

An Exploration into Queerness and Race in Contemporary Comics

Written by Rudy Loewe

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RUDY LOEWE, OCT 12 2016

There has been a visible increase in the inclusion of queer in mainstream comics over the last few years. Queer is an umbrella term for people who are attracted to various genders and don't identify as straight. Our representation, and that of trans characters, in comics is refreshing and important. Being able to see ourselves reflected in the media, in a way that we can relate to, is humanising. Comics have the potential to be a part of social discourse and do so in many forms, online, but also in print media, such as newspapers, allowing for sometimes radical ideas to make their way into unlikely spaces. Comic artists and publishers often take risks to broach topics that are yet to feature in others forms of media. The examples that I have chosen to discuss are a reflection of my own reading and interests; often I search for characters of colour and queer characters – preferably both. Sometimes the comics have a relationship to each other, sometimes they hardly have any. They span an incredible number of genres and topics.

One of my favourites, *Saga* (Vaughan and Staples, 2012) includes varied sexualities, without their being a main component of the storyline. In the fantasy fiction series, Gwendolyn – who is a black bisexual woman – is a strong and likeable character included in the narrative. Gwendolyn first enters the story as a scorned lover. Her fiancée Marko left her for Alana, whilst fighting in a war. Gwendolyn is hunting Marko down, as he stole something of hers, a family heirloom.

At first I felt slightly disappointed that this dark skinned black woman was being used in the story as the less desirable lover, in contrast to Alana, who is light skinned. But as her own story develops, outside of the context of Alana and Marko, her character becomes more complex. We, the readers, discover that her ex was a woman called Velour, whom she lost her virginity to.

The way that queerness is presented in the comic strengthens the notion that being attracted to different genders is not a remarkable idea that needs to be shouted about from atop a mountain. Instead, it is a part of ordinary life. Moreover, black women's bodies are often portrayed as 'exotic' and sexually available, or relegated to a lower, 'lesser' position than that of white women's bodies. But Gwendolyn's character challenges these stereotypes. Gwendolyn has more of the complexities of real human beings. She is angry because of her mistreatment and wants to get something back that belongs to her. She is also caring and soft and knows how to assert her boundaries. For example, when another character tries to kiss her non-consensually, she punches him in the face.

Another contemporary example that includes LGBT characters is *The Wicked + The Divine* (Gillen and McKelvie, 2014). It is an ongoing series about young people selected to be gods for two years before meeting their untimely deaths. A number of the gods are queer. Gods can symbolise the holy, as the title says – the divine – something that is pure and good. Whilst the notions of 'good and pure' do not reflect all of the gods, this could suggest that the sexualities of gods operate outside of a human framework. My intention in this reading is not to put queerness on a pedestal, but rather to explore the subtext of having multiple gods with fluid sexualities.

Baal is a masculine black man, always dressed in a suit, reminiscent of Kanye West. In the series we find out that he was in love with Inanna, another god who looks remarkably similar to the musician Prince. Baal's character verges on the hyper masculine, whilst having a visible softness and strong emotional ties to Inanna. Their relationship seems

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complicated; the reader can sense a dramatic history. But Baal's sexuality is not hidden and his character doesn't fall into the dominant theme of queer men compensating for a perceived lack of masculinity – an internalised form of homophobia. In this reading of the comic it could be seen that their divine status puts the gods above the ideas of what sexuality is and denotes about a person. None of the gods seem to have any angst about their sexuality, and they experience drama like any other person. This is a refreshing portrayal of queerness.

Another interpretation could focus on the fact that Baal and Inanna are no longer together – a common narrative for queer people and people of colour, suggesting that our romances are doomed, and our lives must inevitably end in tragedy.

There is also a trans woman of colour, in the form of Cassandra. At the beginning of the plot the reader isn't aware that she is a trans woman. This is important because it shows that trans characters can be included into narratives without it being the centre point of why they are included in the story. At some point later it is brought up in a conversation with the god Woden, who fetishises Asian women. He attempts to recruit her as one of his Valkyries, his group of followers. From the beginning the reader is aware that all the gods experience fame and fortune for two years and then die. We could question if queers being doomed to short lives is also part of this downfall.

Are they wicked gods or divine? And this seems to be an overarching theme of the series.

Moving into an entirely different genre of comics, *Spit and Passion* (Road, 2012) is a coming of age story about growing up Cuban American, Catholic and queer. It highlights Road's experience of tensions living in a Catholic Cuban household and being part of American punk culture. Using the thread of Green Day, the protagonist's favourite band, and Catholic iconography, she creates a juxtaposition, one she finds herself at the centre of. And amongst all of this she has to deal with her feelings of queerness, a crush on a girl and searching for queer icons in punk.

Spit and Passion highlights an important dynamic: how "coming out" can also be further complicated by our relationships to religion and culture.

Another great example of queer comic book characters is in the Hernandez Brothers' series *Love and Rockets* (Hernandez, Hernandez and Hernandez, 1982). Two of the main characters, Hopey and Maggie, are best friends. In their closeness, their relationship sometimes has a sexual aspect, though it would be a stretch to say they are dating. Maggie dates men, whilst it seems that Hopey only dates women. This storyline presents an exception in the trend, in that there is a limited representation of Latinx, a gender-inclusive term for people of Latin American heritage, in comics. Jaime Hernandez' portrayal of these characters over the many years that the comic has been running, is believable. The danger of creating certain types of characters in comics, it seems, is that creators can come to rely on lazy stereotypes. And coming from the group described can make these inaccurate portrayals hurtful to say the least. Hernandez doesn't fall into this trap. Over the years, they are characters that you can fall in love with.

In my own work as an artist I have addressed themes such as *Decolonising Queer* (Loewe, 2016). This was a comic exploring language or the way that 'queer' can become imperialistic (I myself am guilty of this). In the comic I talk about how calling myself queer to my Jamaican auntie is not going to aid the conversation, but instead create barriers. And if the intention of language is to communicate with others, then language needs to be fluid to cater to the other person(s).

Having queer characters in works, even when the narrative is not specifically about being queer is crucial.

In another ongoing comic I am working on, *Medusa* (Loewe, 2015) is about a young black woman who has snakes for hair. For me she is the perfect anti-hero, embodying a number of tropes that are thrust upon black women. It was an important sub-narrative for me that she is queer. Often in the context of people who are assumed to somehow be less desirable, the idea of sexual agency is assumed to be non-existent. Too often fat people, dark skinned people, disabled people, are shown as being without sexual agency. I wanted to challenge this and show a complex representation of a dark skinned, fat black woman who is unapologetic in her body and has her own sexual agency.

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There is, and I assume always will be, room for improvement in the presentation of varied gender identities and sexualities in comics. But it is exciting to see the inclusion of LGBT characters, especially made by LGBT creators, in a way that isn't just tokenistic. I hope that this kind of representation continues, facilitating a larger space for LGBT people and people of colour to represent ourselves.

References

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About the author:

Rudy Loewe's practice includes drawing comics, illustrations, zines and prints. Rudy's intention is to take complex ideas and narratives, drawing them out into more accessible and digestible formats. Using comedy and satire Rudy's work subverts dominant power structures and starts difficult conversations around intersectionality. You can see more of their work here.