

## Precarious Lines

Heroism and hyper-capability 90s *Nightwing* comics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article discusses the run of the comics series *Nightwing* (Dixon/McDaniel 1996-2009) with particular focus on how hegemonic masculinity and bodily capability are linked and tied to a normative concept of heroism. Through the visual style of the comics and the use of antagonists, the comics rehabilitate the excess and precariousness of the hero, Nightwing, by contrasting him to more extreme forms of masculinity. Although the comics show Nightwing's privilege and ability to be precarious and a source of anxiety and heightened visual tension, the subversive potentials remain unrealized. By relegating excessive, disabled, and working-class forms of masculinity to queered and villainized characters, the comics uphold a nuanced but ultimately normative heroic ideal.

**Keywords:** superheroes, masculinity, able-bodiedness, comics, orientation

"He's gotta be strong, and he's gotta be fast, and he's gotta be larger than life," sings Bonnie Tyler in what is perhaps the most commonly referenced song in superhero scholarship, "Holding out for a

Hero" from 1984. The lyrics epitomize many of the traits associated with the comic book superhero since Superman appeared in 1938: strength, speed, superhuman presence and, not in the least, identified by the masculine pronoun. Growing diversity in superhero scholarship, as well as the heightened degree of exchange between comics studies and queer theory, has led to an ever-increasing number of analyses of the constructions of gender, sexuality, able-bodiedness, class, and race in superhero comics.<sup>2</sup> Despite the male-dominated makeup of both superheroes in general and their imagined readership<sup>3</sup>, masculinity remains under-analyzed, apart from a few key contributions: Jeffrey A. Brown's studies on the intersections of masculinity and blackness in comic books, with a particular focus on Milestone Comics' superhero titles (Brown 1999; 2001); work on the classical male superheroes, Superman, Batman, and Spiderman by scholars such as Edward Avery-Natale and Robert and Julie Voelker-Morris (Avery-Natale 2013; Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014); as well as a study by Mervi Miettinen which investigates masculinity in the context of the oft-claimed "deconstruction of the superhero" in the late 1980s (Miettinen 2014). A recent anthology, edited by Sean Parson and J.L. Schatz, is the first collected edition to explore hegemonic masculinity in superhero media (Parson and Schatz 2019). A subset of studies, including work by Brown and Avery-Natale as well as Anna F. Peppard (Peppard 2018), pays attention to the excessive and extravagant 'beefcake' style of superhero comics in 1990s and the turn towards increasingly hyper-gendered bodies (see Beaty and Woo 2016, 79–80 for a more detailed discussion of the 90s Beefcake aesthetic and politics). While Peppard focuses on the superheroes created and drawn by artists Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld, I wish to turn my attention to another superhero who came into his own in the 90s: DC comics' *Nightwing*, as written by Chuck Dixon and drawn mainly by Scott McDaniel. In doing so, I will be paying special attention to how *Nightwing's* masculinity is constructed and contested, as well as how it intersects with negotiations of able-bodiedness and class. The emergence of masculinity in relation to able-bodiedness and precarity in the comics reveals how heroism is coded through performances of gender and embodiment.

At surface level, the Dixon/McDaniel *Nightwing* run fits with both the aesthetic and the politics of its historical context. As schol-

ars such as Brown, Carolyn Cocca, and Ramzi Fawaz have argued, the changes in the mainstream U.S. comics market in the 1990s, which traded newsstand sales for direct market and led to a homogenization of 'the comics reader,' resulted in an extreme gender binary prevalent in mainstream comics (Cocca 2016; Fawaz 2016; Brown 1999). Nightwing and his supporting cast adhere to stereotypical and exaggerated depictions of hypermasculinity and hypersexualized femininity. I would argue, however, that close reading reveals an awareness within the comics that the foundations for this gender binary are precarious and hinged upon an impossible standard of bodily capability. The vulnerability of Nightwing, which occasionally comes to the fore through the narration and changes in panel structure, presents the hypermasculine body as pure surface with no underlying stable 'truth.' The genre conventions and idealized bodies uphold an impossible standard that goes beyond exaggerated physiques. Read against the grain, the comics tell a story of the entangled natures of masculinity and able-bodiedness and the extremes to which one must go to keep up the charade, as well as how non-normativity is ultimately relegated to the bodies of villains.

### **Nightwing: the manliest hero of them all?**

Nightwing, alias Richard 'Dick' Grayson, first appeared in comics as Batman's sidekick Robin in 1940. As the character aged and new characters took his place as Robin, Grayson became known as the superhero Nightwing, working both alongside Batman, in various superhero teams including the Teen Titans, and on his own. The 1996-2009 run, published by DC Comics and spearheaded by writer Chuck Dixon, was the first solo run for Nightwing (outside a couple of mini-series published in 1995). The main storyline details Nightwing's coming-of-age as an independent superhero, beginning with his move from Gotham to the neighboring town of Blüdhaven, rife with organized crime and outside the unofficial jurisdiction of Batman. In *Nightwing #1*, Grayson loses his exceptionally long ponytail when it is cut off during a fight (Dixon et al. 2014, 117). Apart from the obvious castration metaphor, this begins Nightwing's journey of 'growing up', donning not only a more practical haircut but one which makes him look more like Batman. His costume becomes darker, more streamlined, and slightly less

garish than the tri-colored Robin outfit. And while he still retains the quippy, sarcastic wit associated with the character, the story-arcs and associated villains of the *Nightwing* comics are as dark and fantastical as those in the *Batman* comics. The increasing similarities between protege and mentor are touched upon explicitly in the comics, as Nightwing admits to expecting to 'take over' as Batman in the future. Batman becomes a symbol of successful masculinity, presented as physically capable and able-bodied, as well as extremely wealthy, which both protects his civilian identity through class privilege and enables him to perform vigilantism aided by sophisticated and expensive gadgets.

The interdependency of gender and able-bodiedness are at the forefront of the *Nightwing* comics. Dick Grayson so closely approximates Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's definition of the Normate, which appears in *Extraordinary Bodies* (1997):

[there is] only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports. (Erving Goffman, quoted in Garland-Thomson 1997, 8)

Apart from being unwed, childless, and lacking college education (for which he makes up by actively dating women and joining the police academy), Nightwing fits this description to a tee. He also fits the stereotypical idea of the superhero as a white, adult, able-bodied, hetero- (and, indeed, hyper-) sexual man in possession of above-average fighting and acrobatic skills (See e.g. Coogan 2006; Brown 1999). Nightwing should feel right at home on the pages of a superhero comic, especially one drawn in the beefcake style. However, I would argue that a closer look at the comics reveals a great deal of 'body trouble' attached to and surrounding the figure of Nightwing, destabilizing his normative status and revealing the contingency of superheroic masculinity.

"Classical comic book depictions of masculinity are perhaps the quintessential expression of our cultural beliefs about what it means to be a man," claims Brown in his study of masculinity in comic books (Brown 1999, 26). Brown understands masculinity as

emblemized in the male-coded body, in particular the muscular body, which represents “male superiority” and which “clearly marks an individual as a bearer of masculine power” (Brown 1999, 27). Brown here indirectly identifies what might, with R.W. Connell’s term, be named the hegemonic masculinity of superhero comics in the 1990s. In a 2005 reexamination of the use and development of the term “hegemonic masculinity,” co-authored by Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, it is emphasized that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed and ahistorical set of traits. Rather, it is the expression of the dominant forms of masculinity at a given spatiotemporal location, which is continuously negotiated by those attempting to inhabit a masculine-coded body and/or social position (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 841, 854)the authors defend the underlying concept of masculinity, which in most research use is neither reified nor essentialist. However, the criticism of trait models of gender and rigid typologies is sound. The treatment of the subject in research on hegemonic masculinity can be improved with the aid of recent psychological models, although limits to discursive flexibility must be recognized. The concept of hegemonic masculinity does not equate to a model of social reproduction; we need to recognize social struggles in which subordinated masculinities influence dominant forms. Finally, the authors review what has been confirmed from early formulations (the idea of multiple masculinities, the concept of hegemony, and the emphasis on change. Like the Normate, hegemonic masculinity is a model or construct, which no one person necessarily inhabits but around which men, in particular, orient themselves. Brown’s equation of the male body and masculinity is not uncommon in superhero scholarship; Avery-Natale’s study of superhero embodiment identifies Superman as not only an archetype of superheroes, but an archetype of masculinity (Avery-Natale 2013, 72). He further argues that, despite the superhuman and transgressive capabilities of the superhuman body, the gender binary seems to be the one thing superheroes are unable to transcend (Avery-Natale 2013, 95). This argument dovetails with Brown’s identification of the male-coded superhero body as a site of masculinity, exemplified through exaggerated musculature and traits usually coded as masculine: strength, hardness, and impenetrability.

Nightwing's hypermasculinity is tied to his status as hyper-capable. His body, which is drawn in great detail by McDaniel and is the visual focus on almost every page of the comic, becomes a site for exploring the fraught links between gender and able-bodiedness. Cynthia Barounis, discussing Batman, has argued that the visual aesthetic of impenetrability in the superhero genre works to link heteromascularity with able-bodiedness and heightened capability (Barounis 2013, 316). But although Barounis sees little to no queer potential in such depictions, I find that the *Nightwing* comics repeatedly underline the contingent nature of the hero's impenetrable body and capability in both narrative and visuals. Should he lose his extraordinary abilities, we are led to understand, his entire identity would come crashing down around him. According to Peppard, a strictly binary gender difference is upheld and pushed to extremes in 90s comic book style. Peppard reads the "excessive superhero bodies" as expressing the "fears and desires that underpinned the image-focused culture of the 1980s and 1990s," citing bodybuilding, fitness culture, and other image-focused body trends during the era (Peppard 2018, 3). Following this argument, the excessive style of drawing prevalent in superhero comics can be seen as the continuation of the deconstructive trend in superhero comics in the 80s, which according to Miettinen is a reaction to the same "crisis in masculinity" with regards to masculine embodiment in the U.S. Miettinen further suggests, pointing to the example of the character Rorschach in Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* (1986-87), that the 'deconstructive' move of pushing masculinity to the extreme also leads to an embodiment of those extreme ideals, which might hold appeal not just as parody, but as an affirmation (Miettinen 2014, 107). Further, according to Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris;

Mainstream superhero narratives are significant to explore in terms of gender because of the ways in which representations of seemingly one-dimensional muscle-bound males tap into complex multi-dimensional social archetypes and socio-political themes. (Voelker-Morris and Voelker-Morris 2014, 101)



In other words, depictions of superheroic masculinity as excessive embodiment has both normative and subversive potentials. Keeping this in mind, I will now look to how hegemonic masculine ideals prevalent to 90s superhero comics are negotiated through both style and narrative in the Dixon/McDaniels *Nightwing* run and how these are entangled with heroism.

### **Masculinity on the edge**

For decades, the superhero genre has placed male superheroes in a complicated social space somewhere between the extremely heteronormative ideals of gender, which amongst other things results in the hypersexualized images of women, and a homosocial collective practice of donning tight spandex suits and fighting crime in all-male (or mostly male) teams. Nightwing's narrative explores this contingent masculinity. This becomes particularly apparent in *Nightwing* #25, titled "The Boys," which depicts Nightwing and the then-current Robin on a training expedition atop a moving freight train, voluntarily blindfolded. The story serves as a break from the overall story-arc, as the pair encounter no recurring villains and make no progress in open investigations. During their discussions of the risks inherent in vigilante work, Nightwing and Robin touch upon the subject of Jason Todd, another former Robin who was beaten to death by the villain The Joker. The sequence highlights the emotional vulnerability of the two heroes by using low, wide panels showing close-ups of their faces (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275–77).

This is a departure from the mostly vertical panel structure utilized throughout the *Nightwing* comics, which is especially suited for showing Nightwing's high-speed acrobatics. Full-page panels and highly stylized pages of three side-by-side tall panels are frequently utilized throughout the run, often showing Nightwing in the technique known as simultaneous figuration (Groensteen 2013, 24; CF Gravett 2008), in which a character is depicted multiple times across the page to illustrate high-speed movement (See e.g. Dixon et al. 2014, 139).

This characterizes Nightwing as a dynamic character who is almost always in motion, directing the eyes of the reader as they move across the pages. He is the master of his own narrative, at least when unchallenged. The standard panel shape in the Dixon/



Figure 1. "Excerpt from Dixon et al 2016, 276.  
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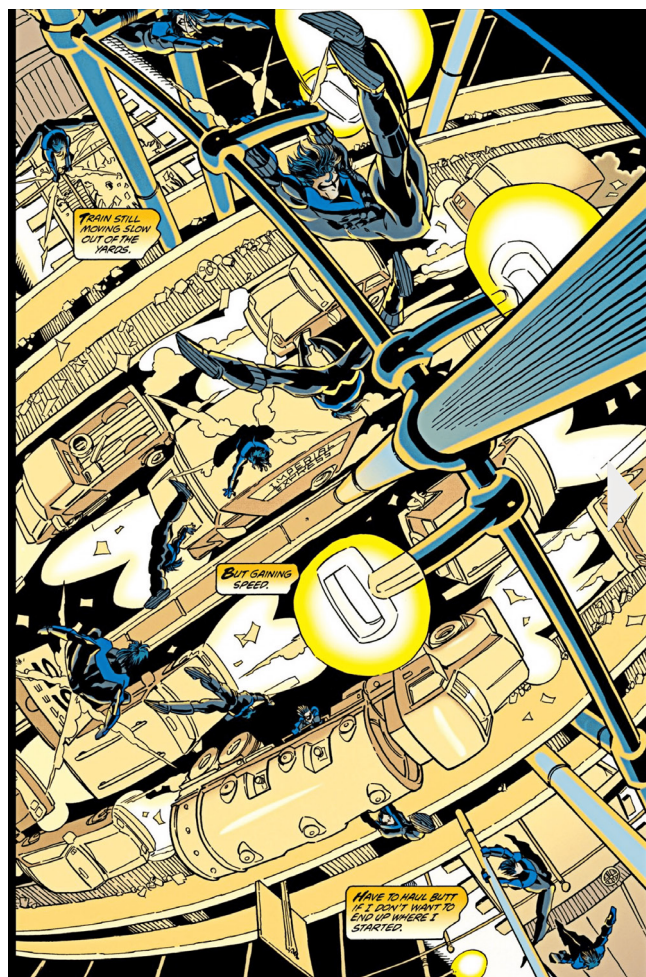


Figure 2. "Excerpt from Dixon et al 2014, 139.  
© DC Comics "

McDaniel run, which can only be described as phallic, frames Nightwing literally as an 'upstanding guy', pushing the narrative forward at breakneck speed. In contrast, the horizontal panel orientation which dominates "The Boys" makes it possible for both heroes to be depicted at once, next to each other, but also brings the reader closer to them emotionally, taking part in their relationship. The intimacy of the discussion leads to Robin confessing to feeling fearful when working as a superhero, unlike Batman and Nightwing, whom he believes to be fearless (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 276). Nightwing explains that the fearlessness is a façade and that



he often gets scared, “Mostly of **failing**. Sometimes of **dying**.” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 277). But just as the sequence threatens to completely dismantle the tough and capable heroes, the team of would-be robbers shows up, giving our heroes the chance to prove their physical capability. The tension between depictions of heroism and depictions of vulnerability becomes clear through the changing panel structure and the discussions of heroism. On the one hand, vulnerability and precarity is shown to be part and parcel of being a superhero. On the other, the visual separation of emotional vulnerability and bodily hyper-capability in different panel styles suggests an incompatibility of the two.

Earlier in the sequence, Nightwing and Robin are forced to leap off the train when a group of teenagers throw rocks onto it. Nightwing only just manages to cling onto the carriage and a shocked Robin wants to take off his blindfold and stop the training. “NO! You can’t change the rules when the game is rough.” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275).

Nightwing exclaims, to which Robin protests that they are putting themselves in mortal danger purely for training. Nightwing retorts that they put their lives on the line constantly when on duty, “So what’s so different about **tonight**?” (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 275). Being Nightwing always means living on the edge, no matter the circumstances. It becomes clear to the reader, in this sequence and throughout the run, that Nightwing’s hyper-capability and superheroic identity are so closely linked that one cannot exist without the other. This is further emphasized by the fact that we rarely see Grayson out of costume – and in the rare cases that we do, he is posed dynamically and usually on the move or fighting. Nightwing is always in movement and testing his limits, which is reflected in the visuals, linking his embodied masculine heterosexuality with able-bodiedness and hyper-capability.

Garland-Thomson argues that able-bodied people shy away from disabled bodies because they are a visual reminder of our own precarious able-bodiedness. Highlighting the unstable nature of normative embodiment can thus destabilize the permanence usually ascribed to gender and sexual identity, as they are linked to able-bodiedness (Garland-Thomson 1997, 14, 37). Peppard makes a similar argument in her reading of hyper-masculine superheroes:

the combined rigidity and ultra-detailed partible-ness of Lee's male superheroes advertises their (super)heroic ability to remain hard, self-contained, and ready for action amid and despite the seemingly impossible challenge of holding together hundreds of tiny, individually articulated parts that one wrong movement – or one moment of softness – might otherwise topple, or at the very least rearrange. (Peppard 2018, 10)

The *Nightwing* comics foreground this cultural anxiety by making Nightwing embody it: his superhero identity is explicitly shown and described as dependent on his capability, which is neither guaranteed nor stable, but which nevertheless scaffolds his entire being. The extreme depiction of his body visualizes the extreme nature of his identity, while at the same time highlighting the shaky ground on which his identity is erected.

### **Villainous masculinity**

Having explored how Nightwing's masculinity is explored and challenged through the visual style of the comics, it has become apparent that the comics themselves offer a critique of the mutually reinforcing standards of able-bodiedness and masculinity. This critique becomes more apparent, but is also complicated, when considering the antagonists offered as contrasts to Nightwing throughout the run. I turn now to two examples, Torque and Nite-Wing, to illustrate how their embodiments of disability and working-class youth, respectively, rehabilitate the hegemonic masculinity represented by Nightwing by disassociating it from 'bad' traits and linking it to heroism by contrasting it with the explicit villainy of the antagonists.

Nightwing encounters Torque in the very first issue as the corrupt police inspector Dudley 'Deadly' Soames. Soames is a traditional 'dirty cop', who both helps Nightwing and sells him out to über-villain Blockbuster (Dixon et al. 2014, 262). As Soames fails to eliminate Nightwing, Blockbuster attempts to murder Soames by applying his signature move: twisting the victim's head around 180 degrees. Miraculously, Soames survives this attempt on his life (Dixon et al. 2015, 75), and after treatment and extensive physical therapy returns as the villain Torque, whose head is permanently



Figure 3. "Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 186.  
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fixed in a backwards position (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 76). Like his 'creator', Blockbuster, whose body is distorted to inhuman size and strength by advanced steroids, Torque inhabits a grotesque and impossible body. His entire identity is reoriented, literally and figuratively, by his new body; he takes the name 'Torque' after the force which rotates objects around their own axis, he leaves palindromic messages for his enemies, and frequently speaks in puns related to his disability. When identified as Soames by Nightwing, he replies, "That life's **behind** me now. / That's a bit o' **cripple** humor." (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 116). His wholesale embrace of this new and different form of embodiment is reflected in the page layouts, which increasingly feature Torque in circular panels, which have been a recurring feature throughout the run. These mimic the mirrors which Torque uses to navigate, connection the circular motif to him (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 186).

Although Torque and Nightwing may seem like opposites and are positioned antagonistically, their narratives mirror each other: as Soames leaves the police force to become the vigilante Torque, Nightwing joins the police academy to aid his vigilante

work. The trope of the villain as a 'dark mirror' of the superhero is a staple of the genre (Coogan 2006, 103), as is the framing of disability and/or disfigurement as leading to a villainous nature (Alaniz 2014, 88). Both tropes are utilized to make a point about the fate which, according to the logic of the comic, awaits someone irreversibly disabled by their exploits: villainy and disfigurement. Torque and Blockbuster both represent exaggerated and deformed versions of masculinity, which are coded as evil and linked to a failed performance of able-bodiedness. While the disability politics of the comic, which are in line with a long-standing tradition in the genre, are not exactly progressive, they do

hint at the dangers of hyper-masculinity and its entanglement with compulsory able-bodiedness by villainizing even more extreme forms than those embodied by Nightwing.

Another antagonist who mirrors Nightwing is Tad Ryerstad, a juvenile delinquent who is inspired to vigilantism by Nightwing, donning the moniker 'Nite-Wing' and employing ultra-violent street-style fighting along with very poor judgement (Dixon, Grayson, et al. 2016, 181).

As his name suggests, he is a 'discount version' of the main hero; working alone and without a mentor like Batman, jumping into fights with no premeditation or investigative work, accidentally assaulting innocent passers-by, and showing little to no empathy in his work. His outfit is homemade, and, unlike Nightwing, he has no specialized equipment or training to make up for his lack of superpowers. He is quickly established as a foil to Nightwing, who must rescue him on several occasions (e.g. in *Nightwing* #22) and is often credited with his blunders, as police and criminals alike mistake the two for each other.

Nite-Wings origin story, revealed in an appendix to the trade paperback *Nightwing Vol. 4: Love and Bullets*, contains thinly veiled references to Dr Fredric Wertham and the Comics Code controversy, setting up Tad as a young boy who flees a traumatic upbringing by reading violent comics, which in turn make him a sociopath with a distorted sense of reality (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 278). Unlike Nightwing, he has grown up poor and without the privilege of being taken in by a billionaire superhero who could act as a mentor. Nite-Wing is, essentially, Nightwing without the class privilege and is framed by the genre conventions as a ruthless antagonist. While the comic aligns the reader with Nightwing's perspective, making it hard to read Nite-Wing sympathetically, one can identify a critique in the framing of Nite-Wing as Nightwing's mirror. Read reparatively, Nite-Wings grossly caricatured past and blundering aggression can be understood as a comment on the role of class privilege in superheroics, where the well-to-do hero is trusted more than the do-it-yourself version. Both Nite-Wing and Torque, however, are marginalized by their choice to 'do evil', framed purely as a voluntary turn of events. The comics do not seriously comment on the privileges which allow Nightwing to inhabit a morally superior form of vigilantism, rather framing him as a self-made man



who comes up from nothing and chooses to do good. As long as 'evil' is safely contained in the bodies of Torque and Nite-Wing, our hero remains safe – and, indeed, heroic. The boundaries are muddled, however, by the repeated emphasis placed on Nightwing's similarities to these villains. He risks being 'tainted' by the darkness at every turn. Tying the circular panels to Torque and positioning Nite-Wing as a 'dark twin' infuses the narrative with the sense of precarity discussed above. The villains thus function as orientation devices in both narrative and visuals; at surface level, they safely locate non-normativity outside of the hero.

While rehabilitating Nightwing's privilege, Torque and Nite-Wing also function as guarantors for Nightwing's masculinity as respectable and mature. Not only is Nightwing's masculinity linked to his able-bodiedness and class, it is also linked to his heroism in contrast to the gendering of the villainous characters. In his study of comic book masculinity, Brown argues that the male superhero relies on the dual nature of both a strong, 'masculine' side – usually, the one wearing the costume – and a softer, 'feminine' side – usually, the 'civilian' identity. Comic book masculinity, Brown writes, "is ultimately premised on the *inclusion* of the devalued side." (Brown 1999, 32) In other words, Nightwing's vulnerability marks him, both in the visuals and in contrast to the antagonists, as more 'truly' masculine, not less. When Torque's status as able-bodied is taken from him, his stereotypical dirty-cop masculinity turns from cocky to murderous. His tendency towards evil is characterized in part through his attitude towards women, whom he deliberately endangers and/or kills to save his own skin. He threatens Blockbuster's elderly mother in an attempt to get the upper hand on the crime lord (Dixon et al. 2015, 69) and murders the woman doctor in charge of his rehabilitation (Dixon, Beatty, et al. 2016, 32). Similarly, Nite-Wing represents an immature and crass approach to 'saving the day and the girl', frequently assaulting innocent bystanders and lashing out against those who taunt him for his lack of finesse and class. Neither villain shows nuance or any sign of being in touch with any other version of masculinity than a hard-edged and ruthless reliance on physical strength and violence. Between them, Torque and Nite-Wing reveal Nightwing's masculinity to be entangled in able-bodied and class privilege, as well as how Nightwing's more vulnerable and less hard-edged masculinity, following

Brown's argument, is reinforced as hegemonic. In this, of course, its entanglement with other forms of privilege is essential.

### **Queering the beefcake**

Dixon and McDaniel never leave us in any doubt that Nightwing is as 'manly' as any traditional superhero. They do, however, stress that constantly living on the edge makes him vulnerable and means that he could lose his able-bodied and, by extension, masculine privilege at any point. Masculinity is expressed, visually and narratively, as an embodied experience of privilege, although of a fleeting kind. The spectacular nature of the hyper-masculine body can be read as reifying its dominance, but also as placing the superheroic male body in a position we usually think of as being inhabited by the feminine-coded body: that of the visual spectacle, the fetishized object, the body on display in suggestive poses. Peppard's work on the 90s visual style argues that the excessive way in which male bodies are depicted suggests "a new permeability of the boundaries between masculinity and femininity, and/or between spectacular bodies that are ego ideals and spectacular bodies that are sexual objects." (Peppard 2018, 7). This move, in turn, can be read in several ways: as visual dominance and a power play AND as a subversive moment which renders the hypermasculine body as bleeding into stereotypically 'feminized' territory. While a classic gender binary would identify invulnerability as masculine and vulnerability as feminine, as well as the active/dynamic as masculine and the passive as feminine, the hyper-masculinity represented by Nightwing is linked to vulnerability. By re-coding vulnerability and precarity as masculine, the comics turn the binary on its head, at the same time re-coding masculinity as vulnerable and precarious. The gender binary, while not deconstructed completely, is reworked. It is important, however, to keep in mind the ubiquity of this extreme visual style at the time of publication. Nightwing may appear, particularly to readers today, to be absurdly hyper-gendered. But in the context of the comics, however much they explore the vulnerability of this body, he is positioned as a heroic, rather than grotesque, embodiment of masculine strength and prowess.

The deconstructing move performed on the comics pages is countered in the use of villainous characters, whose function seems primarily to be to rehabilitate Nightwing's masculinity and norma-

tive status by embodying disability, working-class crassness, and misogynistic masculinity, all of which are entangled in the villainous 'other'. Villains like Blockbuster and Torque are framed as even more absurdly exaggerated embodiments of able-bodied masculinity, pushed to extremes that become disabling. And failed vigilantes such as Nite-Wing embody the lack of class privilege and maturity which Nightwing has transcended by growing up with a billionaire mentor/father figure. By framing Torque and Nite-Wing as more extreme, more queer, and more crass than Nightwing, the comics normalize a hero whose masculinity and capability would otherwise be understood as extreme.

The vilification of the antagonists hints that Nightwing's overcompensatory embodiment and identity are in danger of sliding into villainy. While it becomes clear that his privilege protects him, his precarity can thus also be read as a warning about excessive masculinity and the dangers of being at the extremes of the gender binary. The superhero body is still an idealized body and the superhero genre still frames this body and its exploits as wish-fulfillment, but the parodic extremity of the visual style and the careful attempts to rehabilitate masculinity as more than just having a lot of muscle mass also frame the superhero body and genre as a warning against one-dimensional, invulnerable masculinity.

The 90s 'beefcake' style may have been the norm at the time Dixon and McDaniel began their run on *Nightwing*, but read today, it is almost impossible to overlook the queer potential of the grotesque art style and the clichéd plots. *Nightwing* establishes an almost picture-perfect Normate, only to test and question him at every turn, even making him muse aloud about how his entire being would collapse should his body fail him. And while, at surface level, the *Nightwing* comics present a hypermasculine superhero who fits perfectly with the extreme aesthetics and conservative gender politics of the time, close reading reveals a more nuanced negotiation and rehabilitation of extreme masculinity – even though the extremes are ultimately vilified. The queer potential is thus never truly realized but exists as messy negotiations on the visually busy pages. Heroism, nevertheless, remains linked to a form of masculinity, which – when shored up by privileges of able-bodiedness and wealth – can encompass vulnerability.

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### Endnotes

- 1 The author wishes to thank Dr. Michael Nebeling Petersen for his help and advice on this article.
- 2 See e.g. the 2018 special issue of *American Literature*, "Queer About Comics", as well as monographs by Nama (2011), Alaniz (2014), Cocca (2016), and Fawaz (2016), to name a few.
- 3 I am yet to identify a piece of superhero scholarship which imagines a male-led superhero title to be aimed primarily at girls or women.