What Comic Books Say About American Society: Marvel Entertainment Group Portrays Homosexuality

Comic books have long refracted society’s attitudes on issues, ranging from the Red Scare of the Cold War to drug abuse, or groups such as African Americans, women, and homosexuals. The comic books then reveal mentalities of society that holds to those attitudes. “Comic books,” Joseph Witek said in Comic Books as History, “have long been one of the places where America shows itself what it looks like.” Comic book writer Jack Jackson wrote into “Nits Make Lice” portrayals of sexual violence committed against curvy, large-breasted women, and in doing so, conveyed mentalities of sexist and misogynistic ideas. The comic book medium contributes to society both social commentary and criticism of contemporary life; meanwhile, notably absent from the secondary literature is the argument against the use of comic books as historical material. A parsing of the textual representations of homosexual characters in Marvel comic books communicates some American mentalities during the 1980s and 1990s when historians compare those portrayals to the idea of sexual perversion in gay men and the AIDS crisis. That case will be addressed in this study through the examination of two comic book storylines: The Hulk! #23 and Alpha Flight #41-50.

The history of the American gay civil rights movement has been researched extensively in the past few decades. Historians have written on key events, groups, legislation, and individuals, but no writer has considered the mentalities of the American public toward this movement. The
significance of these mentalities to history exists in the fact that they examine the attitudes held by ordinary people in everyday life. The mindsets give historians a more accurate sense of the thoughts and feelings of the general American public during the period of study. Concerning the historiography of examining mentalities in comic books, Joseph Witek is the only notable scholar of the topic. Due to this lack of literature, historians must necessarily look to historian Robert Darnton. Darnton, as his contribution to the field of the history of mentalities, studied folktales from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984) to discover what folktales such as “Tom Thumb” or “Little Red Riding Hood” could reveal to historians about the mental inclination of the peasantry. Darnton presented evidence of the food shortage in seventeenth-century Europe caused by the climate change. He then analyzed peasantry folktales and discussed how searching for food was central to the peasants’ mental states, with a longing for food always foremost in their minds. These tales were not tied to any one particular event, but to a general crisis: not having enough to eat. In a like vein, comic book portrayals are not tied to specific events; they too reveal general mentalities. Comic books also do not embody every opinion toward homosexuality; they allow historians to enter into certain mentalities concerning homosexuality. Through the portrayal of homosexual characters in the text of these comic books, the writers demonstrate prevalent societal attitudes toward homosexuals at the time the books were published.

Historian Patrick Hutton said, “a conception of the world could continue to influence the minds of men…long after the political and social realities [the conception] was supposed to explain had disappeared.” Hutton’s words articulate the relevance of this study, in that mentalities remain relevant even once the attitudes they conveyed are not prevalent. The
conception of mentalities toward homosexuality in comic books brings forth previously ignored material to the existing literature on the history of the gay civil rights movement. The argument could be made that this research is too contemporary, and the historian does not have the distance required to parse the research in the proper perspective, as he must be aware of his prejudices in not only the twentieth century, but in all centuries. \textsuperscript{11} “All history is contemporary history,” quoted E.H. Carr from Benedetto Croce, in that history is viewing the past through eyes in the present, with recognition to the problems, no matter the era. \textsuperscript{12} To this question of partisanship, historian Alan Bullock gave the sound reply:

The best corrective, the only corrective, to such partisanship is the training and discipline of the historian. [The historian’s] training forces him to look carefully and critically at the evidence on which … judgements and accusations are built up. The discipline he has acquired teaches him to reserve judgement until he has examined the evidence and heard both sides. His experience inclines him to be sceptical; he remembers too many cases in the past where issues which appeared as black and white to those involved now look very different. \textsuperscript{13}

The contemporaneity of this topic is precisely where much of the importance lies, because the contemporary historian has an advantage over historians of earlier periods, \textsuperscript{14} in that oral accounts and the chance to question the participants of the object of research are available to the contemporary historian. \textsuperscript{15}

This study begins with psychologist Fredric Wertham, who claimed comic books promote homosexuality. \textsuperscript{16} His work led to the 1954 Comics Code. \textsuperscript{17} In order to understand the portrayal of homosexual characters in the comic book medium, one must first understand the Comics Code that regulated when and how those homosexual characters could be portrayed and the factors that brought the Code into being. This Code restricted such portrayals as the near-rape of Dr. Bruce Banner – AKA the Hulk – in issue 23 of The Hulk! (1980), which conveyed the common mentality of sexual perversion in gay men. \textsuperscript{18} The idea of gay men as perverts was not strictly
confined to rape, including both murder and child molestation. The hints of homosexuality in issues 41-50 of *Alpha Flight* came amidst the AIDS crisis. AIDS was originally named GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency), as the disease was so closely associated with homosexuality. When the clues that Northstar had AIDS became clear, his homosexuality was revealed to many readers, and the storyline revealed a common societal mentality that AIDS meant “gay.” The forbiddance against portraying homosexuality was not taken out of the Comics Code until the 1989 revision, replaced with a mandate for sensitivity to all orientations, including sexual.

The timing and manner of these portrayals give historians an inside look at mentalities during specific moments of the history of the American gay civil rights movement.

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“The comic-book pest, which we can isolate, is one of the worst and most far-reaching [of evil influences to which we expose children],” wrote Dr. Fredric Wertham in “The Comics…Very Funny” (1948). He also made the case that comic books could affect a child’s psychosexual development. Claiming comic books are “sexually aggressive in an abnormal manner,” Wertham said that “comic books are demoralizing the morals of youth.” In *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Dr. Wertham elaborated on his accusation of abnormal sexual aggression. He put forth that comic books could lead children to become homosexual, or at the very least, promoted and encouraged the homosexual lifestyle. The example Wertham used to make this point was the case of Batman and Robin. Wertham said, “…the Batman type of story helps to fixate homoerotic tendencies by suggesting the form of an adolescent-with-adult…type of love-relationship” and may “stimulate children to homosexual fantasies.” Such a claim was certain to fire up the public and legislators alike, with fear of homosexuality at an all-time high because of the belief that homosexuality was a pathological mental disorder and a sexual perversion, as
will be discussed later.

The concern over the effect of comic books on “immature readers” was not limited to
Wertham and his colleagues. The conflict reached a national level of concern, especially after the
publication of Wertham’s book-length study over this dilemma, *Seduction of the Innocent*. The
U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency formed and conducted its spring-1954
investigation – consisting of three days of hearings – into the “definitely and completely
harmful” effect of comic books on children. Wertham’s testimony was critical to the
proceedings, where in one statement, he said that when compared to the comic book industry,
Hitler was more of a beginner, because the comic book industry begins teaching children “race
hatred at the age of four before they can read.”

Faced with the threat of the U.S. Senate Subcommittee enacting legislation regulating the
sale of comic books, the comic book industry gathered and formed the self-regulating Comics
Magazine Association of America (CMAA). The CMAA developed and adopted the Comics
Code in 1954, which consisted of forty-one specific regulations and restricted what could and
could not be presented in the pages of comic books. The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile
Delinquency was satisfied with the comic book industry policing itself, and the Subcommittee
did not pass legislation barring the sale of comic books to children under the age of sixteen.
In the 1954 Comics Code, the portrayal of homosexuality was prohibited in comic books under the
clauses that “sexual abnormalities are unacceptable” and “sex perversion or any inference to the
same is strictly forbidden.” The Code underwent two revisions after its implementation in
1954, first in 1971, and then, again in 1989. The 1971 Comics Code revision expanded the Code
“to meet contemporary standards of conduct and morality.” This revision added a preamble to
the beginning of the Code and expanded certain sections to cover changes that had occurred
within society since 1954. However, this revision retained the clauses forbidding the portrayal of homosexual characters.

The 1989 Comics Code revision was a significant change from the revision of 1971. Rather than a numbered list – separated under headings – of all the topics prohibited from being shown in comic books, the 1989 Comics Code was made up of seven sections of general principles concerning regulations over institutions, language, violence, characterizations, substance abuse, crime, and attire and sexuality. A significant change to the 1989 Comics Code was the specification that character portrayals be crafted in a manner sensitive to “national, ethnic, religious, sexual, political and socioeconomic orientations.” In addition, the second half of the “Characterizations” section included a specification that if a storyline required a character to demean another based on, among other statuses, his or her sexual orientation, then by the storyline’s end, the demeaning words had to be “clearly shown to be wrong or ignorant.” Thus, not only were homosexual characters able to be portrayed for the first time since the Code’s implementation, they were protected from writers who may have attempted to portray homosexuality negatively.

Before the mentality of homosexual perversion could be portrayed in comic books, the idea had to develop and permeate through society, as it did. The historical precedence for the idea that homosexuality was a sexual perversion – the idea that kept homosexuals out of comic books for thirty-five years – had two main origins. The primary origin of this modern conception comes from the belief in and the listing of homosexuality as a mental illness. Historian Marc Stein explained how this belief was made a fact for the American public in 1952, when the American Psychiatric Association (APA) listed homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disturbance in its first official catalog of mental disorders, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel, Mental
Disorders (DSM-I).\textsuperscript{34} When the revised version, DSM-II, was issued in 1968, homosexuality was reclassified under “other non-psychotic mental disorders,” categorized with, among other “sexual perversions,” pedophilia.\textsuperscript{35} The categorization of homosexuality alongside pedophilia (the sexual desire in an adult for a child) brings about the second main source for the idea of homosexuality as a sexual perversion. The connection of homosexuality with pedophilia dates back to historical knowledge of Ancient Greece, where the practice of pederasty was common. Originating from the Greek word \textit{pais}, which means youth or boy, pederasty was “the erotic relationship between a mature man and a young boy.”\textsuperscript{36} Dr. Wertham played off of this association in his crusade against comic books when he claimed that the Batman and Robin dynamic in comic books was one example of the promotion of homosexuality in children.\textsuperscript{37} The homosexual perversion was not strictly limited to child molestation. The idea included both murder and rape, as in the near-rape later depicted by Marvel Entertainment Group in \textit{The Hulk!} issue 23.

Anita Bryant and Reverend Jerry Falwell furthered this stigmatization and Wertham’s claims that homosexuals were a danger to America’s children. Bryant was a former Miss Oklahoma, a popular singer, and she stayed in the eye of the media with her Minute Maid orange juice commercials. Bryant’s “Save Our Children” campaign was intended to stop legislation providing equal rights to homosexuals, whom she considered perverse. Falwell was a Baptist preacher out of Lynchburg, Virginia. John D’Emilio quoted Bryant as having said, “Some of the stories I could tell you of…child abuse by homosexuals would turn your stomach.”\textsuperscript{38} Falwell preached, “So-called gay folks…would just as soon kill you as look at you.”\textsuperscript{39} Bryant and Falwell’s words were widely received, especially those of Bryant. Her crusade against anti-discrimination legislation for homosexuals resulted in the failure or revocation of ordinances in multiple cities that would have protected homosexual citizens from discriminatory practices.\textsuperscript{40}
While the comic book industry took to portraying homosexual characters along these lines of perversion – in the rare instance they addressed homosexuality at all – comic books were not the first area of popular culture to make such portrayals. This action was first taken on by Hollywood, whose movies furthered the perpetuating idea of homosexuals as perverts, always as the villains. Though, this action could not come to fruition until the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) issued a policy on October 3, 1961 – twenty-eight years before the comic book industry would make a similar move – stating, “homosexuality and other sexual aberrations may now be treated with care, discretion and restraint.” This policy meant homosexuals could be depicted in movies for the first time, but only as, in Vito Russo’s words, “pathological, predatory and dangerous; villains and fools, but never heroes.” After this policy change, homosexual villains were portrayed in movies at a high frequency, always defeated by the heterosexual protagonist. In William Friedkin’s 1980 movie, Cruising, Al Pacino played a cop tracking down a serial killer who murdered gay men while having sex with them. By the movie’s end, the audience was left wondering if Pacino’s hunt for the killer had seduced him into “the psychotic world of gay sexuality.” This movie in particular made the implication that homosexuality was not only contagious but also lethal. These movies show how Hollywood continued to convey the negative stereotypes of homosexuality that permeated through American society. These portrayals soon also spilled over into the world of comic book publishing, first with Marvel Entertainment Group.

Marvel conveyed the mentality of sexual perversion in gay men for the first time in The Hulk! comic book magazine series. This series, which premiered in 1977, was originally titled The Rampaging Hulk, but after the ninth issue, the series was re-titled The Hulk! in 1978. This storyline was the first time Marvel had included any reference to homosexuality in any manner.
The protagonist, Dr. Bruce Banner, was staying at the YMCA, and went to take a shower. Two men, Dewey and Luellen, followed Banner into the shower and accosted him. They make clear their intentions to rape him, planning to take turns (fig. 1). Dewey was supposed to be first, and Banner only escapes the assault by revealing to his assailant that he is the man who transforms into the Hulk. The fear Bruce Banner felt at his near-rape causes him to transform into the Hulk, and he goes on a subsequent rampage through New York City.44

The storyline depicted here conveyed the common American mentality of gay men as rapists and criminals: sexual perverts, like the villains of Hollywood in the previous decades. The bold, crass intentions of Dewey and Luellen showed the carelessness of gay men, how they were only concerned with satisfying their perverse sexual desires, willing to rape an unwilling heterosexual man to achieve this satisfaction. That the two would-be rapists pushed Dr. Banner to a state that resulted in his transformation into the Hulk shows the fear in heterosexual society of the very idea of the perversion that was homosexuality. To maintain Dr. Banner’s masculinity and heterosexuality, writer Jim Shooter showed Dr. Banner/the Hulk meeting and sleeping with – at least by suggestion – a petite, victimized young woman (fig. 2).45 Thus, readers were assured that the hero, Dr. Banner, remained heterosexual and had not been seduced into the perverse life of homosexuality.
The next area of gay and lesbian history to be portrayed in Marvel comic books came amidst the AIDS crisis in America that broke out in 1981, when Northstar, a member of the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight, contracted a mysterious illness, hinted to be AIDS. In New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, doctors began to note gay men dying in the prime of their lives from *pneumocystis carinii*, a rare pneumonia, or from an exotic cancer, Kaposi’s sarcoma, between 1980 and 1981. Not until the summer of 1981 had the Center for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta made the connection that a ravaging new disease syndrome had entered medical annals. At the end of 1981, there were 225 documented cases of AIDS. When spring of 1983 came, there were 1,400 cases, 15,000 by the summer of 1985, and 40,000 by 1987.46 AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) as it came to be known, ruined the human body’s immune system, its natural defense against infections, like those of *pneumocystis carinii* or Kaposi’s sarcoma that were killing off gay men in droves. This description of the effects of AIDS is nearly identical to how Northstar describes his illness (*fig. 4*) that writer Bill Mantlo intended to cause Northstar’s death.

The association of gay men with AIDS – and of AIDS with gay men – was established almost from the beginning of the outbreak. Both medical professionals and the media cemented the linkage, as almost every case of AIDS found was in homosexual men. Before officially designated AIDS, the disease was called GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency). Despite finding the disease in other at-risk groups, government officials, scientific experts, conservative
leaders, and media commentators continued to speak of AIDS as “a gay disease,” and newspaper headlines often referred to the new “gay cancer.” The association of gay men with AIDS has lasted ever since. This association made Mantlo’s attempt to convey Northstar’s homosexuality that much easier, through the implication that Northstar had contracted AIDS.

In 1984, three years after the first cases of AIDS were identified in the United States, Dr. Robert Gallo isolated the virus believed to cause AIDS. At this point in the AIDS crisis, American medical professionals called the virus HTLV-III and eventually settled on the nomenclature of HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). During the subsequent two-year period, doctors learned that HIV, and thereby AIDS, was transmitted through sharing hypodermic needles, blood or blood products, and sexual contact involving exchange of bodily fluids. The most efficient means for HIV/AIDS transmission was through unprotected anal sexual intercourse. In such cases, the receptive sexual partner was the most at risk of HIV contamination. These doctors profiled the initial victims of AIDS and were led to believe that AIDS was a by-product of gay male culture: the sexual promiscuity and “fast-lane living.” Tom Brokaw framed the first story about AIDS aired on television by NBC News in 1982, saying, “Scientists at the National Center for Disease Control in Atlanta today released the results of a study that shows that the lifestyle of some male homosexuals has triggered an epidemic of a rare form of cancer.” Brokaw’s statement reinforced ideas already prevalent in American society that gay men had caused the AIDS epidemic. The increased knowledge and media exposure of the “AIDS equals gay” idea gave Mantlo the ability to imply Northstar’s homosexuality through the later AIDS revelation.

Marvel contributed to the irreversible connection of gay men with AIDS through their use of AIDS as a literary device in an existing storyline. The first time Marvel ever made this
integration into their comic book franchise was in the series *Alpha Flight*, which premiered in August of 1983, when the AIDS crisis was already becoming “the major health crisis of the century.” Wanting to use *Alpha Flight* to deal with contemporary social challenges, Mantlo decided to include a gay character. The Comics Code still prevented the portrayal of homosexuals in comic books, so Mantlo began work on a storyline that would “out” Northstar as gay by giving the character AIDS. This idea was conveyed as a subplot from issues 41 through 49, and Mantlo was planning to have Northstar die of his AIDS affliction in issue 50, thus revealing his homosexuality, as AIDS and gay men were all but synonymous.

Northstar’s homosexuality had been hinted since *Alpha Flight*’s inception by the first writer/artist, John Byrne. As the series progressed, the popularity the series had begun with started to wane. When the sales dropped, combined with the large number of characters present in the book, Bill Mantlo was instructed to trim the cast. The manner in which he was supposed to make these cuts, however, was left up to his creative discretion. Mantlo took this opportunity to follow his instructions and also incorporate homosexuality into the series by killing Northstar of AIDS. The set-up to Northstar’s “mysterious illness,” as it would come to be referred, began in issue 41. Purple Girl, who can control the mind of anyone who comes into contact with her unique pheromones, took control of Northstar’s mind a few times. The only way to remove her influence over him was to submerge him in water. His repeated drenching and air drying in the cold air of Canada resulted in him developing a cough by issue 42, though even then, his teammate, Puck, hints that it could be something more serious (*fig. 3*). In that same issue, Alpha Flight prepares to fight the Auctioneer and his minions to rescue Purple Girl and her mother, whom the Auctioneer has kidnapped. When Alpha Flight burst through the ceiling, debris caught Northstar on the arm and cut him. This seemingly innocuous occurrence would have
repercussions relevant to Northstar’s “impending” demise.

Northstar’s cough perpetuated through the next seven issues, with periodic references to the cut on his arm not healing, like when he discusses it with his sister, Aurora, in the mining caves of Burial Butte in Northern Canada.\(^{54}\) Alpha Flight is hunting down Pestilence in issue 44, a villain who feeds on death, becomes empowered by death, and can accelerate death within those he touches. When Northstar finds and engages him, Pestilence grabs Northstar and kisses him on the forehead, explaining that he is feeding on the decay he senses already inside Northstar. The hero asks what the villain means, and Pestilence explains, “…you are dying, speedster! Haven’t you sensed it? And my kiss has accelerated the slow disease spreading like a cancer through your cells!”\(^{55}\) These are the first blatant hints to Northstar’s affliction being AIDS.

The references to Northstar’s “mysterious illness” revealed how little was still known about the AIDS epidemic, with vague hints and veiled comments continuing in issues 45 through 47, from both Northstar and his teammates. The subplot of Northstar’s disease began to come to a head in issue 48, when Alpha Flight was about to confront its newest super villain, Omega. As Northstar wandered around the subterranean corridors of Omega’s New Life Clinic, his internal monologue is conveyed to readers, where Northstar confronts and comes to terms with the real likelihood that he will die.\(^{56}\) Then, in issue 49, when Alpha Flight was fully entwined in their...
battle with Omega, Northstar became overexerted in his weakened state, as a result of his illness. His coughing fit was so immense, that he was left incapable of fighting back.\textsuperscript{57} By the battle’s end, Alpha Flight emerged victorious. Northstar was completely incapacitated and overcome with his coughing. The issue ended with Northstar revealing that he was dying (\textit{fig. 4}) before collapsing in front of his teammates.\textsuperscript{58}

The subsequent issue, 50, was advertised as “A Death in the Family,” and in this issue, Bill Mantlo intended for Northstar to die of AIDS. Thus, his homosexuality would have been revealed to readers, and Mantlo would have accomplished both of his goals: \textit{Alpha Flight’s} cast would be one member smaller, and he would have included homosexuality in his series, making it correspond better with real world society. However, Mantlo’s storyline was never allowed to come to fruition, as the story was ordered changed by “a decree from upstairs,” as comic book writer Peter David put the situation.\textsuperscript{59} Bill Mantlo explained, “When the company found out what we were doing [with the character of Northstar], an edict came down declaring that not only could Northstar not die of AIDS, but we couldn’t even have a gay character because it was controversial. They were afraid too many people in the Bible Belt would stop buying the book and there would be all sorts of protests.”\textsuperscript{60} As such, Mantlo had to rewrite the entire double-sized fiftieth issue to still follow his previous instructions to pare down the cast. But, he could not simply ignore the fact that Northstar had been deathly

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure4}
\caption{Alpha Flight #49, page 20, panel 3.}
\end{figure}

In this panel, Northstar tells his teammates what is wrong with him, describing exactly what AIDS did to a man’s body. The end of this issue was the set up for what would have been Northstar’s death from AIDS in the next issue (#50).
ill, getting progressively worse, for the previous nine issues. What was he to do?

When *Alpha Flight* issue 50 was published and released, the team was searching for a way to cure Northstar of his still-unrevealed ailment. Loki, the Norse god of mischief and regular villain of multiple Marvel superheroes and super teams, while watching Alpha Flight from a magical crystal, misdirects the team and leads them mistakenly into Svartalfheim, the perilous mystical realm of the dark elves and other evil creatures. He goes to Northstar and Aurora, who is sitting with her immobile brother while the rest of Alpha Flight searched for a magic fountain that should be capable of reviving Northstar. Loki reveals to the twins that while their father was human, their mother was an elf (beings also referred to as fairies interchangeably) from the mystical realm of Alfheim, land of the light elves. In this revelation, Loki also informs Northstar and Aurora that Northstar’s ailment is the result of his “pure blood of Alfheim” having spent too much time away from the fairy realm of the elves on the impure atmosphere of Earth. Only the pure light of Alfheim would be capable of curing Northstar. As Loki departs, he is delighted to inform the twins that they have no way of reaching the realm of the light elves, as they are trapped in Svartalfheim, and Northstar will perish (fig. 5).

While Northstar’s superpowers consisted of super speed and flight, Aurora could fly and also produce light from within herself to be used either defensively in the form of blinding brightness.
or offensively in the form of beams fired from her hands. Upon being informed of her and her brother’s true origins, Aurora realizes that perhaps the light she is able to produce is actually pure light from Alfheim. Despite Northstar’s protestations, he is too weak to stop his sister from channeling all of her light into him, in the hope that it will cure his illness. Aurora is right, and Northstar is healed, but Aurora is left powerless against the darklings of Svartalfheim, who choose that moment to attack. Northstar attempts to save his sister, but is overwhelmed by the sheer number of darklings, and Aurora is dragged into the pitch-black depths of Svartalfheim. At the issue’s end, once Alpha Flight has escaped the realm of the dark elves – unable to recover Aurora – a gateway to Alfheim, realm of the light elves/fairies and Northstar’s mother, opens in the sky above the heroes. Northstar is enveloped in the light emanating from the gateway and taken up into the realm, gates closing behind him. With Aurora trapped in Svartalfheim and Northstar whisked away to Alfheim, Mantlo had appeased his superiors; Alpha Flight’s cast had been trimmed, and Marvel had avoided the portrayal of homosexuality. Instead, Marvel had perpetuated yet another negative stereotype of gay men. As Peter David summed up the story change, “Yes, that’s right…[Northstar] wasn’t gay. He was just a fairy. That’s muuuuch better. And the protectors of superheroic masculinity breathed a sigh of relief.”

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An inspection of The Hulk! issue 23 and Alpha Flight issues 41 through 50 reveals to historians some American mentalities concerning the idea of homosexuality as a sexual perversion and the equation of AIDS with gay men. The portrayal of the near-rape of Dr. Bruce Banner came about once the idea of gay men as perverts had been firmly established in the minds of American society. When the idea was carried into the comic book medium, the manner of Marvel’s portrayal conveyed that mentality of perversion to readers. Studying the storyline of
the comic book shows historians what the mental inclination was toward gay men and how far the idea had pervaded into American society. The next instance of Marvel’s inclusion of homosexuality in one of the company’s storylines originated in much the same way as had the portrayal in *The Hulk*.

While the AIDS epidemic erupted in 1981, almost completely in gay men, Marvel’s storyline depicting Northstar’s near-death from AIDS was not brought to paper until six years later, in 1987. By that time, knowledge about what AIDS was and what it did to the human body had increased, and the correlation of AIDS with gay men had been firmly cemented. From this correlation, society had set Bill Mantlo up to include a gay character in *Alpha Flight*, by finding a way around the Comics Code that prevented the depiction. If Northstar died of AIDS, Mantlo had not violated the Code, established before AIDS was identified, yet the majority – if not all – of Mantlo’s readers would understand the implication, confirming Northstar’s homosexuality. Just as the examination of *The Hulk!* issue 23 revealed the sexual perversion mentality in American society, so too does this portrayal of Northstar’s apparent AIDS affliction reveal the mentality in the same society of the equation of AIDS with gay men.

While this study is significant in examining a previously ignored source of historical material, the study’s scope is limited, looking only at two portrayals of mentalities from but one publishing company. The further applications of this study are left open, available to yet unspecified portrayals of mentalities concerning a multitude of other groups and ideas. Examining those other portrayals would allow historians access to those mentalities.

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1 A mentality is defined as a way of thinking, a mental inclination, or a mindset.
3 Ibid., 71.
5 John D’Emilio is the most notable writer of the history of the American gay civil rights movement. He is a pioneer in the field of gay and lesbian history. His award-winning books on the history of gays and lesbians include *Sexual*
Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in America (1998) and Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America (1988), which Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy quoted in the Lawrence v. Texas (2003) decision, which ruled that the sodomy laws of Texas were unconstitutional. D’Emilio received the Brudner Prize from Yale University for lifetime contributions to gay and lesbian studies.


7 While commonly attributed to the Brothers Grimm, these two folktales are in fact French in origin (see chapter one in Robert Darnton’s The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History).

8 Contrary to Darnton’s methodology, annalists subscribing to the idea of the longue durée tend to focus on “total” history, as Emmanuel Le Roy LaDurie does in his work in The Peasants of Languedoc (1974). He and other historians make the case for history based on concrete, tangible evidence, studying how the environment affected history, beginning with the earth and climate. He worked up into the people, culture, and ideas. Darnton, in a contrasting manner, studied how culture, ideas, and mentalities affected history. Social historians (LaDurie) begin with the concrete (environment) and how man’s interaction with the environment impacts history, where cultural historians (Darnton) begin with more intangible evidence (thoughts, ideas, and mentalities) and how man’s thoughts, ideas, and mentalities impact history.


10 Hutton, “The History of Mentalities,” 238. Patrick H. Hutton is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Vermont. He has taught historiography, intellectual history, and contemporary history. His publications include History as an Art of Memory (1993), Philip Aries and the Politics of French Cultural History (2004), and “The History of Mentalities: The New Map of Cultural History,” published in History and Theory 20, on pages 237-259 (October 1981). He is well versed in the theories of both the history of mentalities and of contemporary history.


13 Bullock, 70.


15 Bullock, 69.


17 Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), ix-x.


19 Northstar was a member of Alpha Flight, the Canadian team of super heroes in the Marvel comic book universe.


21 Nyberg, 99.

22 Fredric Wertham was a leading psychiatrist in the 1930s, and he quickly became a media and public favorite as an expert in the controversy over the effect of comic books on children that was becoming a problem in the 1940s. Wertham became interested in the study of children’s psychiatry, specifically delinquency in youths, during his work at the Lafargue Clinic in the Harlem district of New York City. At Lafargue, Dr. Wertham noticed that over half of the delinquent children in the New York City legal system came from the Harlem district. He also noticed how many of those wayward children read comic books. Dr. Wertham’s study of the effects of comic books on children and his later crusade against the comic book industry began at the Clinic. In “Horror in the Nursery,” an article by journalist Judith Crist from March 1948, Dr. Wertham claimed that reading comic books was an influencing factor in every delinquent child that he studied at Lafargue. Wertham referred to comic books as “…a debasement of the old institution of printing, the corruption of the art of drawing and almost an abolition of literary writing.”

23 Crist, 22.

24 Wertham, 190-191.

25 Nyberg, 53.

26 Ibid., 63.

27 Ibid., 112.

28 Ibid., 85.


Wertham, 189.


Stein, 144.


Ibid.

Ibid., 14-16.

D’Emilio and Freedman, 354.

Aurora had also been suffering from illness as well, but in contrast to Northstar’s physical ailments, Aurora’s were psychological. She suffered from a crippled fear of the dark and split personality disorder. The split personality became a problem any time Aurora was caught in darkness, her fear further fracturing her already broken psyche.


Ibid., 20.
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