



QUEER ANTIHEROISM OF DC COMICS' *SECRET SIX*

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ABSTRACT

Following the increase of LGBTQ+ characters and growing demands for authentic diversity in the superhero genre, the concern for queer representation in superhero comics scholarship has risen in the past few years, which is undoubtedly a significant advancement. One character that frequently appears in discussions of queer representation is Marvel's Northstar, who is the first major superhero to have come out as gay in 1992. Similarly, Batwoman with her much-acclaimed solo series in DC, and the very popular superhero team Young Avengers from Marvel, where most of the members are sexual minorities, have also gained attention. While these characters and series have been rightfully highlighted by scholars, there is one series (and team) that barely appears in past or present superhero scholarship despite its remarkable and distinct depiction of queerness: DC Comics' Secret Six (2006-2007; 2008-2011). This paper thus sheds light on the Secret Six, their antiheroism, and their unique queerness. I argue that the fact that the Secret Six are antiheroes, rather than superheroes, who are traditionally expected to maintain the status quo even in terms of gender display, or supervillains, who are traditionally Othered in extreme ways for their "gender transgression," is what allows the Secret Six a freedom to operate in queer ways neither party does nor can. Through their narratives, they repeatedly challenge heteronormative ideals, openly disrupting gender norms that have been essentially upheld by superheroism, and confront the privileges superheroes have been given in their societies.

Keywords: antihero; gender; sexuality; US American (super)heroes; queer identity.

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1. INTRODUCING THE SECRET SIX

The concern for queer representation in superhero comics scholarship has risen drastically in the past few years. This is both an understandable and significant advancement since the number of LGBTQ+ characters has increased in the superhero genre, following the growing demands for diversity and authentic depictions of minorities. Such scholarship varies in approaches, providing numerous perspectives on queer representation. For example, Jessica Plummer provides a chronological analysis, pinpointing key moments in superhero history (2023), while Daniel Stein (2018) and Ramzi Fawaz (2016) identify an inherent queer nature in superhero storytelling, and scholars such as Olivia Hicks (2020)

select individual characters or series to demonstrate how they and/or their stories contribute to queer representation.

One character that frequently appears in deliberations of queer representation in superhero comics is Marvel's Northstar, who is the first major superhero to have opened up about his homosexuality in *Alpha Flight* #106 (Mar. 1992). Others include Batwoman, with her much-acclaimed solo series from DC Comics, and the very popular superhero team Young Avengers from Marvel, where the majority of the members are sexual minorities. In recent depictions, both Superman's son Jon Kent, who is first known as Superboy but eventually becomes Superman, and Tim Drake, the third Robin and current Red Robin, are openly bisexual, and have garnered compelling discussions.

All of such characters, series, and individual issues have been rightfully brought up by scholars in their studies on queer representation. However, there is one series (and team) that barely appears in past or present superhero scholarship despite its remarkable and distinct depiction of queerness: DC Comics' *Secret Six* (2006–2007; 2008–2011). The Secret Six was originally a team that appeared in DC Comics in the 1960s, later re-introduced in the 1980s with new characters. It was once more renewed in the comic event *Infinite Crisis* (2005–2006) tie-in miniseries *Villains United* (2005–2006) by Gail Simone. She had recreated here an entirely new version of the team, which led to the limited solo series *Secret Six* (2006–2007) and another in the same name but with a much longer run consisting of thirty-six issues, lasting from 2008 to 2011. Members of the team change frequently throughout Simone's series, but the central characters remain the same: Scandal Savage, Deadshot, Catman (not to be mistaken with Catwoman); and Ragdoll. Additional members who become just as crucial include Jeannette, Knockout, and Bane among others; as well as Cheshire, who is an original member appearing in *Villains United* but betrays the Six. While this team and series are rarely ever mentioned in superhero studies that focus on gender, sexuality, or otherwise, they portray an incredibly intricate array of queerness that subverts heteronormative understandings of gender that appear even in works featuring sexual minorities.

This may perhaps be due to the fact that the Secret Six is a team of not superheroes but rather antiheroes. Generally, as many scholars have pointed out, one of the primary and traditional functions of the superhero is to prevent threatening forces from upsetting social order, or in other words, to maintain the status quo (Reynolds 1992, 50; Bahlmann 2016, 75). "Status quo" here does not only refer to social order of lawfulness but also the upholding of hegemonic beliefs. While this may certainly involve beliefs about morality and goodness, it also involves assumptions towards gender and sexuality. More often than not, superheroism has traditionally entailed heteronormativity as a requisite (see King 2021), endorsing it as part of the status quo. The Secret Six, who are not superheroes but antiheroes, or characters who, though they "typically encourag[e] sympathy" from

the audience (Vaage 2015, xvi), are morally ambiguous and at times corrupt, have no obligation to stay within these regulations.

Unlike the superhero's display of "upstanding" heteronormativity, supervillains have commonly exhibited gender transgressive or queer behavior. Representation of sexual minorities has undoubtedly advanced significantly but, traditionally, supervillainy has been where those who parade sexually deviant behavior end up. Though discriminatory stereotypes have been challenged and positive representation has been promoted through superheroes over the years, the usage of abject gender, or gender deviance, in constructing villainy among supervillains remains, on the large, unquestioned. This, then, implies that superheroes' morality and display of gender and sexuality are linked in that their world-saving also involves the retaining of the heteronormative status quo from the sexual deviants. In comparison, though antiheroes may be "mocked for [their] insufficiencies, vices, and foibles" which can easily refer to queerness, they are "never delimited by them" (Torrance 1978, 5). Consequently, especially when the antiheroes appear as protagonists, who are in a more likely position to invite sympathy from readers, the trope where (exaggerated) sexual Otherness is directly linked to immorality as commonly seen in supervillains is more easily averted. Therefore, that the Secret Six are not supervillains, whose role is to bring abjection to the readers through exaggerated depictions of gender transgressive Otherness, is a key factor too.

Compared to these two extremes of superheroism and supervillainy, where one must uphold the hegemonic values while the other represents evil deviance, the antihero in the superhero genre floats in a very vague in-between. Therefore, in this paper, I argue that the fact that the Secret Six are antiheroes, rather than superheroes, who are expected to be the upholders of majority values and the status quo, or supervillains, who are Othered in extreme ways, is what allows the Secret Six a freedom to operate in queer ways neither party does nor can. Not only that, the Six's expressions of sexualities and gender are, as I will demonstrate in sections below, unlimited, a factor that leads to them acting in ways that disrupt gender norms and heteronormativity. But as protagonists, their disruptive queerness is not portrayed as a negative force. And through their narratives, they openly question heteronormative ideals that have been essentially upheld and challenge the privileged statuses superheroes have been given in their societies by hegemony and the status quo. Never really has been there a superteam where almost everyone exhibits a "queer" queerness that defects from gender and sexual expectations that are inflicted upon not only the majority/superhero but the minority/supervillain as well. That there is no scholarship on this series overlooks the significance of how the Secret Six offers new and unique forms of queer expression.

2. THE QUEER SUPER-ANTIHERO

An antihero commonly refers to a “flawed protagonist” (Lotz 2014), who “lack[] the qualities of nobility and magnanimity expected of traditional heroes and heroines” (Baldick 1996). Especially in the superhero genre, many antiheroes willingly commit morally questionable and excessive violence that may lead to deaths of their opponents. Yet, they are not simplistically evil; antiheroes are complex in that the characters are usually depicted as “struggling with their responses to circumstances not entirely of their making” (Baldick 1996) or fighting in a world that would rather “cast [them] into the shadows” (Barksdale 1996, 8) for their unwillingness to comply to societal standards. For this, they garner sympathy and from the audience, who root for the antiheroes’ (unlikely) victory.

However, these characters are, especially in popular media, not without problems as gender norms are highly active in antiheroism (see Mitchell 2015). In addition to how antihero protagonists are most likely male, Susan Hopkins (2020) finds these men are driven into antiheroism because they experienced “male anxiety, shame, paranoia or humiliation [that] can only be effectively dealt with or avenged through violent actions” too excessive and perhaps self-centric to be considered heroic (n.p.). Many antiheroic narratives, then, are about men who endeavor to take back control of their lost masculinity by becoming an “avenging masculine” (n.p.). Hopkins reads the antiheroic men’s stereotypically masculine aggression and violence as a reclaiming and enforcing of patriarchy. As such, antiheroism and masculinity, or rather, toxic masculinity, considering the men’s aggressiveness and violence, is central to an antiheroic man. While recent popular series and works with antiheroic women have been on the rise, such as with characters like Harley Quinn, there remains a “distinct lack of female characters who invite us to embrace their troubling morality” (Mitchell 2015). On this, Jason Mitchell (2015) observes that traditional “cultural norms [are] at play” (Ch. 4). There still seems to be societal insistence that masculine display of “ruthlessness, self-promotion, and the pursuit of success at any cost” call for “respect[] and admir[ance]” (Ch. 4). This is in heavy contrast to women who continue to be understood as figures to be acted upon rather than taking action which displace them from the more forceful antiheroism.

However, while in general, antiheroes do tend to fall into traditional patterns of gender, antiheroic characters can also show “unexpected resilience and fortitude” against hegemonic norms (Brombert 1999, 2). This especially may be the case in the superhero genre. As many scholars have pointed out and as I have noted in the introduction, one of the traditional and fundamental responsibilities of the superhero is sustaining the status quo (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 501). On the contrary, antiheroes of the superhero genre “do not reaffirm the status quo’s values; instead, they challenge them. They bring a fracture with a negative reality” (Favaro 2019, 5). In superhero comics, then, the antiheroes’ disruptions of society have the power to reveal to the superheroes of their fictional

worlds as well as their readers the imperfection and unfairness of the society, which may very well include gender norms.

The antiheroes are able to do this because they proactively go up against what they deem as the enemy. One notable characteristic and trope of the superhero that many scholars have pointed out is that superheroes must remain responsive, rather than active (Reynolds 1992, 51). In other words, superheroes must be passive in that they must wait until a crime has been committed by a supervillain, and only then can they engage in battles. This is so that the superhero, who possesses superabilities, does not become too threatening to society, and this genre convention asserts to both readers and the civilians of the fictional universe that the superheroes will not use their powers for their personal gains. Yet, this also means that while evil continues to persist in the world, superheroes cannot do anything about it until supervillains move forward with their evil plots. Without restrictions by the genre or expectations to act superheroically passive, antiheroes have no need to “wait for an external threat, but attacks evil already present within society” like the superheroes (Favaro 2019, 5). As a result, not only do antiheroes have more freedom to take action against what *they* consider as threats and enemies instead of what the law, hegemony, or society does, but they can do so *when* they see fit.

Unfortunately, the antiheroes are seldom effective in bringing justice to the world as they see it inside and outside the superhero genre. This, in the case of superhero comics, is, of course, partially due to the genre convention that ultimate victory is promised to the superhero.¹ But what also contributes to their impending failure is that as antiheroes, they are usually “alienated from his culture and society” (Barksdale 1996, 6). Superheroes are often claimed to be outsiders of society and law because of their super status (Curtis 2016, 107), but they are central to their societies in that they are there to preserve them and in that their heroism is harmonious with the society’s hegemonic values. Antiheroes, on the other hand, are marked by “alienation and estrangement” because of their inability to conform to acceptable morale and norms (Barksdale 1996, 6). Therefore, however just their intentions may be to them and their audience, their “actions . . . are ultimately useless” (Favaro 2019, 5) in that in the superhero genre, the hegemonic status quo will always be put back into place by the superheroes. Still, though it is true that antiheroes such as the Secret Six do not (cannot) conclude their adventures with a victorious happily ever after, they and their series certainly provide opportunities for subversive narratives that challenge matters that have been thought normative and hence remained unquestioned throughout the years of publication.

¹ It also may be on account of the fact that overly changing social order in accordance with their personal beliefs can be considered too tyrannical to the democratic America. Hence, that is a line antiheroes cannot cross without truly becoming villains.

Because the antihero is not villainous enough to be a supervillain, sometimes acting heroic, but is too untamed to be a superhero, “the anti-hero finds himself in a grey area where good and evil are not easily recognizable” (Favaro 2019, 5). Accordingly, the Secret Six resides in this vague in-between of villainy and heroism. Though the original members were all initially labelled supervillains, throughout the Six’s adventures, certain types of villainy such as abuse, slavery, and pointless murder are condemned and punished by the Six. While their punishment, which involves excessive violence and sometimes deaths, is far from superheroic and “fail[s] to be blessed” with a superhero’s “moral and physical high ground” (Ho 2020, 101) their retribution inflicted against undeniable evil can arguably be seen as just.

Such actions of antiheroism blur the lines between the good and the bad. Binarism is thus ineffective, but this antiheroes’ rejection of clearcut categories interestingly resonates well with queerness as queerness, too, refuses to be confined within binary recognition. Queer is described by Eve Sedgwick as an “open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning” (1993, 8). The term “queer” is thus exceptionally fluid, encompassing and advocating for many forms of identities and expressions of sexuality and gender rather than creating a definitive applicable label. In queerness, binaries are problematized, and this includes not only that of male/female but also those such as heterosexual/homosexual. In this sense, while queer can refer to, for example, lesbian and gay identities, it is not exactly identical to them. David M. Halperin thus correspondingly writes that queer is “whatever [that] is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (1995, 65). Queer, then, suggests an escape from clear-cut identities and boundaries that regulate them, both of which are, more often than not, insisted on by the majority.

However, despite endless possibilities of queerness, “queer representation” in superhero comics tends to be one-dimensional, or rather, homonormative. According to Lisa Duggan, homonormativity “is a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized . . . gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (2002, 179). As homonormativity “does not challenge heterosexist institutions and values, but rather upholds, sustains, and seeks inclusion within them” (Duggan 2004, Ch. 3), securing places for the non-gender conforming members of the LGBTQ+ holds little to no interest. “Heterosexist institutions and values” here include, for example, monogamy, marriage, and building families, and sexual minorities who comply with them are considered respectable and appropriate. Any demonstration of sexuality otherwise such as polyamory or promiscuity, which is seen as the antithesis to nuclear families, are condemned as antisocial behavior. Ultimately, homonormativity is “aimed at securing privilege for gender-normative gays and lesbians based on adherence to dominant cultural constructions of gender” (Stryker 2008, 147–48). Even if one is seemingly being accepting

of the LGBTQ+ community, the upholding of homonormativity suggests the persisting enforcement of assimilation to hegemonic gender and sexual norms and the ongoing institutional power of heteronormative standards within society.

As Jeffrey Brown will agree, superhero comics are a prevalent arena of homonormativity (2021, 93–94). Brown argues that “common romantic elements of momentous kisses, proposals, wedding, all of which have been employed in superhero stories as a traditional means to celebrate heterosexuality . . . are now also used to help normalize same-sex relationships” (2021, 93–94). Accordingly, in superhero comics, one finds numerous instances where normative romantic displays of (monogamous) same-sex couples are drawn as dramatic moments, taking up the majority of the page’s space as a celebration of their “queer” but normative love. The aforementioned Northstar and his wedding, or a traditional heteronormative ceremony of couples, being treated as an important event by Marvel with special variant covers, is one such example. Brown describes such presentations as “heteronormative rituals” (2021, 94). Though it is without a doubt encouraging to see non-heterosexual romance in mainstream comics depicted positively, when “queerness” appears in superhero comics, the majority of them tends to be between two cisgender people who are likely to be the same gender, and depictions of them stay within rather conventional romantic and sexual relationships. Variations of relationships and behaviors that fall outside traditional romance have been limited or outright ignored. Hence, even non-heterosexual superheroes are prone to be confined within rather limiting rules of heteronormativity to maintain their superheroism.

3. THE SECRET SIX AND THE FIGHT FOR QUEERNESS

Though in *Secret Six*, there are certainly monogamous couples, the majority of the team upsets hetero- and/or homonormativity and gender norms as well as binaries. First, as it has already been mentioned, most of the teammates are sexual minorities. Scandal Savage, an out lesbian, and Knockout are a couple, while Catman and Jeannette, who is suggested to have been in a relationship with Scandal prior to the series, are bisexual.² Ragdoll, too, is pansexual, with the creator, Simone, claiming on X (formerly Twitter) that he is nonbinary.³ But more important than their sexuality is that the queerness displayed by these characters, whether it be romantic/sexual relationships or individual gender

² King Shark, who briefly becomes a member of the Six is also bisexual, and that King Shark is a walking and talking bisexual shark may arguably contribute to the Six’s unconventional queerness.

³ In the comics, there have been scenes where Ragdoll is fluid with his gender presentation. For example, we see him happily donning costumes of both male and female superheroes, such as Wonder Woman and Robin. When Ragdoll dresses up as Robin, he calls himself “He/She Wonder” and “Boy/Girl Wonder” (*Secret Six* #9). Yet, while Simone has stated Ragdoll is nonbinary with the comics supporting this, in the text, the character is referred to with he/him pronouns, and I use that in my paper as well.

performance, barely ever fit what may be considered homo-/heteronormative, exhibiting “queer” queerness. Scandal and Knockout, for example, who were initially monogamous, later become a threesome when Knockout returns from the dead. When Knockout was revived, Scandal had already found a new girlfriend, Liana, and Scandal, unable to choose between the two, proposes for the three of them to be romantically involved together to which all parties (happily) agree.⁴ Though depictions of polyamory have appeared since then in superhero comics, such as in *Guardians of the Galaxy* #9 (Feb. 2021), polyamory remains a topic yet to be fully explored.

Visually, too, these characters of the Six do not conform to heteronormative expectations of the genre. For instance, the superhero genre is notorious for catering to heterosexual male readers by depicting women in hypersexualized costumes and poses (see Cocca 2016). However, though there certainly are moments where female characters are posing unnaturally sexually (especially in issues not drawn by Nicola Scott, the main artist for the *Secret Six* series), the women of the Six are rarely hypersexualized. These women thus refuse to conform to the heteronormative visual tropes of the genre, and if anything, the character who shows the most skin is Catman, as he seems to be more comfortable without his shirt after spending years in the wild, and hence appears shirtless on numerous occasions. In addition, even heterosexual characters such as Bane physically and visually suggest queerness. I have argued elsewhere (see Tomabechi 2025) that excessive displays of masculinity which includes grotesquely exaggerated muscular bodies such as Bane’s can be interpreted as queer as it is a sign of a distorted and deviant form of masculinity. Bane’s body, then, massive even by the already above-average muscle mass in the superhero genre and is easily twice the size of Catman’s and Deadshot, removes him from heteronormativity despite his heterosexuality.

Among them all, however, Ragdoll, alone, perhaps disrupts numerous heteronormative notions through his identity, sexuality, and displays of gender the most. For one, especially when in costume, Ragdoll is sans visible markers of gender (see Figure 1). A rare case in the superhero genre, he is all skin and bones, and has none of the muscles to typically indicate strength and masculinity (nor curves as signs of femininity). Instead, his body is but sharp edges and joints. Additionally, his mask fully covers not just his face but his head as well, obscuring his (gender) identity entirely. But even without it, his facial features are ambiguous in terms of gender with his large, almost childish eyes, protruding bones, and bald head that sprouts a few strands of hair.

⁴ Knockout had already been suggested to be polyamorous (or, coming from the planet Apokolips, has a different understanding or culture of sexual relations) in the limited *Secret Six* series.



Fig 1. Ragdoll © DC Comics.

But more importantly, consider how he has had multiple surgeries throughout his body to replace all his joints with those that can rotate 360 degrees. In the process, he decided his penis was in the way of his acrobatic arts of contortion and had it surgically removed. Therefore, Ragdoll can be argued to already have been symbolically castrated since he is both queer (nonbinary and pansexual) and disabled (body distortion, since he needs regular medication for his joints), but he is also literally and physically self-castrated. Whereas the heteronormative society will deem castration (both literal and figurative) as depowering as psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud would famously agree,⁵ and perhaps even treat Ragdoll as monstrous for the self-mutilation, Ragdoll is proud of it and is, in fact, even empowered by it. This is because not only is he seen on numerous occasions mocking his enemy who had kicked his crotch, saying he has “had all that bother surgically removed” (*Villains United* #5), but the removal of the penis allows him to twist his body without physical disruptions, an advantage that he uses as an effective weapon. The literal castration, then, is what has allowed him to wholly access his *superability* of

⁵ See works such as Sigmund Freud’s “The Uncanny,” translated by Alix Strachey, *MIT* (1919), <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>

contortion. Therefore, the phallus, which is normally seen as a symbol of masculinity and societal superiority—the empowering factor that allows one access to various privileges—is, by the nonbinary Ragdoll, seen as a nuisance. Only with the removal of it was he able to reach his full capacity.

Even Deadshot, who is another of the very few heterosexual members alongside Bane, is nonconforming in terms of gender and sexual relationships and wavers the borders of heterosexuality. In the second run of *Secret Six*, Deadshot becomes romantically involved with Jeannette. It is noticeable that in most of the scenes of their trysts, Jeannette is usually seen to be taking initiative in their physical or sexual relations. This can be found in rather steamy moments when they are both lying naked, or more casual moments, such as Jeannette dipping Deadshot for a kiss. Their heterosexual relationship (though the woman is bisexual), then, effortlessly flips gender expectations in romance, where customarily, the man is expected to be the more active participant, while the woman is passively acted upon, and expressions of sexuality from a woman can be seen as unruly behavior.

Additionally, what should also be mentioned about Deadshot is that *Villains United* issue two (2005), which comes prior to Jeannette’s joining, features a notably homoerotic encounter between Deadshot and Catman. The two men here find each other in the dark kitchen in the middle of the night. Still having doubts about the team and its members, both are prepared and ready to strike the moment the light turns on. However, their confrontation is as deadly as it is almost flirtatious, for not only are they standing in very close proximity (with Catman shirtless), slightly smirking, they also each have a gun and knife, both phallic objects, aimed at the other. This is soon followed by a curiously domestic scene where Catman cooks eggs for the both of them while Deadshot lounges about. Throughout the miniseries, this is the only time where readers see two specific characters bonding with one another this deeply, and with their scene taking up more than five pages, the significance of their bond is highlighted. The only time another pair comes close is when Catman sleeps with Cheshire, but that only consists of three pages. This scene which concludes issue four (2005). is, in any case, immediately followed by issue five’s (2005) cover where Deadshot and Catman are in the midst of a brawl. Yet again, the homoerotic nature of the art is undeniable as Catman is drawn straddling and directly on top of Deadshot, with his crotch placed almost in the middle of the cover (see Figure 2). Ultimately, Catman’s relationship with Cheshire is broken off with her betrayal, and the miniseries ends with the two men walking away together. Though the miniseries has Catman involved in a heterosexual affair, he is soon brought back into his relationship with Deadshot.

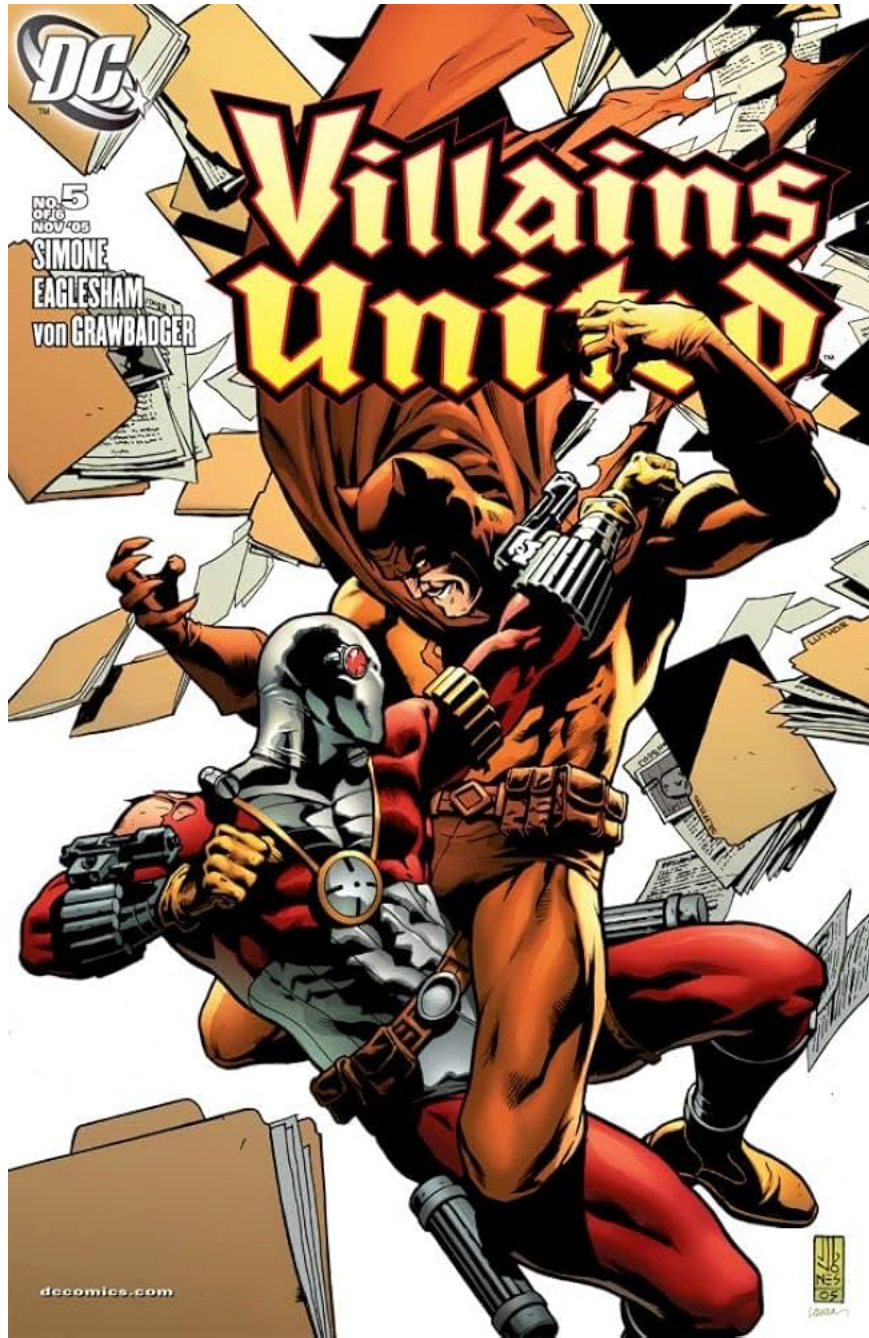


Fig 2. “Villains United” cover © DC Comics.

Deadshot and Catman’s ambiguous relationship does not end with *Villains United* but continues into the *Secret Six* series, their flirty banter appearing frequently. Such scenes are all in addition to the fact that Deadshot and Catman are time and again captured in the same frame, which is at times, small and close-knit. Not only the narratives, then, but also the comic pages, too, place them physically tight against one another. Their flirtatiousness remains even after Deadshot becomes romantically involved with Jeannette, opening up a possibility for another polyamorous relationship, which unsettles Deadshot’s presumed heterosexuality. Furthermore, Deadshot’s homoerotic relationship with

Catman did not go unnoticed by one of the creators of the comics, the artist Nicola Scott, as she has drawn the two men post-coitus. Ergo, even Deadshot himself, one of the few heterosexual members of the team, is not so strictly heterosexual.

But this is not surprising as heteronormativity, in general, do not seem to bode well for the members of the Secret Six. Take, for instance, the fact that one of the conflicts central to both *Villains United* and that of the first solo series involve the bearing of a child, an act traditionally considered as the preeminent goal of a heteronormative relationship. In *Villains United*, situations become incredibly complicated as Cheshire desires to have a child with Catman, as she considers him to have good genes. Once there is the possibility of her pregnancy (or so she says), she is not hesitant to use their child as a hostage to escape the Six after her betrayal. Readers discover in the second series that she was indeed pregnant, as the Six are once again caught in trouble because of the child's existence.

But more important is Scandal Savage's struggle with her father, supervillain Vandal Savage, in the first *Secret Six* series. In these issues, Vandal attempts to get rid of the entire team, as he hopes to retrieve his daughter so that she will once again be a part of his organization. Yet, what is most significant to Vandal is murdering Scandal's lover, Knockout. This is because he strongly wishes for Scandal to produce an heir, his grandchild who will eventually inherit and carry on their Savage legacy. Demanding the lesbian Scandal to sleep with a man (preferably Catman because according to Vandal, too, he has excellent genes—Catman's genes seem to be surprisingly popular among supervillains), Vandal endeavors to force heteronormative relations with violence, and Scandal, with her queer teammates, must fight against this. Supervillainy generally has the tendency to entail a monstrous queerness, where gender transgression is denounced as disruptive and undecipherable. The monstrosity of the villains' uncanny queerness is especially emphasized as they go against heteronormative (or homonormative) superheroes, for this clash effectively highlights the "goodness" of superheroes' normative gender performance. However, in the case of *Secret Six*, a series featuring queer antiheroes, it is toxic heteronormativity that does not allow for alternative gender or sexual identity and performances and is portrayed as a villainous evil that the characters must antiheroically combat.

The Secret Six themselves seem to be frustrated by such impositions of heteronormativity by not only those around them but also from society, and how their noncompliance with societal norms and the status quo leads them to their isolation from society. They also seem to be aware of how those who uphold hegemonic/heteronormative power are given privilege, something the Six are constantly denied access to. This appears most in issue nine of the second series (2009), which is a tie-in with the miniseries *Battle for the Cowl* (2009). *Battle* focuses on Gotham City which had fallen into chaos after Batman's disappearance, and other heroes attempt to fill in the absent superhero's shoes.

Among those are the Six, or some of the Six to be exact. As Bane and Catman have had close ties with both Batman and Gotham, with the help of Ragdoll, they attempt to bring order to Gotham by infiltrating a scheme of kidnapping children though their crime-fighting is, at times, rather too violent to be called heroic. In the midst of their mission, however, right when they were rescuing in time a baby from getting snatched from his family, the superhero Nightwing intervenes. He demands Bane step away from the kidnapper he was most likely about to kill and takes away the baby from Ragdoll. Ragdoll tries to explain himself, but Nightwing cuts him off, claiming he “know[s] what [they] were trying to do.” Handing over the baby to the mother, Nightwing is the one who is thanked for saving her child, and not the Six.

Until then, the Six, though problematic in their violence, had been portrayed as doing good. Yet, despite them delivering, though small and temporary, justice to the chaos-ridden Gotham, Nightwing, who is one of the “real” heroes, unlike the Six “who don’t believe in ‘good’ and ‘evil’” binaries (*Secret Six* #2, Aug. 2006), treats them like he would any other scum villain. To Nightwing, who sees a definite division between heroism and villainy, the Six, who stand in an ambiguous in-between, can only be “bad” if they do not side clearly with the good.

Still, Nightwing understands that Catman, Bane, and Ragdoll *did* prevent the kidnapping and decides to pretend he never saw them. But what Nightwing probably sees as generosity in his eyes, his willingness to let them scamper off, is condescending. Acting not only as if he has full authority here, Nightwing also immediately assumes and acts as if he is the superior man. This, as well as Nightwing’s “sanctimony,” infuriates Catman. He says with downcast eyes: “We were trying to rescue kids. And [the superheroes] look at us as if we’re not fit to live. As if the world is too damn small for us to have a corner of it. No one gave them that power. They just took it. They always just take it.” Indeed, no one in particular gave these (heteronormative) superheroes powers and privileges of being automatically seen as synonymous with virtue as well as functioning as a yardstick of various societal values. But as the upholders of the status quo, superheroes are gifted these privileges by their society. The superheroes not only happily endowed themselves with such privileges, but they also had eventually acquired the power and authority to judge what is good/heroic. Everything that falls out of their judgment has the danger of being classified as bad/villainy.

Therefore, Catman’s words most certainly refer to how regardless of his or the Six’s wishes for heroism, to the “morally perfect” superheroes, who are unable to see that the lines between good and evil are ambiguous at best, the Six can only be criminal, and hence his resentment towards the very exclusive superheroism. However, simultaneously, his words can also interestingly be seen as, especially taking into account how traditionally “appropriate” display of sexuality have been closely linked to superheroism/good, a cry of anger from a queer man about how those who do not meet the status

quo of heteronormativity and hegemonic gender norms are easily shunned, how they cannot be but “a sufferer, an outsider, an initiate, never confirmed in his institution” (Barksdale 1996, 6). Catman’s yearning to be considered a hero thus may not only be about being part of the good and just but also about receiving the privileges that come with being a hero and the right to live in society without instant condemnation for being who he is, to be respected like any other, all of which he has been denied for years. This aligns much with the undeniable fact the queerness has been and is both villainized and marginalized for its difference, Otherness, and inability to conform to societal norms in fictional universes and otherwise (Dubowski 2016, 226; King 2020). Appropriately, Favaro writes that “the anti-hero of the comic finds himself always in a negative, tragic, corrupt reality” (Favaro 2019, 5), like the queer man who is caught by the inescapable heteronormativity. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that it is Nightwing who rebukes the Six. This is because Nightwing is not only a model superhero, but also known to have been in famous relationships with multiple superhero women including but not limited to Batgirl, Starfire, and Huntress and had been considered the “lady’s man” of the superhero genre.⁶ From Catman’s point of view, then, Nightwing may as well be the epitome of the heterosexual superhero. Even in recent years, where support for sexual minorities has grown exceptionally, hetero- and homonormativity remain prevalent in queer representation (Brown 2021, 13-14), and actions that heavily depart from traditional values of gender and sexuality are still seen as devious. Hence, the Six, who are not only queer antiheroes but also constantly defy heteronormativity and in extension homonormativity, are “trapped inside an essentially negative reality without the possibility of escape” (Favaro 2019, 5) and are constantly struggling to find a place in a world that is dominated by heteronormative superheroes.

Such discontent towards the society that shuns them is what leads to the finale of the second series where the Secret Six decides to overthrow the superheroes of Gotham (*Secret Six* #36, 2011). The Six ultimately find themselves with only two options: fight or be regulated, or in other words, resistance or assimilation to the status quo. While Catman is adamant that he does not “want to live in a world where those people

⁶ Dick Grayson is an interesting character in terms of queerness. Since the publication of Frederic Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) that read the nature of his relationship with Bruce Wayne to be homoerotic and was followed by the campy sixties live action Batman series that frequently featured the short-shorts donning Robin in need of rescuing by Batman, queerness has been a part of his character. Additionally, *Secret Six* #36 is known for Nightwing’s back shot of his buttocks, which most likely contributed to the fan trope that he has an impressive and attractive butt. This has led to artists actively drawing him facing backwards, and he has become a character frequently and deliberately sexualized, sometimes in ways similar to female characters in recent years. Furthermore, while not comics canon, he seems to be bisexual in the game *Gotham Knights* (2022). However, his sexual capital and bisexuality all come after the *Secret Six* series.

[superheroes] make the rules” and is determined to fight, he, as well as the entire team, seems to be aware of their doom, that they “always never win” (*Secret Six* #36, 2011). With the superheroes set in place as the eminent victors of their society, the Six will forever be “haunted by his own invisibility” (Barksdale 1996, 6) But the Secret Six, antiheroes “born out of rebellious desire to subvert what the author considers the standard conventions of fiction” (Simmons 2008, 3) in Ragdoll’s words, “don’t know how to surrender” (*Secret Six* #9, 2009). Whether it be for diverse queer representation in a heteronormative genre, or for the complex sense of morality in antiheroism that allows for narrative freedom, or both, the Six will fight for their voice and their legitimacy until the end. Until the very end, the Secret Six, both the series and the team, is pessimistic about and fights against the superheroes, their values, and their unquestioned authority.

Conclusively, these queer antiheroes are such a menace to their (fictional) world and its status quo that it is not only the Gotham superheroes the Six end up fighting. Instead, the entire DC Universe shows up. It is interesting to note that Batman and Superman, who may be considered the authoritative and patriarchal figures of superheroism, are here with their respective Bat- and Superfamilies, while Wonder Woman, a bisexual woman originating from a matriarchal, all-female, and hence queer, society is absent from the melee. The only superhero among them who sees their struggle is Huntress, a superhero who began as an antihero and have been shamed in the past by fellow superheroes for her promiscuous, or non-monogamous, behavior. While Huntress is discomfited by this fight, now a part of the heroes, knows that the Six must be put down.

The *Secret Six* concludes ambiguously, or perhaps queerly, which is fitting for the characters. It is most likely that the Six, in spite of defeat, are not dead, since superheroes typically do not take lives, though the Six’s use of Venom, the toxic drug that enhances strength which Bane used to use and was addicted to, may possibly have done serious damage alongside the injuries given to them by the superheroes. The Six, not given a proper closure with death, will likely be incarcerated after this battle, and what the future awaits remains unclear. Yet, happy endings as well as closure or “predetermined outcome[s]” have been argued to allude to heteronormativity since they usually result in “traditional heterosexual reproduction, family forms, or gender norms” (Fawaz 2016, 22). That the Six are not given one is thus very apropos. Denial of closure, the removal of the Six from a traditional heterosexual and heteronormative life, is perhaps the most fitting ending for the Six.

The Secret Six “had no chance. Not a prayer” (*Secret Six* #36, 2011) from the start, since they are ill-fated with “unheroic defeat” (Barksdale 1996, 6). Nevertheless, they certainly served well as a “response to the uncertainties of people about traditional values” (Neimneh 2013, 76) creating a fissure to the superheroism that continues to favor the status quo of heteronormativity in the DC Universe. From the superheroes’ perspective, the Secret Six are but villains who disrupt societal order, but to the members of the Six and

maybe the readers, *Secret Six* provides space for queerness to thrive and refuse simplistic binaries and norms that so easily exclude many forms of identities.

4. CONCLUSION

Sure enough, the series is not perfect in terms of representation of sexual minorities. Neither Catman's bisexuality nor Ragdoll's pansexuality are barely ever mentioned. In fact, Catman's sexuality was only revealed through Simone and never within the series itself. Furthermore, Scandal's polyamorous relationship is suggested as tragic, as Liana is left alone as her fiancés go off into battle, likely to never return again. And finally, while queerness and the challenging of heteronormative romantic and sexual relationships are depicted through the characters' actions, these challenges rarely appear verbally, and straightforward terms or discussions about sexuality hardly ever appear.

Things change drastically and for the better when the *Secret Six* is rebooted in 2015. The *New 52 Secret Six* is comprised of entirely new members save Catman. Though those who were members of the Six such as Scandal, Jeannette, and Ragdoll appear, it is only midway through the series and as recurring characters, not central ones. The previous *Secret Six* run seems to now be obliterated from the DC Universe since there appears to be no history among the characters. Yet that *Secret Six* serves as a safe space for queerness remains the same. Or rather, the representation becomes less held back. For instance, Scandal, whose engagement ended tragically with her defeat, is now seen in a healthy, polyamorous relationship with Knockout and Liana. Catman and Ragdoll are both openly interested people of all genders. Not to mention, the Six has added to its membership the genderfluid Porcelain who discusses gender identities in the comics pages. Compared to the previous *Secret Six* runs, this series seems more aware of the implications as well as the impact of properly depicting queer characters and aims for positive representation. Additionally, a new *Secret Six* series started its run in March 2025. Though Simone is not the writer, what innovative representation it will bring in terms of gender and sexuality, the readers shall see.

Still, the fact remains that *Secret Six*, running during the mid-2000s, making their first appearance before the now acclaimed and popular lesbian superhero Batwoman had made her debut and before Marvel's *Young Avengers*, which was praised for their positive portrayal of the teenage gay couple, deserves recognition, something superhero scholarship, as of yet, has failed to do. As many other scholars such as Carolyn Cocca have pointed out (2016), the majority of superhero comics have been and continue to be heteronormative, and as Brown argues (2021, 13–14), that applies even among LGBTQ+ representation. Therefore, how the *Secret Six* disrupts heteronormative order should be acknowledged academically, as it has achieved during the 2000s what not many series and issues have yet to manage even in the current 2020s.

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