

# Mobile Masculinities: Changing Representations of the Gay Male Form in Comics over Time

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[Accepted for publication: 20/11/2021]

## Abstract

THIS article explores how representations of the gay male form in comics have changed over time in relation to shifting social and cultural contexts. It compares three works: *Miss Thing*, by Joe Johnson, Fabrice Neaud's *Émile*, and *Greek Love*, by Dale Lazarov and Adam Graphite. On one hand, the differences between these works reflect shifting attitudes towards the presentation of the male gay body; on the other, each of them corresponds to a different distribution platform: the periodical gag strip, webcomics, and prestige hardbacks, respectively. *Miss Thing* satirizes work of its time such as that typified by Tom of Finland's oeuvre. Johnson parodies this pneumatic, exaggerated masculinity and contrasts it with a more feminine, graceful line. Playing on the butch/swish dynamic, he uses satire and camp to generate punchlines. *Émile*, on the other hand, is dependent on the juxtaposition of words and imagery, but Neaud highlights the male form by its absence. The figure only appears in renderings of photographs, which are used comparatively to illustrate the characters who are otherwise only present in the narrator's appeals. *Greek Love*, finally, stands in contrast to the other two comics by merit of its wordless nature. It recuperates Greek mythology to reweave the male queer body into history and finds a form of sexual freedom in a proto-post-AIDS climate. The article makes a comparison between these works to illustrate the changing nature of the male gay form in comics and suggests that these changes are reflective of evolving socio-political contexts, especially the HIV/AIDS crisis.

## Introduction

THE gay male body is rarely seen outside of specifically queer (and often “indie”) graphic narratives; and when it does appear in mainstream works it tends to be desexed, stereotypical or presented as hetero/homonormative (Bikowski 286). Within the conservative structure of mainstream superhero comics, for example, the occasional gay characters are typically presented in a way that is socially legible for a straight audience. Such legibility is achieved by recognizable stereotypes

and a tendency to heteronormative behaviour. Kyle Bikowski gives the example of Iceman from the X-Men series of books, who has in recent years come out as gay. Iceman displays both stereotypical “promiscuity” and the trope of “fast-moving relationships”, meeting a man, having sex with him, then moving from New York to Los Angeles the very next day “to be closer to him” (286). This form of characterization is not inherently negative; the gay male community is extremely varied, and many gay men engage in either (perceived) promiscuity, a desire to move relationships on quickly, or both. Rather, the issue is with both a lack of breadth of representation, and a tendency among largely heterosexual writers to present gay men within a narrow, often stereotypical, framework so that the character is legible to a straight audience. In the case of Iceman, even openly queer writer Sina Grace struggled to write the character due to “greater creative restrictions than his straight counterparts” (Bikowski 286).

Here is the problem with representations of the gay male body: shorn of behaviours, affectations, clothing, accessories, and other visual cues, the gay male body is no different to its straight counterpart. Comic artists therefore have no choice but to evidence the gay male body through those accretions. Further, the gay male body is by definition a male body that engages in behaviours, activities, interpersonal relationships, and the like that are (at least partly) motivated by same-sex attraction. Consequently, this article is concerned not only with the literal, visual presentation of the gay male body, but also with what that body *does*.

Rarely in visual art can the human figure be detached from its environmental context or its activities within it. The human figure is generally an important component of graphic storytelling, and how that figure is represented is often indicative of trends. According to curator Steven L. Gafe, “Today’s comic artists are the inheritors of the classical European art tradition [of] representational and figurative art”, since they mostly depict human (or anthropomorphic) figures and the objects, places, and spaces in and with which these figures interact (Wolff Scanlan). As a narrative medium, comics tends to use the human figure as the vehicle for storytelling. Authors are influenced not only by contemporary stylistic trends, but also by the platform and distribution method via which their work is disseminated, as well as by their target audience/market. However, perhaps the most significant factor is the sociocultural and/or political context in which a work is created. All these elements, then, make representation of the gay male form inherently mobile and transmutable, effecting changes over time that reflect the context in which a creator works.

Given that openly queer authors have been making comics since at least the late 1940s,<sup>1</sup> one might expect a rich body of research of the queer figure in comics. However, most scholarship on the figure focuses on mainstream texts, usually of the superhero genre. Edward Avery-Natale explores how “male-centric production and consumption” of superhero comics led to a plethora of “hyper-masculine” (straight) male characters and “hyper-fetishized and hyper-sexualized [...] female

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Hall considers Touko Laaksonen, better known as Tom of Finland, the first openly gay cartoonist, who was creating pictorial sequential stories from at least 1946 (Ramakers 37–49).



characters” (72), making the case that modern superhero bodies “have moved in a postmodern direction, in which the gender signifiers lose all connection to real human bodies, becoming simulacra” (73). Most studies of masculinity in superhero comics, though, explore the male figure as representative of hegemonic masculine behaviour (see Weltzien; G. Johnson). There is little readily accessible scholarship on the use of the male form in non-mainstream or independent comics. The main focus is instead on the interpretation of the female form, particularly with regard to over-sexualization, exploitation, and the male gaze.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it would appear that the female body in visual art generally, and certainly in comics, has been discussed from every angle.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this article is to turn the gaze onto the male body as an object of study, paying particular attention to the gay male form as a site of manifestation of masculinity. This approach marks the first attempt to reveal the ways in which those representations have shifted over time.

Since the comparative approach used in this article is focused on mobility over time, I have selected works from three time periods. The works were chosen as being representative of the broad spectrum of gay comics available over the last fifty years, covering the one-panel gag strip (*Miss Thing*), autobiographix (*Émile*), and erotica (*Greek Love*). The earliest one dates from the late 1960s, prior to the AIDS crisis, while the other two are from the era of combination antiretroviral treatment. The works I have chosen to explore have in common that both the masculine subjects and their creators are ostensibly cisgender. The texts relate to and contrast with each other in interesting ways regarding their style, format, and relationship with the male figure. That each relates to the AIDS crisis from either side of its peak is a matter of chance rather than a deliberate decision to avoid that period, and there are many comics from that time that present the gay male form in interesting ways.<sup>4</sup> Non-mainstream queer graphic narratives are often idiosyncratic, so I do not consider these works to be inherently representative of contemporaneous trends in aesthetic or artistic styles; rather, I am interested in the ways in which the authors individually respond to trends of a more socio-political nature.

I will argue that the varying styles and representations found in the works analyzed here offer a perspective on societal changes, revealing interesting correlations and offering a commentary on how the male figure might come to represent those changes. The article will further examine some of the challenges involved in a historiographical approach to mobility in comics—namely the difficulties of performing queer historiography in an artistic medium that has often been ephemeral over the decades in question. The specific methods of production and delivery available to each author inform not only the production of each comic but

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<sup>2</sup> Interesting contributions in this area include work by Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo, and Carolyn Cocca.

<sup>3</sup> Meghan Hale provides a useful overview of this body of research.

<sup>4</sup> Several queer creators responded to the AIDS crisis during its peak, including Howard Cruse, whose strip *Wendel* ran in *The Advocate* from 1983 to 1989, and many others; Paul Morton’s article covers this period and delves into Cruse’s work specifically (Morton).

also their availability to scholars and their inclusion or absence from the cultural archive. Among those who have carried out some of this archival work, my article is indebted to the anthology *No Straight Lines*, edited by Justin Hall, which carries out the crucial task of archiving and celebrating queer comic work that is otherwise difficult to access.<sup>5</sup> Studying non-mainstream, independent, or underground comics can be difficult due to their often ephemeral or “disposable” nature; queer comics of the last 50 years can be doubly precarious due to the limited range of available delivery methods via which creators could publish their work. Magazines fold, websites are shuttered, and publishers’ attitudes and approaches can change entirely, for financial, political, or other reasons. It would be difficult to conduct a study like this, especially one that casts a wide temporal scope, were it not for the effort of editors who bring together work that is difficult to find or which has not been collected or re-printed since its first publication. The geographical spread of this article is limited to English-language (or wordless) comics from North America, South America, and Europe. There remains scope to study the gay male form in comics of other geographical locations and cultures.

### ***Miss Thing (and Big Dick too): Joe Johnson***

**L**AUNCHED in *The Advocate* in the late 1960s, Joe Johnson’s *Miss Thing* is a one-panel gag strip. It follows the exploits and adventures of a swish (or femme) gay man as he traverses the subculture of contemporaneous homosexual life (fig. 1). Gag cartoons are a “combination of punch lines and scenarios intended to make readers laugh” (“Cartoon America”). To achieve this, they often rely on identifying, pricking, or ironically challenging social conventions, such that they require knowledge of the cultural context for the reader to understand the punchline. *Miss Thing* exemplifies this, requiring a degree of knowledge of gay subculture on the reader’s part to decode the gag. A significant aspect of the strip is the counterpointing of the main character of Miss Thing with a variety of butch characters, including the protagonist of Johnson’s other concurrent strip, *Big Dick*. These butches are obvious parodies of the pneumatic, hypermasculine erotica popularized by Tom of Finland (pseudonym of Touko Laaksonen).

One of the earliest and most enduring sources of gay illustrative art in the latter half of the twentieth century, Laaksonen’s work has been replicated, and its male bodies pumped-up and inflated beyond parody, ever since its original publication.<sup>6</sup> However, during the era of *Miss Thing*’s publication, Laaksonen’s work was still very much underground; bound by strict censorship codes in the USA. His work, and that of his peers, was published in gay erotic magazines that masked

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<sup>5</sup> There has also been useful work carried out on Japanese *bara* in the shape of a collection *Massive*, released by Fantagraphics (Ishii et al.).

<sup>6</sup> The modern manifestation of this influence of Tom of Finland’s work is typified by the output of Class Comics, run by Patrick Fillion and Robert Fraser since 2000. They produce a vast catalogue of gay male erotica comics that feature a variety of art styles, but most popularly a hypertrophied, pneumatic style in which characters have massive pectorals and hyper-inflated phalluses.

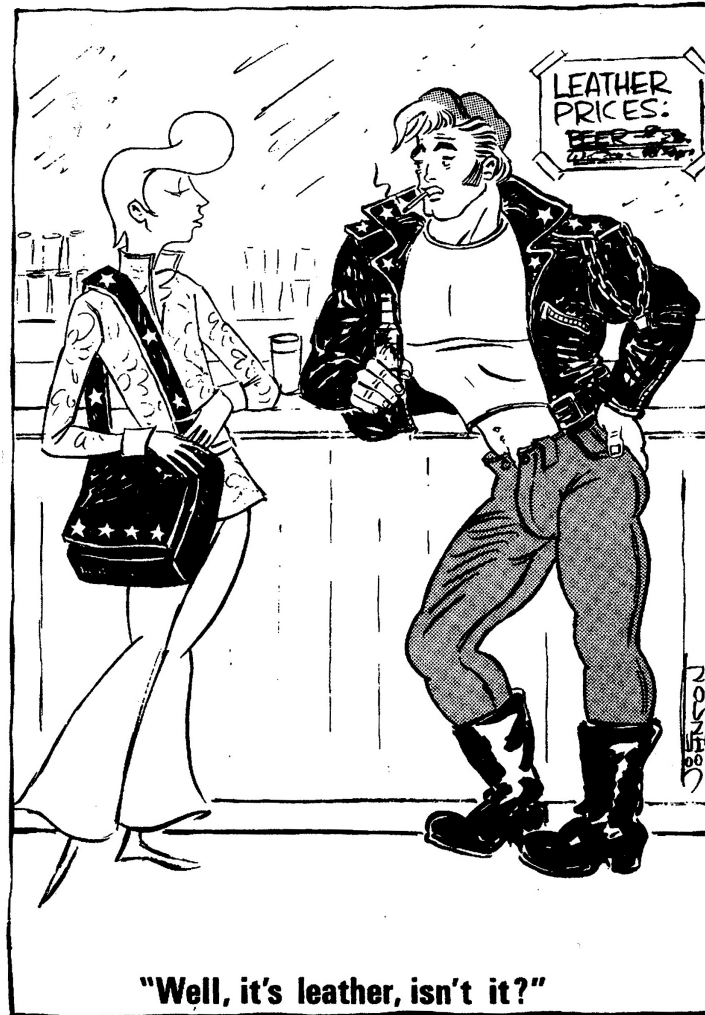


Fig. 1. “Well, it’s leather, isn’t it?” Miss Thing with butch character (reproduced in Hall 2). ©Joe Johnson. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

themselves as health and fitness magazines, such as the famous *Physique Pictorial*. In a 1962 landmark legal case—*Manual Enterprises v. Day*, 370 U.S. 478—the United States Supreme Court ruled that certain “homoerotic physique magazines [...] were not obscene” (Stern).<sup>7</sup> This paved the way for a gradual relaxation of publication rules around the male figure, and by the time *Miss Thing* was being published, Laaksonen was no longer operating sub rosa in physique magazines, but had begun publishing more overt homoerotic work, including comic books. Although his work gained more cultural visibility, it was still some time before

<sup>7</sup> Interestingly with regard to the earlier discussion of gender portrayal in superhero comics, Justice John Marshall Harlan II reasoned that these magazines could not be considered more obscene or “objectionable than many portrayals of the female nude that society tolerates” (Stern).

he would be celebrated in exhibitions and monographs and become recognizable within wider culture, in both Europe and the USA. At the time of the publication of *Miss Thing*, his work presented a recognizable visual language within the gay male community that might have acted as a mutual visual shorthand, but it was not yet a widely parodied style.

The relationship between Tom of Finland and parody is inherently complex. Dale Lazarov discusses the fact that Tom himself was using parody and exaggeration to complicate “accepted power differentials” (Dewey). That being so, Johnson’s parodying is less a stylistic or critical commentary on that work than a repurposing of a graphic icon that was already becoming part of the nascent gay community’s shared visual language; as such, it could exemplify and represent *butch* as a character in Johnson’s strips. The creation of a tightly packed, easily legible visual icon can deliver information more efficiently to the reader than a subtler, more complex rendering might. Such stereotypes are particularly useful in one-panel gags. At the time of the strip’s release, Tom of Finland’s work and its iconic visual language would be sufficiently well known to Johnson’s gay male audience for Big Dick and other butches to become easily understood icons, and a neat counterpart to the similarly iconic figure of Miss Thing, who represents the *swish* antithesis.

In contrast to the large set and solidly outlined Big Dick, Miss Thing is drawn in flowing, feminine lines, with long, sinewy poses and a louche posture. The tension between these two styles is emblematic of the “contentious and bitter debate” experienced in the gay community of the era, as Craig M. Loftin describes in his article “Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945–1965”, which explains the subcultural tensions of that time. During this period, gay men were often seen (by each other, and by culture at large) to identify as, or inhabit the performance of, one or the other of these totemic gender roles: swishes were effeminate and flamboyant, often unwilling (or unable) to “pass” by hiding their ostentatious homosexuality; they were (and still often are) stereotyped as identifying with supposedly feminine subjects like fashion and beauty. Butches, on the other hand, were masculine presenting, physically strong, and associated with fitness, sport, and any number of careers perceived as masculine, like law enforcement. In many ways, the latter came to represent those largely middle-class homosexuals who “felt pressure to pass as heterosexual”, whereas swish identity was associated with, paradoxically, both working-class and elite culture (Loftin 577–78). The nature of this anxiety between butches and swishes at least partly related to a willingness among butches to reinforce “the supremacy of masculine values in American society” and resulted in some anti-swish prejudices among homophile organizations of the era (Loftin 591). However, while some of this animosity still exists today, *butch* and *swish* can also be seen as deliberate plays of gender *performance*.

While many men strongly identified as one or the other, such labels were not always serious, or a useful indicator of one’s “manliness”, whatever that is taken to mean. It may help the contemporary reader to see *butch* and *swish* as both terms of identity and as forms of drag. These sites of gender play may have been, some-

times, deliberate signals of sexual roles or preferences rather than, or in addition to, a concerted effort to reify or distance oneself from male as a perceived gender, at least in the cultures that Johnson explores in his gag. (Although it must be noted that, just as often, gay men enacted the gender performance that was natural to them, and that swishes often faced aggression and violence because of their perceived gender non-conformity.) This was the protean era prior to the AIDS crisis; gay men were opening their closets and emerging into a more liberated, collective sexuality. As they had become increasingly visible and connected since the early years of the twentieth century, they began to carve out public spaces in which they could meet and hook up: bathhouses, saunas, cinemas, gyms, parks, and the like (Chauncey 179). Liberation meant freedom from the heteronormative mores of marriage, reproduction, and chaste monogamy, and those hookups provided “collective support for their rejection of the sexual and gender roles prescribed them” (Chauncey 205). Instead, an almost utopian promiscuity emerged; first and foremost, from the mid-twentieth century, gay men and lesbian women were fighting for recognition and decriminalization of their sexual identities, behaviours, and proclivities. This preoccupation resonates strongly through Johnson’s work, as will become clear in the panel discussed below.

In the panel reproduced here (fig. 2), we see two characters chatting over the phone and across apartment buildings, commenting on an item of underwear that one of the characters has hung out to dry. Both characters present as swish, with an economy and lightness of line that could allow one to mistake them for women were it not for the context. Nevertheless, I will refer to these characters as she/her, one of a “variety of strategies” relied upon by those gay men who “boldly announced their sexual interests and created a visible gay presence by speaking, carrying themselves, and dressing in styles that the dominant culture associated with fairies” (Chauncey 187). A cursory examination of the panel in question reveals that this description fits the characters perfectly. Miss Thing, on the right, eyes heavy-lidded, checks her nails in a louche pose; her neighbour comments on the extremely capacious athletic supporter (known universally in gay culture as a jockstrap, and rarely used for sports) that hangs in the space between them. The situation, which might be familiar to those who grew up in working-class tenement communities, is redolent of gossip, and the juicy topic at hand is of course the jockstrap. The character on the left eyes it hungrily and wants to know who it belongs to, a question that is posed in the gossipy, speculative form of “Who’s your new friend?”, which Miss Thing merely reflects in a non-committal reply. The situation implies that Miss Thing has engaged in a sexual encounter the previous night and has hung out her conquest’s laundry for all to see. This news is so delicious for her campy friend thanks to the *size* of the jockstrap. Miss Thing has pulled a rather well-endowed piece of rough trade and wants everyone to see but does not want her neighbours to *know* that she wants them to see it.

The gag narrative is conveyed in the semiotic play of camp. Susan Sontag calls camp a “private code, a badge of identity” (515), but where she sees camp as “neutral with respect to content”, “disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolit-



Fig. 2. “My dear, whatever do you mean, Who’s my new friend?” Miss Thing in conversation with a neighbour (reproduced in Hall 2). ©Joe Johnson. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

ical”, Bruce LaBruce argues that camp is “by its very nature political, subversive, even revolutionary”. Despite emerging sexual liberation and exploration, gays and lesbians were still routinely denied participation in public life. Protest and activism were on the increase (the Stonewall riots took place in 1969, at the time *Miss Thing* first appeared in *The Advocate*), but many gay men lived closeted lives, and many more were choosing to pass (as straight) in wider society; this was an era where anti-communism was still used to sow suspicion of homosexuals in the minds of the greater population (Berube 269). It is perhaps for this reason that Johnson finds himself so at home in camp, signifier of the “mysterious bond” between gay men (Chauncey 188); his humour is delivered in a subtextual, ironic manner that re-

quires the audience to understand the sensibility of camp to decode the punchline. Such semiotic play may act as a kind of safety mechanism, hiding its commentary beneath layers of campy humour, but more importantly, it also acts as a shared community language. LaBruce describes this form of camp as a “kind of madness, a rip in the fabric of reality that we need to reclaim in order to defeat the truly inauthentic, cynical and deeply reactionary camp—or anti-camp—tendencies of the new world order”. This reality-rendering component of camp in the strip is the way in which the gag accepts so-called promiscuous behaviour as a component of gay life yet also refuses shame in this regard. The word *promiscuous*, with its many connotations, is often wielded against gay men by heteronormative culture as evidence of deviance or degeneracy. However, the connotation that promiscuous sex is indiscriminate or casual is at odds with the lived experience of many gay men. Indeed, novelist Edmund White celebrates “anonymous sex” as being “personal” and “emotional” and not “preclud[ing] intimacy” (300). The intimacy he refers to is that between two anonymous lovers, but it may also be found between two friends discussing (or gossiping about) that anonymous sex, as in this panel. Rather than presenting shame about such behaviour, Johnson instead celebrates it, making Miss Thing subtly brag about her conquest to a fellow swish.

The presentation of the male figure is fascinating in this panel. The swishes represent a rare rendering of femme culture, as these bodies were not often as celebrated as the pneumatic musclebound and hyperinflated gods of Tom of Finland and the physique magazines. This is further highlighted by the absence of an important male figure, the butch himself. Visible only by the presence of his enormous jockstrap, both the swish neighbour in the panel and the reader are left to imagine the reality of Big Dick or his buddy. The composition of the panel and the absence of the owner of the garment in question deifies him; the positioning of the two swishes on either side, forming the base of a triangle with the jock at its peak, puts them in an almost religious arrangement, with the object of sacred devotion between them. Yet, if viewed from the tribal tension between butch and swish, it also deprecates the butch. By his absence, he has been reduced to a large penis, a mere appendage, an object of discussion only by virtue of his physical endowment. This is pure, classic camp, relying on “an emphasis on artifice and *exaggeration*” (LaBruce; emphasis added) and “a spirit of extravagance, a kind of grand theatricality” (LaBruce). The gag strip is, then, also subversive on several levels; its code keeps the content secret, shared only among the community the work is intended for, and it subverts gender roles within that community, diminishing the butch via objectification while raising the profile of the louche, confident, unbothered femme.

The delivery method of *Miss Thing* is interesting too. *The Advocate* was a biweekly periodical published in Los Angeles that offered serious news on gay and lesbian politics. Within that publication the gag strip acted in the same way as its heterosexual cousins in broadsheet newspapers—that is, as an editorial amuse-bouche or palate cleanser, providing some temporary light relief from the more mundane and often troubling news of that issue. However, that delivery method



adds to its precariousness as a piece of queer historical cultural production. *The Advocate* was, like most daily or weekly newspapers, not meant to be collected; copies were literally disposable, printed on cheap paper with correspondingly inexpensive inks. *Miss Thing* was re-printed in a collected edition only once, in 1973, (J. Johnson) and has been out of print since. Outside of the four panels reproduced in *No Straight Lines* (Hall) it is difficult to access the strip, there is no evidence of scholarly work based on study of Johnson or his work, and there are few articles available online. Given that his work appears emblematic of, and ostensibly in conversation with, the socio-political and cultural contexts of its era, as per my discussion regarding the visual codes of the butch/swish dynamic and the language of camp, this inaccessibility means that a significant historical and artistic document of queerness has been all but lost, due to its assumed nature as low, disposable art. As a result, the life of this early queer cultural producer is rarely celebrated or even remembered.

### Where is *Émile*?

THE decades between *Miss Thing* and the online publication of Fabrice Neaud's *Émile* (fig. 3) in French in 2000 saw socio-political changes that were cataclysmic—namely, the AIDS crisis hit and changed everything for gay men: promiscuity and sexual utopianism (largely) ended. As gay men found it increasingly difficult to resist or overcome the hardening morality of dominant heteronormative culture, sexual liberation was gradually replaced with integrative calls for tolerance, equal rights in the legislative realm and the avowal that “love means love”. Mourning and loss reminded the queer community of just how precarious its existence was, and the goal shifted to obtaining the legislative protection that would enshrine its rights, providing continuity and legacy, and helping it to become more integrated into wider society. Gay men now had to contend with a non-localized, transtemporal trauma. The AIDS crisis exacerbated deep feelings of shame and suspicion of sex, and the condom arguably came to reflect the psychological barriers to intimacy that many men constructed around themselves as a form of psychic protection. They also realized the need for self-advocacy and organization, especially regarding healthcare in the United States since Reagan's government was unwilling to even mention AIDS. This crisis transcended national borders; globally, gay men were affected by the spread of the epidemic, including France where Neaud produced his work. Since the “gay community in France at this time was more reluctant to assume a collective identity and to take action as a group”, there were fewer “collective cultural responses” than in the USA, for example (Ferguson). However, Michel Simonin's autobiographical work *Danger de vie* (Simonin and Rozenbaum) signalled a shift wherein gay men who were grappling with seroconversion felt increasingly more willing to share their stories and draw attention to the crisis. Such work was often autobiographical, and this period of cultural activity may have influenced the direction Neaud would take as a

creator. Nevertheless, while creative responses to the crisis helped to raise awareness, it would be several decades before society changed its opinion on those who contracted HIV/AIDS.

# Émile

from spring '98  
to today  
(an ongoing story)

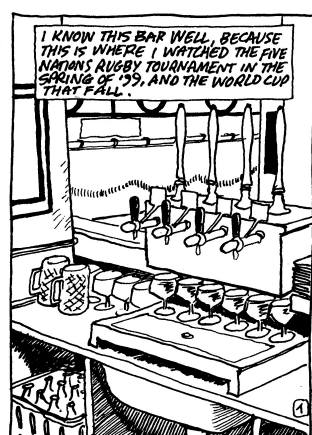
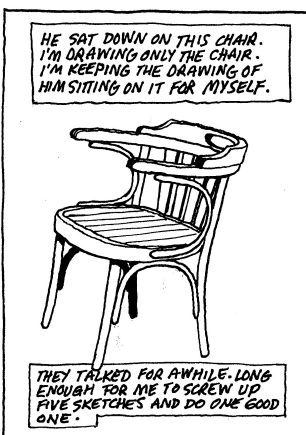
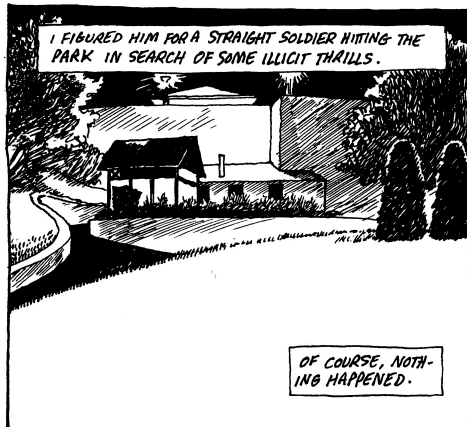
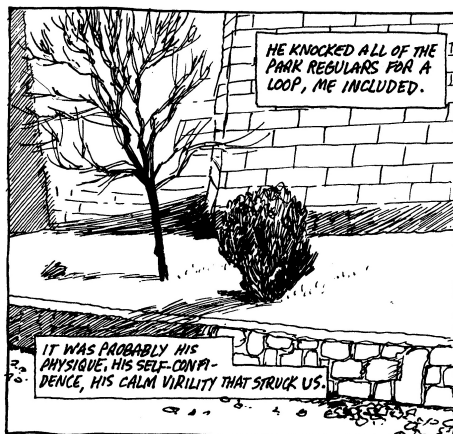


Fig. 3. First page of *Émile* in English translation (reproduced in Hall 175). ©Fabrice Neaud. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

Robbed of the utopian dreams of the future envisaged by liberatory activist groups in the 1960s and '70s, the '80s and '90s were occupied with a deep sense of loss and an acute awareness of mortality. Sexual freedom was traded for the right to hold a job, buy a house, and start a family, ushering in the era of the "good gay", the one you would be happy to live next to in your suburban cul-de-sac, safe in the knowledge that your lovely gay couple next door won't be having sex parties or lowering the property value in the area with their gender non-conformity. Yet despite having access to the "straight world" and its benefits, many gay men experienced a discontinuity. They still lived in the shadow of AIDS, a constant reminder that sex could kill, and had peered behind the veneer to see how dominant society really perceived them: tragic plague victims or aggressively hypersexual deviants, with little wiggle room in between. Militant groups of the era still fought for liberation rather than assimilation, but their radical critique of marriage, for example, often put them at odds with other LGBT people. However, the psychic shock of AIDS resulted in myriad responses, among them so-called "bug chasing", the practice of eroticizing HIV/AIDS and deliberately seeking it out. The motivations of those men are diverse, including a perception of sexual and personal empowerment, a sense of seroconversion acting as a masculinizing factor and a transgressive device acting against heteronormativity; but there is a sense that some men leant into the mor(t)al panic of HIV/AIDS instead of living in fear of it. It is little surprise, then, that the death drive emerged as a temporal concept in queer studies during this time; Lee Edelman's polemic *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* was released four years after *Émile*.

*Émile* is an autobiographical work in which Neaud as narrator talks to, and reminisces about, the comic's namesake. A complex work that was originally serialized online in Neaud's native French, *Émile* was a development of the work he had already undertaken in his prior memoirs; and *Émile* is inextricably influenced by events occurring during his work on the third *Journal*. During publication, Neaud was issued a court injunction against drawing the subject of that work, a man with whom he had an unrequited love affair. He also faced many extra-legal threats during this time, ostensibly from people close to the subject in question. He described this as a "crisis in his life and work", making it difficult not only to finish his book, but also to feel comfortable continuing to stay in Angoulême (Wivel). For an artist whose work depends heavily on the use of photographic reference to "himself and those in his entourage", the difficulties he faced around the publication of *Journal 3* must have been a significant blow, and the fallout of that time is evident in *Émile* (M. Johnson 36). Those experiences shaped the book in a way that is particularly interesting for this study: the figure is entirely absent. He does this to "illustrate by absence the personal consequences of appropriating another person's image in art" (Wivel). In an act that seems both self-defensive and provocatively political, Neaud describes his relationship with Émile in the form of narrative captions over detailed renderings of locations related to their various encounters.

The only figures present take the form of drawings of photographs of sportsmen (fig. 4), which Neaud uses as points of comparison to the subject of the story. This introduces a complex layering. Neaud works in a “naturalistic rendering style, heavily based on photo reference, which seeks to capture likenesses in detail” (Wivel), yet in *Émile* the figure only appears when he replicates photographs instead of using them as reference. Occluded, shifted into subtext, the male form otherwise haunts the comic by its absence: alluded to, appealed to, questioned and provoked, yet never diegetically present in the form of a character. This lends a mournful, melancholic air to the memoir. The relationship is seemingly unreconciled; the narrative focuses on the chase, the dance, the emergence of the possibilities of a relationship, but never on its consummation. Whether intentional or not, Neaud’s production of the strip seems informed by a variety of circumstances specific to the period in which the work was created (and in which it is set). In the latter stages of the crisis of AIDS, in an era of increasing identity politics, there is a sense throughout of the gay man once again becoming hidden or closeted. Neaud is in “constant battle against the objectifying gazes of the straight people in his milieu”, and rejects the idea that he might ever “represent [or] be the face of homosexuality” for those straight people (M. Johnson 35).

The disappearance of the figure in *Émile* might also represent the apex of a train of thought that runs through *Journal*. Neaud offers a complex discourse on the idea of the face and masks; as Michael A. Johnson describes, Neaud sees a dichotomy between “a shame-driven covering of the face and a ‘pride’-driven assumption of face” (35). He is never fully freed from the “mask of shame or of [...] gay cliché”, because of the insistence of the “objectifying hetero-normative gaze, a gaze that itself imposes masks on its other, and is all too easy to internalize”, though he nevertheless refuses to wear “masks of social intelligibility”, preferring to remain inscrutable and illegible (M. Johnson 35). However, by the time Neaud embarked on *Émile*, the “immense formal and conceptual labor that is reflected in *Journal*” (M. Johnson 34) has been somewhat subverted. Legal and extra-legal threats based on the frank portrayal of his life, loves, and sexual escapades have undoubtedly caused him to internalize a degree of shame, even if that is undercut with anger. It is compelling to draw a line between the moralistic attitude of those who served him with an injunction to prevent publication of a book (where even the inclusion of an unconsummated relationship with a man might be seen as rendering that man as queer in the eyes of his peers), and the wider context of the AIDS crisis, which brought with it a new scrutiny and the powerful resurgence of a conservative, religious morality around gay sex. That became intertwined with identity politics, shifting the focus from sexual practice to the more rarefied idea of love, from liberation to assimilation, and from demanding recognition on the community’s own terms to the acceptance of tolerance and marginal legislative wins in return for capitulation into the linear, hegemonic, capitalist regime.

This tension runs throughout *Émile*. Despite this intensified public scrutiny and the community’s new, acceptable, socially intelligible fronts, gay men of course still engaged in promiscuous sex, hook-up culture, and sex in public spaces—and they

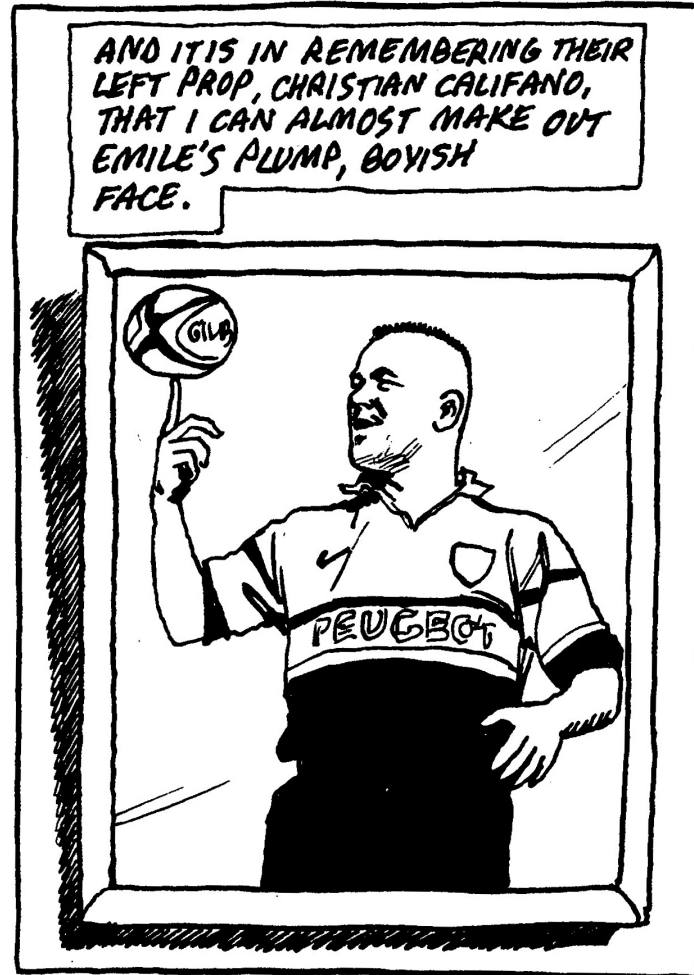


Fig. 4. Example of sportsman in *Émile* (reproduced in Hall 176). ©Fabrice Neaud. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.

continue to do so. Neaud's book begins with descriptions of cruising but lacks the sly winking and *jouissance* of *Miss Thing*. It is not celebratory but furtive. The locations are rendered in deep inks, detailed black and white illustrations that are redolent of night-time cruising, yet the subordination of the figure that is otherwise the subject of the book is suggestive of withholding, internalizing, withdrawing. Neaud often pulls back from giving away too much detail even in the narrative captions, fearful of the risk of revealing identifying information which, when combined with the closeted nature of several of his subjects, feels like a form of closeting itself. In these years following the emergence of the gay liberation movement and identitarian successes, such occlusion seems retrograde, as if Neaud is revealing his own internalized shame via the erasure of the male

figure. Unlike *Miss Thing*, where the object of desire is also absent, *Émile* does not celebrate or deify the figure; instead, its absence reveals Neaud's internal struggle with desire.

Figure 5 shows a nine-panel grid with transitions in a non-sequitur style (McCloud 72), showing objects like a CD, a military coat hanging over a chair, a diary entry, as well as scenes in a park. While seemingly unrelated, the narrative captions tie them together, albeit in an imprecise fashion, as Neaud describes why he must "shield [Émile] from [his] desire" (qtd. in Hall 182). He admits that he hasn't felt this kind of attraction for five years, and that in that time his "heart had ground to a halt and felt dry as a pebble, out of guilt over [his] previous affair... *Dirty, tainted*" (qtd. in Hall 182; emphasis added). This sense of shame and guilt means that Neaud actively works to retain the unreconciled, unrequited nature of his love, that he doesn't "have the right to love" like he used to, and that he must "not mention it to him, not call him, never write him". The centre panel is a flat black rectangle with one caption: "I am in hell." This self-imposed exile from actualized affection and love, Neaud's desire for men who wear the "mask of shame" (M. Johnson 34), and his willingness to lose himself in potentially toxic unrequited affairs are all suggestive of his insistence on inscrutability. That insistence emerges from a complex blend of personal shame and the wider difficulties faced by the community in the era of the socially legible gay male, at once driven by survival to become penetrable to the dominant straight culture while simultaneously driven from intimate sex by the long shadow of AIDS. Neaud's incongruity reflects a personal desire to remain wholly himself in the face of such pressures; the absence of the male figure reveals the difficulties of those choices.

Finally, the delivery method of *Émile* is once again of importance. Initially released on the website of publishing house *Ego Comme X* ("Émile: Du printemps 1998"), several years later *Émile* was translated from French to English. While this community translation is still accessible on the *Internet Archive* (see Neaud, "Émile: From the Spring of 98"; Welsh), the original French comic is no longer available on the creator's now defunct website.<sup>8</sup> Hall re-printed the first 11 pages in *No Straight Lines* and commissioned a professional translation of those pages, which was undertaken by Laurence Schimel and Kim Thomson (Hall 312); no other English language translation has been published in print. Despite being considered by Bart Beaty "the most important cartoonist in the world who does not have a book published in English", Neaud's work remains inaccessible to readers and scholars alike. While some international stories like *Persepolis* (Marjane Satrapi) have become bestsellers, and countless Japanese *manga* titles such as *Barefoot Gen* (Keiji Nakazawa) have been translated for English-speaking markets with great success, international queer books may be seen as special interest and therefore more of a risk. Even acclaimed English-language titles like Howard Cruse's *Stuck Rubber Baby* (1995) spent long periods of time out of print. While *Stuck Rubber*

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<sup>8</sup> Ironically, visitors to the site are now faced with a generic porn accumulator site with click bait articles that mainly follow the "top 20 listicle" format.

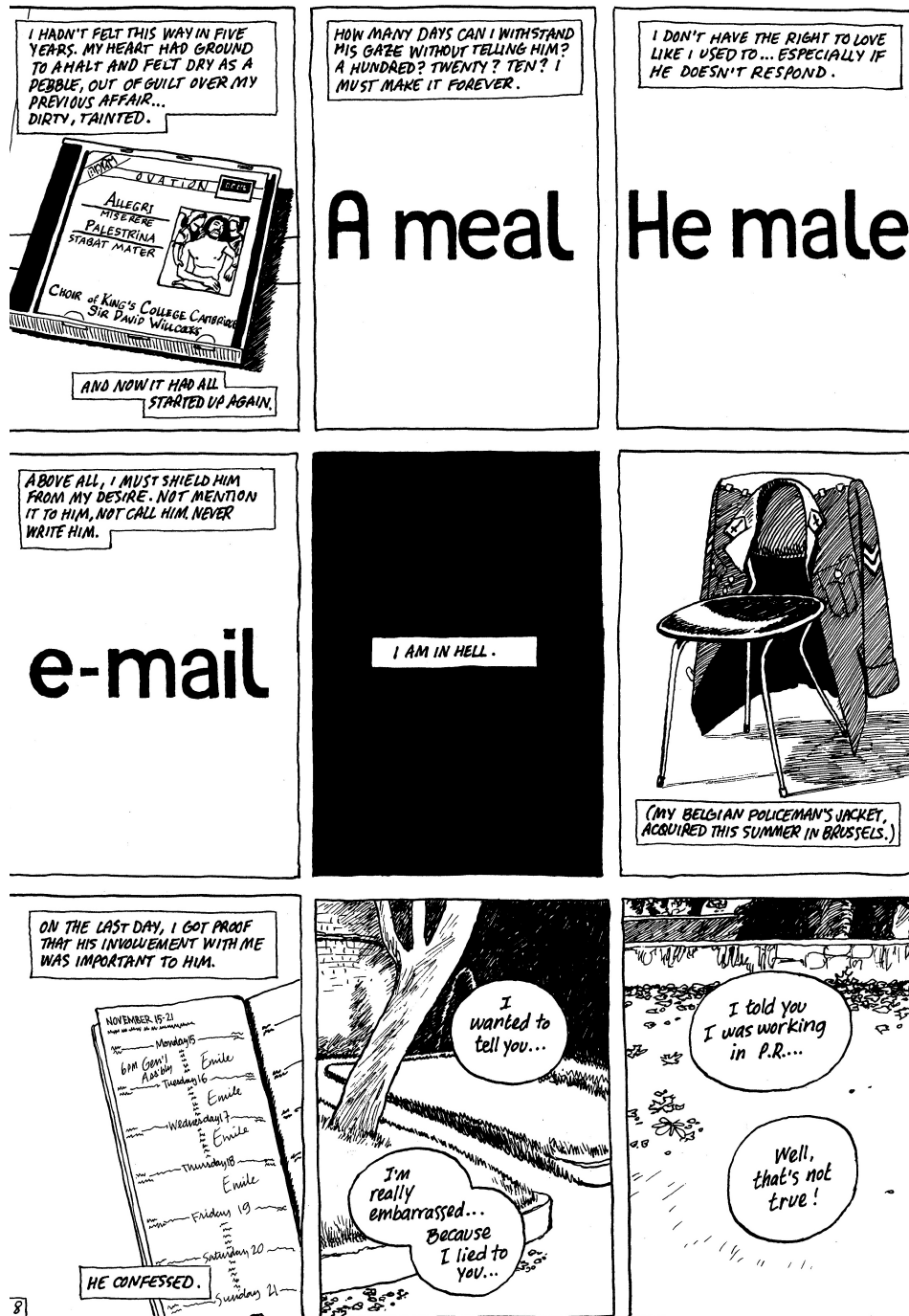


Fig. 5. Non-sequitur transitions in *Émile* (reproduced in Hall 182). ©Fabrice Neaud. Courtesy of Fantagraphics Books.



*Baby* has been reassessed in recent years, particularly in connection with Alison Bechdel's success in the medium, which helped result in a twenty-fifth anniversary reprint in 2020, lesser known and especially non-English titles often remain out of print indefinitely, struggling to achieve visibility and relevance. Again, the precarious nature of queer publication means the work of keeping those titles alive and in the public consciousness is made even more difficult.

### ***Greek Love and Elysian Futures***

**B**ETWEEN the publication of *Émile* and *Greek Love* (Lazarov and Graphite), the socio-political context shifted again, from the hopeless choice between withdrawal and capitulation burdened by the weight of the past, to a more hopeful, future-facing mode of possibility. A mere five years after Edelman's 2004 polemic, José Esteban Muñoz published *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, a work that acted as a direct rebuttal of *No Future* and repositioned the temporal dynamics of queerness from a highly individuated, nihilistic stance to a collective one which faced the future head-on. The modern LGBT movement succeeded in part by distancing itself from overt references to sex and sexuality in favour of a more generalized and socially legible demand for acceptance of non-normative types of love and companionship. At the same time, many gay men who seroconverted still faced crushing stigmatization from dominant culture. However, medical advances eventually made possible the reduction of transmission of HIV/AIDS. PeP and PreP (post and pre-exposure prophylaxis, respectively) offered hope to those who wished to engage in the sexual behaviours of their choosing while significantly lowering the chances of seroconversion. Pharmacological advances in the treatment of HIV further meant that the virus is untransmissible for those taking the correct combination of antiretrovirals.

Such advances led some to proclaim this as the post-AIDS era, but it remains a highly contentious supposition (Walker). In the Global North, access to PeP and PreP is mainly through screening and depends on the willingness to explain why one wishes to engage in risky sexual behaviour. On a state level, awareness of the availability of the treatments has led to renewed moralizing around that behaviour, particularly when combined with the cost-benefit analysis carried out by the boards deciding whether to provide new drugs through public health bodies. In the UK, for example, the dialogue around PreP has focused on the question of whether public health funding should be used to pay for prevention of a disease that is still seen as being contracted by risky and perceived immoral sexual conduct (Cáceres et al.). Meanwhile in the Global South, access to generic treatments for those already living with the virus is geographically, politically, and economically hampered. Stigmatization of people living with HIV/AIDS continues around the globe, and in certain locations gay men are still encouraged to believe that abstinence is the only way to truly protect themselves. So, in a period termed by some as post-AIDS, the shadow of the disease still looms large. I offer this detour

because I use the term in a rhetorical way when discussing *Greek Love*; the very notion that we *may be* on the cusp of a post-AIDS era is a cause for hope, not only for individual liberty but also because it may arrive contemporaneously with a resurgence of queer thought and theory that is diametrically opposed to the narrow policies of integration shaped around discrete identities. It is this hopeful socio-political context that pervades *Greek Love*.

This text differs from the others in two key respects. Firstly, it is erotica, so while both *Miss Thing* and *Émile* tackle sex incidentally, *Greek Love* is the most graphic of the three. Secondly, *Greek Love*, like most of Lazarov's output, is entirely silent. It is an erotic romp with three central characters: the lithe, twinkly Eros and two warriors. The latter two protagonists are exemplary of a kind of rugged, warrior masculinity in terms of their anatomy and musculature; artist Graphite renders them in a bold, chunky style which brims with character (see fig. 6). The blurb for the comic describes them as Ares, the god of war whom we can see resting on clouds at the opening of the narrative, and Herakles, a demi-god and son of Zeus. However, there are otherwise few identifying features or narrative cues within the text that would ground the characters in a specific identity and/or spatiotemporal environment, making these two seem more human than those non-diegetic descriptions would suggest.



Fig. 6. Warrior masculinity of protagonists in *Greek Love* (Lazarov and Graphite, front cover). ©2016 Dale Lazarov & Adam Graphite.

Yet, despite *Greek Love*'s position as a modern gay erotic comic, its style is distinctly different from many comics produced at the same time, most evidently

in Graphite's rendering of the protagonists' anatomy. Patrick Fillion's Class Comics stable was mentioned earlier (see *supra*, note 6); it follows in the pneumatic footsteps of Tom of Finland but takes it to new parodic heights. Here in *Greek Love*, that parody of the masculine form is absent, and the characters are presented more realistically. However, the characters are still idealized, and Lazarov and Graphite play with tropes also found in *Miss Thing*. Throughout the narrative, neither sexual combatant plays a fixed, stable role; instead, they alternate positions, being versatile and swapping from so-called dominant to submissive roles in a way that subverts the heteronormative concept of active and passive participants. Neither of the two warrior figures has his masculinity diminished by inhabiting the "bottom" role. The introduction of the third character in the ménage à trois, Eros, who incites the action with his magical bow and arrow, further complicates the sexual identities at play. He begins as a voyeur, watching the fruits of his work from a privileged position before finally being dragged into proceedings by the two warriors. All are nakedly masculine in presentation, but Eros is presented as younger, lighter, more ethereal and a little camp, as shown here (fig. 7), with the use of iconographic visual symbols such as love hearts and a blush in his cheeks.



Fig. 7. Voyeuristic Eros getting drawn into the ménage à trois (Lazarov and Graphite 9). ©2016 Dale Lazarov & Adam Graphite.

If Lazarov and Graphite deliberately craft a narrative that subverts even contemporaneous attitudes to gay male sexual roles, it is worth exploring the cultural context in which that emerges. In a proto-post-AIDS era, the story is shorn of

obvious socio-political and prophylactic baggage: the sex is all bareback, there are no condoms or barriers of any kind present, and the authors are not interested in providing any kind of political background to the world in which these lovers play. In fact, they seem to exist in a kind of timeless, apolitical, and paradisaical world. Re-siting the action in mythical Ancient Greece is a past-facing but futurist, liberatory move releasing Lazarov from any responsibility to show safe-sex practices. Yet, as contemporary readers, we cannot fully divest ourselves of our own context: all modern gay erotic work exists in the shadow of AIDS and, arguably, makes a comment on that context in some form or another. It is with this in mind that I suggest *Greek Love* resonates with Nicolas Poussin's painting *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig. 8), a memento mori that scholars largely agree is a commentary on the ultimate impossibility of utopia.



Fig. 8. Nicolas Poussin. *Et in Arcadia Ego*. 1628. Public Domain. Wikimedia, [URL](#).

Even in this unspoiled green paradise death exists, in the form of a crypt. Poussin situates his painting in Arcadia, “an area in the central Peloponnese region of ancient Greece” that became mythologically linked with Pan, the “god of the wild, and of shepherds and flocks” (Jones). That god, “famed for his ambivalent sexuality and sensual abandon”, came to emerge in Victorian literature as not only that society’s “fear of, but also, crucially, its fascination with homosexual desire” (Imko 1). Art historians like Erwin Panofsky argue that the meaning of the inscription on the crypt in Poussin’s painting, which is the same as the title, and which translates to “I, too, once lived in Arcadia”, is a reminder that even utopia will one day pass into death (Jones). The crypt that sits subtextually in modern gay erotic work is AIDS, the ever-present reminder of mortality that is inextricably linked with gay sex. And yet, I would argue that Lazarov effectively counters this position: by resituating the sexually liberated homosexual male in mythical history, he stitches a continuum that reaches towards us, from the past to the present day, and further, out into the impossible utopia that Poussin comments on. As Muñoz argues, queers can enact futurity and utopianism because we have had to learn to reckon with our mortality and survival, because we have turned to face death

instead of deferring or avoiding it. That horizon of becoming does not preclude death or confer immortality; instead, it is because of our awareness of mortality, our collective experiences of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the threat of physical and social violence many have faced that we might begin to work rhizomatically rather than linearly, contributing in the present to shifting our gaze towards a horizon of the future. “Post-AIDS” then is less a statement of current fact than it is a matter of temporal reorientation, looking towards a future in which the threat of AIDS has been eradicated globally, so that we might begin asking questions of what that future might look like. When the suffering, stigma, and moralizing around AIDS have finally passed into history, might we be free to undertake once more an emancipatory and liberatory sexual politics?

This sense of freedom and abandon in *Greek Love*, then, feels less like the romanticization of an imagined past than a kind of utopian act that asks us to imagine a world in which we, as queer men, are freed to explore our desires without fear of censure or death and in which heteronormative roles are cast aside in favour of a more explorative approach to desire. *Miss Thing* subverts the display of the masculine body by foregrounding swish figures, displacing the butch into subtext so as to engage in a camp form of humour, while *Émile* occludes the male figure entirely, due to shame, guilt, and anger. In contrast, *Greek Love* celebrates the male body, revelling in its erotic charge and using it as a vehicle for a kind of shameless sexual play. The characters reflect the ideal of the god Pan, whose “hunting ground is more realistically populated by young men” than by the more widely rendered nymphs (Imko 2). In his book *The Cult of Pan in Ancient Greece*, Phillippe Borgeaud describes Pan’s landscape as “set aside for strictly masculine projects” (77). If the Victorian era saw Pan as emblematic of the perceived futility and degeneracy of extra-marital sex, his promiscuity in dangerous and direct opposition to marriage, then *Greek Love* instead reifies the god’s “ambivalent sexuality and sensual abandon” in the form of characters who exemplify the “natural origin of homosexual impulses” (Imko 1). Victor Imko also points out that Pan is considered the god of shepherds and huntsmen, and in figure 9 we see Herakles tending to a flock of sheep, forming a direct, symbolic connection to this mischievous, libidinous god. Lazarov and Graphite glorify this form of masculinity without value judgement on their success within any kind of presumed gender performance or their ability to uphold masculine ideals as they relate to sexual roles, while nevertheless rendering the male figures as stereotypically strong and muscular. They do this, though, in a way that subverts contemporaneous portrayals of hypermasculinity within gay erotic comics. However, unlike in *Émile*, the protagonists of *Greek Love* are mythical fictions; Lazarov and Graphite do not need to contend with the problems of tackling real people within their work that Neaud struggled with so much, freeing them to play with desire in a way that is closer to the camp humour of *Miss Thing*.

*Greek Love* too faced issues in regard to accessibility; originally published by Bruno Gmünder Verlag under the Sticky Graphic Novels imprint since 2016 (Spurgeon; Cronin), that publisher folded in 2017 with the death of its founder (Terror).



Fig. 9. Herakles tending to a flock of sheep (Lazarov and Graphite 8). ©2016 Dale Lazarov & Adam Graphite.

This left Lazarov's comics in publishing limbo, and he pivoted to fundraising through merchandise to continue to sell his catalogue. He now sells digital versions of his work via Class Comics and self-publishes printed comics through Aerio. Lazarov also had trouble selling digital-first comics on the popular Comixology platform, despite previously uploading Comixology-specific censored covers, where a print of a brown paper bag covered up any nudity (Johnston). While the specific reason for this refusal is unclear, Lazarov himself argued, with reference to pull quotes and sales figures, that quality and interest could not be part of the decision-making process, implying that while Comixology carried several sexually explicit straight comics at the time, they were effectively censoring *his* work. This interference extended to other digital platforms, each of which dropped or refused the work due to "credit card processor interference" (Thomas-Faria). As mentioned earlier, it is not only queer work that faces the problem of inaccessibility over time. However, queer comics and especially queer erotica, face a more difficult time than most. Reliant upon publishers of erotica, when they fold, it is often difficult to find a new home for that work; and despite digital platforms offering increased accessibility and new ways for creators to reach their audiences, even these methods are precarious, since partners often take a conservative approach to the products they will allow. This applies even to non-queer creators who introduce queer content into their work (Dredge). Even so, creators in the modern, digital era still can sell comics directly to readers, or band together on less constrained digital platforms like Class Comics. So, while Lazarov has faced these difficulties, his books, including *Greek Love*, are still available for readers to enjoy, unlike either *Miss Thing* or *Émile*.



## Conclusion

THE three texts chosen for comparative analysis in this article are not in direct conversation with each other, nor are they necessarily representative of broader contemporaneous styles. Neither do I suggest that the authors have directly responded to the wider socio-political and cultural contexts in which they were created. Instead, I have argued that the way the gay male figure is represented changes over time, and that through that mobility we might glean some understanding of those shifting, evolving contexts. I have shown that the work of queer creators which uses the male figure as its subject can be effectively positioned relative to the AIDS crisis, gender roles, feelings of shame and guilt, liberation, and the perception of the community by those outside it, offering a useful way to view those changing contexts. Comics as a medium is inherently mobile across time, and specific comics can act as a kind of time capsule where the figure becomes a lens that allows us to see through to the authors' time from our own. For queer cultural production and comics specifically, such mobility is often precarious owing to less interest in the wider culture in protecting and archiving work that is out of print or was hosted on websites and servers that have since become inaccessible. By comparing diverse queer comics production, I point to its rich diversity, cultural importance, and the need for academic exploration of such precarious work. Ultimately, I highlight the illuminating nature of changing representations of the male form, and how those representations are reflective of the ever-evolving socio-political contexts in which creators produce their work.

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