

# Fatal Attractions: AIDS and American Superhero Comics, 1988-1994

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## Comic Books in Epidemic Time

In January 1992, a respected Canadian army veteran broke into the intensive care ward of Toronto General Hospital. The veteran, Major Louis



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.

Saddler, attempted the murder of Joanne Beaubier, an infant whose recent AIDS diagnosis had become the subject of national headlines, the impetus of a groundswell campaign to increase AIDS awareness and prevention in the Canadian public school system. Joanne's murder was forestalled when her adoptive father, prominent public figure Jean-Paul Beaubier, discovered Saddler. In the course of the ensuing fistfight Saddler's motives were made clear: his own son had recently died from AIDS-related complications and, unlike Beaubier's adopted daughter, Saddler's son Michael "was gay--so people didn't afford him the *luxury* of being 'innocent.'" Motivated by Saddler's grief, and ashamed of the lack of public empathy for the homosexual experience of the AIDS crisis, Beaubier declined to press charges. Joanne died shortly after the incident, from AIDS-related complications, leading a despondent Beaubier to hold a press conference in which he "outed" himself as gay and publicly affirmed, in the voice of ACT UP, his devotion to fight the silence that equaled death (Fig. 1; Fig. 2). The superheroic feats, *noms de guerre*, and colorful spandex extracted, the story above abridges the plot of a comic book, *Alpha Flight* #106, published in early 1992 and feted by newspapers in the United States and Canada as a harbinger of progressive social change for gay men.

*AF* #106 is paradigmatic of the comic-book discourse on AIDS, and reflects the growing concern on the part of gay men and their allies about gay men's visibility in the cultural moment of the AIDS crisis. During a moment of intense public interest in AIDS what otherwise might have been a forgettable comic, one of dozens published that month, became a media sensation, reviewed in newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Orlando Sentinel*, *The Seattle Times*, and Canada's *The Globe and Mail*, as well as by the Associated Press and its subscribers -- a newsprint chorus eagerly harmonizing the tune of gay acceptance.<sup>1</sup> The instantaneous and positive media response to Northstar's coming out was in part galvanized by concomitant media coverage of HIV/AIDS, gay community and AIDS activist efforts, and government responses (or lack thereof) to the epidemic in the late 1980s and the 1990s, as well as by the growing public awareness of the staggering toll AIDS had reaped within just a decade.<sup>2</sup> But the success of *AF* #106 also suggests a larger discourse about the intertwined issues of AIDS and gay visibility, one already well underway in comic books and among their creators and consumers by 1992.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay, I theorize the interconnections among the popular fantasies of superhero comic books, the social and political formations of the AIDS crisis, and representations of gay men and PWAs (people with AIDS). I trace the dominant trends comic-book creators used to address the AIDS crisis through their medium. Comic-book creators plotted the virus and the HIV/AIDS affected into tales of fantastic possibility and melodramatic superheroism, wherein the conventions of comic-book fantasy allowed cures

to be found, villains could render homophobia villainous, and superheroic dialogue could offer health education. I also suggest, however anecdotally, that the rise of gay visibility in American comic books was in part the result of creators' desire to respond to the AIDS epidemic and its disproportionately negative -- and, at the time, institutionally ignored -- effects on gay men.

With the exception of a brief moment in the 1950s when comics came under fire for their purported "sex perversion" (CCA, quoted in Gabilliet, 2010:316), comic books' lower standing in the postwar U.S. cultural hierarchy and their increasingly specialized audience meant greater freedom from the moralizing scrutiny that befell televisual and filmic attempts to narrate the lives of gay men. In fact, the explosion onto the comics scene of gay male characters in the late 1980s made for very little controversy, so little that news media, fans, and scholars alike have given scant attention (excepting *AF* #106) to the comics about AIDS produced between 1988 and 1994 -- a period whose otherwise unremarkable brevity is conversely matched by its significance as a "substantive moment" in what sociologist Suzanna Danuta Walters terms the "gaying of American culture" (2001:26).

Though not every comic with a gay character dealt explicitly with the AIDS crisis, the association between gay men and AIDS was nonetheless a symbolically powerful one in American popular culture. As literary scholar James W. Jones observes, "it is impossible to read a piece of fiction about gay men in the present and not assume AIDS is going to make its presence felt one way or another" (1993:229). The impossibility of decontextualizing AIDS from its gay referents in not just literature but also American popular culture meant that the presence of gay characters raised questions about the position of gay men, and therefore of AIDS, on and beyond comic books' pages.

Comic books were unique among the discursive practices of the AIDS epidemic; standalone issues such as *AF* #106 were more than topical showpieces responding to current events. They were the culmination of a decades-long struggle by comics artists to incorporate gay characters into their narratives following the establishment of the industry-regulating Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954, which among other things, stipulated that "sex perversion [i.e. homosexuality] or any inference to same is strictly forbidden" (CCA quoted in Gabilliet, 2010:316). The CCA's anti-homosexual censorship took on symbolic necessity during what historian Whitney Strub names an era of "masculinized nationalism" and feminine "containment on the homefront" (2011:13) and straightened out representations of gay men, lesbian women, and others -- crossdressers, transsexuals, "loose" women -- whose deviances seemed to threaten the fragile balance of postwar gender roles.

But the Code's policing of heteronormativity was nearly immediately subverted, in part due to the inborn queerness of the super-subject himself

and of the superhero's (often teenage, same-sex) sidekick, but also because of creators' efforts to play with normative social roles through the fantastical comics genres.<sup>4</sup> Creators like Steve Ditko could thus get away with a story like "The Man Who Stepped Out From A Cloud" (Sept. 1957), about a dashing alien stranger whisking a lonely boy off to a welcoming planet populated with happy, snappily dressed men (Fig. 3). Over the next three decades, creators grew bolder in their presentation of gay characters, who became more prevalent and more realistic from the mid-1980s onward,<sup>5</sup> ultimately allowing the emergence of an AIDS discourse concurrent with major changes internal to the comic-book industry that encouraged creators to take more risks, and produce more "mature" works of comics art.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 3.

To frame the history of comic books' contribution to the broader public discourses of AIDS and gay men's visibility in "epidemic time" (Gill-Peterson, 2013:279),<sup>7</sup> I build on cultural historian Ramzi Fawaz's description of the superhero genre as "the paradigmatic example of American popular fantasy" (2011:359). Popular fantasy describes "expressions of literary and cultural enchantment that suture together current social and political realities and impossible happenings, producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist" (359). Popular fantasy offers a

way to understand the superhero genre as always purposively political, and emphasizes comic books' ability to represent the sometimes conflicted, occasionally ambiguous, but nonetheless radical political yearnings of creators as they turned their craft to the AIDS crisis and its effects in gay men's lives. I focus my readings on comics as diversely positioned as DC's *The New Guardians* and Marvel's X-Men franchise, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Nomad*. Through progressive if sometimes flawed narratives, comic-book creators deployed popular fantasy as a means of representing the personal, social, moral, and ethical dilemmas that confronted heterosexuals and gay men alike as thousands of PWAs continued to die, as the government failed to respond to the epidemic, and as the unaffected turned a blind eye.

### **“Going through the Motions”: AIDS and the Superhero**

The popular fantasy of the superhero allowed creators to distill their political beliefs through the genre's eponymous figure, to point to the superhero's actions as a framework for a moral and just response to AIDS. Comic-book series such as DC's *The New Guardians* and Marvel's X-Men comics contextualized for readers the stakes of the AIDS epidemic, which by the turn of the 1980s was increasingly understood as a “crisis.” From the late 1980s, into the 1990s comics book narratives and AIDS activism alike poured their energies into the late-postmodern rhetorics of apocalypse. While activist organizations such as ACT UP and outspoken intellectuals like Larry Kramer deployed apocalypticism as a “resistive discourse” in art, literature, protest, performance, and journalism (Long, 2005:13; see also essays in Murphy and Poirier, 1993), at the same apocalyptic crisis also characterized the dominant impulses in U.S. culture of the “long nineties.”

As Marxist cultural critic Phillip Wegner has argued, culture workers in the period between 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall) and 2001 (the fall of the WTC towers) were fascinated with cataclysm, dystopia, and the apocalypse, in part because, for some, the end of the Cold War controversially signaled “the end of history” and the abeyance of alternatives to capitalism (Wegner, 2009; Fukuyama, 1989). Not surprisingly, from the mid-1980s publication of the aptly named *Crisis on Infinite Earths* series, which narrated the destruction of thousands of universes at the hands of the matter-devouring Anti-Monitor, and well into the 1990s, apocalyptic scenarios typified comic-book storylines, leading fans, critics, and creators to label the era the “Dark Age.” Working through the crisis-prone superhero comics of the late 1980s -- exemplified by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* -- creators were free to turn their attention to controversial social issues, not the least of which was the AIDS epidemic.

At its height in the late 1980s and until it was understood as a global epidemic circa 1994, AIDS was met with an unprecedented interest on the part of comics creators, many of whom were young, socially conscious, politically engaged men living and working in New York, one of the social and cultural epicenters of the epidemic. For those who wrote/drew gay characters, the decision was made out of a sense of urgency to represent gay men as part of comic-book universes, occasionally as superheroes but more often as “normal” people, people who lived in the world, with whom readers interacted on a daily basis, and whose lives were disproportionately negatively impacted by the virus. After decades existing in a subtextual closet of metaphors, tropes, and stereotypes, in 1988 openly gay characters exploded into the pages of superhero comics, leading one clever critic to dub it “the gayest year in comic book history” (The Queer Comics Historian, 2013). Nearly two dozen comics with explicitly LGBT characters were published that year; unsurprisingly, the majority featured gay men and addressed HIV/AIDS in some narrative capacity. Many were passing representations, as in DC’s *The Spectre* #11 (Moench, Feb. 1988), on a single page of which the superhero Dr. Fate saves gay rights protesters -- toting signs with the slogan “Act now!” -- from a falling building (Fig. 4). Other comics, however, took more sustained liberties in their depiction of the politics of AIDS.

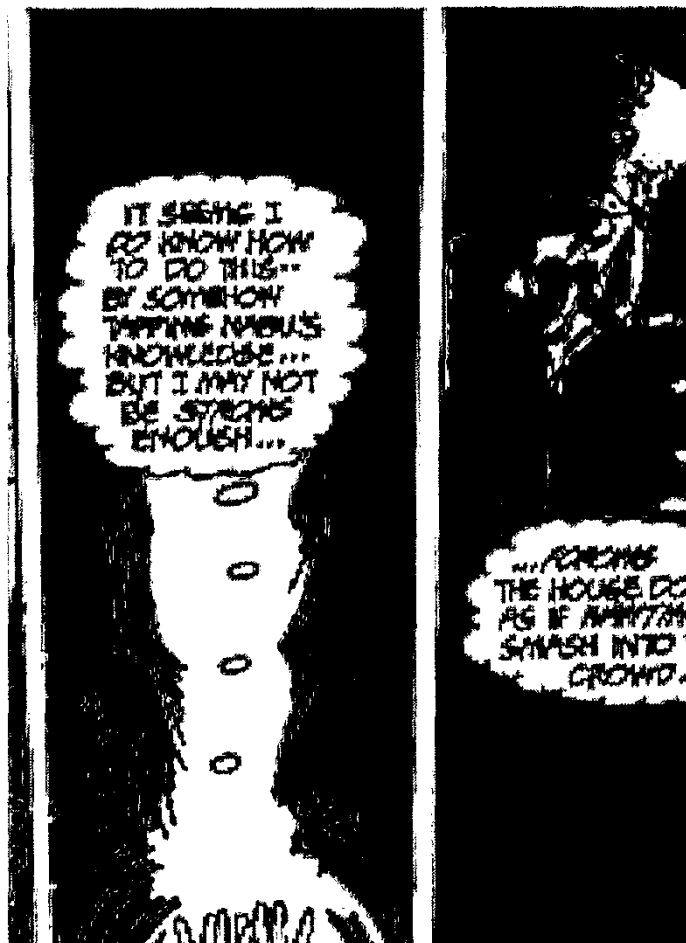


Fig. 4.

Perhaps the most significant comic book of the 1988 “gay” explosion was DC’s “mature” (i.e. non-CCA approved) series *The New Guardians*, which promised heroes whose diversity would springboard its fictional world’s -- and, by extension, its readers’ own -- cultural, political, and biological evolution into the next millennium. *The New Guardians*’ origin lies in the late 1987 comic-book “event” *Millennium*, published in eight weekly installments that detailed the emergence of a billions-of-years-old cult that attempts to prevent the universe’s immortal Old Guardians from bringing forth their replacements, the New Guardians. Caped in all the conventions of the superhero genre, *Millennium* introduces the unlikely cast of *Guardians*: Jet, a Jamaican woman and immigrant to Britain; Gloss, a communist Chinese woman; Ram, a former Japanese businessman; Floronic Man, an extradimensional plant-man and former supervillain; Betty Clawman, an Australian aboriginal; Harbinger, a white woman raised by the immortal Monitor; and Extraño, an openly gay man from Peru. Throughout its brief, 12-issue run *Guardians* bespoke a consistently political tone, addressing issues as varied and controversial as South African apartheid, U.S. intervention in Latin America, late-Cold War U.S.-Soviet relations, and, most significantly, the domestic and global contexts of the AIDS epidemic.

Not only did *Guardians* include a flamboyant gay character, the Peruvian superhero-magician Extraño, whose sexuality was discussed often and with candor, and who elicited positive responses from readers in the comic’s letter columns, but AIDS was a dominant plot point throughout the series. The decision to make AIDS a locus of narrative conflict for the New Guardians was a conscious effort by the series’ initial writer, Steve Englehart, to bring awareness to the epidemic but also to denote its overwhelming impact on gay men. In an interview with gay comics critic Andy Mangels, Englehart offered the opinion that to ignore AIDS would be irresponsible: “If I were writing a story about a homosexual in 1988 and didn’t do a story on AIDS, [I’m] not really doing 1988” (Mangels, 1988b:51). Englehart’s insistence on showcasing the virus’s damage in gay communities is significant because it countered the contemporary emphasis on heterosexuals’ victimization by AIDS, ignoring and even demonizing the “fringe” populations through which AIDS originally spread.<sup>8</sup> As early as 1987, communications scholar Simon Watney reasoned that “AIDS is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to “justify” calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable” (1996/1987:3). In a now-classic essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani similarly claimed that AIDS was “treated like an unprecedented sexual threat” by mainstream media, political profiteers, and opportunistic evangelists (1987:198). Moreover, this media discourse, both on account of its magnitude and tone, “made the oppression of gay men seem like a moral imperative” (204).

The *Guardians* AIDS storyline challenged the moral imperative

Bersani identifies by familiarizing readers with a sympathetic gay character, and through that lens transformed the comic into a platform for HIV/AIDS education. The storyline began in *Guardians* #1 (Englehart, Sept. 1988) (Fig. 5), when the Hemo-Goblin, a vampire genetically manufactured to infect its victims with AIDS, is sent by the fictional South African apartheid dictator Janwillem Kroef to infect/murder the Guardians. In the battle with Hemo-



Fig. 5.

Goblin, three characters are infected with HIV: Extraño, Jet, and Harbinger. Later, in *Guardians* #3 (Bates, Nov. 1988), the three PWAs visit an HIV clinic, outside of which a homophobic protest is underway. There, they learn how HIV is contracted and how it progresses to AIDS. They also visit an HIV support group and listen to personal stories about living with the virus. One woman tells her story of contracting HIV through drug use. A gay man describes telling his family, to whom the diagnosis revealed his closeted identity, and another gay man recounts the love and support given him by his partner and friends in the gay community. Through these voices writer Cary Bates emphasizes that HIV is not a death sentence, but that people “live with AIDS” -- a phrase popularized in the rhetoric of AIDS activism. One of the men even reminds readers that “life-styles don’t cause diseases-- / --germs

do” (Bates, Nov. 1988, emphasis and unusual punctuation in original; from here on “/” denotes a word balloon break). In this issue, it is also revealed that Jet’s condition has progressed from HIV to “full-blown” AIDS.

Jet becomes the central focus of the series’s AIDS narrative. Her carefully positioned identity allows her to take on multiple signifiers of the AIDS crisis, markers of social positions that make her character all the more significant since it is Jet -- and not the gay character, Extraño -- whose diagnosis develops into AIDS and causes her death. Jet is both a woman and more specifically a black Caribbean expatriate. While her Jamaican origin is denoted in the second issue of *Millennium* (Englehart, Jan. 1988), it is also connoted by Englehart’s and Bates’s attempts to write Jet’s script in patois -- “Sitting aroun’ ain’t my *style*-- / --bot I not in de mood ta *socialize!*” -- which evokes a borderline racist stereotype, at the very least is a caricature (Englehart, Sept. 1988, emphases and unusual punctuation and spelling in original).

Jet’s identity points to U.S. hysteria about the alleged Caribbean origins of AIDS and as a woman (of color) with AIDS, Jet’s struggle prefigures wider public acknowledgment of women’s varied experiences of the epidemic. Organized responses to women’s erasure from the dominant AIDS narratives came to the fore of AIDS activism in 1988 following the publication of *Cosmopolitan*’s “Reassuring about AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why *You* May Not Be at Risk” (Gould, 1988). The article, by psychiatrist Robert E. Gould, “assured” readers that American women with healthy vaginas would not be infected with HIV so long as they practiced “ordinary sexual intercourse” and not the “brutal way” in which “many men in Africa take their women.” ACT UP responded immediately by protesting *Cosmopolitan*’s offices in January 1988, and through their campaign brought attention to the fact that women, especially women of color, were indeed at risk.<sup>10</sup>

By the sixth issue of the series (Bates, Holiday 1988), believing that a prolonged death from AIDS-related complication is forthcoming, Jet sacrifices herself in a last-ditch effort to save Earth from an alien invasion. At Jet’s funeral, Extraño gives a compelling, symbol-laden eulogy for his friend:

...She was not the *first* gallant soul to give up her *life* in the war against these *alien invaders*... / ...nor will she be the *last*. / Yet our courageous [Jet] was already in the throes of a life-and-death struggle on *another* battlefield. / A struggle her ravaged immune system would not permit her to win. / And yet, despite the agony she had to endure over the past few months... / throughout it all, her beautiful *spirit* remained indomitable (emphases and ellipses in original).

Jet’s death came quite literally at the instigation of space invaders, which Extraño likens to the immunological ravages of HIV. As Susan Sontag has argued, “in the era of Star Wars and Space Invaders, AIDS has proved an ideally comprehensible illness,” one that is fashioned as a violent invader

in “the language of political paranoia” (Sontag, 2001:106). At a formal level, Jet’s passing is, in the grand scheme of the superhero genre’s flippant treatment of death, all the more meaningful because unlike the vast majority of superheroes, sidekicks, and villains who “die,” Jet remains irrevocably dead.<sup>11</sup>

But Jet’s death has even deeper resonances, simultaneously and problematically distancing gay men (here, Extraño) from a fatalistic AIDS discourse as it points to the heavy toll the virus was taking among women and people of color in the late 1980s.<sup>12</sup> In the democratizing hyperbole of superhero comics, Jet is a stand-in for all persons with AIDS -- a purposefully broad, open-ended interpretation of who can and does become affected by HIV/AIDS. A chronotope presenting the scorched earth marred by Jet’s fatal explosion, the image of what remains in the wake of her death inscribes the story of an individual and a social category into the fictional landscape of the comic (Fig. 6). This physical marking of AIDS-related death

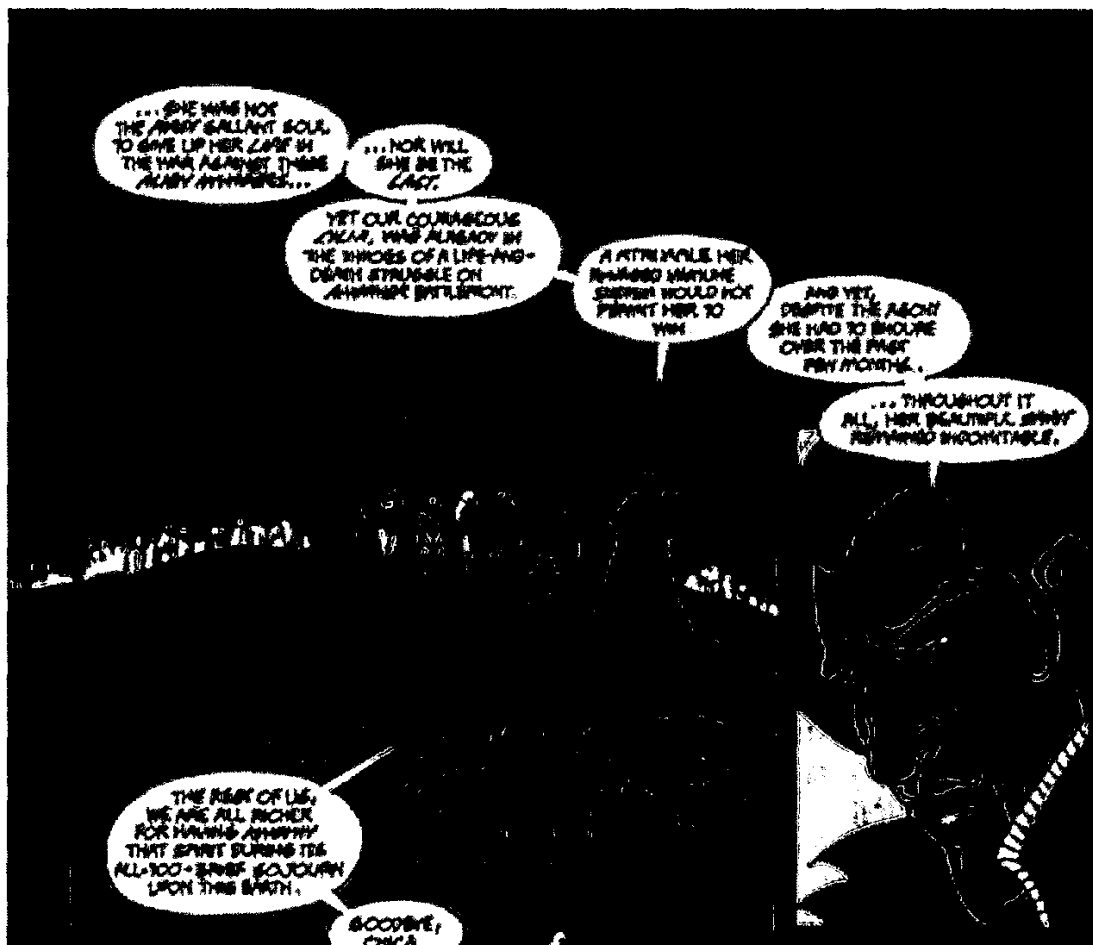


Fig. 6.

is reminiscent of the contemporary black-and-white photographs forming *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, taken in 1987 by David Wojnarowicz minutes after Peter Hujar’s death from AIDS-related complications (Fig. 7). The images convey Wojnarowicz’s personal, emotional response to his partner’s death,



Fig. 7.

but at the same time index what art critic Jennifer Doyle reads as “rage at the indifference of the public to the suffering of a generation” of gay men (2013:127). *Guardians #6* is conspicuously absent an image of Jet’s body, probably in an effort to avoid the suggestion -- already bandied about in the letter columns -- that *Guardians* was “pushing” the AIDS agenda too vociferously.<sup>13</sup> Extraño’s eulogy nonetheless emphatically reminds readers of the erasure of the human element from public conversations of death tolls and caseloads, Senate proceedings, and curative drug testing.

Following Jet’s death, in *Guardians #7* (Bates, Feb. 1989), Extraño returns to his hometown of Trujillo, Peru to mourn Jet and reflect upon the role AIDS has played in his life. There, he has an emotional reunion with an old friend, to whom he reveals in untranslated Spanish that his diagnosis has progressed to AIDS (“Lo tengo”). While home, Extraño visits the graves of friends and former lovers, all of whom died from AIDS-related causes. Trujillo, or rather its “gay” district, has been rendered a ghost town by the epidemic. Extraño’s fictionalized gay community metonymizes the experiences of gay communities everywhere in the late 1980s: with thousands already dead and many more thousands diagnosed every year, AIDS was, as many activists articulated it, an apocalypse. This brief glimpse at the global context of the AIDS crisis was the series’ final nod to the AIDS storyline begun by Steve Englehart in the first issue and continued by Cary Bates. Thereafter, the series tamed Extraño’s flamboyancy, opting instead for an ironically queer macho aesthetic, and ceased all discussion of AIDS.

Though *The New Guardians* only lasted 12 issues, its creators provided a highly unique account of PWAs in comics form, consistently challenging stereotypes, misinformation, and prejudice about who gets HIV/AIDS, how they get it, what their lives are like, and how the reactions of persons without

AIDS determine the experiences of those most affected. In the wake of the “gay” explosion of 1988 that *Guardians* helped define, the 45-year ban on gay representation was officially struck from the Comics Code Authority in 1989 (reproduced in Gabilliet, 2010:320-322), opening the way for comics of the early 1990s to more broadly, openly, and productively engage gay characters and the AIDS crisis.

The early 1990s institutionalized AIDS in a mass discourse constituted of near-constant news media coverage (roughly 3,000 stories a year; Brodie, *et al.*, 2004) joined by films and made-for-TV movies as diversely positioned in their relations to the gay community as “Philadelphia” (1993) and “Our Sons” (1991). AIDS was also mythologized in widely circulated stories of heterosexual AIDS “victims,” the most prominent of whom was hemophiliac teenager Ryan White, who contracted HIV from a blood transfusion in the mid-1980s and was ostracized by his small-town Indiana community. After several years in the media spotlight as the poster child of heterosexual narratives about the epidemic, White died in April 1990. HIV/AIDS was also central to the third season of the immensely popular reality television show “The Real World: San Francisco” (1994), which included the handsome 22-year-old gay PWA and AIDS educator Pedro Zamora (Fig. 8). So great was Zamora’s role in early 1990s American popular culture that President Bill Clinton spoke at a benefit for Pedro Zamora a month before his death in November 1994, stating, “Over the past few years, Pedro became a member of all of our families. Now no one in America can say they’ve never known someone who’s living with AIDS” (“The Real World: A Tribute to Pedro Zamora”).<sup>14</sup> In comics, too, the AIDS discourse intensified in the early 1990s.



Fig. 8.

Taken up by Marvel Comics in 1992 in the pages of *AF* #106 and with less fanfare through passing mention in other titles, AIDS also emerged as a major theme in the X-Men comics.

From the mid-1970s and into the late 1990s, the X-Men was one of Marvel's most lucrative comic-book franchise. Led by the ongoing original series *Uncanny X-Men* (vol. 1), the franchise was attuned to the major artistic impulses of the "Dark Age" and was an especially high seller in its multiple incarnations. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, the X-Men were "mutants" whose genetic mutations bestowed superhuman capabilities, some of which manifested physically (e.g. as wings or blue fur), others of which remained hidden (e.g. telepathy, laser vision), allowing them to "pass" as non-mutant. The comics' positioning of mutanity in relation to "normal" humans allowed the X-Men to metaphorically embody social, cultural, and political "others." Throughout its history, the "mutant metaphor" was purposively articulated by comics creators to minority group contexts, for example, to the racial tensions of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and of women's liberation in the 1970s. At other times, mutanity was broadly constructed so as to make the X-Men a fluid signifier of any sort of prejudice. The mutability of the mutant metaphor has opened the way for queer readings of the X-Men as well, which Fawaz (2014) deftly illustrates in his reading of X-Men comics in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>15</sup> But while earlier X-Men comics covertly encoded queerness, two early 1990s storylines, "X-Cutioner's Song" (1992-1993) and "Fatal Attractions" (1993-1994), represent the first creator-intended usage of the X-Men's mutanity as a metaphor for homosexuality (Darowski, 2014:105-117).

"X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions" rallied the fantastic affordances of the superhero genre and the metaphorical versatility of the X-Men's mutanity to allegorize homosexuality, HIV, and the AIDS crisis. At the surface, however, "X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions" are an interwoven epic of the X-Men's perpetual struggle against their various and multiplicitous enemies -- among them anti-mutant hate groups (Purifiers, Church of Humanity), anti-human mutant groups (Mutant Liberation Front, Acolytes), and archetypal supervillains whose vocation is mayhem (Apocalypse, Onslaught). The 12-issue "X-Cutioner's Song" introduces a deranged mutant from the future, Stryfe, who travels back in time to the X-Men's present to assassinate the X-Men's leader, Professor Charles Xavier. Defeated by the X-Men at the end of the story arc, Stryfe releases the Legacy Virus, a bioweapon manufactured to kill mutants (Fig. 9). Legacy begins to infect mutants all over the world beginning in the following 31-issue crossover "Fatal Attractions," a major event marking the thirtieth anniversary of Marvel's X-Men franchise. The virus claims multiple lives throughout "Fatal Attractions" and remains an ongoing subplot to the Xavier-Magneto conflict.<sup>16</sup>



Fig. 9.

Legacy is a fantastical allegory for the AIDS virus and its effects on the gay community.<sup>16</sup> By allegorizing AIDS and withholding the virus's name -- a tactic that comics creators in years prior had not used in their critique of AIDS politics -- X-Men writers unintentionally mirrored the dominant trend of early 1990s gay writers who normalized the presence of the virus in gay life by "refusing" its name (cf. Jones, 1993). The many deaths that occur as a result of Legacy throughout "Fatal Attractions" demonstrate its purposive resemblance to HIV and that virus's etiology. It is noted in the epilogue to *Uncanny X-Men* #300 (Lobdell, May 1993) that the virus affects each mutant differently, owing to the fact that the "X-Gene," the source of mutants' superpowers, manifests differently in each mutant. In much the same way, HIV and AIDS open up PWAs to an array of opportunistic infections, such that the effects of the virus on each PWA are unique. Moreover, both AIDS and Legacy are (at present) incurable, a point of significance that underscores the ethical concerns creators felt toward the representation of AIDS. That Legacy denotes AIDS is confirmed in an interview with Fabian Nicieza, one of the primary X-Men writers in the early 1990s, which is worth quoting at length:

We [the creative teams behind "X-Cutioner's Song" and "Fatal Attractions"] specifically discussed ways to alienate mutants even further from mainstream superheroes, since by then the thematic tone of prejudice was cemented into the book's structure. One thing the "new wave" of writers discussed was "why are mutants railed against but people are

okay with the Fantastic Four or Thor?"...HIV/AIDS was a very prevalent topic at the time and absolutely as creators, having gone through our 20's in the 80's, we were well informed by the thematic underpinnings of prejudice against gays as a result of the virus outbreak (interview quoted in Darowski, 2014:116).

AIDS, in the form of the Legacy Virus, was therefore a narratologically convenient but nonetheless heavily and explicitly politicized means for the X-Men's creators to explain why mutants were different from, and feared by, non-mutant humans.<sup>17</sup>

Nicieza and the other writers' deployment of the Legacy Virus's as a metaphor for AIDS is at times conflicted. To begin, Nicieza *et al.* intensified the discourse of AIDS that creates, in the words of Leo Bersani, "the peculiar exclusion of the principal sufferers," focusing instead on "the heterosexual groups now [in 1987] minimally at risk, as if the high-risk groups were not part of the audience" (1987:203) This is evident in the story of the adolescent mutant Illyana Rasputin's sickness and death in *Uncanny X-Men* #303 (Lobdell, Aug. 1993), which bore on the cover, in bold descending letters adjacent to the image of two crying female characters, the hortative "If you read only *one* X-title this month--this issue *must* be it!" (emphases and unusual punctuation in original) (Fig. 10). Illyana, being a young female



Fig. 10.

child, and more so a mutant whose powers have yet to manifest, and who therefore cannot be said to have chosen to be a mutant (or to have joined the X-Men), her “innocent” death refracts the fears of mainstream heterosexual America and doubly points to Ryan White’s three years prior. Ilyana’s death is what Bersani describes as “displacement” (1987, *passim*): it centers the discourse on those least affected and pushes the disproportionately affected PWA groups to the discursive, and thus social, margins.

Moreover, the Legacy Virus raises unique questions about the ethics of the superhero in relation to AIDS, especially because the X-Men and its allied and enemy organizations can be read as representing the social formations of the AIDS crisis. The Acolytes, for example, are a militant group of mutants who fight alongside organizations such as the Mutant Liberation Front for the supremacy of mutants over humans.<sup>19</sup> Not an exact (or very positive) mimesis of the militant factions of AIDS activists (e.g. ACTUP) whose confrontational methods brought immediate attention to the plight of gay communities, the Acolytes stand in contradiction to X-Factor, a group of mutants employed by the U.S. government to handle mutant affairs. X-Factor metaphorizes AIDS activists, such as Treatment Action Group (TAG) and GMHC, who sought to effect change through bureaucratic means, rather than protest. The X-Men and X-Force (a band of 20-something mutants), attempt to uphold the status quo by protecting mutants and non-mutants alike.

The comics themselves produce the critique that the X-Men are “a group of mutants-- / --risking their lives to create a world where *everyone* is *treated equally*,” a moral stance described by a disaffected former X-Man as “the *stuff* of dreams” (Lobdell, May 1993, *emphases and unusual punctuation in original*). The popular fantasy of mutant superheroes fighting over mutanity’s place in society enacts the political fantasies of competing approaches to AIDS activism and demonstrates the superhero genre’s unique ability -- compared to, say, television or film of the same era -- to map the ethic complexities of the AIDS crisis. In the brilliantly crisis-prone, melodramatic world of comics where imagination runs beyond logic, superheroes can answer or at least address difficult questions about who controls the narrative of the affected and how that narrative is told, about who gets treatment and government attention, and about how the public reacts to the affected. Superheroes can fight back; they never die (for long) and they always win.

The superhero’s relationship to the AIDS epidemic is dramatized throughout mainstream comics of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. *The New Guardians* and the X-Men’s Legacy Virus demonstrate that the superhero’s relationship to AIDS extends beyond the virus itself, implicating the superhero in the fight against the virus itself but also the fight for rights of those affected. Northstar’s 1992 coming out in the pages of *Alpha Flight*, for example, directly addressed whether superheroes have an ethical obligation to use their positions of power to effect positive change. Other comics



Fig. 11.

throughout this period challenged the virus and the virus's social effects alike. Superheroes even wrestled the epidemiological and social arms of the metaphorical AIDS supervillain in public service announcements published by DC Comics in association with the National AIDS Hotline, the GMHC, and the AIDS Project Los Angeles. DC's PSAs featured the Green Lanterns, the Flash, the Teen Titans, members of the Justice League, and even Batman's

sidekick Robin, each of whom confronted damaging misconceptions about HIV/AIDS transmission (Fig. 11).<sup>20</sup> The superhero, it seemed, was the ideal figure to challenge the AIDS epidemic, as a role model for social action through education, and as a friend and defender of PWAs.

### **“We’re Not Interested in Copping Out”: PWAs and the Superhero**

Since the superhero’s early days on the bright, four-colored pages of cheap newspaper print, critics have derogated tights-and-spandex-clad superhumans as mere power fantasy, one that is both fascist and eugenicist in its origins. But like any heroic figure, the super-subject has moral and ethical obligations to the communities it serves and protects, a generic distinction that comics historian Peter Coogan identifies as “a selfless, pro-social mission” (2006:30). The extent of that mission speaks to prevailing social concerns about criminality, morality, and (social) justice; at a practical level, to the personal ethical obligations and political beliefs of creators, who extend the work of social justice in the real world onto the pages of their comics. Comic-book creators recognized that their fantastic medium could configure the superhero’s mission to fight (literally and metaphorically) the virus itself, but also to extend that mission to protecting and fighting on behalf of PWAs.

At the same time that *Alpha Flight* was fading from the market -- unaffected by Northstar’s coming out, which was quickly subsumed into the dying series’s plot -- Marvel writer Peter David brought to culmination an HIV/AIDS storyline three years in the making. Critically, *The Incredible Hulk* #420 (David, Aug. 1994) takes as its point of conflict the question of the superhero’s ethical duty to PWAs. This issue of *Hulk* was bound in an all-black cover, the darkness of which is disrupted by the image of a dying man, Jim Wilson, holding the Hulk’s hand for comfort as he lies in a hospital bed (Fig. 12). A lamp provides a cone of light that pierces the cover’s stygian gloom, allowing viewers to glimpse the Hulk’s intimate moment. The cover also bore a red ribbon -- symbol of The Red Ribbon Project by artist-activists Visual AIDS, founded in 1991 -- in the corner below the publication information. Just below the series’ title are the barely visible words “In the Shadow of AIDS,” hidden in an off-black grey. David plays self-consciously on a problem facing comics writers, one that *The New Guardians* letter column editor, Mark Waid, recognized in 1988 (more below). That is, whether or not superheroes, who often have access to science-fictional technologies or magical items with unbelievable capabilities, should be able to “cure” AIDS in their fictional worlds.

*Hulk* #420 details the last moments of two PWAs’ lives. The issue begins with Jim Wilson, the Hulk/Bruce Banner’s African American sidekick



Fig. 12.

and close friend, being severely beaten by protesters picketing a PWA's attendance at a local high school.<sup>21</sup> Jim, who revealed his HIV diagnosis three years prior in *The Incredible Hulk* #388 (David, Dec. 1991), is a heterosexual African-American AIDS activist who runs an AIDS clinic in Los Angeles. Hulk intervenes in the protest-turned-riot to save Jim, whom he whisks away to his high-tech base of operations. On his death bed, Jim asks Hulk for a transfusion of the gamma-irradiated blood that gives Hulk his superpowers and which Jim hopes might cure HIV. The Hulk agrees to the transfusion, but instead uses non-gamma-irradiated blood because he fears turning Jim into a Hulk-like "monster."<sup>22</sup> But Jim uncovers Hulk's subterfuge, and, understanding Hulk's fears about using his own blood, Jim pretends that he is feeling stronger, that he is "gonna leap *out* of this bed in just a couple minutes. / Just gotta rest up a bit..." (David, Aug. 1994, emphases, ellipses, and unusual spelling in original). His last breath a performance, Jim dies. Meanwhile, Hulk's wife, Betty, an emergency hotline attendant, is about to leave work when a suicidal, HIV-positive man named Chet calls. On the last page of the issue, as Betty fitfully tries to encourage him to live, the reader watches Chet drive his car onto a train track, as the light of a train approaches and the panels fade to the black anonymity of his death (Fig. 13). These two intertwining stories are ultimately conflicted in their presentation of AIDS.

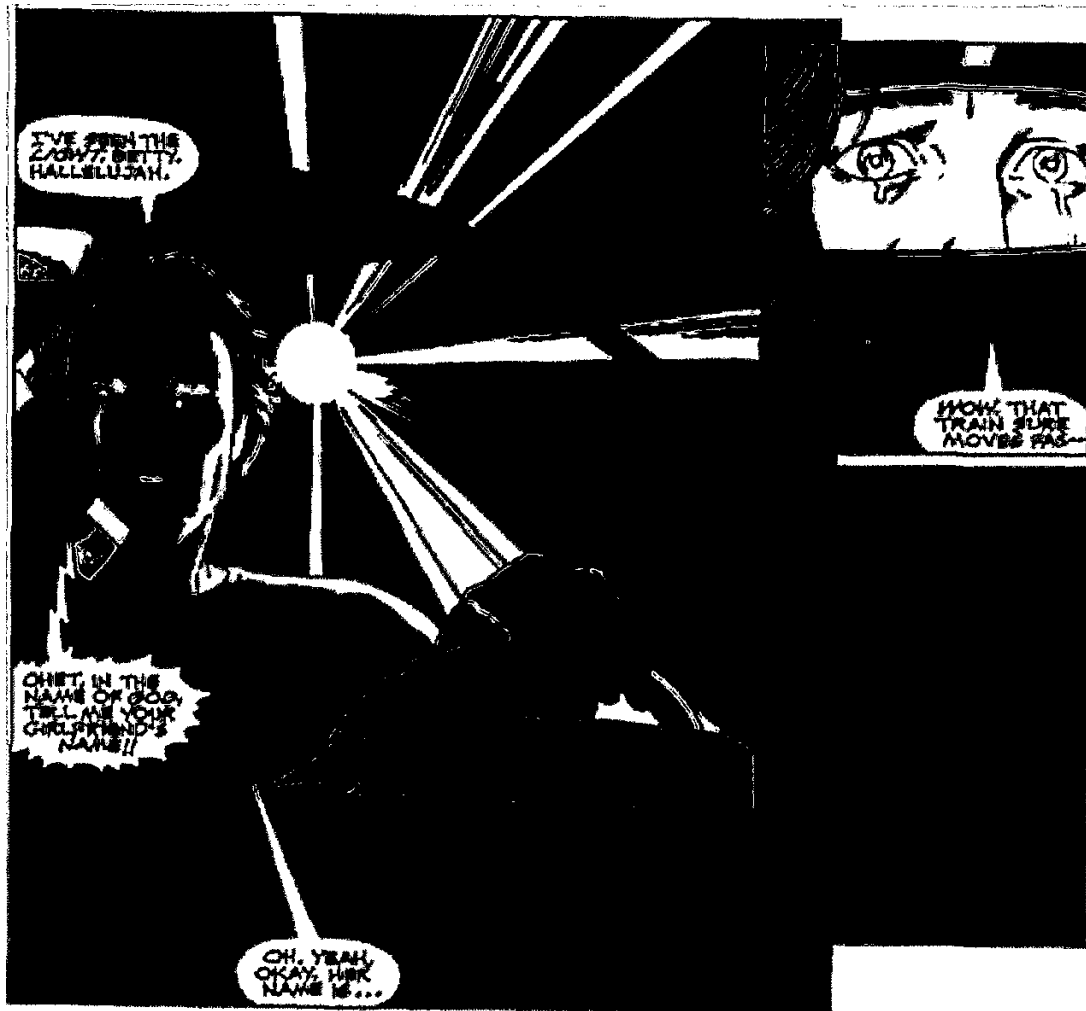


Fig. 13.

Jim's desire for a miracle cure and his hope that the superpowered Hulk could deliver one signifies the utopian fantasy of a quick end to the AIDS epidemic, a hope heightened and flattened in the wake of various experimental drugs' failure to provide successful long-term treatment. Jim's and Chet's passings are described by death and disability studies and comics studies scholar José Alaniz as "existential death," a unique brand of comic-book expiry that is meaningless in the schema of the superhero genre (2014:194). Like all comic-book deaths, such deaths burden the psyche of the hero but differ from "heroic deaths" (180-190) that save people or accomplish an end -- deaths that "mean" something. Jim's death burdens Hulk's psyche, even though it was the Hulk who made the ethical choice not to cure his friend. Hulk's quiet, despairing flight from Jim's deathbed resounds with Betty's presumed response to Chet's suicide. Together, the deaths of Jim and Chet -- one from AIDS-related complications, the other because he is afraid of the social consequences of living with HIV -- are, like other existential deaths examined by Alaniz, "an emotionally powerful and authentic means to relate the high-risk stakes of superhero experience in a more realistic fashion"

(2014:196).<sup>23</sup> By emphasizing the negative impact of AIDS-related deaths on the superhero, or in the case of Betty Banner, on the superhero's wife, *Hulk* #420 reinscribes the discourse of displacement witnessed in part in *The New Guardians*.

But it might be possible to rescue the superhero from the dubious position it seems to hold in relation to its ethical responsibility to AIDS. For while Hulk's refusal to provide a cure for Jim, and the inability of the New Guardians to muster their magical and technological prowess to treat HIV, are surely ethically problematic, the characters' failures to "solve" AIDS in their fictional worlds are acts of comic-book activism. As popular fantasies, these comics "suture together" the social and political realities of AIDS activism by holding out the possibility of a "cure" for AIDS (Fawaz, 2011:359). Superheroes, especially ones with alien technologies and magical powers, should be able to cure diseases -- that, after all, is one of the functions of fantasy: to project the impossible into the real. But as a "popular" fantasy that builds on social realities, the superhero genre cannot solve problems that will, for its audience, persist beyond the pages of the comic and into the quotidian.

The Hulk's choice not to provide a cure to Jim is as much an ethical decision as Peter David's choice to write that decision into the comic. It is a decision recognized and faced by creators since 1988. In response to a letter querying whether Extranño could cure his teammates of AIDS, for example, the editor of *The New Guardians* letter column Mark Waid responded

no, Extranño [sic.] could not magically cure his teammates...What a crummy insult that would be to all the real-life AIDS victims out there -- waving a magic wand and curing one of the greatest tragedies of current times. How comic-booky. AIDS is a touchy issue; we're not interested in copping out, and we think you realize that (quoted in Bates, Winter 1988).

That Waid identifies a magical AIDS cure as the stuff of comics points not to the actual content of *The New Guardians* or any other comic engaged in the AIDS discourse, but rather to the prevailing public opinion that superhero comics are fantasy, fun, and gimmicks -- the very opinion that Fawaz's politicizing conceptualization of comics as popular fantasy counters. It may be that preventing a cure provides the practical benefit of drawing out the drama of a story, of using AIDS as a tragically cliché character-building device, and of allowing a more extensive critique of real-world events. But comic books' failure to cure AIDS reflected their creators' genuine concern for the social effect of their stories. They took seriously the ability of comics to enter into the discursive realm of the AIDS crisis, to be mimetic rather than farcical. By dwelling on the emotion provoked by Jet's or Illyana's or Jim's deaths, comic-book creators painfully demonstrated that a cure did not exist. Cures are fantasies, and unadulterated fantasy in this instance was for the creators as much as the superheroes, unethical.

Dedication to the emotional content of the AIDS crisis is further demonstrated in the letter column of *Hulk* #420, which featured a unique collection of letters written by comics-industry insiders about HIV/AIDS in their lives. The letter writers included Marvel editors (Kelly Corvese), writers (Don DeBrandt, Gary Guzzo, Michael Kraiger, Jeph Loeb, Mindy Newell, Barbara Slate), and artists (Chris Cooper, Joe Rubinstein, Tom Tenney), a number of whom told stories of gay PWAs -- themselves, friends, family, neighbors, lovers. The letters ranged from brief personal stories to elegies, many of them stating their hope that, through comics about HIV/AIDS, they might save a life or change homophobic attitudes (“a *human* problem, not a *homo* problem”; quoted in David, Aug. 1994, emphases in original). The letter column pooled the emotional energies of creators to show readers that even if AIDS finds its way into comics only occasionally, the industry’s culture workers cope with it daily. Not surprisingly, the *Hulk* column was a one-time affair; nothing like it appeared before or again in mainstream superhero comics. But it was the first place in superhero comic books where readers could come to know the effect AIDS was having in the lives of creators. The column reflected earlier, frank discussion of the epidemic in independent comics anthologies such as *A.A.R.G.H. (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia)* (Moore, 1988) and *Strip AIDS USA* (Robbins *et al.*, 1988). It also crystallized the discourse about AIDS and homosexuality that was present in a small body of mainstream comics, their letter columns, and occasionally in comic-book advertisements, such as DC’s PSAs.

Whereas *Hulk* #420 addressed the relationship of the superhero to individuals in his life who suffered from AIDS, and in so doing raised ethical dilemmas about the superhero’s ability to protect PWAs from the ravages of the epidemic as well as questioned creators’ life experiences and reasons for writing about AIDS, other comics broadened the superhero’s horizon to explore the societal ramifications of AIDS, with special emphasis on its impact in gay men’s lives. “Hidden in View,” for example, was a four-issue story arc in the somewhat obscure series *Nomad* (vol. 2), a comic about the eponymous vigilante Jack Monroe, former sidekick to Captain America turned disgruntled “bleeding heart liberal,” who travels the U.S. with his toddler daughter. Together they fight for the rights of the economically and politically disadvantaged. Writer Nicieza (of X-Men fame) utilized *Nomad* as a bullhorn for sensitive political issues, among them American Indian land rights, racial tension in Los Angeles, drug use and poverty, and the military-industrial complex. Although its underlying premise was the conflict between *Nomad* and the metamorphic supervillain Hate-Monger, “Hidden in View” also explores different aspects of gay life in the “epidemic time” of AIDS.

In the first issue of the storyline, *Nomad* #12 (Nicieza, Apr. 1993), *Nomad* takes to the defense of an AIDS clinic that is beseeched by the Clean Community Commandos (CCC), a group of homophobes who seek to rid

Ft. Worth, TX, of “queers.” The CCC are galvanized to action in nightly attack against the clinic and its patients by a radio shock jock, the “Roar,” who believes that gay men are responsible for the AIDS epidemic. Moreover, he believes that because gay men sometimes keep their sexuality private (“closeted”) they are trying to subvert the United States and its moral integrity, “to bring this country *down*.” The Roar stands here as an example of a trope common in the comic-book discourse about AIDS: the use of homophobia to galvanize the hero -- and, by consequence, the reader -- to the defense of gay men, and by association, PWAs.

To be sure, homophobia is glimpsed wherever AIDS appears in comics of the era I am charting. Anti-gay protestors are seen at the AIDS clinic protests in *The New Guardians* #3 and are the cause of the riot at the beginning of *The Incredible Hulk* #420. Homophobia is also a predominant theme in other narratives, such as the two-part story arc “Gauntlet,” which appeared in *Green Arrow*, vol. 2, #5-6 (Grell, Jun.-Jul. 1988), in which the Green Arrow intervenes in a “gay bash wave” (Grell, Jun. 1988) that hits Seattle at the behest of a gang leader who contracted AIDS in prison, and who murders gay men in a campaign of existential revenge (Fig. 14). Whereas



Fig. 14.

Green Arrow is interested in immediate, individual justice -- finding and beating the gay-bashers, threatening them with retaliation from a generic "gay activist alliance" (Grell, Jul. 1988) -- Nomad explores the social depth of homophobia in the United States.

Nomad goes undercover as a journalist for *Rolling Stone* to interview the Roar, whom he later discovers is the leader of the CCC. The connection to *Rolling Stone* is crucial, since it identifies that magazine's prominence in the popular discourse about AIDS, which it entered into very early in the history of the epidemic, in 1985, with David Black's two-part feature "The Plague Years" (1985a, 1985b), expanded and released in a book of the same name the following year (1986). Black's writing emphasized the damage wrought by AIDS on gay men's political successes from decades prior. That Nomad poses as a *Rolling Stone* journalist also positions the series as one of Marvel's "coolest" series, and simultaneously demonstrates that very little had changed in the eight years since Black's "The Plague Years." To frame his approach to the Roar, Nomad interviews people all across Ft. Worth. The city-roaming interviews are illustrated panel by panel, each of which is overlaid across two pages with a portion of a monologue by Nomad:

I listen to people talk. / -- To those who think you can get it from *kissing* your girlfriend--whether she has HIV or *not*. / I hear their anger, their hare-brained reasoning-- / --their rationalizations, their fears, their blindness, their *ignorance*--and I realize-- / it's a *stupidity*<sup>24</sup> thing-- /... / There is so much ignorance about the *HIV* virus and the *AIDS* disease-- / --about who gets it, how and why. / From people who think *touching* a gay man will do it-- / --it's not a *Texas* thing. It's a people thing. And in *this* country, more and more every day, if it's a *people* thing-- /... / If I'm not part of the *solution*, I must be part of the *problem* (Nicieza, Apr. 1993, emphases, ellipses, and unusual punctuation in original).

Writer Nicieza parses suspected reasons for homophobia among the general population, using Ft. Worth as a temperature gauge for the rest of the nation.

Nicieza's recognition that contemporary U.S. homophobia is exacerbated by AIDS is an important one. Homophobic hate crimes skyrocketed in the late 1980s and throughout the early 1990s, and though statistics vary nationwide depending on the reporting institution, the numbers are telling. The National Gay & Lesbian Taskforce, for example, cited a 244 percent increase in homophobic episodes reported per year between 1985 and 1989 (Berrill, 1992:36); the New York City Gay and Lesbian Anti-Violence Project noted a 405 percent increase in local anti-gay incidents (37); and the FBI reported a 127 percent national increase in violent homophobic crimes between 1988 and 1993 (Walters, 2001:9). As a cultural phenomenon, the AIDS crisis was constituted of competing political claims that simultaneously rendered gay bodies as victim and threat, dying minority and deviant aggressor.

Nicieza turns his attention in the following issue, *Nomad* #13, to

government inaction in the face of the AIDS epidemic (Fig. 15). After fleeing Ft. Worth for fear that he would be charged with assaulting the Roar, Nomad moves 30 miles east to Dallas, where a serial criminal nicknamed “The Needle” is infecting her sexual partners with HIV using an HIV-laced serum injected via needle. The comic shows concerned citizens protesting in the streets, but rather than protesting violently against gay men, these protestors turn their attention to the cops’ lack of success apprehending the criminal. The protesters are led by Nomad’s girlfriend, Horseshoe, who rallies the crowd around her calls for justice: “The cops want this woman to keep on killing don’t they? / ‘Course they do--helps them get rid of the ‘social deviants’! / Makes their jobs *easier*, don’t it? Well it’s time to tell the fascist system we won’t lie back an’ take it!” (Nicieza, May 1993).



Fig. 14.

Horseshoe’s call to action is mimetic of the anti-fascist tone that cultural historian Christopher Vials (2014, esp. 194-232) suggests characterized AIDS activists’ configurations of Reagan and his administration as perpetuating a

genocide of gay men and drug users -- the "social deviants" Horseshoe refers to. In a twist that is, unlike most comic-book plot twists, actually shocking, Nomad discovers by issue's end that Horseshoe is The Needle (and, like Saddler/Major Maple Leaf in *AF* #106, she tries to kill a child, Nomad's daughter). Formerly a nurse, she gave up her job when she accidentally infected a "poor little girl" with HIV during a blood transfusion. Since then, she made it her mission to infect people who "deserve it," who "need to live with the *guilt* of what they do" to other people, to the world. In the end, Horseshoe figuratively takes her own life, injecting herself with the last of her serum (Nicieza, May 1993).

Nicieza takes his storyline deeper into critical territory when, in the subsequent issue, *Nomad* #14 (Jun. 1993), he turns to the problematic of "outing" and the implications of being out and gay in the era of AIDS. *Nomad* #14 is a response to the shock jock's fear mongering in *Nomad* #12 (Nicieza, Apr. 1993) when he declares the closet as an inherent threat to the public, a hiding place for the AIDS epidemic to fester before assailing heterosexual America. *Nomad* #14 follows its mulleted super-protagonist's efforts to stop a gay tabloid, *Out and About*, from "outing" a senator's son. The fictional magazine was likely inspired by *OutWeek*, a well-known but short-lived gay publication famous for Michelangelo Signorile's "GossipWeek" column, which regularly outed closeted public figures. Nomad is hired to stop the outing by the outee's father, a U.S. senator who stands to lose a military contract on account of his son's identity.<sup>25</sup>

The question of the ethics of outing is directly related to the AIDS crisis both in the *Nomad* storyline and in comics more generally. Consider, for example, that Northstar decides to out himself in *AF* #106 (Lobdell, Mar. 1992) only after he is accused of being complicit with government and public inaction regarding AIDS's effect in the gay community. While both Scott Lobdell of *Alpha Flight* and *Nomad*'s Nicieza identify the act of outing as a loss of the outee's autonomy over his public identity, and therefore label the act homophobic, both writers contend through their characters the necessity for (gay) public voices to represent the communities most affected by AIDS.<sup>26</sup> The "Hidden in View" storyline concludes in *Nomad* #15 (Nicieza, Jul. 1993), wherein it is revealed that all of the homophobic incidents were manipulated into being by Hate-Monger, a shapeshifting villain with an unexplained grudge against Nomad.

Written by one of the scripters of the X-Men's Legacy Virus, "Hidden in View" is a unique engagement with the politics of the AIDS crisis, since over the course of three very different issues, Nicieza addresses some of the most important ethical questions raised by the epidemic. Nomad is a streetwise vigilante whose stories appear to be more a part of the crime or detective genre than of the superhero, despite the fact that he is, like Captain America, a superpowered former soldier. Nomad is figured as homophobia's enemy

on the street, the mouth and muscle of those educated to the knowledge that exonerates gay men from insipid constructions of their moral and sexual depravity. Attuned to the sources of public discourse, Niecieza writes the media and public figures as much more important than the superhero in swaying public opinion. While Nomad takes a side, he is not considered a bastion of moral authority as might be expected -- social movements do not rally around Nomad, but are joined by him. In this way Niecieza asserts that massive, nationwide action is required to fight the epidemic proportion of AIDS -- that AIDS, like poverty, is a social crisis too big for the superhero to fight alone.

After all, as the X-Men, New Guardians, and the Hulk could attest, superheroes and their sidekicks die from AIDS-related causes, too.

### Comic Books in the Post-AIDS Era

After 1994, AIDS dropped out of creators' comics art, even though homosexuality continued to be written into comic-book storylines and was perceptibly heightened in fictional comic-book universes in the 2000s. This shift to silence came at a curious moment, both in the history of comics and that of AIDS. Comic-book companies -- and by necessity the creators whose paychecks depended on them -- pushed toward more generically normative narratives, the comic-book equivalents of "blockbusters" that might, like *X-Men* #1, vol. 2 (Claremont, Oct. 1991), sell in the millions. This meant making more comics more quickly, comics that hit the broadest common appeal by exposing the superhero to greater heights of hypermasculine excess and cutting down on heavily political content. At the same time, AIDS reached its highest number of deaths and caseloads in the mid-1990s, peaking in 1995 with just over 49,000 deaths that year in the U.S. alone, more than double the annual toll in 1988 ("Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic," 2011). Death tolls declined significantly in 1997 with the advent of antiretroviral (ARV) treatments, marking what Gill-Peterson describes as "a mutation in the temporality of HIV/AIDS...from epidemic to endemic time" (2013:279). All of this is to say that the shift to the post-AIDS era came early for comics and that the AIDS discourse that lasted between 1988 and 1994 had a significant impact on the comics immediately postdating that shift.

The post-AIDS moment of gay visibility began nearly instantaneously. Milestone Comics -- a subsidiary of Milestone Media that published as an imprint of DC Comics, and that was devoted to characters and readers of color -- for example, published a multi-issue story arc, "What Are Little Boys Made Of?," about homophobia and gay rights in one of its hippest comics,

*Static* (vol. 1, #16-20).<sup>27</sup> Despite gay characters' continued presence, gay visibility perceptively lessened in comics of the mid- and late 1990s, as few sustained storylines dealt with gay characters as they had in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Instead, gay visibility was reduced to single-issue events, and while gay characters who had outed themselves or been outed previously continued to appear in the comics of the late 1990s, their sexuality remained largely unimportant to the stories being told – with the exception of Apollo and Midnighter, gay married superheroes in Warren Ellis's *Stormwatch*. But AIDS was no longer a thematic of comic-book discourse.

Its virtual disappearance from superhero comic books after 1994, however, did not mean that AIDS ceased to be important in the lives of comic-book creators. In the letter column of *Tempest* #4 (Jimenez, Feb. 1997), for example, series writer/artist Phil Jimenez came out to readers. In doing so, he disclosed his long-term relationship with noted DC writer/artist Neal Pozner (who died in 1994 from AIDS-related complications), writing, “[Pozner] was the first man I ever asked out on a date; he was my first boyfriend; he was the first person I'd ever watched live with and die from complications from AIDS.” Jimenez's recollection of Pozner is sincere and candid, reminiscent of the stories told in the letter column of *The Incredible Hulk* #420, and of more visceral works, such as the posthumously published graphic autobiography of David Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles A Second*, published by Vertigo in 1996.

After nearly a decade of silence on the topic of AIDS, a breakout new creator at DC, Judd Winick, used his position as writer of *Green Arrow* in the early 2000s to remind readers that HIV/AIDS still affected the lives of millions. Judd Winick's mainstream comics success was prefaced by his tenure on the 1994 MTV reality show “The Real World III: San Francisco.” The show featured Winick alongside Pedro Zamora and a cast of six others. As noted, Zamora brought the experiences of life with AIDS to millions of viewers, who watched as Zamora's castmates became close friends with him, as they advocated for greater awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside him, and as they worried over his deteriorating health. Through the show, Winick became intimate friends with Zamora, and when Zamora was too sick to continue an AIDS education tour, Winick took over for him and continued giving HIV/AIDS education lectures for three years after Zamora's death.

In 2000 Winick published an Eisner award-nominated autobiographical graphic novel, *Pedro and Me*, which wove together his and Zamora's life stories. Winick's success as a graphic novelist propelled him into DC Comics' spotlight, and by the summer of the same year Winick was writing *Green Lantern*, which opened the door for more than a decade of writing at DC. In 2002 Winick wrote “Hate Crimes” (*Green Lantern*, vol. 3, #155-156), about the homophobic bashing of the intergalactic superhero Green Lantern/Kyle Rayner's friend, Terry, and the Green Lantern's uncharacteristically violent reaction, which leaves the three gay-bashers hospitalized. Much like *Static*

homophobia story arc, “Hate Crimes” is not about HIV/AIDS. But it was an attempt by Winick to start a discussion about the continued existence of homophobia in post-gay liberation America. Moreover, “Hate Crimes” was developed through an unprecedented coalition between a comic-book industry professional and a gay rights organization -- its narrative based on personal experiences related to Winick by bisexual comic-book editor Bob Schreck and written in consultation with Cathy Renna of GLAAD<sup>28</sup> (see Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005).

In response to “Hate Crimes,” *Out* magazine hailed Winick as a “superhero to gays and lesbians” (quoted in Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005:390). Two years later, Winick channeled his experiences as an HIV/AIDS educator into “New Blood” (*Green Arrow*, vol. 3, #40-45). In this five-issue story arc Winick reveals that Oliver Queen/Green Arrow’s ward, Mia “Speedy” Dearden, is HIV-positive.<sup>29</sup> “New Blood” is devoted to Mia’s coming to terms with her diagnosis, which is the result of her forced prostitution and former drug addiction. The “New Blood” narrative is loosely inspired by Zamora’s life, so much so that, in the arc’s final issue, Mia gives a speech to her high school about “living with H.I.V.” (Winick, Feb. 2005). While “New Blood” received none of the critical attention that “Hate Crimes” did, Winick’s serious engagement with HIV highlighted and challenged the erasure of HIV/AIDS in superhero comic books. Moreover, like earlier attempts to narrate the lives of PWAs or the public life of the AIDS epidemic, driven as they were by personal desires to use comics to advocate for gay men’s and PWAs’ rights, Winick’s comics lay bare his struggle to understand his best friend’s AIDS-related death and his desire to recognize the continuing struggle for gay social justice and HIV/AIDS education.

Winick’s comics reflected on one of the most crucial moments in the history of gay visibility in American popular culture, a brief six years between 1988 and 1994 that saw an unprecedented rise of gay men’s visibility in American comic books. The same period that achieved the repeal of the CCA’s half-century-long ban on the representation of homosexuality (1989) also effected a sincere, prolonged, and politically motivated engagement with the AIDS crisis. That comics creators rallied to engage the politics of AIDS and the fact of its disproportionate impact on gay men was not unprecedented. Fawaz (2011), for example, argues that from the 1960s onward, creators shaped the discursive field of comics into “a space for modeling new modes of radical critique that offered alternatives to direct-action politics and the discourse of civil liberties” (2011:357). In works both obscure and critically acclaimed, mainstream comic-book creators addressed the paucity of government response to the AIDS epidemic and simultaneously advocated awareness of the disproportionate effects of AIDS in the gay community. Creators also recognized the connection between rising homophobia rates and the social construction of AIDS as a “gay disease” and a threat to the

American body politic.

Through the figure of the superhero, comic-book creators fought AIDS. They did so through the fantastical affordances of the superhero genre, wherein their four-color superhumans challenged AIDS at the epidemiological and social levels. In the physical form of the comic book and its popularly consumed narratives creators also provided HIV/AIDS education. They directed reader attention to the social, cultural, and political problematics of the epidemic, but also gave practical information about how the virus spread. Comic books' discursive commitment to the AIDS crisis between 1988 and 1994 provided much-needed awareness of HIV/AIDS alongside serious critiques of public and governmental inaction. Uniting the generic conventions of the superhero with the energies and anger of AIDS activists and the affected, comic-book creators carved out their own discourse within the larger cultural sphere of the AIDS crisis. In the company of superheroes, PWAs gained advocates and visibility largely denied in other popular narratives of the AIDS era.

### Endnotes

\* Profound thanks for helping to prepare this paper go to Aaron Lecklider, Rachel Rubin, Jen Haas, Patrick Haas, and Cady Vishniac.

<sup>1</sup> While Northstar's sexual identity was the first to garner major public attention -- and somewhat strangely so, considering his less-than-marquee status at Marvel -- the previous year DC "outed" the Pied Piper, a former supervillain, turned friend of the Flash, in *Flash #53* (Messner-Loebs, Aug. 1991), and sustained a conversation about his identity over several issues, winning acclaim from GLAAD and garnering its first "Outstanding Comic Book" award.

<sup>2</sup> amFar, The Foundation for AIDS Research places the cumulative death toll in the United States at 194,476 by the end of 1992, with 245,147 cases reported ("Thirty Years of HIV/AIDS: Snapshots of an Epidemic," 2011). Their data are drawn from the most comprehensive, retrospective tabulation of nationwide reports of HIV/AIDS-related deaths and cases, and as such are often much higher than statistics reported *in tempore*.

<sup>3</sup> On Northstar's sexuality and its anticipation by fans, see Schott (2010), Bolling (2012), Mangels (1988a).

<sup>4</sup> Neil Shyminsky (2001) suggests that in the context of the U.S.'s Cold War anxieties about masculinity, the subject position of the superhero's sidekick -- a generic figure nearly as old as the superhero itself and most famously represented by Batman's teenage protégé Robin and "Superman's pal" Jimmy Olsen -- simultaneously demarcates and blurs the boundaries between homosociality and homosexuality. This is because at the most basic level,

the male superhero upholds dominant discourses of nation, sexuality, gender, race, class, and ability while also subverting them vis-à-vis the otherness that renders him superhuman. In addition, a number of scholars have observed that it is not so much the superpowers but rather the costumed dual identity of the superhero that renders him suspect. Scott Bukatman contends that “[o]ur costumed vigilante is...a dandy, a flamboyant, flamboyantly powered, urban male, who, if not for his never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American Way, would probably be ordered to ‘just move it along’” (2003:216). Moreover, the superhero’s secret identity -- and his worry that someone will discover it -- uncannily resembles the closet. The superhero’s masculinity is therefore always already suspect. Andy Medhurst has noted, for example, that “if one wants to take Batman as a Real Man, the biggest stumbling block has always been Robin” (1991:159). Thus, the assertion of the superhero’s always imperiled status as the embodiment of American masculinity relies in part on the contrasting role of his adolescent sidekick. The superhero’s tensions with a historically constructed hegemonic masculinity are thus structured by some of the genre’s most iconic conventions, allowing for “queer readings” whenever a man leaves behind “the visual drabness of his closet” to don four-color tights (Bukatman, 2003:216).

<sup>5</sup> For a study of the means by which homosexuality has been metaphorized and represented in comics between 1985 and 2002 see Mandel (2003).

<sup>6</sup> It is disconcerting to note that gay men (and lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals) were disincluded from radical pushes in the comics industry to include racial, gender, economically disadvantaged, and even differently abled others in superhero comics of the 1970s -- what José Alaniz calls the “relevance movement” (2014:138). Bradford Wright similarly describes the relevance movement as “a proliferation of self-consciously leftist comic book explorations of political and social issues” (2001:233). Though creators seemingly made no effort to engage gay liberation in the 1970s, Fawaz (2011; forthcoming) argues otherwise via a queer reading of, among other things, the X-Men, Fantastic Four, and Superman.

<sup>7</sup> Gill-Peterson (2013) splices the history of AIDS into two temporalities, the earlier being the “epidemic time,” the “crisis” years of AIDS, in contradistinction to the present, “post-AIDS age” of “endemic time,” when HIV/AIDS has become a manageable medical condition, has passed out of public interest, and has been depoliticized in the U.S. as a result of its becoming a transnational medical issue.

<sup>8</sup> Englehart’s use of AIDS and a gay character were points of major contention between him and the editorial staff at DC, particularly *Guardians’* editor Andy Helfer. As a result, Englehart opted to quit *Guardians*. See Mangels (1988b) for a contemporary discussion of Englehart and *The New Guardians*.

<sup>9</sup> Robert E. Gould, “Reassuring about AIDS: A Doctor Tells Why *You* May Not Be at Risk,” *Cosmopolitan* (January 1988): 146-204. Gould’s article

was written in part to explain away why AIDS proliferates in Africa among heterosexual people to greater extents than in the United States; his article is of course heavily racist in tone, going so far as to describe Africans' heterosexual sex practices as "close to rape by our standards." There were a number of contemporary responses to Gould's article beyond ACT UP, including *AIDS Patient Care*, 2.2 (April 1988), which included three articles responding to Gould, one of which was an interview with *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown. The ACT UP protest of *Cosmopolitan* magazine is covered in Crimp and Rolston (1990:38-43). For an incredibly thorough contemporary study of the gendered narrative of AIDS see Treichler (1988).

<sup>10</sup> Take for example the Gran Fury poster distributed by ACT UP, titled *AIDS: 1 in 61*, which countered the erasure of women and people of color by exposing that "one in every sixty-one babies in New York City is born with AIDS." The answer to why the media pretends otherwise, the poster reveals, is "because these babies are black. These babies are Hispanic" (Crimp and Rolston, 1990:42).

<sup>11</sup> For a sustained study of death and dying in superhero comics see Alaniz (2014:158-281). Moreover, unlike other superheroes who are involved in HIV/AIDS narratives (with the exception of the allegorical Legacy Virus in the X-Men comics), Jet is the only superhero who succumbs to AIDS-related causes. Jet is, however, brought back to life in the late 2000s, most notably in the series *Checkmate*, vol. 2, where she appears with other characters from *The New Guardians* -- this, after several universe- and company-wide reboots that effectively erased the internal history of her death from HIV/AIDS.

<sup>12</sup> Take for example the ACT UP slogan "Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die From It," which was used at a demonstration at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control in 1988 in order to bring attention to the ways in which medical definitions of AIDS made women sufferers invisible (Shotwell, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> *The New Guardians'* letter column is telling in other ways, since the letters betray a distinct interest among many readers -- who run the gamut of identifying as gay, as PWAs, as friends/family of PWAs, and even as health professionals -- about the role of HIV, and later AIDS, throughout the series. Nearly every letter is engaged with some critique of either Extraño's homosexuality or his, Jet's, and Harbinger's HIV/AIDS diagnoses. For a discussion of letter column responses to "coming out" narratives in mainstream comics see Franklin (2009).

<sup>14</sup> Pedro Zamora's many accomplishments as an AIDS activist, including as a member of ACT UP and as a nationally recognized HIV/AIDS education lecturer, are detailed in Morgenthaler (1991), published three years before Zamora appeared on *The Real World*. Zamora's death was widely reported on; see, for example, Israel (1994).

<sup>15</sup> Discussing Chris Claremont's X-Men run in the same period, *New Mutants*

(Marvel) artist Bill Sienkiewicz provided a unique reading that is attuned to the mutant metaphor's versatility in the era of AIDS. At length, Sienkiewicz stated that, "A lot of the religious factions scream about the link between AIDS and gays. Now heterosexuals and children can get it as well; it's no longer seen as a gay disease. The paranoia and fear and misunderstanding are there. "There are the times that try men's souls.'...People tend not to want to be informed because that connotes a certain degree of responsibility and maybe a change in thinking. When they read about the mutant paranoia, it's fifty times removed from the world, yet it's still there. I think that's more the link between the mutant stuff than anything else" (Mangels, 1988a:46).

<sup>16</sup> The Legacy Virus is unveiled on the final page of *X-Force* #18 (Nicieza, Jan. 1993). Illyana Rasputin is first diagnosed in *Uncanny X-Men* #300 (Lobdell, May 1993).

<sup>17</sup> For a very different study of the Legacy Virus, see Norman (2014).

<sup>18</sup> The Legacy Virus remained incurable during the period under discussion, but a cure was effected in *Uncanny X-Men* #390 (Lobdell, Mar. 2001). It should also be noted that, as a biological weapon created for the purpose of exterminating a particular population, Legacy looks very much like the conspiracy theories surrounding HIV/AIDS in the late 1980s. One of the more pernicious of those theories held that HIV was the product of American military scientists who used the virus to cull the population of Africa; only accidentally, according to this theory, did it spread from Africa to the Caribbean, and to the United States. This rumor circulated in the Soviet bloc in the mid-1980s and found its way to British conservative newspapers; it continued to be repeated in newspapers worldwide throughout the late 1980s, as Sontag attests (2001:140-141).

<sup>19</sup> There is, of course, a resemblance between the name of the Mutant Liberation Front and of the Gay Liberation Front, the vanguard of the aptly named 1970s gay liberation movement.

<sup>20</sup> DC's superhero AIDS PSAs appeared infrequently in various comics of their superhero line between 1992 and 1995. They also created a more candid PSA, *Death Talks about Life* (Gaiman, 1994), a sixteen page comic in which Death, from the *Sandman* comics, speaks openly about HIV infection, the toll of AIDS, and the importance of condoms to stopping the spread of HIV. It was published by DC's "mature" imprint Vertigo. Other companies, such as Archie Comics, published AIDS PSAs as well. Comics were recognized as a useful tool for the disbursement of HIV/AIDS education throughout the U.S. The People of Color Against AIDS Network, for example, hired comics creator and scholar Leonard Rifas to produce *AIDS News* in July 1988. For a study of comic books' use in HIV/AIDS education, see McAllister (1992), which is largely about independent comic books and well-known newspaper strips (e.g. "Doonesbury"), though he does discuss DC's PSAs. His study also contextualizes the long history of comic books' uses for social-educational

purposes, the most famous examples of which are *The Amazing Spider-Man* #96 (Lee, May 1971) and *Green Lantern* #85 (O'Neil, Aug. 1971), both about the dangers of drug use and addiction.

<sup>21</sup> This protest is most likely a reference to the widely publicized protests that initially kept HIV-positive teenager Ryan White from attending school in Kokomo, Indiana, and, after a judge ruled that he could return to school, that ultimately led to the White family relocating to a more hospitable town.

<sup>22</sup> Hulk's fear about using his blood for Jim's transfusion is not unfounded; in *Savage She-Hulk* #1 (Lee, Feb. 1980) Bruce Banner (aka the Hulk) gives his dying cousin Jennifer Walters a transfusion, and turns her into the unimaginatively named She-Hulk.

<sup>23</sup> Alaniz discusses Jim's death in brief (2014:195-196), though he does not address Hulk's decision to withhold a potential cure and he does not mention Chet's disturbing death -- arguably a more "meaningless" and therefore more "existential" one.

<sup>24</sup> I have used bold italics font to represent the extra emphasis given the word "stupidity" in the comic, which is rendered in large, bold, red lettering -- an unusual font for comics, but one that is often used by letterer Chris Eliopoulos throughout the *Nomad* series.

<sup>25</sup> *OutWeek* played a crucial role in the history of gay serial publications; see "Open Closets, Closed Doors" (1991) for a discussion of *OutWeek's* legacy after its closing. *Out and About*, the name of the fictional magazine in *Nomad* #14, is also the name of a gay travel newsletter (Walters, 2001:277). For a discussion of Michelangelo Signorile in the context of the gay nineties and his theorizing gay visibility in relation to the closet, see Walters (2001:28-29).

<sup>26</sup> Compare the problem of being "outed" as gay, and of trying to protect one's sexual identity, to the generic fret over the public discovering a superhero's secret identity.

<sup>27</sup> *Static* was published between 1993 and 1997 by Milestone Comics, a company originally founded by four black artists and writers -- Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, Derek T. Dingle -- for the purpose of telling stories predominantly about superheroes of color. Among their taglines they claimed to be starting "A Revolution in Comics"; they also sampled the title of the 1971 Gil Scott-Heron song, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," in their advertisements, as well as quipping that their comics provide "More than Just the Color." Critically, Jeffrey A. Brown has argued that Milestone and their eight-plus series provided an answer to the lack of visibility of people of color in American superhero comics. Although they began as a separate company, Milestone Media struck an immediate deal with DC Comics to publish as an imprint of DC. Using DC's market position as one of the two leading mainstream companies, Milestone was made a significant impact on the comics industry in the mid-1990s. See Brown (2000) for a history of Milestone Comics; shockingly, Nama discusses Milestone

Comics but briefly (2011:93-96). It is prudent to note that Ivan Velez, Jr., writer on several of the “What Are Little Boys Made Of?” issues, is a gay Latino comics creator, and that much of his acclaimed work is independent gay comics. See his website, *Planet Bronx*, [www.planetbronx.com](http://www.planetbronx.com), for more information about his works and biography. As a result of Velez’s importance to the company’s writing projects, Milestone Comics touched on queer themes on several occasions.

<sup>28</sup> A letter from Cathy Renna, also then representing GLAAD, appeared in the letter column responses to Northstar’s coming out in *AF* #106, published four issues later in *AF* #110 (Furman, Jul. 1992).

<sup>29</sup> For fans, Mia’s nickname, “Speedy,” marks her as the contemporary successor to Oliver Queen/Green Arrow’s first sidekick and ward, Roy Harper, who also went by “Speedy.” That Mia’s diagnosis is a result of her former (forced) drug addiction is a nod to *Green Lantern* (vol. 1) #85 (O’Neil, Aug. 1971), wherein it is discovered that Roy Harper/Speedy is a heroin addict. The iconic Neal Adams cover showed a stunned Oliver Queen exclaiming “My ward is a *junkie!*” as Speedy hunches over before him, gripping his upper arm -- needles, vials, and a cooking spoon splayed out on the table next to him.

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