

A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and *Green Lantern*

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When I was a kid reading comics, I used to sometimes think “they saved the mother and kid from the falling building, but would they rescue me if they knew I was a fag?” I now have an answer for that. (Letter 17)

The US comic book industry has addressed a number of pressing social and political issues in its narratives through the years, including alcohol and drug abuse, racism, environmental devastation, gun control, and poverty. In the process, the industry has provided a rich tapestry of American cultural attitudes and philosophies that reflect varying approaches to issues that continue to haunt, confound, and rile the American public. With its pulse on issues relevant to US public culture, it is not surprising that the complexities of gay identity and antigay hate crimes have been increasingly explored by industry leaders, DC and Marvel Comics, since the late 1980s. While there are many comic book companies, DC Comics and Marvel Comics are consistently the nation’s top two comic book producers, controlling approximately 60% of the market (McAllister 19). These two leaders in the field have introduced various gay and lesbian characters in their mainstream comic books since 1988, most of them in minor roles (Franklin 224). In 2001, the long-standing comic book *Green Lantern*, reaching approximately 65,000 readers every month, introduced a well-adjusted, proudly out central character,

Terry Berg, in its issue #137. The issue won an award from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) for being the year’s best comic book. DC Comics pushed the envelope even further in the September and October 2002 issues of *Green Lantern* by becoming the first mainstream comic book to focus a major two-part story line on a central character, the aforementioned Terry Berg, whose experience of antigay violence leaves him on the verge of death.

The *Green Lantern* hate crime story line has received considerable attention in a range of media outlets; news stories have appeared in such mainstream venues as *The New York Times* (Gustines) and *CNN.com* (“Comic’s Gay”). Additionally, the *Green Lantern*’s writer at the time, Judd Winick, was featured on an episode of MSNBC’s *Donahue* discussing the debut of the story line. *Out* magazine’s December 2002 issue featured Winick drawn in comic art being hailed as a straight alliance. Further, *Out* exclaims that the writer of *Green Lantern* is a “superhero to gays and lesbians” (Champagne 86). In a telephone interview, Winick lamented the fact that “hate crimes only come on the radar when people are beaten and murdered, when it also exists on a daily level.” With this story, Winick said that he hoped “to create dialogue” about the topic and to prompt people to “think twice, check their mind-sets, challenge their behavior.” Bob Schreck,

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editor of the *Green Lantern*, states, “It’s a story that needs to be told . . . We’ve tried to reasonably, intelligently educate people that we’re not all on one note” (Gustines). As if to underscore the salience of the topic, as the first installment of the two-part story line hit the stands in September 2002, the Associated Press reported that three men in West Hollywood had been victims of anti-gay violence (“Gay Man Beaten”).

The *Green Lantern* hate crime story line provides a compelling opportunity to examine reader response to an important moment in the history of the US comic book industry. It also presents an opportunity to contribute to what is presently a dearth of research on masculinity in general, and gay masculinity in particular, in mainstream comic books, a point that we establish in the next section. In order to assess reader reaction to the antigay hate crime story line, we analyze twenty-nine unpublished letters¹ written in response to the story line provided by Bob Schreck and Judd Winick. In our analysis of the letters, we argue that there was a meaningful level of understanding regarding issues of concern to the gay community among these particular letter writers. To begin, we provide an overview of the burgeoning research on masculinity studies and locate gay comic book masculinities in that literature. Next, a synopsis of the hate crime story line is supplied to establish a context for analyzing the letters. Finally, we present and examine the letters, which are grouped according to content and tone.

The Representation of Masculinities in Comic Books

The morphing state of masculinity has been an issue of mounting dialogue for more than three decades in the United States, and more recently, in global contexts (Connell 39–66; Pease and Pringle 1–17; Kimmel, “Global” 21–38). Arthur Brittan contends that the role of US men and what it means to be “masculine” came under intense scrutiny as a result of second-wave feminists’ interrogations of the gender order and patriarchal

ideology, as well as challenges to heteronormativity brought forth by the gay rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s (179–86). As early as the 1970s, men began to examine their roles in society more critically in response to these challenges, even prompting an independent field of study (Craig 2). These explorations have produced self-help books (Farrell), men’s movements and scholarly analyses of the movements (Kimmel, *The Politics*; Messner; Schwalbe), autobiographies dealing with the negotiation of normative expectations for American masculinity (Bouldrey), and New Journalism biographies on twentieth-century American men, such as Elizabeth Gilbert’s analysis of Eustace Conway IV, an environmentalist challenging notions of hegemonic masculinity and its relationship to consumerism. Both Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America* and E. Anthony Rotundo’s *American Manhood* investigate the cultural and social history of US masculinity and the ways in which the construct has transformed through time. Additionally, David Gilmore has provided a cross-cultural analysis of manhood, while others have focused on culturally specific dimensions of American masculinities, such as black masculinity (Carby; Majors and Billson), Jewish masculinity (Brod), and gay masculinity (Nardi). Of course, collections have emerged that provide frameworks for theorizing masculinities (Brod and Kaufman) and researching masculinities generally (Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell; Beynon; Connell 3–36; Whitehead).

One area of considerable growth in the research on men and masculinities in the past decade has been in the realm of popular culture. Some of this scholarship has focused on the representation of men and masculinity in a medley of popular culture artifacts, from porn (Simpson 131–49) to music (Collins 149–80) to sports media (Sabo and Jansen 169–84). Others have focused on the representation of masculinity in television and film (Holmlund 141–56; Lehman; Pfeil; Shugart 67–91; Silverman) and advertising (Dotson). Scholarship that focuses specifically on the representation of the male body in the media also has emerged (Bordo 168–228; Jeffords; Tasker 73–90). Analyses of the so-called crisis in masculinity and

the framing of white masculinity as “wounded” in popular culture have provided yet another perspective on contemporary US masculinity (Robinson; Savran; Tasker 109–31).

Even though there has been a remarkable expansion of scholarship on men and masculinity in the past several decades, there still exists a lacuna in research on the representation of masculinity in comic books. This is somewhat surprising, as “classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man” (Brown 26). While a respectable number of scholars have focused their attention on male characters in comics, thus providing analyses that are implicitly about masculinity, the explicit focus of the research lies elsewhere, and consequently, the endeavor does not contribute substantially to our understanding of the function of gender in American culture. For example, Michael Straub, in his examination of the comic book *Maus*, discusses “what it means to have a Jewish identity in a post-Auschwitz age” (37). While the article is, first and foremost, about Jewish identity, Straub draws his observations from a story that focuses on a man and his father, a Holocaust survivor, and their negotiation of life and relationships. Inevitably the article suggests something about masculinity, but this is implicit. Such is the case with a variety of other research on comics whose primary concern includes such things as the representation of war (MacCallum-Stewart 1–18), nationalism (Edwardson 184–201), the struggle between liberal ideology and counterculture approaches to radical change (Moore 263–78), and the American monomyth (Lang and Trimble 157–73).

Few scholars have studied, as a primary focus of investigation, the representation of masculinity in general (Glasberg 25–32; Pecora 61–77; Brown 25–42), and the representation of gay masculinity in particular (McLelland 13–25; Franklin III 221–50; Sewell 251–74), in comic books. In his analysis of sexual stereotypes in the *Archie* comic books series, Ron Glasberg argues that the white male character, Archie, exists “in a wish fulfillment of eternal youth where he stands at the threshold of a choice he never has to make” between the

characters Veronica and Betty, who respectively represent “material success and interpersonal intimacy” (31). Those men in the comic who have matured and gained the capacity to make such choices are represented as losing their power, “and that loss comes from having made a choice in which one valuable option is gained at the expense of another” (31). Glasberg contends that such representations unfortunately suggest to male readers that “maturity is an inevitable defeat” (32).

In her analysis of comic books as socializing agents for young men, Norma Pecora contends that comic books with superheroes like Superman and Batman have served as “important symbols of ‘maleness’ in American culture since Superman was introduced in 1939” (61) and that “little has changed” as late as the 1990s (77). The many and varied characters presented in comic books through the years “have functioned in a world that is male and white, where the women are either young and buxom or old and frail—but never equals” (61). “Images of racism and anti-feminism are still very much part of the comic book culture” as people of color and women are typically relegated to the background or are villains or trim (76). This is a trend, Pecora argues, that has continued through the years, and young men “are still offered cultural representations that reinforce maleness as machismo” and masculinity as violence oriented (77).

Jeffrey A. Brown analyzes the representation and reception of alternative black masculinities presented in three comic book series—*Icon*, *Hardware*, and *Static*—by Milestone Comics, a black-owned and controlled publishing company. The Milestone characters are read in the context of characters from Image Comics, an emerging industry giant that, Brown argues, “set a new standard of hypermasculinity” through “the obvious overpresence of masculine signifiers” such as “exaggerated representations of the male hero’s body as a mass of veiny muscles” (33) and the presentation of “brainless brawl after brainless brawl” (36). Brown’s subjects commented on the ways in which Milestone’s characters were more multidimensional than those in Image Comics, saying such things as, “It’s nice to see cool brothers in the comics who can *think* their way out of a

rough spot. You know, Icon's a lawyer; Hardware's an all-purpose science super-genius; and Static, well, he's just a high school kid . . . but the smartest of them all" (36). Drawing on ethnographic data from an ethnically diverse group, Brown reports that the Milestone representations are effective in presenting alternative masculinities because they "incorporate previously disassociated concepts of softness with hardness, of mind with body . . . the Milestone books work to infuse gentler, more responsible, and more cerebral qualities within the codes of dominant masculinity" (41). While fans recognize that the images of masculinity that Milestone presents are "different," they are amenable to this change, Brown asserts, because of Milestone's merging of some aspects of traditional comic book masculinity with newer, more progressive elements.

While Glasberg, Pecora, and Brown focus on heterosexual white and black masculinities, Mark J. McLelland analyzes the representation of young gay Japanese males and their love affairs in Japanese comic books (*manga*) directed toward women, and he discusses the reasons behind Japanese women's affinity for these particular representations. McLelland argues that gay men in women's manga are depicted as favorably feminine and androgynous, as "beautiful youths" who could be "best friends or even ideal partners for women" (13). In contrast, gay magazines made by and for gay males in Japan depict hypermasculine gay men negotiating a homosocial world, far away from women and their concerns (14). McLelland contends that Japanese women find satisfaction in the depiction of gay male love affairs as depicted in this medium because heterosexual relations in Japan are limiting to women (24). "Heterosexual sex in Japan is structured in relation to two strong paradigms: the sex trade and the family" (22), neither of which is terribly satisfying for women. Indeed, "unreproductive sexual practice outside marriage is represented as dangerous [for women], the results of which are damaged morals as well as damaged bodies" (24). Alternatively, "'licensed' sexuality which takes place within marriage leads to a wife becoming a mother whereupon she is desexualized" (24). The representation of love be-

tween men in the women's manga gives heterosexual women an opportunity to fantasize about sexual relations in a more free and satisfying way because the sexual relationships between men are depicted as "both caring and enduring, based on love not sex" (16), and there is no anxiety about becoming pregnant or playing a subservient role in the relationship or in society, issues that adult heterosexual Japanese women regularly face. Ultimately, McLelland questions whether these representations of gay sexuality have anything to do with gay male culture at all. Rather than mirroring gay culture, these depictions seem to reflect the "concerns and fantasies of the women who avidly produce and consume them" (24).

Edward Sewell examines the effects of authorship in his analysis comparing the representation of queer characters in US alternative publications produced by queer cartoonists with that of queer characters created by heterosexual cartoonists in US mainstream comic strips. Sewell suggests that the representations of queers that heterosexual cartoonists produce often lack important elements of the queer lifestyle. Specifically, the queer characters produced by heterosexual cartoonists tended to have no distinguishing characteristics that would differentiate them from heterosexual characters, and they also were presented as nonthreatening and "thoroughly assimilated" (271). In contrast, Sewell's analysis of queer characters in the alternative comic strips found that queer cartoonists focus not on "assimilation into a dominant culture, but rather on the creation of a thoroughly queer culture that often is in opposition, if not direct conflict with, the dominant heterosexual culture" (271). Queer cartoonists create a world that is mostly inhabited by queers, and the characters are truly distinct from their heterosexual counterparts, thinking and acting differently. Sewell contends that queers need a "queer space" like that found on the Internet, where queer characters are "allowed to live in a queer world doing queer things with the dominant culture playing a marginalized role" (271). He longs for the day that we might open our local mainstream daily newspaper and find an "authentically queer² comic strip, by an openly queer cartoonist" (271).

Finally, Morris E. Franklin III provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of the GLBT community in comics to date in his investigation of the emerging representation of gays and lesbians, as well as coming-out narratives, in US comic books in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Franklin analyzes published letters to the editor that react to these representations, as well as the editors' published responses to the letters. In his close reading of the letters, he demonstrates that a range of communication practices are at work, including self-disclosure, confrontational arguments, praise and blame of the editors, and morality debates. He also reveals the varied reactions that these representations elicit and the tensions that course across audiences, between readers, and with the editors. The supportive and critical positions in the letters made several readership patterns clear; comic book readers are active and engaged with comic book texts and their makers, and gay readers in particular have little tolerance for stereotypes and flat, one-dimensional gay characters, as they recognize the material and identity stakes at play when GLBT issues surface in comics.

While the aforementioned articles stake out important ground, there is still a lacuna in the literature regarding the representation of gay American masculinity, antigay hate crimes in comic book culture, and audience response to these representations. The hate crime story line in *Green Lantern* and our unmitigated access to the unpublished letters written in response to this pioneering depiction provide a compelling opportunity to make such a contribution. By examining the letters, we may gain a sense of how fans are reacting to the representation of gay masculinity and the antigay hate crime in this particular mainstream outlet. Before presenting the letters, we provide a synopsis of the hate crime story line in issues #154 and #155 of *Green Lantern*.

Green Lantern Hate Crime Story Line

At the end of issue #153, which is entitled "You Can Never, Never, Never Go Home

Again," Kyle Rayner, who is the alter ego of Green Lantern (in the same manner that Clark Kent is the alter ego of Superman), receives a phone call from his friend John Stewart indicating that something bad has happened to seventeen-year-old Terry Berg. Terry is Kyle's assistant at work and one of his close friends. In the last panel of the issue, Kyle bows his head and says, "Oh, God," as a tear rolls down his face (22). It is not until issue #154, entitled "Hate Crime: Part One," that the reader learns what has happened to Terry. The cover of issue #154 shows two large, muscle-bound white males baring their teeth, with blood spattered on their arms. One of the men is pulling Terry's head up by his hair and both men are holding him, presumably under his arms. The reader would not recognize that this is indeed Terry, except for his characteristic blond locks and the cliffhanger in issue #153 warning that something terrible will happen to him. Blood is dripping profusely from around Terry's nose and mouth, and it looks as though one of his teeth is missing. The area around his left eye is swollen, and his clothes are torn and spattered with blood.

The first panel on the first page of issue #154 shows Terry's boyfriend, David, with tears streaming down his face. Distraught, he explains that he and Terry were walking home after visiting a dance club. David was charged up from the fun they were having, and this prompts David to lean over and kiss Terry while they are out in the street. David laments having engaged in this public display of affection because, although at the moment it appeared that they were alone, three men have witnessed the kiss and begin whistling at them. This by itself concerns Terry and David, but then they hear the men shout the word "faggot" and start running toward them. Frightened, Terry tries to get a signal on his cell phone as he and David start running, with the three men in hot pursuit. In a panic, Terry and David decide to split up in order to distract their pursuers. The men follow after Terry, chase him down, and beat him ruthlessly. Moments later, David musters the courage to go back and look for Terry. When he finally finds him, David is able to recognize Terry only by his shoes because he is so badly beaten.

Once Terry is in the hospital, we learn that he suffers from a skull fracture, a broken arm, two broken legs, four broken ribs, and a collapsed lung, and he is also in danger of losing his left eye. He is on a respirator, in a coma, and struggling for life.

Everyone, especially David, is deeply shaken by what has happened. The situation is made worse for David because Terry's father refuses to let him into Terry's hospital room to see him. In issue #155, entitled "Hate Crime: Part Two," Jen, Kyle's girlfriend, confronts Terry's father in order to gain entry for David. Terry's father exclaims, "I do not want him in the room with Terry! You hear me?! I'm his father, and the final word ends with me! He's [referring to David] lucky I let him stay in the hospital!" Jen protests, saying, "Mr. Berg, this isn't helping anyone. Please. David has the right to see Terry. He's his boyfriend." Mr. Berg replies,

You shut the hell up with that kind of talk!
All this business is what got Terry attacked
in the first place! Because of people like him!
[Mr. Berg points to David] If Terry hadn't
met him then he'd be home right now. None
of this would ever have happened. No one
would have laid a finger on him! He'd be
safe. He wouldn't ... be here in this god-
forsaken hospital ... he'd be home. (Winick,
"Part Two" 2-3)

In this angry statement, Mr. Berg blames David for the crime rather than the three perpetrators, and he even suggests that David is the reason that Terry is gay.³

Shortly after the incident, a police officer questions Kyle, asking him if Terry uses drugs and suggesting that Terry might have tried to "pick up" the perpetrators, thereby prompting the attack (Winick, "Part One" 9-10). Kyle is enraged by this line of questioning which, similar to Mr. Berg's statements, attempts to blame the victims. During the interview, the officer is called away by another officer. Kyle eavesdrops on their conversation and finds out that one of the three perpetrators has been caught and is being held at Riker's Island House of Detention. He also hears that if the perpetrator who is caught does not inform on

his accomplices soon, the other two may never be caught.

Using his super powers, Green Lantern enters the prisoner's cell and demands to know where the other two perpetrators are. When the prisoner refuses, Green Lantern lifts him out of his bed, turns him upside down, and threatens to break his wrists. After both of his wrists have been broken, the perpetrator finally tells Green Lantern the location of his accomplices. Green Lantern hunts them down and beats them both brutally in retaliation. While Green Lantern could have beaten one of the perpetrators to death, he stops himself at the last minute by punching the brick wall behind the man's head, leaving the man physically and mentally traumatized but not dead. Afterward, Green Lantern, now back to his Kyle Rayner alter ego, returns to Terry's bedside and says, "I did my part, now you've gotta do yours" (Winick, "Part One" 22). Terry still has not emerged from his coma.

Drawing on comic book story lines and graphic art, audiences engage in, react to, and imagine themselves in the life-world of comic texts. As can be seen in the letters that follow, comic book readers are actively involved in the production and consumption of comic texts; they are busy self-fashioning story lines to suit their interests as they share their ideas about character and plot development. We turn now to our analysis of the letters that *Green Lantern* fans sent to the writer and editor of the comic book. We trace the competing ideological positions that exist across readers and examine the underlying assumptions and political stakes that emerge.

Audience Response: Letters to the Writer and Editor

The following unedited excerpts are taken from the unsolicited and unpublished letters written to the editor and writer of *Green Lantern*. Thirty-one letters were sent in response to the hate crime story line. Twenty-six (84%) of the

letters came from males, two (6%) came from females, and three (10%) were from individuals whose genders could not be identified. In what follows, the letters are grouped according to their content and tone. A total of 6.45% ($n = 2$) of the letters were not categorized or analyzed because they did not fit into a clear category. One of the two uncategorized letters was a request to use the cover of issue #154 as a visual aid in a speech for a university speech team (Letter 31). The writer of the second uncategorized letter simply stated that after the September issue, he would no longer be reading the *Green Lantern*, but he did not specify why (Letter 30). The rest of the letters are categorized as follows: resistance to gay issues being probed in a mainstream outlet, concern about Green Lantern's vigilante violence, concern about the representation of GLBT characters, and, the largest category, appreciative letters. In what follows, an examination of each of the categories is provided.

Resistance to Gay Issues Being Probed in a Mainstream Outlet

A total of 16% ($n = 5$) of the letters express dissatisfaction with the story line because it focuses on an issue of concern to the GLBT community, and these authors are not sympathetic to the community. Three of the five letters provide emphatic statements about the immorality of homosexuality and the influence that such a topic might have on young readers. In the first letter, a *Green Lantern* reader asserts,

I am astonished and outraged by your writing. In issue #154 you created a scene that sickened me. This is a book that kids read and you're telling them that it's o.k. to be gay. In issue #137 you had GL himself say that being gay is not a sin. You have made a mockery of Christianity. Leviticus 18:22 clearly states that being gay is an abomination unto the Lord. If you are a Christian you need to take another look at the Bible

... I will not support a company that let's you write garbage like that. (Letter 10)

The second letter also evokes images of immorality and concern for children:

Isn't the real world immoral enough without bringing this into the imaginary. And to top it off he [Terry] had a crush on the main character, this is one of the worst things you could have done. I was unaware of the new character last year, and I do wish to thank you for saving me money by not having to purchase anymore DC Comics so my kids won't have to be exposed to this trash. (Letter 11)

The third letter expresses concern with the story line because "adolescents should not have to deal with gay bashing" (Letter 12). The reader continues, "The notion that a gay comic is cute and appropriate for any child is outrageous" (Letter 12). All these letters echo the same sentiments: those of moral outrage and concern for the pollution of children. Implicit is the assumption that children are the primary readers of comic books. Although conventional wisdom suggests that adolescents are the main audience of comic books, Franklin III reports that the actual age of most readers is between twenty-five and forty (248). Underneath this child protection rhetoric is an unfortunate reality—the GLBT community and representations of it are not perceived as socially legitimate or ethical. What is more, Christianity is hailed as the moral backdrop that justifies the omission not only of gay social issues surfacing in the realm of representation but also gayness itself.

Regardless of how the story had been written, the previous *Green Lantern* readers would not have been happy with it. In the following letter, however, the reader suggests that he would have been more tolerant of the issue had it been written differently:

Oh boy, here comes the obligatory homophobic violence issue! "One shocking moment" indeed. I seriously doubt that any of your readers haven't seen this one coming since the last time you preached the joys and wonders of homosexuals to us. I suppose we

could always hope that the issue will be dealt with in a manner that includes good writing, accurate human portrayals, and a touching lesson in comparative morality. Unfortunately, it has already been proven that the only thing we can expect is a good message turned into a hammer with which you will bludgeon your readers to death. You've successfully turned Terry into my least favorite character in all comics. Rather than feel anxiety for his fate, I find myself hoping he's beaten severely enough that I'll never have to read about him again. (Letter 9)

This writer suggests that had the story line been dealt with more skillfully, he might have been drawn in. However, the hostility that permeates his letter makes this assertion untenable. On the one hand, he claims that this story "could have been a touching lesson in comparative morality," yet the statements that come before and after it are much harsher. His opening remarks suggest that he is tired of GLBT issues before opening this issue of *Green Lantern*. Without giving any concrete examples of poor writing or inaccurate portrayals, he simply alleges that *Green Lantern* readers have been "bludgeoned with a hammer" (note the metaphor), and he even expresses a wish that Terry would receive the bludgeoning—but with a fatal outcome. Rhetorically, this reader's "lesson in comparative morality" is curiously undercut by images of imagined violence and murder and by a tone of sarcastic superiority and contempt.

The last letter is akin to the preceding one; the reader expresses dissatisfaction with what she feels is writer Judd Winick's tendency to focus on gay issues:

Why is Winick so hung up on driving through this gay agenda (everyone must love gays) of his? I mean I've given this a lot of thought and instead of preaching love for gays and how difficult they have it. Shouldn't he be preaching (yes and I do mean preaching cause that's what he does) on tolerance and love for everybody. I mean the way he and gay activists tell it. I as a heterosexual must be having a swell time, with no problems. Well the exact opposite is

true . . . Why doesn't Winick give it a rest with this tiresome "love gays" story line. And just preach tolerance for everyone. Whether you like them or not. (Letter 13)

Again, this is a mixed letter. While peppered with hostility to the GLBT community, the writer suggests that there should be tolerance for everyone. There is an understated context about which group of people have been more wronged. This is a common strategy, conscious and unconscious, for rejecting gay issues. As a heterosexual, she contends that gay people are not the only people who suffer, that straight people have problems too—yet the reader does not consider the ways in which the lives of straights and gays might be different based on dominant cultural norms regarding sexuality in US society.

Concern about Green Lantern's Vigilante Violence

Nineteen percent ($n = 6$) of the letter writers express concern with the vigilante violence that Green Lantern engages in to avenge Terry's attack. While most of these letter writers indicate that they understand why Green Lantern was pushed to act as he did, they all suggest that his behavior was inappropriate for a superhero, an extraordinary being who is supposed to be beyond such base human responses. For example, one letter writer laments that "Green Lantern used to be so much more than a petty thug" (Letter 5). Another letter writer suggests that Green Lantern has taken a "fall from grace" (Letter 7), and yet another writer begs, "Please don't make him a bad guy" (Letter 4). A fourth writer argues,

Just because he is a superhero doesn't mean that he can take the law into his own hands, even though he does it everyday fighting super villains. This was a different situation. The bad guys weren't super villains, they were just some stupid kids who did something they never should have done. So what I guess I'm really saying is that unlike most

people I wasn't bothered by the gay factor in issue 154, but I was bothered by Kyle's response. (Letter 8)

A fifth letter writer is disturbed by the premeditation that Green Lantern engages in before torturing the thugs who beat up Terry:

Face it, the character [Green Lantern] took a defenseless individual, albeit one who was guilty of a horrific crime, and tortured him. This wasn't a heat of the battle moment, nor was it an accident. Rayner went to the jail, set up a cover screen, hooked the bad guy up like a slab of meat and slowly broke his wrists. How do these actions make him any better than the thugs he was going against? It doesn't, for it puts him at the same level. (Letter 6)

The sixth writer suggests that "it was not so great to see vigilantism and sensationalism at their worst in GL 154" (Letter 3). He explains, "granted, without any argument, it was immoral for the thugs to beat up Terry." But he also argues that it was immoral for Green Lantern to beat them up as well. The writer describes himself as a libertarian, and "accordingly, I hold the belief that force is only justified in self defense. Non-aggression, as a matter of principle is morally better than aggression."

These letters express concern for the character Terry, and they acknowledge that antigay violence is wrong. At the same time, the fans are deeply troubled by the methods that Green Lantern employs to avenge the attack and what such a course of action might suggest about the moral grounds that have historically governed superheroes. The concerns of these readers come through clearly in the above excerpts, and the investment they have in the integrity of Green Lantern as a superhero is striking. They are not hostile, only deeply concerned about issues of character and ethics. These carefully crafted, thoughtful messages indicate that such fans are not only engaged readers, but they are also committed to constructing writerly texts. They write back hoping for constructive interventions, working with and against the grain of the text.

Concern with Representation of GLBT Characters

A total of 6.45% ($n = 2$) of the letter writers express concern with the ways in which the GLBT community is portrayed in the media, and in particular, in comics. The first letter writer exhibits anxiety regarding what will happen to Terry in the forthcoming issue. He has read the teaser in issue 153 that suggests that something terribly wrong has happened:

I trust you to do the right thing with our characters, like Terry in the upcoming issue 154 . . . Now on the backside of a GLAAD award and inclusive, insightful writing we are again held hostage by time until next month and [issue] 154 to hear about Terry. But again, I trust you to do the right thing with our book. We do need Terry to keep on showing us something, every month, but crises make the universe interesting, so I trust. (Letter 2)

The comment that "we do need Terry" suggests that the reader is concerned that Terry will die in the forthcoming issue. The reader perhaps recognizes that historically, in the media, the bodies of women, minorities, and the gay community have borne the burden of society's ills, and they have died disproportionately in comparison to straight white male characters. Writer Judd Winick recognized this pattern in the media and early on decided that would not happen to the character Terry. "That's the cliché in all mediums. Who dies in movies? Gay people, people of color. Killing him seemed like too much. We wanted a little bit of hope" (Gustines).

The second letter writer also has read the teaser at the end of issue 153 and is anxious and somewhat pessimistic regarding what is going to happen to Terry:

NO. No, you are NOT going there. I just finished reading GL #153 . . . and I think it's very obvious . . . that Kyle's young gay assistant Terry has either been injured or even killed as a result of a hate crime act . . . I applaud the fact that you at DC have even

attempted to present the topic of homosexuality in your various titles. But let me also tell you that you have not always been kind and certainly not helpful in doing so. (Letter 1)

The fan refers to various gay characters who have emerged in comics through the years and laments that many of them have been portrayed in a very stereotypical fashion. He worries that the same will hold true for Terry:

And now we have Terry, a regular non-meta gay character who is probably about to fall victim to yet another gay stereotype. All gays are not disease ridden, all gays are not fem or butch, all gays are not borderline psychotic, and all gays are not potential victims of a violent demise (any more than anyone else is!). Yes, I know that this is just comic book fiction, but there are people who believe everything they read. The stories in your books are capable of spreading very dangerous and false information Please be careful where this story is leading. (Letter 1)

For some people, their only exposure to the gay community is through the media. Hence, their perceptions of the community are based largely on what they read or view. It is not surprising, then, that this reader would show concern regarding the way in which Terry's situation will be handled, especially since Terry is one of few characters in the mainstream media who has been portrayed in such a positive manner.

Appreciative Letters

Fifty-two percent ($n = 16$) of the letters, more than half of all letters received, express appreciation that DC Comics was bold enough to provide a story line that deals with an antigay hate crime. Comments ranged from "thank you for having the courage to release such a controversial comic" (Letter 14) and "this is so progressive" (Letter 15), to "it's too important to hide events like this in the closet" (Letter 21) and "this . . . is

an unprecedented step forward in comics as a whole" (Letter 20). Some readers even recounted their own experience of harassment or violence:

I'm also a 25 year old gay man. I came out at 16 and was subjected to some of the brutality young queers face in America. I was harassed, though thankfully never physically attacked, through high school. During that time, I longed for positive queer characters to help me justify myself and my feelings. I found a handful, but also discovered that queer characters who survived to the end of the novel were exceedingly few When I was a kid reading comics, I used to sometimes think "they saved the mother and kid from the falling building, but would they rescue me if they knew I was a fag?" I now have an answer to that. My hope is that a closeted teenager will read that comic book and think "someone will fight for me. Someone who is respected and powerful will stand up for me and my rights" My hope is that a homophobe will pick up that comic and think. (Letter 17)

Self-disclosure is a powerful communication practice for this reader, one that both accomplishes catharsis and holds up hope for gay youth, providing an interesting contrast to the earlier readers' tales about the pollution of children through gay texts. Rather than tainting children, this reader suggests that such representations will provide support for gay youth and perhaps prompt empathy among other readers for the complexities in life that the GLBT community must face.

Another reader was moved to recount his experience of antigay violence on a New Jersey city street twelve years ago:

Nobody saved me that night. Clothing was ripped. Bones were broken. I had two black eyes, and a scar on my forehead that reminds me of the incident twelve years later. I grew up on comic books, and I never remembered Superman or Batman or the Flash fighting one fag-basher. But I did remember they fought for justice, and so the next morning, I went down to the police station to report the crime. I was still wearing the ripped and bloody t-shirt [that had the name of a gay

political organization on it]. The police officer asked, "Don't you think you were asking for it, wearing a t-shirt like that?" When I asked if I could file a report, he told me that it was useless. He said that he was tired of defending people like me. (Letter 16)

The candor and emotion in this letter demonstrate the power of the *Green Lantern* story line. It is rare that people feel safe enough to recount such a horrific experience, let alone to an audience that they have never met. The story line seems to have had a greater effect than one could anticipate: it has created a forum where individuals can discuss antigay hate crimes and a space where individuals who have been the victim of harassment and violence may share their experiences.

The words of a high school student help illuminate the positive influence that the comic book has had in the student's school:

As the President of my high school's Gay-Straight Alliance, I have never been more proud of mainstream comic books than I am now. We discussed the issue of hate crimes and gay bashing in our club and all agreed it was laudable that Judd Winick and his team brought these truths to the limelight. Since such occurrences are not rare, and the three incidents of gay bashing that occurred in the last month in West Hollywood show this, it is important that readers who are the main target audience for these books know what the current state of living gay and "out" is. (Letter 18)

In contrast to one of the former letter writers who stated that "adolescents should not have to deal with gay bashing," it appears that these particular adolescents are not only already aware of antigay violence but that they also want and need to talk about these issues in a mature manner. Rather than being a source of turmoil or negativity, in this instance, the story line has served as the impetus for a cathartic discussion regarding the realities of the everyday lived experience of the gay community and their friends and family.

Gay Masculinity in Mainstream Comic Books

Based on this analysis of the twenty-nine letters, we argue that there is a notable level of understanding regarding issues of concern to the gay community among these particular letter writers, pushing open new possibilities for future representations of gay masculinity in mainstream comic books. The range of responses was varied, but overall, the letters suggest that these readers were, in large part, supportive of the character Terry Berg and the antigay hate crime story line being addressed in this mainstream comic book. Other letter writers openly stated that they were not bothered by the fact that *Green Lantern* was touching on an issue of importance to the gay community, but they were concerned with way in which the hero was handling the situation. These readers understood why their hero would be outraged at the perpetrators of the crime, but they were pushing the writer and editor for a more evenhanded and nonviolent resolution, in keeping with the tradition of the conduct of superheroes. Other readers pushed the envelope even further, arguing for more humane and multifaceted representations of the GLBT community in *Green Lantern* and other comic books. Ultimately, only five of the twenty-nine letters expressed dissatisfaction with the story line because it dealt with an issue of concern to the GLBT community.

Edward Sewell longs for the day when people will pick up their daily mainstream newspaper and find a queer comic strip authored by a queer cartoonist. Although this day has not yet come, the representation of Terry Berg in *Green Lantern* reflects an effort to bring a regular gay character and the complexities of gay identity to the forefront of an American mainstream comic book. Sewell was concerned about the ways in which authorship influenced the representation of the GLBT community; the character Terry Berg represents an interesting amalgam of experiences involving the gay community and their allies. The original idea for the character emanated from conversations between Schreck, the editor of

Green Lantern, and Ron Marz, the former writer of the comic book. Schreck wanted to introduce a character who “coped with his confused feelings about his sexuality, much as Mr. Schreck, who says he is bisexual, did while growing up” (Gustines). When Marz left Marvel to work exclusively for CrossGen Comics, Schreck hired Winick to write for *Green Lantern* and to cultivate the character. Winick, who has been in the cartoon industry since 1998, is also known for his 1994 role as one of the San Francisco roommates on MTV’s *The Real World*. While there, he became friends with one of the roommates, Pedro Zamora, an AIDS educator. Through the course of their friendship, Winick witnessed firsthand the complexities that Pedro faced both as a gay male and as someone who struggled with AIDS in US culture.⁴ While the hate crime story line began with Schreck’s idea, based on his personal experiences, it took form with Winick’s writing, which drew upon his friendships with the gay community, and finally, it was influenced by Cathy Renna at GLAAD, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, an organization that works to ensure the fair and accurate portrayal of the GLBT community in the US media. As a result, the story reflects the experiences and concerns of an interesting array of people who are either part of or deeply care about the gay community. Ultimately, their cumulative efforts produced a story line that, based on the preceding letters, received largely positive feedback from the *Green Lantern* readership.

It is refreshing to note that, in the year 2002, even mainstream corporations such as DC Comics were willing to take risks and engage in politically volatile social issues. As they did so, they risked reduction in their market share, losing advertisers, or negative publicity. Our study, on the other hand, paints what may seem an overly bright picture of a readership that largely approves of these efforts and is mainly troubled by their superhero’s descending to exact revenge on the perpetrators of the hate crime. This rosy assessment must be tempered by the self-selected nature of our respondents; they were the readers who cared enough to write a letter. Our assess-

ment must also be tempered by our contemporary sociopolitical environment—one in which eleven states passed legislation to ban same-sex marriage, the nation at large re-elected a president who supports a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriage, and broadcast networks are increasingly hesitant to air commercials and programming that might be deemed offensive because they reach out to the gay community. Such a milieu prompts the question, What will the future hold for the representation of gay masculinity in American comic book culture, or American popular culture in general? Future studies might focus on the ways in which representations of the GLBT community may be influenced by the contemporary retreat from gay rights.

In the ebb and flow of American politics, a few steps forward often are followed by a backlash. Backlash cuts at least two ways, like power and resistance. Reactionary policy will likely call out a broader audience than the GLBT community alone; indeed, the *Green Lantern* story line examined here provides one example of a counter-hegemonic text created by a network of gay and straight allies. Whatever the outcome of our current climate, comic book culture will continue to address social issues and social policy, making the tension productive between comic art and public sites of struggle. We are called to reflect on what these representations mean, and what they mean to our common humanity.

Notes

The authors would like to thank Judd Winick and Bob Schreck for allowing us to have access to the letters. We also would like to thank Judd Winick for making himself available to answer questions we had about the text and his motivation to write particular scenes.

1. To ensure the anonymity and privacy of the letter writers, their names have not been used.

2. While we recognize Sewell’s concerns about eliding differences, we challenge the notion that there exists an “authentic queerness” and an essentialist or unitary notion of homosexuality (or heterosexuality). As Steven Seidman remarks, “The questioning of the notion of a core homosexual identity is at the heart of queer theory” (253). Indeed, the notion of an “authentic queerness” might even violate the very concept of queerness, which seeks to blur boundaries regarding sexuality.

3. The decision to have David's complicity questioned by Terry's father (and even David himself) and to have Jen explain that the situation was *not* his fault was a conscious decision made by writer Judd Winick. In the authors' telephone interview with Winick on October 3, 2002, Winick explained that he made this decision because blaming the victims was "the most realistic thing to occur." He wanted to underscore how harmful such a perspective is to the victim. Winick continues, "With younger gays and lesbians, they may think they have to be cautious [when it comes to public displays of affection]; [they] don't want to flaunt it, push it. That's wrong! But in day to day life, what is the end result? Mild affection almost got him murdered. I thought a young guy would think to blame himself. Even so, it doesn't make it your fault—that's why Jen says to David, 'it isn't your fault.'" Further, Winick thought to involve Mr. Berg because his response reflects many parents' reactions when obstacles arise in the lives of their GLBT children. Winick continues, "Terry's coming out was successful—until it comes to his family life. They weren't very supportive, but when Terry becomes hurt, then the truth *really* comes out. Families are okay when they don't have to discuss it, but when it becomes an obstacle, then the truth comes out The father was looking for someone to blame." Winick's thoughtful consideration of the complexities of GLBT family life results in a story line that explores the tensions felt by family members and concerns felt by victims while also pointing out that the hate crime was not caused by the victims.

4. In 2000, Winick published the book, *Pedro and Me*, which recounts his friendship with Pedro.

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