentless*, n.p.). Their relationship is referred to as "working" not being together or sharing a life, and the line about Apollo amazing Midnigher could have worked as a hint toward their intimacy, if it had not been quantified by the follow up of Apollo also irritating him. This reference, while conveying that hint of intimacy, also reads as a sort of marriage joke; the two are committed but can still weigh on each other's nerves, a homonormative manner of referring to the relationship.

From there, nothing is done in relation to conveying the relationship to readers until seven issues into the series, giving the title time to pull in a readership before revealing the inclusion of a gay couple. Readers get a glimpse that perhaps there is

something more between Midnighter and Apollo than simple companionship when Apollo has expended all of his energy and collapses. There is a panel that shows Midnighter holding Apollo up with his hand cupping Apollo's face. Once again, though, the next panel quantifies the behavior and obscures any possible inferences to be made when their teammate Jack Hawksmoor says, "Apollo falls over and everyone wants to know why. *I* get sliced up so fine you could make sandwiches out of me and does anyone run to *my* rescue? You're all bastards" (Ellis, *The Authority: Relentless*, n.p.). With this statement, Jack is equating himself and the emotions his teammates feel toward him to those felt toward Apollo, implying they are all on equal standing, and Midnighter's concern for his "teammate" Apollo should be equal to his concern for Jack, and he is a "bastard" because it is not.

Finally, in the last issue of the first volume of *The Authority*, the true nature of the relationship is revealed to readers, early in the series, but in a subtractive manner so as not to deter readers from the title. The team is about to set out on a last-ditch effort to defeat the story's enemy, and Midnighter is warning Apollo that he is not strong enough for his portion of the mission. He cups Apollo's face with both hands and says, "You'll die." In the next panel on the next page, Apollo kisses Midnighter on the cheek, and in the following panel, says, "I wouldn't dare" (Ellis, *The Authority: Relentless*, n.p.). The team itself also finally acknowledges the relationship on the last page of the last issue. In the first panel, the team has returned from their successful mission, and Midnighter and Apollo are hugging. In the next panel, Jack Hawksmoor says, "Get a room, you two" (Ellis, *The Authority: Relentless*, n.p.). While benign and easily interpreted as a friendly jab between teammates, that joke is the closest that readers get to real on-page

acknowledgement of the relationship.

The value and privilege shown to the heterosexual lifestyle within the series have “produce[d] as a social norm and ideal an extremely narrow context for living” (Berlant and Warner 556), the narrow context within which Midnighter and Apollo were portrayed. The social idea has arisen that people—and literary characters—must identify somehow with this narrow context for living in order to obtain social membership and a sense of futurity (557). With the next volume of the series, *Under New Management*, Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship does not receive much on-page attention or development at all. When Jack Hawksmoor takes over as leader after the death of Jenny Sparks, he takes the team’s existence public, and they become instant celebrities. This notoriety is where readers first see the relationship mentioned again, over halfway through the volume, when Midnighter and Apollo are giving a speech at a press conference and that panel is juxtaposed with a magazine cover portraying the both of them, with the caption, “Apollo and the Midnighter: A Look Around the Carrier⁹ with the World’s Finest Couple” (Ellis, *The Authority: Under New Management*, n.p.). In the final issue of this volume, Apollo is about to kill the man who defeated him in their previous encounter. When Apollo holds back, the man asks if it is too hard for Apollo to kill a man whom he finds attractive and who gives him fuzzy feelings. Apollo says, “Don’t be ridiculous...I just promised you to a friend” (Ellis, *The Authority Under New Management*, n.p.). Apollo’s use of “friend” is interesting here, as it reveals the writers still trying so very hard to walk the perceived thin line of including a non-normative (gay) couple in their book while not showing too much of it to readers, perhaps for fear of

⁹ The Carrier is a sentient spaceship that the Authority (and later Stormwatch from DC) use as their means of travel and as a base of operations for protecting Earth from threats.

driving away potential readership, a theme throughout the WildStorm series, especially when it was still getting onto its feet as a new title. This risk of driving away readers was real and evidence is clear in the example negative reactions of fans to early gay characters, as examined by Morris E. Franklin, where one fan warns of exactly that possibility when he writes, "...a major DC character [will not] reveal his/her 'gayness'...sales would plummet..." (qtd. in Franklin 244). These examples show the value and privilege paid to the heterosexual lifestyle as a social norm. In addition, the examples and the reader reaction from Franklin's article reveal the manner in which sustainability for a comic book title hinged on not alienating readers with the inclusion of any portrayals that were too progressive for the current audience.

The fourth volume of the series, *Transfer of Power*, contains a wealth of developments for the couple's relationship, all along the homonormative line and within the heteronormative institutions the series has been progressing along to this point. The

Figure 9: Panel from *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, art by Frank Quitely.

first issue opens with Shen and Angie, the two female teammates, playing with baby Jenny Quantum, whom the team rescued in *Under New Management*. They discuss Midnighter and Apollo's impending wedding and planned adoption for Jenny (figure 9).

This reference is the first time

readers know anything about a wedding or the adoption. There was never a build up to a proposal or an engagement, and readers never see the couple discuss getting married or adopting the child. Angie also mentions to Shen that she hopes the two men do not become one of those “weird, self-contained couples” after the wedding and reveals how Midnighter said he and Apollo had discussed buying a house in Santa Fe, New Mexico after the wedding, in which to raise Jenny (Millar, *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, n.p.). The domestication of the couple is a stark example of the homonormativity in the story, as they plan to marry, adopt a child, and buy a home in which to settle down and raise the girl.

Midnighter and Apollo’s wedding is portrayed in minimalist fashion so as not to risk the offense of the audience, upon whom the industry depends for sustaining publication of all comics titles. The wedding appears on the last two pages of the volume, with only five panels dedicated to the affair and only a single panel showing where the two share a kiss at the end of the ceremony (figure 10). Apollo has switched out his white suit for a black tuxedo (traditional for the man in the wedding ceremony) and Midnighter’s traditional black leather has been traded in for the same suit, but in all white (the traditional color for the woman in a heterosexual wedding

Figure 10: Wedding scene from final pages of *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, art by Dustin Nguyen.

ceremony), showing the manner in which the homonormative wedding has been made easier to accept for readers through heteronormative wedding ideals (Millar, *The Authority: Transfer of Power*, n.p.). The lack of page space the ceremony is given is also one more example of the writers treading the line between portraying a non-normative couple while not trying to show more than is absolutely necessary of the socially unacceptable marriage between two men. Esther de Dauw, in her analysis of homonormativity within a comic book series from Marvel, refers to this relationship between Midnighter and Apollo as exemplifying “the heteronormalization that occurs to gay characters in order to make them more palatable to a mainstream audience” (62). Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant explain heteronormalization—long-term monogamy, marriage, adoption/raising of children—as existing where “the givenness of male-female sexual relations is part of the ordinary rightness of the world” (552). They go on to explain that “This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just in sex—is what we call heteronormativity” (554). The heteronormativity, the relationship as acceptable to mainstream audiences, is based in the family form, which Warner and Berlant argue has “functioned as a mediator and metaphor of national existence in the United States” for over two hundred years (549). The authors connect this to “Clintonian familialism” which sought to increase the already unequal legal and economic privileges of married couples and parents (550). By getting married and adopting a daughter, Midnighter and Apollo were homonormalized via being written to fit within the heteronormative paradigm that made them acceptable to mainstream—primarily heterosexual—audiences.

The homonormativity conveyed in Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship is comparable to other early audience-appeasing comics portrayals of homosexual

relationships. Morris E. Franklin III examines a portrayal from DC Comics, in which the girlfriend, Dinah, of the titular character, Green Arrow, runs a flower shop. A gay couple enters, presumably regular customers of Dinah's shop, to buy flowers and announce that they are celebrating their seventh anniversary of being together. Dinah congratulates them and says, "That's longer than most marriages last!" (qtd. in Franklin 231). Franklin goes on to explain the quote as "both supportive and essentializing, as though only heterosexual relationships can last a number of years, that long-term monogamy is desirable and 'right,' or that marriage is an exclusively heterosexual ritual" (231). Franklin's showing of the equation of gay relationships to heterosexual marriage shows the manner in which homosexual characters needed to be homonormalized in order to fit into the mainstream public gaze. While gay characters were no longer being portrayed as "evil, deranged, or abnormal," they were still legitimized by their adherence to heteronormative institutions and were "generally compared against heterosexual relationships" (Franklin 224). The characters' acceptance here was one based on a sense of mainstream normalization.

After the marriage, new writer, Robbie Morrison, crossed over the line of minimal attention paid to the relationship, the line that Warren Ellis and Mark Millar seemed to try so hard to walk, but even his progression was subtle enough that risk to readership was likely not a problem. Midnighter and Apollo develop as a domestic couple raising a child, but also as superheroes who do not end up move to Santa Fe. Rather, they remain with the team and continue to live on the Carrier. Early in the fifth volume, *Harsh Realities*, readers see the couple in bed at night, kissing, when their daughter Jenny pops in and wants to sleep with her fathers. She is ordered back to bed by Midnighter. Now a toddler

by this point in the story, Jenny pouts and walks from the room, and Apollo says to Midnighter, “Never thought I’d hear myself say this, but sometimes you’re too hard on her...too hard period.” In the next panel, Midnighter lifts up the sheet and looks down, stating, “Not any more I’m not...” (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.). Later in the same volume, readers again see the family in a domestic scene where Angie is telling Jenny about a monster that almost ate Midnighter. Midnighter and Apollo are sitting on the couch with Apollo’s legs laid leisurely over Midnighter’s. Angie tells Jenny, “Yeah, tried to gobble him all up -- leather pants and all...who would ever want to eat him?” (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.). There is another instance on the same page of Morrison pushing the boundaries and referring to Midnighter and Apollo’s sex life (*Figure 11*). After Angie asks who would want to eat Midnighter, Apollo raises an eyebrow and Midnighter warns him, “Hey. Keep it clean.” Never before were readers given such a blatant (while still guarded) reference of inuendo to the sexual

Figure 11: Panels from *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, story by Robbie Morrison, art by Tan Eng Huat.

aspect of the relationship between the two, a positive development in the portrayal of the characters, even if they have continued following the homonormative line along which they were created.

This homonormativity is shown one more time in the same volume, conveying the

relationship within the confines of marriage to try and appeal to reader's comfort. Apollo catches Midnighter as he falls and carries Midnighter through the air. Apollo says, "Just like our wedding night, when I carried you over the threshold." Midnighter responds with one more reference to their sex life when he says, "Apollo, we never made it as far as the threshold..." (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.). These examples of reference to a socially non-normative intimacy were a movement forward, but all of these moments are bound within the context of monogamous love and marriage, where they thus remained within the confines of the heteronormative framework of the relationship. While monogamy itself is not a bad or negative construct, the strict adherence of Midnighter and Apollo to a monogamy of only ever being with each other does box the relationship in and limit the exploration of their sexuality.

Later in the WildStorm line, Midnighter and Apollo separate over differences of opinion, in a socially comfortable manner similar to the way a married couple might undertake a trial separation as they try to sort out their problems. In this instance, Jack Hawksmoor, still the team leader, makes a series of morally ambiguous decisions, resulting in Midnighter leaving the team. From there, the team breaks up completely. Midnighter did not only leave the team; he also left Apollo and Jenny. In the issue after Midnighter leaves the team and they disband, readers see Midnighter hunting criminals in Russia, living the superhero life. A few pages later, readers see Apollo admitting he and Midnighter have not had any contact. In the following issue, Apollo approaches Midnighter, and readers see them argue back and forth, mentioning, among other things, seeing a marriage counselor and Midnighter's outright refusal (Brubaker, *The Authority by Ed Brubaker & Dustin Nguyen*, n.p.). The team does get back together, but Midnighter

and Apollo's relationship reconciliation is never addressed. These moments of dealing with Midnigher and Apollo's separation, while not exactly normative in a culture of monogamy and matrimony, are still a replica of a not-uncommon occurrence in many heterosexual relationships, where partners separate, including situations when children are involved and one parent must serve as sole provider. The progression in the relationship would be considered a natural manner in which to throw some tension and strife into the book while carrying along with the homonormative nature of Midnigher and Apollo's relationship. These developments in the relationship between the two fit into what Berlant and Warner call "a constellation of practices that everywhere disperses heterosexual privilege as a tacit but central organizing index of social membership" (555). Midnigher and Apollo have been organized as marginally acceptable social members via their adherence to heterosexual social institutions.

The portrayal of the relationship between Midnigher and Apollo is conveyed in a manner that upholds and sustains heteronormative assumptions and institutions. This dynamic relates to Edward Sewell Jr.'s analysis of the earlier inclusion of gay characters in comic strips. Sewell writes that "Queer characters in mainstream comic strips are well integrated into heterosexual society in that they look and act 'straight' before coming out as queer, and they look and act in a manner appropriate to the dominant heterosexual culture after coming out" (Sewell 253). This example conveys the exact idea of the manner in which Midnigher and Apollo were first portrayed. Readers only have basic hints at a sexual or romantic nature to their relationship, and the two do not "come out" in announcing their relationship so much as readers just finally see it on the page, in minimal rendering. Franklin makes a statement as well, concerning this minimal

rendering that fits the idea of gay characters fitting into a heteronormative set of regulations. When examining the on-page portrayal of gay relationships, Franklin writes, “The representation of homosexuality is also downplayed and subtle; there are no scenes, for example, of men kissing or women lying together in bed” (Franklin 225). While readers do eventually see Midnighter and Apollo in bed together, it is important to note that this moment only occurs after the two have been married and have adopted Jenny. Premarital sexual innuendo is not referred to before the marriage and adoption, which would have been acceptable social terms for sexual intercourse that these characters were made to follow as well, offering yet one more example of their homonormative portrayals.

This minimalization is representative of attempts to convey the couple in a homonormalized fashion and to appeal to readers in a way that would sustain sales of the title, especially when contrasted with portrayals of heterosexual relationships within the page of *The Authority*. Shen is depicted in the second volume of the series in bed with an unidentified man she met at a party the Authority hosted the night before on the Carrier (Ellis, *The Authority: Under New Management*, n.p.). Angie, the Engineer, conducts a semi-regular sexual relationship with Jack Hawksmoor, but later in the series, she is depicted in bed with the Doctor, smoking after they have just had sex. Further into the same volume, readers see Angie meeting a man in bar and going back to his motel room to have sex (*figure 12*), which is depicted on the page (Millar, *The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, n.p.). In the fifth volume of the series, Angie and Apollo are discussing her relationship with Hawksmoor and her liaison with the Doctor. He is surprised she slept with the Doctor for multiple reasons and asks about her relationship

with Hawksmoor. She reveals the two have an open relationship (figure 13) and can see other people in addition to each other at will (Morrison, *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, n.p.). Jack and Angie's sexual relationship is given more page space to develop, and the Doctor's divorce is shown as well (a divorce that occurs after his sexual

Figure 12: Panels from *The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories*, story by Mark Millar, art by Frank Quitely.

relationship with Angie, indicating the condoning of adultery in the title as well). These relations being given so much more page space can be read as creators appealing to their mainstream audience as a means of maintaining sales that would sustain the title in the pure-profit market.

Figure 13: Panel from *The Authority: Harsh Realities*, story by Robbie Morrison, art by Dwayne Turner.

Contrary to the portrayal of heterosexual characters but keeping in line with appealing to the dominant audience, Midnighter and Apollo

are never shown as participating in any of the extramarital sexual antics and are only ever shown in bed together twice across twelve years of *The Authority*'s publication from WildStorm. This imbalance between depictions of various forms of relationships falls in line with the minimalization of the relationship between Midnighter and Apollo, while the heterosexual characters are free to explore their sexualities as they see fit, with a variety of partners. Concerning the difference in portrayals of relationships in the media, Larry Gross points out a similar double standard when it comes to views on public sex. He discusses "the double standard that views public sex between men and women, in parked cars or on beaches, as romantic and even amusing, while public (though much less visible) sex between men is seen as horrible and perverted" (168). This explanation reveals the way sexual relationships between men and women are not subject to as strict a set of rules as sexual relationships between two men, in the same way that Midnighter and Apollo could not be shown in bed together before they were married—and only rarely after that—while the rest of the team could have rampant sex outside of any sort of monogamy or marriage constraints.

Midnighter and Apollo are portrayed as a homonormative couple from the creators at WildStorm to appeal to readers and not alienate them from the book because of the socially non-normative relationship therein. Lisa Duggan sums up the argument about this homonormative portrayal when she explains how the varying forms of sexual dissidence are turned away to encourage and force "naturalized variations of a fixed minority arrayed around a state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige" (65). McAllister, Sewell, and Gordon, in their "Introduction" to *Comics and Ideology*, pose the question, "Do comics serve to celebrate and legitimize dominant values and institutions

in society, or do they serve to critique and subvert the status quo?” (2). The first half of this question can be addressed with the analysis of WildStorm’s portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo. The characters do in fact celebrate and legitimize dominant values and institutions, both the otherness of homosexual relationships and the heteronormative social institutions into which creators pushed Midnighter and Apollo. While these portrayals were regressive in the representation of homosexuals in popular culture, they aligned with dominant social ideas and values, making them sustainable in the economic market of mainstream superhero comic book publishing, shown through the twelve years of stories published in which the characters were portrayed in this manner.

In the DC portrayals, Midnighter and Apollo serve to critique and subvert the status quo in that the characters are not confined within mainstream heteronormative institutions or regulations. The rejection of other sexual intimacies and the normalization of such orientations that Duggan expresses are the concepts DC Comics seemed to be working against, in favor of a more diverse and inclusive comics line, when they performed the company-wide reboot of their comics lines and wrote the characters of Midnighter and Apollo into a more open literary space. As is shown in the next chapter, that space was not sustainable for the economic market, resulting in the failure of continuing the progressive representation of homosexual characters DC was making within the stories examined.

CHAPTER TWO:

DC COMICS SHOWS NORMATIVITY TO READERS

Introduction

A great number of changes were made to the characters of Midnighter and Apollo in the DC Comics New 52 reboot as DC made a move toward diversity and inclusivity in their comics lines. The significant changes DC made to the characters opened them up to being explored more deeply by creators for readers and becoming more developed than they ever had under WildStorm. These changes raise the larger question of whether or not mainstream superhero comic books can ever successfully make large-scale political statements if those ideas do not align with an already-existing majority social ideology. The storylines featuring Midnighter and Apollo as gay men and portrayals of their relationship are both handled in a progressive manner by the creators that conveys homosexuality as average, normal, and equal to dominant heterosexual relationships. Writers and artists crafted these representations with attention to appropriate messages concerning the equality of people rather than aligning with dominant social ideologies of gay men with little or no concern for reader reaction to the nature of the relationship, which ultimately made the message unsustainable in the pure-profit market economy of the dominant culture of mainstream superhero comic books.

In order for DC Comics to recreate Midnighter and Apollo in a more progressive and culturally sensitive manner, they incorporated the WildStorm characters into their own “comics universe” with the New 52 reboot in 2011. Midnighter and Apollo’s history

was completely undone, and they were given a whole new story. Their first appearance as DC characters (*figure 14*) happens in the first issue of *Stormwatch* (2011). They are no longer married, and they have not adopted Jenny. The two have never

Figure 14: The core Stormwatch team from DC (from left to right): Midnighter, Jenny Quantum, Apollo, Jack Hawksmoor, Martian Manhunter, and Angie Spica aka Engineer.

even met until the final page of the issue, as the Stormwatch team is being assembled (a team very similar to the Authority), with DC making some line-up changes to better incorporate the characters for readers unfamiliar with the WildStorm cast (Cornell, *Stormwatch: The Dark Side*, n.p.). Through the course of the couple's appearances in DC's various comics lines, readers see the two develop and come to terms with their feelings for one another; they see the couple interact with other characters who have to realize the relationship and address their own feelings toward it; they see the couple break up and explore relationships with other men (at least for Midnighter, the more popular character of the two); and they see the couple reconcile and get back together by the end of their last appearance in the main DC comics universe from the final issue of *Midnighter and Apollo* (2017).

In showing the manner in which DC Comics moved toward diversity and inclusion with their changes made to the characters of Midnighter and Apollo and the

portrayal of their romantic relationship, I examine the differences in the development of their relationship within the DC universe including the attention paid to their relationship in relation to the various storylines in which they are involved, differentiating between positive attention paid in some situations and a lack of attention paid in others, indicating a sense of progressive inclusion to a historically non-normative relationship. These examinations serve to show how DC created a more inclusive universe for their characters where readers can see that the world is more diverse than simple concepts of heteronormativity and rigid binary stereotypes. This second chapter is not meant to show how DC is “good” and WildStorm was “bad;” rather the intent is to show how DC Comics wrote corrections for some social issues into their storylines of Midnighter and Apollo and how the creators provided a lesson on a proper manner in which to convey minority characters with sensitivity to their individuality and convey it to readers and the public audience as just as normal for society as any other mainstream or majority character portrayals.

While DC Comics and the creators of the Midnighter and Apollo storylines were successful in their portraying a more progressive representation of homosexual characters, this progression proved to be unsustainable in the pure-profit economic market. The lack of sustainability is revealed in the publication numbers of the titles featuring Midnighter and Apollo (and sometimes just Midnighter). The two first appeared in a DC Comics comic book title in 2011. They last appeared in a title in 2017. During that period, there was also a roughly two-year gap where the characters were not included in any titles past Midnighter’s few guest appearances in *Grayson*. The analysis to follow will reveal the progressive portrayal as a means of supporting the lacking sustainability

for a progressive statement concerning homosexual character representations.

DC Comics Universe Attention Shown

Contrary to all of the negative attention paid to Midnighter and Apollo from their time in WildStorm comic book lines, the DC Comics reboot served to change this aspect of their relationship and their portrayals in general to more positive and inclusive attention. Concerning an examination and comparison of the kinds of attention paid, the DC portrayal is unique for its almost complete lack of attention of any kind paid to the relationship, in line with ideas of antinormativity as outlined by Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson in their editors' introduction to a special issue of *Differences*, titled "Antinormativity's Queer Conventions." Their article offers the suggestion that queer studies' focus on forms of normativity (homo- and hetero-) can result in the blind spots that arise from such an intense focus, claiming that "queer studies can still be critically queer by rallying against liberal political norms; prioritizing non-normative sexual practices, identities, and desires; and exposing the exclusions and compromises of the field's institutionalized logics, including its seeming reliance on traditional disciplinary practices and familiar race and gender hierarchies" (7). The portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo from DC Comics shows the prioritizing of non-normative sexual practices and identities through the lack of specialized attention paid to the relationship or their identities as gay men, conveying them within normal and accepted expressions of their sexuality without being framed within heteronormative social institutions.

The portrayal from DC fits the call for dialogue and change from Franklin's article in which social injustices are addressed, as they were with the progressive

portrayals of Midnighter and Apollo. In explaining the development of the comics medium, Franklin writes, “comic books continued a social reflection trend when the stories began to acknowledge issues not normally discussed in other media” (Franklin 224). He goes on to explain the way comic books addressed the issue of gay and lesbian characters, explaining how “topics of gay and lesbian lifestyles also changed through the years, moving from discussions of prejudice and discrimination to the importance of role models and finally to gay politics and social history” (Franklin 224). This shift is exactly the change in portrayals that happens with the New 52 reboot from DC Comics. The creators have done what Franklin calls for later in his article, when he is discussing reader and editor feedback on early portrayals of gay characters. In discussing one editor response in particular, Franklin writes, “Several arguments are made here, but the most prominent is the idea that comics can be used to discuss social issues and contribute to public dialogue, particularly regarding discriminatory practices. Indeed, the editorial response indicates that comic books should be used toward that end” (Franklin 241). Many titles from DC are in fact used toward this end, engaging in a dialogue about and moving against discriminatory practices and portrayals, specifically here of homosexual characters.

The progressive portrayal of the relationship begins from their first appearance together in the DC comic book universe with no regard to reader reaction so early in the title’s publication. After Midnighter and Apollo meet in *Stormwatch* and begin to develop feelings for one another, no one else in the book really seems to notice, or if they do, they do not pay any attention to the mutual attraction between the men. At one point in the first volume, Apollo rescues Midnighter from being stranded in space. As he carries

Figure 15: Panel from *Stormwatch: The Dark Side* (2011), story by Paul Cornell, art by Miguel Sepulveda.

Midnighter to safety, Midnighter stares up at him and says, “God, you’re hot.” Apollo responds with, “I... You know the others can hear--?” and Midnighter tells him, “I’m the damn Midnighter. I don’t care what they hear” (*figure 15*) (Cornell n.p.). This moment reveals to readers that the team is now—if they were not before—fully aware of the attraction between the two men. After that moment, any interaction is shadowed by the team’s knowledge, thus the lack of attention paid speaks to the normativity with which the relationship is portrayed and the presumed acceptance of their attraction by the rest of the team. Readers see the interaction between Midnighter and Jenny Quantum in the next volume, where she tells Midnighter she knows he likes Apollo. When he tries to deny it (so much for not caring what the others hear), she tells him, “I think it’s nice. You have someone” and reminds him that “Boys can like boys. It doesn’t matter” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Enemies of Earth*, n.p.). Jenny’s words of encouragement and her reminding Midnighter that it does not matter the gender of the person he loves both go great lengths toward showing the normativity of a relationship between two men, as well as serving as a message to readers about that same normativity the book is promoting.

Another important instance to note is Angie’s acknowledgment of the developing

relationship and how the attention she pays is not negative toward their sexual orientation, even though such attention would have led to less risk of deterring readers who disagree with Midnighter and Apollo's lifestyle. Angie serves as quasi-team leader after the Shadow Lords, the council who commands Stormwatch's missions, name Emma (the Projectionist) as team leader and Harry Tanner, the member who betrays them, kidnaps her away (Cornell n.p.). She is trying to prepare the team for a mission and asks if either Jenny or Jack Hawksmoor have seen Midnighter and Apollo. Jack informs her that he last saw them "getting friendly over a delicious lunch of desiccated Stormwatch gruel" (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). Angie becomes frustrated that they are missing and threatens to report them to the Shadow Lords. This threat is rather menacing as it comes after a deranged former member of a years-past iteration of the team¹⁰ had just reveal that the Shadow Lords do not let their Stormwatch members fall in love and will forcibly remove (kill) that love if they feel it is impeding a member's ability to focus solely on Stormwatch's goals (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Enemies of Earth*, n.p.). Readers could interpret this moment as Angie trying to force the two men apart, to not allow their relationship because of the nature of that relationship. However, this fact is disproven by the revelation about the Shadow Lords and by background on Angie's own love life. She blames herself for Harry Tanner's betrayal, because she was manipulated into falling in love with him and was thus too distracted by her affections to see his betrayal coming as she feels she should have. Because of this, she begins to agree with the idea of the Shadow Lords not allowing Stormwatch members to have romantic relationships, though

¹⁰ The character, Piero Rosci aka Vitruvian Man, served as a member of Stormwatch—formerly known as the Demon Knights, controlled by the Shadow Lords to protect the Earth from all manner of natural and supernatural threats. The character was incapacitated for centuries but awakens and wreaks havoc across Venice, Italy over his despair at the death of his lover at the command of the Shadow Lords.

readers have not seen this confirmed by the Shadow Lords anywhere on the page.

The attention Angie pays to the relationship is done with regard to the effectiveness of the team and not because of any derision for the fact that two men are romantically involved with one another, conveying a progressive sense of the normality of the relationship. Once the team has dealt with the same threat in which Angie was looking for Midnighter and Apollo, the team is standing in the rubble, and Midnighter and Apollo have an intimate moment of relief that the other is unharmed. Angie breaks into the moment, saying, “Break it up, you two. Don’t think I haven’t forgotten you went AWOL,” referring to the date they were sharing as the initial mayhem erupted. Midnighter stands his ground and asks, “What are you going to do about it, Engineer? Smack our butts and throw us off the team?” Instead of answering, Angie announces a new rule for the team: “As of now, I’m prohibiting any close personal relationships between agents.” Apollo jumps in this time, saying, “That’s bull. We’re adults.” Angie ignores Apollo’s outburst and reveals the punishment for the rule: “Anyone found infringing this new regulation will be reported to the Shadow Lords” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). The threat of being reported to the Shadow Lords is especially potent because the team witnessed the punishment of the Shadow Lords. In *The Dark Side*, when the Shadow Lords decided that Adam One, Stormwatch team leader from the first issue of the series, had disappointed them as team leader, they kill him by sinking him into what they call a “death pit” (Cornell n.p.), which gives Angie’s threat a more significant amount of weight for the team than it might have otherwise carried.

Much of the progressive attention the team pays to the relationship comes in the volume *Betrayal*, later in the series but continuing to reflect a sense of justice to the

characters rather than conveying socially dominant ideas to attract or retain readers. In this volume, the characters discuss Midnighter and Apollo's relationship with each character in a manner that presents the relationship as just like any other, with no special attention paid to the gender of neither Midnighter nor Apollo. Later in this volume, when Harry Tanner reveals his plan, part of it involved convincing the team that Midnighter was collaborating with him in his betrayal and that Midnighter had been manipulating Apollo into falling in love with him. Midnighter escapes and takes the Projectionist with him. They are traveling through the arctic to avoid detection by Stormwatch. Projectionist asks Midnighter if he even cares about being a part of Stormwatch. Midnighter admits that he thought he did, but he is coming to realize that he might care more about Apollo and what Apollo thinks of him. This scene is where Projectionist says, "My God, you really do love him" (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). There is not undue attention to the fact that Midnighter and Apollo are both men; she simply points out that she has noticed how much Midnighter loves Apollo.

The scene changes on the next page to Apollo and Jenny Quantum who discuss the relationship in a similarly progressive fashion to that of the interaction between Midnighter and the Projectionist that still does not seem directed at reader comfort or retention. Apollo is flying toward the sun, but Jenny Quantum is floating in between Apollo and the surface of the sun. She thinks he is about to kill himself over his heartbreak concerning Midnighter's betrayal. This intervention is the only mention of the relationship or the betrayal, with no undue attention paid past that. Once more, the lack of attention conveys the normativity of the relationship in the eyes of the characters surrounding Midnighter and Apollo, very different from the attention paid within the

WildStorm series. Within this same storyline, when Midnighter and Apollo are looking for assistance against Harry Tanner and a corrupted Engineer,¹¹ Zealot asks Midnighter, “You and the handsome one [Apollo] together? As in boyfriends?” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). The comment passes without any special fanfare or attention, and Apollo replies shortly, still angry at Midnighter for the supposed betrayal, “Midnighter and I are colleagues,” reminiscent of Midnighter’s reference to Apollo as his colleague early in their days in WildStorm’s comic book universe. The scene moves on from there, with much jealousy from Apollo and his assumption of a romantic relationship between Midnighter and Zealot. The questioning from Zealot in such a casual manner provides further evidence for the normativity of the possibility that Midnighter and Apollo could be boyfriends.

When the series moves into volume four, *Reset*, new writer Jim Starlin resets the team’s reality to a story similar to the Authority, an important choice in that the title retains the progressive portrayal even in this callback that long-time readers would have recognized while being corrective to the negativity previously conveyed. In this story, there is no sense of negative attention paid to the couple. The only time another character mentions the relationship at all is when teammate Hellstrike is complaining about the under-performance of the team, and says, “Even the best can only do so much with a couple of alternative lifestyle types, a walking corpse and a creepy kid” (Starlin n.p.).

¹¹ Angie aka the Engineer swallowed a device know at the Evolution Engine in the previous storyline. Readers find out that Neanderthals secretly still exist and have been waging a secret war against humanity for centuries, trying to perfect the Evolution Engine, which would devolve anyone exposed to it to lesser levels, thus making humans less developed than the Neanderthals and allowing the Neanderthals to take their “rightful” place as the masters of humanity. The Neanderthals turn on the Evolution Engine and Angie swallows the device (she is a machine who can absorb other machines and supposedly render them inert as they become part of her being). The team does not know that the device begins to affect Angie from within, devolving her human side so that the machine side, lacking all sense of empathy and compassion, manifests itself and agrees with Harry Tanner’s totalitarian goals of domination as a means of protecting the Earth.

Hellstrike is revealed earlier to be a racist, though he never expresses this in any scene and his prejudice does not bleed into his reference to Midnighter and Apollo, who would previously in WildStorm's comics have been referred to as "poofs," "sissies," or "faggots." The only other mention of the relationship comes later in the volume, when the team is informed of the fact that their reality was created by the Kollektive, who created the reality as a means of getting rid of the original Stormwatch in order to see their nefarious plans come to fruition. Midnighter asks, "There were another Midnighter and Apollo?" and Apollo follows up with, "Were they also lovers?" Lobo, another teammate of the group for a brief time in this altered reality, replies, "Who friggin' cares? I quit and am goin' home!" (Starlin n.p.). Here, readers have a character explicitly state that whether or not the two men are in a relationship is of no concern whatsoever, reinforcing the normativity and mundane natural of the relationship as "alternative" or any other non-normative consideration.

Readers get one last moment of normative attention paid to the relationship at the end of the volume after reality has been set right and the original Stormwatch of the series has been returned to the page, closing the series with one last note of normalcy for readers. Midnighter and Jenny Quantum are searching for a device that is causing the buildings of a city to come to life and attack civilians. They are beneath the city in old, unused subway tunnels, and Jenny says she does not like the dark. Midnighter says, "No one does, kid. 'Cept me," to which Jenny asks, "Then why are you and Apollo so close?" referring to their superhero names and their corresponding affinity for either light or darkness. Midnighter answers her with an explanation of emotions versus a sense of duty, conveying that Apollo has romantic feelings for Midnighter in spite of their differences

of opinion (Starlin n.p.). This final moment of acknowledgement to the relationship between the two men sums up most all of the moments of attention paid to the relationship while also foreshadowing the later breakup. They are discussed where relevant to the story and never in a way that degrades or ostracizes the socially non-normative romance. The characters and their attraction are treated the way any other heterosexual relationship might be treated rather than the constant sexuality jokes and homophobic remarks and insults that were so prevalent in the *WildStorm* series.

The cancelation of *Stormwatch* with issue #30 reflects the lack of sustainability for such progressive statements, but the continued publication of stories featuring Midnighter and Apollo reflects DC Comics' commitment to progressive portrayals of gay men. Through the rest of Midnighter and Apollo's appearances within DC Comics (as far as February 2020), there are only three moments worth explaining as further evidence of progressive portrayal within DC's storylines. Between the cancellation of *Stormwatch* and the publication of Midnighter's self-titled series, the characters make brief appearances within *Grayson*, in which neither their relationship nor their sexuality in general are mentioned by any characters. The first scene of attention paid that is worth examining comes in the first volume of *Midnighter: Out*. Midnighter is on a date with a man, Matt, at a bar in Moscow. A couple of men approach Midnighter and Matt's table, where they had just been holding hands in the previous panel. One man asks, "What the hell is this? ...You think you people can do what you want? Where you want? Men drink here...Time I think for you and girlfriend to leave" (Orlando, *Midnighter: Out*, n.p.). The reference to "men" drinking there and Matt being Midnighter's "girlfriend" are homophobic in their assuming Midnighter and Matt cannot be "men" and have romantic

feelings for other men. Midnighter proceeds to assault the man, proving his superior manhood, before he and Matt stroll out of the bar onto the street in the very next panel. While briefly homophobic in nature, this interaction is immediately corrected by Midnighter, and the handling of the interaction in just four panels shows how little attention is paid to the negativity of the moment, whereas homophobic interactions from the WildStorm stories often received at least as much on-page attention and often more, without ever being explicitly conveyed as wrong or inappropriate. This scene is also significant in the way it contrasts the scene with Last Call and the shaman. Where in that scenario, Last Call beats the shaman to death for presuming Last Call could ever be a homosexual, Midnighter assaults (but does not kill) the man who presumes there is anything abnormal about his relationship with Matt or his attraction to men in general.

The other important scenes to mention in support of the normativity of the attention paid to the relationship come from the series *Midnighter and Apollo* where even the attention that the villains pay to the relationship is not negative as directed at the sexuality of the characters. While the title of the series alone supports DC's shift toward an environment of diversity and inclusivity, two specific moments in that book bear examination as well. In this series, Apollo is kidnapped to a hell dimension and held prisoner by Neron. The two engage in a battle of wits as Midnighter tries to find a way into the dimension to save Apollo's soul from Neron. Midnighter twice battles the villain who kidnapped Apollo's soul, a demon named Mawzir. In both interactions, Mawzir refers to Apollo as Midnighter's "lover," an important choice made by the writer, Steve Orlando, as this moment is the first instance where a villain refers to one man or the other as something besides a derogatory term as was the case in the stories from WildStorm.

The use of “lover” shows that even the villains of the story acknowledge the normativity of the relationship between the two men.

Apollo’s interaction with Neron is corrective in reading as a callback to *The Authority* stories, in which religion is often used to convey the negativity of the relationship to readers. In the portions of the story dealing with Apollo and Neron, much of their time together is spent with Neron trying to convince Apollo that his soul belongs in Hell. At one point he tells Apollo, “Your soul is putrid. Festering and calcified with a lifetime of foul acts” (Orlando, *Midnighter and Apollo*, n.p.). While this statement could read as Neron’s accusations against Apollo’s sexual orientation, Apollo’s homosexuality is never mentioned as one of the sins of which Neron claims Apollo is guilty. Neron accuses Apollo of pride, anger, lust, murder, and of guilt by association because of how often Midnighter kills the criminals he encounters, but he never claims Apollo deserves to be in Hell because of his sexual orientation or his sexual acts with Midnighter. This distinction is important for the development of the relationship outside of the frames of hetero- or homonormativity, especially considering the social and biblical rhetoric of homosexuality as an abominable sin, committing a person’s soul to Hell for all of eternity. The scene is also an interesting contrast from the storyline from WildStorm in which Reverend John Clay and his “Transcendence Movement” try to “cure” both Apollo and Midnighter of their homosexual “affliction” through the power of their faith.

In pointing out the difference in attention paid to the characters and their sexuality, I return to Scott McCloud’s explanation to show how the crafting of these panels and the overall story convey a progressive message about homosexual relationships. McCloud discusses breaching the walls of ignorance through

communication and understanding the form of communication being used. Contrary to the rampant homophobia and unnecessary mentions of Midnigher and Apollo's sexuality that were common in WildStorm comics lines, the Midnigher and Apollo stories from DC have only two brief mentions of even perceivable negativity toward the characters. These moments are also handled in a subtractive manner, to reference McCloud again, whereas the relationship is given the page- and panel-space to develop across the many storylines, an additive choice made by the creators. This choice shows how important the normative nature of the relationship was to the creators after the New 52 reboot. These changes also reveal how the creators tried to convey that same importance of normativity and inclusivity to their readers as well.

The Relationship as Normative

After Midnigher and Apollo's first meeting in the first issue of *Stormwatch: The Dark Side*, their relationship develops slowly throughout the series, but the development is very much present on the page to convey it clearly to readers, without special regard to how readers might react. Readers find out in the next issue that Midnigher has been watching and studying Apollo before realizing he wanted to work with him. He tells Apollo that he knows him pretty well after following him for a year, and he "know[s] why [he] stays apart. Why [he] hasn't come out as a 'super hero'" (Cornell, n.p.). Midnigher's phrasing there is interesting, as "come out" is loaded language for a gay man. His exceptional interest in Apollo is the readers' first clue to romantic interest, especially considering his later revelation to the Stormwatch team that he found the "one partner" with whom he wants to work. Through the rest of *The Dark Side*, readers get

moments of flirting and others of intimacy between the two men, and a brief discussion of the status of their sexuality considering the status of “superheroes,” with Midnighter stating, “The public loves their heroes. But we’ve seen enough to know...not enough of them would love us” (Cornell n.p.). This addressing of the problem of the visibility of gay characters is important toward showing DC’s acknowledgement of previous portrayals where characters were forced into a heteronormative dichotomy and the manner by which they moved away from such portrayals as this storyline carries forward. The statement is also loaded and seems indicative of the mainstream audience of comic book culture and how “not enough of them” loved the characters enough for the progressive storylines to economically sustainable.

Interactions between Jenny and Midnighter are striking in the way they differ so much from the way their relationship was handled in *The Authority*, changing from a “parent/child” dynamic to a “teammates who do not trust each other” dynamic, further moving away from the homonormativity of the previous iteration. In the second volume, *Enemies of Earth*, Midnighter admits—in a roundabout way—to Jenny Quantum that he has romantic feelings for Apollo after Jenny tells him “You like him.” He tries to avoid her question, saying, “Of course I do. Apollo is a trusted ally and friend--” but Jenny cuts him off, stating, “You know what I mean. I’m twelve but I wasn’t born yesterday. Boys can like boys. It doesn’t matter” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Enemies of Earth*, n.p.). Midnighter cuts the conversation short as he claims the timing is inappropriate considering the threat they were currently facing. The tone of acceptance and even permission was a promising development toward making the relationship normative rather than making it one for constant jokes and ridicule.

Midnighter and Apollo's relationship to Jenny is also an important change that again moves them away from stereotypes of heteronormative portrayals in favor of a more progressive representation. In *Stormwatch*, the three are all simply teammates, with neither Midnighter nor Apollo having any parental background over the child. This difference is shown most obviously in a moment from *Enemies of Earth*, where Midnighter decides that Jenny Quantum's abilities are too powerful and too dangerous for a twelve-year-old girl to possess, so he strands her in another dimension. Her powers are even greater than he guessed, however, and she is able to return to the team, with Midnighter now as a secret enemy within the team's dynamic. Midnighter's actions here are another reversal of the homonormative dynamic developed in the WildStorm universe. Rather than falling into the parental role as surrogate father to the girl and reinforcing the concept and prestige of the family form as the "mediator and metaphor of national existence" (Berlant and Warner 549), Midnighter tries to kill the girl and spare the world from the risk of her powers, pushing against the heteronormative institutions that informed the previous incarnation of his life and relationship, reading as a direct call back to *The Authority* from WildStorm in which Midnighter served as the girl's father.

The rest of the volume is rife with developments to the relationship, showing the men exploring their feelings in a progressive manner of normalcy in an additive fashion that reads as unconcerned with reader opinion for such a relationship. The two men flirt more, Apollo deals with his struggle to be part of a secret organization,¹² and he reveals

¹² Stormwatch is an organization that has existed for centuries in this comics universe and it serves to protect Earth from all threaten, both on Earth and from beyond. In order to best execute this protection, Stormwatch is mandated to operate in complete secrecy without the knowledge of anyone on Earth, whether superheroes, governments, or civilians. This secrecy becomes a personal problem for Apollo, as he is uncomfortable with hiding any portion of who he is as a person after spending years hiding his sexuality from his family and society.

to Midnighter some of his backstory and how his father dealt with him being gay, explaining that he came out of one closet and does not want to find himself in another. At another point, a teammate approaches the two men, and Midnighter pulls away. Apollo asks him, “You still care that people know about us?” and Midnighter replies, “I didn’t know there was any ‘us’ yet” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Enemies of Earth*, n.p.). The slow and steady development of the relationship over time, and in concert with dealing with other things happening in their lives, both personally and as members of Stormwatch, is a more realistic and normative development than the previous incarnation. Not “homo-” or “hetero-” normative, but rather just normative, normal, a relationship like any other that readers are allowed to see blossom and develop and falter, rather than just being told the relationship exists for the sake of not risking negative reader reaction.

The relationship develops in a progressive manner for the remainder of the volume, with more on-page attention to the relationship than any other volume, which may have contributed to the eventual cancelation of the title considering the number of readers who might have stopped reading after seeing such developments. The rest of the volume consists of a storyline in which the team is led to believe Midnighter betrayed them to their enemy and former teammate, Harry Tanner.¹³ The important aspect of this scenario is that Midnighter is supposed to have manipulated Apollo with his affection so that Apollo falls in love with him, leaving Midnighter protected from Apollo’s power when Midnighter’s betrayal is revealed. Midnighter tries to convince Apollo that the team is being misled, making such statements as “I’ve been off-balance since the first time I

¹³ Harry Tanner absorbs the knowledge from an alien being and becomes near all-powerful, planning to use his newfound knowledge and abilities to either overthrow or control Stormwatch, because he is a narcissist who believes he alone knows best how to protect the Earth and humanity and feels the team gets in the way of his vision for domination and control.

saw you” and later, when Apollo tells Midnigher to stop acting as though they had been lovers, Midnigher admits, “We nearly were” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). When Midnigher escapes and discusses the situation with Emma aka the Projectionist, another team member, she looks at him and says, “My God, you really do love him,” which is readers’ first revelation of the depth of Midnigher’s feelings for Apollo. On the very next page, Apollo is flying off directly for the sun, thinking to himself such comments as “I’ll burn it all away...Fire doesn’t feel pain. Fire doesn’t feel like a stupid idiot.” When he gets there, he finds Jenny Quantum waiting for him, fearful that he is about to fly into the sun and kill himself over the heartbreak of Midnigher’s supposed betrayal, revealing that the team had knowledge of the true depths of the men’s feelings for one another. Later, when Midnigher is caught, Harry Tanner is about to execute him, but Apollo takes the blast and saves Midnigher’s life. He is not sure he believes Midnigher but cannot watch the man he loves be killed.

The next section of the volume conveys Midnigher and Apollo openly discussing the state of their feelings in a manner more progressive than any story featuring them thus far, possibly leading to the title’s eventual cancelation. Apollo and Midnigher escape from Harry Tanner, and Midnigher seeks out his friend, Zealot. A new development in the relationship comes across the page in the form of Apollo’s jealousy of the possibility that Midnigher could have romantic feelings for Zealot. Zealot makes sexualized comments about Midnigher’s attractive nature, and Apollo becomes jealous, making constant comments about finally understanding why Midnigher kept him at a distance every time they were becoming close. Apollo finally asks Midnigher, “Are you gay?” (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). Midnigher blows him off, as they have more

pressing concerns. When everything has been resolved and the enemies defeated, Zealot leaves. Apollo asks Midnighter why he did not go with her and says, “It’s no crime being straight, if that’s what—” but Midnighter cuts him off by grabbing his face and kissing him (*figure 16*) (Milligan, *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, n.p.). The juxtaposition of this statement is an interesting reversal of the common sentiment that being straight (heterosexual) is the norm

Figure 16: Panel from *Stormwatch: Betrayal*, story by Peter Milligan, art by Will Conrad.

and being gay (homosexual) is the taboo or the sexual orientation that would be “a crime” or wrong by social standards. This scene is a direct movement against the idea of heteronormativity—and thus the homonormative portrayal of the relationship—because the moment is in direct contrast with Berlant and Warner’s definition of heteronormativity as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (548). Apollo’s inference that Midnighter could somehow see heterosexuality as the crime inverts the normativity of heterosexuality.

The final volume was a significant shift from the tone of previous volumes in a manner that would appeal to long-time readers of *The Authority* but also corrects the

homophobic aspects of previous iterations, in which here, attention to the relationship was positive rather than negative for reader benefit. Writer Jim Starlin rewrote the reality of Stormwatch into a version in which Midnighter and Apollo are deeply in love and living together, conveying the relationship on-page. The story is reminiscent of *The Authority* in the manner with which Midnighter and Apollo interact both with each other and with their teammates. In the last few pages of the volume, when reality has been reset to the New 52 standard, Midnighter and Apollo are sharing a room on the Carrier, making jokes about mounting a slain alien head on the wall, and Midnighter tells Apollo that if he mounts the head, Apollo will be sleeping alone for a year. The alternate reality version of Midnighter and Apollo's relationship is the only development readers get as far as the relationship being official. The buildup readers get is an important change to the homonormative portrayal from the WildStorm series, but the relationship itself never gets developed past that point.

After the cancelation of *Stormwatch*, DC creators showed Midnighter pushing into diversity again with the way he went about future relationships a very progressive portrayal with which readers would not have been previously familiar and may have been a cause the failure of the portrayals' sustainability. Between *Stormwatch*'s cancellation and the publication of *Midnighter*, Midnighter and Apollo only make brief guest appearances in one other comics storyline until the *Midnighter* series began publication. The series, as the title indicates, focused solely on Midnighter with Apollo not making any appearances (aside from a flashback or two) until the final issues of the series. When *Midnighter* opens, he is in bed with a man who is clearly not Apollo. Later, he is seen on a date with another man, and readers find out that he has a profile on a dating app (*figure*

17). Not until Midnighter goes to his friend's bar after the date is interrupted by a violent attack do readers learn that he and Apollo have broken up over differences of opinion concerning Midnighter's affinity for violence and killing, and his having no memory of his life before a series of experiments turned him into Midnighter. He breaks up with Apollo, saying they moved too fast and that he does not know who "Midnighter" is without Apollo. He needs time to figure that out. This view into Midnighter's personal life is a significant shift in the manner in which Midnighter (or Apollo, for that matter) have been portrayed before. Even when separated before in the WildStorm stories, neither ever dated nor even interacted with another man. In *Midnighter*, readers see him dating, having sex with, and waking up next to a variety of men. This normalization of such behavior from a socially ostracized and generally non-normative sexuality and type of relationship is a further reflection of DC's push toward diversity and inclusivity with the New 52 reboot. These scenes of Midnighter with a variety of partners are also interesting when compared to the WildStorm comics stories in which only the heterosexual members of the team were allowed the page-space to explore their sexuality so freely. Further into the first volume, *Out*, a flashback scene reveals the breakup between the two and shows them discussing the failure of the relationship (figure 18).

This information gives readers the means of understanding what happened in the

Figure 17: Panel from *Midnighter: Out*, story by Steve Orlando, art by ACO.

relationship and a firmer grasp on where the story of *Midnighter* is now. This explication is also an interesting development, as the relationship between these two men was never given this sort of page space, even when the two were separated in the WildStorm universe, readers were never given reasoning or purpose, and the reunion was also never given page space; the narration just showed that the separation had happened and then they were just back together some issues later. Where in WildStorm, important developments in the status of the relationship (such as their impending marriage and adoption of Jenny Quantum) are only revealed in dialogue from other characters, from DC, readers see these kinds of events on the page as they happen.

The end of *Out* shows *Midnighter*'s lingering feelings for Apollo, a plot device that sets up the next story where the primary focus is on *Midnighter* and Apollo reconciling, a definite progression from the unexplained resolution from *The Authority* stories. *Midnighter* sends Apollo a picture of him as a young boy that he retrieves after a villain tries to use his forgotten past against him. This scene leads into the second

volume, *Hard*, where *Midnighter* reconnects with Apollo. When *Midnighter* is trapped in an explosion, he reaches out to Apollo, hoping the man still cares for him as well and is keeping an ear out for his distress.

Figure 18: Panels from *Midnighter: Out*, story by Steve Orlando, art by ACO.

Apollo flies in and rescues Midnighter, taking Midnighter back to the apartment they used to share in order for him to recover. The two men talk, and Midnighter admits he was wrong to leave Apollo the way he did and still cares for him. He includes Apollo in his mission for that storyline, and the volume ends with the two of them agreeing to give their relationship another shot and to see where things will develop (*figure 19*).

This development and the on-page portrayal of their emotional vulnerability and the emotional aspect of their romantic relationship are new for their relationship and act as a means of DC's writers conveying the story in a manner that normalizes their relationship and reveals its development to readers in a way that is not taboo or non-normal. Contrary to criticisms levelled against other superhero comics' portrayals of gay couples, the same criticism leveled in the previous chapter against the WildStorm portrayals, DC's version of Midnighter and Apollo is not "only just visible enough to

Figure 19: Panels from *Midnighter: Hard*, story by Steve Orlando, art by ACO.

ensure that the reader is aware that they are an item" and it also does not "remain largely in the private, off-page, non-public, easy-to-ignore sphere" (de Dauw 66). The writers of

these characters here are utilizing the power Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven claim comic books have. The two women write that graphic narrative, “has the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation” (Chute and DeKoven 772). These portrayals do intervene against a former culture of invisibility, risking a truer representation of the relationship. The relationship between Midnighter and Apollo violates the premise of heteronormative ideas as well as homonormative assimilation, considering the two are not in a monogamous committed relationship or starting a family or anything of the kind. They are simply exploring their feelings for one another in a way that is just normative.

This refreshed relationship continues to develop within the mini-series *Midnighter and Apollo* that picks up where the *Midnighter* series was cancelled with issue #12, revealing DC Comics’ commitment to the portrayal of the characters and concluding the story despite the lack of sustainability for the progressive message. The volume opens with a full-page panel of Midnighter and Apollo in bed together before the next scene changes to the two men working together to save civilians in their superhero lives. After some intimate development of the relationship, Apollo is kidnapped away to a hell dimension and held prisoner while Midnighter scours the world trying to find a way to break into that hell dimension and save his lover. The story alternates between Apollo’s battle of wits with Neron, the lord of the hell dimension, and Midnighter’s battle through the demon hordes, searching for Apollo. The two eventually escape and return to Earth. After the revelation and development of their devotion to one another, with each risking everything just to get back to the other, the volume concludes with Midnighter and Apollo celebrating the victory with a few friends. The final pages shift to just Midnighter

and Apollo alone in the apartment they now share, discussing the future of their relationship before going off to bed together in the volume's final panel (*figure 20*).

This development could be argued as still-homonormative, but considering the monogamy of the relationship, the on-page portrayal is progressive in that readers can see and are placed in the scene of the men being together, regardless of risk to reader reaction. In addition, reading the relationship as still heteronormative would be a false reading in my opinion, as the fact of the matter is that the two men date and form relationships the same way heterosexual men and women or two female lovers might also form a relationship. The fact that this comic line portrays so candidly the development of a socially non-normative relationship as normative is evidence of DC's push toward diversity and inclusivity that was previously lacking in their storylines before the New 52 company-wide reboot. The portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo in this manner, with the balance of development in their personal lives as gay men and their professional lives as

*Figure 20: Final page/panel of *Midnighter and Apollo*, story by Steve Orlando, art by Fernando Blanco.*

superheroes, serves to help change, in the words of Jean Bessette in “Queer Rhetoric in Situ,” “our understanding of normativity to be more nuanced, flexible, and *contextual*” (151, emphasis original). The visual and narrative portrayal of the relationship as “normal” expands the concept of normativity to include such relationships as those between two men and to support the case that a relationship does not have to be heterosexual, between one man and one woman, to be “normal.”

DC Comics’ portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship aligns with Esther de Dauw’s statement about the spectrum of sexual preference concerning a recent story depicting Wiccan and Hulkling, a teenage gay couple from Marvel Comics. Like the teens, Midnighter and Apollo’s relationship from DC is a “better representation of the full spectrum of human sexuality...suggesting a more liberal attitude to gender and sexuality” (72). Unlike de Dauw’s examination of Wiccan and Hulkling, the relationship between Midnighter and Apollo as portrayed in the DC Comics storylines does not just “suggest” a more liberal attitude; it achieves that attitude as it shows a socially non-normative relationship as accepted in order to convey the idea that a different kind of love and affection is not wrong or lesser, it just is, in the same way that love and affection between a man and a woman is not “right” or “more valuable.”

Relating the differences in view and portrayals of various sexualities, Berlant and Warner make the claims that “the contemporary United States is saturated by the project of constructing a national heterosexuality” (553) and “the normativity of heterosexual culture links intimacy only to those institutions of personal life, making them privileged institutions of social reproduction, the accumulation of and transfer of capital, and self-development” (553). Likewise, Duggan develops upon the concept of homonormativity

when she explains assimilationist activity, wherein gay couples uphold and do not contest “dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions” (50). These assumptions and institutions include but are not limited to the standard family model of a man, a wife, and some kids: monogamy and family, a “normal” relationship, which Midnighter and Apollo are not developed into from the DC stories. Within these pages examined from DC’s portrayal of Midnighter and Apollo, they do not uphold these institutions, but neither do they resist, oppose, or dissent, not in the manner Erin Rand explains how both queer theory and queer activism developed around the premise of exactly that: “resistance, opposition, and dissention” (qtd. in Bessette 153). Midnighter and Apollo are just “normal” (or “normative”), as any other couple might be, without social restrictions of heteronormativity, homonormativity, or queer theory’s antinormativity.

The analysis shows the manner in which DC Comics represented a gay couple in a progressive manner that is corrective when compared to previous portrayals from another WildStorm. The analysis also reveals on a larger scale how such progressive representations of certain minority characters is not sustainable in the pure-profit economic market of the dominant superhero comic book industry. With the cancelation of each title Midnighter and Apollo appeared in and a three-year hiatus since their last appearance in the DC Comics comic book universe, the analysis of the progressive representation supports the argument that there is not a large enough market in the mainstream superhero comic book culture for such progressive statement to be sustained across long periods of publication. The same cannot be said for all manner of progressive minority portrayals, but it seems to be true for the portrayals of homosexual characters, at least in the current social climate and within the dominant comic book culture.

CONCLUSION

The analysis and comparison between the two stories show the manner DC attempted to and succeeded at creating a diverse and inclusive environment for their gay characters. From *WildStorm*, the characters had been portrayed in a manner that fell in line with heteronormative social constraints and homonormative assimilationist behavior and portrayals. The relationship was never shown as developing insofar as the couple was already in a long-term commitment. The on-page attention paid to their relationship was minimal, aligning with the idea that just enough was shown to let readers know they were in a relationship without the risk of offending the mainstream (presumably heterosexual) audience. The attention that was paid consisted of gay jokes and homophobic remarks and insults like “faggot” and “poof.” The two developed along a homonormative lineage, confined to the heteronormative institutions of marriage and family development. When the story comes to these homonormative developments, even those are given the most minimal page space. Readers are not permitted to see either *Midnighter* or *Apollo* propose to the other, and there is no period of “engagement.” Readers find out the two are planning to marry and adopt baby *Jenny Quantum* via a conversation between two other team members. Then, when the actual wedding is permitted to happen, the nuptials are given only two panels: one of *Midnighter* and *Apollo* kissing and one of their teammates having a brief, barely related discussion. From there, the advancements are few, with a couple of scenes of the two in bed (more tolerable because they are married and have a child; they are a “family”) and scenes of them caring for their daughter. Besides that,

readers are not given any on-page covering or development of the relationship.

The portrayals from DC Comics correct this homonormativity to an extent, by allowing the characters the time and page-space to explore their feelings and sexuality and to develop a relationship from the beginning, without taking for granted an already-established connection. Readers watch the two men meet, flirt, grow into their feelings, and eventually make a move toward starting a relationship. The characters are allowed to discuss their feelings for one another, separate, feel jealous and insecure, and in the case of Midnighter, explore both sexual and romantic relationships with other men. In addition, the attention paid to the men, by both their teammates and their enemies, was respectful and nonspecific to their orientation, which was an exceptionally progressive development, specifically in the open conversations Midnighter has with Jenny concerning his feelings for Apollo, the Mawzir's references to Apollo as Midnighter's "lover," and Neron's not mentioning homosexuality as one of the reasons Apollo's soul supposedly belonged in Hell. The situation in Hell can also be read as contrasting with the use of social slurs and the religious condemnation that appears so frequently in the WildStorm comics lines. The relationship is treated as any other relationship might be treated by both characters and writers, without any special language and space given for unnecessary attention to the same-sex nature of the relationship.

The analysis above reveals the progressive manner in which DC Comics portrayed their homosexual characters. This progression combined with the shorter period of time the titles featuring Midnighter and Apollo managed to resist cancellation show how such progressive portrayals are not sustainable in the mainstream pure-profit culture in which the stories were published. The hetero- and homonormative stories from

WildStorm lasted for twelve years while the progressive DC Comics stories managed to survive only six total years before cancellation removed them from the company's lines of published comic books. This trend is also noticeable in the staggered manner of DC Comics' publication of books featuring Batwoman, a prominent lesbian character the company owns, and the various homosexual characters Marvel Comics, DC's leading competitor in the superhero comic book industry, has tried to publish, especially recently, including stories featuring Iceman, Hulkling and Wiccan, and Northstar. The characters have not managed to sustain their own series for longer than twelve issues, and even the superhero team-titles that feature these characters do not feature them for extended periods of time before the storylines result in those characters' removal from the title.¹⁴ The trends of unsustainable progressive representations of minority characters raise the question of whether or not mainstream superhero comic books can successfully sustain large-scale calls for political change if those ideas do not align with an already-existing majority social ideology. Some large-scale statements have been successful, as can be seen in the case of prominent female superheroes like Captain Marvel and Batgirl and superheroes of minority races like Black Lightning, Ms. Marvel, and the recently rejuvenated Black Panther. The case of Midnighter and Apollo would seem to support that mainstream superhero comic books cannot sustain certain progressive representation in the long-term, at least as long as publication of such stories is done in a pure-profit economic environment.

¹⁴ Iceman can be considered an exception to the team-title trend. He is a founding member of the fan-favorite group, the X-men, and thus manages to retain membership on one or another of the team-titles published under that "family" of comic books, however even his membership on teams of X-men characters has been of a lesser amount than before his sexuality was revealed in April 2015. Like the other gay and lesbian characters mentioned, no self-titled series featuring the character has lasted longer than twelve issues.

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ENG 21011-044: College Writing II (Fall 2017)
ENG 21011-056: College Writing II (Spring 2017)

ENG 21011-061: College Writing II (Spring 2017)
ENG 21011-039: College Writing II (Fall 2016)
ENG 11011-050: College Writing I (Spring 2016)
ENG 11011-051: College Writing I (Spring 2016)
ENG 11011-046: College Writing I (Fall 2015)

Guest Lectures

ENGL 470 - Digital Publishing: Miracle Monocle Issue XIII. Sarah Strickley, instructor.
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, November 8, 2019
ENGL 470 - Digital Publishing: Miracle Monocle Issue XIII. Sarah Strickley, instructor.
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, September 6, 2019
ENG 20021 - Introduction to Creative Writing. Katherine Orr, instructor. Kent State
University, Kent, Ohio, March 15, 2018.
ENG 30069 - Poetry I. Katherine Orr, instructor. Kent State University, Kent, Ohio,
March 7, 2017.
ENG 20021 - Introduction to Creative Writing. Katherine Orr, instructor. Kent State
University, Kent, Ohio, February 9, 2016.

Tutoring Experience

University Writing Center, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Fall 2018 –
Spring 2019.

Internships

Graduate Intern, *Miracle Monocle* literary magazine, University of Louisville, Louisville,
Kentucky, Spring 2019.
Teaching artist, Summit County Juvenile Detention Center via Wick Poetry Center at
Kent State University, Facilitator: Nicole Robinson, Community Partner: Ruth
Edge, Fall 2015.

Academic Service and Professional Development

Pedagogy Workshop. "Meeting Microaggressions with Microresistance: Ways to Support
and Empower Students." *Composition Department Pedagogy Workshop Series
Fall 2019*, facilitated by Dr. Cynthia Ganote, University of Louisville, Louisville,
Kentucky, November 14, 2019.
University of Louisville Composition Program Pre-Semester Workshop, Louisville,
Kentucky, August 12, 2019.
International Mother Language Day event. Coordinated with Bronwyn Williams,
Catherine, Lange, and M. Quaid Adams, University Writing Center, University of
Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 21, 2019.
Kent State University Writing Program Pre-Semester Composition Workshop, Kent,
Ohio, August 21, 2017.
Teaching artist, Wick Juniors Summer Writing Camp, Wick Poetry Center at Kent State
University, Kent, Ohio, July 19-24, 2017.
Kent State University Writing Program Pre-Semester Composition Workshop, Kent,
Ohio, August 22, 2016.
Final reader, Senior Writing Portfolio for Writing Minor, Samantha Eash, *Soteria*, Susan

Sainato, director, Spring 2016.
Kent State University Writing Program Pre-Semester Composition Workshop, Kent, Ohio, August 24, 2015.
Committee member, Distinguished Teacher Award/Award of Distinction Committee, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 2015.
Committee member, *Student Research Conference* Selection Committee, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, March 2015.

Publications

“Postbellum Slave Narratives with a Spotlight of Booker T. Washington.” Article. *Companion to Literature of the U.S. South*, edited by Todd Hagstette, Katie Burnett, and Monica Miller, Routledge, forthcoming Winter 2020.
“Varied States of Being: A Review of John James’s *The Milk Hours*.” Book Review. *Miracle Monocle 13*, edited by Sarah Anne Strickley, Miracle Monocle, University of Louisville, December 2019.
“From Trauma to Starvation: A Review of Varley O’Connor’s *The Welsh Fasting Girl*.” Book Review. *Miracle Monocle 12*, edited by Sarah Anne Strickley, Miracle Monocle, University of Louisville, April 2019.
“‘Jailed on the Charge of Sodomy’: A Same-Sex, Interracial Marriage in 1888.” Article. *Nineteenth-Century Ohio Literature*, edited by Jon Miller, vol. 1, The University of Akron Press, July 2018, pp. 92-104.
“What Comic Books Say About American Society: Marvel Entertainment Group Portrays Homosexuality.” Conference Proceeding. *Open Access Kent State*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, 24 April 2015.
“Joey.” Fiction. *Canto 25*, edited by Jane Moneysmith and Robin Clark, Kent State University at Stark, 2013, pp. 22-23.
“A Child’s Lament and Her Saving Grace.” Poetry. *Voices from Hurt Street*, edited by Brian Newberg and Robert Miltner, directed by Brian Newberg, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, 12-14 & 19-21 April 2013.
“Interview with a Word.” Script. *Voices from Hurt Street*, edited by Brian Newberg and Robert Miltner, directed by Brian Newberg, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, 12-14 & 19-21 April 2013.
“You’re Tough? Prove It.” Fiction. *Canto 24*, edited by Jane Moneysmith, Derek Ilario Mitchell, and Charlie Dale, Kent State University at Stark, 2012, pp. 8-11.

Readings and Performances

Introduction to Casey Plett Reading, Axton Reading Series, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, November 21, 2019.
“Boardwalk Elegy.” Reading, Fall Graduate Student Reading, Four Pegs, Louisville, Kentucky, December 10, 2018.
“Averted.” Reading, Queer Writers Showcase, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, September 26, 2018.
The Only Thing He Never Told Them. Reading, NEOMFA Spring 2018 Graduation Reading, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio, April 28, 2018.
The Only Thing He Never Told Them. Reading, Graduate Research Symposium, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, April 19, 2018.

“A Child’s Lament and Her Saving Grace.” Performed by Kent State University at Stark Theatre Department via Domestic Violence Project, Inc., *Taking Back the Night*, Malone University, Canton, Ohio, October 15, 2013.

“Joey.” Reading, *Canto 25* Publication Reception, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, May 1, 2013.

Talk back session with writers and ensemble, *Voices from Hurt Street*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 12-13 & 19-20, 2013.

“You’re Tough? Prove It.” Reading, *Canto 24* Publication Reception, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, September 5, 2012.

Presentations and Panels

“The Thing is: Jewish Identity and Experience in Marvel’s *Fantastic Four*.” Comics, the 2020 International Conference on Narrative, International Society for the Study of Narrative, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 5, 2020.

Panel chair, *Comics*. The International Conference on Narrative, International Society for the Study of Narrative, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 5, 2020.

Panel chair, *Creative Panel: Fiction Reading*. The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 22, 2020.

“Midnighter and Apollo Appropriate Masculinity and Femininity: The Breakdown of Binaries and Heteronormative Stereotypes.” *Studies in the Graphic Novel: Genre, Genders, Narrative, Desire*, the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 21, 2020.

Panel chair, *Speculative Fiction’s Politics*. The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 21, 2020.

“Failure to Address: Captain America and Police Brutality.” *Oral Talk Session III: English*, Graduate Student Regional Research Conference, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 28, 2019.

“The New Gothic: American Media and Popular Culture.” *Poster Session II: English*, Co-authored with M. Quaid Adams, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 28, 2019.

“Superman and Wonder Woman: Icons of Male and Female Societal Roles During and After World War II.” *Redefining Gender in and Through 20th-Century Art*, the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 22, 2019.

Panel chair, *Creatures of the Night*. The Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 21, 2019.

Presentation moderator, *Student Research Conference*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 28, 2017.

Presentation moderator, *Student Research Conference*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 29, 2016.

“Marvel Comic Books Portray Homosexuality: A Brief Study of American Mentalities toward the Homosexual Identity.” *(Un)Stable Identities: How the Self is Forged and Found*, English Graduate Student Association, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, March 19, 2016.

Panel chair, “(Un)Stable Formations and Manifestations of the Self in Contemporary American Literature.” *(Un)Stable Identities: How the Self is Forged and Found*, English Graduate Student Association, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, Greensboro, North Carolina, March 19, 2016.

“What Comic Books Say About American Society: Marvel Entertainment Group Portrays Homosexuality.” *Student Research Conference*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 24, 2015.

Editing Experience

Assistant editor. *Monster: A Miracle Monocle Micro-Anthology*, Sarah Strickley, faculty editor, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, forthcoming Fall 2020.

Assistant editor. *Miracle Monocle 14*, Sarah Strickley, faculty editor, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, forthcoming April 2020.

Assistant editor. *Miracle Monocle 13*, Sarah Strickley, faculty editor, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Fall 2019.

Assistant editor. *View Through the Monocle: Queer, Rural America*, Miracle Monocle, Sarah Strickley, faculty editor, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Fall 2019.

Graduate editor. *Miracle Monocle 12*, Sarah Strickley, faculty editor, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Spring 2019.

Submission reader for *Canto 25*, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, February 2013.

Conferences and Workshops Attended

Morgan Parker poetry workshop, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, September 13, 2019.

Chris Offutt Master Class fiction workshop, Axton Reading Series, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, March 1, 2019.

Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference, Tampa, Florida, March 7-10, 2018.

Winter Wheat, *The Mid-American Review* Festival of Writing, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, November 2-4, 2017.

Emily Mitchell fiction workshop, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio, October 4, 2017.

Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference, Washington DC, February 8-11, 2017.

Terrance Hayes poetry workshop, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, December 6, 2016.

Ohio Academy of History Annual Conference, Kent State University at Stark, North Canton, Ohio, April 1-2, 2016.

Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference, Boston, Massachusetts, March 6-9, 2013.

Association of Writers and Writing Programs Annual Conference, Chicago, Illinois, February 29-March 3, 2012.

Creative Nonfiction Workshop, Ashland University, Ashland, Ohio, July 2011.

Community Service

LGBT Advisory Council through the Canton Domestic Violence Project, Inc., 2012 – 2013.

Professional Affiliations

International Society for the Study of Narrative, 2020-Present.

English Graduate Organization, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, Fall 2018 – Present.

Ohio Academy of History, 2016-2018.

Association of Graduate English Students, Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, Fall 2015 – Spring 2018.

References

Available upon request.