

John Constantine in America
“So We’d Always Have a Place to be Young and Hard Again”
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Deviant and outsider communities are often rendered as outposts of sexual freedom, and are strongly associated with permissiveness and acceptance. However, behavior within subcultures and deviant communities is as heavily policed as behaviors in broader culture, or in communities held up as normative. While this is not a particularly new concept, witnessing it within the comic/sequential art community is particularly important, as comic books are themselves the representative interest of a deviant community. Just as it is important in other literatures to examine how deviancy is rendered by cultural outsiders, it is necessary to examine comics both for their popular culture properties (i.e. as cultural artifacts that encode specific norms in a variety of ways) and for their “view inside” (i.e. their link to the audience as a subculture). The way in which the gaze is staged can give us insight into not only the deviant community depicted in the work, but also into the comic community. In the *Hellblazer—Highwater* storyline, the main character John Constantine travels through a number of outsider communities, and while the story is largely focused on him, his actions, and his death, it also examines those communities in which he acts. The framework itself is interesting to break down: within a comic, itself a cultural artifact of a deviant community, we are asked as readers to move first through an ideologically conservative deviant community (the white supremacists), then through an outsiders’ cultural analysis of the American condition, and then simultaneously into two discreet but related scenes, one the locus of a sexually deviant community and the other a bastion of normative culture’s law and order—a police station. How we understand the sexually deviant community, and its codes and customs, is dependent upon this framework.

The first community we enter is clearly one of discipline, but it is of a variety to which we are unaccustomed. A narration of a white supremacist interpretation of the Bible overlays Constantine’s initial interaction with a group of young Neo-Nazis and their older leader. An incident occurs in which the young thugs kill and display the mutilated corpse of an arms dealer for his praise of black women’s sexual prowess, creating a space in which the leader must react. He chooses, at Constantine’s urging, to physically punish and humiliate the dominant man among the youths, an action that clearly demonstrates the strict codes of behavior,



While we are meant to understand that the murder would draw undue attention to the group, it is also implicit that because the younger men did not seek direction from the older dominant man, Ellison, humiliation is necessarily a part of their punishment. Humiliation is the base of another punishment in this community as well, but it is more overtly sexual in nature. The S.W. Manor character (who has funded both the arms dealer and the white supremacist group) comes to Ellison to address the arms dealer's murder. While he mentions a possible Biblical solution (an absurd parody of the beginning narrative), to “take the proverbial eye” (Azzarello 88), he instead decides that “I need to feel good. I need...to cum in someone's mouth. Correction. Not just anybody's...yours, Ellison...or hers,” (Azzarello 89) referring to Ellison's daughter. Several pages later, we are given to understand that Ellison took the

humiliation punishment,



(Azzarello 93).

When a different set of rules are introduced, those punishments associated with a different deviant community are also enforced. But we are to understand that, while these two varieties of punishment look dissimilar to the naked glancing eye, they are essentially the same—the element of humiliation and domination are present in both the punch and the fellatio. They are rendered in a similar way in the construct of the narrative—there is an overlay of the white supremacists' narrative of belief, the dialogue between Ellison and Constantine tonally matches the monologue of Manor, and they are visually comparable. However, we are still clearly within the social structure of the white supremacist group, because we see the punch thrown, but we do not see the fellatio. We know that it occurred, but it is not rendered in the artwork—we are left to imagine the scene between Manor's arrival and Ellison's daughter spitting in his face. The intervening frames are from another narrative, another segment of the story arc that seems out of place, given the expectations fostered by the dialogue between Manor and Ellison.

Constantine himself is out of place, as he has been from the beginning a very British character, but is placed in America, as an “other” who reconstructs himself within

several American subcultures that are composed of others. This is perhaps why the storylines are structured and drawn as panels envisioning a schizophrenic gaze. Scott McCloud discusses the process of “amplification through simplification”, by which the author/artist of a graphic novel amplifies certain features of her characters while leaving most of the work relatively simple to allow the reader “to mask themselves in a character and safely enter a sensually stimulating world” (McCloud 43). Marcelo Frusin’s iconic play of shadows allows the reader to enter into the characters, and the textures are such that we are more likely to recoil at some of the story as it is rendered in the images. Of course, this fragments the reader’s perception of the story, so our ability to close the gap between implication and reality is compromised both by the artwork (which includes a wandering gaze) and by the plot. In the shadows, we cannot only participate in the non-normative sexual behaviors in the book, but we can also experience the imaginative realm more fully than we normally may without the intrusion of the symbolic realm. The non-normative sexual behaviors are portrayed differently—those seen as less fetishistic (those more accepted, at least on some level, by society at large) are usually little more than shadowed silhouettes. Those that are more fetishistic, those less universally accepted and seen as less desirable by the mainstream are rendered as characters more clearly differentiated from the reader.

In *Hellblazer—Highwater*, the multiple narrators define Constantine with both their description and their gaze, outlining him in each panel in which his activities are narrated, but their own activities define how we read the narrator and their narrative, and to what extent we participate in their actions. It is my contention that within this “sexually deviant” community, some sexualities are more acceptable than others, and these “norms” are encoded both in the artwork and the narration of Constantine’s actions by different narrators. Each narrator is seen in the context of an interrogation room after Constantine’s death. An FBI agent, Frank Turro, speaks with each in turn. The first narrator, Milton, is clearly framed as deviant even within the community. Turro has to insist that Milton talk, as one would expect in any opening interrogation scene, and Turro’s threat that “I need you to tell me something so I don’t throw your flabby, do-nothin’ ass in jail with some folks who’d know exactly what to do with it” (Azzarello 154) seems to momentarily awaken Milton. However, after a pause, Turro says “Wait a minute—you’d like that, wouldn’t you?” to which Milton replies “I’m bi, if that’s what you’re asking” (Azzarello 155). Before Milton’s narration of Constantine even begins, we are to understand that he is both different and weak. In response to a threat of facilitation of rape, and the implication that because he is a member of a sex club and therefore a deviant community, prison rape would somehow be desirable, he simply states his sexual preference, which is not sex-specific. We are meant to read this as a sign of weakness and indecision, as Milton has already demonstrated these qualities, and while it is unnecessary to point out his specific sexual orientation in the subsequent context of the story, it is meant as an indication of his desires. While he may perhaps be bisexual, bisexuality itself is “othered” even within deviant communities. In addition, despite his self-proclaimed bisexuality and ambivalent response, the threat does in fact inspire him to narrate his view of Constantine, that “I thought he liked to watch... but he didn’t really. He liked things to happen to him, but he never initiated anything” (Azzarello 155). This frame is set up as if the reader is looking directly in Constantine’s eyes, that if he did “like to watch,” the reader would be the object of the gaze. But the

next frame shows Constantine and a number of women in shadow. Milton's narration indicates that Constantine is passive in terms of initiation. The frame represents Constantine, silhouetted, and surrounded by three nude women entirely in shadow, in silhouette (which places an emphasis on their feminine curves),



(Azzarello 156).

However, this scene is more subversive than meets the eye—though it first appears as a heteronormative scene, the average heterosexual male fantasy of being the object of desire of more than one woman, there are two men besides Constantine in the frame. One is off to the right side, and while we cannot see his intentions, we interpret that he is following the women, either because of Constantine or in spite of him. The other man is the curious one. It is merely a silhouette of half of a bald head, but the head is placed next to (and possibly overlapping) Constantine's inguinal region. The suggestion of bisexual orgiastic behavior would likely be a bit more than the average reader could take given the propensity to project into the obscured characters, but while the reader is conscious of the scene, and is aroused by it, she or he is not thrown out of the scene by the tabooed behavior. Rather, one has to look at this scene for some time to notice the head overlapping the genitals. The narration itself is Milton's description of Constantine's behavior, and a single question posed by Turro, answered with "Nothing. I *never* do *anything*" (Highwater 156). This again repositions the view—we are seeing Constantine as a passive being, and we've been told that it is a passive gaze viewing a person being acted upon. What is particularly interesting about this passivity is that in both cases, it is a passive male—the females in frame one are acting upon a male, and while the gaze is male, it is not distinctly masculine. It does not intrude into the frame, and in fact defines itself as passive. Even within Milton's narration, in the use of shadow, the art encodes the message that Milton's behavior is less desirable than that of Constantine. While Milton narrates that both he and Constantine "never do anything," the reader is displaced from Milton, he is too clearly rendered, a subtle encoding of the more and less acceptable



forms of deviant sexualities, as in (Azzarello 156).

Peggy's narration is from a closer proximity to Constantine. While some time is spent in description, the artwork simply depicts Peggy speaking with Turro in the

interrogation room until their dialogue is interrupted by a scene from the Manor mansion. Her narration picks up with a series of frames drawing back from solid black to a scene of multiple partner bisexual intercourse (or an orgy),



(Azzarello 169) while Peggy repeatedly describes Constantine as sexually “insatiable” (Azzarello 168-170). Within this, the silhouetted faces and bodies ultimately imply that this is among those desirable behaviors: not only the orgy, but the state of being insatiable and (to whatever extent) sexually selfish. In this, Peggy’s narrative diverges significantly from Milton’s—while Milton saw Constantine as passive, Peggy describes Constantine as “mov[ing] like a tiger from one body to the next, just devouring” (Azzarello 168). What is key in this comparison is how desirability is encoded in Constantine’s person—he is a vessel of the desires of the narrator/witness. Milton’s desires are grounded in passivity; he wants things to happen to him without maintaining agency over the sexual event, so when he sees Constantine, he sees Constantine being acted upon. Peggy narrates an incident during which she was dripping hot wax on a sexually helpless and fettered Constantine,



(Azzarello 171) when he requests that she pour lighter fluid over his chest and light him,



(Azzarello 172). While this incident is not within the norms of sexual behavior for society as a whole, within this community, play with hot wax is acceptable. However, most are not masochistic enough to ask to be set aflame, but the frames depicting Constantine being burned are much more erotically charged, i.e. are more invitation to the reader, than the frames with only the hot wax. Not only this, but all frames show Peggy in a dominant position—she is the actor, and Constantine is being acted upon, showing that her narration, the text of the comic is a description of her own desires ascribed to Constantine, who is dead, and is so made safe for society at large, the individual reader, and more importantly, the interpretive community. Need it be noted that in both frames, she is holding a dripping or spurting phallic object?

In a community based on sexual freedom, there are remarkably strict codes of behavior encoded within the divide between the narration in text and in pictures, and the men and women are still expected to conform to some extent to gender roles. A sexually passive man, while admitting his own passivity, ascribes it also to Constantine to assure himself that his behavior is normal within the abnormal community. A sexually aggressive woman completely denies her own aggressive behavior, and instead ascribes it to a man who is also within the community. In addition, since Constantine is a well-known character with a relatively large audience, the average reader has already clearly differentiated Constantine from himself or herself. And while the reader is, by virtue of the shadows, invited to participate vicariously in Constantine's sexual activities, the unidentified or minor characters are what we truly enter, and by each narrator's projection of their own desires onto Constantine, we are also invited to see him as a reflection of our desires as well.

Graham's narrative shows a different side of this phenomenon. His interrogation begins with a brief description of his own importance (mentioning his sexual activity with a famous actress and his own acting career), then describing Constantine as "a fuckin' nobody [...] a phony, but the bastard was always the center of attention. Everybody raved on an' on about his technique" (Azzarello 197). This shows that Graham's description of Constantine is both an expression of his desires and his insecurities—he desires attention and recognition, but he is in fact nobody. This is not the most interesting part of his narrative however. He goes on to describe one night, when he was "workin' over a regular [or rather] an irregular. Most of the members, they say they're into pain. Well, they're not. They get off on the threat of it. But this particular guy?" (Azzarello 198).

The narration abruptly jumps from Graham to Joey, when s/he tells Turro that "[with this particular guy] the pain was what he was really after" (Azzarello 202). Joey isn't truly narrating Constantine's story, though—when Turro asks about Constantine, s/he says "that boy [concerning orgasms], buckets, both from him and everyone he touched" (Azzarello 202). S/he goes on to say that s/he'd never been with Constantine, positioning Constantine himself as the desire, which serves two purposes. First, if there

are no latent desires to examine encoded on Constantine, the narrative of Graham's client can move forward, which moves the story to its conclusion. Second, the transsexual character is the only narrator whose desires are not limited or entirely defined by those codes in place within the deviant community. Joey is the only character who seems sexually comfortable even in the context of the interrogation room (though admittedly none of the characters are shrinking violets). In addition, s/he is framed so as to be appealing to the heterosexual male reader, as in



(Azzarello 202).

Joey is also the only character who does not give a general idea of the activity s/he was engaged in at the time of Constantine's death.

S/he goes on to describe "Graham [...] beating him [...] ripping the skin off his back" (Azzarello 215). These frames are where the reader begins to see that she is an object in the story as well. The client (Manor) is shadowed/silhouetted in the first frame, and as the whip meets his back, we are still viewing this from outside. The next three frames however position the reader as a participant—specifically that one on the other



end of the whip: (Azzarello 205). Though Joey is still narrating the event as it appeared some distance away, we are seeing it from a vantage point within the lashes. Then the vantage point again changes, and we are again watching from some distance as Constantine kisses the man S.W. Manor. A brief dialogue between the two ensues, which places this club and this moment in the context of the larger, multi-trade paperback story arc.

The final narrator of Constantine's sexuality and death is S.W. Manor, the client who was romantically involved with Constantine. The scenes within Manor's mansion are narrated by Manor to a priest. The moments that are in silhouette of Manor and Constantine are not sexual moments, but rather moments of emotional tenderness. Constantine's relation of hate to love is particularly tender, that "[h]ate is a strong



emotion[...]

” (Azzarello 222). This is important in that, while most of the comic has allowed the reader to vicariously experience sexually deviant behaviors, we are inserted into the experience of tenderness between two men. While homosexuality is not discouraged, genuine affection seems to be excluded from the sexualities of this particular community. This occurs between two men and is iconic, inviting the reader to project themselves into the moment, and in this gently realigns our heteronormativity (even within the deviant comic-reading community). As Manor narrates this, the scenes of he and Constantine alone together are shown, but silhouetted in a window within the scenes are the figures of Manor and the priest—within a narration of memory, the present circumstance intrudes both textually and visually. As Manor’s narrative continues, it becomes more fantastic. The further he moves from the community, the more sexual acts are replaced with violence. It is significant that his sexual preferences tend to the masochistic, but in the successive revealing during the narrative, his violence turns outward.

The level of iconic rendering of characters involved in various sexual acts identifies which behaviors are admitted and which are discouraged within the deviant community (McCloud 36). In emphasizing the concept (over realistic portrayal), the artist allows us to vicariously experience the non-normative acceptable sexual acts while closing us off from the non-normative unacceptable sexual acts, thus transmitting the community’s codes of behavior. Unlike many cartoons that have “slightly more realistic [backgrounds]” (McCloud 42), the plain red-and-chains background is perhaps not as threatening to the reader as a truly realistic rendering of the interior of a sex club might be (though it should be noted that the interrogation room is realistic). Or perhaps, this is because of the variety of sensual stimulation in this particular storyline—though sexual attraction tends to begin visually, its consummation is visceral. The tactile sensations involved in sex acts cannot be adequately approximated in the pages of a comic, so the text must describe, even as the art shows. As “our perception of ‘reality’ is an act of faith, based on mere fragments” (McCloud 62), so our experience is sexual arousal is also fragmented. Viewing or reading sexuality in a comic allows us to enter the realm of fantasy, and leave unharmed, as we are closed off from those characters participating in acts that could result in punishment within the non-normative sexual community. This relates also to the white supremacist component of the storyline—though the average reader would find the views expressed morally and politically abhorrent, we are invited into a realm of alternative belief and reasoning, invited to identify with the characters in

moments more familiar to us, so we remain untainted while still experiencing the



character in acceptable ways, (Azzarello 24), and so allowing us to engage on a more personal level with the narrative. The policing of behavior in deviant communities is strongly related to the gaze and narrative within the *Hellblazer—Highwater* story arc. Both the white supremacist community and the sex club community are based in a set of shared proclivities and beliefs, but despite the outward ideological agreement, there is still a hierarchy of acceptable behavior, and transgressors must accept some sort of humiliation as punishment. The desires of the white supremacist group are relatively uniform, but if their enactment of these desires falls outside of a hierarchy of need, their behaviors are policed. The desires of the sex club community are anything but uniform, and even within this “permissive” atmosphere, they are invited to project their desires or state of being onto a single vessel/scapegoat, so as to escape censure. The essential similarity of the structure and actions of these two communities is meant not only as a comment on the uniformity of deviancy, but also as a gesture to the community of the reader—the comic reader. *Hellblazer* is a title that involves a long-term commitment to the story and to the character, so within the readership, there are tiers of knowledge relating to familiarity with the *Hellblazer* title, other DC Vertigo titles, the DC universe as a whole, and comics in general. Within these tiers, behavior and ideas are policed, as various desires are more and less acceptable. And part of the method of encoding behaviors and acceptable desires is the rendering of the artwork, and how the narrative is framed.

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