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Superheroes in Contemporary Media

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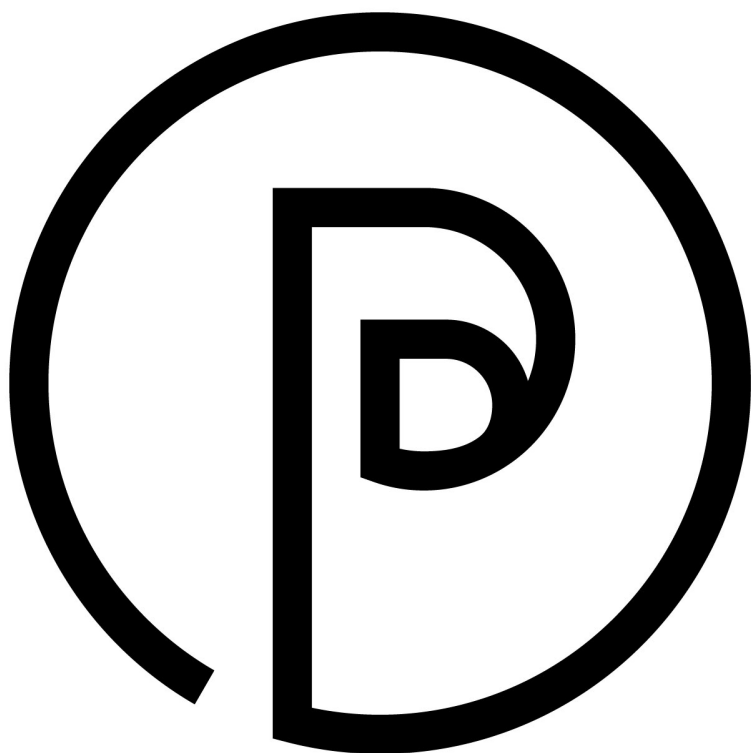
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Foreword: Superheroes in Contemporary Media

Morgan Oddie & Dan Vena

Dealing with superheroes can be a tricky business. They tend to make a mess of things while battling opposing forces, often destroying buildings, devastating infrastructure, and debilitating city centres they claim to protect. Beyond damaging their external environments, superheroes tend to have a bad track record when it comes to maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, often lying to their loved ones about their identities under the guise of ‘protection.’ Together, these collective harms may be worth the cost of staving off another intergalactic takeover, but it can still be difficult to accept superheroes exclusively as ‘heroes’ when they maintain the uncanny ability to destroy worlds with the flick of a finger. Indeed, there remains an unsettling, almost monstrous quality to superheroes whose corporeal and moral logics seem to extend beyond the intelligible, making them figures without proper place or home.

The inability to locate superheroes within human world orders is what marks their bodies as supreme sites of otherness, and in turn, what often makes them appealing to outcast or marginalized fan communities. Within the Western pop cultural imagination, superhero fans are typically understood as socially inept, white, cis-hetero male nerds who may assuage some of their masculine anxieties by identifying with or in relation to these figures. For such fans, superheroes may provide a temporary release from larger physical or emotional insecurities, represent ego ideals or sexual fantasies, or may even offer a space in which to embrace one’s own felt sense of non-belonging. At least within conventional representations of these relationships, the outsider status of the superhero is experienced as an entirely white male affair and rarely are other types of viewers/readers/fans even considered.

However, given the robust and steadily diversifying landscape of contemporary superhero media, it is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the ways in which these figures are being taken up by artists and fans of colour, as well as by women and queer folx. For instance, Patty Jenkins became the first female director to helm an American superhero movie with the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017. Jenkin’s film also remains the biggest domestic opening for a female director. The year following, Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018) became the highest grossing superhero film ever made and the only one to be nominated for Best Picture at the Academy Awards. Notably, *Black Panther* costume designer Ruth E. Carter and production designer Hannah Beachler became the first artists of colour to be nominated for and to win Academy Awards in their respective categories. Most recently, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck’s *Captain Marvel* (2019) broke opening weekend box office records, surpassing expectation and inciting outrage from trolls on online review boards.

Even with this brief list of DC and Marvel Comics Universe highlights, it is clear that Western superhero culture is at a turning point. As of the late 2010s, there has been a palpable shift towards restorative superhero narratives that attempt to recuperate and carve out space for identities that have long gone underrepresented in this genre. It is not that contemporary superheroes serve an entirely ‘new’ ideological or political function; for instance, they continue to bring up questions of nation, governance, race, gender, sexuality, and the human. Rather, now more than ever they seem to be poised to address larger systemic histories of violence and cultural erasure for a mainstream/normative public. No longer relegated to Saturday morning cartoons or dime comics, these superheroes are quite literally the talk of Tinsel Town, and their impact—much like the mess they make while fighting—is growing exponentially. Take for instance the utter seismic wake of Coogler’s *Black Panther*, which via its iconography and now-famous expression, “Wakanda forever,” has become synonymous with projects of black empowerment, liberation, and recognition. The superhero genre has often been lambasted as worthless, juvenile and low art. However, its images and gestures are increasingly being mobilized in real-world political resistance—an astounding phenomenon that should continue to be explored. This is the cultural phenomenon that this inaugural issue has attempted to capture. To paraphrase an expression, “we aren’t in Smallville anymore.”

This foreword has meditated briefly on the Western comic book and cinematic superhero, but as you will see in the articles to follow, there is much more selection in this genre than meets the eye. In accordance with the mandate of *Panic at the Discourse*, this issue has sought to support new and innovative ways of theorizing that do not necessarily fit within traditional frameworks. Superheroes, as this foreword cues, are a messy business and demand a multi-directional approach that moves forward with a bit of trepidation, a pinch of bravery, and a smattering of courage. It is not necessarily easy to stare down a superhero, but if you can look them in the eye, they may just reveal a secret (identity) or two.

As the authors of this issue will show, the superhero genre and its multiple mediums are ripe for cultural analysis. For those unindoctrinated in these conversations, we hope that you use this issue as a primer and an opportunity to combat some potential reservations you may have regarding taste and value around such figures. As mentioned, superheroes have long since worn the supposedly shameful label of childish entertainment, apparently offering little by way of serious academic fodder. In response, scholars of comics, sequential art, film, media and beyond have written extensively on the political, intellectual and artistic merit of these texts, bringing superhero figures into the academy as valuable research pursuits.

For those more familiar with these dialogues, we invite you to use this opportunity to refract these characters through new lenses. An unquestionable binary of good versus evil guides many superhero values. Gender binaries also often go unchallenged in the genre and there has been a sordid history of gender-based character representations. Robyn Joffe’s “Holding Out for a Hero(ine): An Examination of the Presentation and Treatment of Female Superheroes in

Marvel Movies” looks at depictions of the Marvel cinematic characters Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique to show how the postfeminist origin of the strong female character trope problematically represented superhero women variously through hypersexualization, infantilization and maternalization. Kaitlyn Adier Cummings’ “Same Image, Different Lens: Revisiting the Critical Reception of Two Different Generations of Cinematic Superheroism” asks what superhero films do to be considered ‘feminist’ texts. The article examines the contexts of different generations of superheroine depiction and reception by looking at *Catwoman* (2004), *Elektra* (2005), *Wonder Woman* (2017), and *Incredibles 2* (2018).

While the superhero genre may have seen a positive increase in diverse representations, there is still considerable room for improvement. Nao Tomabeche’s “Recycling the Other: The Role of Nostalgia in Superhero Comics’ Orientalism” discusses how Asian portrayals in comics continue to be marked by Orientalist stereotypes and nostalgia for a manufactured past. The article examines the settings, characterizations, and otherness of DC Comics’ Japanese hero Katana and Wolverine’s storylines in Japan from Marvel Comics. James M. Elrod’s “‘I am also a we’: The Interconnected, Intersectional Superheroes of Netflix’s *Sense8*” examines how the representations of bodies and kinship-based subjectivities highlight queer people and people of colour as sources of heroic power. However, this intersectionality is also globally cosmopolitan, where neoliberal capitalism and its technologies threaten to uncritically flatten difference in national, racial, gendered, and sexual identities.

Turning to comics, Peter Cullen Bryan’s “‘I was swallowed by metaphor and digested by self-loathing’: De-toxifying Masculinity in Gail Simone’s *Secret Six*” discusses hypermasculine tropes found in characters typical to the superhero genre. In examining Gail Simone’s depiction of Catman and Bane as adaptations, the article explores the possibility of redeeming characters and plots to healthier versions of masculinity. Joe Yang’s “Salaryman Masculinity in *One-Punch Man*’s Kynical Narrative” examines the manga and anime to draw parallels between Japanese salaryman masculinity and superheroes, including the friction of the individual and socio-structural expectations of gender and systemic productivity.

Centring on contemporary politics, Megan Genovese’s “Plot Twist or Plot Hole? Public Debate About *Secret Empire* and American Identity Crisis” contextualizes the 2017 Marvel Comic’s reveal of a fascist Captain America in light of the 2016 American presidential election. The article uses political discourse analysis to examine the national identity crisis and its accompanying memory work. In “The Dissolving Panopticon: Surveillance Culture and Liquid Modernity in Spider-Man Media,” Dave Stanley examines the various cinematic portrayals of Spider-Man in order to trace the development of surveillance technologies and culture in post-9/11 America.

All of the contributions to this issue are original and interesting contemplations on superheroes in contemporary media. On behalf of the editorial team, we are proud to have

produced this inaugural issue and hope that you enjoy engaging and grappling with these articles as much as we did. We sincerely thank Queen's University for their financial support for this new project.

Holding Out for a Hero(ine): An Examination of the Presentation and Treatment of Female Superheroes in Marvel Movies

Robyn Joffe

Abstract

Prior to the release of *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), the way that female characters from the Marvel Comics' canon were realized onscreen was problematic for several reasons and encumbered by issues rooted in the strong female character trope and its postfeminist origins. A close examination of three Marvel superheroines—Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique—reveals that while they initially appear to be positioned as equal to their male teammates, they are consistently burdened with difficulties and challenges that men never have to face. The filmmakers' focus on these women's appearance and sex appeal, their double standard for violent women, and their perception of a woman's role, create a picture of "strong" women that is questionable at best and damaging at worst.

Keywords: Marvel, postfeminism, sexualization, infantilization, maternalism

Introduction

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is a media franchise and shared universe, owned by Marvel Studios and currently consists of twenty feature films, seven television series, one digital series, assorted direct-to-video short films, tie-in comic books, and other mixed media products. It is a shared universe that is actively expanding as more and more properties are slated for release. The *X-Men* film series, until recently owned by 20th Century Fox, is one of the interconnecting series of films based on specific characters from Marvel Comics. It currently consists of eleven films and two television series, with more to be released this year. While both of these universes in their entirety are ripe for scholarly attention, this essay will only focus on a selection of the available feature films and their main female characters.

Marvel's female superheroes have thus far been presented as powerful, empowered women and equal to their male counterparts. However, while they appear at first glance to be strong female characters, a closer examination of how they are depicted onscreen, the ways they are made to perceive themselves, and the ways they are characterized by others, reveals that these women are more about style and stereotype than substance. In deconstructing the strong female character trope and its postfeminist origins, I will demonstrate that the filmmakers' focus on these women's appearance and sex appeal, their double standard for violent women, and their

perception of a woman's role, all combine to create a picture of "strong" women that is problematic at best and damaging at worst.

Theoretical Framework and Research Methodology

I will be examining three female superheroes and how their onscreen portrayals conform, to varying degrees, to stereotypes in the filmmakers' efforts to present them as strong female characters. I will do this by using feminist literary criticism to interrogate the postfeminist values that I argue guide these representations. Feminist literary criticism is one avenue of an interdisciplinary mode of enquiry that is based on two main ideas. First, that gender inequality, rather than being based on biology, is a cultural construct that can be broken down and studied. Secondly, the male perspective has been assumed to be universal, which has led it to "dominat[e] fields of knowledge, shaping their paradigms and methods."¹

Like any other forms of artistic expression, the crafting of literature and film is paired with ideology—the set of unconscious beliefs and assumptions held by each individual, as well as the practices that inform our everyday lives.² The problem is that ideology can offer a false or limited perception of reality and may reinforce harmful power structures, especially when a book or film's central conceit is that the series of events are happening in a fictional version of the "real" world. In presenting the actions of a specific group or individual, as well as their perception of our world, literature and film do more than merely communicate ideology to their consumers: "since each invocation of a code is also its reinforcement or reinscription, literature [does] more than transmit ideology."³ Like literature, film can also end up creating ideology. Nothing scripted can truly be completely objective and lacking in any kind of agenda—including this essay.

Throughout this paper I will employ qualitative textual analysis. In using this method, I will examine a selection of Marvel characters and films, from both the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the *X-Men* film series. From the official MCU, I will be examining both Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), and Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch). From the *X-Men* film series, I will be examining Raven Darkholme (Mystique).

Postfeminism and the Strong Female Character

Postfeminism can be said to have begun in the early 1990s, in reaction to second-wave feminism and the then burgeoning third-wave feminism. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn suggests that postfeminism did not originate in the academy, but instead originated in "popular discourse of the 1990s to suggest that in the contemporary era, feminism had lost its relevance."⁴ More a "cultural condition" than a movement, postfeminism "generated a second line of feminist inquiry" that moves concurrent to third-wave feminism, overlapping in some areas.⁵

Postfeminism assumes that society is past feminism, glossing over realities of social difference that would problematize that assumption: “white and middle class by default, [postfeminism is] anchored in consumption as a strategy (and leisure as a site) for the production of the self.”⁶

According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism is “a *process* by which popular culture ‘undoes’ feminism while appearing to offer a well-intentioned response to it.”⁷ While postfeminist ideas were “well refuted” by scholars, they were embraced by the mainstream media.⁸ That same media then used those ideas as the base for “sensationalized discussions” about feminism, concluding that the older movement was outdated.⁹ This allowed postfeminist discourse to take hold.¹⁰

Jeffrey A. Brown writes that much of postfeminism is “a marketing ploy or a carefully scripted rhetoric about freedom of choice for women.”¹¹ While there are positive aspects to postfeminism, “it also runs the risk of simply reframing cultural sexism as the woman’s choice.”¹² This is because, in postfeminism, the creation of sexualized images and displays is often characterized as the result of an “active choice” that women have made, rather than as something that has been chosen for them.¹³ Karen Orr Vered and Sal Humphreys warn that “in its disengagement with the structures of patriarchy, it is possible that postfeminism fails to offer any valid strategy for change.”¹⁴ Despite this scholarly consensus, “postfeminism” now “accurately describes how filmmakers, audiences, and the media may conceptualize certain characters and narratives.”¹⁵

One way that mass media has conceptualized postfeminist women can be seen through the emergence of the strong female character. According to Samira Nadkarni, this trope creates a “one-dimensional framework” that prizes physical strength above all, makes attractiveness a requirement, and necessitates the “wearing of skin-tight, skimpy, or fetishistic gear.”¹⁶ She further concludes that the strong female character trope “seemingly offers a symbol of feminism while choosing to undercut values more closely associated with [it].”¹⁷ Strong female characters “risk undermining female strength when the visual focus is as much, or more, on the beauty and desirability of the heroine than on her accomplishments.”¹⁸

Hannah Shaw-Williams, feature editor for *Screen Rant*, has noted that, especially in male-oriented genres, female characters are made to “carry a standard for their entire gender, while male characters get to just be characters.”¹⁹ She further observes that strong female characters aren’t given character arcs wherein they must confront and overcome their own personality flaws, because they are only there to show that women “are just as good as men.”²⁰ Heather M. Porter quotes Shauna Mlawski, who insists that strong female characters are bad for women, precisely for that reason: “Any character without flaws will be a cardboard cutout. Perhaps a sexy cardboard cutout, but two-dimensional nonetheless.”²¹ And Porter specifically references the superhero genre when she writes, “characters need flaws and weaknesses; this helps motivate them ... to achieve something greater.”²²

Case Studies

Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch), and Raven Darkholme (Mystique) are all Marvel Comics characters with intricate and detailed histories in the comic canon. Because Black Widow and Scarlet Witch first appeared in Marvel Comics in 1964, and Mystique first appeared in 1978, the filmmakers had a lot to draw on when creating the backstories and narratives for the film versions of these characters. Black Widow is a Russian spy and a former KGB assassin. After her crimes catch the attention of S.H.I.E.L.D. (a fictional spy agency that deals with the paranormal), an agent is sent to kill her; however, this agent ends up convincing her to defect and join S.H.I.E.L.D. instead. In her first film appearance, which was in *Iron Man 2* (2010), she is sent to spy on and evaluate Tony Stark for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Avengers Initiative. She then became an Avenger herself in *The Avengers* (2012). Her character has appeared and had a significant role in six of the twenty feature films that have been released so far by Marvel Studios.

A newer addition to the MCU, Scarlet Witch has thus far appeared in three films as well as in the mid-credits scene of a fourth one. After previewing their characters in one of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*'s (2014) final credits scenes, she and her twin brother, Pietro, made their feature film debut in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) as orphans who volunteer to be experimented on by Hydra, a fictional criminal organization that originated in Nazi Germany. These experiments then give both twins superpowers. Scarlet Witch gained facility with "neural electric interfacing, telekinesis, [and] mental manipulation", and her brother is gifted with super speed.²³ Although both twins eventually switch sides and join the Avengers, Pietro (Quicksilver) is killed in the final battle.

Mystique is a very complicated character. In the initial *X-Men* trilogy, she appears as little more than a sidekick and lover of the villain, Magneto. However, in the more recent *XMFC* trilogy (which, despite being released afterwards, takes place before the initial *X-Men* trilogy), her character is explored more in depth. Mystique is a shapeshifter who can become anyone, but in her natural form she has scaly blue skin, red hair, and yellow eyes. As a child she runs from parents who are fearful of her and finds a place to stay with a young Charles Xavier, a telepath who would become Professor X, leader of the X-Men. Although in the beginning she hides her true form behind blonde hair and blue eyes, she learns to embrace her natural appearance with the help of Erik Lehnsherr, the man who would eventually become Magneto. Because of this connection with Erik, she leaves Professor X and joins Magneto's Brotherhood.

All three of these characters, as well as the narratives of the films, are driven by postfeminist beliefs. According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism "seems to embrace feminism while at the same time viewing the movement as so outdated that it has become oppressive itself."²⁴ Nowhere is this more apropos than when examining how two of these women are sexualized onscreen.

The Avengers begins with scenes that establish the impending central conflict of the film, and that introduce each of the superheroes who will end up as part of the team: Captain America is in a gym, beating a punching bag so hard that it flies across the room; Bruce Banner, who can turn into the Hulk, is in India, treating the sick; Iron Man is finalizing the installation of his latest technological creation; Black Widow is in a warehouse, tied to a chair.

Because she is a strong female character, Black Widow manages to turn the tables on her would-be torturers, manipulating their interrogation of her to get the information she needs from them, before fighting them all—and winning—despite starting the fight while still tied to the chair. Although this helps to establish her character as a force to be reckoned with, she is still the only character introduced through perceived victimization and fetishistic imagery. That this type of introduction could exist in a supposedly “family friendly” film points to just how pervasive the objectification of women is in our society.²⁵

Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze establishes that mainstream Hollywood movies appeal to audiences because of their “skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure” and left unchallenged, film “coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.”²⁶ Visual pleasure, Mulvey claims, has been divided into two categories, with men as active participants and women as passive witnesses to their own objectification: “In their traditionalist exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*.”²⁷

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the camera certainly enjoys looking at Black Widow. There is one particular camera shot that is present in almost every movie she is in: a close-up framing of her backside. In *Iron Man 2* and *Age of Ultron*, they are lingering shots as the camera follows her as she walks across a room. In *The Winter Soldier*, it is the final shot of a fight scene, as she drops her improvised weapon and struts out of the room. In all three cases, it is an unnecessary excuse to put her body on display so that she may fulfill her function as, as Mulvey called it, the “erotic object” for the camera,²⁸ as well as for anyone watching, both on and off screen.

While the camera is admittedly not as intent on Mystique’s body as it is on Black Widow, it does not have to be. The camera does not have to go to the trouble of highlighting a woman’s curves when the woman in question is not wearing any clothes: “Both actresses who played the character [in the two trilogies] were nude but for a few strategically placed scaly prosthetics.”²⁹ This decision was made despite the fact that it did not originate from the Mystique in the comics, only the film version regularly appears undressed. According to Gordon Smith, the first film’s special makeup designer, director Bryan Singer “slam[med] his fist down on the table screaming, ‘I want her nude! I want her nude! I want her nude!’”³⁰ Carolyn Cocca speculates that Singer was looking to place Mystique in contrast to the X-Men, who are dressed in plain, simple black

leather (albeit skin-tight leather) uniforms; however, his doing so “cannot but position her as an object ... something to look at, instead of someone to root for or identify with.”³¹

Gladys Knight writes that “[Post]feminists ... tend to equate sexual power with physical power and believe that women who are beautiful and draw the male gaze can be coded as powerful.”³² Critics like Ariel Levy, however, reject this idea, “insisting that what some are calling ‘the new feminism’ is really ‘the old objectification’, disguised in stilettos,” and blame postfeminists for “co-opting the ideals of sex radicalism and feminism by equating sexually provocative behaviour with freedom.”³³ However, the question of whether or not women can be empowered by displaying themselves sexually onscreen is a moot point: their agency is surrendered once they become an object of the male gaze.³⁴ After all, it is exceedingly unlikely that the “dominating patriarchal gaze” views the resulting sexualized images onscreen as evidence of a woman’s strength and power.³⁵

Scarlet Witch is perhaps a unique character in consideration of this: she has not been ogled by or put on display for the camera. However, her situation introduces another way in which women’s looks are policed by media and society. During the publicity tour for *Age of Ultron*, Elizabeth Olsen, who plays Scarlet Witch, spoke about acting in slow motion while demonstrating for her audience: “Usually facial expressions aren’t great in slo-mo, because sometimes we’ll do super slo-mo moves, and, you know, you’re trying to do effort...But what I did just then, in slo-mo, is quite literally the most unattractive thing you could ever see anyone do. It’s so weird. And [director] Joss [Whedon] would always remind me to use a calm face because that is okay to watch.”³⁶

Whedon complained that there is a “genuine, recalcitrant, intractable sexism, and old-fashioned quiet misogyny that goes on” in Hollywood.³⁷ But even though he speaks out about it, his actions only help to perpetuate the cycle: none of the male actors have reported being told to make a “calm face” during fight scenes. Moreover, this treatment is not the only thing that separates Scarlet Witch from the other characters. While Black Widow and Mystique are objectified by those behind the scenes, Scarlet Witch is diminished in a different way. A consequence of conflating power with desirability is that a character that is not sexualized can instead be seen as vulnerable—even when she is meant to be strong.

In *Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch single-handedly paralyzes the Avengers by going into each of their minds and causing them to experience detailed and traumatic hallucinations. She later stops a speeding train and instigates a city-wide evacuation with her magic. Her abilities are extremely versatile and—although she struggles with them at times—there have been no hard limits established regarding what she can do. She is currently demonstrably the most powerful superhero in the MCU, and yet she is the only one who panics in the midst of a climactic battle. She cowers in an abandoned building until Hawkeye, a straight, white male character with no actual superpowers, gives her a pep-talk:

Are you up for this? ... We're fighting an army of robots, and I have a bow and arrow. None of this makes sense. But I'm going back out there because it's my job, okay? And I can't do my job and babysit. It doesn't matter what you did, or what you were. If you go out there, you fight, and you fight to kill. [If you] stay in here, you're good; I'll send your brother to come find you. But if you step out that door... You are an Avenger.³⁸

As Hawkeye is revealed to be a father of three in this film, there is a paternal quality to this speech that, along with the words and images used, emphasize the idea of Scarlet Witch as a frightened child. Adding legitimacy to this idea, she is motivated rather than angered by his words, and emerged dramatically from the abandoned building to fight alongside the others. Although Whedon has built a reputation for presenting strong and empowered women onscreen, a closer examination of the type of female character he most often creates reveals a very different reality.

Sarah Hagelin writes that "our culture ... remains troublingly invested in [stories] of female fragility."³⁹ Whedon is more than willing to provide those stories. The projects for which he is most well-known each feature at least one character that plays on the "hysterical woman" trope. Frail, slender, and emotional, these women are either extremely intelligent or exceedingly powerful. They are also constantly overwhelmed by their intelligence or power, appear unbalanced, and are seen as being in need of protection.⁴⁰ Throughout *Age of Ultron*, Scarlet Witch is shown as being dependent on her brother for comfort, protection, and emotional stability: "[Scarlet Witch] has such a vast amount of [power] that she's unable to learn how to control it. No one taught her how to control it properly. So it gets the best of her. It's not that she's mentally insane, it's just that she's just overly stimulated."⁴¹

Whedon calls himself a feminist, but presenting powerful women is only progressive if those women already have or gain the control and confidence to handle their power. Whedon's presentations of female strength tend to weaken upon closer examination. It cannot be a coincidence that the two female Avengers in *Age of Ultron* are the only ones who are carried from the final battlefield by male characters despite the fact that both are conscious and that Scarlet Witch's powers allow her to fly. All of the surviving male Avengers, in contrast, leave under their own power.

Whedon is not the only director who considers Scarlet Witch in need of rescue: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) directors, Anthony and Joe Russo, appear to feel the same way. This shared view of her character is indicative of the way she has been infantilized by those around her—both in front of and behind the camera. Despite her immense power, this infantilization implies that she is powerless where it matters. In *Civil War*, after her brother's death at the end of *Age of Ultron*, the male Avengers have taken his place as her protectors. Throughout the film they consistently treat her like a child, absolving her of any and all guilt and responsibility for her actions, even when her actions result in the deaths of

innocent bystanders. Despite her role as an Avenger, the power she possesses, and the fact that Olsen was twenty-eight years old when the film came out, in comparison with the male Avengers, Scarlet Witch is “just a kid.”⁴²

Avengers: Infinity War only continues this trend. Even though her extreme power level is finally acknowledged within the narrative, Scarlet Witch still needs to be rescued when she and Vision are attacked towards the beginning of the story. In the directors’ commentary, Joe Russo states that the filmmakers arranged for events to unfold in this way specifically because they wanted to give Captain America a “great entrance” into the film.⁴³ Even though Scarlet Witch should be more than a match for her foes, she is instead overwhelmed by the battle solely so that Captain America can save her. Unfortunately, she is not the only female superhero who is treated like a child and otherwise diminished by the men in her life.

X-Men: Days of Future Past (2014) starts in a dystopian near-future, in the midst of genocide caused by the murderous Sentinels. In order to save the world, a group of surviving mutants decide to send one of them, Wolverine, back to 1973 to stop the first incidence in the chain of events that would lead to that future. That event was Mystique’s assassination of Bolivar Trask, creator of the Sentinels. Trask had been conducting secret and lethal experiments on mutants, but his death at the hands of a mutant only convinces the government that mutants are dangerous and Sentinels are necessary. His death is also the first time that Mystique kills, or as Professor X declares, “The day she truly became *Mystique*.”⁴⁴

This idea that the act of killing is a line from which, once crossed, there could be no return, reveals one of the many flaws in this film’s narrative. The men that Wolverine gathers to stop Mystique—including the younger version of Professor X (Charles)—are all of the same mind: Mystique must not kill. In an early scene in 1973, Mystique stops a group of Trask’s security contractors from taking mutant soldiers, including her friend Alex, into custody in Vietnam. When one tries to stop her, she starts to strangle him, and it appears as though she is not going to stop. Alex then takes it upon himself to use his power to blast the man that she is strangling across the room, presumably saving the man’s life. Mystique is not amused by Alex’s intervention:

MYSTIQUE: “I had that.”

ALEX: “I know.”⁴⁵

Judith Lorber writes, “In the social construction of gender, it does not matter what men and women actually do or even if they do the same thing. The social institution insists only that what they do is perceived as different.”⁴⁶ In *X-Men: First Class* (2011), Erik walks into a bar filled with former Nazi soldiers, has a drink, and proceeds to kill them all. He shows no remorse and no mercy, and yet, later in the film, Charles still tells him that he is capable of goodness and redemption. Mystique, however, must be saved from herself. While it is understandable that the men want to stop Mystique from killing Trask in order to prevent the horrible future, the episode

with Alex implies that any death she causes will place her irrevocably on the side of evil. This plays into the idea that the existence of a female villain is more disturbing than that of a male villain, because aggressive and violent women are “unnatural.”⁴⁷

Paula Ruth Gilbert writes, “according to our rigid gender polarity ... violent women are seen neither as sane nor as women. Society needs to see violent women as different—either mad or bad—because otherwise, we would need new discourses to understand that both men and women can be violent.”⁴⁸ Mystique’s plan to kill Trask is both cold and calculated—as much an execution as an assassination—because while she is motivated, in part, by revenge, she is not driven by that desire; it does not control her. She is impassive and unyielding, even when Charles confronts her:

CHARLES: “If you kill Trask you’ll be creating countless others just like him.”

MYSTIQUE: “Then I’ll kill them, too.”

CHARLES: “Those are Erik’s words, not yours.”⁴⁹

Charles’ response to her declaration is telling. Her words must be Erik’s, because the idea that *he* is a merciless killer is culturally acceptable, whereas the ruthlessness and premeditation found within Mystique’s words could not possibly belong to a woman: “The fact that social tolerance for aggression is gendered reflects the cultural equation of violence and masculinity.”⁵⁰

In this way, Mystique refuses both the traditional characterization of a female villain—a slave to her emotions, jealous, or insane⁵¹—and of a postfeminist femme fatale, who wields her sexuality like a weapon.⁵² The truth is that Mystique is oddly positioned in this film. A heroic villain, she is on a crusade to stop a murderer, but her actions will result in a holocaust. The problem with Mystique, a three-dimensional and imperfect character, in *Days of Future Past* is not Mystique herself, but the way she is treated and viewed by the male characters and the overall narrative: “[Mystique is] positioned in the middle of a feud between Erik Lehnsherr and Charles Xavier. Both of these men try to secure her affection and loyalty to their ideologies, and both treat her as a much younger and immature character ... [and] mostly talk about her as if she is a mere object.”⁵³ An early exchange between the two men, referencing Mystique, makes this obvious:

CHARLES: “You took the things that meant the most to me.”

ERIK: “Maybe you should have fought harder for them.”⁵⁴

In the end, Charles refuses to use his powers to control Mystique, leaving her to decide whether or not to kill Trask. While this, in and of itself, may be a triumph, one cannot ignore that she is only able to make her choice because Charles *allows* it. As Jason Zeigshiem observes, “In the X-Men filmic universe, women who embrace their powers and exert their agency risk annihilating the world. It is only white men who possess the authority to wield their own powers as they see fit.”⁵⁵ The plot may hinge on Mystique, but the narrative focuses entirely on the fact

that she is wrong and the men must correct her: “Her role is central, but at the same time carries forth the historical underrepresentation and stereotyping of female characters.”⁵⁶

Mystique is not the only female superhero whose more recent characterizations carry forth sexist stereotypes while ignoring underrepresented realities and relying on postfeminist ideas of normative femininity. Black Widow’s role in *Age of Ultron* and its director’s emphasis on maternalism exemplify these issues. According to Diane Negra, postfeminism “withdraws from the contemplation of structural inequities fostered by feminism, putting forward diagnostics of femininity that take the place of analyses of political or economic culture. It achieves this, in part, by relentlessly stressing matrimonial and maternalist models of female subjectivity.”⁵⁷

Maternalism “is the notion that femaleness is rooted in motherly qualities so that women must become mothers in order to realize themselves.”⁵⁸ Rooted in the origins of feminism, maternalist thinking promotes the idea that maternity equals morality and that the maternal instinct is present in all women, ensuring their good moral character.⁵⁹ The “new momism,” a slightly reimagined idea of maternalism, “has become the central justifying ideology of what has come to be called ‘postfeminism’.”⁶⁰ As with many ideas related to postfeminism, the new momism emphasizes the freedom of choice:

Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. But here’s where the distortion of feminism occurs. The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves ... that you are a ‘real’ woman, and ... a decent, worthy one, is to become a ‘mom’ ... Thus the new momism is deeply contradictory: It both draws from and repudiates feminism.⁶¹

The new momism is the driving force behind Black Widow’s storyline in *Age of Ultron*.

Midway through *Age of Ultron* there is a scene featuring Black Widow and Bruce Banner wherein they discuss a potential romantic relationship. Banner demurs, bringing up the fact that he cannot always control when he turns into the Hulk. He says that there is no future for Black Widow with a monster like him. In return, Black Widow reveals part of her history: “In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised... they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It’s efficient. One less thing to worry about; the one thing that might matter more than a mission. It makes everything easier, even killing. You still think you’re the only monster on the team?”⁶²

This speech generated significant reaction from fans, as they accused Whedon, who also wrote the script, of suggesting that Black Widow’s inability to conceive made her a monster. Although Black Widow does not explicitly say that her sterility makes her a monster, she does say that it is the reason she was such a good assassin. If her status as a killer is what makes her a monster and her sterility is why she was a good killer, then her words do imply a connection between childlessness and monstrosity. This unfortunate situation is only compounded by the

fact that just prior to this scene in the film, the Avengers are introduced to Hawkeye's very pregnant wife, Laura, whose happiness at her current and impending motherhood become another source of angst for Black Widow.

A year after the film's release, Whedon finally addressed the scene between Black Widow and Banner and that section of dialogue in particular, so as to explain what he had been trying to accomplish. In an interview on the *Tumblr* website, Whedon wrote: "[Black Widow] said she was a monster because she was an assassin ... Being rendered infertile made her feel unnatural, made her feel cut off from the natural world. But it was her actions that defined her."⁶³

Rosalind Petchesky argues, "at the foundation of all patriarchal ideology is the idea that 'Motherhood ... is the primary purpose of a woman's life'."⁶⁴ Mardy Ireland is more specific in her critique that "there is an implicit assumption that motherhood is intrinsic to adult female identity. This assumption necessarily implies an 'absence' for any woman who is then not a mother."⁶⁵ Whedon's response does nothing to pacify the complaints that many raised when the movie came out. That he thought this explanation would appease those concerned only highlights how the new momism has helped to skew the conversation disproportionately in favour of maternalist rhetoric. The other side of the argument—that the many happy and successful women who are not mothers help to prove that motherhood "is more of a culturally embedded mandate" than a biological imperative⁶⁶—is rarely, if ever, heard in popular media.

Conclusion

Alexandra Petri writes, "fiction matters. You don't have the luxury of getting to know most people. But fictional characters you can learn inside and out. ... you get glimpses of their interiors that most people, even the people you're closest to, never afford you. You internalize them and make them a part of yourself."⁶⁷ Each of these characters and the issues mentioned here, individually, may not stand out as significant problems in need of solutions. However, when looked at with the knowledge that up until recently, these portrayals were representative of all female superheroes onscreen, the destructive patterns and practices of these filmmakers require a response.

Representation is important, but quality of representation also matters.⁶⁸ Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique are all women who have been put onscreen by men, which may be part of the problem. Simone de Beauvoir writes, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."⁶⁹ Although they are fictional, these representations matter because they help to construct new ideas of female identity—the acceptance of which can then lead to changed behaviours.⁷⁰ This is not to suggest that men are incapable of creating complex and imperfect female characters, but to do so requires more than good intentions.

Action must be taken, even if the first step may seem counterproductive. In other words, the strong female character, with its shallow ideas of strength and its overreliance on a single personality type, must disappear: “these postfeminist action heroes provide images of an equality that has not been achieved and [they] mitigate their viewers’ interests in exploring inequalities.”⁷¹ This will require a shift away from postfeminism, and the emphasis on style over substance that reduced the feminist movement to “mere slogans of token empowerment.”⁷² It is not that female superheroes cannot be sexy or have childlike personality quirks but this cannot be all that they are; and, there must be variety that extends beyond superficial appearance.

Tania Modleski warns that the postfeminist move from “womencentered, feminist approaches to gender studies is allowing patriarchy to both appropriate and contain feminism for masculinist ends.”⁷³ After all, postfeminism does nothing to alter the patriarchal status quo. The challenge now is to move beyond surface measures and create actual, substantive change. Although this may require drastic changes in attitudes in those who work behind the scenes, there is no reason why it cannot be done. If our culture can accept that superheroes exist in fictionalized versions of “our” reality as complex, flawed, and noble human beings, there is no reason it cannot accept that some of them are women.

Notes

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Same Image, Different Lens: Revisiting the Critical Reception of Two Different Generations of Cinematic Superheroism

Kaitlyn A. Cummings

Abstract

What does a superhero film have to be in order to be celebrated as a ‘feminist’ text? This essay aims to answer that question by surveying the critical reception surrounding four superhero films: *Catwoman* (2004), *Elektra* (2005), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Incredibles 2* (2018). Each led by female characters, these films received grossly different appraisals of their feminist messages. Close analysis of each film sheds new light on what cultural changes may be responsible for the disparity in reception; bridging the gap through interrogation of the contemporary sociopolitical climate.

Keywords: female superhero, feminism, postfeminism, film criticism, genre studies

Introduction

Hollywood has not been kind to the female superhero. History shows the superheroine has rarely been given a cinematic stage of her own, instead often relegated to an auxiliary role as sidekick (Storm, *X-Men*; Black Widow, *Iron Man*; Wonder Woman, *Justice League*), positioned to serve as a romantic foil to male protagonists (Jean Grey, *X-Men*; Elektra, *Daredevil*; Sue Storm, *Fantastic Four*) or cast as a hyper-sexualized villainess (Mystique, *X-Men*; Poison Ivy, *Batman & Robin*; Harley Quinn, *Suicide Squad*). However, among this extensive catalogue of underserved women with superpowers appearing on the silver screen, a narrow few have had the opportunity to star in their own pictures. Since the arrival of the new millennium, a period Jason Dittmer refers to as a “post-9/11 cinematic superhero boom,”¹ up until last year, there have been only four female-led superhero films: *Catwoman* (2004), *Elektra* (2005), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Incredibles 2* (2018). Released in inadvertent couplets just months apart, these two generations of female superheroes, segmented by a 13-year intermission, stand in significant contrast to each other both in their commercial performance and their sociocultural representations of female heroism.

The first wave in the early 2000s was received with poor critical reception and even more disappointing box-office returns—returns with a stench so pungent that it lingered long enough to have reportedly led Marvel CEO Ike Perlmutter to, in 2014, declare women-fronted superhero films “a very bad idea” and “a disaster” in counsel against the company’s prospective venture into “female movies.”² Both *Catwoman* and *Elektra* have been derided as exploitative uses of the

superheroine figure. The *New York Times*' A.O. Scott referred to *Catwoman* as a "teasing S-and-M ballet,"³ while an *AV Club* review of *Elektra* referred to the red bustier-clad protagonist as the "world's deadliest hooker."⁴

Contrastingly, the recent second coming of the female superhero has been met with critical plaudit and record-shattering sales. *Wonder Woman* has the third highest domestic gross of 2017 at over \$400 million⁵ and *Incredibles 2* delivered a box-office weekend debut of \$180 million—the best debut of any animated feature ever.⁶ So, what changed in the years between these two moments in superheroine cinema? *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* arrived on the heels of a cultural wave of feminine assertion that has seen women warring against discrimination in a host of male-dominated industries (both 2017 and 2018 have been declared 'The Year of the Woman'). The success of both these films, while merited by their quality alone, has been buttressed by the work of critics who, in the wake of the film industry's own Time's Up initiative,⁷ have championed for these titles to be recognized as feminist triumphs. But the feminist approach achieved by the new edition of superheroine can also be found in the superheroine of old. A comparative close reading of the two film pairs presents an assessment of the (anti)feminist messages in *Catwoman* and *Elektra* previously condemned by critics, and a reconsideration of the feminist treatises critics have built around *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2*.

Selection Process

This essay excludes from its analysis television series' and those films that predate or lie outside of the big-budget formula of today's various studio-led franchises. This limited scope allows for an in-depth examination of the post-2000 critical landscape and is not intended to be an exhaustive study of the genre. The inclusion of the PG-rated animated film, *Incredibles 2*, which is unlike the other PG-13 rated live-action films, is dictated by a critical consensus that has consistently classified the Pixar franchise as a member of the superhero genre, regardless of its marketability to children and families. Admittedly, its designation as a female-led superhero film is a more contentious qualification. Dr. Nadine Wreyford, research fellow with a UK-based research council on women in contemporary film, found that *Incredibles 2* had a three to one ratio of male to female characters with speaking roles,⁸ with Mr. Incredible, the first film's unequivocal star, still playing a significant role in the second. But, *Incredibles 2* earns its rank among the small school of female-led superhero films, as Elastigirl is undoubtedly the driving force behind the narrative action of the film. A small handful of films were omitted from this study, counted among them are *Kick-Ass* (2010) and *Fantastic Four* (2005), which were both discounted because their female characters function as supporting characters. Others, like the romantic comedy *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* (2006) starring Uma Thurman or the campy sci-fi

comic adaption *Tank Girl* (1995), lean too heavily into tropes outside of the superhero genre to be considered for the intents and purposes of this female superhero catalog.

***Catwoman*: Sexual Repression and the Emancipation of the Female Body**

Leather is the language of the female superhero. Superman, Batman, and Thor may wear capes, but can they fight crime in cut-out chaps like their female colleagues? It has long been an argument of feminist theorists that the fetishized wardrobe of superheroines is the superfluous effect of what Laura Mulvey cites as the male gaze—a term that refers to the camera’s tendency to frame the female figure as a sexual object for the pleasure of the heterosexual male viewer.⁹ The needless costuming of superheroines in high heeled shoes, bare midriffs and latex, functions not only as an impractical depiction of crime fighting but also as a purveyor of her sexualized image. As described by Richard J. Gray, “the leather jumpsuit...serves as a ‘second skin,’ which from the perspective of the viewer, allows all of the nooks and crannies of the female body to be displayed.”¹⁰ The 2004 film, *Catwoman*, is among the most relentless cinematic uses of such dominatrix-styled voyeurism. Directed by the mononymous filmmaker Pitof and starring Halle Berry, *Catwoman*’s ensemble has been counted among the most “unnecessarily revealing movie costumes”¹¹ in history and described by one critic as “so-in-your-face it’s not sexy”¹². Berry, dressed in a black bra-top and torn-apart leather pants, plays Patience Phillips, an introverted graphic designer who works for behemoth cosmetic company, Hedare Beauty. One evening, in an unfortunate happenstance, Patience overhears the company executive, Laurel Hedare, played by Sharon Stone, discussing the sinister secret behind the success of Hedare Beauty’s makeup products. After her eavesdropping is discovered, Patience tries to flee the company grounds but is murdered by Hedare’s henchmen. Patience’s fate is reversed, however, when she is reborn as Catwoman, a mystical creature with catlike reflexes and shrewd intuition.



Catwoman, 2004.

Patience's metamorphosis into the nimble feline vigilante is saturated with sexually-charged images of Berry licking not just her screen-mates but even herself—in one instance, ordering a glass of milk from a bar and then sensuously lapping the residual cream off her lips.



Catwoman, 2004.

Peter Travers of *Rolling Stone* remarked, “so much for feminism,” in an unforgiving 200-word review evaluating the superheroine's crimefighting “cat suit.”¹³ The film is unrelenting in its desire to demonstrate Catwoman's newfound libertarian sexual prowess, but its hypersexualized modes of representation are not without purpose. *Catwoman* places sexual politics at the center of both its imagery and its narrative; while one sells sex, the other sells feminism, respectively. The film's dialogue and narration are littered with the mantras of second wave feminism's calls for self-actualized female sexuality, of which the pioneering feminist Kathie Sarachild once called, “our only possible weapon of self-defense and self-assertion.”¹⁴

Catwoman's ultra-eroticism is matched by dialogue that refers to early tenets of feminist thought, aimed at freeing women from the cage of femininity.¹⁵ In a conversation between Patience and the shaman-figure, Ophelia, who guides her through her transition to ‘catwomanhood,’ the film's feminist approach is made overwhelmingly transparent as Ophelia explains to Patience her new abilities as a Catwoman:

OPHELIA: Catwomen are not contained
by the rules of society.
You follow your own desires.
This is both a blessing and a curse.
You will often be alone
and misunderstood.
But you will experience a freedom
other women will never know.

You are a catwoman.

[...]

PATIENCE: So, I'm not Patience anymore?

OPHELIA: You are Patience.

And you are Catwoman.

Accept it, child.

You've spent a lifetime caged.

By accepting who you are,

all of who you are...

...you can be free.

And freedom is power.¹⁶

Unlike her comic counterparts, who see their image sexualized in service of a male audience, Catwoman's overt sexuality is political for its inherent ties to her character's ascent into self-actualization. Whereas Patience has been repressed by societal norms that subjugate her to a life of sexual reticence, Catwoman is unhinged from the social conventions of womanhood. It is Catwoman's sexuality that leads her to reject the genre's romantic pull toward patriarchy, embodied in her square-jawed suitor, Detective Tom Lone (played by Benjamin Bratt). Patience begins an affair with Lone while her alter ego evades arrest under his investigation into a series of crimes committed by Catwoman. Ultimately, Patience casts Lone aside in a nonconformist rebuttal to traditional patriarchal standards of behavior. In her concluding monologue, Catwoman boasts, "You're a good man, Tom. But you live in a world that has no place for someone like me."¹⁷

Catwoman's desire to "live a life untamed and unafraid"¹⁸ takes primacy over a historical pedigree that encourages women to find self-value in marriage. A romantic relationship between Catwoman and Lone is made impossible not by his refusal to accept her as a radically empowered female figure, but by her own distaste for structures of patriarchal restriction (embodied quite literally in one scene when, while detained under arrest, the impatient Patience writhes and contorts her body to fit through the narrow bars of a jail cell to escape capture). As Patience explains to Lone in their final scene together: "In my old life, I longed for someone to see what was special in me. You did, and for that you'll always be in my heart. But what I really needed was for me to see it. And now I do."¹⁹ In this farewell to Lone, Catwoman recognizes that her own subordination is tied to a patriarchal system, which she has internalized and normalized through heteronormative acts of validation. With Catwoman, a figure who finds no value in such a system, Patience is emancipated.

***Elektra*: Hardbodied Maternalism**

Following the hyper-feminized poise of Berry's cat-lady, is Jennifer Garner's role as the green-eyed assassin, Elektra. Released just one year after *Catwoman*, critics like Maitland McDonagh of *TV Guide* magazine were quick to liken *Elektra* to the "pinup appeal"²⁰ of her cinematic predecessor. Manohla Dargis, in her review for the *New York Times*, wrote that Elektra "looks like she was drawn by a man with a deep familiarity with the oeuvre of Russ Meyer,"²¹ the famed 1960s sexploitation director. Elektra sports the uniform not of a lethal martial arts trained ninja but, as the *Washington Post* put it, of a woman "auditioning for a spot on the next Victoria's Secret TV special."²² Donning a firm breasted red bustier with silk trousers to match, Elektra's sultry costuming is inarguably gratuitous, but it does offer a new lens from which to view the female superhero body.

Garner made her debut as Elektra in 2003 as the pugnacious love interest in *Daredevil*, a thankless role that, to the credit of director Mark Steven Johnson, managed to showcase Garner's hard-earned musculature. Her toned physique gets its first on-screen introduction during a fight sequence with co-star, Ben Affleck. Affleck, as the blind lawyer Matt Murdock, is conservatively dressed in a suit and tie while Elektra, stands bare-armed, ready for combat in a thinly strapped tank top. With broad shoulders and chiseled arms, Elektra's physicality commands the screen, overshadowing Murdock's doughy figure, dubbed by the online news site *Salon* "almost androgynous" for his soft-bodied appearance.²³ Likewise, Garner's Amazonian build did not go unnoticed by media. A *Telegraph* profile of Garner's role in *Daredevil* featured the subtitle "...her muscles put Ben Affleck...to shame" with the piece later remarking that Garner's "biceps [were] rippling under her T-shirt."²⁴



Daredevil, 2003.

Two years later, when she reprised the role of Elektra for a solo feature, this time armed with a detectably sturdier build, Garner's brute athleticism was critically disregarded. In a recent

essay on the film, Brown University professor, Michael D. Kennedy, went a step further, not just overlooking Garner's muscly stature but working to undo its existence all together. Kennedy stated, "Jennifer Garner's version...rejected the more transgressive muscular action heroes (Ellen Ripley, Sarah Connor) in favor of an empowerment featuring 'slim, white, heterosexual feminine beauty' for the consumption of the male gaze."²⁵ The hardbodied women to which Kennedy refers are a legion of female characters who lead their own action films (i.e., *Terminator*, *Aliens*, *Blue Steel*, *Point of No Return*), all popularized in the 1980s. As explained in Jeffrey A. Brown's writings on the gendered fetishization of action heroes, "the well-toned, muscular female body...is presented in these films as first and foremost a functional body, a weapon...The cinematic gaze of the action film codes the heroine's body in the same way that it does the muscular male hero's—as both object and subject."²⁶

The framing of the robust female body as a tool of lethal function is a visual trope exploited throughout *Elektra*. A chiaroscuro effect is often employed in the cinematography to emphasize the contours of Garner's hardened biceps and abdomen as distinctly athletic. In a scene that is germane to the film plot and included only to demonstrate Elektra's sheer muscular force, a training montage shows Elektra executing an arduous workout that includes one-armed pull ups and a calculated jump rope routine. The lighting in this sequence mimics a similar backlit glow James Cameron's *Aliens* (1986) used to frame central action figures like Ripley. The effect is a sharp white glow that reflects on the angular silhouette and outlines the hardbodied figure.



Elektra, 2005.



Aliens, 1986.

In addition, the artwork of the film's DVD release advertises *Elektra* as "Born to fight. Trained to kill," with the still image of Garner cross-armed with a pair of her single-pronged metal blades in each hand.²⁷ Once again, her muscular body is fashioned prominently and accentuated by the effect of the incandescent glow from behind, in a glorification of her brawny bicep similar to that of the *Terminator 2*'s gun-wielding Sarah Connor.



Elektra, 2005.



Terminator 2: Judgment Day, 1991.

Elektra's hardened images of feminine heroism are far from what Kennedy has described as a "rejection" of the celebrated female "badassery" established in Regan-era action films, though there is room for critique of its representational approach. Some theorists have noted the belittling effect such a masculinized imagery can have on the female figure functioning under binary gender codes. Brown writes,

the image of heroines wielding guns and muscles can...render these women as symbolically male...[The] binary structure situates men as active, women as passive...Thus, within this strict binary code the action heroine, who fights and kills on par with men, confuses the boundaries and is seen by some critics as a gender transvestite...[the] notion of the hardbody heroine as a male impersonator.²⁸

The legitimacy of these roles is interrogated for their inability or unwillingness to present acts of female heroism as anything other than simply imitations of masculinity. A concern for which *Elektra* offers a response.

Claims of the chiseled Elektra as a masquerade of performative masculinity are silenced by her character's push toward maternalism. When we are first introduced to Elektra, her demeanor is that of a woman inured to violence and impervious to affection. Labeled at the beginning of the film as a "non-existent woman," she is a motherless mercenary who, in the absence of the maternal link, is characteristically unfeminine in profession and behavior. That is, until she meets Abby, the young ingenue who fulfills her call to maternalism. After Elektra discovers that her latest assignment is to execute Abby and her father, with whom she has just

recently become acquainted, Elektra is compelled into a role of matriarchal authority, forced to protect Abby and her father, Mark, from the dangerous horde of ninjas who seek to apprehend them. Thus, she becomes a mother-figure and adopts a role as protector. In one scene, Elektra looks to Abby, seated in the backseat of a pick-up truck blowing bubbles out of chewing gum, and murmurs to herself in disapproval, “I’m a soccer-mom.”²⁹

During an earlier scene, Elektra yells at Abby from across the dinner table for using profanity, in an exchange clearly meant to satirize the clichés of traditional American family life. Though it is worth mentioning that Abby’s father, Mark, is also seated at the table during this spat and he too barks at Abby for her foul language, it is Elektra’s stern and commanding voice that emerges first as the dominating figure of authority. Furthermore, there is a brewing romantic subplot with Mark that leaves room for a reading that might suggest the relationship reinforces patriarchal norms, but such an interpretation overlooks the narrative’s countless demonstrations of matriarchal dominance. When under peril, Elektra and Abby function as protectors to each other and Mark, who possesses none of their physical ability or combative skill. Unable to protect himself, Mark is rendered the ‘helpless damsel.’ The film’s depiction of superheroism is subtly transgressive in its representation of a female hardbody that can simultaneously function as the maternal figure central to the narrative. As Brown says, Elektra “straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both subject and object, looker and looked at, ass-kicker and sex-object.”³⁰

The Return of the Superheroine: *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2*

It would be over a decade before Hollywood would attempt to place the female superhero at the front of a blockbuster-budgeted action film again. With *Catwoman* and *Elektra* proving to be huge financial letdowns for studios, it was feared that the ill-received pictures had irrevocably soured public appetite for superheroines on the big screen. One *Elle* magazine critic wrote that the failed attempts unjustly fostered a “conventional Hollywood wisdom...that female superheroes aren't bankable,”³¹ while a 2014 *BBC* article cleverly dubbed it “Catwoman’s curse.”³² But by 2015, Warner Brothers, healed from the wounds of its lost investment in *Catwoman*, decided to advance on a standalone film for the beloved comic book character, Wonder Woman. They placed a female director at the helm (Patty Jenkins), furnished her with a \$180 million budget, and anxiously waited to see where the chips would land.

At about the same time, Pixar, who had garnered huge commercial success developing sequels to old properties (*Finding Dory*, *Cars* series, *Toy Story* series, *Monster’s University*) announced a follow-up to its 2004 animated mega-hit, *The Incredibles*. The sequel, *Incredibles 2*, would focus on Elastigirl, the superheroine wife to the first film’s male lead, Mr. Incredible. Both *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* nearly burst their profit margins at the seams, ushering in a welcomed farewell to the bygone superheroines who had come to represent all the risk and

none of the reward of a female superhero film. These succeeding superwomen were not simply an improvement on their poor-quality progenitors, they were considered by many to be a feminist rebuttal to them. Wonder Woman has been referred to as a “masterpiece of subversive feminism”³³ (*The Guardian*), “a beautiful reminder of what feminism has to offer”³⁴ (*Washington Post*), and “the feminist we’ve been waiting for”³⁵ (*The Daily Beast*). Likewise, *Incredibles 2* communicates a “triumphantly feminist message”³⁶ (*Metro*) as it pushes “for female empowerment, gender equality”³⁷ (*Variety*), “delving into the fragility of the male ego in a world where women are asserting themselves”³⁸ (*Time*). The resounding critical perception asserts that Wonder Woman and Elastigirl managed to succeed where Catwoman and Elektra had not. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to the new-age superheroine is due, in part, to a contemporary critical lens that has been filtered through the Trump-era sociopolitical landscape. While both *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* are arguably better films than *Catwoman* and *Elektra*—superior in performance, special effects, screenplay and overall production value—the newfound critical appreciation for these representations of superheroism as transgressively feminist draws attention to its glaring absence from the critical discourse fourteen years ago.

A sharp turn in the sociopolitical climate over recent years has been influential in reframing the millennial superheroine as a feminist icon. The election of Donald Trump in 2016 inspired a national women’s movement, the results of which are still ongoing, but so far has seen more women take office at the state and federal level than in any other period.³⁹ Historic worldwide protests voiced an outpouring of fury over Trumpian rhetoric about women, in a massive show of resistance and female assertion. This movement of twenty-first century feminism was compounded by an onslaught of sexual misconduct allegations that made headlines with the hashtag “MeToo,” publicly accusing powerful men across a range of industries. This proved to be a watershed moment as, one-by-one, media giants like Harvey Weinstein and Pixar’s own John Lasseter, were deposed by the emboldened victims of their sexual misconduct. Not invulnerable from these sociopolitical circumstances are the film critics tasked with evaluating *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* amidst this cultural zeitgeist. Writing for the *Washington Post*, Henry Godinez called Wonder Woman “the perfect hero for the Trump Era” in a deeply personal review that labeled the film “eerily apropos at this moment in our nation’s history.”⁴⁰ A *Los Angeles Times* interview with the *Incredibles 2* cast and director anticipated the sequel “might resonate in the era of #MeToo.”⁴¹ The pre-Trump climate that birthed *Catwoman* and *Elektra* in the early 2000s, was less inclined to laud cinematic superheroism for its feminist statements. The present-day critical discourse failed to fully contend with the representational misgivings of contemporary iterations. There are three points of contention for critics to consider in their feminist analyses of *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2*.

First Consideration: *How Setting Frames Political Argument*

The setting of *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* becomes essential in an analysis of their feminist approaches. Place and time imbue narrative with the political and cultural issues of the period in which the story is set. For *Catwoman* and *Elektra*, contemporary society offered a sufficient canvas for the films to affix their feminist messages. *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* plant their feminist roots firmly in eras of the past. This, as culture critic Hoai-Tran Bui argues, permits the films to grapple with outmoded gender politics that deal with antiquated social concepts well-addressed in first and second wave feminism and bypass the more tendentious elements of modern-day feminism (i.e., intersectionality and the changing discourse surrounding ‘victimhood’).⁴²

When superheroine, Diana Prince departs the lush pastures of her native Themyscira to fight alongside mankind during World War I, her journey brings her to confront gender-baiting lines of dialogue like, “What the hell were you thinking bringing a woman into the chamber counsel?”⁴³—after she invites herself in to observe a British cabinet meeting. Because Themyscira is an island of Amazons, inhabited only by females, Diana is oblivious to the political disenfranchisement of which early twentieth century women were accustomed. In another scene, after a character explains to her the job of a secretary, Diana bluntly says, “in my country we call that slavery.”⁴⁴ The scene is intended in good humor, but still delivers a message disapproving of the scarce economic opportunities afforded to women in the workplace at the time. Diana is confounded by mankind’s sexism, a quality the film uses to articulate its feminist opinions.

In *Incredibles 2*, the adventures of Elastigirl take place in a sleek cityscape that vaguely situates the film somewhere inside the aesthetic of the Eisenhower-era but imagined lightyears ahead, using the visual motifs of *The Jetsons* as a prototype. The setting is manifest through characters costumed in 1950s wardrobes and a highly stylized mid-century modernist architecture that satisfies the film’s nostalgia for a period well-suited to the narrative’s gender politics. Unlike *The Incredibles*, which characterized Bob Parr as breadwinner and Mr. Incredible as patriarchal hero while Helen/Elastigirl tended to household, *Incredibles 2* reverses those gender roles. After Helen is asked to become the face of a new PR campaign to legalize superheroes, Bob must endure domesticity while Elastigirl gets to be the face of heroism. The effort for superhero legalization is led by a media conglomerate called DevTech that aims to market Elastigirl as the poster-woman for “supers” by broadcasting television spots where she empowers young women with lines like, “Girls, come on... Leave the saving of the world to the men? I don't think so.”⁴⁵ Elastigirl’s message is informed by the feminist subtext of second wave feminists like Betty Friedan who called for women’s increased involvement in the labor force in 1963.⁴⁶ The ‘Rosie the Riveter’ rhetoric put forth by *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* is necessitated by their historically-situated backdrops and thus deliberately avoids engagement with a broader conversation about the aims of contemporary feminism. Messages of

empowerment that proclaim “girls can save the world, too!” are put front and center, while a more complex discussion of the political implications of what that might require can be conveniently sidestepped.

Second Consideration: *The Changing Perspective on the Female Action Hero Costume*

The body of the female superhero is perhaps the most scrutinized of any female character in cinema, in large part, because her costume often reveals so much of her figure. Both *Catwoman* and *Elektra* were criticized for the gratuitous sexualization of their superheroine bodies through hyper-erotic costuming, a tradition carried on by Wonder Woman and Elastigirl. Wonder Woman wears a gladiator-style miniskirt and corset; the outfit’s minimalism is briefly mocked in the film when Trevor (Diana’s love interest) stops her from publicly removing her coat. As she moves to reveal her battle uniform, Trevor shouts, “You’re not wearing any clothes!” and quickly shields her from public gaze.⁴⁷



Wonder Woman, 2017.

The humorous interaction relies on the film’s self-awareness, commenting on the controversy that has long surrounded Wonder Woman’s apparel, or lack thereof. In 2016, after two months of serving as UN ambassador, Wonder Woman quickly had the title revoked after an onslaught of public complaints and petitions declared that she was more of a sex symbol than a feminist icon. Lynda Carter (the actress who formerly played Wonder Woman on the 1970s television series) came to the defense of her character’s suggestive attire by contending, “It’s the ultimate sexist thing to say that’s all you can see, when you think about Wonder Woman, all you can think about is a sex object.”⁴⁸ Historically, comic book publisher Max Gaines wanted her character to be seen in as little clothing as possible. As Jill Lepore details in her extensive book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, “to sell magazines, Gaines wanted his superwoman to be as naked as he could get away with,” instructing illustrators to draw her in outfits described as “scantly clad.”⁴⁹

Now under Patty Jenkins, Wonder Woman's sartorial stylings have been cast under a new light by film and culture critics more willing to find threads of female empowerment in outfits that showcase the female form. One critic at *Bustle*, an online women's magazine, gave praise to *Wonder Woman* for reclaiming "the iconic costume to make it a symbol of strength."⁵⁰ The critical embrace of superheroine costuming that is no more conservative than previous styles—once lambasted for their poor taste—evidences the effect of Trump-era gender politics on public perception.

Equally risqué is the wardrobe of Elastigirl—a custom-made latex bodysuit that is finely tailored to her unrealistically drawn waist-to-hip ratio. Her exaggerated physique has become so infamous that it became the subject of viral online memes and tweets that took notice of Elastigirl's curvaceous figure, labeling the superheroine "thicc" (a term that describes a sexually-charged full-figured body).



(Source: *Uproxx.com*)



(Source: *DailyDot.com*)



(Source: *TenDaily.com*)

When *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane, made mention of the arousing posture of Elastigirl in *Incredibles 2*, he triggered a series of social media responses and editorial essays that scorned him for sexualizing the character. *Slate* magazine said of the review, “Lane objectifies characters meant to embody women’s strength.”⁵¹ The reaction in defense of Elastigirl’s figure marks a changing tide since the last time a superheroine was shown fighting crime in latex and heels (recall Manohla Dargis’ aforementioned critique of Elektra’s costume).⁵²

Third Consideration: *Post-Feminist Mixed-Gender Coalitions and the Erasure of Individual Feminist Triumph*

In a female-led superhero film, there lies the expectation that the heroine will save the day. Armed with superhuman strength and whip-smart instincts, she will arise victorious, having prevailed on her own—or more specifically, without the help of a man. Like the cinematic male heroes who predate her, the superheroine is shown to be capable of fighting her own battles. In *Catwoman*, the superheroine faces off with villain, Laurel Hedare, in a hand-to-hand fight that employs her acrobatic skill and unshakable endurance. In *Elektra*, the superheroine spars against five supervillains, aided on occasion by her young female protégé, Abby. In *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* the same is true. Both female superheroes display immense physical strength in one-on-one battles against their evil rivals, however unlike in *Catwoman* and *Elektra*, throughout their films, Wonder Woman and Elastigirl are cast in an ensemble supported by the help of men. Wonder Woman teams up with a crew of hired soldiers assembled by her male co-star, Trevor. Wonder Woman is the formidable leader of the group and consistently outshines her mortal teammates with her superhuman acts of valor, but the film’s desire to form a coalition among its male and female characters in the fight against evil is an approach specific to its generation. Elastigirl is also paired with a team of superheroes to help her foil her archrival, Evelyn Deavor’s scheme to permanently criminalize “supers.” A league of six minor characters join Elastigirl in her crime-fighting quest, each of whom possess their own unique superhero trait. It is only with the help of this ragtag team of superheroes and her family, that Elastigirl can thwart Evelyn’s diabolical plan. Both *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* support a message of gender parity, in which feminist triumph is upheld by mixed-gender partnership, but these moments of coalition also work to subvert singular acts of feminist achievement. This new age of superheroine, who forges alliances with her male accomplices, is a contemporary superheroine trope that has been shaped by postfeminist values.

In popular scholarship post-feminism has come to be understood as a reactionary cultural movement that “suggest[s] that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of meanings that [feminism] is no longer needed.”⁵³ As Angela McRobbie explains, “...new gender norms [have emerged] (e.g. *Sex and the City*, *Ally McBeal*) in which female freedom and ambition appear to be taken for granted, unrelent on any past struggle... and certainly not

requiring any new fresh political understanding.”⁵⁴ In her writings on postfeminism and media culture, Mary Douglas Vavrus identifies the “feminist fallacy” of postfeminism: “Texts and trends promoted as feminist, or even pro-woman, do not always hold up as such in meaningful ways. If anything, an absence of strong feminism is more evident in mainstream media.”⁵⁵ Vavrus describes postfeminism as distinctly anti-feminist for its apolitical approach, wherein there is the opinion that gender should not matter. Here, the “absence of strong feminism” as presented in the postfeminist approaches of *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2*, presumes the achievement of gender parity and in doing so rolls back the representational objective of the feminist superheroine—an objective previously centered on a feminized image of lone heroism.

Conclusion

Both *Catwoman* and *Elektra* hold a 10% score on review aggregator site, Rotten Tomatoes, and are regarded as two of the worst superhero films ever made.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, these two oft-maligned works exist in the female superhero film pantheon though their contribution to the genre, when not being overlooked, is often disparaged. Critical reception to these two early aught-age films has extended beyond a discussion of quality and ventured into commentary on their anti-feminist representations of female heroism. One opinion piece for Wired.com protested “The main plot begins with Halle Berry’s character being killed over...face cream. Is it any wonder *Catwoman* wasn’t a success?”⁵⁷ After over a decade, the return of the female superhero has been embraced by many critics for finally getting it right. Most curious in all of this is the critical embrace of the feminist approaches in *Wonder Woman* and *Incredibles 2* despite room for criticism, old and new, of the ways this new era of superhero films present their female leads. As outlined in this essay, a change in critical attitudes perhaps brought on by the contentious sociopolitical landscape is relevant to understanding this shift. This essay endeavors not to compare the quality of these four films, but to consider how the reception of their overlapping feminist messages could be so drastically different.

Notes

¹ Jason Dittmer, “American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the Post-9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 1 (February 2011): 114–30, doi:10.1068/d4309.

² Ema O’Connor, “A Brief and Recent History of Women and Marvel Movies,” *Buzzfeed*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeed.com/emaconnor/all-the-marvelous-ladies>.

³ A.O. Scott, “A Not-So-Cuddly Cat Cracks a Mean Whip,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2018, <http://movies2.nytimes.com/2004/07/22/movies/22CAT.html>.

⁴ Keith Phillips, “Elektra,” *The A.V. Club*, January 18, 2005, <https://film.avclub.com/elektra-1798200392>.

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Recycling the Other: The Role of Nostalgia in Superhero Comics' Orientalism

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Abstract

Whiteness has been one of the core ideals in American mainstream superhero comics, but in recent years, with demands for diversity increasing, more than ever, racial minorities have leading roles in superhero comics. However, the struggle for Asians in the superhero genre is not entirely gone. The number of appearances may have increased, but stereotypes do persist. Japanese characters in superhero comics, for instance, whether they are heroes or villains, are still forced to display their Otherness, even in recent works. In this paper, by using Wolverine's adventures set in Japan and the Japanese superhero Katana from DC Comics as examples, I argue that Asians in contemporary superhero comics are still contained within the grasps of Orientalism, and that nostalgia plays a significant role in that containment.

Keywords: Orientalism, nostalgia, racism, continuity, diversity

Introduction

As many scholars and fans have already pointed out, whiteness has been one of the core ideals in American mainstream superhero comics.¹ From DC Comics' Superman and Batman to Marvel's Captain America and Iron Man, the most famous and popular superheroes, as well as supervillains, have always been predominantly white. In recent years however, with increasing demands for diversity, this focus on whiteness has been highly questioned and criticized. Consequently, more than ever, racial minorities have leading roles in superhero comics. Miles Morales, the Spider-Man of Marvel's Ultimate Universe, is a mixed-race teenager, and the African Black Panther is now extremely popular after the successful film released in 2018. Asian representations too are praised to have improved significantly. For instance, Silk is an Asian-American superhero, with spider powers similar to that of Spider-Man. She was first introduced in *Spider-Verse* (2014), a crossover event that brought together various Spider-people of alternate universes, and eventually led to her own solo series. The series was unfortunately cancelled, and her appearances have decreased since then, but though it is outside comics pages, she was confirmed to appear in the sequel and spin-off movie of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). Another example is Amadeus Cho, a young Korean-American, who is known in the Marvel universe as one of the eight smartest people on earth. After finding out that the source of power that allows Bruce Banner to transform into the Hulk was about to detonate, Amadeus helped Bruce remove the Hulk from Bruce's body by transferring the Hulk onto his own. As the new Hulk, Amadeus too led a series entitled *The Totally Awesome Hulk* (2015-2017). Even after he was no longer the Hulk,

as Brawn, he continued as one of the main characters in *Champions* (2016-2018). Finally, there is of course, Kamala Kahn, or Ms. Marvel, whose top-seller comics features her adventures in which she struggles to find a balance between her identities as a teenager, a Muslim, and a superhero.

However, the struggle for Asians in the superhero genre is not entirely gone. The number of appearances may have increased, but stereotypes do persist. Marvel Studios recently announced that they are developing a film with Shang-Chi, or Master of Kung Fu, as the protagonist. While many are excited for Marvel Studio's first Asian-led movie, others are concerned that the studio's choice of character was a stereotypical martial artist who happens to be the son of Fu Manchu, the offensive and racist fictional villain popular during the twentieth century, who "emblemized the yellow peril from 1913 to 1970s."²

In this paper, by using Wolverine's adventures set in Japan and the Japanese superhero Katana from DC Comics as examples, I argue that Asians in contemporary superhero comics are still contained within the grasps of Orientalism, and that nostalgia plays a significant role in that containment. Japanese characters in superhero comics, whether they are heroes or villains, are still forced to display their Otherness, even in recent works. Tropes such as samurais, ninjas, and the Yakuza (the Japanese mafia) are recycled and reused in recent adventures that involve the Japanese and their culture. Though my paper focuses specifically on the depictions of the Japanese culture and characters in superhero comics, it is not my intention to exclude other Asian countries or claim that the Japanese are most affected by the continued existence of Orientalism. Japan is given central attention because first, it is the Asian country I am most familiar with; second, Japan in general remains understudied in American superhero scholarship; and finally, Japanese culture in contemporary popular culture, including superhero comics, is still stereotyped, as I will elaborate below.

On Orientalism and Nostalgia

The term "Orientalism" as I use it here refers to Edward Said's *Orientalism*.³ Said claims that Orientalism explains how the West presumes themselves the superior culture and continues to patronize the East through exaggerated depictions. In Orientalist understandings of the East, Eastern culture is depicted as the exotic unknown. With its differences from Western culture overemphasized, "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off the Orient as a surrogate and even underground self."⁴ On such practice, Xu explains that the "emphasizing [of the] difference means maintaining distance and superiority."⁵ Furthermore, the Western thinking often deems Eastern culture as primitive, barbaric, irrational, and even violent, which leads to the Western beliefs that the East is in dire need of Western intervention to assist in modernization. This binary relationship "of power, domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony"⁶ that situates the West as the superior and the East as the inferior Other results in misrepresentation through stereotypes, along with "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice."⁷

Fans of the superhero genre tend to enjoy being reminded of past works in present comics through continuity, which is the “interconnectedness of the characters, stories, places, and contextual temporality in comic stories”⁸ that influence each other in their storytelling and is a distinctive feature of the superhero genre. Therefore, stories of past comics serve as an important basis for contemporary superhero storytelling: creators cannot simply invent something new with no regard to existing works, as this will lead to a disruption of continuity as well as outraged fans. Because of the convention of the genre to always tie present works closely to the past, ground-breaking progressions are challenging to achieve, for there must always be a link between the new and the old. It is familiarity—and the intimacy and comfort that comes with it—that is preferred. For instance, an article on the superhero genre points out a “bout of nostalgia . . . follows a lot of upheaval over the last few years.”⁹ Vaneta Rogers mentions one of the reasons for this surge of nostalgia as “a backlash from all the ‘new’,”¹⁰ stressing the heavy reliance and expectation fans have on past works and continued references to them.

Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as “a yearning for a different time . . . a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress,”¹¹ identifying two types of nostalgia: reflective and restorative. Reflective nostalgia “thrives on . . . the longing itself,” while restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,”¹² and tends to hold itself as “truth and tradition” of “universal values,” refusing contradictory evidence of history.¹³

In the case of the superhero genre, it is restorative nostalgia that comes into play. This is because in the superhero genre, past works serve as solid canonical history, and when contemporary comics progress too much, fans yearn for narratives of the “lost home” from a different time. A good example is found during the late eighties and mid-nineties. In the late eighties, Frank Miller and Alan Moore revolutionized the superhero genre through their groundbreaking series, *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and *Watchmen* (1986-1987), which caused a big shift in the narrative style of the genre. They introduced a more mature tone, dealing in a straightforward manner with realistic violence and, in *Watchmen*’s case, sexuality as well. Superhero comics influenced by the two works published onwards since then have been grittier, darker, and more pessimistic. By the mid-nineties, however, nostalgic works appeared that featured stories and characters more similar to those from a few decades ago, pleading to remember the “good ol’ days.” Mark Waid and Alex Ross’ *Kingdom Come* (1996) criticized the violence-crazed superheroes that were everywhere now, and “stage[d] the return of the classic heroes, the return of the powerful origin and inspiration to conform what was done to their name.”¹⁴ Kurt Busiek’s *Marvels* (1994) traced the feats of Marvel superheroes before the surge of Miller and Moore, “plead[ing] . . . that superheroes not be seen as monsters.”¹⁵ Both works “attempt to reclaim heroes and return to the early days of comic books.”¹⁶

In an interview on nostalgia in the superhero genre, one interviewee answered, “Nostalgia helps me overlook or see through many sexist elements of the series. What matters to me now is what the much younger I made of the story and character.”¹⁷ The same

can be applied to racism as well: the sentimental nostalgia allows the genre to ignore racism and Orientalism of past works. A number of non-white characters were created years ago, perhaps when racism, fetishization of cultures, and stereotyping were less questioned than they are now. Despite the fact that many of these characters' central characteristics are defined by exaggerated Otherness of exotic foreign lands and cultures, they still make appearances in recent works or remain popular among readers. Japan and the Japanese in superhero comics, from DC's Katana and Marvel's Sunfire, the Silver Samurai, and Lady Bullseye may at first seem to be "presented as a type of celebration of ethnic diversity and appreciation."¹⁸ However, in reality, they "never [stray] far from the racist . . . origins of timeworn stereotypes."¹⁹ Japan in superhero comics is thus frozen in time, as I will demonstrate in the analysis to follow.

The genre's dependency on nostalgia and the nostalgic nature of superhero comics provide an excuse to continuously reuse "the unexamined repetition of fossilized conventions that encode the colonialist attitudes that helped to create the original character type and continue to define it in relation to imperial practices."²⁰ Furthermore, because these "fossilized conventions" of "colonialist attitudes" are repeated for the audience for the sake of continuity, the Orientalist notions are overlooked and reinforced through repetition. As Galaver comments, in contemporary superhero comics, the "Orientalist pit is getting deeper."²¹ Recycling their stereotypical portrayals for modern use reinforces the beliefs of drastic differences of cultures between white America and the Other. The "dead and resurrected influence of the past"²² continues to fuel contemporary comics.

Case Study I: Wolverine

Assumed Western superiority is especially notable in Akira Yoshida's *Wolverine: Soultaker* (2005). Controversial news broke late 2017 concerning this writer. It was revealed that Marvel's "Japanese" writer, Akira Yoshida was in fact the white American C.B. Cebulski, the now editor-in-chief of the same company. Under the Japanese pseudonym, Cebulski wrote mini-series such as *Elektra: The Hand* (2004) *Wolverine: Soultaker* (2005), and *X-Men: Kitty Pryde - Shadow & Flame* (2006). This revelation shed new light on these series' Western perspectives of Japan, as all of them take place in an incredibly stereotyped Japan that is represented as a place for Western heroes to save the country and experience exotic adventures. This controversy concerning Yoshida, or Cebulski, signifies how little concern there is for Asian representation. Despite his highly offensive actions that both appropriate Japanese culture and took away opportunities for Asian voices in the comics, Cebulski remains the editor-in-chief of Marvel. Other creators have gone on to defend Cebulski, stating that the "man has lived in Japan, speaks Japanese, and . . . very much associates with Japanese culture."²³ Other articles treat Cebulski's misrepresentation and yellow-face along with his violation of Marvel's contract policies that forbid editors from writing comics equally in terms of how and why his lies were problematic.

Yoshida's *Wolverine: Soultaker* begins with Wolverine arriving in Japan after receiving a distress call from an old acquaintance, who claims that Wolverine is the only one who can help her. After an exciting adventure involving ninjas, shrines, and katana swords dripping in blood, Wolverine ends up teaming with a mystic priestess, Mana, to save Japan from an evil ancient spirit. *Wolverine: Soultaker* is not Wolverine's first visit to Japan. His relationship to Japan was in fact first established in Chris Claremont and Frank Miller's *Wolverine* run during the eighties. Claremont and Miller's issues covered the majority of stereotypes of Japan imaginable: Sumo wrestlers are placed as bodyguards. Honour is upheld, however unfair a character's situation may be. One woman, Mariko, will "rather die" than deny her "honor-bound" obligations.²⁴ Lord Shingen, whom Wolverine is forced to fight, calls Wolverine a *gaijin* (Japanese for "foreigner"), underlining the clashing and incompatible differences between the cultures of the two men. Finally, scenes are set in either traditional Japan, with a large Buddha statue or rooms with *tatami* mats, or a modern and urban cityscape with neon lights. All of the above comes merely from the first issue out of four.

Soultaker demonstrates the Westerner Wolverine as the utmost saviour against evil. For instance, though Wolverine wields a centuries-old katana and fights with Mana by his side, in the end, the final battle in *Soultaker* is won by his physical prowess. This illustrates clearly that the priestess' mystical powers passed down generations, as well as the ancient mystical katana that is supposedly the ultimate weapon, are no match for Wolverine's claws, implying that it is up to the Western hero to save the day.

Mysticism frequently appears in association with Japan in *Soultaker*, as well as in Claremont and Miller's mini-series. What must be considered here is how Western culture understands mysticism. Richard King in *Orientalism and Religion* observes that the West recognizes Asian mysticism as "irrational" and an antithesis to their "liberal, egalitarian, secular and modern" culture.²⁵ Mysticism, he explains, is not only "religious" but also "traditional," opposing "secular rationalism."²⁶ King further points out that "the denial of rationality to the Other is a common strategy in subordinating the Other."²⁷ Thus, this practice of the West assuming the East's inability to modernize and secularize, remaining ever primitive, is nothing new but rather an act repeated in history and earlier academic discourses on the Orient. Presenting certain cultures as having strong ties to religious mysticism that influences both their private and public life is a strategy to suggest inferiority and failure to modernize.

This then explains why Wolverine's claws are more advantageous in the battle than Mana's mystic powers or the ancient sword. His claws are entirely removed from religion and mysticism, for not only are their uses extremely physical, but they were also given to him through pure biology and science. As a mutant, he originally had retractable claws as part of his skeleton. Later, he was taken into the Weapon X program, where experiments were conducted in which adamantium, an indestructible alloy, was bonded to his bone cells, resulting in the metallic claws for which he is famous. In addition, the physical strength that comes with his mutant abilities serves well in the superhero genre, since "physical power" is held as a "traditional male possession" or as a part of the masculine ideal.²⁸ Therefore, the

physical masculine ideal combined with Western culture's regard for secularism as superior to Asian mysticism gives Wolverine the power to triumph over both the mystic enemy and ally. He becomes a better saviour than the mystic priestess, also establishing Western ideals as more effective.

Additionally, not only does *Soultaker* play into stereotypical exotic fantasies, it distorts Japanese history as well. The *Shinsengumi* was a special governmental police force active during the 1860s, or Edo-era Japan. The force is now known for the strict codes they lived by and their charismatic members and are frequently seen in Japanese popular culture. Whether they are to be seen in a positive or negative light, as they were authoritative figures of an overthrown government, is another debate for another time. Yet, what is important to note here is that a large portion of their history and significance to Japanese history and culture is lost in *Soultaker*. When the *Shinsengumi* (whose name is misspelled "*Shisengumi*" in the first appearance) suddenly appear as a zombie army of the enemy, the comics explain to their readers that the *Shinsengumi* consisted of "eleven of the most wild and deadly samurai to ever live. They [were] brutal killing machines who swore revenge when they were executed as traitors."²⁹ Not only are the generalization of members' deaths historically inaccurate as not all were executed, these historical figures—who are now one of the most known and popular in Japanese history—are also turned into inhuman and ruthless murderer zombies. Their only purpose, for Wolverine, is to destroy them and demonstrate that Western modernity has been and will always be superior to the archaic and inefficient traditional culture Japan had. According to Western popular culture, including these comics, Japan may still be archaic, inefficient, and traditional, as these works persistently imagine contemporary Japanese culture to have close ties to, for example, the samurai. As Wolverine slays the *Shinsengumi* zombies, he conquers Japanese history from modern times.

Narratives involving Wolverine and Japan have appeared a number of times after *Soultaker*; for Wolverine in Japan is a well-loved plotline, and they continue to this day in later series such as *Wolverine: Back in Japan* (2012) and *Wolverine: Japan's Most Wanted* (2014), in which the very first panel is of a huge screen with an anime-styled girl in a kimono advertising ramen, with neon signs of gibberish letters surrounding it. Issues thirty-one to thirty-six of *Old Man Logan* (2016-2018) take place in Japan as well. With the Hand clan, a supervillainous organization founded in sixteenth-century Japan involved in the arc, it seems (evil) ninjas, mysticism, and samurais were unavoidable. Japan is therefore deeply rooted and tied to Wolverine's character. However, these ties are not to the actual Japan, but to a stereotypically imagined Japan.

Case Study II: Katana

Another character that deserves attention is DC Comics' Katana. Created in 1983, Katana is, for a lack of a better description, a samurai superhero from Japan. She has a tragic backstory in which her husband, Maseo, was killed by a mystical sword that trapped his soul inside it. The Yakuza was involved in Maseo's death, and Katana seeks revenge. Jeff Yang comments

that “if [one is] a superhero of a particular race or color [their] ethnicity always shapes [their] power somehow,”³⁰ and Katana is no exception. While she does not have a particular superpower, her choice of weapon, her high abilities in martial arts, and her improbable status as a samurai all signify Japan. Her superhero outfit, too, even after a redesign in 2011, exhibits her ethnicity. The strong emphasis on Japan in her character thus continues to center the construction of her narratives.

One might argue that Katana is a progressive character. After all, she is a foreign woman of colour who is a fierce superhero rather than a passive Madam Butterfly, a type in which many Japanese female characters in various media fall. However, Katana still remains immensely stereotyped. She is intensely devout and submissive to Maseo, despite the fact that he exists only as a spirit in her sword. Her main purpose of fighting is not to protect citizens, but to avenge Maseo’s death. She fights evil and protects people on her way to revenge and does have a strong sense of justice, but that seems to be for approval from her husband.³¹ When Maseo’s soul seemingly disappears after telling her that he is disappointed in her actions, she is devastated and falls unconscious.³² Maseo is also shown to make decisions for Katana’s actions as a superhero. In the *Birds of Prey* (2011), she arrives in Gotham only because “[her] husband suggested it” and “urged [her] to give serious consideration to” the offer given to her to join the superhero team Birds of Prey.³³ Therefore, though Katana is a fierce warrior, she is inherently written as an Oriental submissive wife who serves her husband even after his death. Her devotion to Maseo has always been there since early depictions, but interestingly, it seems more exaggerated in recent appearances, perhaps because as one of the central characters, more attention is given to her rather than the side character she was during the eighties and nineties.

Exaggeration of her Japan-ness can be found, for example, in the *Katana* (2013) solo series, which ran for a short period of merely ten issues. The series takes place mainly in either Japan or Japantown and never allows Katana outside this pseudo-Japanese circle. Though it is said that the Japantown is in San Francisco, the town depicted in the comics hardly resembles the actual one. Katana herself describes Japantown as a place “where time telescopes. Antiquity and Modernity stride side by side,”³⁴ finding traditional Japanese customs among contemporary society. Rather than underlining its “Antiquity,” it is more accurate to acknowledge that Japantown is “held back in time.” With the ever-present Yakuza and brothels, it is corrupt as well. The livelier areas of the city resemble a tourist attraction, with Japanese architecture, people wearing strangely designed kimonos, and ninja shows that recreate what may be a traditional Japan fantasized by Western audiences that emphasize exotic qualities of Japanese culture.

Similarly, a *Suicide Squad* (2016-) issue that features a short comic on Katana’s backstory shows her in a time that readers may mistake to have been not some years in the past but a century ago, if not for the men wearing modern Western clothes in the background. Taking place in a traditional wooden house in a “countryside [setting]...bereft of technology,” which is a common image of Japan that counters the cyberpunk “technologically advanced”

urban areas,³⁵ Katana is removed entirely from Western society. This also reinforces the image of Japan as an alien culture with landscapes that strikingly differ from America.

In *Birds of Prey*, Katana is recruited by Black Canary to join her and Starling. They are joined by Poison Ivy, who is more of a villain than a hero. In *Birds of Prey*, Katana is considered by her teammates as “mentally unbalanced”³⁶ and “delusional.”³⁷ Neither Black Canary nor Starling believes that her sword contains Maseo’s spirit. Apparently, a spirit-containing sword is more absurd than Black Canary, who has the ability to let out an ultrasonic scream, or Poison Ivy, who can control plants. To them, Katana is a strange foreign woman who has a habit of regularly conversing with her sword. Though Poison Ivy is the villainous member in the team with unclear motives as to why she joined, it is Katana, the sole non-American, who is treated as the unstable and perhaps even crazy member.³⁸ Furthermore, as the non-American in the series, her foreign nature is highlighted repeatedly in her appearances. For example, in addition to her occasionally throwing in Japanese words here and there, in one scene, Katana consoles her husband, who became agitated seeing Starling’s tattoos because tattoos in Japan are considered common signifiers of the Yakuza, and he suspected her of being a member. Katana soothingly tells him that because “she’s an American[,] . . . her tattoos mean nothing.”³⁹ Not only does this suggest her different cultural background by specifically pointing out Starling’s Americanness, but a distance is also set between her and America. Though eventually Black Canary and Starling come to trust her, Katana is never quite in sync with her American teammates. In issue fifteen, after a mission that takes place in Japan, she stays behind.

By keeping Katana within a Japanese environment, and never allowing her to blend into American culture, it is as if she is provided a personal bubble that shuts out Western or American influences from her adventures. This ensures adherence to “the western Orientalist discourse on Japan” that specifically “support[s] the construction and maintenance of ‘Japaneseness.’”⁴⁰ Japan is emphasized in the settings, along with her allies and enemies, giving the series a distinct or exotic tone in comparison to the majority of other comics by DC that are set in an obviously American environment.

Conclusion

Appearances of non-white characters are increasing and representations are improving in the superhero genre. This, for sure, is undeniable. However, some portrayals remain problematically stereotypical because the superhero genre is built on continuity. Nostalgia, which makes complete innovations of characters and eliminations of outdated features difficult, plays a significant role in maintaining this continuity. Additionally, because it requires constant references to past works, racist storylines are replayed in contemporary times. Since the 1980s, Japan has held a crucial place for Wolverine, whose exotic adventures in the country are popular enough to be written or referred to every so often. The essence, though, has not changed since then. Wolverine continues to fight stereotypical Japanese enemies such as ninjas, samurais, and evil mystic spirits or creatures. Katana is a character

whose history, personality, and appearance signify almost loudly a Japan that differentiates her from other American superheroes. Through repetition, Otherness continues to be reinforced, ever trapping the Asian Other, or in my paper's case, the Japanese Other, in the confinements of Orientalism.

Notes

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“I am also a we”: The Interconnected, Intersectional Superheroes of Netflix’s *Sense8*

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Abstract

This article explores the hero collective in Netflix’s science fiction series *Sense8* (2015–2018) as a manifestation of deeply-felt desires and anxieties in an era when neoliberalized capitalism and technology seemingly have encroached on every part of the globe. The superhero “cluster” of *Sense8* carries the appeals of cosmopolitanism, globalism, and promised forms of intimacy which partially flatten experiences of difference by uncritically bypassing lines of nation, race, gender, and sexuality. However, as the cluster’s cosmopolitanism undercuts projects of re-negotiating and re-articulating power relations, it simultaneously represents various forms of enacted resistance in which bodies and inter-subjectivities of queer people and people of colour become literal sources of power. This meets the need, not only for greater identarian inclusivity across media, but for an intersectionality that can rebound against neoliberal logics.

Keywords: superheroes, intersectionality, cosmopolitanism, queer kinship, virtual intimacies

Introduction

At several historical moments and within various socio-historical contexts, humans have created superheroes to meet the exigencies of the world around them. Today, in the face of the ever-increasing digital interconnectedness experienced by many individuals and societies around the world, more and more people might be looking for heroes to limn both the newly-available forms of mediated, virtual intimacy and the emergent anxieties surrounding surveillance and privacy concerns across digital platforms. This article explores the collective of heroes in Netflix’s queer science fiction series *Sense8* (2015–2018) as a manifestation of those deeply-felt desires and anxieties in an era when neoliberal forms of capitalism and technology seem to have encroached on every part of the globe.

A riveting and complex work of the superhero science fiction subgenre, *Sense8* is also arguably one of its most queer and ideologically progressive iterations. Co-created by Lana and Lilly Wachowski (known also for the *Matrix* trilogy, *Cloud Atlas*, and *Jupiter Ascending*) and J. Michael Straczynski (known also for *Babylon 5*), *Sense8* follows a group of eight main characters spanning seven different countries and four continents. These heroes discover early in the first season that they are interconnected through their limbic systems, the part of the brain associated with instincts and affect. Having psychic and sensual links, these eight ‘sensoriums’

or ‘sensates’ function as the collective protagonist able to share and channel each other’s emotions, experiences, and bodies. Although far apart in physical relation to each other, their intimate connection helps them grow individually and aid each other’s evasion from the nefarious Biologic Preservation Organization (BPO), which seeks to capture them for experimentation. In terms of its identarian representations, the character ‘cluster’ contains four men and four women, one of whom is a gay man and one a transgender woman in a lesbian relationship. Nationally and sexually diverse, the cluster appeals to audiences that have gravitated to it for its identity politics as well as its compelling characterization and themes.

One of the biggest appeals of *Sense8* that I consider is the queer form of kinship and utopian vision that it speculates through its portrayal of the sensate cluster. In this article, I also engage critically with the figurative potential of this cluster of superheroes as audiences might read it within the current context of the expanding digital age. Interpreting the *Sense8* cluster as a metonym for conditions of the series production, circulation, and consumption on Netflix, I extend its figurative scope to refer to any globally expansive digital platform operating under the logics of neoliberalism. As an act of co-constituted creation, embodied and virtual interactivity, and queer kinship and belonging, the superhero cluster of *Sense8* carries the appeals of cosmopolitanism, globalism, and promised forms of intimacy which also tends toward enveloping and flattening experiences of difference by uncritically bypassing nationalized, racialized, gendered, and sexed lines. However, even as the show’s cosmopolitanism pose problems for projects of re-negotiating and re-articulating systems and relations of power, at the same time the cluster represents the various forms of enacted resistance in which the bodies and inter-subjectivities for queer people and people of colour become sources of power in themselves. This too meets the need for increased diversity of visual representations in media and for the intersectionality that can rebound against the logics of neoliberal capitalism.

In order to trace my claims to their interpretive and evaluative conclusions, I first situate them within the formal or discursive categories of genre. In addition to a close reading of key moments and dynamics of the series, I also review what other scholars and critics have argued about the show in order to highlight its dialectical political and ideological tensions. Finally, I briefly weigh the *Sense8*’s material existence on Netflix’s digital platform against online fandom discourse and activism surrounding the series to suggest ways that audiences have identified with—and even imitated—the show’s superhero characters in tangible ways.

“I am also a we”: *Sense8*’s Queer Utopian Potential, Virtual Intimacies, and Digital Anxieties

The past three decades have seen a spike in popularity and commercial success for the speculative genres of fantasy and science fiction.¹ These genres—particularly fantasy and science fiction—have tremendous potential to influence both individual and social change. In

fictional worlds containing magic or advanced technology, truly egalitarian environments and societies are more seemingly within grasp. This is partly what leads scholar Robert Shelton to classify fantasy and science fiction as “utopian” genres.² Furthermore, since the diegetic worlds of fantasy and science fiction texts can bend the rules and representations of mimetic realities in many senses, they are laden with potential to be free from any number of social, historical, or material norms and conventions. They might more easily surpass other genres, which might cower behind the shield of realism when it comes to their inclusivity and transformative power. In theory at least, the speculative nature of fantasy and science fiction provides a blank canvas upon which one can paint diegetic worlds, characters, and plotlines which might transcend most pre-existing cultural or social realities.

However, this idealist vision does not translate into the actual works being produced. Instead, these genres can be interpreted as playing out—through their semantics and syntaxes and largely in dystopian settings—current anxieties, struggles, and developments of the self and society at large. The superhero subgenre of science fiction, especially in its most simplistic binary form, reifies these tensions through the positioning of its heroes, who embody ideological virtues, against its villains, who represent ideological challenges or threats. However, we have come a long way since *Adventures of Superman* (1952–1958). One need only look to popular film and television today to see it rife with examples of more complex superhero media texts: *Arrow* (2012–), *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–), *The Flash* (2014–), *Supergirl* (2015–), *Jessica Jones* (2015–), and *The Runaways* (2017–) are a few examples. Considering the Marvel *X-Men* franchise alone, there have been nine films since the turn of the millennium, with one more releasing in 2019, as well as two television series: FX’s *Legion* (2017–) and Fox’s *The Gifted* (2017–). Ramzi Fawaz traces the history of these and other superhero texts from their 1960s comic book origins, which had already begun to cast mutant superhero characters as outsiders to ordinary humanity.³ Coming to embody and represent the marginalized identities and social groups such as women and racial or sexual minorities, Fawaz observes how mutant comic book franchises such as *X-Men* reflected the radical political struggles of the 1960s as beyond.⁴ One can look to Brian Singer’s *X-Men* films as contemporary examples in which especially recent LGBTQ+ identity politics—as well as both assimilationist and more radical agendas—become symbolically represented through the characters, storylines, and fan discourse.

The Netflix original *Sense8* is another contemporary science fiction show that fans, critics, and scholars have praised for its treatment of LGBTQ+ themes. The most famous moments of represented sexuality in the series are its scenes portraying already queer group sex formation in arguably even queerer ways. For example, a groundbreaking moment from Season 1, Episode 6 (‘Demons’) shows several cluster characters ‘visiting’ each other, or channeling each other’s consciousnesses, with explicitly sexual denotations and intents. In the scene, the character Wolfgang (Max Riemelt) visits a bathhouse in Berlin. While bathing in the nude, he makes psychic, virtual contact with the character Nomi, who happens to be having sex at that

moment in San Francisco with her partner, Amanita (Freema Agyeman). Then Lito (Miguel Angel Silvestre), who is having sex in Mexico City with his partner, Hernando (Alfonso Herrera), joins them. Meanwhile, Will (Brian J. Smith) is breaking a sweat at the gym where he also virtually joins in the shared sexual act, hoping that nobody notices when he climaxes. Considering only the sensates involved in this exchange, viewers witness a transgender lesbian, a gay cis man, and two cis men understood to be heterosexual engaging in sexual constructions extending beyond their self-defined or socially perceived purview.

According to the logic of the show, the characters' virtual, mental intimacies matter just as much, if not more, than bodily ones. The series blurs, if not completely eliminates, the notion of an essentialized or socially inscribed sexual orientations or identities, offering up instead a shifting, mutable queer sexuality which transcends both. Slippages in and between various characters' consciousnesses take place across time, space, bodies, and identities, arguably queering everything in between. Within the psychically-linked sensate cluster, there are polysemic portrayals of coupling, copulating, and group sex abound. Through their shared consciousness, the cluster's members are capable of both disembodiment and of being fully, sensually present, arguably allowing for immersive, undefinable, and utopian possibilities for sexuality.

In fact, one might understand the intra-cluster sexuality or intimacy as a sexual, psychophilic partialism which privileges or employs the mind as a site from which to derive sexual pleasure. In other words, the sensates are literally capable of have sex with their minds. This arguably allows for immersive, undefinable, and utopian possibilities for forms of sexuality outside of normal space and time. Instead, queerness in *Sense8* reimagines both. One of the queerest ideas that *Sense8* presents is the disembodiment of the body. Even though it is a media text created within and bound by most conventions of continuity editing, *Sense8* suggests a queerness which defies visual representation. In fact, its major shortcoming in its ability to portray the queer potential of psychophilia derives from having to use the signifiers of bodies at all. The nature of cinema forces the show to rely on images of actors in physical contact with each other to give imagery what, to a cluster-outsider in the diegetic world, would take place solely within headspace. Although poststructuralism or even neuroscience might tell us that all reality is mediated or even produced by mechanisms and structures of discourse or the human brain, *Sense8* goes beyond to offer a queerness or queer sexuality that defies definition in its very pre-lingual—perhaps even pre-conscious—state. In other words, it transcends systems and structures of discursive formation, primarily that of human language, which construct human subjectivities. In semiotic terms, the sensate cluster exists as a sign of queerness without even the need for a signifier to contain it or nail it down concretely.

Nevertheless, the radical sexuality presented within the sensate cluster is subject to critique. Queer sci-fi scholar Alexis Lothian challenges the seemingly utopian vision of a “sexual connectivity [which] insists that *Sense8*’s fantasy of mind-to-mind connection never means

leaving the body behind.”⁵ She argues that its “sterile fantasy [is merely] a cover for the messy, queer possibilities that erupt when bodies meet bodies.”⁶ However, instead of distancing itself from the messiness of bodies, I contend that the cluster invites a further messiness of inherent to forms of intimacy afforded by shared psychic connections. Hence, the psychophilia of the orgy scenes in *Sense8* contains the pleasure that might exist were humans able to bridge the gap created by the separation of consciousnesses and bodies, a form of intimacy and kinship that would—and does—generate a lot of affective messiness. Furthermore, it hints toward where connective technologies are seemingly leading humanity.

I contend that one of the ways *Sense8* invites audiences to interpret the cluster is through the lens of the increasingly interconnected digital world we inhabit. Even as the show outlines queer intimacies hinting toward true utopian, asemiotic potential, a potential that no existing technologies could afford, it uses this psychophilic connection as a way to deepen their individual and collective lived experiences in ways resembling how we use social media and other digital platforms to communicate across space and time. The series’ opening credits sequence furthers this notion as it displays in increasingly rapid succession, accompanied by a mounting non-diegetic score, a montage of moving images shot around the globe, featuring cultural practices, public displays of human contact and affection, iconography of LGBTQ+ pride, and well-known national and international landmarks. From the tone set at the outset and the diversity the show presents in the cluster, it works toward a global and sexual imaginary which contemporary digital platforms and their afforded modes of virtual intimacy seem to promise.

Of course, in addition to seeing the sensate cluster functioning as a metaphor for the ways we currently use digital technology and the Internet to connect with each other in sexual and non-sexual intimate ways, anxieties also emerge from the implications of mind-hacking and body-hacking within and between the cluster members of *Sense8*. Not only can Nomi’s character seemingly hack into any computer system mainframe with relative ease, but the sensates can fluidly hack each other’s minds and bodies at will. For example, in the ninth episode of Season Two (‘What Family Actually Means’), Sun (Bae Doona) is out of prison and is attempting to take justice for her father’s murder into her own hands by getting close enough to her brother to kill him. To do this, she needs Lito’s help to pass a cocktail mixology and serving exam. Furthermore, she needs to perform with dramatic flair to impress the interviewers so that they will hire her to work at an event where her brother will be present. Lito, however, happens to be in a casting audition for a role in a film which would help revive his acting career. The exigence of Sun’s situation almost jeopardizes his own performance and goals. Also, there is a moment in the fourth episode of the same season (‘Polyphony’) when Nomi expresses to Amanita that there are some personal experiences which her cluster still cannot know about her. However, Wolfgang visits her psyche precisely at that moment to seek her help, foreshadowing that it might be a matter of time before the cluster members’ separate lives collapse completely into

each other's.

Sense8, while perhaps lamenting the loss of privacy, also celebrates the characters' separate and unique identities. Except for Will, Riley (Tuppence Middleton), and Wolfgang, the norms of dominant Western culture would marginalize the other five sensates in some way. In fact, in a roundtable of scholars about the series, Lokeilani Kaimana interprets all the major characters as "avatars for minoritized folx."⁷ As they advance into new, shared explorations of sexuality and interconnectedness they begin to transcend—or even negate—the limitations of separateness in a way that allows for shifting possibilities for new subjectivities. Furthermore, this pluralism is what enables the characters to escape the "trauma of enforced confines."⁸ Each separate subject, in other words, has become part of a stronger collective. Nomi echoes this in the second episode of Season One when she famously says while vlogging before San Francisco Pride, "I am also a we."⁹ As in the real world, this transformative potential of interconnectedness might signal a dearth of privacy and the rights to one's own thoughts, but it also opens up new potentiality for what happens when intimacy effaces the barriers of language and bodily affections into pure pre-conscious affect.

In addition to its attempts to portray undefinable queerness and queer forms of sexuality, the showrunners also queer *Sense8* by framing its storylines outside and in resistance to linear, heteronormative narrative forms. In terms of the narrativising of the protagonists' lives, *Sense8* crafts its plot to operate outside or on the fringes of heteronormative spheres of contemporary capitalist society and conventional family life. Instead of merely gesturing toward the characters' bedroom activities, the series instead positions the clusters' shared sexuality—literally, their capacity and impetus for intimate connection—as the plot's fulcrum and impetus, as opposed to the concerns of capitalism and its attendant needs for continuity and social order. This might also distinguish it from other superhero franchises such as *Batman* and *Iron Man*, which feature highly affluent protagonists, or even the elitism suggested by Charles Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters in *X-Men*. However, this also entails an overly escapist omission of the material realities of labour, wealth, and social class play in shaping people's lives. Instead, *Sense8* seemingly erases class differences and class concerns, and that is possibly not all it threatens to omit.

In the next section, I examine other potential sources of erasure by considering how the collective desires which *Sense8* anticipates and imagines through its cluster of heroes also teeters on the edge of a cosmopolitan myth of shared progressive ethos.

The Flattening Effects of *Sense8*'s Cosmopolitanism and the Global Imaginary

The queer utopian vision of *Sense8* seems to pair problematically with the flattening effects of cosmopolitanism and a global imaginary. First, it does not engage substantively with the localized contexts, lifeworlds, or struggles of any of its individual characters. Instead, it unites

them under a shared agenda and bypasses meaningful, important lines of difference in seemingly effortless ways. Thus, it is in danger of reducing its characters to stereotypes and mouthpieces of a liberalist, universalist, and cosmopolitan fantasy. Katherine Sender notes “how readily cosmopolitan claims to sexual liberalism bolster neoliberal values of individualism and consumer acquisition. These values eschew community claims, efface real differences of power in the figure of the universal subject, and disavow the histories and continuing effects of colonialism.”¹⁰ In other words, cosmopolitanism offers a progressive ideological model of peaceful and participatory global citizenship, but to achieve this would most likely require and result in complete infiltration of and assimilation to dominant (i.e., Western neoliberal late capitalist) ideology. Similarly, the seemingly liberal project of cosmopolitanism surfaces in what Manfred G. Stegner calls the “global imaginary” to refer to “people's growing consciousness of thickening globality.”¹¹ Furthermore, this global imaginary “is also powerfully reflected in the current transformation of the conventional ideologies and social values that go into the articulation of concrete political agendas and programmes.”¹² A progressive vision, such as the one *Sense8* presents, flirts dangerously close and perhaps overlaps with a neoliberal myth of cosmopolitanism and its lure of the emancipatory potential that we might achieve through a shared ethos of individual freedom and acceptance.

Sense8 portrays a comprehensive progressive, queer sexual imaginary and unites the characters under a shared ethos. Thus, the show flirts closely with cosmopolitanism and its attendant ideologies of universal freedoms and rights that the West might unleash on the rest of the world, primarily through the free market and neoliberal practices of consumption and branding of sexual identities. Delicia Aguado-Pelàez, while praising how the series challenges heteronormative, patriarchal hegemonic structures and representations, simultaneously laments its presentation of non-normative homosexual identities.¹³ By this, she is not referring to Lisa Duggan's conception of homonormativity; after all, none of the characters seem to be following a conventional heteronormative trajectory for marriage and human reproduction. However, what Aguado-Pelàez criticizes is the choice to have all of the characters situated in urban even more cosmopolitanist spaces, instead of rural, and inhabiting visually appealing and gender-conforming bodies, instead of bodies that might be less conventionally coded as attractive or genderqueer bodies. Similarly, Alexis Lothian critiques the group sex scenes for the way that they “highlight the racial limitations of dominant queer representation as well as...the white liberal fantasy that we are all under the same skin.”¹⁴ However, Lothian wrote this before the release of the Christmas Special and Season Two, which feature more group sex scenes with all members of the sensate cluster are involved, as well as their partners. One might argue that this unravels her previous claims.

This ignores the history of Western colonialism that deeply affected the cultures of at least three of its characters somewhat like the series does. The flashy appeal of the cosmopolitan myth rears its head in other aspects of the series as well. Just as the characters' shared

psychophilia erases their borders between identity and sexuality, their pre-lingual, asemiotic queerness seemingly eradicates the borders between their nations, as well as the other markers of cultural and nationality identity. For example, even though the characters speak six or seven different languages in reality, the virtuality of their connection flattens it all to English. The show explains this away by informing the reader they are all encoding in their primary language but being understood in the language of whoever is decoding them. The choice to make this language English, practically speaking, perhaps comes from the producers wanting to avoid the inconvenience of subtitles or gauche nature of dubbing that might be off-putting to audiences. Regardless, the effect furthers the global imaginary of Western, English-speaking audiences, flattening the cultural distinctions and differences that would otherwise separate international strangers in the real world. Presenting a slightly varied or more nuanced view on cosmopolitanism, Lisa Rofel observes that it “does not have a stable meaning, nor is it merely the opposite of ‘the local.’” Rather, she offers that “locating activity, rather than ‘local’ activity, might help us to position the ‘cosmopolitan’ in determinate cultural practices rather than treating it as a deterritorialized phenomenon or wholly a penetration from the West.”¹⁵ Instead of a flattening of national and individual subjectivity under the presupposed steamroller of globalized neoliberalism, she considers the uneven and mixed practices of consumption that shape the politics of desire and identity.

Rather than vindicate any version of the series’ cosmopolitanism, I simply want to acknowledge its immense appeal to audiences the growing hegemony of neoliberal global capitalism. As the promises of a digital utopia have failed and lived experiences within online spaces become even more insular, fragmented, and divided, audiences long for a set of diverse yet like-minded strangers in which to belong. Furthermore, the appeal of *Sense8* for audiences comes from more than its portrayals of psychophilic group sex. In fact, the sex serves as a catalyst for transformative interconnectivity which causes the sensates to evolve as individuals and as a cluster. As these sensates initially discover their connections and shape a group ethos, they also help each other work through personal struggles, which are admittedly sometimes very reductive or stereotyped, especially for the non-Western characters. Furthermore, as a group they have to mobilize to escape the threat posed by the ominous antagonist Whispers and the Biologic Preservation Organization. To accomplish this, the sensates use their bodies as more than organic entities inhabiting space but as hyper-linking technologies capable accessing ‘bodies’ of knowledge which include particular subsets of skills: computer hacking, science, adept vehicle operation, performance and affective states, martial arts, and work outside the law. The cluster becomes a community of virtual intimacy, learning, and support which imbricates broader social fields. It is also one separate from traditional capitalist exchanges. Aside from the sexiness of the show, I contend this is also an equal, if not greater, part of its appeal.

Conclusion

In this article I have offered ways of reading *Sense8* within complex dialectics of representation, affect, and ideology present in the contemporary moment of advancing digital connective technologies and neoliberal capitalism. *Sense8* and its superheroes are undeniably and unabashedly queer, but they are also perhaps a bit too cosmopolitan and Western-centric. The series' narrative foci enact resistance to capitalism by seemingly existing outside its material and ideological structures, but they also neglect the growing class divisions within such systems. Yet despite objections to certain aspects of the show, the series has found a firm niche among primarily queer audiences largely due to its highly visible and progressive representations of gay, lesbian, trans, and otherwise-queer bodies, sexualities, and subjectivities. This might be one of the its most redeeming, or perhaps the most redeeming, aspects. Like media texts in the *X-Men* franchise, *Sense8* resonates with queer folx and people of colour. Furthermore, the series' politics, arguably unlike those of recent iteration of *X-Men*, are not limited to those of recognition or conformity. In fact, even as the representation of queerness in *Sense8* is normalized, it never seeks to be assimilationist or heteronormative. Instead, it presents the queerness of its cluster in opposition to hetero-patriarchal and corporate agendas.

Finally, I want to briefly consider *Sense8*'s material existence on Netflix as a digital platform, weighing this against the series' online fandom discourse and activism. I hope that highlighting audience identification and interactivity with the series, I can point toward the potential of what might occur if mainstream society—especially in an age of great interconnectivity via virtual spaces, networks, and technologies—adopted these transformative models of kinship, such as those queer communities and collectivities already recognize and live.

The popularity of Netflix does not need to be restated, nor does the fact that its platform is now available in 190 countries around the world. Within a matter of years, Netflix has emerged as a poster-child for neoliberalism, both through its global expansion and its individualized algorithmic curation and recommendation of content for and to subscribers. When they released *Sense8* in 2015, it successfully targeted fans of both science fiction and queer genres. Predominantly identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community, fans of *Sense8* congealed into a still active audience fandom which latched onto its inclusive identity representations and storylines as well as its portrayals of hyper-connected intimacy or kinship. Across platforms such as Tumblr, Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook, several hashtags became attached to fan discourse. These included #iamawe, #wearetheglobalcluster, and #bravelikesense8. There were even webpages where users could generate their own clusters with others around the world. Therefore, it is unsurprising that when Netflix announced the cancellation during Pride Month in 2017, it sent shockwaves through the Twittersphere and immediately mobilized fans to push for the show's renewal. New hashtags such as #bringbacksense8, #renewsense8, and #sensatesforever emerged and spread quickly through Internet spaces. Fans also created petitions, such as one on Change.org which acquired over half a million signatures, to urge Netflix to renew the series.

Within the month, the fans had ultimately succeeded in gaining approval for a two-hour finale, which premiered on Netflix's portal during the summer of 2018. Without overstating the implications of their digital activism, the fans of *Sense8* essentially outmaneuvered, albeit in fairly temporary and limited ways, the logics of neoliberal capitalism. By successfully demanding what a company like Netflix—with its nearly endless options for streaming—was not supplying, fans with queer affiliations, queer alliances, and intersectional identities revealed power through collective movement.

In fact, one contention of this article has been that the most radical notion *Sense8* presents through the collective consciousness of the sensate cluster lies in the very nature of its sharedness or intersectionality. Instead of identifying with one or two characters in the series, *Sense8* invites the process of identification with a group counter-intimacy and kinship in unison—man, woman, gay, straight, cis, trans—and to disrupt queerly the very labels that delineate their differences. Their differences in knowledge, bodies, individualities, and experiences are what give the cluster its powerful potential, but concurrently these differences efface into a public. In other words, they are asking the viewer as an 'I' to identify, like Nomi, as a 'we.' Alexis Lothian has also commented on the effects of this collision or collapse of identity:

The intensity of sensate communication means that each member of the cluster has no choice but to recognise every other member as an equal with whom they can empathise fully. Rather than a world with “no race...no genders...no age,” the utopia of sensate connection seems to offer an alternative vision for globalisation, one in which the dehumanisation and exploitation by the rich world of the poor could be replaced by an empathetic diversity in which the full subjectivity of every person would be incontrovertibly recognised.¹⁶

Furthermore, this 'alternative vision for globalisation' seems look beyond the shortsightedness of cosmopolitanism that popular audiences perhaps have not yet recognized and advocated against. What would this 'empathetic diversity' look like in praxis, and is it even possible? *Sense8* has not—or has not yet been given the full chance—to take its vision beyond that which “often relies on western colonial conception for its global imagination and marginalizes characters of color [and] theorizes contemporary media spectatorship in its appeal to affect and eroticism.”¹⁷ However, the show presents characters from many places on Earth who transcend xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia, all lamentably still traits of many contemporary, dominant societies and political climates. However, in its model, the show at least demonstrates the possibility of what might happen if subjectivities traded phobias for a form of psychophilia that might help individuals living in Western-dominated cultures to feel less alone and isolated. *Sense8* and its heroes demonstrate the superpowers that emerge when shared bodies, identities, and virtual selves connect and activate in haptic, transcendent, and often quite literally intersectional ways.

Notes

¹ Gareth McLean, "The New Sci-Fi," *The Guardian*, June 27, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2007/jun/27/broadcasting.comment>.

² Robert Shelton, "The Utopian Film Genre: Putting Shadows on the Silver Screen," *Utopian Studies* 4, no. 2 (1993): 1.

³ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Alexis Lothian, "Utopia Anniversary Symposium: *Sense8* and Utopian Connectivity," *Science Fiction Film and Television* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 95.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Lokeilani Kaimana, "Sense8 Roundtable," *Spectator* 37, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 78-79.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Sense8*, "I Am Also a We," Season 1, Episode 2 (June 5, 2015), directed by The Wachowskis.

¹⁰ Katherine Sender, "Sexual Mobilities: Selling Cosmopolitanism With Same-Sex Materials in Korean, UK, and US Sex Museums," unpublished journal article (2017): 50-51.

¹¹ Manfred B. Stegner, *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Delicia Aguado-Pelàez, "Los cuerpos como cartografía de resistencias: Anàlisis interseccional de *Sense8*," *Arte y políticas de identidad* 15 (Fall 2016): 39-58.

¹⁴ Lothian, "Utopia," 95.

¹⁵ Lisa Rofel, *Desiring China: Experiments in Neoliberalism, Sexuality, and Public Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 133-34.

¹⁶ Lothian, "Utopia," 93.

¹⁷ Kaimana, "Sense8 Roundtable," 74.

“I was swallowed by metaphor and digested by self-loathing”: De-Toxifying Masculinity in Gail Simone’s *Secret Six*

Peter Cullen Bryan

Abstract

This essay explores the intersections and divergences of Catman and Bane within Gail Simone’s *Secret Six* run. Simone is a pivotal figure in the development of modern comics, instrumental in spreading the term “Women in Refrigerators” and exploring disability and trauma in her *Birds of Prey* run. Simone’s oeuvre explores modern questions of gender and performance. Both Catman and Bane subvert expected behaviors of male superheroes, instead grappling with their respective masculinities. Each undergoes a transformation in comparison to their preexisting depictions, becoming better versions of themselves. Simone’s characterizations mitigate the toxic aspects of their personalities retaining their core identities. This offers an opportunity to recontextualize and perhaps redeem even highly problematic characters within comics and opens new avenues for discourse on gender and superheroes.

Keywords: masculinities, comics studies, adaptation studies, fan studies, Gail Simone

Superhero comics by their nature are almost inevitably the product of adaptation. Writers and artists come and go from titles naturally, with others taking their place. Characters are passed along, with personalities, backstories, even powers retconned for the needs of the current story. Well-established, popular characters might have tighter editorial restrictions, but comics are a collective, ongoing effort—the work of dozens, if not hundreds—poured into the characters on the page. This process creates opportunities for redemption and reclamation; long-forgotten heroes and villains can be brought back, turned to good or evil, and adapted for a present era. Gail Simone’s initial run of *Secret Six* (2006-2011) offers a useful illustration of this process and its larger potential: the characters of Bane and Catman become deconstructions of the superhero narrative and the larger problems of toxic masculinity, the characters taking on dimensions that did not previously exist. For the purposes of keeping the discussion contained, my focus will be on the two limited series (*Villains United* no. 1-6 and *Secret Six* vol. 2, no. 1-6) and the first arc of the ongoing *Secret Six* series (*Secret Six* vol. 3, no. 1-7). There is a great deal of depth in Gail Simone’s writing on the subject of gender, including Rag Doll’s queerness and Scandal Savage’s polyamory but the emphasis here is on toxic masculinity and the redemptive arcs of Catman and Bane.

The superhero body is one that is codified as inherently masculine; rippling muscles and impossible physiques are par for the course in the average superhero comic. The expected and acceptable behaviors of superheroes have changed over the years, but function in the same basic framework as 1938: stoic men of action, facing down incredible odds, superheroes have long embodied this particular blend of masculinity. The Dark Age of Comics saw the intersection of traditional superhero narratives and mainstream action films with Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989).¹ Barna William Donovan offers a reading of the body in action films: "the male version of the body image crisis...manifests itself as the ironic flip side of the female affliction. Whereas women cannot get thin enough, men cannot get big and bulky enough. The media image of men is usually muscular, 'ripped,' and chiseled, broad-shouldered with 'six pack abs' and bulgy biceps."² In describing the action heroes of the late twentieth century, Donovan offers a framework for reading the superhero body, particularly during this period. Moreover, this body is one that is at odds with the softer side of society; Donovan explains that "the heroes of action films are often at odds with women in their lives because such men lack adequate communication skills. They are not 'sensitive' enough, or 'in touch with their feelings.' Their penchant for violence and primal, physical masculinity has no place in a woman's world."³ This concept of sensitivity, and the lack thereof, is key to understanding Simone's approach with Catman and Bane in *Secret Six*, as she reconstructs the nature of the modern masculine superhero into a figure that works to de-toxify masculinity. Both Catman and Bane embody toxic masculinity in earlier appearances, but in the hands of Simone, come to embody more positive aspects of masculinity, while still recognizing their shortcomings.

The coding of the superhero body is explored further by Chris Gavalier, who argues, "superheroes emphasize physicality. Their bodies are definingly extraordinary, and that emphasis highlights their other physical attributes, most overtly gender...these fantasies are predicated on gender binaries that define masculinity's opposition to equally artificial definitions of femininity."⁴ The superhero body is one of perfection, but one that is gendered: while both male and female heroes possess Olympian physiques, the framing and poses of these bodies favour a male gaze. These characters are often called wish fulfillment, though they function as a higher form of fantasy; the superhero physique has become impossible to achieve for the average person. Failure to attain this physique—to not push one's body to its limit—is to be marked as a failure of a man.

Gail Simone's particular deconstruction functions as an adaptation, even as the medium remains the same. While adaptation studies are traditionally applied to transmedia texts (often in film adaptations of literature), Simone's work on *Secret Six* functions as an adaptation of the characters, rather than a specific work itself. Timothy Corrigan's framework, which defines adaptation as a process, a product, and an act of reception, offers a useful path toward understanding the forces at play.⁵ Superhero comics embody an unusual case, as the existence of an extended universe requires an awareness of history and audience on the part of creators. Each

new story must exist within the larger shared framework, and the fidelity to the previous work looms large.⁶ A creator's take on the characters exists in conversation with the previous versions, even as they evolve and change, with retcons serving to mitigate out of character behavior. Fidelity to preexisting works and characterizations is an expected aspect of superhero storytelling, although it does allow for some creative freedom in recontextualizing history and personalities, aspects Simone seizes upon in her work to an unusual degree. Gail Simone reflects this process with her work on *Birds of Prey*, in which Barbara Gordon is paralyzed, and her work on *Secret Six* reflects this same process. Julie Sanders offers a potential for comprehending adaptation as a site of criticism, explaining that "adaptation is nevertheless frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text...offering a revised point of view from the 'original,' adding hypothetical motivation or voicing what the text silences or marginalizes."⁷ Adapting the characters in the pages of *Secret Six* allows Simone to explore their respective masculinities, including aspects that were ignored or otherwise overlooked in previous iterations of the characters.

Catman was a Silver Age villain who battled members of the Bat family (including Catwoman) across a few minor appearances. His gimmick was mostly as a spear counterpart to Catwoman, filtered through the Silver Age silliness including assaulting the Batcave atop a giant cat robot. Catman represents the opposite end of the spectrum from Bane. Rather than possessing a hyper-masculine body, his body loses shape in his later appearances. He relies upon a magical cloth that allegedly gives him nine lives but lacks confidence without it. In one of the Silver Age stories, Batwoman defeats him by convincing him that his outfit has lost its life-sustaining power, resulting in his meekly surrendering to the authorities.⁸ It is notable that he tangles with female heroes (Catwoman and Batwoman) as often as Batman, reinforcing his lack of masculinity. Gavalier's reading of the superhero body is relevant here, with Catman's decline marking a decrease in effectiveness and attractiveness. Like many period villains, he was forgotten until the 1990s, being revived as a member of the Misfits, a mostly comedic group of low-tier villains that appeared in *Shadow of the Bat*.⁹ A subsequent appearance featured him as a secondary villain, more a nuisance for Catwoman than a serious threat in his own right.¹⁰ Brad Meltzer later used Catman as a joke villain for Green Arrow in 2002, casting him as an ineffectual, overweight foe who is easily dispatched in the space of a single issue; Oracle even comments, "I'm not sure who he's ripping off—Catwoman or Bats...his background is just as cliché....he went whole hog: made a cat-a-rang, a cat-line, even a cat-mobile. How pathetic is that?"¹¹ Catman is rendered a joke, and his masculinity is called into question. He is a failure, because his gimmick mirrors others, he has become fat and lazy, and he is soundly defeated within a single page. Catman reappears a few issues later, during a chance encounter with Green Arrow at a rest stop. He is portrayed as a domestic abuser, threatening his female partner with violence, and proves unable to land a blow after the hero intervenes. Once again, Catman is cast as a paper tiger; he proclaims, "I fought Batman four times! To a standstill!", only to be dragged

away to his (alleged) death a few panels later.¹² In contrast to Bane, who possessed a clear identity as hyper-masculine villain (“The Man Who Broke the Bat”), Catman lacked even that characterization, never posing a serious threat for Batman in any of his appearances, despite his insistent claims otherwise. If Bane is hyper-masculinity run amok, Catman is its opposite: soft and pathetic, rendered something less than a threat.

Catman’s redemption begins on the pages of the limited series *Villains United*, the precursor to *Secret Six*. As the titular organization comes together, Catman is the first to refuse membership, perhaps in part because he is referred to as “a perpetual bile-stained amateur.”¹³ He has undergone a physical transformation, now a Tarzanesque figure living among the great cats of Africa, but there is more to it. Talia al Ghul, who was dispatched to make the offer, remarks, “he is not the man our intelligence suggests. He’s remade himself. Admirable. His presence for a moment reminded me of a very great man.”¹⁴ It is not simply that Catman has re-trained his body, but that he now embodies something greater; Talia marks him as akin to Batman, at least in the moment, and thus recognizes his worth and value, even if others do not. Catman’s entry into the Secret Six, prompted by the murder of his pride of lions, allows him to further reassert his masculinity, both in terms of combat and more social settings. The events that transpired between his appearance in *Green Arrow* and *Villains United* are off-handedly mentioned a few times before Catman explains in detail how he was humiliated and nearly died in the previous series.¹⁵ What makes this notable is that Simone does not ignore his trauma. As she did with Batgirl and Black Canary in *Birds of Prey*, she made a deliberate choice to not erase this backstory; the events of *Green Arrow* were not retconned, including his domestic abuse. Instead, that moment—a dark joke at his expense—became emblematic of his rock bottom. Simone explained, “I didn’t put a new guy in the Catman suit, I added to his story elements that were scattered about already.”¹⁶ For the purposes of the story, it had to be the original Catman, Thomas Blake, not a legacy character, of which the team featured two others.¹⁷ *Villains United* effectively revolved around Catman’s redemption, from its opening to the final moment, which sees Catman warn Green Arrow of the upcoming massive crossover event before socking him in the jaw, a violent rejoinder to being shot in the shoulder years earlier. The very inclusion of Catman was a point of contention; Simone explained of the team that “I picked a bunch of losers...a random, nameless parademon, a crappy golden age legacy who didn’t even have his father’s powers. One of Vandal Savage’s thousands of bastards. A war criminal poison specialist. And Deadshot. All approved...but they balked at Catman.”¹⁸ The original pitch had involved a number of A-list villains, but many of those had been claimed by other titles, as part of a massive, ongoing crossover. It is not clear why Catman was a sticking point on the editorial side; he did become a sort of minor crusade for Simone, however.

The situation provides a useful illustration of the intersection of gender and adaptation, with Catman offering a similarly distorted vision of masculinity to Bane, albeit on the opposite end of the spectrum. Simone explains that “Catman was a loser his entire career. No one cared

about him, and to make it worse, Kevin Smith solidified his cowardice and uselessness. But then I thought, hey, the DCU needs a Tarzan. It was the one thing they said no to. He could not be redeemed, it was felt...I explained that if it didn't work, I would kill him off."¹⁹ This offers an example of adaptation in practice; not all changes are universally received, and even obscure characters can inspire entrenched opinions. This is more complex in a large-scale universe, where a change to character can impact not only contemporary stories, but also the larger scope of the universe. While some choices are undertaken lightly (the crippling of Barbara Gordon during *The Killing Joke*), there is an effort to maintain continuity and the status quo, and have characters retain their place within the larger universe. Catman, before Simone began writing him, played the role of a loser, not just in-universe but in the minds of comics writers and the comics-going public at large. Moreover, he was a figure bereft of masculinity: weak-bodied and ineffective, a jittery coward.²⁰ The most heinous villain is redeemable, but a failure of masculinity cannot, as far as superheroes are concerned. Simone takes this as a challenge, to redeem this character, while still maintaining his sense of history.²¹

Simone's selection of Catman reflects a desire to grant him a degree of redemption. He was almost certainly the least popular member of the team, even more than the obscure additions, and this was likely at least part of the reason for the opposition to the inclusion. Moreover, Catman served a crucial function within the larger narrative; he was at the lowest point, and thus had the most potential for redemption, not on a traditional villain-to-hero axis, but in terms of reclaiming his masculinity. Catman makes the choice to reclaim his masculinity, getting back to basics as a method of overcoming his personal demons (and negative characterization). This theme continued throughout Simone's run; Catman later laments, "when I let myself go so badly, I dyed my hair black. I guess I thought I looked tougher."²² His history becomes something to overcome, not be ignored, creating a powerful argument in the process. Catman's redemption does not come from any one specific moment (though his initial refusal at the start of *Villains United* begins the journey), but by virtue of how he operates. He proves himself simply capable in what he does and counters the perception of himself as a joke; even as he hearkens back to it periodically. Catman chooses to be a better man, even as the community at large tends to discount him, and the fact that he is still alive, despite Simone's aforementioned offer to kill him off, speaks to the success of the endeavor.

Bane's toxic masculinity is bound up in his origins and is a key component of his identity. Introduced by Chuck Dixon and Graham Nolan in 1993, Bane represented a highwater mark for the Dark Age of Comics, a villain designed entirely to bring down Batman, much as Doomsday would do to Superman the following year. He was more a plot device than a fully-fleshed out character, though his striking design—a heavily muscled figure in a luchador mask—and relative success in breaking the Bat²³ marked him as a fan favorite during the decade. Crucially, Bane is defeated not by Bruce Wayne, but his temporary successor Jean-Paul Valley, then operating under the Batman identity, who utilizes lethal weaponry to bring down the villain.

Bane thereafter received a few limited series, and appeared occasionally within the Batman comics, first as muscle for Ra's al Ghul and later as an anti-hero in his own right. In Bane's last appearances before *Secret Six*, he takes on the role of the typical 1980s villain, down to being portrayed as a Caribbean drug lord before being soundly defeated by a powered-up Batman.

Bane embodies a specific brand of toxic masculinity, reflecting the conservative character of period comics. He is a dark mirror to Batman, reflecting many of the aspects the hero possesses, albeit to an extreme degree.²⁴ Bane possesses a genius-level intellect, but he is often described as animalistic and cunning, contrasting Batman's more intellectual villains. Bane's body verges on parody; his muscles and sheer size are larger than Batman's often-exaggerated physique, even before being boosted further. His enhanced strength comes from a steroid-like drug called Venom, a common theme in period comics, a thinly-veiled commentary on the War on Drugs. Bane utilizes narcotics to increase his threat level, and hails from a corrupt, fictional Caribbean narco-state Santa Prisca, having been raised in prison. What is intended as a deconstruction of the superhero mythos instead reinforces it. Jeffords outlines the villains of Reagan-era film as "outsiders—foreigners, terrorists, criminals...[who] criticize Reagan values as reactionary, harking back to an earlier era in which the United States could effectively play the world's cowboy hero, wielding guns to stop criminals and evildoers, always on the side of justice, always winning in the end."²⁵ Bane, an interloper acting to bring down key symbols of American justice and power, embodies these ideas, although Batman (or, at least, a Batman) ultimately triumphs.

Bane embodies this to a parodic level, essentially becoming hyper-masculine to an inhuman degree. Jeffords' reading of Reagan-era action heroes fits this relationship as well; the relationship between Batman and Bane echoes similar dichotomies, "one portraying the hard body at its best—reviving strength and individualism in foreign policy—and the other starkly portraying the body's dark underside of hardened brutality as a destructive force directed against humanity itself."²⁶ Bane's physique is ultimately marked as artificial, destructive and dangerous. His victory in combat grants him a degree of superiority in terms of masculinity, but it is ultimately empty. Bane's subsequent appearance sees him defeated by Batman (now Bruce Wayne once again), losing the respect of Ra's al Ghul and the affection of Talia al Ghul. This echoes Gavalier's statement that "a male superhero's 'hyper-physical' body may be termed perfect in the sense that it expresses both hyper-effectiveness and hyper-attractiveness, embodying the belief that optimal effectiveness and attractiveness should be combined and that a male body is attractive to the extent that it is effective."²⁷ Bane's defeat, and loss of favor, reflects this system, although he was not portrayed as traditionally handsome in the manner of Bruce Wayne or other heroes.

Bane's appearance in *Secret Six* finds him a changed man, forswearing the use of Venom. He is a man struggling with addiction, but it is more an addiction to toxic masculinity than to the drug itself.²⁸ The drug is emblematic of his addiction to defeating Batman, and his

efforts to go cold turkey also keep him far away from his nemesis; when the moment comes to face off with Batman early in the run, it is Catman who takes the challenge. Bane's coping mechanism is to latch onto Scandal Savage, despondent after the death of her girlfriend Knockout, resolving that "she is in pain. I believe love is the answer...it is not the caress of a lover that she requires. It is the firm but loving hand of a father."²⁹ The relationship is at first one-sided and comical, and Bane's efforts are met with confusion, but he is persistent. This relationship offers Bane a sense of tenuous stability, even as his attempts at stern fatherhood are initially ignored.³⁰ He is attempting to be a better person, in a halting and ham-fisted manner, though stays the course.³¹ Events culminate when the Six, fleeing across the country, steal an ice cream truck. The team is exhausted, and Bane invites Scandal to lay her head on his lap. Scandal responds, "Should've known. Very funny. I thought you were unlike other men. Never mind."³² She assumes it is a carnal invitation, a gross joke that implies how familiar Scandal is with such invitations. But Bane is insistent: "You need to rest, Scandal Savage. Lay your head, here, on my lap...Sleep. I will watch over you. No demons in your dreams, Scandal Savage."³³ The moment subverts the expectations of the superhero genre, particularly where villains are concerned, as well as toxic masculinity at large. There is nothing sexual about Bane's intent, and it serves as a reaffirmation of the earlier decision to treat Scandal as a daughter, leading to this moment of tenderness.

Bane's relationship with Scandal provides a sense of sobriety, helping him avoid avoiding the bad habits that lead him to abuse the drug in the first instance, and granting a sense of stability. It is his desire to protect Scandal, even more than his own life, that leads to his falling off the wagon. When he finally uses Venom, he does it for her, explaining, "Scandal. Only...only for you would I do this. Off the wagon, my adopted daughter. I fall."³⁴ The immediate aftermath, in which we can see Bane's Venom-warped vision of the world, illustrates the depth of his addiction, when he sees everyone, including his allies, as various Batmen. This also marks a moment when Bane embraces the most toxic aspects of his personality: his penchant for violence, brutality, and pure rage. This is not a triumphant moment but a tragic one; Scandal comments that "[Bane] broke the Bat. But somehow, the Bat broke him back."³⁵ This moment serves as a larger comment on the cycle of hurting; Bane's victory was fleeting and destructive for both men, and those wounds will never really heal. Bane's choice to use Venom again, to relapse, does not function as a grand heroic moment, doing little to change the flow of the battle. It requires the sacrifice of another hero, and some quick thinking on the part of the team, to effectively end the fight. This is not a hero finding their hidden power at the last moment to save the day but a decision to protect a loved one that ultimately has dire consequences.

Gail Simone utilizes two masculine figures to critique toxic masculinity in comics. Catman's major theme is regaining a sense of self: throughout much of the run, he lacks confidence, but slowly rebuilds his self-esteem, overcoming his past failings without erasing

them. Bane's journey comes from better understanding how to utilize his strength more wisely, to avoid giving into the toxic aspects of his personality, and his arc runs perpendicular to that of Catman. Each embodies aspects common to the male characters in superhero comics: powerful physiques, a propensity for violence, questionable morals, but each arrives at a different place than where they started from. Simone's work was ultimately cut short by a universe-wide retcon, and though she would continue to write the team in a revamped continuation, the original versions of Catman and Bane serve to represent the possibilities of the detoxifying the masculinity of superhero comics.

Notes

¹ The Dark Age of Comics broadly refers to the period of the 1980s and 1990s that saw grittier portrayals of superheroes, including the incorporation of sex and violence. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* are often cited as key moments, and it saw the arrival of Tim Burton's *Batman* films that reinforced the darker storytelling of the period.

² Barna William Donovan, *Blood, Guns, and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2009), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ Chris Gavalier, *Superhero Comics* (London, Bloomsbury: 2017), 179

⁵ Timothy Corrigan, "Defining Adaptation," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas M. Leitch (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017), 23.

⁶ David T. Johnson's "Adaptation and Fidelity" offers a much deeper exploration of the concept and how it functions within the larger adaptation studies scholarship. David T. Johnson, "Adaptation and Fidelity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, ed. Thomas M. Leitch, (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2017), 87-100.

⁷ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 23.

⁸ Bill Finger and Jim Mooney, "The Cat-Man Strikes Back," *Detective Comics* 1, no. 318, DC Comics (August 1963).

⁹ Killer Moth, the nominal leader of the group, at one point complains that "I started this group because we're losers—because we never get to win!" Alan Grant and Tim Sale, "The Misfits: Part Three," *Shadow of the Bat*, no. 9, DC Comics (February 1993): 21.

¹⁰ Alan Grant and Barry Kitson, "Secrets of the Universe," *Batman: Shadow of the Bat*. no. 43-44, DC Comics (October-September 1995).

¹¹ Brad Meltzer, Phil Hester, and Ande Park, "Photograph," *Green Arrow* 3, no. 16, DC Comics (November 2002).

¹² Brad Meltzer, Phil Hester, and Ande Park, "Kryptonite," *Green Arrow* 3, no. 20, DC Comics (March 2003).

¹³ Gail Simone, Dale Eaglesham, and Wade von Grawbadger, "And Empires in Their Purpose," *Villains United*, no. 1, DC Comics (July 2005): 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁵ "You might say I was swallowed by metaphor and digested by self-loathing...I didn't begin as a joke. I had many advantages. And somehow, I'd allowed myself to become the lowest rung on an already short ladder. I'd let terror and stupidity dominate every part of my life. I once fought Batman to a standstill, and yet, years later, I was reduced to a weeping mass in my home by Green Arrow. I abused women. Anything weaker than myself, I despised." Gail Simone, Dale Eaglesham, and Wade von Grawbadger, "A Weapon to Unify," *Villains United*, no. 1, DC Comics (October 2005): 22.

¹⁶ Gail Simone, Twitter Post, September 14, 2015, 9:58am, <https://twitter.com/GailSimone/status/643468903486590976>.

¹⁷ A legacy character refers to a hero that takes up a preexisting mantle; the various Robins, for instance, are all based on the original Dick Grayson version, even though they are distinct figures within the DC universe.

¹⁸ Gail Simone, Twitter Post. April 4, 2018, 5:53pm, <https://twitter.com/GailSimone/status/981696629181788161>.

¹⁹ Gail Simone, Twitter Post. April 4, 2018, 5:54pm, <https://twitter.com/GailSimone/status/981696629181788161>.

²⁰ He is described later in the series, long after he had proven himself a threat in combat, as “Catman was Thomas Blake, whose early promise had been lost in rolls of fat and indolence. So far had he sunk that he’d become something of an uncivil jest among the ‘heroic’ community.” Gail Simone, Nicola Scott, and Doug Hazlewood, “The Last Mile,” *Secret Six* 3, no. 6, DC Comics (April 2009): 21.

²¹ It is notable as well that she compared him to Tarzan, a significant figure in the development of modern masculinity and perhaps even superheroes, as outlined by John Kasson. John Kasson, *Tarzan, Houdini, and the Perfect Man The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001).

²² Gail Simone, Nicola Scott, and Doug Hazlewood, “A Run of Misfortune,” *Secret Six* 3, no. 6, DC Comics (April 2009): 7.

²³ Although, Batman would return to crime fighting within a year.

²⁴ Susan Jeffords, in locating the masculine aspects of the Reagan style in John Orman’s work on the subject, offers a list that would be recognizable within superhero comics: “competitive...athletic...decisive, never wavering or uncertain...unemotional...strong and aggressive, not weak or passive...powerful...a “real man,” never feminine.” Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 35. This list serves a useful compass for exploring superheroes, particularly the more subversive efforts that will follow this age of comics.

²⁵ Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 61.

²⁶ Ibid., 105.

²⁷ Gavalier, *Superhero Comics*, 181.

²⁸ During a fight in which the team is clearly outmatched, Deadshot demands “Use the Venom. ‘Roid up, man. That thing is gonna kill us all.” Bane responds that “I do not use it anymore. It is immoral...the righteous path is always the correct one. No matter what the cost.” Gail Simone, Nicola Scott, and Doug Hazlewood, “The Way of the Traitor,” *Secret Six* 3, no. 2, DC Comics, (December 2008): 16.

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Simone casts these attempts as comedic, with statements like, “You look tired. You need rest. It is your bedtime, Scandal Savage.” Simone, “The Way of the Traitor,” 7. And, “Scandal, you are allowed one ice cream of your choice.” Gail Simone, Nicola Scott, and Doug Hazlewood, “Money for Murder,” *Secret Six* 3, no. 4, DC Comics (February 2009): 6.

³¹ It helps that Scandal Savage’s father is noted supervillain Vandal Savage, who retains eternal life by cannibalizing his children.

³² Simone, Scott, and Hazelwood, “Money for Murder,” 9.

³³ Ibid., 9.

³⁴ Gail Simone, Nicola Scott, and Doug Hazlewood, “Revelations,” *Secret Six* 3, no. 7, DC Comics (May 2009): 13.

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

Salaryman Masculinity in *One-Punch Man*'s Kynical Narrative

Joe Yang

Abstract

This article examines the world of *One-Punch Man*, a popular manga and anime series by ONE and Murata Yusuke. It focuses on the friction between the role of the individual superhero versus the system that values their efforts. I argue that *One-Punch Man* evaluates its heroes based upon their productivity. Thus, *One-Punch Man*'s heroes fall prey to a broader ideology of "Japan, Inc." In *One-Punch Man*, this ideology shapes its heroes into workers rather than agents. More specifically, *One-Punch Man* envisions its heroes through the lens of salaryman masculinity.

Keywords: ideology, salaryman masculinity, Japan, manga, anime

Introduction

In episode 9 of *One-Punch Man*, a Japanese animated feature (anime), the main character, Saitama, stands alone against the Deep Sea King. The arc spans two episodes. The Deep Sea King is a massive, muscled, and chitinous monster. He is leading a vast army to invade and take over the land. Heroes attempt to stop him but all are unsuccessful. Citizens of the city hole up in a giant domed bunker and it does not take long before the Deep Sea King penetrates the walls. Mumen Rider, a low-ranked hero, attempts to stop him. Unsurprisingly, he fails. Before the Deep Sea King can slaughter the civilians, Saitama arrives. In one punch, he defeats the Deep Sea King. The citizens of the city are grateful, shocked, and confused. They are grateful because they were spared; shocked that the Deep Sea King died so easily; and confused because such a minor hero is the one who defeated the villain. One citizen theorizes that the other heroes are frauds; if a no-named individual such as Saitama could so easily defeat the Deep Sea King, what is the point of supporting heroes at all? Saitama, sensing the growing unrest, lies to the crowd, "Today's my lucky day! I barely did anything and now I get all the credit!"¹ The crowd turns on him.

The denouement of the Deep Sea King arc mirrors a testy negotiation between a subject and a structure. By witnessing Saitama's immense strength, the crowd questions the role of the Hero's Association, an organization that evaluates, compensates, and legally defends superheroes. By presenting himself as a slimy opportunist, Saitama does two things. One, he stresses the necessity of the Hero's Association. The crowd cannot question the organization's role. As such, Saitama makes himself a type of martyr. Second, the crowd's questioning unveils an assemblage of logics. The conversation revolves around the supposed uselessness of the hero's hierarchy. Regardless of the hero's rank, they all fall before the Deep Sea King. It is Saitama, a C-rank hero, who defeated the

Deep Sea King. Yet the sequence is only briefly jovial. By sacrificing his reputation, Saitama upholds the ideology of the hero's association. Such an ideology extends beyond the story of *One-Punch Man*. This ideology is one of masculinity, in particular, referring to salaryman masculinity. *One-Punch Man*, as a cynical take on superheroes, reveals how pervasive such an ideology is in contemporary Japan.

***One-Punch Man* and Superheroes in Japan**

One-Punch Man refers to various media properties. It began as a webcomic by ONE. It then became a collaboration between ONE and Murata Yusuke for *Weekly Shonen Jump*. It was then adapted into an anime by Studio Madhouse. ONE intended for the comic to test out how to draw comics.² ONE's intentions were to publish these comics on Nitosha, a free publishing platform for comics. Since the comic began as an experiment, *One-Punch Man*'s initial art style was crude and simplistic. ONE rendered characters in full black and white with thick lines. The resolutions were small and the designs were simple. *One-Punch Man* exploded in popularity when manga artist Murata Yusuke (*Eyeshield 21*) came across the webcomic. According to ONE in a *Weekly Shonen Jump* interview, "Murata Sensei just happened to find my website and became interested in *One-Punch Man*. I had always been a fan of his, so I jumped at the opportunity to work with him. I get really excited seeing my work transformed into something with so much passion and amazing art."³ Murata is largely the artist for the manga collaboration. Through the collaboration, the character designs have become well-defined and the heroes, intricate. Overall, the manga was much more visually complex. Yet the collaboration between ONE and Murata runs deeper than a writer-artist collaboration. Murata became involved in writing the collaborative *One-Punch Man* manga. The result was Shonen Jump-specific arcs that never appeared in the original webcomic. Likewise, both ONE and Murata played clear advisory roles for the *One-Punch Man* anime.

Despite the minor differences between all three, the narrative structure of *One-Punch Man* remains consistent. *One-Punch Man* concerns a penniless superhero named Saitama. After saving a young child from a crab monster, Saitama develops a taste for herodom. Thus, he undergoes a rigorous training regiment: 100 push-ups, 100 squats, 100 crunches, and running 10 kilometers a day, no exceptions. According to Saitama, there were two by-products: hair loss and insurmountable physical ability. Well into his hero career, he meets Genos, a cyborg. Genos introduces Saitama to the Hero's Association, an institutional body that financially supports and regulates heroes. It turns out that Saitama's lack of notoriety is because he never enlisted in the Hero's Association. Despite his immense physical prowess, Saitama nearly fails the written examination. As such, while he is by far the strongest character in the series, he begins as a C-rank hero.⁴ The story of *One-Punch Man* concerns his efforts to climb the ranks.

Why is *One-Punch Man* an important case? There are two reasons. First, Japan, compared to America, has a much more fractured image of the superhero. At a glance, there is a clearer

homology of superheroes in America. Images of Batman, Superman, the Avengers, and other characters from the DC and Marvel comic universes, are clearly marketed and delineated as superheroes. Such superheroes, according to Chris Gavalier, refer to older stories of agential exceptionalism. To Gavalier, “[b]efore the dawn of election ballots, kings represented God and so ruled by divine right. When God retired from politics, supermen claimed the empty throne. Even when they allow some petty president or prime minister to sit on it, superheroes...pledge allegiance to no government.”⁵ Thus the image of the superhero in American comics (partially) recalls sentiments of famous revolutionaries like Guy Fawkes and Oliver Cromwell, whose moral compass and political orientation were not supposed to be beholden to any government. Gavalier also notes that superheroes are free agents, “radicals championing their own self-defined liberty.”⁶ Exceptional status and ability go together with exceptional capacity. In Japan, such characters do exist. However, they are not usually referred to as superheroes. Son-Goku from Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball*, for instance, is an individual of exceptional ability. A savant of combat, Goku's journeys are reminiscent of American superheroes. Goku has enemies, allies, and fights for what he believes is right or true. His immense physical prowess undergirds his ability to enact his morals. However, Goku is not marketed as a superhero. In Japan, characters like Goku, Ichigo (from *Bleach*), Luffy (from *One Piece*), or Naruto (from *Naruto*) act akin to superheroes. However, they are almost never marketed as superheroes, nor do audiences perceive them as superheroes. The cultural distinction becomes even more complex when looking at adjacent or subcultural texts. Takeuchi Naoko's *Bishojo Senshi Sera Mun* (Sailor Moon) concerns a group of schoolgirls who transform into costumed fighters and combat evil. Here, Sailor Moon falls in the lineage of Super Sentai (Sentai meaning “task force”) shows. In *Super Sentai*, a team of heroes work together to fight off threats. *Super Sentai* itself is a form of *tokusatsu* (“special effects”) television, many of which involve superheroes. The result is both a market and a field of study that bears a different registry in Japan. Many of these characters do not fall under the category of superhero. Instead, these characters fall under *nekketsu* (hot-blooded), *shounen* (young boy), *mahou shoujo* (magical girl), among others.

Japan's heterogenous look at the superhero is crucial. Despite its fractured image of the superhero, Japan does have its own superhero genre. Furthermore, the Japanese superhero genre is fully aware of its American influences. The Japanese superhero genre bears significant cross-Pacific influence with America. Thus, on some level, it bears occidental undertones. Kohei Horikoshi's *My Hero Academia* is a chart-topping manga and anime series about students with powers. Horikoshi noted that he was influenced by Marvel comics, specifically *Spiderman*.⁷ While billed as *tokusatsu*, Tsurubaya Eiji's *Ultraman* reflexively refers to itself as a ‘hero.’ And while Japan does have numerous hero-related subgroups, one of the earliest contemporary television *tokusatsu* was Toei Company's loose adaptation of *Spiderman*. This adaptation, which ran from May 17, 1978 to March 14, 1979, is *Spiderman* in name and costume only. In fact, *One-Punch Man* is a direct play on words of an earlier Japanese superhero story, Anpanman. Saitama himself is a reference to Anpanman, a hero whose head is a bean jam bun. *One-Punch Man* bears lineage of Japanese

superheroes that call attention to their herodom. While the characters in the previous paragraph fulfill the roles of heroes, they rarely identify nor are they marketed as superheroes. Properties such as *My Hero Academia* and *One-Punch Man* directly refer to its own characters as superheroes. The importance of this distinction is that there is an acknowledgement and understanding of the superhero. Recalling Goku, even though he acts like a superhero, he is not sold or understood as a superhero.

***One-Punch Man* as a Kynical Text**

This leads to the second point. While *My Hero Academia* employs a complex system of superheroes, *One-Punch Man* foregrounds its own self-reflexivity. Both texts involve systems of hero-dom. Both texts involve characters whose central drama concerns navigating those systems. Both texts, in such dramas, make statements on the necessity of those systems. *One-Punch Man* differs from *My Hero Academia* because *One-Punch Man* is self-reflexive. *One-Punch Man* engages with the nature of what makes a hero. At the same time, asking what makes a hero reinforces its ideology. It is a kynical text. Peter Sloterdijk popularized the term in *In Critique of Cynical Reason*. He argues that when we consider ideological critique, such considerations bear a “polemical continuation of the miscarried dialogue through other means.”⁸ For Sloterdijk, critique of ideology already takes on the form of respectability. Yet such respectability is insufficient for proper critique. Drawing on Diogenes, Sloterdijk argues that sufficient critique requires a cheeky, playful challenge to idealistic critiques of ideology. Sloterdijk's kynical reasoning is reminiscent of Bakhtin's carnival: a cheeky, playful space in which systems invert. Building on Sloterdijk, Žižek proposes that such kynical texts draw cynical reasons. For Žižek, whereas the cynic is an embodied vulgarity that challenges idealistic systems, the cynic presupposes such an engagement and operates within such systems. The cynic, in other words, is aware they are a subject of an ideology. They are thus aware of Marx's basic ideological tenet: “they do not know it, but they are doing it.”⁹ In fact, cynical subjects of an ideology know they are doing it, but they do it anyways. In doing so, the cynical text is ideology par excellence. In believing they are aware of how ideology shapes them, they become comfortable. Doing so reinforces their ideology. For *One-Punch Man*, there is no clear cynicism. Neither ONE nor Murata has made any pretenses about the critique of ideology; yet, the text bears several critiques (which will be addressed later). In short, *One-Punch Man* engages in playful dismantling of power structures. At the same time, it provides no clear answers on how to negotiate the ideology of its heroes.

This kynical attitude pervades *One-Punch Man*. The rhetoric and deflation of Garou is one such example. A rogue agent, Garou prowls the cities and engages in what he calls a “hero hunt.” The hero hunt is where Garou challenges heroes to test his power and skill. He is often victorious. The hero hunt is so successful, in fact, that the Hero's Association sends out an organization-wide bounty. Everyone is after Garou, now dubbed as “the human monster.” The arc climaxes at the

showdown. Several heroes and monsters are in a pitched battle. Garou is in the fray and he is severely wounded. In chapter 68 of the webcomic, while wounded, Garou laments to one of the heroes:

Garou: Aren't you playing 'hero' as well? It reeks of hypocrisy, it makes me sick. What you're doing now is also part of 'conducting justice and punishing evildoers'? As long as you do the right thing, you gain power, right? That's powerful, sure. Humans conducting violence with no regret or guilt, they can beat anyone. If needed, just throw that kindness overboard. You heroes are shit.¹⁰

Chapters later, he is defeated. But such precarity unlocks a power within him. He reaches a physical apotheosis, and, ascended, disposes of the heroes and monsters with ease. The arc reaches its nadir, with all hope lost, until Saitama comes to the fray. Saitama's entrance is a visual gag: his appearance, sketchy and simplistic, is disarming. He is rendered entirely with thick, jagged, frenetic lines amidst empty backgrounds. His presentation undermines the tension of the previous chapters. Still, despite his ascended form, Garou is unable to stop Saitama. In a fit of rage, Garou asks Saitama what gives him the power, what drives him as a hero. Saitama's answer is a continuation of the visual gag. He picks his nose, and then says, "It's a hobby."¹¹

"It's a hobby" is pure cynicism. Compared to Garou's impassioned speech about the unfairness of the world, Saitama's comment decelerates the narrative's forward momentum. At the same time, the comment also reveals the playfulness of ONE's writing. The heroes and villains, in all of their magnanimity, are powerless before Saitama's might. The battle between Garou and Saitama is a negotiation between cynical and kynical. Garou represents the cynical perspective, fully aware of the system, and more broadly, the ideology. For Sloterdijk, the challenge with cynical reasoning is that such critiques can strengthen ideology: "the critic admits that ideologies, which from an external point of view are false consciousness, are, seen from the inside, precisely the right consciousness."¹² For the cynical critic, such falsities are irrelevant—subjects simply believe them to be true. Garou's position is a law of nature that believes itself to be true. Thus, it places him at odds with the heroes and the monsters. He sees both groups as jockeying for power, both behind charged political messages. Garou's behaviour is incredibly cynical. He adopts an air of being above such political dimensions. Yet when given the chance, he proposes his own political position. He believes in being above it, though there is little evidence to suggest he really is. However, his action plan falls within ongoing structures of power. Nothing has changed.

In comparison, Saitama's response bears no further consideration of such ideologies. On a narrative level, his jarring appearance and deadpan character embodies the kynical position. Instead of believing he is aware or above the system, he inhabits the system. At times, his behaviour is akin to Diogenes' vulgarity; it betrays ideological contours. Thus, the implication is that in moments where such cynicism is subdued, ideology is operating without fail. This brings us back to the beginning. The Deep Sea King battle is the failure of such kynical reasoning. Saitama, the jester, is

incapable of joking around. He is beset by a concretizing, ideological pressure. The crowd's skepticism of the Hero's Association is an Althusserian interpellation. To Louis Althusser, interpellation is the hail. A police officer yells, "Hey you!" If a subject responds to that call, they are locked into a system in which they are a subject of a state apparatus.¹³ In this situation, the citizens' skepticism is the hail; Saitama chose to answer it. Here, the playful vulgarity has failed. So, if this is a case of ideological interpellation, then what is the ideology of *One-Punch Man*?

Salaryman Masculinity

One-Punch Man is built on an ideology of salaryman masculinity. As simply put, salaryman masculinity refers to an idea of men as providers for a family. Conformity to a masculine image entails work-centric lives revolving around production. Mizuho Aoki notes that salaryman masculinity is a post-war, *Shōwa* era¹⁴ by-product. The image of working men—most of them fathers—legitimises a corporatist productive social fabric. Such an image upholds a broader apparatus colloquially referred to as "Japan, Inc."¹⁵ In *Precarious Japan*, Anne Allison describes Japan, Inc. as a nationwide set of social contracts.¹⁶ In return, members of society are prodigious and productive. In doing so, citizens uphold what supporters refer to as a "super stable society" (*chou antei shakai*). With the *nikkei* crash of the early 1990s, the mentality of a reciprocal, corporatist Japan was severely undermined. Full-time workers began to shift into temporary workers (*haken*). Such dismantling accelerated in the early 2000s. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi enacted several neoliberal reforms, further compromising any return to "Japan, Inc." Yet despite the transition from lifelong employees to temporary workers, individual identification, arguably, has not kept pace. Aoki notes that while the economic conditions of men are changing, old mentalities persist.¹⁷ She notes, "even when men find it tough to continue working, the traditional masculine image of toughness and stoicism makes them refrain from quitting or even discussing their suffering."¹⁸ In other words, such masculinity is very pervasive.

Despite the simple definition, salaryman masculinity is an incredibly robust ideology. Because it revolves around masculinity through the lens of productivity, salaryman masculinity penetrates much of Japanese society. Likewise, while salaryman masculinity tends to refer to working men, it also involves a wider field of what Gilles Deleuze might consider as becoming-subjects.¹⁹ The becoming-subject collects references around it to compose of an image. But that image is neither static nor a mirror.²⁰ Instead, development acts alongside desire, with both implicating one other. The image of the salaryman is resilient because it is reminiscent of such identification. Salaryman masculinity can simply refer to "manly men are men who produce." Such a simple description ignores critical compositional nuances. For instance, Ian Condry notes that salaryman masculinity is a hegemonic framework that affects discussions beyond work. When Condry refers to the "otaku" (super fans), he notes that "many interpretations of otaku masculinity share an assumption with salaryman masculinity — namely, that value...tends to be grounded in

productivity.”²¹ For Condry, *otaku* masculinity orbits around presuppositions of salaryman masculinity. To be a ‘good’ *otaku*, for Condry, is to be a productive one. Yet such good or bad *otaku* debates do not happen without a relative position to the salaryman. Condry makes such a concession: “if the salaryman stood for one model of Japan's economic productivity, I would argue that *otaku* represent a new form of manhood.”²² Tomoko Hidaka notes that such stoic, collective productivity manifests in topics as broad as love and gender. For instance, Hidaka notes that one of her respondents looked for a wife who was “to have a wife who represented a ‘good wife, wise mother’.”²³ Marriages of love are classified entirely differently (*ren'ai kekkon*). In short, while there is a specific, simple definition for salaryman masculinity, its operative implications are broad. When referring to salaryman masculinity, I reference its productive aspect. A man is a man when he produces. Salaryman masculinity is thus not as concrete as one might conceive of an ideology. Rather, it exists as nodal points, in which elements revolve around it. On occasion, it pulls elements into its orbit. An element adjacent and sometimes involved in salaryman masculinity is becoming a *shakaijin*.

One-Punch Man's Salaryman Masculinity

Why is this important to *One-Punch Man*? *One-Punch Man* might not be addressing salarymen with specificity. However, salaryman ideology undergirds its narrative. The specific permutation of salaryman masculinity emphasized in *One-Punch Man* is referred to as “going into society” (*shakai ni hairu*). Though *shakai* generally translates to society, it connotes a working society. As such, people can be considered going in or out of *shakai*.²⁴ The reciprocal, contractual relationship between member and society is key. Being a member of *shakai* requires certain responsibilities. The most applicable is one of measurable productivity. When a citizen is measurably productive, they become a ‘person of society’ (*shakaijin*). One distinction to note is that *shakai* is not always subservient to the salaryman label. Mary Gobel Noguchi notes that students can be considered *shakaijin* (*shakaijin gakusei*).²⁵ However, salaryman masculinity is a form in which *shakaijin* concretizes its subjects. People work because they wish to be seen as members of society. Doing so, they uphold the corporatist order that legitimises the society they wish to be a part of.

In *One-Punch Man*, Saitama does not begin as a *shakaijin*. Instead, Saitama was working part-time at a convenience store. By the time of the main story, Saitama was jobless. He lived in a desolate, destroyed city, and had no job prospects. Saitama’s clash against the crab monster—and thus the moment in which he decides to be a hero—happens after a failed job interview. Saitama exists outside of the productive sphere of the salaryman. Regardless, despite his meager funds and destitute living, he continues to be a hero. It is in his lack of fame where *shakai* is revealed to be ideological. Shortly after defeating a monster, Saitama runs across the cyborg Genos. Genos offers to pay Saitama in exchange for the opportunity to shadow the blasé Saitama. From Genos, Saitama learns that there is a Hero’s Association. Furthermore, because Saitama is unregistered, his exploits

have gone uncredited. The story thus sets up the necessity of the institution as a negotiating factor of value. Saitama's actions as a hero—defeating villains and monsters—is a net benefit to society. Yet because his actions fall outside the purview of the Hero's Association, he is an abject agent. His lack of presence is because he inhabits the space outside of the association's control. In fact, the Hero's Association directly refers to self-proclaimed heroes (such as Saitama) as “weirdos” and that they should be “viewed with suspicion.”²⁶ In other words, his value to society is only valuable insofar as society can register them. Thus, for Saitama, his immediate registration at the Hero's Association is an act of *shakai ni hairu*. He is going into society.

To become a registered hero, hopefuls must undergo an examination administered by the Hero's Association. When Saitama and Genos take the hero examination, there is both a physical and a written test. Genos passes both with stellar marks, thus putting him in the upper echelon of heroes: S-rank. Saitama, in comparison, smashes the physical records. But due to his poor test scores, he places at C-rank. The test is reminiscent of company entrance tests (*nyuushashiken*). Here, organizations use the test to evaluate the fit and ability of the recruit. Regardless of ONE's intentions in crafting such a test, the fact that the association utilises a writing portion with significant weight (given that Saitama's physical score was affected so profoundly to derank him) suggests some sort of reference to larger Japanese corporate structures. On one level, the story plays Saitama's low rank (especially compared to his 'student' Genos) for laughs. The C-rank juxtaposes both his efforts and his power versus the Hero's Association view of him. In *One-Punch Man*, the Hero's Association enlists numerous petty, Machiavellian heroes, many seeking glory and fortune over an exercise of morality. It often does so by mimicking the corporate politics of Japan. For instance, Saitama's first meeting with Fubuki, leader of the Blizzard Group (*Fubuki-gumi*), is confrontational. Fubuki's intentions are to establish a pecking order through a seniority system. Thus, the Hero's Association operates much like an abstract approximation of a large Japanese company.

Nowhere is the ideological pressure more visible than in the hero King, dubbed “the greatest.”²⁷ An intimidating man, King is an S-rank hero who, it turns out, is powerless. His exploits and achievement, in a twist of fate, are Saitama's. Given that Saitama leaves immediately after dispatching monsters, the Hero's Association attributed such deeds to King, who happens to be present at many of Saitama's heroic deeds. Thus, the praise showered upon him are unearned. King is no stronger than an ordinary civilian. He acts as a character foil to Saitama. While Saitama is powerful and relatively unknown, King is famous yet powerless. In chapter 39 of the manga, King meets Saitama. Saitama asks King two relevant questions:

Saitama: Have you become so strong that fighting is too much of a hassle for you?

After finding out that King is a fraud, he nonchalantly asks him:

Saitama: Just become strong, and then you'll be fine, right?²⁸

Saitama, despite realising that King stole his achievements, does not chide him. Rather, in kynical fashion, he dismantles the dramatic tension of the scene. The text presents Saitama as above it. This revelation is particularly prescient given that Saitama and King are connected by only one thing: labour. King's fame is a by-product of Saitama's efforts, but Saitama does not care about such labour. This moment is what Frederic Jameson would consider a symbolic act. Jameson argues that a text fundamentally runs into social contradictions.²⁹ Such contradictions are then resolved or transcended through the text, via interpretation: "the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction."³⁰ In resolving such a contradiction, we understand what Jameson refers to as an "ideology of form." These are significations representing a social collective hidden in the text. The conversation between Saitama and King, I argue, is one such symbolic act. Remember that Saitama's intention for joining the Hero's Association is to accrue fame. The moment where he can reclaim the fruits of his labour, he casts it aside. The chapter proposes an imaginary resolution to its real contradictions: there is something greater than the labour. Saitama's herodom - which has remained largely vague and abstract—emerges as an endeavour that seeks no glory. *One-Punch Man* presents something greater than the efforts of the hero. In an idealistic fashion the stories propose that *true* heroes do not seek selfish desires. Thus, Saitama's kynical response is one of a 'true hero', ascending above such petty reasons. But at the same time, *One-Punch Man* continues as if this conversation never happened. The story never addresses the conversation again. Despite the dramatic display of herodom, the ideology of the text reconstitutes itself. Thus, at the same time, Saitama's speech reaffirms the salaryman ideology. Subjects internalize the value of their work because they want to. When Saitama asks King whether fighting is a hassle, Saitama is referring to the labour of herodom as alienation. Despite those concerns, Saitama continues to be a hero.

Conclusion

One-Punch Man is, in effect, a treatise of the pervasiveness of salaryman masculinity. Very little suggests that ONE nor Murata wrote the comics with the intention of writing about salarymen. However, such discussions emerge regardless. The images of *One-Punch Man*'s superheroes are, in effect, the image of its salarymen. They are productive bodies placed in a broader machinery that shows them how to internalize their own (given) values.

One-Punch Man also naturalises the labour of its superheroes. The ideological fabric of its world requires acknowledging the heroes' hidden labour. The Hero's Association is the gatekeeper of Saitama's recognition. His measurement of a hero is arbitrary: his initial ranking is not an evaluation of him as a hero, but what the association values as a hero. Such measurements are couched in productive rhetoric, recalling salaryman masculinity.

Notes

¹ *One-Punch Man*, “Unyielding Justice,” Season 1, Episode 9 (September 17, 2016), directed by Shunichi Yoshizawa, Netflix.

² SUGOI JAPAN Award 2016, “‘Wanpanman’ *tanjō hiwa! Kon'nanimō omoshiroi riyū ga akiraka ni*,” <https://web.archive.org/web/20160326034723/http://sugoi-japan.jp/sugoi/03.html>.

³ Murata Yusuke, “Weekly Shonen Jump Interview,” *One-Punch Man Wiki*, 2015, https://onepunchman.fandom.com/wiki/Interviews#Weekly_Shonen_Jump_Interview.

⁴ In *One-Punch Man*, heroes are ranked with a number and a letter class. At the top are the S-rank heroes. At the bottom are the C-rank heroes. Within each class, heroes are also ranked by number, with 1 being the highest. In *One-Punch Man*, hierarchies often form within each letter class.

⁵ Chris Gavalier, *On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 48.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Megan Peters, “Interview: ‘My Hero Academia’ Creator Kohei Horikoshi Talks Quirks, Comics, and Detroit Smashes,” *Comic Book*, August 2, 2018, <https://comicbook.com/anime/2018/08/02/my-hero-academia-kohei-horikoshi-interview-anime-manga/>.

⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 15.

⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 25.

¹⁰ ONE, “ワンパンマン *One-Punch Man*,” <http://galaxyheavyblow.web.fc2.com/fc2-imageviewer/?aid=1&iid=95>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sloterdijk, *Critique*, 20.

¹³ Louis Althusser, *On Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), 48-49.

¹⁴ Japan’s periods tend to correspond with the reign of its emperors. Periods end when the emperor abdicates or dies. Emperor Akihito’s abdication in 2019, for instance, marks the end of his reign, known as the Heisei period, spanning from 1989 to 2019. The Shōwa period refers to the reign of Japanese history from December 25, 1926 to January 7, 1989, under Emperor Hirohito. In this case, the post-war Shōwa period refers to the period of Japan’s massive economic boom after the Second World War.

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³⁰ *Ibid.*, 76.

Plot Twist or Plot Hole? Public Debate About *Secret Empire* and American Identity Crisis

Megan Genovese

Abstract

The 2016 presidential election represents a crisis of national identity for many Americans. In 2017, Marvel Comics published *Secret Empire*, a comics event premised on the fascist corruption of the character Captain America. In light of the coincidental thematic overlap between these two incidents, public discourse around *Secret Empire* constitutes a microcosm of memory work ignited by crisis, trying to address the rupture in national identity by redefining the site of Captain America. Drawing on discourse in professional cultural reporting and criticism from a range of outlets, I use political discourse analysis to analyze the development of arguments to integrate or abnegate *Secret Empire* as a Captain America story. In this public debate, *Secret Empire* became a referendum on American identity and the limits of acceptable counterfactuals to national narrative.

Keywords: Captain America, politics, political discourse analysis, collective memory, lieux de mémoire

Introduction

Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016 was a crisis; a shocking twist in the expected plot of American political history. There have been competing narratives forwarded to explain how and why it happened, some trying to reinterpret the story of American identity and politics in a new light of xenophobia, racism, misogyny, and other moral failings to account for Trump, while others reject him as an illegitimate aberration to protect the story of a meritocratic nation of immigrants and beacon of democratic freedoms. This debate is historical, evidencing and interpreting the reality of what American history has been and what the nation is now, but it is also about memory. What experts know to be factual about our past and our present is for many less important than what we imagine about where we come from and who we are.

National identity is tied to specific sites of collective memory, and Trump's election ignited debate over the definition of these sites and their memorial contents. The discontinuity between expectations and reality have led to a rupture in the widely accepted story of America as told through sites of memory, and the sites require repair in the aftermath. One such site is Captain America, and this project analyzes the public debate over the character's recent representation in the 2017 comics event *Secret Empire* (SE). Though its contents are often

medium- and genre-specific to comics and superheroes, the contours of the public debate over how to understand Captain America after *SE* are shaped by the need to react to the crisis of Trump's election. Public discourse around *SE* constitutes a microcosm of memory work ignited by the crisis of the Trump presidency, trying to address the rupture in national identity by redefining the site of Captain America.

My analysis focuses on professional cultural reporting and criticism in news, periodical, and online outlets. Reporters and critics are important intermediaries between the public and memory sites, influencing patterns of exposure and ways of thinking and amplifying the visibility of existing public discourses.¹ The cultural-critical discursive mode thus is analogous to and predictive of discourse and sentiments in social and interpersonal spaces more nebulous and difficult to sample. I built a corpus of 111 texts using an iterative purposive sample of English-language outlets that covered *Secret Empire* in some critical capacity that situated the comic in larger popular culture and political conversations. After identifying the outlets *Birth.Movies.Death.*, *Bleeding Cool*, *The Daily Dot*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *io9*, *The New York Times*, *Paste Magazine*, *Polygon*, *Slate*, and *Vulture*, I used keyword searches of their archives to find all *SE* coverage between the event's announcement in March 2016 and its conclusion in September 2017. Popular culture-oriented outlets like *Bleeding Cool* and *io9* posted many articles relating to *SE* during this period, whereas the traditional outlets of *The New York Times* had just one in August of 2017, indicating the controversy had expanded beyond its original comics niche. I do not consider the wide range of different outlets' styles, editorial slant, or audiences in my analysis except to note that they show the breadth of the public interest in Captain America's identity crisis. As real-world events and the fictional plots apparently collided, these outlets of both popular culture and public political discourse engaged with *SE* and the controversy around it as a proxy for the crisis of American identity.

Life Accidentally Imitates Art

Secret Empire became a lightning rod for the rupture of American identity partly by design. As a major comics event in the works since early 2016 that involved thirty-two different book titles over its official run from April 19 to August 30 of 2017, a marketing campaign, and accompanying merchandise rollout, it represents an enormous investment of time, energy, and money into a product that was supposed to attract attention and inspire consumption. A comics event is a marketing ploy through which the publisher (in Captain America's case, Marvel Comics) tries to boost sales for existing and new comic books by having their plots crossover with a major plotline centered on already successful characters and the books in which they appear. Captain America is one of Marvel's flagship characters, at a peak in popularity due to his visibility in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and *SE*'s premise is that he betrays the public, the nation, and his own established principles by revealing himself to be a fascist.

Ubiquity has made comics events increasingly less effective at drawing attention,² but a twist of fate catapulted Marvel's 2017 event onto the national stage. The inciting action in *SE* is Captain America's silent coup to put the United States in the hands of the fascist, formerly Nazi-allied organization Hydra. He goes on to rewrite national history, remove political opponents, and imprison minorities. The similarities between real life political events and the fantastical story were eerie and uncomfortable to behold for many commenters: "Waking up to find that America-the-idea has become openly hateful, no longer masked with a hopeful veneer to hide longstanding bigotry, is not a distant fiction for millions of Americans" after Trump's victory.³ Within a week of *SE* #0's release on April 19, 2017, the Trump administration was resisting judicial oversight on the Muslim travel ban⁴ and news broke that, as part of anti-immigrant policies and a crackdown on undocumented immigrants,⁵ they had deported the first person protected under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.⁶ As the *SE* plot was reaching its crescendo in August, Trump's tepid, equivocating response to the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville⁷ and the murder of counter-protester Heather Heyer were in headlines.⁸

In other circumstances, temporarily making Captain America the leader of a fascist coup might have been written off as a bizarre and offensive, but ultimately forgettable, corporate ploy to goose sales. Against the backdrop of resurgent white nationalism and creeping fascism many readers perceived around them, Captain America's political and moral corruption was a facet of the national crisis, a representative miniature through which the crisis could be addressed and more easily resolved than in real life. *SE* became a referendum on American identity and the limits of acceptable counterfactuals about its superhero avatar.

Superhero as Site of Collective Memory

Captain America does not mediate Americans' national memory; rather, he constitutes a site in which collective memory is anchored and indexed. Sites of collective memory, or *lieux de mémoire*, are characterized by their real or metaphorical spatial fixity and capacity to hold meanings. Sites need not be physical spaces or objects, but can be anything with a perceived concreteness, familiarity, and predictability for the community that employs it. Memory must be stored in sites when the acceleration of history through processes of industrialization, digitization, and mediatization displace memory from living experience.⁹ As people become alienated from their collective past, sites of memory then become necessary prostheses for recollection of collective identity:

Lieux de mémoire arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as spontaneous memory, hence that we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course. [...] without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep [us] away. These bastions buttress our identities, but if

what they defended were not threatened, there would be no need for them. If the remembrances they protect were truly living presences in our lives, they would be useless.¹⁰

True to this observation, Captain America was not the subject of national debate until the 2016 election and *SE* threatened the integrity of the character and the collective memory he encompasses.

It is not surprising that Captain America would be a site of national memory. The link between Captain America and American identity goes back to the character's 1940 introduction as a clear metaphor for Americans taking up arms to defend Western democracy from fascism. Appearing in 1940 and punching Hitler in the face on the cover of his first issue, Captain America was an expression of pro-interventionist politics held by his Jewish-American creators, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon.¹¹ His was the first superhero comic to explicitly depict Nazis and the Axis as public enemies.¹² This publishing origin story and the blatant symbolism of the character's name and red, white, and blue costume referencing the national flag established Captain America as the archetype of a nationalist superhero, a character through whom discourses around and ideologies underpinning state policy and national identity become legible and legitimate.¹³ All superheroes have the capacity to represent political stances, but his nationalist affiliation and origin in association with World War II make Captain America an unavoidably political character representing an ostensibly mainstream conception of American identity.¹⁴

Sites of collective memory are plucked out of the progression of history for their significance to moments of national importance but through careful forgetting, they also assume the character of pure, timeless symbols.¹⁵ Like lived memory, sites selectively index events, ideas, and emotional resonances that uphold a specific narrative of collective origins. "Nation is narration" of identity and belonging, but also of denial and exclusion.¹⁶ Intervention in World War II was not a popular opinion when Captain America debuted in late 1940, a year before Pearl Harbor, but postwar memory conveniently forgot that detail; it contradicted the post-hoc narrative that defeating the Nazis was a moral duty Americans knew they were uniquely called on to fulfill.¹⁷ Audiences today understand Captain America as the eternal embodiment of their ancestral "patriotic ideals" in staunch opposition to "distinctly anti-American values, including Nazism [...], fascism, communism, anarchism, and terrorism."¹⁸ Marvel itself defines Captain America as "a patriotic symbol" who "rallied the troops abroad...and the people at home" as a fictional soldier in World War II and today "represent[s] America...through the world and beyond."¹⁹ It is then little surprise that *SE*'s contradiction of this established history and nationalist characterization would represent a crisis for its American audience.

Sites are most relevant when their meaning is under contestation. If memory and the identity formed through it are not threatened, then it needs no sites to preserve it; universal

agreement “is ultimately the road to amnesia,” obsolescence, and identity loss.²⁰ The contestation of the meaning of *lieux de mémoire* is how Captain America rises to national significance. In 1940, he challenged the defined site of the superhero genre with overt politicism by advocating intervention and challenging Americans to put their values into practice in the European war. Post-1941, though, with public opinion in favor of the war and other superheroes also fighting Nazis, Captain America faded from public relevance. Now he has been reactivated as a *lieu de mémoire* by the confluence of the legacy-disrupting *SE* storyline with the American identity crisis induced by the 2016 presidential election. *SE* thus catalyzed multiple projects of re-dedication that attempted to reestablish a consensus of meaning around the site of Captain America.

The Popular is Political

In a moment of identity crisis, what role does art play in national memory? I have demonstrated why Captain America and *Secret Empire* have contemporary political resonance, but how does talking about pop culture constitute political speech? How does the public use popular culture as a discursive site of national identity construction and rehabilitation?

Different media play different roles in memory work depending on their perceived relevance to recalling the past, understanding the present, and projecting a vision of the future.²¹ Popular media is highly consumed but not regarded as authoritative except when the popular text has been reified over time into a *lieu de mémoire*, and/or has become politically controversial. Public disagreements over specific cultural objects often indicate a site whose collective meaning is under contestation, in which the “public display” of opinions about the object “becomes an *occasion* for speaking about problems well beyond” it.²² This is especially significant when many communities feel alienated from traditional political engagements and discourses. For those who believe in their own political powerlessness, political expression may only be possible in reaction to popular culture texts that show “the core contradictions of our lives indirectly enough to make discussion of them bearable.”²³ The discourse around *SE* is not merely art criticism; it is a debate over what to do with a disturbing vision of American identity and, by extension, what to do to resolve the crisis constituted in the 2016 election and Trump presidency.

Because I am interested in the specific political utility of this pop culture discourse, I use the framework of political discourse analysis.²⁴ Political discourse analysis (PDA) is an innovation of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that recognizes discursive formations are in service of deliberation. Whereas CDA illuminates “traces of ideological bias in texts” in the interest of society-wide justice and equity,²⁵ PDA analyzes how “discourses (and orders of discourse, as structures) provide agents with reasons for action.”²⁶ To summarize Fairclough and Fairclough’s model, values (what we care about) predict goals (in which our values are realized) that, in light of relevant circumstances produce a claim for action meant to effect positive change

to fulfill goals. Without disregarding the influences of structural power on proposed policies and outcomes, PDA is interested in the form of practical reasoning for practical argumentation, “the social and rational *activity* of attempting to justify or refute a certain claim, and aiming to *persuade* an interlocutor” to accept or reject a certain claim.²⁷

The goal shared by all participants in the public discourse over *SE* is a return to consensual enjoyment of Captain America comics, but their values, relevant circumstances, and claims to action differ. In analyzing public discourse about Captain America in 2016 and 2017, I look for the development of judgments of *SE* through the framing of relevant circumstances and invocation of values to build one of two claims to action, either to integrate or abnegate *SE* from the Captain America site. My analysis identified three key issues in the debate: contemporary political circumstance, comics publishing circumstance, and values of engagement with comics and superheroes. The latter two are beyond the scope of this paper, which is interested in the relevance of the debate over *SE* to political discourse. This debate does not map perfectly onto the national discourse over how to interpret American history in light of the 2016 presidential election and Trump presidency. However, the use of the circumstance of contemporary political climate in both integration and abnegation arguments shows the parallel readers saw between *SE*’s events and Trump is why this debate took place on the national stage. Given this root cause and the development of argument in light of political circumstance, the opposing claims to action for redefining Captain America have significant implications for public debate over national identity.

Of National Importance: Citing Political Circumstance

The perceived real-world parallel with the Trump presidency is intrinsic to the arguments over *Secret Empire*. The integration of political discourse in a critical mode of pop culture discourse is indicative of a trend in American media criticism to take the social roles of art and the culture industry seriously. Within the last decade, critics have developed an appreciation for political meaning in popular culture, praising effective engagement and criticizing poor or lacking attention to sociopolitical implications.²⁸ This is especially true when popular media happen to coincide with topics already under public debate, which is why *SE* did not attract much public attention until after Trump’s inauguration. Though Marvel leaked the basic premise of *SE* prior to the 2016 election, only a niche audience of comics reporters, critics, and readers took notice. After Trump won the presidency and *SE* issues started coming out, the perceived resonance between the two and their reflection on American identity caused the controversy to expand to a larger public and the national stage.

SE had been plotted long ahead of the election results made it look like a commentary on Trump specifically, but all debate participants take as a given that *SE*’s author, Nick Spencer, intended to make some political statement. Aside from the eventually revealed content, the early

publicity teased a political engagement with themes of the corruption and abuse of presidential power. The title *Secret Empire* comes from a 1974 storyline by the same name in which Captain America uncovers a government conspiracy orchestrated by the president to undermine Captain America's legitimacy, an unobvious criticism of then-president Richard Nixon. Before the 2016 election, Marvel's spokespeople were calling back to the 1974 comic, promoting the new *SE* as "a Watergate moment" that would lead younger characters to reevaluate their relationships with other heroes and the government.²⁹

After the election and the official start of the event, the backlash began. Spencer did not shy away from the accusation that his work was political, only defending himself from allegations of fascist sympathies. He maintains that he was critiquing the dangerous allure of fascism, and many commenters agreed that Spencer and Marvel probably intended to make some kind of generic, uncontroversial statement about the moral superiority of democracy. In the face of criticisms of the execution and the premise of *SE*, however, Marvel changed their story. As criticism mounted in April 2017 ahead of the first issue, Marvel said that the parallels with current politics were "probably intentional but metaphorically, not literally."³⁰ In May, they released an unprecedented statement that audiences should wait until the end of the event to form their opinions on *SE*.³¹ As the backlash against the comic continued to grow, Marvel's editor-in-chief, who had promoted the comic by saying Marvel "tr[ies] to write comics in 2016 that are about the world and the zeitgeist of 2016," began insisting that the event was not supposed to be a commentary on contemporary politics.³²

The real-world crisis of the Trump presidency was the source and backdrop of the public debate over *SE*, but the integration and abnegation sides interpret the perceived parallels in opposite ways. Those in favor of integrating *SE* with Captain America canon view similarities between the fascist Captain America and President Trump as a coincidence that increased the impact of Spencer's intended anti-fascist, pro-democracy message. Integrationists argue Spencer's parable of the allure of fascism would have always been relevant but is especially so in "an era when neo-fascist ideology has somehow found a home in the highest echelons of American politics" in the form of Donald Trump.³³ Grappling with the corruption of institutions in fiction would teach Americans that "as much as symbols can be corrupted, they can be redeemed" and potentially empower resistance against the Trump administration's policies.³⁴ The integrationists represent the abnegation argument as indicative of ignorance and hysteria from readers and critics unfamiliar with comic books and unable to see where *SE* was going.

Those in favor of abnegating *SE* are critical of the premise of the event and are not taken in by the obviously temporary twist of characterization intended only for shock value. The *New York Times* article announcing that Captain America would be "Fighting Evil Again" after *SE* notes in the first line that this is "Surprising [to] absolutely no one."³⁵ Abnegationists see the coincidence of contemporary politics as a spotlight on the already suspect decision to make a famously moral character just "another monster who wants to see the world burn, at a moment

when American politics is not short of those monsters.”³⁶ Regardless of *SE*’s ultimate restoration of Captain America to virtue, they believe the damage of seeing the avatar of idealized American integrity lead a fascist coup is done.

Abnegationists also criticize Spencer and Marvel for ducking the accusation that they made Captain America a neo-Nazi, instead splitting hairs over whether the fictional organization Hydra, which was part of the Third Reich in early Captain America comics contemporaneous to the Second World War, is a neo-Nazi group in *SE*.³⁷ This semantic obfuscation recalls 2016’s relabeling of white nationalists and American fascists as ‘alt-right activists,’ belying the fact that *SE* makes Captain America a ready “icon for the intolerant” and invites praise from the neo-Nazi online forum *Daily Stormer*.³⁸ A few zealot abnegationists go so far as to accuse Spencer of fascist sympathies, but they are merely mentioned or cited in the coverage, not represented in the public debate’s participants. Spencer being pro-fascist is considered a stretch but many concede that since it is told from Captain America’s point of view, *SE*’s intended moral lesson gets muddled in a “somewhat compelling” argument for the efficiency and power of fascism as a political system and the invitation to sympathize with a fascist leader’s decision-making.³⁹ Regardless of Spencer’s intent, those in favor of abnegation say *SE* gives a platform to an ugly ideology that needs no more attention than it already has and has no place in a superhero comic.

Political circumstance is just one of three key areas I identify in my study. The intersections between the political circumstance and medium- and genre-specific circumstances and values are already becoming visible in the integrationists’ insinuations about the proper audience for and mode of engagement with comics, and the abnegationists’ rejection of particular subject matters and moral characterizations for superheroes. The political circumstances that created a crisis of American identity ignited the debate over *SE*, but the content often draws on existing questions about the nature of comics, superheroes, and their audience. While interesting, a thorough account of the ways in which integrationists and abnegationists answer these questions are beyond the narrow scope of this paper. Instead, I turn next to the ways in which the inciting crisis of American identity runs through the *SE* controversy to animate the different claims to action with broader political implications. Whether interlocutors believe *SE* can be integrated with or must be abnegated from Captain America as national *lieu de mémoire* reflects a public grappling with a moral question about how to understand the 2016 election and Trump presidency.

Who is Captain America?

The development of both the integration and abnegation positions on *SE* starts and ends with a perspective on political circumstances. Integrationists think parallels between the comic and real life exhibit the medium’s best qualities and enhance the author’s intended message. They conclude that the character of Captain America and ideas about national identity embedded in

him are therefore without inherent value. Whatever his creators intended in 1940, integrationists see Captain America as not authored but owned, a piece of intellectual property that “is inherently without an identity; it has no politics or aesthetics or ethics” and can be shaped and reshaped into whatever product Marvel wants to sell.⁴⁰ Some integrationists view the abnegating idea that Captain America should be preserved in his original, uncomplicatedly heroic state as dangerous escapism. In a Twitter thread directed at his critics, Nick Spencer called the campaign to preserve Captain America’s purity an “irresponsible, cowardly argument” in the face of the world’s problems and national flaws.⁴¹ In this view, *SE* is not just an allowable permutation of the national hero; it is a necessary crack in the rosy façade on a national avatar, showing the “rotten, fascist, war-mongering core” and forcing readers to reexamine their heroes and themselves.⁴²

Scaling out from the *SE* debate to the national identity debate, the integration position is one of radical redefinition. The Trump presidency is only shocking because we have willfully forgotten the nation’s long history of misdeeds and unacknowledged vices. However, it is unclear if this unforgiving characterization of America is meant to galvanize a self-improvement project or absolve the public of any need to act. If things are as they always have been and it never was a problem before now, does that mean the problem is long overdue for redress, or that there is no problem after all? Integrationists do not make a clear case for the former, suggesting that their response to *SE* and Trump as ruptures in American identity is equivocal or apathetic. Their position on national identity is radical, but they make no case for radical action.

Abnegationists on the other hand treat the parallels between fictional fascism and real-life politics as a crossed moral line, making *SE*’s version of the character and Trump’s use of the presidency equally insupportable. They describe Captain America as “a secular holy figure” who should not be represented except as “the indomitable spirit of liberty, a defender of the afflicted and oppressed, more uncompromised and virtuous than any real-life political actor.”⁴³ *SE* must be categorically rejected to save Captain America’s soul. Responding directly to the integrationist claim that intellectual property is owned, not authored, abnegationists note that building an event around audience shock at image of Captain America wearing a Hydra uniform depends on Captain America holding some core meaning. If he stands for nothing and means nothing, every possible premise collapses into insignificance; what is the point of a story about an empty signifier?

Scaling up to the national identity, the abnegation position resists alteration of the traditional definition of the nation as an exceptional beacon of democracy on the world stage. Whether or not America has always lived up to its ideals is beside the point for abnegationists; abdicating any responsibility to preserve and pursue political or moral ideals would obliterate American history and identity. If Marvel wanted to make a statement about insidious fascism for the betterment of America, then Captain America should have one of the heroes blindsided by its rise and a leader of the resistance, so the story would be “about how one can feel disillusioned

and defeated, but must rise back up to again to fight back.”⁴⁴ But if Captain America leads the fascist coup, if even fictional, perfect symbols of our moral will can fail us, then what hope is there in real life? Though simpler and more conservative than the integrationists’, this position is transparently political and partisan against the Trump administration and its policies. Thus, the abnegation position can articulate a clear, precise prescribed action in response to the rupture of American identity constituted in *SE* and/or the Trump presidency: resist.

Who Are We?

The narratives of history and identity indexed in sites of memory “are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*. As such, they have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations, and our histories.”⁴⁵ The question of what to do with *SE* attracted national attention because it was a more comfortable, manageable proxy for the question of what to do about the 2016 election and its aftermath. “When a society undergoes rapid developments that shatter its social and political order, its need to restructure its past is as great as its desire to set its future agenda,”⁴⁶ and Captain America speaks to both urges. He has been the embodiment of idealized American ideology in a fictional version of our world since 1940, fighting America’s real-world enemies and supervillains alike. His history is our history, the more embarrassing and shameful episodes carefully excised from both. That history has to be reasserted when present events call it all into question. Are we defined by our memory or our experience? Are we heroic or hateful? If we accept today’s insult to our story about who we are and have always been, who will we be tomorrow? What will our national identity become?

By an accident of timing, *SE* provides an analogous, more manageable proxy for narrating our national identity, and debate interlocutors often understood what they were doing. They also recognized that thinking about an enormously complex issue through a proxy increases risks of miscommunication, that “if there’s to be any kind of productive discourse about Captain America, or more importantly, America itself, it’s vital that we’re on the same page. We can’t make any kind of progress until we’re having the same conversation.”⁴⁷

The debate over *SE* has national implications, but not everybody participating in it did so with that dynamic in mind; in particular, many integrationists dismissed readers’ upset over depicting Captain America as a fascist dictator as hysteria over nothing, even if they expressed passionate beliefs in the political messaging ability of the medium and the *SE* story. Additionally, political deliberation that happens with pop culture can get mired in pop culture issues that are not relevant to policy. Parts of *SE* debate became mired in some integrationists’ accusations that the abnegation position was driven by fake fans who do not read comics or know anything about the industry,⁴⁸ accusations strong tinged with gatekeeping against non-white, female, and queer audiences. Some abnegationists confused the issue by accusing Nick Spencer, Marvel, and anybody who enjoyed *SE* of being fascists purely on the basis of their

affiliation with the comic book. Though pop culture can provide the venue for and useful objects with which to have political debates, pop culture is neither neutral nor infinitely flexible. Its endemic debates can bog down discussion of broader political issues even as it provides unique opportunities for negotiation of meaning.

Another crucial question left unanswered about the use of pop culture sites in political discourse is how much impact they have on political ideas and attitudes. Captain America is one of a multitude of *lieux de mémoire* that constitute national identity, and not one that is central to many communities' idea of the core American institutions. For fans, the *SE* debate may have galvanized a more active deliberation around political power and policies in America, but for people who only knew about the debate because the *New York Times* published a blurb about it in their Books section in August of 2017, it likely had little impact. At the same time, one of pop culture's characteristics is its ubiquity in modern life; everybody watches or reads or listens to or plays *something*. Captain America is a particularly apt pop culture site for political appropriation because of his close ties to modern American identity narration, but popular culture is full of opportunities to engage with the looming questions of who we are and what we value in a meaningful way. Even if it is only among fans of the same media, it may help develop political ideas and habits of participation.

Notes

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The Dissolving Panopticon: Surveillance Culture and Liquid Modernity in Spider-Man Media

Dave Stanley

Abstract

Over the last two decades, across three film franchises, portrayals of Spider-Man have unwittingly charted fluctuations in American cultural attitudes toward surveillance. Michel Foucault's panoptical theory and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" can be productively combined to structure examinations of modern surveillance. The emergence of progressively more "liquid," mobile and digital, surveillance technologies has coincided with the continuing cultural shocks initiated by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. As technological devices become increasingly ubiquitous, and as data-collection becomes increasingly invisible, cultural concerns regarding both continue to diminish. By looking at the increasing engagement with technology that the *Spider-Man* films portray, a trajectory can be marked from the initial trilogy of films by Sam Raimi to Spider-Man's introduction into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Keywords: Spider-Man, surveillance, panopticon, modernity, superhero

Introduction: Finding Trouble

With the vast amount of space in New York City, how can a superhero like Spiderman always seem to know exactly where a crime is happening? In the 2002 film *Spider-Man* by Sam Raimi, Peter Parker patrols the city looking for trouble. He walks the streets, runs across rooftops, and swings through the city looking for criminals in action. He only seems to find them by random happenstance; more frequently, super-villains actually come looking for Spider-Man, whether directly or by baiting him with an imperiled loved one. With the ramping up of American governmental surveillance to fight the "War on Terror" following 9/11,¹ as well as with the explosion of corporate data-collection in the 21st century, the film seems remarkably retrograde in its presentation of how technology might impact Spider-Man. The use of technological surveillance ramps up very slowly in the successive *Spider-Man* film franchises, considering that as late as 2007, with the premiere of *Spider-Man 3*, Parker has only gone as far as using basic radio scanners to help him observe the city, otherwise largely still stumbling upon criminality accidentally or when sought out by his foes. However, by the release of this final Raimi film, the superhero cinematic genre was poised upon the brink of irrevocable change, with the premiere of *Iron Man* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2008. The films of the MCU took the gritty militaristic hyperreal style that has become prevalent in war films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Black Hawk Down*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* and bring it to the superhero genre. Obsessed

with post-9/11 culture,² the MCU has been largely driven by heroes like Iron Man who have embraced technologically enhanced surveillance and vigilantism in the service of state and corporate power as acceptable in all but the most extreme circumstances.³ In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, released in 2017, Spider-Man's first film as a part of the MCU, Parker possesses a technologically advanced suit. Designed, built, and provided by superhero business mogul Tony Stark, this gear digitalizes Spider-Man via networked surveillance and weapons technology, including A.I. and a drone, empowering him to better assist in monitoring and fighting crime. It also imprints upon him the signification of being yet another "suit" in Iron Man's collection of mobile weapons systems. Even the word *suit*, itself, is loaded with a variety of negative corporate and state significations.

Given the rapid release and reboot cycle by which the *Spider-Man* film franchises have been characterized for the last sixteen years, this intellectual property functions as a subsection of superhero media that showcases a rapidly evolving trajectory of popular thought concerning surveillance, as well as a societal shift in surveillance culture. The films can be used to track the growing understanding about, and acceptance of, state and corporate surveillance and surveillance technologies as tools of power, enclosure, and control in the post-9/11 zeitgeist.

Origin Story: Spider-Man's Emergence

Originating in the anthology comic *Amazing Fantasy* #15 in August of 1962, "Spider-Man" was the product of writer-editor Stan Lee and writer-artist Steve Ditko. The hero's initial adventure was so successful that seven months later Marvel Comics launched the now-classic series *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Focusing on the misadventures of high school student Peter Parker as he struggles with life, love, and his studies, his origin story depicts the acquisition of his superpowers. Bitten by a radioactive spider, Parker develops arachnid-like abilities. These superhuman powers include literal "wallcrawling," enhanced strength and durability, and extrasensory danger perception, which Parker refers to as his "spider-sense." Already highly intelligent, after acquiring his powers, Parker designs and builds "web-shooters" with which to swing around Manhattan and restrain bad guys. Parker's cinematic portrayals are useful in tracking emerging mainstream American societal ideals, especially related to surveillance, from his debut onward.

The character of "Spider-Man" is manifested by two key iterations of surveilling power. The very creature whose abilities he inherits from a radioactive spider's bite, and whom he thus takes for his avatar, is iconographic of stealthy intelligence-gathering and entrapment. The spider's webs are the formative metaphor for the modern intelligence network. Unlike other extremely popular superheroes, who are only metaphorically connected to the animals they have assumed as their totems, Spider-Man's possession of arachnid powers leads him to physically embody the spider's *modus operandi*. At the same time, the *radioactive* component that created

the unique effect of Parker's spider bite is imbued with the Cold War anxieties of the era in which he was conceived. By linking Spider-Man's origin to the nuclear byproduct of radiation, the comics—if only inadvertently—contain these anxieties by creating a fictional silver lining. This specific element of his origin is also the one most often updated and changed over the character's history. In more modern origins, rather than being radioactive, the spider has variously been genetically modified, exposed to alien DNA, or crossbred with other species of spider. This flexible metaphor allows the writers to continuously update Spider-Man's origins with newer and more relevant cultural anxieties.

Themselves flexible metaphors, Spider-Man's surveillance activities—and the cultural anxieties that they contain—are continually redefined by the era in which they are portrayed. Playing into the growing 1960s mythologization of the invisible hero saving the world from the shadows, the spy became a pop culture icon. As perceptions of danger grow, societies become increasingly willing to submit to, and revel in fantasies of, the clandestine activities of control that create the illusion of safety.⁴ In the same way that millennial superhero media increasingly embrace digital surveillance as the threat of terrorism becomes more ubiquitous-seeming, the growing “Communist threat” during the 1960s engendered ever-more valorizing portrayals of Western espionage throughout popular culture. Already framed around secret identities and surveillance, superhero comics were uniquely positioned to capitalize on the fad and continue redefining it. Though later storylines would reveal that Peter's missing parents had been involved in espionage (alternately serving as spies, secret corporate researchers, and many other types of clandestine agents throughout subsequent iterations), this has little direct impact on the character's appeal during the 1960s. In an era in which average people felt particularly powerless regarding the fate of their world, Peter Parker invoked a fantasy that was largely unique within both contemporary comics and spy fare. Unlike James Bond, he did not answer to a state-authority figure. Unlike Bruce Wayne (Batman), he did not represent, however well-intended, corporate interests. Unlike both figures, he was destitute. Despite his superpowers, moreover, Parker's defining characteristic has always been his scientific genius, without which he could not defeat his villains. Spider-Man thus represented an everyman with whom the average comics readers could identify. His popularity was driven by a very specific subset of power fantasy: that of possessing the combined agency and intelligence with which to resist the larger forces of the world. It is sadly ironic, then, that modern interpretations of the character seem so invested in the tools of state and corporate power, utilizing them to defend the status-quo as neoliberal capitalism has thusly defined it.

Surveillance is further normativized within Spider-Man comics because of Parker's most frequent profession as a newspaper photographer. Rather than being a gung-ho reporter like *Superman's* Lois Lane, he takes a similar role to her denigrated sidekick, Jimmy Olsen. Both the disrespect and financial burdens that Parker endures strengthen his everyman mythos. Where Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark are privileged billionaire playboys, with the time and money to

play vigilante, Peter Parker is a starving student constantly torn between his need to support himself and to protect the people of Manhattan. His Christ-like self-abnegation strengthens Peter's pathos, especially given his choice not to use his powers for personal gain. As a further test of his humility, he is repeatedly forced to sell photos of Spider-Man to the *Daily Bugle* in order to subsist from one advance to the next. Surveilling his own alter-ego, Peter must sacrifice a part of himself in order to stay afloat, becoming complicit in newspaper mogul J.J. Jameson's abusive libeling of Spider-Man. Peter cannot control how the data about himself that he sells is then used by the authority figures in his life, or how it then influences his loved ones' opinions of Spider-Man. Rather than commenting on the act of surveillance, this alludes to the threat of its misuse by the powers that be.

The comics portray Spider-Man's snooping against criminals as unproblematic. Where J.J. libels Spider-Man out of personal vendetta coupled with a greedy desire to grab headlines, Parker uses his surveillance on behalf of the public. In early comics stories, Parker often relies on his camera to preemptively observe individuals and to plan for his ensuing crimefighting, as well as to document their criminality. Surveilling his targets and outwitting their plans are especially essential to Parker's eventual success against crime bosses such as his corporate foe Wilson "The Kingpin" Fisk, whose complex multistage capers are filled with obfuscation and misdirection. The plots of such corporate foes almost always have directly negative consequences for Manhattan's ordinary citizens, further mythologizing Spider-Man as a modern-day Robin Hood figure. Often representing himself as a "friendly, neighbor-hood Spider-Man," he uses both this title and his actions to legitimize his use of surveillance by positioning himself within—rather than above—the tightknit communities he has self-elected to protect.

Theoretical Groundwork

To better understand how the *Spider-Man* films can be used to chart the growing cultural engagement with surveillance technology, we must consider several theoretical lenses. For much of the last forty years, the work of post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault has dominated the discussion within surveillance studies. His foundational book *Discipline and Punish* explores the theoretical work of philosopher Jeremy Bentham and his project: the panopticon. Devised as a prison structure, Bentham's panopticon is designed to keep the prisoner in constant view of the prison guard, while rendering the prisoner unable to know for certain whether the guard is watching. This forces the prisoners to conform to the behaviour standards of the prison under constant threat of punishment for misbehaviour that only *might* be observed. Foucault describes how the panopticon exemplifies the methods by which institutions—such as the family, the school, the barracks, and the factory—employ surveillance to consolidate power and change individual behaviour. He suggests that, beyond the brick-and-mortar structure, the panopticon can serve as a metaphor to explain how subjects, when they are knowingly being surveilled,

moderate and modulate their behaviour to, at first, avoid negative consequences tied to misbehaviour. After enough repetition, the new behaviour comes to seem natural; the subject, having adjusted to their confines, becomes docile. For Foucault, through the lens of the panopticon, power comes in the form of knowledge: the watcher gains power by being able to watch, and the subjects made powerless through their awareness of the possibility of being watched. This power structure is, however, a static and institutional one that oppresses its occupants into conforming to a known and strict moral code.⁵

Modern technology decentralizes the power that is key to the panoptical model of control, calling for redefinitions and expansions of its scope. In his “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” Gilles Deleuze explores the temporal specificity of Foucault’s “*disciplinary societies*”.⁶ Endemic to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these institution-bound forms of power “reach their height at the outset of the twentieth.”⁷ Published in 1992, and largely predating the explosion of digital surveillance that would soon redefine modernity, Deleuze’s “Postscript” describes the “already in process...substitution for the disciplinary sites of enclosure.”⁸ Describing the ongoing “crisis of institutions,” Deleuze outlines the societal shift away from the Foucauldian power of *disciplinary* structures toward the “states of perpetual metastability” (4) and “universal modulation” of the “societies of control.”⁹ In Foucault’s pre-digital model, “the individual never ceases passing from one closed environment to another, each having its own laws,” which in turn condition behaviour.¹⁰ Like the physical locations by which they are signified—the family, the school, the prison, the factory—these institutions are distinct from one another. This means that individual progress is discrete to the institution in which it is achieved, effectively resetting to zero with each transition. Deleuze’s computer-empowered *societies of control* replace the old, discontinuous “spaces of enclosure” with the new “network” that renders control “continuous and without limit.”¹¹ Thus, Foucault’s series of separate panopticons have been superseded by an all-encompassing meta-panopticon constantly redefining itself as the web of subsidiary-panopticons comprising it undulates.

Postmodern sociologist Zygmunt Bauman further nuances the Deleuzian model of social control. He suggests that modern society exists on a fluid spectrum, having transformed in recent years from a “Solid Modernity,” largely based on industrial production, to a “Liquid Modernity” which centers itself, instead, on the consumption of services and the generation of data. Like Deleuze, Bauman juxtaposes the *solid* “capitalism of concentration, for production and for property,” with the *liquid* “capitalism of higher-order production” oriented around marketing stocks rather than physical products.¹² The *solid* factory has been replaced by the nebulous *corporation*, without which the “light, fluid, diffuse, and network-like” *liquid modernity* could not exist.¹³ The *solid*, unmoving, industrial institutions of the past were pioneered by business giants like Henry Ford, whose factory workers often stayed at the same jobs for most of their lives while still earning enough money to give them real purchasing power. Conversely, modern workers are expected to be extremely flexible, able to change jobs frequently, work more than

one job at a time, commute long distances, accept stagnant and inconsistent wages,¹⁴ and carry with them the consequences of misbehaviour in previous institutions. Bauman indicates that *liquid modernity* privileges speed and mobility over space and production, stating that individuals who “move and act faster, who come closest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule.”¹⁵ Corporations that can expand quickly become more profitable than long-standing businesses, and companies that can capture and profit from social trends are extremely successful. This speed also creates a significant sense of risk and uncertainty, since the task of maintaining one’s social position has become increasingly difficult. The very concept of a “permanent record” from a school, job, or prison that carries beyond enclosure in that institution is fluid in its essence. Perceived threats to individual social standing combine into a societal willingness to submit to hyper-vigilant legislation that sacrifices personal privacy and autonomy upon the altar of alleged greater security and stability, especially in the immediate wake of national tragedy such as that of the September 11 terrorist attacks.

We can consider Bauman’s *liquid modernity* as a way of making sense of the twenty-first century technological surveillance, especially in the context of Deleuzian societies of control. With greater mobility comes a sense of isolation and separation in the individual. They are driven from the communities of older *solid modernity* (often formed in workplaces, neighborhoods, or churches), and instead connect with others in online spaces, since physical interactions happen less frequently and are often fleeting. This, in part, has contributed to the great data-generation and -collection boom of the twenty-first century. Unlike panoptical theory, which is focused upon enforcing control and suppressing deviance, Bauman suggests that liquid modernity has extended its surveillance, a *liquid surveillance*, into every corner of society through data collection. Whether driven by institutional bureaucracy or digital consumerism, as technology advances, surveillance, likewise, keeps pace with the new range of activities that technology engenders. In short, surveillance tends to increase in both scope and intensity as technology widens the field of its vision.

Combining these theories of social surveillance and control, David Sarich suggests an evolution of the Foucauldian panopticon that can be adapted to our *liquid modernity*. He calls this the *dissolved panopticon*,¹⁶ proposing a “synthesis of panoptic and liquid surveillance.”¹⁷ Sarich states that this hybrid frees “the panoptic eye” from being “locked into any one given position”¹⁸ or ideology. Instead, “the eye can be in many locations at once, while the singular operator has given way to multiple operators who may work concurrently,” which marks the *dissolved panopticon* as “simultaneously a panoptic and synoptic surveillance.”¹⁹ It can employ both the oppressive reach of the state, and the market-driven power of data collection. The *dissolved panopticon* functions to both observe and police individuals at the discretion of the given observer, both state and corporate. We can then categorize various surveillance technologies in accordance with their technological sophistication as “a liquid technology, a solid technology, [or] a non-technolog[y].”²⁰ Each of these forms may be used in concert with, or

separately from, one another. *Liquid technology* is defined as any technology that can create a digital data point that can be collected algorithmically, or manually, and added to an individual's *data-effigy*, the representation of that person made up entirely of data points.²¹ These *liquid technologies* represent the most recent, connected, and mobile of modern surveillance and recording tech. *Solid technology* is stationary or structural, requiring an operator, but still enhancing their ability to surveil. *Non-technology* is any type of surveillance done by a subject, without the assistance of technological enhancements.

In recent decades, superhero films have come to dominate a significant market-share of popular culture. In its most basic analysis, superhero work²² depends on surveillance. A superhero, whether working outside the law or under its mandate, must observe, track, identify, and then act on criminal activity. Regardless of a person's (lack of) access to superpowers, it is the action of choosing to participate in superhero work that defines someone as a *superhero*. With the ever-increasing popularity and market saturation of superheroes, it thus becomes critical to consider *how* superheroes' performance of the surveillance upon which their acts of heroism depend is portrayed. Surveillance has always been a fundamental component of most superhero stories, to varying degrees. By his very nature Spider-Man is defined by his knack for clandestine observation, operation, and infiltration. While surveillance has always been a part of his comics, it has taken on increasingly real-world significations within contemporary media. Tracking the types of surveillance utilized in various *Spider-Man* media, combined with the cultural context of the specific historical moment each text inhabits demonstrates how surveillance and the thoughts concerning it have rapidly changed in the new millennium. Starting from the Raimi films, working through Sony's reboots, landing finally in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is possible to see the *dissolved panopticon* and its various technologies, implemented to full and terrifying effect.

Spider-Man on the Screen: An Industry Overview

The film rights to the Spider-Man character were passed among a number of different studios during the 1970s and 1980s before ending up in the hands of Sony Pictures Entertainment in 1998. The studio infamously passed on the opportunity to purchase the rights to the entire Marvel Universe,²³ focusing instead on only Spider-Man. In 2000 Sony hired Sam Raimi to direct a series of films, resulting in *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and *Spider-Man 3* (2007). In 2010, still feeling the sting of the mixed critical reviews and failed box office expectations garnered by Raimi's final film, Sony decided to reboot its franchise, clearly updating Spider-Man in an attempt to capture the massive success of Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* and its gritty, topical, and technologically driven themes. The ensuing two films, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) failed to successfully live up to unrealistically optimistic studio expectation that they would achieve the same massive profits

Marvel Studios was continuing to enjoy as they completed the MCU “Phase One” and transitioned into “Phase Two.” Late to the party, the first Spider-Man reboot opened during the same summer as *Marvel’s The Avengers* (2012); regardless of the fledgling franchise’s actual potential, it was hamstrung from the start by studio executives who insisted these two new, single-hero films compete with the MCU’s sixth and first cross-over film, and with those that would quickly follow as part of a highly anticipated continuation of Marvel Studios’ well-executed shared superhero universe.

Despite initially considering a third film in the *Amazing Spider-Man* series, in 2015 Sony reached a deal with Marvel Studios to share the character rights of Spider-Man,²⁴ at last allowing his integration into the well-entrenched MCU. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) saw the wall crawler forge a relationship with the star character of the MCU, Tony Stark. With *Spider-Man: Far From Home* and the next *Avengers* cross-over film set to release in 2019, *Spider-Man* media is more popular than ever.

Army of Dorkness: Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man

The 2002 film *Spider-Man* presented an unprecedented shift in superhero media and is often credited with the increased interest in superhero films that would make the MCU’s success possible. Pre-millennial comic-book adaptations, such as those of the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises, tended to be overly campy, unfaithful to the subject material, produced cheaply, and/or targeted exclusively at children.²⁵ With the more serious take that Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* brought to the genre in 2000, the stage was set for Sam Raimi to produce a high budget and earnestly mature superhero film in *Spider-Man*. Raimi began to work on the project in January of 2000, with principal photography completed in June of 2001. Initial trailers for the film depicted Spider-Man trapping a helicopter in a massive web strung between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 Sony pulled the trailer, as well as a poster prominently featuring the iconic buildings.²⁶ Sony tried to present an image of cultural sensitivity by withdrawing this marketing but without redefining the New York that Spider-Man inhabits. This presents New York’s, and by extension, Spider-Man’s, resilience to and acceptance of both power and responsibility in the face of the massive social upheaval following 9/11. In point of fact, the only major re-shoot added to the film was a scene in which a group of concerned citizens heckle the Goblin, saying that this is “their city,” while attempting to help Spider-Man save civilians.²⁷

Despite the massive ramping up of governmental surveillance and military action in service of the “War on Terror,” Raimi’s *Spider-Man*—having completed the majority of its production prior to 9/11—evokes a distinctly pre-9/11 milieu. The film features very little *liquid technology* and very little deliberate surveillance, with Spider-Man utilizing almost no tech himself. Even his traditionally technological web-shooters have been replaced by organic glands

on his wrists. The one piece of *solid technology* that Peter Parker does use, his film camera, only serves to allow him to take pictures of and to surveil himself to negative effect. Parker sells these pictures to J.J. Jameson, who then uses them to villainize Spider-Man on the front page of the *Daily Bugle*. Scientist and businessman Norman Osborn, in contrast, experiments on himself with advanced technology to save his company, Oscorp, from losing military weapons development funding. This transforms him into the Green Goblin, who uses Oscorp weapons to commit theft and murder. Positioning him as the villain, the film puts the Green Goblin in striking contrast to later neoliberal corporate superheroes like Tony Stark,²⁸ who engages in similar weapons development and vigilantism but who is praised as a hero, since he targets Middle Eastern terrorists.

Early in *Spider-Man*, Peter Parker has an encounter with Mary Jane, his close friend and love interest, that ends with her walking away from him toward a dark alley. Unknown to Mary Jane, Peter watches and “non technologically surveils”²⁹ several men who follow her around the corner and attempt to sexually assault her. Having changed into his Spider-Man costume, Peter beats the men up and Mary Jane playfully jabs that Spider-Man is her “superhero stalker” before they share the now-iconic upside-down kiss.³⁰ Mary Jane’s joke aside, if Peter had not been watching her, he could not have perceived his friend being pursued. Throughout the film, his reliance upon such *direct surveillance* techniques remains instrumental, indispensable even, to his ability to act as a superhero.

Osborn later discovers Parker’s true identity by observing a wound that Osborn, as the Green Goblin, had inflicted upon Spider-Man. Osborn, visiting him for a Thanksgiving dinner, enters Peter’s room without permission and observes his belongings before sensing Peter hiding on the ceiling, still garbed as Spider-Man. These acts of *non-technological surveillance*, combined with Osborn’s lack of other surveillance methods, mark the film as only tacitly engaged with the social shifts brought on by the “War on Terror” that would contribute to the *dissolved panopticon*. From their limited engagement with emerging media technologies³¹ to their clean, bright, and traditional aesthetic, the Raimi *Spider-Man* films attempt to maintain a distinctively pre-9/11 “timelessness” divorced from historical reality. By the release of *Spider-Man 3* in 2007, Raimi’s attempted “timelessness” comes to feel hopelessly outdated. Less than a year later, when Marvel Studios fires *Iron Man* as its opening shot, the shift to gritty “hyper-realistic” and incredibly timely superhero film reinvigorates the genre in the way that *Spider-Man* had done 6 years earlier. With its explicit reliance on terrorists and *liquid surveillance* networks as driving thematics, *Iron Man* is marked as distinctively post-9/11.

The Not-So-Amazing Spider-Man

Sony’s attempted reboot of the *Spider-Man* franchise in 2012 came much more quickly than has been typical of the reboot culture in the superhero genre.³² Despite its partially updated aesthetic

and themes, this blatant attempt to cash in on Marvel Studios' popular and financial success in the MCU largely failed. *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* managed to update and modernize both Peter Parker and his villains. These villains abandon any sense of individual code, and attack civilians at random in order to cause destruction *en masse*. Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* first appears in a targeted attack on the board of directors of Oscorp, who are attempting to force Norman Osborn out of the company. While this attack takes place during a large festival, the damage is mostly contained to Osborn's intended targets. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, by contrast, Dr. Connors, transformed into the monstrous Lizard, attempts to mutate the entire city of New York by using a toxic gas attack. In other words, he exploits weapons that were banned from use by the Chemical Weapons convention of 1992,³³ and whose use is considered a war crime, in the process murdering police Captain George Stacy, a *first responder*, simply for trying to stop him.

In *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, Max Dillon is presented as being obviously mentally unstable, isolated, and angry. He becomes enamoured with Spider-Man after a brief encounter with the hero where Spider-Man calls Max his “*eyes and ears out here*.”³⁴ Though likely unintentional on the part of the filmmakers, it is nevertheless ironic that this single phrase of Spider-Man's, to which Dillon latches on, directly pertains to his own role as an observer. Once Dillon is transformed into the powerful Electro, he wanders, confused and afraid, into an altercation with the police in Times Square. Spider-Man attempts to de-escalate the situation and talk Max down, the way a hostage negotiator might with a domestic terrorist. With a news camera trained on Electro, every screen in Times Square is painted blue with his face, and he mentions that he only wants everyone, all the people who previously ignored him, to “see.”³⁵ Dressed in a black hoodie, and violently lashing out in order to gain attention, particularly through the mass media, Electro cannot help but evoke the mass shooters that have become increasingly ubiquitous in the new millennium. Electro becomes enraged after a police officer attacks him, and further angered as Spider-Man, saving the officer from his retribution, replaces Electro on the screens of Time Square. His brief spotlight stolen, Electro lashes out at the public more violently not only in anger, but in an attempt to refocus the attention onto himself. Engaging with the rapid and viral way that news reporting—itsself a form of public surveillance—and media proliferate on the internet, the film could be read as critiquing the role that mass media has in driving the attention-seeking³⁶ actions of such domestic terrorists. However, the racial implications inherent to the casting of Jamie Foxx as Max Dillon cannot be ignored, since the film premiered two years after the shooting of Trayvon Martin. Dillon paradoxically exemplifies the attention-seeking mass shooter, while being potentially conflated with the seemingly invisible young black men in America who are repeatedly victimized. And yet, the change of Max Dillon into Electro redefines him, and steers very directly away from this sense of victimization toward the direction of the mass shooter.

Beyond these few examples, the *Amazing Spider-Man* films are largely still out of step with the way the MCU had begun to reflect the full breadth of the *dissolved panopticon*. Sony's reboot franchise continues to rely most heavily on non-technological surveillance methods, despite the revelation of Peter's parents' involvement in clandestine experimental science, and his frequent use of the internet to do research. Sarich indicates that "[w]hile Spider Man came to rely on technology more often in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, he still scaled the heights to watch over New York, still finding a use for direct surveillance."³⁷

Spider-Man's Homecoming

2017's reboot of Spider-Man, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* finally sees the wall-crawler integrated into the MCU, though he made a passing appearance in 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*. Recruited by Tony Stark and given a technologically advanced crimefighting suit, Peter is more potent than ever in his ability to battle and surveil criminals. Stark, however, feeling cautious considering Peter's young age of 15, limits his access to the suit's deadlier features; it is notable, however, that despite this sort of child-locking, Stark nevertheless includes the features. The new costume has an A.I. named Karen, built into it, not unlike Tony Stark's own Iron Man suits, which enables Peter to activate and track the suit's advanced systems, including a "Spider Drone" that can autonomously track targets of Peter's choosing. The drone is also used in the suit's "enhanced interrogation mode," an obvious reference to the military euphemism for *torture*. On multiple occasions Parker uses the drone and his suit's other *liquid technology* in order to assess situations, track suspects, and locate crimes in progress. Since the suit was designed and produced by Stark, and functions in much the same way as an Iron Man suit would, the film reaffirms the MCU's engagement with the full spectrum of the *dissolved panopticon*. At a point when Spider-Man film history moves into an over-reliance on *liquid technology*, it is handed down to Peter by a member of the previous generation, and in this case, the man who started it all for the MCU: Tony Stark.

Stark has always relied on his Iron Man tech, but in 2013's *Iron Man 3* he learns the valuable lesson that technology alone cannot make him a hero, and that he can be a hero even without it. Tony, operating without his armor, is forced to solve a complex plot against him with nothing more than his wits. Despite the fact that he dons the Iron Man armor again almost immediately, Stark supposedly has learned a valuable lesson about personal responsibility and overreliance on technology, as well as gaining new insight about himself. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming* Peter realizes that Stark is tracking his every movement through his spider suit and chooses to hack it to prevent Tony from surveilling him. He then ambitiously tries to stop the illegal sale of alien arms by Adrian Toomes, also known as the Vulture, and inadvertently endangers a large number of civilians. Stark, feeling Peter to be too immature to wield the power that his advanced costume gives him, confiscates it and tries to prevent Parker from engaging in

further hero work. When Peter begs him not to take the suit, saying, “I’m nothing without this suit,” Stark, dismayed, can only respond, “If you’re nothing without this suit, then you shouldn’t have it.”³⁸ This reflects Stark’s attitude that the person at the centre of the technology is what legitimizes its use. He had no issue with handing a fifteen-year-old an advanced piece of surveillance and weapons technology, until that literal child proved to be irresponsible with it. Peter must then earn back the right to use this *liquid technology* through acts of selfless heroism in the face of great danger, without the assistance of said technology. Earning the “right” to use *liquid technology* functions as a literal rite of passage for the MCU’s Peter Parker. He is rewarded by Stark in *Avengers: Infinity War* with an even more technologically advanced and deadly “Iron Spider” suit.

Conclusions: A Troubling Future

Over the sixteen years of *Spider-Man* media in the twenty-first century the property has inadvertently charted the rapid emergence of post-9/11 surveillance culture and fantasies of control. Sony’s first attempt at a Spider-Man franchise became increasingly unsuccessful as it failed to reflect the changing political and social landscape surrounding it. Their *Amazing* reboot released only five years after the final Raimi film, *Spider-Man 3*, transparently sought to capitalize on the financial and aesthetic success of the edgier modern Marvel Cinematic Universe. These films only partially updated Sony’s *Spider-Man* franchise, successfully including smartphones and the internet, but without addressing surveillance culture. When Spider-Man finally became an official part of the MCU, his film fully reflected the culture of the *dissolved panopticon*, while still testing the ethics of the power imbued by it. In the new 2019 video game *Marvel’s Spider-Man* by Insomniac Games, players are presented with a world in which Spider-Man has embraced open mass surveillance of the citizens of New York. He and thus the player utilizes a mobile and *liquid technology* in the form of police surveillance towers. Because *Marvel’s Spider-Man* is indicative of the continuing normativization of the *dissolved panopticon* within superhero media, the time has come for both scholars and media consumers to reassess—and potentially redress—the genre’s and the medium’s future directions.

Notes

¹ The NSA, in cooperation with American telecommunications companies, illegally collected and collated American internet and cellular usage. For more see Babu Kurra, “How 9/11 Completely Changed Surveillance in U.S.,” *Wired*, September 11, 2011, www.wired.com/2011/09/911-surveillance.

² Leah Schnelbach, “Giving History a Better Ending: Marvel, Terrorism, and the Aftermath of 9/11,” *Tor.com*, August 22, 2017, www.tor.com/2017/08/22/the-marvel-cinematic-universe-confronts-terrorism/.

³ While it is possible to explore the MCU’s numerous attempts at deconstructing and redefining Tony Stark (see *Iron Man 3* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*), his subsequent appearances in films like *Spider-Man: Homecoming* and

Avengers: Infinity War reset the clock, undoing character progression and leaving Tony's ideology ultimately where it started. Further discussion of this dynamic is warranted, but beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ Fedyashin explains that "Cold War espionage fiction acted both as a barometer of international tensions and a means for societies to face collective anxieties about foreign and domestic threats." For more see Anton Fedyashin, "The First Cold War Spy Novel: The Origins and Afterlife of Humphrey Slater's Conspirator," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 19, no. 3 (2017): 134-59.

⁵ In Foucault's discussion of power in *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, power is a fluid relationship (rather than top-down oppression) and a force that is constantly circulating rather than static. For more see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1975).

⁶ Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *L'Autre journal*, no. 1 (May 1990): 3.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 6.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Z. Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 25.

¹⁴ Or, to accept, in Deleuzian terms, the "modulation of each salary," which imposes upon workers "states of perpetual metastability that operate through challenges, contests, and highly comic [game show-esque] group sessions"; the "equilibrium" of the factory, which allowed workers to unite to mutual benefit, has been displaced by the metastability which divides their interests. For more see Deleuze, "Postscript," 4-5.

¹⁵ Z. Bauman and D. Lyon, *Liquid Surveillance: A Conversation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 119.

¹⁶ David Sarich, "The Normalization of Surveillance in Superhero Films," Master's Thesis (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2016), 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 38.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ These "data points" continuously chart and redefine the universally modulated, inescapable Deleuzian network of control. For more see Deleuze, "Postscript," 4-5.

²² Though beyond the scope of this paper, much remains to be said regarding the theoretical implications of defining superhero labour as "real" work. The efforts of many traditional heroes, especially those of impoverished individuals such as Peter Parker, might fall within Daniels' conception of "invisible work," which is not deemed socially valid because it is not done for pay. With the emergence of newer superhero universes, such as that of *My Hero Academia*, in which most individuals are "powered," and in which "hero work" forms actual professions, there are increasing nuances to consider.

²³ Sam Barsanti, "Sony Once Turned down a Chance to Buy All of Marvel's Movie Rights for Only \$25 Million," *The A.V. Club*, February 15, 2018, www.avclub.com/sony-once-turned-down-a-chance-to-buy-all-of-marvels-mo-1823048876.

²⁴ Adam Chitwood, "Marvel and Sony 'Spider-Man' Rights Explained: What's MCU and What's Not?" *Collider*, July 3, 2017, www.collider.com/spider-man-marvel-sony-deal-explained/.

²⁵ Aaron Couch, "'Batman Forever': The Story Behind the Surprise Hit 'Nobody Really Wanted'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, June 17, 2015, www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/batman-forever-story-behind-surprise-802804.

²⁶ Drew Grant, "10 Year Time Capsule: 'Spider-Man' and the Erasing of the World Trade Centers," *Salon*, May 11, 2011, www.salon.com/2011/05/10/10_year_time_capsule_spiderman_wtc/.

²⁷ *Spider-Man*, directed by Sam Raimi (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002), DVD.

²⁸ Kyle Smith, "Iron Man, Capitalist Hero," *New York Post*, May 9, 2010, nypost.com/2010/05/09/iron-man-capitalist-hero/.

²⁹ Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 73-77.

³⁰ *Spider-Man* (2002).

³¹ Sarich indicates that *Spider-Man* has more non-technological surveillance than any other superhero film except those set in the past or on alien worlds. Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 62.

³² Eliana Dockterman, "Here's Why Hollywood Will Never Stop Making Spider-Man Movies," *Time*, June 20, 2017, time.com/4784729/spiderman-homecoming-sony-marvel-reboot/.

³³ Signed in the United Nations, this arms treaty is administered by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) an intergovernmental organization based in The Hague, The Netherlands. It has been signed by all UN members except Egypt, Israel, North Korea, and South Sudan.

³⁴ *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, directed by Marc Webb (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2014), DVD, emphasis mine.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jennifer L. Murray says that "Many of these infamous killers reference/discuss their well-publicized prior homicidal role models... they do not just copycat prior killers, they often relate to them, are inspired by them, and want to outdo them. The entertainment form and logic of mass mediated news provides the inspiration and fuel for later killings" (114). For more see Jennifer L. Murray, "Mass Media Reporting and Enabling of Mass Shootings," *Cultural Studies: Critical Methodologies* 17, no. 2: 114-24.

³⁷ Sarich, "Normalization of Surveillance," 62.

³⁸ *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, directed Jon Watts (Culver City: Sony Pictures Releasing, 2017), DVD.