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Superheroes in Contemporary Media

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Foreword: Why Superheroes?

Morgan Oddie

Is superhero fatigue real? In contemporary popular cinema, super- and other-than-human bodies of heroes dominate. Since 2007, Marvel Studios has produced twenty-two films, with nine more slated for development and production. In a review of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), A.O. Scott pejoratively noted, “It’s Marvel’s Universe. We just live in it.”¹ The amassing popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has contributed to the mainstreaming of what was historically a fringe subculture, confined to dingy comic book stores and children-focused animated adaptations. DC’s cinematic legacy is longer—though arguably less consistent in quality and critical and popular reception than MCU—and is also producing films at an overwhelming rate.² However, this does not even account for the films outside of the MCU and DC Extended Universe (DCEU) that have been produced by other studios, or the vast array of superhero-centred television series. A little more than halfway through the year and we have already seen the live-action releases of *Glass* (2019), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Shazam!* (2019), *Hellboy* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Brightburn* (2019), *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2019), and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019). So, why superheroes? It seems that this trend is more than the natural evolution of action films³ and the financial success of these products indicates a staying power dictated by a large and committed audience. Even if there were no other reasons (there are), this is enough to make superheroes a relevant and worthy topic of study.

The adoration of superheroes has been an ongoing staple of Western popular culture, functioning both in the idealization of human potential and the fight against evil. Perhaps it is the tremendous feeling that the world is burning in a giant trash fire, and the superhero is the figure that can fix what is broken. Through incredible abilities and unquestionable authority, the world can be repaired by the superhero. As Peter Coogan wrote in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, “The metaphor the superhero most often embodies outside the superhero genre is the idea of effortless efficacy, the power to right wrongs without danger to oneself...the superhero has a unique signifying function. It can be used to express ideas that other genres cannot portray as well...Superheroes enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others, and they possess overwhelming power.”⁴ Superheroes create order. Simply, the audience is able to gain scopophilic pleasure from this order.

Once contained to the margins of geekdom, largely populated by white, cismen, superhero fandom is expanding and simultaneously being reimaged by creators. Erika Chung’s “Ms. Marvel: Genre, Medium and an Intersectional Superhero” examines the 2014 release of *Ms. Marvel* with a Muslim Pakistani-American teenager as its new titular character. Chung’s article shows the importance of meaningful representations and how the elements of comic books can

be employed to nuance characters and their intersectional identities. Existing legacy characters are ripe with opportunities for revamping beyond the traditional stereotypes of white, cis, heteronormative heroes with super-human bodies. Writing about Brazilian fandom, Larissa Tamborindenguy Becko discusses identity formation and cultural performance in her article, “Consumption of Superheroes: The Performance of Fans as Strategies of Involvement.” Including excerpts from ethnographic interviews with superhero fans, the article traces patterns of consumer engagement as expressions of fandom adherence.

In general, fans most strongly identify with superheroes that represent them. In the study “Superpowering Girls” by the Women’s Media Centre, researchers found that there is not enough female representation in the superhero genre, but there are rich opportunities for relatable themes and heroes.⁵ Claire Meagher’s “Crossing No-Man’s Land: *Wonder Woman* & Liminality” locates Patty Jenkin’s *Wonder Woman* (2017) in a liminal state that allows the character to undermine gendered and cultural expectations. These gaps produce the potential for power, and Wonder Woman is able to exploit this for remarkable boundary transgressions. Meagher closely examines the cinematic representation, particularly the aesthetics of costuming, and compares them to the original comic character. Shreyashi Mandal’s “Claiming the Domains of the Natural and the Supernatural in Netflix’s Occult Series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*” locates the titular character in herodism by highlighting Sabrina’s supernatural superpowers in the politics of gender and violence that thread throughout the first season of the series.

Unfortunately, representation is not always done well. Ky Pearce’s “Deadpool is Normal(ly) Terrible: A Queer Critique of *Deadpool 2*” examines how Deadpool’s non-heterosexuality is only prominent for comedic effect. In this case, superhero cinema’s supposed representation of a 2SLGBTQ+ character actually problematically reinforces damaging stereotypes of queer sexual predators and maintains the hegemony of cis-heteronormativity. In her article, “Aquaman: The Eternal Return of the Male Subject,” Francesca Lopez situates the release of *Aquaman* (2018) as a pushback against the more diverse representation seen in contemporary superhero films. The film exhibits themes from classic Greek heroism, while buttressing hegemonic masculinity. Her article shows how the masculinity emblematic in the film relies on heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and a particular masculinized use of force for good and justice.

While the interaction of fans with superheroes is often a topic of psychological analysis,⁶ fewer works have turned to the psychology of the superheroes themselves. Two authors in this collection examine superheroes in this light. Matthew Wincherauk’s “A Foe He Can’t Fight: Tony Stark, Addition, and PTSD” examines the representations of mental illness in the *Iron Man* film trilogy. By looking closely at Tony Stark/Iron Man’s traumatic history, Wincherauk traces the evolution of traits and coping mechanisms as they are depicted through events in each film. He argues that representations such as these positively contribute to the destigmatization of

mental illness. In “Of Amazons, Humans, and Batman: Superheroes and the Affectual Dynamics of Loneliness,” Emily Scherzinger analyzes *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) to illustrate the complexity of loneliness as individual affective dynamics of each superhero as well as how loneliness organizes Western public life. Unjust hardship, trauma, and sometimes oppression, found in superhero stories is a narrative exaggeration of the existence of these under neoliberal capitalism. In this way, Scherzinger uses Wonder Woman and Batman as mythologized and exceptional figures to illustrate larger processes of loneliness and its affectual dynamics.

Although distant from the fascist fighting heroes of the Golden Age of comics, superhero cultural texts have a continued importance in modern politics. In “Ready Player Four: Waluigi and the Rainbow Road to the Alt-Right,” Michael Bodkin discusses how the Nintendo character Waluigi from the Mario Bros. universe has been taken up by contemporary alt-right internet users. Originally intended as a foil to Luigi and a very pragmatic option for the Nintendo 64 console’s fourth controller, Waluigi has become a manipulated cultural symbol for neo-nazi ideologies. Bodkin situates this analysis in the concepts of Jean Baudrillard’s empty signifier and Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to show how through folkloric processes, Waluigi (and his memes) became a tool of alt-right adherents. Meg D. Lonergan’s “It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! It’s Security as Pacification! Security as Pacification in *Superman Red Son*” uses the comic book to make cultural criminology more accessible and emphasizes the importance of cultural texts in critical analysis. *Red Son* re-envisioned a Soviet-raised Man of Steel and highlights the underlying (somewhat supervillainous) motivations of state securitization. Lonergan argues that the revisionist nature of this text in its emphasis on pacifying security—as well as the possibilities in the superhero genre more largely—enhances the audience’s critical engagement.

Our editorial team is proud to have collaborated with authors to produce the second volume of our inaugural issue of *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Aligned with the mandate of the publication, we have worked to support unique theoretical contributions from graduate students and early career researchers. There is no signal that the superhero mania will slow anytime soon, and while superhero fatigue may be real, these texts illuminate threads of cultural analysis that are important to examine. We hope that you enjoy reading the journal and the works provide unique perspectives, whether you are a long-time fan of superheroes or if this is providing an introduction to the depth of the genre.

Notes

¹ A.O. Scott, “‘Avenger’s Infinity War’: It’s Marvel’s Universe. We Just Live in It,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/movies/avengers-infinity-war-review.html>.

² DC Entertainment is a subsidiary of Warner Bros. that is responsible for DC Comics films, television, and video games since 2009. It has released eleven films and has another six in various stages of production.

³ This is suggested by Dani Di Placido, "Why Superhero Fatigue is a Myth," *Forbes*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2019/01/20/why-superhero-fatigue-is-a-myth/#5ef0dfa747c0>.

⁴ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain, 2006), 231.

⁵ Women's Media Centre, "Superpowering Girls: Female Representation in the Sci/fi Superhero Genre," *WMC Reports*, October 8, 2018, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/reports/bbca-wmc-superpowering-girls-infographic>.

⁶ See for examples, Robin S. Rosenberg, ed., *Our Superheroes, Ourselves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and, Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Ms. Marvel: Genre, Medium, and an Intersectional Superhero

Erika Chung

Abstract

Superhero comic books are not known for their diverse representation of characters in their storytelling. Dominated by stories about men as heroes who save the day, women and people of colour are often left to the sidelines. However, the 2014 release of *Ms. Marvel*, a superhero comic book series that featured a young Pakistani-American Muslim girl as its protagonist, challenged and demonstrated that there is room in comic books for diverse representation. This paper examines the superhero genre, the comic book as a medium, and intersectionality, in relation to *Ms. Marvel*, in order to understand how meaningful and nuanced representation of women of colour can be included in superhero comic books.

Keywords: *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan, comic books, representation, superhero

Introduction

Superhero comic books are best known for their iconic male characters and series. Popular superhero titles that come to mind are *Superman*, *Batman*, *Captain America*, and *Iron Man*. Female characters and characters of colour are typically marginalized, such as Batgirl from *Batman* who was originally meant to be a love interest or Kato from the *Green Hornet* who was a sidekick and a butler. Further, female characters are commonly objectified or killed, also referred to as “fridging,” in order to have the male protagonist’s story progress.¹ It is uncommon for a female character of colour to headline their own superhero comic book series, and yet in the fall of 2013, Marvel Comics announced they were reviving the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series.

Despite *Ms. Marvel* being a short-lived series originally published in 1977, the 2014 revival would feature a new character as Ms. Marvel. The new lead character is Kamala Khan, a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim (Carol Danvers, a white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed woman was the original Ms. Marvel). The switch to Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel was part of a publication initiative from Marvel Comics to feature more female leads and to diversify its cast of characters.² Laura Hudson, former senior editor for *WIRED*, said: “Although the most popular superheroes tend to be white guys created decades ago, legacy heroes who pass their familiar names to new characters are one way publishers like Marvel and DC Comics have brought greater diversity to their fictional worlds.”³ In other words, the revival and reimagining of familiar superheroes is one way of enabling more inclusive and diverse representation in

superhero comic books. In contrast to the predominant white male representation in superhero comics, the 2014 release of *Ms. Marvel* was a step in a different direction.

Representation in superhero comic books matters because when the narratives of marginalized people are ignored and reduced to objects, it reinforces and naturalizes inequalities in social structures. When the narratives of marginalized people are ignored and reduced to objects, it reinforces and naturalizes inequalities in social structures.⁴ Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel is a nuanced and intersectional representation of a young woman of colour as a superhero. As the protagonist of her series she demonstrates agency and power. Like other superheroes, Kamala struggles with her identity, growing up, her heritage, and her place in her community. She even wears a costume with a mask. It appears that she is no different from other superheroes from Marvel or DC. However, the character and narrative of *Ms. Marvel* complicates assumptions of who can be a superhero and what a superhero looks like. Kamala's gender and race are foundationally incorporated into her narrative and experience as an American teenager, Muslim, and superhero. The comic book series does not break down her identity into categories of difference for exotification, and instead presents Kamala as a teenager trying to learn about her multifaceted identity and community.

This paper looks at how genre, medium and the intersectionality of race and gender are used in the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series to demonstrate meaningful diverse and inclusive representation. By examining *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal*, which collects the first five issues of the 2014 series, this paper argues that Ms. Marvel is an intersectional superhero because of how race and gender are foundational to the character and narrative, thus resulting in a nuanced representation of a young woman of colour as a superhero that goes beyond tokenism. The first half of the paper examines how *Ms. Marvel*, as a comic series and character, challenges the typical male power fantasy. Through an examination of genre, this portion of the paper explores how the superhero genre has been defined and gendered as male. Furthermore, the comic medium itself, in combination with how narration is used in *Ms. Marvel*, will be analysed to demonstrate how issues of race and gender are communicated through the superhero genre and the medium of comic books. The second half of this paper uses an intersectional framework to study how issues of race and gender are utilized in the series, specifically in terms of narrative and character development. By highlighting how intersectionality is used in *Ms. Marvel*, I will provide insight into how racial and gender representation in superhero comics have grown to be diverse and inclusive.

The Male Power Fantasy of Superhero Comics

Superhero comic books predominantly feature white heteronormative men as heroes, in roles of leadership, and as the ones who bring justice and resolution. This encapsulates the male power fantasy, where male characters are centered as the chosen one who will be a saviour, commonly

found in superhero comics. Being right and infallible places the male superhero as the key problem-solver to conflicts, and therefore justifies his decisions. This is reflected in the seven characteristics comics scholar Richard Reynolds developed to define the superhero archetype. Two characteristics in particular play into the masculinist fantasies: justice and superpowers/politics. Reynolds makes the point that a superhero's devotion to justice stems from a blind but well-intended place,⁵ and when needed, he will circumvent figures and institutions of authority⁶ in order to restore 'justice.'

When narratives of white heteronormative masculinity dominate, the stories of people of colour and women are left to the periphery. Popular culture scholar Jeffery Brown argues that if there were diverse representation in superhero comics then the perception of who can be a superhero would become more complex.⁷ Inclusive visual representation of superheroes with different racial and gender identities calls into question why superhero narratives focus predominately on white male characters as protagonists, and offsets the assumed default of these characters and narratives as being white by illustrating how characters from marginalized backgrounds can wield power. In particular, Brown notes how superhero comic book publisher Milestone Comics, which is now under DC Comics, incorporated,

[t]he influential reality of existing norms of gender and race-informed patterns of behaviour...by providing alternatives from within the dominant modes of discourse, by maintaining many of the fundamental conventions of comic book heroism at the same time that they expand the traditional definition of the medium.⁸

In other words, the genre of superhero comics can change from within to address problematic gender and race representations. *Ms. Marvel* demonstrates the genre's capability to change and reinvent itself regarding how characters are used and prioritized. Becoming diverse and inclusive does not mean having to lose the superhero genre in comic books. Instead, it means shifting the discourse and focus to marginalized characters and narratives, and therefore expanding the genre so that a variety of perspectives are represented.

Superhero comics are distinct because of their characters and plot lines. According to comic studies scholar Peter Coogan, there are three important elements that make up the superhero genre's distinct form. The three elements are mission, powers, and identity; any combination of the three will establish the core essence of a superhero comic book.⁹ Unlike the characteristics defined by Reynolds, Coogan's elements provide a more flexible and inclusive framework to examine the composition of superhero character and comic book. The mission element refers to the protagonist's fight, which is designed to be universal, prosocial and selfless.¹⁰ Mission is distinct from other genres because it actively places the hero in initiatives that "do good" for the community at large.¹¹ Powers refer to exaggerated abilities of the character, whether they are magical, scientific/technological or physical.¹² Identity encapsulates

the protagonist's mission and powers because of their secret identity and costume.¹³ Coogan argues, "The superhero genre has changed over time because, like all genres, it responds to changes in culture. But the core conventions of mission, powers and identity have remained stable."¹⁴ Coogan's argument further demonstrates Brown's point of how the superhero comic form has potential to change from within whilst keeping the features and tropes that have made the genre distinct. However, these three foundational elements of the superhero genre do not address how female superhero comics are gendered differently, thus resulting in a disparity between female superheroes and their male counterparts.

The narratives of women, and more specifically women of colour, are marginalized in comics. Superhero comics are normalized and standardized around gender and race. As Carolyn Cocca, author of *Superwomen: Gender, Power and Representation*, highlights, "we have been taught to think of 'white and male and powerful' as some kind of natural, neutral norm."¹⁵ Therefore, it is important to examine how women in superhero comics have been framed and represented in opposition to their male counterparts. As Jennifer K. Stuller highlights:

Thematically, the female experience of superheroism appears to differ most from that of men in its focus on collaboration, love and mentorship, which prompts questions about whether the ways in which these ideas play out in the lives of superwomen express or are representative of something distinctly female or are indicative of limited ideas of femininity.¹⁶

Stuller prompts questions about what defines a female superhero and how female characters are represented in comics. She points out how female superheroes are framed as opposites of their male counterparts. Female superheroes reject the lone wolf model of heroism,¹⁷ as many are motivated by some kind of love.¹⁸ They are often without maternal figures and therefore trained by men rather than women.¹⁹ She argues for the importance of diverse female representation so that female superhero characters are not generalized as one kind of narrative or character type. *Ms. Marvel* is an example of a superhero comic where the narrative and experiences of a young woman of colour is represented as a leading protagonist. Unlike many young female superheroes, such as Batgirl, Supergirl, Invisible Girl and Marvel Girl,²⁰ Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel is not meant to be a love interest, nor is she created to be part of a team of superheroes or be a male character's lesser opposite.²¹ Her origin story is centered on how she takes a previous female superhero's title and makes it into her own identity.

Ms. Marvel has the foundations of Coogan's outline: universal mission, powers, and an identity. It also features the themes of female superhero characters as outlined by Stuller. However, those characteristics and tropes that make a superhero comic and a female superhero are richer and complicated by *Ms. Marvel*'s engagement with racial and ethnic identity. The multiple layers of Kamala's character and story explore her identity as a civilian, an American teenager, a child of immigrant parents, and lastly, a superhero. Readers are introduced to Kamala

as an ordinary teenager who is trying to figure out where she belongs. Because her identity is not framed as a spectacle, Kamala is not demonized or othered. Kamala Khan's story of growing up is relatable to vast audiences.

Ms. Marvel and the Comic Form: Monstrator

Using French comic book theorist Thierry Groensteen's concept of narration is helpful in illustrating how *Ms. Marvel* uses the comic forms and conventions of superhero comics to create a visual and textual narrative that engages and represents the experiences of a young woman of colour. He distinguishes how images and text are used to narrate in comics. He also emphasises that, while the two kinds of narration function differently, they work together to create a cohesive story. Groensteen defines image narration as, "the instance responsible for the rendering into drawn form of the story."²² In other words, the story's structure and organization impacts how images are drawn, coloured and laid out for the reader's eyes. He refers to image narration as "monstrator" and highlights how the artistic style behind the images reflect as much narrative intention as text can impart.²³ Kamala's localities and environments are drawn and designed to reflect this. For example, Kamala's home and mosque are drawn and coloured with enough detail that readers can see what her living spaces are like. In Chapter/Issue one, Kamala is shown at home with her family — mother, father and brother — and readers are shown how the family's home is furnished, what they are having for dinner, the kind of newspaper Kamala's father is reading, and even the kind of mug he is using. This is important because it normalizes Kamal's civilian life as an American teenager and demonstrates how she can still be a superhero with her entire family intact, unlike the common trope of superheroes being orphaned.²⁴

In Chapter/Issue three of *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal*, after she has gotten her superpowers, Kamala is shown attending a youth lecture at her local Mosque.²⁵ Over the course of two pages, readers are shown how a Mosque is organized, the patterned carpet for prayer, and the interaction between the Imam and the teens. The monstrator aids in telling the story of the social and cultural spaces Kamala lives and participates in. The illustrative details invite readers to experience and share that space as well. Most superhero comics are set in dense urban spaces, like *Spider-Man* in New York and *Batwoman* in Gotham City, where high rise buildings and bright lights easily communicate the kind of space a superhero and their civilian self would inhabit. The monstrator here, however, helps develop Kamala's intricate multilayer identity through the details and colours of her vibrant and dynamic life. This illustrates how multifaceted this particular superhero's secret civilian identity is.

An interesting utilization of the monstrator is at the start of Chapter/Issue two. Kamala has just received her shape-shifting/polymorph superpowers, and has transformed into the original white, blue-eyed and blonde-hair Ms. Marvel (Carol Danvers). Unfamiliar with

her new powers, Kamala's body switches between her own and that of the original Ms. Marvel's.²⁶ Within five panels, the artistic style changes from semi-detailed realistic to cartoonish. In the largest of the five panels, readers see Kamala drawn with her body in the midst of switching from her own to Carol Danvers. It is an image drawn with detail to show the awkwardness of Kamala's struggle to gain control of her body and shows her hair colour shifting between her natural brown and Carol Denver's blonde. The shift in the artistic style signals how the monstrator is guiding the reader's attention. As Groensteen states, "The question of the neutrality or involvement of the monstrator is posed in terms of homogeneity or heterogeneity of graphic style. The monstrator remains neutral if it adopts a consistent style all the way through the story."²⁷ Therefore, switching from a detailed artistic style to one that is more cartoon-like reflects how the monstrator is disrupting the visual elements of the story to refocus the reader's attention by presenting a conflicting image made of two different visual styles. It presents an image where the readers need to compare and contrast visual elements so that they can decipher it. Furthermore, here, the monstrator acts like a visual metaphor representing Kamala's struggle with her identity as an American teen and a young Pakistani Muslim. The contrasting effect the monstrator produces reflects the performativity of Kamala as she inhabits Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel.

Ms. Marvel and the Comic Form – Reciter

The text equivalent of the monstrator is called the reciter.²⁸ An example of this is in the climax of *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal*. There is an evil villain to fight Ms. Marvel in the series, but the actual challenge Kamala overcomes is self-acceptance of her multifaceted identity. Her acceptance of her identity is revealed in the climax, shared between Chapters/Issues three and four.²⁹ Kamala arrives at the local convenience store to meet with a friend, but she realizes the store is threatened with armed robbery. It is during this sequence of events that Kamala realizes how her role as Ms. Marvel is just as valid as Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel. Grosenteen states the reciter can, "...occur in the form of a caption box [or] an area within or above the panel frame."³⁰ In the context of *Ms. Marvel*, caption boxes are used to communicate Kamala's panic about saving her friend. Switching between caption boxes and speech bubbles, readers follow Kamala's dialogue with herself as she musters up the courage to confront the robber. Kamala says, "Wait a minute. I have super-powers. I saved somebody's life on Friday. I am 911!"³¹ Understanding what her powers enable her to do, she rushes into the store transformed as the original Ms. Marvel.

Kamala confrontation with the robber best reflects how the monstrator and reciter operate together in a superhero comic. Kamala, shape-shifted as the original white and blonde-haired Ms. Marvel, storms into the store; the fight sequences that follow are drawn in the cartoonish style. At the same time, readers follow along Kamala's thoughts in the caption boxes as she realizes

using her power to help even one person can be good.³² Kamala rushes in to fight the robber but is shot in the process. Interestingly, during this conflict the backgrounds of the panels in the climax are all coloured yellow. The background does not show the interior of the store or the streets outside. Instead, it is coloured in golden yellow echoing Ms. Marvel's signature colour and to have readers focus on the characters. The monstrator and the reciter work collaboratively in the volume's climax to tell the visual and textual narrative of how Kamala Khan becomes Ms. Marvel. The store robbery represents Kamala's confrontation with her insecurities regarding her multifaceted identities and her acceptance as Ms. Marvel. The golden yellow background sets the narrative tone as positive, because despite being injured by a gunshot, Kamala's attitude and approach to being Ms. Marvel change at this point. She no longer feels the need to present herself as the white, blonde-haired, blue-eyed Ms. Marvel because she realizes in order to be Ms. Marvel, she can combine her own complex identity with the superhero name.

The following section examines how the intersectionality of race and gender are the core focus and theme of the *Ms. Marvel* comic book series. It demonstrates how the narrative and character design of Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel reflect the experiences of young women of colour.

Ms. Marvel: An Intersectional Superhero

The concept of intersectionality was developed by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw to address the marginalization of black women in feminist and antiracist theory and politics.³³ It examines how structures of power, such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation and religion, interconnect and operate simultaneously in the lives and experiences of individuals and social groups. Intersectionality is also described as a work-in-progress because it is a framework open to and collaborative with multiple different theoretical concepts and ideas.³⁴ It identifies and addresses the categorical differences that exist within individuals and collectives, and how these categories organize and construct power relations. Addressing these differences and how they intersect enhances opportunities to create and develop collaborations and coalitions between social and political movements with similarities.³⁵ According to Crenshaw, the discourse on race is defined by the experiences of black men, while feminist discourse is defined by the experiences of white women, and therefore results in black women and women of colour being ostracized.³⁶ And on that basis, *Ms. Marvel* is a prime example of how those categorical differences intersect whilst sharing commonalities. Intersectionality is meant to address how power structures, like race and gender, interconnect and the resulting experience of being in-between. Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel addresses this very overlap. She is a young woman of colour who struggles to understand her identity, and despite the differences in race and gender, her story about growing up remains relatable. As a popular culture artifact, *Ms. Marvel* illustrates how the power relations of race and gender intersect and manifest in the experiences of female Americans Muslims as it is told through the story of Kamala Khan.

At the start of *Ms. Marvel*, readers are introduced to Kamala's school bully, Zoe, a slim, blonde-haired young woman who mocks Kamala's friend Nakia for wearing the hijab. Zoe later ridicules Kamala for her cultural heritage and for smelling like curry, suggesting Kamala finally abandon her family to join a party of mostly white teenagers.³⁷ While she is not physically hurt, Kamala is made to feel subordinate to Zoe by those comments. Zoe asserts power over Kamala on the basis of race because Kamala does not fit into Zoe's frame of reference as a white female in America. As black feminist scholar and social activist bell hooks highlights, "white racial imperialism granted all white women, however victimized by sexist oppression they might be, the right to assume the role of oppressor in relationship to black women and black men."³⁸ Therefore, while Zoe's behaviour fits the characteristics of a bully, it also illustrates the racial privilege white American women have over women of colour.

Kamala struggles to fit in at school and is torn between her identities as an American teenager and as a young Pakistani-American Muslim. She expresses her desire to be normal with an internal monologue, "Why do I have to bring Pakoras to school for lunch? Why am I stuck with weird holidays? Everybody else gets to be normal. Why can't I?"³⁹ Upon acquiring her superpowers, she goes on to elaborate on what she means by this. In a dream, she discusses with Carol Danvers, now known as Captain Marvel, and makes a clear separation between herself being from Jersey City while her parents are from Karachi and how she wants to be like Captain Marvel: "...to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated."⁴⁰ When Kamala wakes up from her dream and uses her shape shifting powers for the first time, she transforms into a tall, slim, white blond-haired woman in a spandex costume with high-heeled boots. In other words, the white American standard of beauty still very much informs Kamala's understanding of normal and who can be a female superhero. This reflects how the power relations of race and gender overlap. Kamala is not only torn about her racial identity but also feels insecure about her femininity because it does not match the idealized beauty standards of the West. Moreover, this demonstrates how racist and sexist ideologies can be internalized because Kamala believes her life would be simpler if she fit the prominent white imagery of superheroes. The intersection of race and gender becomes a barrier for Kamala as she navigates her identity as a female Pakistani-American Muslim because she is conflicted with her sense of identity. However, part of Kamala's character development is about her learning how she can experience and navigate between her multiple intersecting identities and demonstrate how female superheroes do not have to be white.

It should be noted that Kamala Khan is not the first Muslim superhero character Marvel Comics has introduced to readers. In 2002 the company introduced a new mutant character named Dust in the *X-Men* series. Created by Grant Morrison and Ethan Van Sciver, Dust was a practicing Sunni Muslim from Afghanistan who was rescued from slave traders by the X-Men. The characterization of Dust was fraught with orientalist and exotic perspectives while subject to the male gaze.⁴¹ For example, Dust's costuming is a skin-tight abaya, which contradicts the

garment's purpose in modest fashion. It indicates the creators' lack of knowledge about Islamic traditions and dress. Furthermore, Dust was situated in a political, social and cultural landscape shortly after 9/11, which meant her character acted as a representation of Muslim women in the West. Her representation as a Muslim woman is problematic because she was presented as a one-dimensional placeholder for a diverse community of women. Her characterization reduces her and Muslim women to stereotypes, an exotic other, and an overall generalization of an entire group of people. Chandra Mohanty, a post-colonial and transnational feminist scholar, states, "The assumption of women as an already constituted, coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, or contradictions, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally."⁴² To assume women as a coherent and homogenous group that face the same kinds of issues and aspire for one solution is a generalization. It also reduces the multiplicities of race, gender, class, sexuality and religion as experienced and negotiated by women based on their social, cultural, economic and political context. The characterization of Dust is a gross generalization of Muslim women in the comic books and popular culture because she is a character designed out of ignorance by white male creators. It does not help matters that the writer and artist differentiated Dust from other X-Men peers on the basis of her religion, gender and dress.⁴³

It is the precedent of Dust and Carol Danvers that makes the weight of the 2014 release of *Ms. Marvel* important in terms of diverse representation in comic books. Dust never had her own comic book series and was relegated to be a very minor character in the X-Men⁴⁴ and the original *Ms. Marvel* series only ran for two years. It is important for characters, especially characters of colour, to headline their own series as the main protagonist and have their narratives center stage. The important difference between Kamala Khan and Dust as Muslim women is that Kamala's religion is not a plot point or conflict—being Muslim is a part of her.⁴⁵ The best example of this is in Chapter/Issue four of vol. 1, when Ms. Marvel is shot defending a small store from a robber as discussed earlier.⁴⁶ Kamala is still performing as the white blonde-haired Ms. Marvel but after getting shot and shape shifting back to her own body, she asks her friend not to call the police because "the NSA will wiretap our mosque or something, and then they'll sell me to science!"⁴⁷ This is the clearest moment in the volume that acknowledges the social and political attitudes Muslims face in current day America. In a short piece of dialogue, it summarizes the tensions that exists between the police and Muslim communities and the problematic surveillance policies that track American Muslims.⁴⁸

What it means to be Muslim and the experiences of being Muslim are represented throughout *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* through the cast of characters and the environment. Kamala's brother is a devout Muslim who adheres to regular prayer and Mosque attendance. Her best friend Nakia chooses to wear the hijab as an expression of her faith. Kamala is shown attending Mosque with her friends and family yet also questioning religion with the imam. Instead of showcasing these as spectacles of the Islamic faith, these experiences of being a

Muslim are integrated into the character's daily life. As Miriam Kent points out in *Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine*, "With these characters, the book diversifies the notion of 'the Muslim' as cast members express their faith differently. Islam is not merely a monolith."⁴⁹ Unlike Dust, whose representation of Muslim women and the Islamic faith is singular and static and plagued with othering and orientalism, *Ms. Marvel Vol. 1: No Normal* illustrates a variety of experiences that make up being Muslim.

Conclusion

Ms. Marvel has all the tropes of a superhero comic because it is one, but it is a superhero comic that is aware of its genre. It uses the genres' tropes and clichés to reflect and incorporate contemporary representations of race and gender. *Ms. Marvel* addresses that question of what would the power fantasy of a young woman of colour look like? The series redirects the male power fantasy for a young woman of colour to inhabit, and celebrates the story of women of colour as heroes. *Ms. Marvel* demonstrates the power of storytelling and how there is space in popular culture for the narratives of women of colour. In order to combat issues of inequalities, storytelling needs to include marginalized communities.

The comic features Kamala with her family intact, which disrupts the stereotype of superheroes being orphaned or abandoned.⁵⁰ The core conflict in the first volume relates to the universal mission of "doing good," but the primary focus is about how a teenage Pakistani-American Muslim harnessed strength and power from her heritage in order to overcome a challenge. As Winona Landis says in *Diasporic (Dis)identification: The Participatory Fandom of Ms. Marvel*, "Kamala Khan's 'restaging' of Ms. Marvel serves to archive this old superhero and convey her history to current readers, while her own awareness and reflection on her performance create a space for her own South Asian and Muslim subjectivity."⁵¹ In other words, there is space in Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel's legacy for Kamala Khan to incorporate her ethnic and religious realities into the mantle of her superhero identity. *Ms. Marvel* complicates superhero comic books by being inclusive. Ms. Marvel/Kamala Khan claims a space in the legacy of superhero characters, and both the character and series expands the superhero genre to be more inclusive and diverse along an intersectional perspective.

Notes

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- ⁵ Richard Reynolds, "Masked Heroes," in *The Superhero Reader*, eds. Charles Hatfield, Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 104.
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- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ¹⁵ Cocca, *Superwomen: Gender, Power and Representation*, 219.
- ¹⁶ Jennifer K. Stuller, "What is a Female Superhero?" in *What is a Superhero*, eds. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.
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- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.
- ²⁰ Batgirl and Supergirl are published by DC Comics, and both were developed from pre-existing male characters Batman and Superman. Invisible Girl, better known as Sue Storm, is part of the Fantastic Four superhero team, and Marvel Girl is an alias used by two female characters in the X-Men teams.
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- ²² Thierry Groensteen, "The Question of the Narrator," in *Comics and Narration*, trans. Ann Miller (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 86.
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- ²⁴ Reynolds, 104.
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- ²⁷ Groensteen, "Question," 93.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.
- ²⁹ Wilson, Alphona and Herring, "Chap 3;" G. Willow Wilson, Adrian Alphona and Ian Herring, "Chap 4," *Ms. Marvel* 1, no. 3, Marvel Comics, 2015.
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- ³¹ Wilson, Alphona and Herring, "Chap 3."
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⁴⁴ Ibid., 807.

⁴⁵ Kent, "Unveiling Marvels," 524.

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Consumption of Superheroes: The Performances of Fans as Strategies of Involvement

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Abstract

The purpose of this work is to examine how Marvel and DC Comics superhero fans build their performances based on their consumer practices and how they contribute as identity elements for these subjects. The research, which presents a qualitative approach with ethnographic bias, seeks to analyze the consumption processes, essentially based on the precepts of Miller (2013) and Barbosa and Campbell (2006), to reflect the multimedia character and mainstream status that these characters acquire. Empirical analysis, based on Schechner's and Goffman's concept of performance, show that consumer processes are closely related to subjects' identity narratives, which create their performances as fans from the consumption of different products related to the adored superhero.

Keywords: consumption, performance, superheroes, fans

Introduction

Cultural theorist Henry Jenkins presented a new understanding about fans.¹ For him, it is not just someone who is a “fanatic” but an individual who contributes to popular culture. He surveyed television fans, reshaping the fans from passive consumers and cult servants to those most actively engaged in cultural products—in these terms, fans have become “poachers” and “nomads.” Jenkins' research changed the idea of a fan to someone who chases parts of the existing culture and creates alternative interpretations and individual constructs from it. As both “poachers” and “nomads,” fans are always in movement, advancing in relation to other texts, appropriating new materials, and creating new meanings.

Over the last few decades, fan studies have generally shown how fans and fandoms have traded, interfered, and collaborated with the productions of the entertainment industries. In this work, I intend to investigate and problematize how consumers appropriate these pop culture media texts. In this way, I am interested in seeing how Brazilian superhero fans build their performances based on the consumer practices and how these performances contribute as elements of the subjects' narrative.

Is the Superhero Now Mainstream?

The heroes of the comics, have gained space beyond the shelves of stalls and bookstores focused on this market. In theaters, one of the forerunners was the 1978 feature film *Superman*.

Currently, it is seen as a milestone of superhero movies and considered the first blockbuster of the genre.² It was from this film that these characters began to gain more cinematic adaptations. Conquering box office records, studios are increasingly investing in the superhero genre. Proof of this are the feature films *Iron Man 3* (2013), which grossed \$1.215 billion, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), with a \$1.405 billion gross, and *The Avengers* (2012), which had a box office of \$1.519 billion, making it the fifth-grossing film of all time.³

Cinema and television seem to have been together in the process of expanding comic book adaptations. Both Marvel and DC Comics have invested heavily in the production of TV series and animations. DC Comics' *Supergirl* (2015-), *Gotham* (2014-), and *The Flash* (2014-), and Marvel's *The Defenders* (2017), and *The Punisher* (2017-2019), are some examples. DC Comics's *Black Lightning* (2018) by The CW Television Network, and *Krypton* (2018) by Syfy were launched in 2018. Streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime have also invested in this type of production.

The growth of stores aimed at sales of 'geek' stuff should also be analyzed as a way fans extend their relationship with the adored superhero. Buying items such as shirts, posters, and collectible toys is common among fans. Recently, established Brazilian department stores have started selling comic book products, such as T-shirts, bedding, and decorative items (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Marvel and DC Comics superhero T-shirts at C & A stores (left) and Renner (right).
Photography from personal archive.



Overall, new ways to experience and consume surround superhero fans. In addition to the strong presence in the entertainment industry, fan-oriented events have also gained relevance. The Comic

Con Experience (CCXP), held five years ago in São Paulo, Brazil, reached an audience of more than two-hundred-and-twenty-seven thousand people in the 2019 edition, establishing it as the largest comic-con in the world. For comparison, the San Diego Comic-Con, one of the most important and which began in 1970, has an annual audience of more than one-hundred-and-thirty-five thousand people. This data indicates that the great growth of consumption has given the universe of superheroes mainstream status, that which is dominant, popular, and destined for the public.⁴ However, what is the perspective of the fans about this process?

Ramzi Fawaz, author of *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics Postmillennial Pop*, relates that Superman's death in 1992 became a milestone that went beyond the boundaries of a comic book's pages.⁵ The author points out that months before the story was scripted, the American print and television media hailed the hero's death as an event of extraordinary cultural significance, boosting what initially seemed a creative decision isolated from the field of public debate.

Public opinion ranged widely, from those who interpreted Superman's downfall as a righteous critique of America's moral bankruptcy to those who recognized it as a marketing stunt to boost comic book sales. In an editorial for the Comics Buyer's Guide years later, leading comic book retailer Chuck Rozanski claimed that upon hearing about the decision, he had called DC Comics editor Paul Levitz, pleading with him that "since Superman was such a recognized icon within America's overall popular culture ... DC had no more right to 'kill' him than Disney had the right to 'kill' Mickey Mouse." According to Rozanski, by choosing to kill Superman for sensational purposes, DC would be breaking an implicit promise to the American people to preserve the hero's legacy as a "trustee of a sacred national image."⁶

Fawaz looks at this context from the American perspective, presenting the hero as a representative of the values of that country. However, Superman is not only important to the United States: he is a character that reaches a global dimension. The death of the superhero was reported in *Jornal Nacional*, one of the most watched Brazilian television news programs. If Americans identify with the character because they see him as a symbol of the moral principles of the United States, what leads Brazilians to adore characters like Superman?

The possibility of global distribution is the first step to understand the "transcultural fandom."⁷ It is the understanding of fan groups of media products established in a national, regional, or local dimension. These groups form in an organized or organic way and they are able to take readings and give new meanings within their own contexts. This understanding is allied with "international-popular memory."⁸ According to the Renato Ortiz, this memory works as a system of communication outside the medium of common cultural references—it establishes

connection between people. The global cultural production ends up assuming a strong role in the social relations and the daily life of the people, permeating diverse social practices exactly as it is the case of the fans.

It is through the stories and the stories that humanity preserves memories and values through the generations.⁹ According to theologian Iuri Andréas Reblin, human history is confused with the sphere of the heroic:

Since the earliest times, the great feats of great heroes are mostly transmitted from generation to generation. They exist and persist because they carry in their personal values (physical, mental and moral, as Nildo Viana points out): coherence, courage, charisma, determination, wisdom, altruism and self-sacrifice. Moreover, through their actions, the heroes keep alive the hope of a new social order, the possibility of a change of reality...Heroes are admired, above all, for their courage to face the dominant and the powerful. They are those who stand, even when the bravest of mortals fall.¹⁰

Reblin proposes that even if the comic book industry were to ruin (and here it is necessary to expand for the entertainment industry as a whole, since superheroes are now in theaters, games, TV series, and other mediums), superheroes would continue to exist in the human imagination and their stories would continue to be told. He justifies this position, claiming that the mythical and archetypal structures of superheroes transcend the time and space of the century or country in which they were generated.

Comic books become important cultural products when one realizes that they are historical facts, opinions and latent tendencies capable of translating the context of an era. Superhero comics are, therefore, a part of this whole. Superheroes are historical and social products, so that the creation and renewal of these characters - as well as the themes, values, conceptions, present in their stories are crossed by reality.¹¹ According to Fawaz, comic characters can be defined as a living archive of our collective fantasies about a number of concerns, including the nature of power (its pleasures and dangers), the meaning of ethical action and collective goodness, visual pleasure in witnessing impossible skills, and the ability to change the world.¹²

Performances as Methodological Lenses

Performance theorist Richard Schechner states that “performing” can be being, doing something, showing oneself doing something, or explaining the fact of “showing oneself doing something.”¹³ In this work, I consider a myriad of practices related to the superhero fans as

performances: wearing the hero's T-shirt; buying personal or decorating items with the character; watching a movie or reading a comic book; getting a superhero related tattoo; and, other expressions.

Sociologist Erving Goffman applied the concept of performance to daily life.¹⁴ He relied on the ideas of dramaturgy to describe the ways in which individuals create and exhibit themselves. He interpreted everyday life as a stage in which people assume different roles according to the situation in which they are placed and the audience with which they interact. According to Goffman, what is essential for these performances to happen is the presence of the other. Amaral, Polivanov and Soares point out that for Goffman, all we are and have are performances, whereas we use them as a form of construction and presentation to others.¹⁵

Even if one accepts the generalized notion of the main conception of fandom, something characterized by the collective aspect, one still needs to understand it as performative.¹⁶ For Hills and Grecom, fandom is related to the "representation of an identity; is about a sense for the self, about affection, in terms of acting on an emotional, subjective level."¹⁷ Performance is an integral part of fan and fandom experiences, especially now, where the digital setting makes communities more visible and more accessible than at any other time in the past.¹⁸

In discussing the notion of musical performance, sociomusicologist Simon Frith considers performance as a possibility of negotiation between artist and audience.¹⁹ I also understand the performances of fans as an element of negotiation in various instances: with the adored products / franchises, with other fans, with other non-fans, etc. The performance serves as a resource for fans to introduce themselves and interact as such. Therefore, in this research, I do not use the concept of performance as a theoretical pillar, but rather as a "methodological lens"²⁰ to see how the subjects present themselves as fans.

The present interviews were conducted for my master's research titled "Unveiling the Fan of Superheroes: Performances, Consumption Practices and Identities." The methodology of research is based on the precepts of ethnography, which has an interest in the lived experience. Before discussing the interviewees' statements, I selected some excerpts from their personal presentations, so that it is possible to know some of their profiles:²¹

Bruce Wayne: I work with drawing, with illustration. I am 34 years old. I was one of those children who drew and everyone said, "Oh, my, how you draw well," and I believed. So I kept doing it all through life. When I was a teenager I was a fanzine, I was collecting Vertigo, I lived in a newsstand, before and after class, on weekends. When I went to the beach, I would get on my bike for miles until I found a decent newsstand so I could see what was new. I got to the point of going there obsessively, daily, maybe sometimes more than once a day, like someone who is anxious and opens the refrigerator to see if food appears, knowing that would not have anything.

Diana Prince: I'm 24 and I'm doing Literature, bachelors in Japanese. I was a very lonely child and watched what was on TV. So I got influences from anime, manga ... I'm a person who by definition is a nerd. If currently I am a sociable person is because of the nerds things, well, because in the old days I just went to have friends from the seventh grade. And before that I had fake profiles of anime characters, which I used to talk about manga. At the events I could socialize a bit too. Over time, I think I've learned to be sociable with the fake profile.

Lois Lane: I'm a transsexual woman, I'm 24 years old, I'm unemployed. I was a student, but I dropped out of Public Policy [...] faculty. I'm from Caxias do Sul, but I lived in Porto Alegre my whole life basically. I studied public school my entire life and I think that's the introduction.

Clark Kent: I'm 38 years old. I'm a federal civil servant and I'm taking a bachelor's degree in history. I love cinema, I am a movie buff, I love series and movies. I love Social Medias, I'm a fan of comic books, and I particularly like DC Comics most. I've always loved the stories of superheroes, I've always found the stories very captivating.

Along with their testimonials, I add my own experiences and insights, as I also consider myself a fan of superheroes. In my case, Captain America is the character to whom I dedicate part of my shelves in my house and my admiration.

Consumption in the Constitution of Fan Identities

Establishing a fan culture is only possible from consumption. In addition, it is through the anthropological perspective that I am going to work on the approaches to consumption, which has become a complex field of investigation, integrating several activities, actors and a set of goods and services that are not restricted only to the form of commodities.²² Moreover, what is the importance of consumer goods fans?

Clarke Kent: DC is doing now this arc of rebirth and I am particularly following. I have bought most of the comic books and I have been enjoying it a lot, for the content, for its new proposal of return to the origins. The stories have been quite pleasing to me.

Bruce Wayne: When I saw Superman's Death on the newsstand in a special edition with laminated cover, I bought it. The strategy of shock in the fan, or of shock in the subject who is not a fan, but who is aware of these things, worked completely for me. I was like "Oh, the Superman died!"

Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood consider consumer goods as elements that communicate cultural categories and social values. It is through goods that the categories of culture become tangible.²³ The authors point out that consumer choices carry social meanings, saying something about the subject, their family, their city, and their network of relationships. The act of consuming is a process in which all social categories are continually defined,

affirmed, or redefined. However, what do these assets represent to the fans? When Clark Kent says “*it’s on my wish list to buy the Dark Knight’s hardcover*” or when Bruce Wayne comments that comic books are no longer sufficient for this audience who also feel the need to purchase t-shirts, mugs, etc., they are giving clues to what goods really mean to fans in general.

Material objects are a scenario. They make us aware of what is appropriate and inappropriate...The surprising conclusion is that objects are important not because they are obvious and physically constraining or enabling, but just the opposite. Often it is precisely because we do not see them. The less we are aware of them, the more they can determine our expectations, set the stage and ensure appropriate behavior, without undergoing questioning.²⁴

In the case of fans, the objects evidence this worship. If you enter my apartment, you will know, right in the first room, that I like comics, Star Wars and Terry Pratchett. Incidentally, if I go into further analysis, it seems that all those objects that define me as a consumer are in my living room, that is, in the social place of my house. I agree with the authors that consumption is a central aspect of constructions and perceptions of identity when I analyze my relationship to material goods. When I think of all of the Captain America merchandise that I have, I realize I did not buy most of them. They are gifts that I gained from people who ended up collaborating to consolidate my fan identity, even if this was not their original intention. I put together all the objects I have of the character (Figure 2). Of all the items I have, I only bought a few comics, the fabric doll, and the mask.



Figure 2. My personal Captain America items. Photography from personal archive.

This exercise refers to Miller's analysis, which argues that in order to study objects, it is necessary to be where they are. In most cases, they are in our homes. After all, the furniture, the way we organize our things, the photographs, the decorative artifacts, will tell us a lot about our history, memories and tastes – it will tell us who we really are. Objects make people to the extent that culture also arises from objects.²⁵

However, even with all the character of affectivity wrapped in objects, fans recognize the monetary investment as an obstacle in the acquisition of goods:

Diana Prince: I like to consume, I like to have these things, but I'm not that close to it because I don't have a lot of money. Hence, most things I keep wishing for a while, until when my birthday arrives, someone gives it to me.

Bruce Wayne: Obviously, I attach value to paper, the storage of this material. I like to have the stories on paper. I like to handle the comic books. Do I have a large digital collection? I have, but it's not as interesting to me as the physical collection.

The popularization of superheroes made it easier for consumers to buy objects such as shirts, mugs, and buttons. However, the fans see this process from different perspectives. Clark Kent understands that these objects may be fundamental to evidence the fan identity:

Clarke Kent: I think the following: If you like comics, movies, series, and, somehow, you demonstrate this through props like T-shirts, I think it's cool. You see I got the Justice League T-shirt here. The fans are performative. At different levels, they are performative. Not only in what they speak, but also in how they present themselves.

Lois Lane thinks that, on the one hand popularization sometimes corroborates the falling of the prices, while on the other hand there may be a process of trivializing superheroes, and the distinction between who is a fan and who is not a fan will become much more difficult.

Lois Lane: The more massified, the cheaper the product gets to my consumption, so this is good. Having more people who enjoy it and consume it is also an opportunity for me to get to know these people and have a contact with them. I'm afraid of when that wave passes ... I have a friend who even likes comics, but he has some T-shirts from Thor and other characters because it's cheap to have these shirts. And he's not a fan, but he has these shirts because they're there to sell. This creates a "nerd" camouflage. It was to create a facility for people to meet other nerds and I think it's making it difficult.

Bruce Wayne, who is a comic book collector and keeps shelves and tables in his house full of them, has no affinity with other objects that have a relationship with the superheroes he accompanies:

Bruce Wayne: *In a way it is not enough that the comics circulate in different formats, colors and flavors. You need those things ... T-shirts, mugs, etc. ... But I confess I don't like much. I don't pay much attention either. Like I said, I know this is an important part of the market, but I don't like it.*

Our relationship with material objects goes far beyond the process of acquisition and use. It is no wonder that the practice of collecting is something so common among fans. Collecting is a creative process that consists in the search and possession of objects in a selective and passionate way. By its character of dedication and commitment of the collector, the practice of collecting establishes a direct relation with concepts like affectivity and passion. Collectivism is an intensely involving form of consumption.²⁶ Collecting is one of the practices that shows the anthropological character of consumption, as we have been dealing with throughout this work. Barbosa and Campbell point out that social subjectivities and identities have become intimately tied to consumption and consumer customization.²⁷ In this context, consumption has a cultural dimension as it functions as a space of social relations in which the negotiations are made freely, in addition to the economic and financial aspects and the cultural norms and morals, which define consumption patterns. Therefore, the act of consuming is complex: from it, we find the elements that collaborate in the identity processes and we relate to other individuals through their own consumption practices in order to put us as similar or different.

Ultimately, consumption implies an order of social meanings and positions, indicating information about who consumes, about their social position, status, local to which they belong or the bonds that they are able to establish. In addition, consumption is a set of sociocultural processes in which people make sense and use products and services in order to say something about themselves, the society, the groups and the localities in which they live. In the case of fans of superheroes, the whole relationship with the characters and the construction of identity, individually and collectively, are based on the processes of consumption.

Conclusion

The media's popularization of superheroes allowed them, more than ever, to contribute to the lives of their fans. For the collaborators of this research, it seems that this link is about a devotion to the superheroes that is created, nourished and resignified from the search of these subjects for opportunities of new experiences to broaden the bond with the character. Decisions about professions and careers, something that is thought for a lifetime, reveal that it is not just a hobby or a simple form of entertainment. I have to include myself in this perspective, since from the very first steps in the academy, I have directed my research interests to my predictions of pop culture. As "poachers" and "nomads" we contribute to cultural processes imbricated in consumption, but we also shape and identify ourselves as fans from these phenomena.

From the analysis, it is possible to perceive that the tastes and objects of affection of the fans end up imbricating themselves in their trajectories of life. This inference corroborates the recognition of fan studies and consumer studies as fields that contribute to the understanding of the culture as a whole. In addition, these areas of research have a particular affinity with the theoretical-methodological approaches that discuss the question of identity. After all, it starts with the individual to understand the processes within the collective.

Notes

¹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

² Gerard Jones, *Homens do amanhã: geeks, gangsters e o nascimento dos gibis* (São Paulo: Conrad, 2006).

³ Rebecca Rubin, "'Avengers: Infinity War' Becomes Fifth-Highest Grossing Film Globally," *Variety*, May 13, 2018, <https://variety.com/2018/film/box-office/avengers-infinity-war-fifth-highest-grossing-film-globally-1202805301/>.

⁴ Frédéric Martel, *Mainstream: a guerra global das mídias e das culturas* (Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2012).

⁵ Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: NYU Press, 2016).

⁶ Ibid., 1–2.

⁷ Bertha Chin and Lori Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom," *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 10, no.1 (2013): 92–108.

⁸ Renato Ortiz, *Mundialização e cultura* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2007).

⁹ Iuri Andréas Reblin, "A teologia e a saga dos super-heróis: valores e crenças apresentados e representados no gibi," *Protestantismo em Revista* 22 (2010): 13–21, <http://ism.edu.br/periodicos/index.php/nepp/article/view/54/63>.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of works to English are mine.

¹¹ Nildo Viana and Iuri Andréas Reblin, *Super-heróis, cultura e sociedade* (São Paulo: Ideias e Letras, 2011).

¹² Fawaz, *New Mutants*.

¹³ Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁴ Erving Goffman, *A representação do eu na vida cotidiana* (Petrópolis: Vozes, 2009).

¹⁵ Adriana Amaral, Beatriz Polivanov, and Thiago Soares, "Disputas sobre performance nos estudos de comunicação: desafios teóricos, derivas metodológicas," *Intercom - Revista Brasileira de Ciências da Comunicação* 41, no.1 (2018): 63–79.

¹⁶ Matt Hills and Clarice Greco, "O fandom como objeto e os objetos do fandom," *MATRIZES* 9, no.1 (2015): 147–63.

¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹⁸ Lucy Bennett and Paul Booth, "Editorial: Performance and Performativity in Fandom," *Transformative Works and Cultures* 18 (2015).

¹⁹ Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²⁰ Amaral, Polivanov, and Soares, "Disputas."

²¹ The interviewees' pseudonyms are iconic comic book characters. Because of the length of this paper, I do not describe my process in methodological detail. All English translations are my own.

²² Livia Barbosa and Colin Campbell, "O estudo do consumo nas ciências sociais contemporâneas," in *Cultura, consumo e identidade*, by Livia Barbosa and Colin Campbell (Rio de Janeiro: Editora UFRJ, 2006), 21–46.

²³ Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *O mundo dos bens: por uma antropologia do consumo* (São Paulo: Editora FGV, 2006).

²⁴ Daniel Miller, *Trecos, troços e coisas: estudos antropológicos sobre a cultura material*, trans. Renato Aguiar (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 2013), 78–9.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Russell W. Belk, Melanie Wallendorf, John Sherry, Morris Holbrook, and Scott Roberts, "Collectors and Collecting," *Advances in Consumer Research* 15 (1988): 548–53.

²⁷ Barbosa and Campbell, "O estudo."

Crossing No-Man's Land: *Wonder Woman* & Liminality

Claire Meagher

Abstract

Princess Diana of Themyscira—aka the eponymous Wonder Woman—in Patty Jenkin's 2017 film, resists distinct classification in her identity. She is set apart from the human world due to her Amazonian heritage, but also distanced from the Amazons due her compassionate nature. As it becomes difficult to identify Diana clearly, her character falls into a liminal space. Cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of liminality can be applied to the trajectory of Diana's story in the film. Diana finds power in her liminal potential—within the gaps in her identity, she becomes a capable superhero.

Keywords: Liminality, Wonder Woman, Victor Turner, Superheroes, Patty Jenkins

Introduction

In Patty Jenkins's 2017 film *Wonder Woman*, Diana—the titular character—transgresses social boundaries within modern myth and contemporary film. The film alters conventions by using Diana to explore her identity through liminality. The liminal figure invites analysis as they break the rules of society; they are outcasts, or characters that can slip between boundaries. In understanding what makes a figure “liminal,” one can better comprehend the definition of what it means to be an insider in society with an established status. In *Wonder Woman*, Diana enters various negotiations of power as she moves between spaces. In her quest to defeat Ares, the god of war, she faces pressures to conform to the WWI society around her but she does not easily fall into a defined category. The film takes the familiar tropes of superhero stories and alters the audiences' expectations. This journey is marked visually through Diana's treatment on camera as well as her costuming. As she leaves the Amazonian island of Themyscira to the ordinary world of humans, she moves from a position of sheltered naiveté (especially as it concerns the nature of war) to a realization of her own power. Her power becomes entwined with liminality which proves to be a source of her abilities.

Liminality

Liminality is a topic of study that speaks about the nature of insiders and outsiders to social groups, but it also lends itself to the nature of human experience and storytelling. Liminality is the experience or space that is felt when an individual cannot be defined by any one identity. By

this definition, liminality becomes a "...fundamental human experience, [because] liminality transmits cultural practices, codes, rituals, and meanings in-between aggregate structures and uncertain outcomes."¹ Since liminality is so all-encompassing, many people experience the phenomenon in their everyday lives. Bjørn Thomassen states that liminality may be present in an individual's experience by outlining three different modalities: experiential (as felt by groups or individuals), spatial (physical areas of borders), and temporal (moments or years).² Each of these can be experienced by an individual or group throughout their lives.

Theories of liminality were initially developed by Arnold Van Gennep in what he called the "rites of passage" and refined by Victor Turner in the 1960s. In *The Ritual Process*, Turner applies Van Gennep's three stages of liminality to consider how an individual is perceived as a "liminal entity" as they are initiated into a group or society.³ Instances of this "rite of passage" may appear as graduation, coming of age ceremonies, or gaining citizenship. Turner expands on Van Gennep's three phases of liminality: separation, threshold (the liminal period), and finally, aggregation.⁴ At first, in the separation period, the subject is divided from their group or society, losing their previous identity or status in order to be integrated into the new group or society. During the next stage, it is difficult to be specific in describing this liminality, as Turner elaborates:

The attributes of liminality...are necessarily ambiguous since the condition and these elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locates states and positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, conventions, and [ceremony].⁵

As Turner says, it is difficult to pin down the identity of a liminal entity, as they are defined as not having a stable identity as they are in a state of transformation, a state of flux. The liminal entity may or may not be accepted into society once again, embracing liminal status or finding their place in society.

The Amazons and Themyscira

To understand Diana's liminality in the film, it is important to understand her origins with the mythic Amazons. She begins her journey on the legendary Mediterranean-esque island of Themyscira where she is raised by the matriarchal Amazons—the all-women warriors led by their queen Hippolyta. In the ancient Greek art, the Amazons, like those of Homeric literature, were frequently depicted as "violent, promiscuous, and war-loving...[which] became an analogous female challenge to the order of civilization."⁶ In short, these representations of Amazons were not obedient women so they posed as a danger to the Grecian patriarchy. The ancient Greeks frequently portrayed their mythic heroes (such as Heracles or Theseus) in conflict with the warrior women. The Amazons represented the antithesis of ancient Greek culture as

they appeared “untamed, virginal, and aggressive, [and] they could serve to represent a phase of life for both young men and women: the androgynous state of life between childhood and adulthood. Yet Amazons serve as important paradigms precisely because they generally fail to make the transition to “maturity.”⁷ This sentiment is, of course, important to the Wonder Woman myth; Diana, too, is represented in this capacity. She is also the exception to this interpretation of the Amazons—she leaves the island and gains a sense of maturity as she travels through the mortal world. The lack of maturity, however, also points to her liminality. The Amazons do not classify as any one thing according to Fantham, as she describes the warriors as both androgynous and between childhood and adulthood; the Amazons may appear as liminal figures as they break patriarchal conventions.

While their early depictions in the ancient world were less than sympathetic, the Amazons offered an alternative narrative to values that were held by Greek culture, especially concerning the show of masculine strength. Jill Lepore writes that by the twentieth century the figure of the Amazon was embraced by the early suffragettes as the term became synonymous with the rebellious “New Woman.”⁸ The mythic warrior women served as a valuable metaphor for the suffragettes as the Amazons, too, rebelled against the patriarchy. For them, the Amazons were a symbol of empowerment—-independent women who did not need to rely on men in order to survive and who themselves were empowered and strong. The overall impression then of these mythic beings was more positive for women of the early twentieth century. By the time that William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman in 1941, the Amazons carried more positive connotations. Comic book scholar Andrew Deman argues that “Marston’s incorporation of Amazon mythology associates Wonder Woman with connotations such as strength, independence, sorority, and disregard for male-orientated societies.”⁹ This idea, of course, is a central sentiment to Wonder Woman’s cause and this idea of strength is carried into the mythology of the 2017 film.

In this cinematic iteration of the Wonder Woman myth, the Amazons are created by the Greek gods to protect humans from the god of war, Ares, who is bent on destroying humanity. More importantly, like the Amazons of myth, Jenkins’s Amazons also offer an alternative to the masculine narrative of war—her Amazons not only protect but, as Hippolyta says to Diana in the film—they also “influence men’s hearts with love and restore peace to the Earth.”¹⁰ Not only are they warriors, capable of protecting others, they also are a positive force for humanity. However, after Ares makes war on the gods themselves, the Amazons are forced to seclude themselves on the island of Themyscira in order to survive. To protect Diana and themselves, the Amazons create a barrier between themselves and the ordinary human world; Themyscira is then isolated in a form of stasis, as are its inhabitants.

The first part of the film shows Diana’s adolescence on the island of Themyscira and establishes the start of her journey as a liminal figure. This phase of Diana’s character represents a starting point in Turner’s theory of liminality. Turner describes, “The first phase (of separation)

comprises symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from the earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions.”¹¹ Diana's character is constructed in accordance to the Amazons on Themyscira but she is not yet integrated into the social group as a full member, so instead she holds a liminal position. Diana, as the only child of the island, is not yet a fully-fledged Amazon. At first, she is inspired to become a warrior like all of the women on the island but her mother, Hippolyta, will not let her train with the other warriors, therefore barring her complete entry into the Amazonian culture and identity.

Diana's costume visually represents her growth throughout the film, and the beginning of the film is no exception. This detail in costuming aligns with film theory as well as Turner's theory of liminality:

Liminal entities...in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing nothing. They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked to demonstrate that liminal beings have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system.¹²

While it is important to note that Diana is not completely without status or privilege as she is still a princess, she does not wear the armour that the other Amazons wear, marking her difference from the group. As a girl, she wears light, almost white, gowns, which are in direct contrast to the dark armoured dresses that her mother Hippolyta and aunt Antiope wear. The colour of the gowns represents both Diana's innocence and the fact that she has not yet been initiated into the Amazons.



Diana (left) fighting Antiope (right). Wonder Woman, 2017.

Enter the character Steve Trevor, an American pilot and spy who serves as Diana's counterpart in the film. However, once Steve crashes on the island and reports the horrific war outside of Themyscira's borders, Diana becomes convinced to help him and the other mortals as she has the capability to do so. Diana tries to reason with her mother, Hippolyta, to leave the island to defend humans from Ares: "Stopping the god of war is our foreordination. As Amazons, this is our duty."¹³ However Hippolyta states, "But you are not an Amazon like the rest of us. So,

you will do nothing.”¹⁴ While Diana has been raised by the Amazons and identifies with them, Hippolyta affirms that Diana is not due to her birth. Diana defies her mother’s wishes as she “is not an Amazon” to journey off the island to help humanity in the war, embracing the status of a liminal figure in order to help others. It is through this conflict, that Diana forms her identity and realizes that she has a power to help others as she loses this status as an Amazon. Hippolyta informs her that if she leaves, she may never return to the island, however Diana replies “Who will I be if I stay?”¹⁵ She is not a part of the Amazons if she leaves but she will also not be a part of humanity with her heritage. However, it is due to this position that she can leave and discover her power.

London Harbour

Diana’s arrival with Steve in London creates a sense of disorientation for the now “ex”-Amazon. This sense of disorientation is an aspect of the liminal stage that Turner identifies, in which the subject may not feel overly connected to their environment and therefore will often feel lost and isolated.¹⁶ This is certainly the case for Diana when she travels through London with Steve. London is still enjoying the height of its empire as a flourishing city in 1918, and, for Diana, the environment is completely different from that of warm Themyscira.



Steve leads Diana through a dull London. Wonder Woman, 2017.

As the pair travel through the harbour, Steve determines that Diana does not “fit in” with the other women of his time, so he deems that Diana needs to change her outfit in order for London’s society to take her seriously. With her loose hair and her cloak covering her stolen Amazonian armour, she is an unusual sight for the generally conservative society of Edwardian London. So, Steve employs his secretary, Etta Candy, to help Diana find more suitable attire. As Diana does not hold a solidified identity in the ‘world of man,’ others can impress different

values upon her because her lack of status may be perceived as a threat by society. Mary Douglas states, “that which cannot be clearly classified in terms of traditional criteria of classification, or falls between classificatory boundaries, is almost everywhere regarded as ‘polluting’ and ‘dangerous’.”¹⁷ As the liminal subject may not have a distinct identity, they may disrupt ideals that are represented by the society. As the liminal figure is not a part of a social group, their difference may be perceived as “dangerous” as they have no distinct classification. Turner discusses how “[Henri] Bergson speaks of how in-group preserves its identity against members of out-groups, protects threats to its way of life, and renews the will to maintain the norms on which routine behaviour necessary for its social life depends.”¹⁸ The liminal subject's identity or values may disrupt the values that are held by the so called ‘in-group,’ which challenges the group's own ideals. This ‘blank’ and ‘unidentifiable’ liminal subject then has values that are imposed upon her as she does not ‘fit in’ with the social group.

The make-over sequence becomes a parody and a source of comedy in the film, used to criticize the restrictive fashion in the early twentieth century. Diana complains about the mobility and the practicality of the clothing. She looks at a corset, saying, “Is this what passes for armour in your country?”¹⁹ This presumably earns a laugh from the audience but also solidifies the fact that Diana has no conception of what is acceptable in 1918, placing herself outside of the knowledge of the in-group. Etta stammers, “Armour? It's fashion,”²⁰ relating to Diana that the role of women in London society is focused on the visual, it is to be looked at. This, of course, can relate to Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure in cinema, as this moment epitomizes the “*to-be-looked-at-ness*”²¹. Focusing on a woman's objectivity than her subjectivity. Diana then tries on a variety of attire with Etta's guidance. All of the outfits are suitable for the time period but impractical as they inhibit movement. “How can a woman possibly fight in this?”²² Diana questions while Etta replies, “We use our principles. I mean, that's how we're going to get the



Steve adds glasses to Diana's London look. *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

vote.”²³ With just this brief exchange, the values of the in-group are communicated; women’s movements are restricted both physically in regard to the fashion and metaphorically in their (in)ability to participate in politics. Etta also implicates with her dialogue that women do not fight physically, unlike what Diana is accustomed to from Themyscira. As Diana refuses the fashion, she also refuses the values that are attached to each outfit, which does not help her integrate into the London culture.

Diana eventually adopts a modest outfit with Etta and Steve’s approval. With this disguise as her new alter ego, ‘Diana Prince’, she is able to confront the men about the war and the actions they must take to make peace. In a heated discussion with the British generals about the war, they ignore both Diana and Steve’s attempts to stop the Germans from developing advanced weapons. Diana appeals compassionately for the vulnerable people in the war, much to the chastising looks of the generals. Steve says, “She’s with me, sir. She’s with us,”²⁴ advocating for Diana to convince the generals that she is allied with them and part of their group. However, Diana declares, “I am not with you!”²⁵ as the British generals decide that they will not send support to the front for the vulnerable soldiers (of both sides) and civilians. With this, she distances herself from British society. She argues, “Where I come from generals don’t hide in their offices like cowards, they die on the battlefield with their soldiers.”²⁶ While at first, Diana appears to have sided with the British, Diana and Steve are not officially working with either side. The two are reinstated as liminal subjects as they choose to leave to enable an armistice that will end the war.

No-Man’s Land

After Diana and Steve abandon Britain for war-torn Europe, they pick up several allies to assist them. Their allies are liminal in their own right as well: Chief Napi, an indigenous Blackfoot demigod; Sameer, an actor turned spy; and Charlie, a Scottish marksman who suffers from PTSD. The motley troop then heads to the front to find the German’s deadly weapons as well as the god of war, Ares, whom Diana believes to be behind the Great War. In Europe, they reach No-Man’s Land. The No-Man’s Land sequence is the central moment in the film as it reveals Diana’s own power while she takes advantage of her liminality. Diana sets out to march through a space which is defined by the fact that no man can cross it. Borders and thresholds such as No-Man’s Land feature prominently in themes of liminality. Karen Kvideland, in *Boundaries & Thresholds*, observes that “all lines, real or imaginary...mark separation and are intended to keep apart that which they divide.”²⁷ These borders and lines ensure a kind of order but occasionally can be fatal if crossed. So, Diana physically as well as metaphorically crosses boundaries in this scene. At first, Diana and her group are stuck on British lines. There, Diana sympathizes with a civilian woman who calls Diana to the impossible task to free her fellow civilians in a captured town across No-Man’s Land. Diana must cross it in order to save the civilians. However, Steve

insists that “[t]his is No-Man’s Land, Diana. It means no man can cross it...this is not something you can cross. It’s not possible...It’s not what we came here to do” to which Diana assures him, “No. It’s what *I’m* going to do”²⁸. She takes responsibility for the vulnerable and sheds her “Diana Prince” costume, revealing her Amazonian armour.

Though the armour has appeared only in flashes previously in the film, this is the first time that Diana’s “Wonder Woman” armour is revealed in full. As Diana climbs out of the trench, Jenkins shows bits of the armour in individual shots onscreen; each piece of armour references in synecdoche the myth of the original *Wonder Woman*. With this sequence of Diana’s armour, the camera does not overtly sexualize Diana in this moment of her empowerment by focusing on her body. Instead, Jenkins concentrates on the objects that will define her Wonder Woman: the shield, the gauntlets, the lasso, and her boots. Each of these fragmented shots come together in the reveal of Wonder Woman. This set of armour is the definition of Wonder Woman and who she is in this incarnation of the character, which, along with the rest of the costuming, represents her values. This is the Wonder Woman of our time.



The reveal of Diana's Wonder Woman costume as she crosses No-Man's land. Wonder Woman 2017.

Princess Diana’s original outfit in the comics was carefully designed by Henry George Peter, the original artist, and Marston himself (see figure 5).²⁹ Marston gave Peter the following instructions, as Jill Lepore illustrates in his biography: “draw a woman who’s as powerful as Superman, as sexy as Miss Fury, as scantily clad as Sheena the jungle queen, and as patriotic as Captain America.”³⁰ Despite Marston’s intentions to create an upstanding female role model “as strong as Superman,” the hypersexualization of “Wonder Woman’s body assures that female power is reigned in, tacitly directing the primary purpose of the body decorated in national iconography to be an object for male sexual pleasures.”³¹ The superhero outfit defines the superhero as it becomes a visual synecdoche for identifying the hero. Oftentimes, a superhero is



Wonder Woman on the first issue of her comic. As found in The Golden Age of Wonder Woman. Vol 1.



Amazon fighting Hoplite in traditional Greek fashion. The red figure vase is apart of the Louvre collection

recognized and branded by their outfit. Jenkins and her costume designer Lindy Hemming worked hard to emulate the original look but also to bring the costume to fit more modern perceptions of femininity. The outfit did not have to be overtly hypersexual as in the original comics but rather function practically—or at least enough to convince the audience that it could. In an interview about the costuming and design of the film, Lindy Hemming adds, “[Jenkins] and all of us were trying to tread a line where you didn't over-sexualize people, but you still were proud of their bodies and proud of how fit they were.”³² Hemming’s design also mimics the armour of the Amazons depicted in ancient Greek art as seen in figure 6.³³ The concept of the armour is similar; the armoured bodice accompanied by a loose-fitting skirt (not entirely unlike the ancient Greek men), and often carrying a shield. With a few adjustments to the armour, it becomes representative of who Diana is in the film. Wonder Woman’s dainty bracelets become gauntlets and the red boots become inspired gladiator footwear complete with greaves to protect her legs. Accented with gold, the armour in Jenkins’s film is brightly coloured in red and blue and stands out against the dull colours of the battlefield. The golden eagle across her chest, which originally symbolized the American eagle, could now represent the god Zeus, as it is his

sacred animal within Greek mythology. While she is fighting with an American in this cinematic version, Diana does not protect a certain country. Her goal is larger to defend humanity rather than just act in the name of just one nation.

After the reveal of her armour, Diana then uses her iconic gauntlets to defend herself from the hail of bullets. Diana's ancient Greek-inspired outfit looks generally out of place on the Great War battlefield, which creates a sense of disorientation for Diana as well as the audience. While Diana's liminality in this sequence is largely defined by her actions, her armour also emphasizes that she is in between places, times, and identities. She is the one that can cross No-Man's Land because she is undefined. After she crosses No-Man's Land, her musical theme is heard for the first time, signifying to the audience that Wonder Woman fights for the good of humanity, accomplished by altering the preconceived ideas of boundaries.



Diana deflects bullets as she crosses No-Mans' land. Wonder Woman, 2017.

The Air Field

One of the great tragedies of the film comes when Diana realizes that good and bad exist in the enemy as well as her friends. Up until this point, Diana has had a relatively black and white view of war; she has determined, quite naively, that humans are entirely good but has not recognized the capacity of humans' ability for evil. She realizes that both the potential for good as well as evil exists within humanity, so she recognizes that there is a spectrum rather than just a binary. She learns that humans can be *both*, that they too can be liminal in their choices. Turner himself postulates that liminality can be "full of potency and *potentiality*...and that periods of social upheaval ha[ve] the opportunity for the *potential* to stir that imagination"³⁴ so that this can lead to "enable individuals to reevaluate themselves and their perception of the world"³⁵. In the close of the film, Diana states that people have "A choice each must make for themselves. Something

no hero can ever defeat.”³⁶ Liminality, with all its unknowns, is a kind of potential and therein lies its power; it can be anything as it does not have any one definition. It has the potential to be anything as it is not restricted. It is through this liminality that Diana herself holds her power.



Diana as a central figure in this frame after the battle against Ares. Wonder Woman, 2017.

The solidification of Diana’s identity is shown visually at the close of the film. After she has delivered the final strike against Ares, the camera places her in the centre of the frame, near the horizon, emphasized by the cracks on the runway. This horizon line is also intensely saturated with the sunset in the centre while the colour fades towards the edge; colour has once again returned to the dim ‘world of man.’ The men are also gathered around the edges of the shot, showing that while they are important to Diana, she is still at a distance. Diana stands between both sides of opposing men, a position that epitomizes her liminality. It is also important to note that all men are intermingling, Germans and Diana’s group alike, and embracing each other celebrating the end of Ares.

Conclusion

In the introduction to their work *Breaking Boundaries*, Horvath, Thomassen, and Wydra note that “Reality itself provides no firm ground for neat classification, so in applying classifications to raw realities there will always be an unclassifiable remainder.”³⁷ It can be through these “raw realities” and “unclassifiable remainders” that meaning can be generated and bridges can be gapped. Jenkins’s work in *Wonder Woman*, while brilliant, is nowhere near iconoclast. Instead she sets a standard for female representation within superhero film by showing Diana transgress and cross boundaries. With Diana’s costuming along with her actions, she acts as a liminal subject, disrupting the expectations for “insiders” as she travels throughout the world. Her

Amazonian heritage, along with "Wonder Woman's" legacy created by Marston, empowers her to be physically strong as a superhero. However, it is her compassion and love for others that allows her to be somewhat undefinable within her own world and inspires her to defy distinct boundaries as evidence of her liminal journey. Diana's character recognizes that there will always be this "unclassifiable remainder" and that, in the gaps, there is power in potential.

Notes

¹ Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra, eds. *Breaking Boundaries* (New York: Berghan, 2015), 3.

² *Ibid.*, 48.

³ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁶ Elaine Fantham, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁸ Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (New York: Knopf, 2014), 17.

⁹ Deman, J. Andrew, *The Margins of Comics* (Toronto: Nuada Press, 2015), 31.

¹⁰ *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (Burbank: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017), DVD.

¹¹ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Turner, *Ritual Process*, 95.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁹ *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 62.

²² *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Boundaries & Thresholds: Papers from the Katherine Briggs Clubs Colloquium* (Woodchester: The Timber Press, 1993), 84.

²⁸ *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

²⁹ William Marston, *The Golden Age of Wonder Woman: Volume 1* (Burbank: DC Comics, 2017), 7.

³⁰ Lepore, *Secret History*, 196.

³¹ Mitra C. Emad, "Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender & Nation," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 39 (2006): 982.

³² Fawnia Soo Hoo, “The ‘Wonder Woman’ Costumes Are a Celebration Of Female Empowerment,” *Fashionista*, June 5, 2017, <https://fashionista.com/2017/06/wonder-woman-film-costumes>.

³³ Painter of Louvre G 443. Hoplite and Amazon, detail, vase shoulder. c. 430 BCE. Artstor, library-artstor-org.subzero.lib.uoguelph.ca/asset/ARMNIG_10313469724

³⁴ Terrie Waddell, *Wild/Lives* (Sussex, Routledge, 2010), 12.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *Wonder Woman*, 2017.

³⁷ Horvath et al., *Breaking Boundaries*, 4.

A Foe He Can't Fight: Tony Stark, Addiction, and PTSD

Matthew Wincherauk

Abstract: This article investigates the manifestation of the character Tony Stark's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and how he attempts to cope with his traumatic past throughout the *Iron Man* film trilogy and *The Avengers* ensemble movie. I analyze how Tony's traditionally masculine superhero traits affect his PTSD, its management, and how his inability to cope with trauma develops into an addiction to his Iron Man suits. This article challenges traditional notions of masculinity and investigates how Tony's character refutes the stereotypes of the male American hero. In the end, the focus on trauma and addiction in the *Iron Man* movies proves to be helpful in beginning conversations about mental illness.

Keywords: Iron Man, PTSD, trauma, heroism, addiction

Debuting in 1963 under *Tales of Suspense*, Iron Man (Tony Stark) has become one of Marvel Comics' most popular superheroes. In 2008, *Iron Man* was the first movie set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). During his time as a comic book mainstay, Iron Man deals with addiction and mental illness, including his addiction to alcohol during the "Demon in a Bottle" arc and his various Iron Man suits.¹ Despite the many physical dangers that Tony faces as Iron Man, I argue that his greatest foe will always be self-doubts and sense of his own inadequacies. These doubts and supposed failures are amplified by Tony's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While Tony believes that his suits are what make him strong and valuable, he fails to recognize that his suits trigger his PTSD; thus, reinforcing that his value lies in his suits, rather than his own genius and heroic qualities. Tony's PTSD symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, anxiety attacks, invasive and violent memories, but he is successful at managing his symptoms when he is away from his suits. However, whenever there is an imminent threat, he convinces himself that the Iron Man suit is the only way to combat the threat, damaging the progress he has made. Unlike the villains that Tony can physically defeat, his PTSD represents a foe that he cannot out-manuever or out-think; his illness requires care that he is not capable of achieving as Iron Man.

While Tony Stark has appeared as a major part of seven MCU movies, my focus is on establishing the origins of Tony's trauma and his struggles with addiction in *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010). I end this article with an exploration of Tony's PTSD symptoms throughout *Iron Man 3* (2013). In this way, I demonstrate how his addiction serves to exacerbate his condition. I locate how Tony's addiction to his suits triggers his PTSD, and how his decisions

to leave behind his suits and accept the support of his friends and family lead him to become successful in managing his trauma and addiction. The result concludes that through productions like the MCU *Iron Man* films, a more intricate investigation of how mental health affects superheroes can be achieved. By using the platform that Marvel has with the MCU films, the exploration of important subjects such as trauma and addiction can help end the stigmatization of mental illness and addiction by reaching large audiences. By using a traditionally masculine hero like Tony Stark and exploring his trauma and addiction as a means to deconstruct the masculine hero, Tony proves to be a positive example of the American military hero.

Authors such as Bradford W. Wright have explored superheroes in relation to American political history and specifically in the context of their roles in military conflicts.² Writers of characters like Iron Man have frequently positioned these superheroes in this context. Despite these writings that center significant comic book characters like Iron Man and Captain America in military and politically influenced conflicts like the Vietnam War,³ there has been a lack of exploration that considers the psychological trauma that has occurred in these characters; how this trauma is portrayed; or how trauma and healing is approached in a superhero comic book setting. Using Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma, I examine Iron Man and PTSD in the MCU to determine the successfulness of Tony's healing process and investigate how popular culture productions engage with the complexities of understanding trauma and mental illness.

The relationship between having physical strength and a mental illness are at odds with one another because one is a toxic ideal that is seen as power and the latter, albeit ignorantly, is often viewed as a weakness. Giving Tony Stark both physical strength and a mental illness in a popular cultural phenomenon like *Iron Man*, highlights that mental illness is not necessarily a weakness. Tony Stark acts as a figure that brings awareness to PTSD and addiction to mainstream media, and as such starts a dialogue on the importance of recognizing the symptoms and effects of mental illness. However, it is important to note that while alcoholism is a large part of Tony Stark's character in the comic books, there is not enough evidence to suggest that the MCU's version of Tony Stark is also an alcoholic. Instead, I argue that Tony is addicted to his suits—which occasionally leads him to indulge in vices like alcohol—and his suits are the main trigger for his PTSD.

Finally recognized by mainstream psychiatry in 1980,⁴ post-traumatic stress disorder is used to describe the impact that a traumatic event has on the person experiencing the incident. The American Psychiatric Association defines PTSD as “a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault.”⁵ Symptoms of PTSD can range from “shell shock, combat stress, delayed stress syndrome, and traumatic neurosis,” and can be within the context of “both human and natural catastrophes.”⁶ Because the experience of trauma is encountered and engaged with differently by each person, Cathy Caruth asserts, “[t]o be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event. And thus the traumatic

symptom cannot be interpreted, simply, as a distortion of reality, nor as the lending of unconscious meaning to a reality it wishes to ignore, nor as a repression of what once was wished.”⁷ That is, one’s own understanding of trauma is defined by their personal traumatic experiences, and the methods of coping with each particular traumatic event changes. When considering someone like Tony Stark who experiences multiple traumatic events, these events must be considered as separate events with distinct symptoms for each, with independent methods of coping. However, while these traumatic incidents are driven by different events, they all share the same trigger: the Iron Man suit. Although Tony associates being a superhero with the suit, the suit is also what triggers his traumatic memories. Tony’s suits represent his initial method of physical survival and means to making him a morally better person. This is complicated when attempting to understand Tony’s story, the traumatic moments that repeat in his head and the accompanying methods of coping (both positive and negative). However, the suits are also what cause the most psychological damage because they are a reminder of his physical fragility and mental anguish. Tony must learn how to fight his foes physically and also how to detach himself from the Iron Man suits, in order to understand his trauma and begin to heal the wounds that he re-opens every time he steps back into the armor.

Tony’s initial moment of trauma occurs immediately in the first *Iron Man* movie when he is taken hostage by a terrorist organization and is forced to build weapons for his captors. Before Tony is taken, we see how he interacts with other people and understand his sole motivation in life: to be popular and lauded for his genius. Tony is vain and thinks little of other people—living a carefree and reckless lifestyle. This is partially why his capture and subsequent realization of his legacy as a warmonger is so powerful. The trauma in this moment of capture has multiple layers of effects on Tony’s psyche. First, he is forced to realize that his legacy will never be his popularity or genius in engineering. Rather, it will be the people that are killed, and lives that are destroyed because of the weapons that his company (Stark Industries) has produced. Tony’s captors use the weapons that his company creates to terrorize and control local villages. Though he sees himself as a great engineer and machine-building demi-god, in reality he is a destructive force. Secondly, Tony will always associate his traumatic moment in being captured and with losing Ho Yinsen, the Afghani engineer who saved his life after being taken hostage. Yinsen was one of the few people that believed in Tony’s capability to do good. When Yinsen sacrifices himself to give Tony the time he needs to finish his first Iron Man suit, Tony is faced with the reality of what being a hero means to him: doing what is necessary regardless of the personal cost.⁷ Although this realization drives Tony to become a better person and see that his weapons are destroyed, it also exacerbates his already reckless and passionate personality to the point of obsession. Finally, Tony’s trauma is related to the moment of building and using the Iron Man suit for the first time. Tony associates power and responsibility with his use of the Iron Man suit, but fails to recognize that the trauma he went through is attached to the suit. This in turn feeds his reliance and obsession with it.

Just as Tony's Iron Man suits are associated with trauma, they also feed his addiction for technologically-gifted powers in the face of impending death in *Iron Man 2*. As Tony grows more accustomed to the suits and the power and fame they provide, Tony pushes his body and mind to a critical mass. Ironically, the technology—the arc reactor in his chest—that keeps Tony alive is also what is killing him by poisoning his blood, making him desperate for a cure.⁸ The arc reactor acts as a physical symbol of his addiction as it is keeping Tony alive, but is also killing him at the same time. Tony's addiction to his Iron Man suits is noticeable when he testifies before the United States Senate and makes a mockery of the proceedings by proving how far behind everyone else in the world is when compared to him. When asked why Tony is the only person capable of being Iron Man, he responds by saying, "Because I'm your nuclear deterrent. It's working. We're safe. America is secure. You want my property? You can't have it. But I did you a big favor. I've successfully privatized world peace! What more do you want?"⁹ Tony's arrogance exemplifies his level of addiction with his Iron Man suits; not only is he addicted to using them, despite their detrimental effect on his physical health, but his addiction also means that no one else can have what he has—superpowers. The impending loss of his superpowers due to his blood poisoning means that Tony's addiction to them will only grow more severe as he starts to lose control of his life.¹⁰

When faced with adversity, Tony's addiction makes him selfish, reckless, and impulsive. When James Rhodes (AKA War Machine) confronts Tony and tells him that he is not the only person who can use this kind of technology and that he is mentally unfit to be using a weapon as dangerous as the Iron Man suit, Tony violently lashes out at him.¹¹ As Tony and Rhodes fight throughout Tony's house in their suits, the two become increasingly frustrated. Tony is angry at Rhodes because he took the War Machine suit without permission, and Rhodes is frustrated with Tony over his lack of responsibility and recklessness. Eventually, the fight culminates with Tony goading Rhodes into firing directly at him and asking him, "You wanna be the *war machine*, take your shot!"¹² The result is catastrophic as nearly all of Tony's home is destroyed. Tony's belief that he can do whatever he wants with the Iron Man suit leads Rhodes to take responsibility by taking away the suit from Tony. As Tony regains consciousness, he watches Rhodes leave with the suit. In this moment, Tony is physically confronted by what triggers him most—one of his suits—and he is unable to confront this repetition of his traumatic past. For Tony, losing the Iron Man suit to Rhodes means that he is no longer capable of holding the responsibility that the suit entails, and that the legacy he worked so hard to re-adjust has been stripped away. The drive to correct his legacy is a primary motivating factor for Tony in *Iron Man*, and the fear that his new legacy is in jeopardy causes Tony to spiral out of control, turning to excessive alcohol consumption and adulation from his fans. Tony's intoxicated state at his party seems to be a reference to the "Demon in a Bottle" story arc, but not an adaptation of it. As stated earlier, Tony's addiction is with his suits, and the state of his mental health is worsened when he turns to alcohol as a means to cope with his fragile physical health. Tony's

spiraling in this scene shows that while he has taken several positive steps in becoming a better person since being taken hostage, he has not eliminated underlying anxieties from his life. Tony needs to continue to work on re-writing his legacy and boosting his quality of life, rather than just refining his suits. In order to boost his quality of life, Tony has to identify what his triggers are in order to better understand his mental illness. However, *Iron Man 3* makes it abundantly clear that Tony has not been able to manage his trauma or identify his triggers, as his obsession with his suits becomes worse.

The opening of *Iron Man 3* sees Tony Stark doing what he does best: tinkering. The audience learns that Tony has spent the majority of his time improving his Iron Man suits, while he continues to ruminate on the traumatic moment at the end of the Battle of New York that occurred in *The Avengers* (2012).¹³ This scene sees Tony lift the nuclear missile through the wormhole above New York City. As he travels further into space, his call to his girlfriend Pepper Potts is cut off, and eventually his suit's systems begin to fail—with the voice of J.A.R.V.I.S., his personal artificial intelligence system also cutting out—leaving Tony alone in space. As Tony lets go of the missile, he sees it destroy the alien ship successfully ending the battle. While Tony is fortunate enough to fall through the wormhole before it is permanently closed, he falls unconscious before passing through, unaware of what his fate will be or if he will wake up again. This act of selflessness reflects a heroic desire that Tony has been seeking ever since he created the Iron Man suit to combat people that wanted to incite war. Tony sees his value as being the person that can defend his friends, family, and the world from those that seek to harm them. What he fails to improve are his own feelings of inadequacy. As we see later in the movie, Tony feels panicked and anxious as people crowd his dinner table, demanding his autograph for saving the world from the missile. When Tony is asked to autograph a child's drawing, he panics when Rhodes recounts the events that happened during the Battle of New York. In his panic, Tony breaks the crayon he was using to sign the picture. As Tony's anxiety levels rise, the small boy beside him asks, "How did you get out of the wormhole?"¹⁴ causing Tony to abruptly leave the table and go to his Iron Man suit stationed outside. Upon reaching his Iron Man suit, Tony exasperatedly asks J.A.R.V.I.S. what happened, and is notified that he is in fact experiencing an anxiety attack. In retort, Tony can only respond in an alarmed tone, "Me?"¹⁵ Tony's bewildered reaction to his anxiety attack is an indicator that Tony's mental illness has not yet been diagnosed and that he has neglected his mental health in favour of being a superhero. When Tony seeks out his Iron Man suit parked outside, he retreats to his safe space, a place where he feels comfortable and secure from the rest of the world. Although Tony sees his Iron Man suits as a safe space, he unknowingly returns to the source of his PTSD and his addiction. This retreat into his suit serves to suggest that Tony uses the suit as a form of self-medication—he feels good in the suit—so he does not recognize that it is a part of the problem. Therefore, this self-medication strengthens his ingrained belief that the Iron Man suit is the only means of attaining

his desired goal: to be a hero. Additionally, this belief about the suit correlates with Tony's status as a physically strong male character baffled at the idea that his mental illness is what ails him.

In their article "Gender and Mental Health: Do Men and Women Have Different Amounts or Types of Problems?" Sarah Rosenfield and Dena Smith note that, "men more frequently exhibit externalizing problems of substance abuse and antisocial behaviour... Men are more stoic and less expressive in their response to stressors... They more often try to control the problem, accept the problem, not think about the situation, and engage in problem-solving efforts."¹⁶ While Tony's reliance on alcohol is minimal in the movie adaptations, his substance abuse becomes the Iron Man suits, and his reaction to having an anxiety attack is one of bewilderment. He views himself as a traditionally strong male figure and cannot accept that he has been affected in such an incapacitating way. Tony's PTSD is out of his control, therefore he is unable to grasp the importance of an ongoing process of managing his triggers. Rather, he would prefer to not think about his situation, hoping that it will resolve itself. Too often does Tony conflate heroism with being strong in all aspects of his life, including his mental health. He has created a persona that is outwardly mentally strong and therefore would be unaffected by something like an anxiety attack. Tony does not admit that he grapples with PTSD because he views that acknowledgement as a weakness. This belief about mental illness reflects the stigma that surrounds traditionally hypermasculine characters like Tony Stark. Recognition of the conditions that affect mental health do not reflect weakness; rather, they provide an understanding of one's self and when help is necessary. In their article "Social Support and Mental Health," R. Jay Turner and Robyn Lewis Brown note that "social support may provide a basis for identifying behaviours and circumstances as promising targets for intervention efforts to prevent or ameliorate mental health problems."¹⁷ Recognition of the stressors and triggers that exacerbate mental health conditions like PTSD are essential, and ideally, identifying and getting help in recognizing and treating these conditions is done through a social support system. When Tony makes these recognitions and gets help from his friends and family, he is capable of his greatest acts of heroism and is able to do the most good for his world. Tony's reaction to his trauma also suggests a sense of invulnerability to non-physical threats. If Tony cannot physically fight someone or something, then he feels especially vulnerable and unwilling to face it.

In *Iron Man*, Tony's moment of trauma is made immediately aware to him by a threat of imminent death, which is significantly different from how he re-lives his traumatic moment from *The Avengers*. Caruth notes that in a traumatic moment, "[t]he pathology consists . . . solely in the structure of its experience or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is to be possessed by an image or event."¹⁸ Tony is haunted by the memory of going into space and releasing the missile. He fears that once he passes out, he will die. In the moment of his trauma, Tony finds himself completely isolated and alone, which is why he isolates himself in his lab to tinker with his Iron Man suits rather than spend time with friends and

family. Unknown to him for months, Tony has repressed the memory of his trauma, but in this moment at the restaurant recalls it in vivid detail. The traumatic repetition forces him to come to terms with an unrecognizable powerlessness after his anxiety attack begins, as well as an uncharacteristic selflessness. As Captain America notes during *The Avengers*: “The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.”¹⁹ Captain America's commitment to sacrifice has been seen multiple times in the MCU, such as when he sacrificed himself to stop a Hydra terrorist attack on the United States in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). On the other hand, Tony's level of commitment to his role as a protector is not as clearly defined through his actions. Tony fights because it is what is expected of him, not because it is what he should inherently do as a person of great mental, moral, and physical ability. When Tony is faced with making that sacrificial move with the missile, he makes an uncharacteristic decision to do a selfless act, taking hold of the missile and launching it through the wormhole.

In *Iron Man 3*, Tony faces his solitary moment in space from the Battle of New York where he nearly dies, which propels him to continue to live as a superhero, someone that is willing to make the threats of the world his prerogative and sacrifice himself. His superheroism is what allows Tony to feel like he has accomplished something meaningful, which is a feeling that was absent in the first two *Iron Man* movies. This feeling is communicated to the viewer through Tony's persistent will in enacting positive change as Iron Man and taking on the responsibility of protecting everyone that he can. However, in continuing his heroic endeavors, Tony is stuck in a cycle of traumatic repetitions. As Caruth states,

In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide...traumatic repetition therefore, is not only an attempt or an imperative to know what cannot be grasped that is repeated unconsciously in the survivor's life, it is also an imperative to live that still remains not fully understood.²⁰

Although Tony has survived his encounters with death, he continually relives them, and is reminded that he should have died, which leaves him in a cycle of traumatic repetitions.

Trauma in a story is “the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival.”²¹ Tony constantly faces the crisis of death through re-experiencing events in his flashbacks, nightmares, and in the protection of his world. However, the crisis of life is a two-fold issue that is not as well-defined as Tony's crisis of death. While Tony must live with the decision that he made in *The Avengers*, to better himself and strengthen the relationships that mean most to him, he must also live with the version of himself that was created from his heroic act. Tony's most notable crisis of life is continuing to live with his status as a hero, and that self-sacrifice and responsibility for his family, friends and the public defines his life more than ever

before. Tony's commitment to living the life of a superhero is confirmed shortly after the moment of Tony's anxiety attack when he challenges supervillain The Mandarin on national television. However, when Tony commits himself to a singular focus without contemplation, reflection, and time for self-care, he recklessly pushes ahead without consideration for the consequences that may occur. Furthermore, the threat of The Mandarin triggers Tony's PTSD, making Tony retaliate physically with the embodiment of his PTSD: his Iron Man suit. However, as Tony distances himself from the suits, he begins to understand the negative effects that they have on him. As a result, when Tony uses his suits for the final time in *Iron Man 3*, he only uses them out of necessity and destroys them afterwards. This destruction of the suits symbolizes his recognition and removal of the source of his addiction and primary PTSD trigger. It is not that his trigger is destroyed, but the physical embodiment of the trigger is now gone.

Tony's most well-thought out actions come when he is free from the suit. As much as the suit supports Tony physically, it detracts from him emotionally and mentally. Much like the end of *Iron Man 2*, Tony comes to a profound recognition of his purpose in life by the end of *Iron Man 3*; he does not need the Iron Man suit to be special. In fact, he has the arc reactor removed from his chest, and the shrapnel taken out of his heart, an act signifying healing and positive management of his PTSD and addiction. Tony's addiction to the Iron Man suit prevented him from truly healing physically or mentally. This procedure could have been done years ago when Tony returned to New York, but his desire to continue to be Iron Man and be a superhero prevented him from doing so. The shift that Tony makes is not only due in part to his own personal strength but is also reliant on his friendship with Rhodes and his relationship with Pepper, illustrating the importance of a support system. The conflict with The Mandarin; the realization that Tony is capable of effecting great change without his Iron Man suit; and that his friends and family support him leads him to make this life-altering decision. While Tony's PTSD and addiction cannot be eradicated, it is clear that he makes the necessary steps to heal and to grow as a person and a hero. As we leave Tony in *Iron Man 3*, he calls back to the brash moment at the end of *Iron Man* stating, "My armor was never a distraction or a hobby, it was a cocoon, and now I'm a changed man. You can take away my house, all my tricks and toys, but one thing you can't take away—I am Iron Man."²² Tony's armor physically made him Iron Man, but his intellect and capabilities as a leader are what truly make him valuable to the world and the people he protects. Tony's PTSD and struggle with addiction will remain a part of him forever; however, he learns to live with them in a way that is healthy for him and his friends and family. In seeing a superhero, a character that has traditionally embodied physical strength brought to such a low point because of his mental illness, but also capable of committing to bettering himself through healthy coping mechanisms and the support of friends and family, the general audience of these movies can see how to successfully manage mental health issues through this representation.

Tony's experience and subsequent understanding and development of coping methods for his PTSD are significant to the character. Perhaps the most important thing to come out of these films is a concrete understanding of how trauma and addiction can function within popular media, and especially in superhero films that have such a wide-reaching audience. This medium provides the opportunity to push against the stigma of mental illness by showing it onscreen. When illustrating the effects of mental illness on a popular superhero like Tony Stark in a major motion picture, it becomes a part of the conversation of hoping for cultural change surrounding the stigmas of mental illness. While the events of *Iron Man* may seem like a unique case, the methods of coping with a traumatic incident, assessing the elements that exacerbate the sufferer's PTSD, and coming to terms with the sufferer's trauma is a universal message. The *Iron Man* trilogy serves as an example of how PTSD is experienced and how it can be managed in a healthy and positive manner. It is significant that the *Iron Man* trilogy not only deals with trauma openly, but trauma is a central focus throughout the story because it is a part of many people's real lives. Considering the success that Marvel had in exploring PTSD through Iron Man, it is no surprise that future MCU characters like *Guardians of the Galaxy's* (2014) Peter Quill/Star-Lord, and *The Punisher's* (2016-2017) Frank Castle have dealt with trauma and loss in different, but equally interesting, unique and powerful ways. Peter Quill refuses to embrace the trauma of losing his mother by burying her final gift to him until he is finally emotionally capable of accepting his place in a new family. In *The Punisher* television series, Frank Castle engages with the traumatic loss of his wife and children by channeling the violence of war that had driven him during his service as a United States marine into a vigilante persona that refuses to accept responsibility for any act of criminality. Frank is unfortunately unable to find a healthy manner of coping with his trauma and believes that he is forced to continue his war on crime at the expense of future happiness. Both of these characters have unique ways of dealing with trauma. Frank Castle is not as successful in finding a healthy coping mechanism and therefore believes that he has to embrace the "Punisher" mentality to continue in his mission. Characters like Frank Castle are important in representing people that continue to struggle with PTSD and trauma and do not have access to healthy methods of coping or support systems like close friends or family.²³ The successes of the superhero cinematic genre allows for creators to experiment with how mental health conditions affect and influence our most popular and historically relevant comic book characters as well as allow for a space to talk about the influence of mental illness and ways to approach talking about mental health.

Notes

¹ David Michelinie and Bob Layton, *Iron Man: Demon in a Bottle* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008).

² Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, 9th rev. ed. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003).

³ Recent incarnations of the character, including the re-launched Marvel Comics Universe, have positioned many wartime characters like Iron Man and The Punisher as being involved in the Afghanistan or Iraq wars for spectator relationality because of their contemporary relevance.

⁴ National Institute of Mental Health, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *Research Portfolio Online Reporting Tools*, June 2018, <https://report.nih.gov/nihfactsheets/ViewFactSheet.aspx?csid=58>.

⁵ Ranna Parekj, "What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?" *American Psychiatric Association*, January 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/ptsd/what-is-ptsd>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4-5.

⁸ In *Iron Man 2*, in the process of preventing the shrapnel from reaching his heart, Tony's use of the Arc Reactor and its palladium core was ultimately killing him by poisoning his blood. The drive to cure this blood poisoning is what leads Tony to create a new element to power his Arc Reactor, which is currently unnamed.

⁹ *Iron Man 2*, directed by Jon Favreau (Hollywood: Paramount Home Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

¹⁰ According to the American Psychiatric Association, addiction is a "complex condition, a brain disease that is manifested by compulsive substance use despite harmful consequence." Addiction is known to cause changes to the areas of the brain that relate to "judgment, decision making, learning, memory and behavior control," distorting "thinking, behaviour and body functions" (Ranna Parekh, "What is Addiction?" *American Psychiatric Association*, January 2017, <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/addiction/what-is-addiction>).

¹¹ In *Iron Man 2*, believing that his blood poisoning is incurable, Tony consumes excessive amounts of alcohol at his birthday party. This reckless behaviour leads to Tony putting on his Iron Man suit while intoxicated and putting civilians attending his party in danger. This is when Rhodes dons the War Machine armour to stop Tony from accidentally hurting anyone.

¹² *Iron Man 2* (2010).

¹³ The Battle of New York refers to the alien invasion in *The Avengers* led by Loki. This battle brought the central characters of the MCU (Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow, and Hawkeye) together to form the Avengers team.

¹⁴ *Iron Man 3*, directed by Shane Black, (Burbank: Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2013), DVD.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Sara Rosenfield and Dena Smith, "Gender and Mental Health: Do Men and Women Have Different Amounts or Types of Problems?" in *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, eds. Teresa L. Scheid and Eric R. Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 260, 264.

¹⁷ Jay R. Turner and Robyn Lewis Brown, "Social Support and Mental Health," in *A Handbook for the Study of Mental Health: Social Contexts, Theories, and Systems*, eds. Teresa L. Scheid and Eric R. Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 204.

¹⁸ Caruth, *Trauma*, 4-5.

¹⁹ *The Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon (Burbank: Marvel Studios, 2012), DVD.

²⁰ Caruth, *Trauma*, 4-5.

²¹ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 7. Emphasis in original.

²² *The Avengers* (2012).

²³ Although this is beyond the scope of this paper, it is topic that should be explored in future works.

Of Amazons, Humans, and Batmen:

Superheroes and the Affectual Dynamics of Loneliness

Emily Scherzinger

Abstract

Western superheroes are often represented as having an inherent loneliness at the base of their character. This paper affectually analyzes Batman and Wonder Woman in *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) respectively to illuminate the complexity of loneliness as both a governing principle and a general public sentiment in Western society. Ultimately, superheroes are revealed to be paradoxically fighting against structures of injustice that produce and proliferate loneliness as a governing principle in Western society, while also simultaneously reinforcing said structures.

Keywords: affect, loneliness, superheroes, Batman, Wonder Woman

Superheroes have taken on a new dimension in the Western cultural imaginary, as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) have both churned out blockbusters which have dominated the action film category at the box office for the past five years. Consequently, their current presence in Western popular culture is impossible to ignore. Superheroes are as popular and powerful as ever, and yet an inherent loneliness lies at the base of their identities. There are many intersecting reasons for this foundational affect. For example, the superhero's mortal identity is erased in favour of their hero persona, thus burdening the superhero with the body-as-symbol. Furthermore, most superheroes experience unjust hardship, trauma, and sometimes oppression earlier in their lives, leaving them overwhelmed by loneliness and a drive to don the hero persona; however, these experiences of oppression and exploitation are not unique to superheroes. In fact, these aspects of existence that lead to superheroes' loneliness are everyday occurrences that are exaggerated for narrative effect. In the case of Batman, he was a child when he witnessed his parents' brutal murder, committed by Joe Chill, an impoverished criminal. When surrounded by men, Wonder Woman consistently experiences sexism not only as her human persona, Diana Prince, but also as her superhero persona. The common denominator between oppressive and traumatizing events and heroes' feelings of loneliness is the societal structures that produce and propagate these occurrences of violence; loneliness is built into Western social structures.

Superheroes have always been considered prismatic, as they reflect the general public sentiment. As loneliness becomes ingrained as an affectual result of neoliberal capitalist systems

of subjugation and exploitation in Western society, loneliness then becomes more pronounced in our superheroes. As examples, I specifically turn to the DCEU's contemporary cinematic representations of Batman in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), and the titular character from Patty Jenkins' box office smash *Wonder Woman* (2017). These films share the superheroes' respective origin stories, which begin in vastly different circumstances and yet are linked through the affectual dimensions of loneliness as both a driving and debilitating force in the characters. Both Batman and Wonder Woman are prime examples of the exceptional, mythologized figure of the Western superhero within contemporary cinematic portrayals that illuminate societal loneliness and its affectual dynamics.

The cinematic history of superheroes begins at the end of the 1970s, as they enjoyed a resurgence of popularity resulting from, as Jean-Paul Gabilliet chronicles in his expansive history of American comic books, "the technological progress made in the field of special effects,"¹ as well as "the elevation, in Western mass culture, of the individualist paradigm juxtaposing the legitimacy of established power."² Although Gabilliet unfortunately moves on quickly and does not elaborate, the history that is layered within this statement contains many implications for the figure of the superhero. The "individualist paradigm" is a widely accepted social theory that, as defined by a team of psychologists and mental health workers in a comprehensive Australian study of individualism and affect, "is characterised by an independent self-construal, emotional independence, and behaviour regulated by the individual's attitudes."³ Often associated with "creativity, economic development, and freedom," the individualist paradigm encourages growth of "competitive, achievement focused" individuals who "devalue the role of interpersonal relatedness,"⁴ effectively connecting how this paradigm necessitates isolation and loneliness. These qualities fostered neoliberalism as a social system structured around the laissez-faire economic schema that characterized America from the 1970s up to the present day. As neoliberalism began to centre and build upon the qualities of the individualist paradigm, the American body-politic was rife with disappointment and disillusionment: Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal, constant barrages of information concerning America's slow defeat in Vietnam, and many more events led the American public to distrust their governmental representatives, and, as Gabilliet suggested, question "the legitimacy of established power."⁵ Although it was only in the 1989 edition of the *Code of the Comics Magazine Association of America* that the expectation of heroes as societal "role models" and "reflect[ive] [of] the prevailing social attitudes"⁶ was materialized, it was always present among readers, publishers, and creators alike. As the waves of discontent and alienation from their political representatives washed over America, the superheroes of the time quickly reflected the prevailing societal affect in their own overwhelming displays of depression, isolation, and loneliness.

As an example, Batman has morphed significantly from the original character in 1939, created to ride the waves of Superman's comic-strip hero success. Though Batman originally used campy humour,⁷ the comedic elements were forgone and replaced with the comic and

cinematic portrayals of a tortured, flawed man subconsciously displacing childhood trauma onto the villains of Gotham City, as well as its corrupt police force. Christopher Nolan, the director of the *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012), points out, “Few superheroes have the sense of purpose and destiny that Batman has. He is driven by an incredible sense of rage, sadness and grief because of the tragedy of his parents’ murder at an early age.”⁸ These affects drive him to don the role of Batman, the ultimate model of justice. In these later versions of Batman, the superhero mirrors the sentiment of contemporary American people struggling under the now full-fledged neoliberal paradigm, or as Ann Cvetkovich describes, “the affects associated with keeping up with corporate culture and the market economy, or with being completely neglected by it.”⁹ In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Cvetkovich reveals the public nature of “*depression*, as a keyword in order to describe the affective dimensions of ordinary life in the present moment. Such an investigation emerges from important traditions of describing *how capitalism feels*,”¹⁰ as well as “the felt sensations of the lived environment.”¹¹

In *Batman Begins*, Gotham City is not only a visual representation of the affectual dimensions of capitalism, as every wide image of the city features grey, mundane urban cityscapes,¹² but is also consistently personified through characters’ descriptions of the city as ‘depressed,’ effectively taking on the alienation and pain that the citizens of Gotham experience. Rachel Dawes, Bruce’s childhood friend and love interest throughout the film, describes Gotham as “rotting,” even though the hegemonic narrative of Gotham is that its “depression [...] is history. It’s not. Things are worse than ever down here.”¹³ Batman’s origin story channels Gotham’s macroscopic ‘depression’ through the microscopic story of his parents’ mugging, a deadly event that Chill alleges he was driven to because of the devastating poverty in Gotham. Indeed, at the prosecution of his parents’ murderer, Bruce witnesses Chill express regret for what he did after the prosecutor announces to the court, “The depression hit working people, like Mr. Chill, hardest of all. His crime was [...] motivated not by greed, but by desperation.”¹⁴ This declaration clearly connects Wayne’s trauma and suffering to the larger societal inequities and injustices in Gotham without delegitimizing the pain of losing his parents. The prosecutor’s claim clearly aligns Batman’s origin story with his character’s resulting subjectivity and consistent affective state. More importantly, however, the prosecutor’s claim connects the deadly mugging to a broader societal “[e]pidemi[c] of depression, [which] can be related (both as symptom and as obfuscation) to long-term histories of violence that have ongoing impacts at the level of everyday emotional experience.”¹⁵

The ability to explore Batman’s affective state in any way is indebted to the labour of women, who have performed the feminized philosophical work surrounding affect, and yet his emotions are considered universal by nature of his affluent white male positionality within society. Therefore, it is necessary to explore other dimensions of loneliness that are specific to superheroes outside of the assumed universal experience of the white male, which is found in the figure of Wonder Woman, and the ways in which the loneliness she experiences is profoundly

shaped by her femininity. Even Patty Jenkins' film *Wonder Woman* begins with a soft introduction to loneliness, as Diana Prince, in the modern day, arrives at the Louvre and gazes at an old WWI-era photo of her in her Wonder Woman armour with a troupe of men.¹⁶ Her eyes begin to tear up as the camera zooms in on a man standing directly beside her in the photo. The Amazonian inability to age, Diana's presence in the modern day, and her nostalgic, reminiscing gaze indicate to the viewer that everyone in the aged, stained photo is dead, leaving Diana as the lone carrier of their memories. Diana is then revealed to be Princess Diana of Themyscira, an Amazon with superhuman powers from the Greek gods and raised by her mother, Queen Hippolyta. As a result of her heritage, Diana never met a man until the American in the photo, Steve Trevor, crash lands his plane on the Amazons' isolated island nation and unleashes a chain of events that lead to Diana leaving Themyscira and hunting down Ares, a god terrorizing Earth in the form of WWI's Axis military powers. Before Diana sets sail for Britain to end WWI, Queen Hippolyta informs Diana, "If you choose to leave, you may never return,"¹⁷ to which Diana asks her mother, "Who would I be if I stayed?"¹⁸ Here, Diana reveals the nature of her existence: to leave, she will be lonely, as the sole Amazon out in an unknown, violent world, and yet to stay would undermine Diana's entire identity, founded upon her belief in a stark difference between good and evil.

Diana embarks on her voyage to Britain with Steve, who remains shocked at her obliviousness to certain Western behaviours and structures, a reaction that foreshadows Diana's loneliness and isolation from the rest of the world. As an example, Steve sleeps beside Diana after initially suggesting that it was inappropriate,¹⁹ an assumption that reflects the constant sexualization of women within patriarchal Western culture. Diana, in response, does not understand what Steve attempts to imply,²⁰ because she never developed the self-objectifying lenses that are conditioned into women as a result of the hegemonic patriarchal nature of Western societal structures. Furthermore, after their arrival in London, Diana is consistently barraged with moments of objectification and sexism, such as a small group of British soldiers catcalling her, to which she merely looks surprised and confused.²¹ The deeper Steve and Diana move into the heart of London, depicted as the strategic epicentre of the Allied effort in the war, the more confusion and isolation Diana experiences when witnessing or being subjected to patriarchal expectations. Another example occurs after acquiescing to Steve's insistence that they visit his military superiors, the Supreme War Council, before heading to the Western Front and completing Diana's mission. In this scene, Diana begins to walk away from Steve with her hands on her hips, revealing her armour underneath her thick cape.²² Notably, Steve grabs her arms to close her cape, fiercely whispering to Diana, "You can't do that because you're not wearing any clothes," while glancing around, embarrassed.²³ Here, Steve moves Diana's arms from an assertive to submissive position when he grabs her and pulls her back towards him, an active and violent policing of Diana's appearance and body language for not seeming more conventionally feminine under Western standards.

Steve's sexist behaviours continue, as he consistently directs Diana physically through London by holding the small of her back²⁴ or grabbing her arm,²⁵ actions implying both male dominance and Steve's lack of confidence in Diana because of her fierce femininity. Steve's apprehension to treat Diana as an equal is additionally evidenced in a telling scene: Steve takes Diana to the office of the Supreme War Council, telling her to wait outside before entering during the middle of a man's speech.²⁶ Diana does not listen and follows Steve into the room, to which everyone falls silent at her appearance, and someone out of frame bitterly mutters, "There's a woman in here."²⁷ Steve apologizes to the men and leads Diana out, but not before labelling her as his "blind sister" in an attempt at explanation to his colleagues.²⁸ After the meeting, Steve's superior berates him for bringing a woman into the council room and ignores Diana completely, even though he clearly offends her during his criticism of Steve.²⁹ Steve later takes Diana into another meeting of the Supreme War Council, and introduces her as his secretary,³⁰ marking the second occasion Steve labels Diana according to societally appropriate codes at the time, in which a woman was defined only in relation to the men in her life, such as a sister, wife, mother, or employee. Diana protests when Steve's commander orders him not to return to the warfront, and Steve attempts to interrupt her, forcefully telling her, "Listen, Diana, I know this is confusing," before she cuts him off and asserts, "This is not confusing."³¹ Steve then tries to placate the Council rather than Diana, turning to the men and explaining, "She's with me," but Diana interrupts Steve again, pushes him aside, and yells, "I am not! I am not with you!"³² She eventually storms out of the office, fed up with the unsympathetic men willing to "sacrifice" the lives of the soldiers on the front, "[a]s if they mean less than [the Council's lives], as if they mean nothing."³³ Although this film is set during WWI, it is important to note that some of these experiences with sexism are still common in the modern day; it may not always be as obvious as the Supreme War Council silencing and removing Diana from the room, but many praxes and structures currently in place still work to silence, define, delegitimize, and oppress women, such as 'mansplaining,' school dress codes, and objectifying advertisements. Indeed, Western society's unwillingness to make space for and listen to assertive, intelligent, and powerful women like Diana is merely one facet of Diana's alienation from humanity as a whole.

Diana's loneliness and isolation are also due to her status as an object among a sea of subjects. Among the men at war, Diana is not initially acknowledged as an equal despite the fact that her abilities far exceed any of the soldiers' strengths. It is not until Diana proves herself as a valuable weapon in the war effort that the men finally respect her and allow her to make her own decisions. This dynamic is perhaps best implicitly exemplified in the ways that the relationship between Diana and Steve change. Before Steve was aware of Diana's superhero status, he consistently told her to "stay here" whenever there was danger,³⁴ but after Diana crosses No Man's Land and takes the enemy's trenches at the Belgian front,³⁵ Steve accepts Diana's direction to "stay here," behind some cover, while she "go[es] ahead" and clears a way for the men.³⁶ This flip in respect for Diana is voiced by Sammy, a soldier who objectified Diana upon

meeting her, calling her a “work of art,”³⁷ but he eventually tells Steve, “We all know Diana is capable of taking care of herself,” before joking that he was more “worried that you [Steve] won’t make it.”³⁸ *Wonder Woman*, touted and advertised as a feminist championship for Western media upon its release, frames Diana as worthy of men’s respect and attention only when she proves her use value to further the war effort in masculinized ways, such as destroying weapons and blowing up enemies.

Importantly, *Wonder Woman* is interpellated into a violent governing structure that upholds and protects the systems and values in Western society that founded and spread the “epidemic”³⁹ of loneliness: the military-industrial complex. As a weapon for the Allies, Diana is complicit in fighting and killing alongside soldiers even though, at the beginning of the film, she states, “Amazons were created by the Gods to influence men’s hearts with love, and to restore peace to the Earth.”⁴⁰ Arguably, the Allied powers were also attempting to restore peace during WWI, but this intention does not negate the environmental destruction, neocolonialism, and affectual damage that the military-industrial complex, and therefore Diana, promulgate throughout the film. Diana is even made aware of the effects of war, as she sees the “awful”⁴¹ injuries and shell-shocked states of the men at war, and is told by Chief, an Indigenous man who smuggles her and Steve’s team into Belgium, that he has “nowhere to go”⁴² as a result of the displacement “[Steve’s] people,”⁴³ the colonizers, imposed upon Indigenous peoples. Diana oddly seems to take Chief’s testimony as a validation of war, and the next scene features Diana running across No Man’s Land as triumphant and inspirational music plays.⁴⁴ This image clearly aligns Diana’s rush to war with bravery and justice, despite her complicity in the incredibly oppressive and problematic military-industrial complex and geo-political structures. Furthermore, Gal Gadot, the actress to portray *Wonder Woman* in the film, is an ex-member and vocal supporter of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and their colonial decimation of Palestine. Here, it is obvious that the dynamics of war in *Wonder Woman* are very real and reanimated into the present day; Gadot’s complicity in the violent and colonial military-industrial complex mirrors *Wonder Woman*’s complicity in the same praxis, albeit in different time periods. This dynamic effectively strengthens these systems of inequality that produce and proliferate loneliness as a general societal affect, while also implicating the white feminist tendency to legitimate colonialism as a form of humanitarianism.

Most superheroes are threatening to humanity’s overarching economic and governmental structure, as they have the potential and prerogative to dismantle whatever they deem to be immoral societal systems. As a result, the superhero must be reined in and incorporated into Western society in order to ensure that their conception of immorality is one that aligns with Western values and, thus, benefits societal structures that birth endemic loneliness. In “Disaster, Crisis, Revolution,” Eric Cazdyn notes, “[C]rises are built right into many systems themselves; systems are structured so that crises will occur, strengthening and reproducing the systems themselves. The boom-bust cycle of capitalism is only one of the more obvious examples of this

logical necessity.”⁴⁵ Superheroes, as crises-in-waiting, are beings that are incorporated into Western economic and governmental structures and, more broadly, white Western patriarchal values, ultimately fighting to uphold the very hegemonic systems that facilitate everyday injustices. Batman takes on the role of the Gotham City police when mounting a defense against the League of Shadows, who rightly pointed out that Gotham was “a breeding ground for suffering and injustice,”⁴⁶ but believed it was “beyond saving and must be allowed to die”⁴⁷ at their hands. Ultimately, Batman saves Gotham City from the League, and, in the last scene of the film, Lieutenant Gordan of the Gotham City police asks Batman for help catching the Joker.⁴⁸ This scene sets the film up nicely as the primary bookend of Nolan’s Dark Knight trilogy and, more importantly, depicts one of Western society’s most devastating structures, the prison-industrial complex, interpellating Batman into its scope of power. Indeed, Batman agreeing to help Lt. Gordan put criminals in jail effectively “strengthen[s] and reproduc[es]”⁴⁹ all societal structures, as the prison-industrial complex and its contingent powers are deeply interwoven with every level and facet of Western life. Consequently, Batman only reinforces and protects the conditions that led to the affective foundation of his identity: loneliness.

It is necessary to note that, while heterogeneous superheroes are necessary for the purpose of effective and ethical representation, interpellating non-conforming bodies, such as Wonder Woman, into these hegemonic structures of white patriarchal normativity ultimately works to incorporate and nullify the threat of resistant ways of being against established hierarchal systems of power. Wonder Woman stands as a non-conforming body not only because she has superpowers but also because she is a woman moving through spaces that only accept masculine bodies. *Wonder Woman* features a telling scene in which Steve’s secretary, Etta Candy, takes Diana shopping for an outfit less “distracting” than her armour,⁵⁰ immediately implying that her practical armour is less important than her appearance. She also engages in discourses surrounding women’s bodies as shameful, necessary to hide, and inherently sexual objects. For instance, when trying on dresses, to Etta’s dismay, Diana continually bends and lunges, asking exasperatedly, “How could a woman possibly fight in this?”⁵¹ After finding an outfit that Diana agrees to, she walks out of the store with her sword and shield, which Steve then directs Etta to take back to his office without consulting Diana.⁵² Diana is clearly interpellated into Western patriarchal society in this scene, as she is forced to wear feminine British clothes to quite literally ‘fit in,’ and these clothes are, as Diana implied, incredibly restricting, a metaphor for the way she feels policed in the patriarchal society she unknowingly entered. Furthermore, Diana is immediately separated from some of the key items she brought from her homeland, her sword and shield, because they do not, as Etta explains cheekily, “match the outfit.”⁵³ Diana’s body, feminized by the dress she dons, is thus deemed unworthy to carry her own sword and shield, obvious symbols of masculine power in British society that were historically popularized not only through their usage in war but also through family crests that are still passed down through patriarchal lineages. It is further notable that Etta takes the sword

and shield back to the office of the Supreme War Council, an incredibly masculine space where it is made clear that Diana is not welcome.⁵⁴ In these ways, Diana's souvenirs of her homeland are quite literally ripped from her hands, symbolizing the pressure to assimilate into Western society and its patriarchal roles for women that leave Diana feeling offended, ignored, isolated, and, ultimately, lonely.

Clearly, the ways in which loneliness manifests in the lives of Batman and Wonder Woman greatly differ, and yet they share a similar facet of their loneliness, along with all superheroes, as these extraordinary beings experience a drastic Cartesian split because of society's process of idolization. At the beginning of his book, *Loneliness as a Way of Life*, a personal and philosophical exploration meant to dive into the concept of loneliness and alienation, Thomas Dumm reads Shakespeare's *Tragedy of King Lear* through the lens of grief, loss, and loneliness. He considers the ways in which Lear's familial ties grow out of "profound sorrow, a recognition that they have suffered something awful already in their lives,"⁵⁵ which Dumm locates as the death of the Queen, leaving Lear's daughters without a mother and Lear without a companion. In the play's famous storm scene, which features King Lear physically struggling against the natural elements to reflect the strife in his mind, Dumm points to the ways in which Lear's "struggle is somatic, his body revolting against his soul,"⁵⁶ and thus he experiences a severe "Cartesian split between body and mind."⁵⁷ Dumm rightly outlines that this split "is a fact of life for sovereign beings, well described in the medieval doctrine of the King's Two Bodies, in which God's chosen sovereign is said to possess both a mortal and an immortal body,"⁵⁸ but never elaborates on the *affectual violence* that the Cartesian split entails.

As a king, Lear's subjectivity is radically separated from his mortal body, and his body is then produced as an immortal symbol of sovereignty. In "Affective Economies," critical race and gender theorist Sara Ahmed uses an economic metaphor to explore the ways in which affect is "produced only as an effect of its circulation" and "distribut[ion] across a social as well as psychic field."⁵⁹ Extending Dumm's analysis of *King Lear* to analyze the affectual violence of the Cartesian split illuminates how Lear's body, as a representation of sovereignty, accumulates its affectual meaning via its dissemination through society. Consequently, Lear's body is constructed as a representation of sovereignty, and is never fully able to represent his own subjectivity, as his mortal identity is entirely erased and silenced in favour of *symbolic value*. This violent dynamic induces loneliness and isolation, as the king's subjectivity can never be fully articulated, and thus he is always already closed off from meaningful relationships, leaving him essentially stranded in a symbol. Superhero narratives work in a similar fashion, often choosing to highlight the extraordinary nature of the figure and attach a specific meaning to the superhero's body that erases the presence of their mortal identity, which in the case of Batman and Wonder Woman are their human personas, Bruce Wayne and Diana Prince, respectively.

The "immortal body"⁶⁰ that the superhero is burdened with is the body-as-symbol, imbued with specific meanings within the cultural imaginary, such as justice or responsibility.

The superhero's body-as-symbol is a theme more thoroughly explored in *Batman Begins* than in *Wonder Woman*, effectively evidenced in Bruce's initial thoughts while brainstorming his masked crusader persona, musing, "As a man, I'm flesh and blood. I can be ignored, destroyed. But as a symbol, I can be incorruptible. I can be everlasting."⁶¹ Further, during one of the film's last scenes, Bruce freely admits to Rachel, "Batman is just a symbol."⁶² Batman's presence effectively silences Bruce Wayne and his mortal desires, as Rachel rejects Bruce's admission of love because she cannot be with him while he is Batman.⁶³ Indeed, for Batman to stand as a beacon of hope for Gotham City, Bruce's mortality and fallibility as a human must be silenced and ignored. Towards the end of the film as R'as al Ghoul burns down Wayne Manor, the family home full of Bruce's childhood memories but the Bat Cave is notably untouched, hidden beneath the foundations of the mansion.⁶⁴ This event indicates that Bruce is free of his family's significant influence over Gotham, as well as the tragic and haunting story of his parents' murder. Additionally, Bruce boards up the well that he fell into as a child that initiated his crippling fear of bats,⁶⁵ a clear demonstration of Bruce actively erasing his formative history to make room for Batman's overwhelming presence. Similarly, Diana leaves her homeland and family to ultimately become Wonder Woman, a blank slate upon which people project hope, justice, and truth, demonstrated when Diana saves a small Belgian village and stands before the townspeople as they clap, cheer, and give her gifts,⁶⁶ like offerings to a deity. Although taking on a superhero persona is technically a *choice*, the two films make it quite clear that it is one that both Bruce and Diana see as necessary to save Gotham and the world, respectively. Just because both heroes willingly and consciously endure the lonely and dissonant nature of societal idolization does not make it less present.

The affectual dynamics of loneliness are vast, political, embodied, and deeper than the well that Bruce fell into as a child. Superheroes, as prisms of the general societal state, allow analysis of the many individual facets that formulate loneliness in its entirety, such as sexism and misogyny, as well as the lonely nature of idolization. Unfortunately, the interpellation of superheroes into Western hegemonic structures that are founded upon inequality strengthens the everyday and historical injustices that occur rather than dismantling said structures. Although there are many routes of analysis beyond the affectual dynamic of loneliness that feed into and intersect with superhero narratives, they all conclude in the startling placation of the body-politic through the affect that sticks to these extraordinary figures. In other words, as long as representations of these superheroes are circulated and disseminated as exceptional beings within Western hegemonic values, traditionally 'positive' affects, such as hope, trust, and excitement, will stick to their bodies. This effectively hides from the body-politic the actual work of strengthening, reproducing, and maintaining inequitable societal structures that these superheroes comply with. As a result, their complicity ironically buttresses the loneliness that is the affectual base of many Western societal structures, such as the military-industrial complex, poverty, and sexism. Ultimately, as superheroes simultaneously fight against and are complicit in the very

systems they purport to fight against, the ways in which loneliness is a necessity for these governing systems is illuminated. Due to the driving force of isolation and loneliness in superhero narratives, it is impossible to escape, and will paradoxically push the superhero further into both their own and others' oppression.

Notes

¹ Jean-Paul Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 309.

² Ibid, 309.

³ Greg Scott, Joseph Ciarrochi, and Frank P. Deane, "Disadvantages of Being an Individualist in an Individualistic Culture: Idiocentrism, Emotional Competence, Stress, and Mental Health," *Australian Psychologist* 39, no. 2 (2004): 143-54.

⁴ Ibid, 143.

⁵ Gabilliet, *Of Comics and Men*, 309.

⁶ Ibid, 321.

⁷ Ibid, 19.

⁸ Marc Graser and Cathy Dunkley, "The Bat and the Beautiful," *Variety*, February 8, 2004, <https://variety.com/2004/biz/news/the-bat-and-the-beautiful-1117899714>.

⁹ Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 12.

¹⁰ Ibid, 11. Emphasis in original.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan (Hollywood, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2005), 1:52:37.

¹³ Ibid, 00:26:45.

¹⁴ Ibid, 00:24:21.

¹⁵ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 7.

¹⁶ *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (Hollywood, CA: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2017), 00:02:37.

¹⁷ Ibid, 00:37:29.

¹⁸ Ibid, 00:37:36.

¹⁹ Ibid, 00:41:50.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 00:47:16.

²² Ibid, 00:47:30-00:48:04.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid, 00:47:00.

²⁵ Ibid, 00:48:00; 00:52:36.

²⁶ Ibid, 00:54:33.

²⁷ Ibid, 00:55:05.

²⁸ Ibid, 00:55:20.

²⁹ Ibid, 00:55:45.

³⁰ Ibid, 00:57:29.

³¹ Ibid, 00:59:00.

³² Ibid, 00:59:16.

³³ Ibid, 1:00:04.

³⁴ Ibid, 00:52:36.

³⁵ Ibid, 1:14:07-1:14:29.

³⁶ Ibid, 1:17:10.

³⁷ Ibid, 1:01:23.

³⁸ Ibid, 1:29:45.

³⁹ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 13.

⁴⁰ *Wonder Woman* (2017), 00:07:17.

- ⁴¹ Ibid, 1:06:58.
- ⁴² Ibid, 1:10:45.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 1:14:07-1:14:29.
- ⁴⁵ Eric Cazdyn, "Disaster, Crisis, Revolution," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 4 (2007): 647-62.
- ⁴⁶ *Batman Begins*, 00:37:29.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid, 2:10:37.
- ⁴⁹ Cazdyn, "Disaster," 649.
- ⁵⁰ *Wonder Woman* (2017), 00:48:58.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 00:49:56.
- ⁵² Ibid., 00:51:03.
- ⁵³ Ibid.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 00:55:05; 00:59:00.
- ⁵⁵ Thomas Dumm, *Loneliness as a Way of Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 3.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 3-4.
- ⁵⁹ Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 120.
- ⁶⁰ Dumm, *Loneliness*, 4.
- ⁶¹ *Batman Begins* (2005), 00:42:03.
- ⁶² Ibid., 2:06:12.
- ⁶³ Ibid., 2:07:26.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., 1:49:50.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 2:06:05.
- ⁶⁶ *Wonder Woman* (2017), 1:19:22.

Ready Player Four: Waluigi and the Rainbow Road to the Alt-Right

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Abstract: Nintendo's mischievous fourth Mario brother, Waluigi, circulates in alternative online communities in a wild exchange of memes. This paper charts an online folkloric reception of Waluigi through an intertwining of controversial cultural politics with the critical theory of Jean Baudrillard and Mikhail Bakhtin. As an empty signifier whose carnivalesque elements imply the inversion of both the Marioverse and non-gaming worlds, Waluigi is situated as an apparatus for the realization of alternative politics. With contributions from the subcultural radar of Angela Nagle, this paper explores the fate of Nintendo's nefarious avatar as a mascot for alt-light manipulation.

Keywords: Waluigi, Nintendo, alt-right, Baudrillard, carnivalesque

The internet has gone purple. Nintendo's Waluigi, the lanky nemesis hailing from the Marioverse, envenoms the internet in the spread of toxic memes, infinitely looping "crotch-chopping" gifs, to eye-rolling and ironically sentimental (WAH)lentine's Day cards written in Comic Sans font. From advertising Sham-Wahs to sprawling across Wal-Ouija boards, the spike in popularity of Waluigi proves that Nintendo's fourth amusement plumber has infiltrated mainstream media quite unlike its classic red and green heroes. These hoodwinking memes seem to carry the nefarious tradition of the similar crimped-moustached and crooked-nosed caricature Dick Dastardly, whose quintessential archetype is known to somehow devilishly foil the world of Yogi Bear and his friends. Similarly, Waluigi sneaks up in popular media but to clown around in mainstream etiquette instead, and interrupt neoliberal divinations and capitalist prophecies. To many reddit and Facebook users uniting under the hashtag *#justiceforwaluigi*, there is an emergent "Wahmunism" that recognizes the induction of Waluigi as a 'woke' anti-hero into the memeverse along with other fictional characters such as Shaggy from Scooby-Doo, Thanos from the Avengers, Shrek, and Kramer from Seinfeld.

Patrick Marlborough, a journalist who writes for Australian online magazine *Junkee*, discerns Wahmunism throughout many dark corners of the internet: "His persistent nastiness makes him stand out in the Marioverse. The internet is littered with videos of pop-songs as sung by Waluigi, Waluigi edited into other video games, Waluigi fan-films, even Waluigi hentai...

The catchphrase ‘It’s Waluigi time’ is ubiquitous on Tumblr. Waluigi revisionism is very real, but ultimately harmless.”¹



Figure 1 “We need to build a wah,” source: <https://i.pining.com/>

seen shapeshifting into the likeness of an eternally weeping Pepe the Frog, whose popularity stems from Matt Furie’s 2005 comic *Boy’s Club* (figure 2). As Mike Wendling, author of *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* observes, Pepe is none other than a “mascot of the alt-



Figure 2 “Waluigi as Pepe the Frog,” source: <https://i.imgur.com>

At face-value, #justiceforwaluigi, popularized after Waluigi’s exclusion from Nintendo’s *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate*, appears only to be an innocuous jamboree of memes as a visual—at times, sentimentally poetic—petition for the avatar to be a playable brawler. Scrolling through these memes might come to a crawling stop when a floating head of Waluigi appears superimposed onto a screenshot of Donald Trump during a presidential debate with the caption “We need to build a wah” (figure 1). Suddenly, the symbolic function of Waluigi mutates. In another corner of the Internet, Waluigi can be

seen shapeshifting into the likeness of an eternally weeping Pepe the Frog, whose popularity stems from Matt Furie’s 2005 comic *Boy’s Club* (figure 2). As Mike Wendling, author of *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* observes, Pepe is none other than a “mascot of the alt-right movement” which saw its appropriation into alt-right groups by 2016.² Could Nintendo’s seemingly harmless avatar be co-opted by neo-Nazism? Exploring the bait-and-switch of “alt-light”³ psychology, which according to Wendling may provide insight to Waluigi’s affiliation with Trump and Pepe, and perhaps alt-right sensibility. According to Wendling, the purpose is to slowly “draw people further towards [the alt-right] side.”⁴ The self-pitying and misunderstood Mario brother demonstrates a new face of authority in a toxic atmosphere of eccentric right-wing politics, obnoxious memes, and revolutionary platformers that question Marlborough’s claim of “harmless” Waluigi revisionism. The purple haze of Wahmunism as an ideology is an incubator for an alt-light sensibility, and Waluigi stands proudly as its leader.

To show how this inauguration unfolds, I situate Waluigi within a short analysis of Jean Baudrillard’s concept of the epidemic of value to demonstrate how Nintendo’s avatar is an exemplar for the modern condition of the effects of valueless simulation. Rendered as an empty signifier, Waluigi becomes the perfect meme on which layers of “memetic folklore”⁵ command Waluigi’s moral leverage. This discussion will dovetail with a brief look at Mikhail Bakhtin’s

reading of the carnivalesque to provide insight to Waluigi as an inversion of a political left (Mario). I develop these concepts in tandem with Angela Nagle's examination of alt-right sensibility to situate Waluigi as a potential influencer of alt-light agendas. But before we dive into the theory, this paper turns toward a quick glance of Waluigi's extraordinary technological heritage.

Since his sudden inception in 2000 as a new contender in *Mario Tennis*, Nintendo has yet to provide any lore of his belonging in the Mario Brothers series alongside the digital heroes of the 80s and 90s. Neither have they provided a strong interpersonal history of the character to legitimize his belonging to the franchise. The idea of Waluigi was simply born out of a technical flaunting that filled the Nintendo 64's infrequently used fourth controller, allowing the rare occasion of four players to compete in doubles tennis against each other. It would make sense, as Marlborough states, that "Mario had a decent rival in his stocky garlic-guzzling nemesis Wario, but what of his brother (and doubles partner) Luigi? And so [Fumihide Aoki of Camelot Games] created Waluigi."⁶ Red with green; yellow with purple. The pairing makes some sense in basic colour theory; yet, as he rightly observes, the archetypal matching between Luigi and his rival is blatantly left unfinished. Quite possibly, the fact that Waluigi was cloned *ex nihilo* out of technological rather than mythological necessity has provided reason for the gaming community to give Waluigi some character development or "folklore,"⁷ in Lynne McNeill's words, onto an otherwise silent and misshapen model. For McNeill, attaching folklore to an instance of internet media is an attempt to linguistically rescue its otherwise fading relevance.

But Waluigi's lack of narrative within the fantasy realm of the Marioverse has indeed led to stranger interpretations that have engendered him with a questionable sense of eeriness. Take for example, Marlborough's recitation of a profound ontological analysis of Waluigi beginning with a brief etymology of his name:

[I]n Japanese [it] is Waruīji: 'warui' meaning 'bad', 'Luigi' meaning, well, 'Luigi'. But it's also a pun on the Japanese word Ijiwaru, meaning ill-tempered or cruel. Waluigi is nothing but an alternate of Luigi, who is an alternate of Mario—created to be Wario's (the perversion of Mario) partner in crime.⁸

Aside from piggybacking on the vague familial ties to other characters who already have a story established within the Marioverse, Waluigi's only ties within the rivalling tennis quartet is through harmless cloning, palette swapping, and a quasi-inversion of protagonist semantics and branding.⁹ This recuperation makes some logical sense in terms of creating rivals out of more than the colour of their suspenders. Waluigi also grotesquely differs in likeness and attitude, which has consequentially given the character a doubly negative quality. Marlborough's analysis continues, but in this instance to address his curious letter-branding: "His design (his cap bares

an upside down ‘L’) denotes his role as a signifier created solely to reflect another signifier—a black-mirror, a shadow of a shadow. Waluigi is a triple negative, a man outside himself, a man built to fill a void by functioning as one.”¹⁰ Therefore, Waluigi is a distant derivative of the original formula but separated from it by two other layers of archetypal signifiers which can never be known to the other two brothers. While this mirroring analogy seems dark, Marlborough is perhaps using this cultural folklore to suggest that Waluigi is an isolated character and is branded as such by a doubly inverted symbol that is not read in the English alphabet. This means Waluigi is more easily dissociated from the script of the Marioverse. In other words, the avatar represents the appeal of total freedom and can vacillate between gaming and cultural politics more readily than the other brothers. This might explain the explosion of Waluigi-mania on the internet as the avatar is a magnetic *tabula rasa* for the absorption of a new cultural code—symbolized by none other than the upside-down L.

It is not surprising that Marlborough’s echoing of Waluigi’s cultural folklore closely follows Baudrillard’s post-structural warning signs of simulation and simulated value, which is reminiscent of his critique of modernity in *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*. In an ironic usage of particle physics as a way of lamenting the fate of aesthetics within burgeoning technocratic societies and their biopolitical side-effects, Baudrillard claims that:

[T]he first of these stages had a natural referent, and value developed on the basis of a natural use of the world. The second was founded on a general equivalence, and value developed by reference to a logic of the commodity. The third is governed by a code, and value develops here by reference to a set of models. At the fourth, the fractal (or viral, or radiant) stage of value, there is no point of reference at all, and value radiates in all directions, occupying interstices, without reference to anything whatsoever, by virtue of pure contiguity. At the fractal stage there is no longer any equivalence, whether natural or general.¹¹

It is helpful here to briefly contextualize his theory within the interests of this paper, and through the lens of the game’s universe. The first stage of value can be associated with the original idea (Mario) which is then dispersed by consecutive and very close repetitions of the model and inherent value in effort to create companions or family members (Luigi as second; Wario as third). Each brother differs slightly in appearance and outlook but in the case of Waluigi, who represents the fourth or fractal stage of value, this avatar is absolved of referential weight and granted absolute interpretive freedom. This results in what Baudrillard calls the “epidemic of value, a sort of general metastasis of value, a haphazard proliferation and dispersal of value.”¹² Waluigi’s appearance as a nemesis is furthermore compatible with how Baudrillard describes the desire of the fractal. That is, the “secret urge to be rid of their [original] ideas, of their own

essences, so as to be able to proliferate everywhere, to transport themselves simultaneously to every point of the compass...A thing which has lost its idea is like the man who has lost its shadow, and it must either fall under the sway of madness or perish.”¹³ Waluigi’s iconic “wah,” one of the only sounds we ever hear him speak, represents the cry of the fractal stage, the emotion of the metaphorical descent into madness through endless repetition and valuelessness. In the same analytic swoop, Baudrillard’s transaesthetic theory opens up possibilities to suggest how Waluigi as a digital creation can or might infect many areas of cultural content simultaneously without seeming incongruous or dissonant. In the endless void of simulated images and models, at the very end of the “culture degree Xerox,”¹⁴ the fractal or Waluigi stands as a symbol of simulated liberation. The very notion of an endless simulation serves for Baudrillard as an introduction to talking about transaesthetic theory, or what he colloquially calls “after the orgy”¹⁵ of modern thought. Such orgiastic concepts transform the original inception of a “Mario Party” into an entirely different connotation. Waluigi’s transaesthetic value could only be represented politically as an evil nemesis to thwart the original heroes of the traditional Marioverse and assume the form of an online troll.

As a model of the fractal stage, Waluigi demonstrates a certain permeability through various levels of culture. Gene Park’s illuminating analysis in *The Washington Post* might contribute to some understanding as to why Waluigi is precisely gaining significant amounts of leverage in the meme world. He states:

[T]hat blank canvas ended up becoming Waluigi’s greatest gift. Since he stood for nothing, supporters could project their wildest hopes unto him, like Barack Obama in 2008 but actually good at golf. He can be described in a single website as anyone from a “true nowhere man” to “the logical end point of capitalism” and the “triumph of capital over creativity.” In other words, Waluigi became the perfect meme fodder.¹⁶



Figure 1 @Waluigi, “FUCK CAPITALISM”
November 14, 2017.

Park’s analysis begins to unveil that the appeal to Waluigi is partially due to its plasticity. Whereas the explicit meaning of Waluigi within the Marioverse desires to trick Mario, the symptomatic meaning could imply a risk to corporate Nintendo. The idea has been exacerbated in one of Waluigi’s more popular memes, which ironically depicts the avatar standing triumphantly over a cityscape reminiscent of a tyrannical Godzilla with the caption “FUCK CAPITALISM” (figure 3).

Park seems to indicate that those who might choose to play as Waluigi or perhaps photoshop him into the ceaseless production of memes, is an attempt at social and capital destruction. Franck Libery, who contributes to the conspiracy webpage “Critical Perspectives of Waluigi,” extends Park’s review to include a more intimate and therefore more terrifying interpretation:

Waluigi is the true nowhere man, without the other characters he reflects, inverts and parodies he has no reason to exist. Waluigi’s identity only comes from what and who he isn’t—without a wider frame of reference he is nothing. He is not his own man. In a world where our identities are shaped by our warped relationships to brands and commerce we are all Waluigi.¹⁷

In the eyes of Waluigi, there is an opportunity to vicariously experience a way to question fraught relationships with capitalism and its discontents. Even if Waluigi is rolling on the ground crying or amplified hatred for an economic system, the behaviour that Waluigi embodies—both in-game and online in meme circulation—correlates to triumph. No matter the outcome played out in-game, Waluigi is consistently portrayed as a sore winner. As Marlborough reflects on the evasive politics of right-wing politician Tony Abbott, “[i]f it looks like they are about to lose they threaten to upend the board or rip out the cartridge. To them, winning isn’t enough. *You* must lose. Hence, victory never satisfies them. They love to fire the blue shell, dodging it is something else entirely.”¹⁸ Waluigi’s elevation into the political sphere may not be farfetched, especially if Nintendo is producing games with overtly juvenile impulses, prepubescent syntax, and yet oddly surreal designs directed towards a younger generation.

When Mike Wendling described the alt-light to be a more “youthful movement”¹⁹ that “values trolling and internet pranks not just as sideshows or light diversions, but as key forms of political action”²⁰ and “video gaming,”²¹ there might exist an uninterrupted interaction between home console or PC gaming, and online video-sharing platforms like YouTube and Vimeo. The switch between video game and online political rant is rather effortless in current console and home computer technology. Whether ripping out a cartridge from the Nintendo, forced rage-quits and hard resets, there may be a correlation between (violent) behaviours in gaming, and the relationship to the production of memes in the form of trolling in a space online as an outlet of victory.

Kate Pahl’s study on the relationship between the formation of childhood identity, particularly in how it appears in interactions with console video games, could provide some explanation to this type of behaviour. Pahl, who incorporates Pierre Bordieu’s concept of *habitus* into her study, demonstrates how the process of recontextualization occurs cross-textually in the formation of identity “from de-location to re-location of a discourse.”²² She concludes that there are comparable spaces created in video games that are similar to elements found within everyday

life situations that are peripheral but nonetheless pedagogical. “Console games,” she explains in her research, “offer a space in which identity can be linked to agency, and embodied action is possible in ‘as if’ figured worlds. Some [participants] lacked material resources, and yet these games offered ‘a figured world’, which led to textual possibilities.”²³ What is missing from her conclusion is the blending of these worlds as one platform, which can not only confuse ethical perception but also prevent gamers from perceiving the ethical world behind social media platforms in the realization of these textual scripts. The discrepancies or even verisimilitudes between them might be stretching out another space between them in which gamers toy and experiment with political thought. Shifting between both spaces becomes a translational complication and requires spatial acuity.

Gaming seen as an activity performed in solitude, coupled with the explosion of unfiltered online content, nevertheless alludes to Angela Nagle’s commentary on the vacillation between aggressive political activity and extreme isolation. In her book *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right*, Nagle traces “[t]he Situationists’ critique of ‘the poverty of every day life’, like Baudelaire’s *An oasis of horror in a desert of boredom* [italics not mine], [which] articulated a common sentiment found from the Romantics through to contemporary online cultures of transgression, that ennui, boredom and inertia requires a counterforce of extreme transgression.”²⁴ It is no surprise that Waluigi has become the meme that sways between political spaces and gaming environments.

The pace is building momentum. The faster the vacillation between worlds combined with the increasing verisimilitude of digital worlds, the less distinct the line becomes between worlds. This approach helps Nagle consider online transgression with a utopian critique. She approaches her understanding of 4chan culture through an invocation of the carnivalesque, which derives from Mikhail Bakhtin’s theoretical work on utopias and carnival. She refers to his concept of the carnivalesque to help identify notions of “radical transgression against hierarchy and hegemony”²⁵ to locate “self-descriptions of trolls on what trolling is doing.”²⁶ In quoting Bakhtin, she states: “[c]arnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival’s participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking deriding.”²⁷ Under a Bakhtinian interpretation, Waluigi resembles more of the court-jester or clown in the Kingdom than he does his fellow wrench-holding plumbers, symbolized by both his incessant “wah-ha-ha’s” and the inverted L, a sigil to grant access to turning the world upside-down. Waluigi juxtaposed as an abrasive, political, clownish figure resounds with the alt-right tendency to invert any form of political correctness to “[mirror] that of their sworn enemy, the ‘social justice warriors’”²⁸ (Mario and Luigi). While they might appear similar in the distorting, a tacit threat lingers in the warped reflection.

Michael Gardiner notes how Bakhtin's reading of the carnival can indeed be interpreted as a threat but in a way that conveys a "bacteriological metaphor."²⁹ In "Utopia as Critique," Gardiner claims that the "carnival is an 'antibody' living within a pathological social body, always threatening to rupture it from within. In other words, carnival is simultaneously continuous with the contemporary social world and desperately at odds with it."³⁰ That goes to say, any world, political or not, that Waluigi "crotch-chops" in has an internal, churning, carnivalesque aspect as a gateway to alternative social worldviews. Furthermore, as Gardiner continues, the idea of "[c]arnival...leads men and women out of the 'apparent (false) unity' of the epic mentality, out of what is 'indisputable and stable.'"³¹ Carnival, therefore, can be regarded as a powerful catalyst for the proposition of desiring to see drastic change in any context. The carnivalesque element drives Waluigi both digitally and conceptually can mediate an array of alternative voices through which reigning political ideologies can be challenged. Bakhtin says this is also expressed as laughter, an entwining symbol of mockery, celebration, and triumph, which for those voices "frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely derived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church's cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere."³² This outer realm can not only contain just any cultural ideology, but as Gardiner interprets, "the necessity of linking ideological criticism to some conception of an alternative (and more desirable) state of affairs, to a 'positive hermeneutic' which expresses our 'deepest fantasies about the nature of social life, both as we live it now, and as we feel in our bones it ought to be lived.'"³³ While alternative typically indicates direct opposition, the carnival rather implies the communal desire of an optional space through grotesque aesthetics. The dream is of a new but intensely radical social order that the carnivalesque implies through exaggeration and debauchery. It might be fitting that Waluigi, an obtusely and inhumanly shaped figure, could indeed represent the effigy of revisionist tendencies. The theory of carnival can in many ways be regarded as a transgression against societal norms that is not only found within the world of political affairs, completely inverting left-wing politics and mocking neoliberal hegemony.

Carnival does not only signify the grotesque as interruption. Carnival indicates relentless celebration which implies the complete admiration of grotesque bodies as well as the realization of a range of sexualities—Waluigi is no exception. Just as often as he is juxtaposed with political satire, Waluigi is also sexually provocative. Images reflecting multiple sexual orientations or allusions to phallic objects in memes continuously surface online that further distill him as a form of cultural resistance. Jenny Powell writes on "Critical Perspectives on Waluigi," that seems oddly similar to Baudrillard's transaesthetics:

Mario has Princess Peach and is seen to be the embodiment of heterosexual happiness but rumour and counter rumour surround his brother Luigi. Whilst sometimes he is paired with Princess Daisy there are enough hints and innuendoes dropped throughout the Nintendo universe that suggest Luigi is not quite cut from the same cloth as his brother. If we take it that yes, Luigi is a closeted homosexual—and this is by no means a controversial reading—then he is clearly a non-threatening cuddly and slightly cowardly homosexual stereotype. What then of Waluigi—his warped reflection? Waluigi is the negative stereotype: the cowardice curdles to malice and spite, the cuddly curves become jutting sharp edges—he is aggression without machismo. Whilst Bowser and Wario have simple motivations—lust for the Princess, lust for money—Waluigi poses more difficult questions, he seems to reject the patriarchal and capitalist urges of his villainous contemporaries. He wants something else, on one hand he is an avatar for fear of the homosexual other, on the other he is the truly liberated individual, he rejects the façade of the Mushroom Kingdom: he wants no part of the (Mario) party.³⁴

New memes have explored the possibility of a secret homosexual affiliation while others seek to hypersexualize (or hyper-realize) him. This process plays a larger role in the act of online transgression, as further indicated by Nagle. She suggests that in the online culture wars, this explicit sexuality can become confused as “it has run up against a deep philosophical problem about the ideologically flexible, politically fungible, morally neutral nature of transgression as a style, which can characterize misogyny just as easily as it can sexual liberation.”³⁵ The ambiguity surrounding Waluigi allows meme creators to channel a multitude of sexual discourses that run a fine line with transgression in the form of misogyny. Established through a contortion of societal conventions, Waluigi is hyper-realized as belonging to a “master race” and actively contributes to and is influenced by the alleged “manosphere”³⁶ of alt-right tendencies.

This hypersexualization of Waluigi might indeed run parallel to the transformation of what Nagle has been identifying as:

the dominant and consistent preoccupations running through the forum culture of the manosphere...the idea of beta and alpha males. They discuss how women prefer alpha males and either cynically use or completely ignore beta males, by which they mean low-ranking males in the stark and vicious social hierarchy through which they interpret all human interaction.³⁷

The transformation of a white and lanky “beta male” into a representation of an “alpha male” through what Nagle has been calling the “Supreme Gentleman,”³⁸ is able to shed some light on the controversy surrounding the alleged alt-right sympathizer and incel Elliot Rodger and even Waluigi himself.³⁹

Rodger, who shot both men and women on a violent rampage with the intention of murdering only female students at the University of California-Santa Barbara, had previously uploaded a manifesto expressing his desire to “punish women for rejecting him.”⁴⁰ This despair, as Nagle comments, “described his sexual frustration, his hatred of women who kept thwarting his desire to have sexual relationships with them, his bitter loathing of those sexually successful men, who he also called ‘brutes’ and ‘animals’, and his contempt for interracial couples in which a white woman coupled off with a man Rodger saw as genetically inferior to him.”⁴¹ The behaviour surmounting from witnessing sexually successful men engage in relationships with women describes a peculiar theme Nagle proposes, that reflects a “social-Darwinian thinking about attracting a mate in the name of ‘game,’ then to the misogynist rhetoric about women’s evil narcissistic nature when the gaming doesn’t work.”⁴² This awkward ‘game’ can be visualized through the peculiar way that Waluigi love-letter memes are structured and experienced in their circulation (see figures 4, 5 and 6).



Figure 4 “Waluigi the god of romance,” source: <https://www.shitpostbot.com>

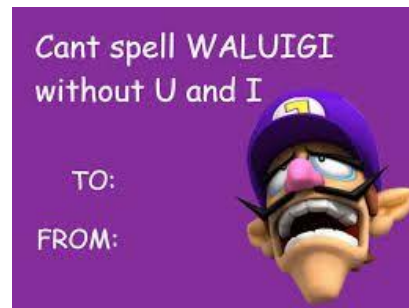


Figure 5 “Cant spell WALUIGI without U and I,” source: <https://i.pinimg.com>



Figure 6 “Nintendo too scared of Waluigi,” source: <http://i.chzbgr.com>

Nintendo too scared of Waluigi’s raw sexual energy to include him in the Super Smash Bros. roster.



A mixture of repressed aggression and latent frustration in these failed flirtatious memes recalls the tacit depression of Rodger and others who might have experienced a similar tripartite of rejection, inferiority, and vicariousness. Despite his self-loathing of genetic makeup and social ranking, Rodger nonetheless considered himself as the supreme gentleman, in what could be a defensive ploy to circumvent nonacceptance. Nagle observes that this declaration “has remained a joke on the anti-feminist Internet ever since and Rodger has become a comical archetypal figure of the angry beta male.”⁴³ In this light, the supreme gentleman appears carnivalesque and the relationship, referring to Baudrillard, is fractal. The supreme gentleman is none other than Waluigi. It is no surprise then, that Waluigi’s head also appears superimposed in a meme as the brooding “Stupid, Sexy Waluigi,” a title referencing Homer’s frustration with his own body when seeing Ned Flanders in a ski suit (figure 7). Others, as in the title of a subreddit by user mcgrathc09, ask the online community the question, “Why does no one care about our boy?”⁴⁴ Alpha or not, the malleable male body of Waluigi shapeshifts to accommodate these failed sensibilities that demonstrate the impulse to decidedly interrupt conventional representations of



Figure 7 “[Wahs Romantically],” source: <https://i.imgflip.com>

the alpha male, the societal norm, and the racer in first place.

The trajectory outlined in this paper points to the dawn of a countercultural figure. It has only scratched the surface of a comparative analysis of situating the meme of Waluigi as an alt-right influencer and the leader of Wahmunism. Uncovering this elusive group may point to a culturally incognito faction of radical enthusiasts fighting to keep an alternative and carnivalesque world spinning in an adoration of Waluigi. Such ironic veneration of this character has become so culturally powerful that Wahmunism

stretches beyond its newly found political associations. For example, recent memes have already begun the apotheosis of Waluigi by juxtaposing him in a square with Jesus, the Buddha, and Shiva with the caption “What’s up with Gods holding their hands up?” (figure 8). Not surprisingly, Waluigi’s square has been swapped out with images of a saluting Hitler and Salt Bae. The religion of Wahmunism also emerges.

What's up with Gods holding their hands up?



Figure 8 "What's up with Gods holding their hands up?" source: <https://knowyourmeme.com>

Nintendo has likely missed its window of opportunity to deter alt-light groups from incorporating Waluigi's likeness as part of their political campaign. Further research would be required to determine whether the impact of these culturally profound memes is in fact, detrimental to Nintendo. Is there room for Nintendo to breathe new life back into Waluigi as the fourth player in a harmless game of tennis or in a heroic jaunt through Mushroom Kingdom? The quickest answer is no. Waluigi, drowning in a sea of memes and a void of representation, might not resuscitate from the subcultural myths or "dankness" that surrounds the avatar. As a symbol for the carnivalesque, a space of inverted political colouring and grotesque ideologies, Waluigi is on a polychromatic pathway (or Rainbow Road) to alt-right groups through the soft power of alt-light sensibility. It is on this pathway that Wahmunism can be accessed. Ready Player Four?



Figure 9 “Wal-Ouija,” source: <https://www.memedroid.com/>

Notes

¹ Patrick Marlborough, “Tony Abbott is the Waluigi of Australian Politics,” *Junkee*, September 14, 2017, <https://junkee.com/tony-abbott-waluigi-australian-politics/123371>.

² Mike Wendling, *Alt-Right: From 4chan to the White House* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 10.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁵ For a further exploration into the intersection of traditional folklore and digital memes, refer to Lynne S. McNeill, “The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice,” in *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2009).

⁶ Marlborough, “Tony Abbott.”

⁷ McNeill, “The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice,” 82.

⁸ Marlborough, "Tony Abbott."

⁹ The Mario Brothers' series is not the only gaming series to have accomplished this. Consider the palette-swapped ninjas from the *Mortal Kombat* series introduced to expand the roster of fighters. Of the most jarring is Noob-Saibot, an avatar that is void of any colour palette and detail in the second installation of the series. He merely exists as a shadow and is also secret character.

¹⁰ Marlborough, "Tony Abbott."

¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena* (London: Verso, 2009), 5.

¹² Ibid., 5.

¹³ Ibid., 6.

¹⁴ Ibid., 9.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Gene Park, "Waluigi Was Robbed and Humiliated By Nintendo, And His Fans Are Furious," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2018/06/12/waluigi-was-robbed-and-humiliated-by-nintendo-and-his-fans-are-furious/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b32a10f3a30b.

¹⁷ Franck Libery, "I, We, Waluigi: A Post-Modern Analysis of Waluigi," *Critical Perspectives on Waluigi*, May 20, 2013, <https://theemptypage.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/critical-perspectives-on-waluigi/>.

¹⁸ Marlborough, "Tony Abbott."

¹⁹ Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 16.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Kate Pahl, "Narrative Spaces and Multiple Identities: Children's Textual Explorations of Console Games in Home Settings," in *Popular Culture, New Media and Digital Literacy in Early Childhood*, ed. Jackie Marsh (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2005), 133.

²³ Pahl, "Narrative Spaces," 143.

²⁴ Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Washington: Zero Books, 2017), 35.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 36.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Wendling, *Alt-Right*, 20.

²⁹ Michael Gardiner, "Bahktin's Carnival: Utopia as Critique," in *Bahktin: Carnival and Other Subjects: Selected Papers from the Fifth International Bahktin Conference*, ed. David Shepherd (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993), 37.

³⁰ Ibid.

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³² Mikhail Bahktin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 7.

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³⁴ Jenny Powell, "Spoiling the Mario Party: A Queer Theory Analysis of Waluigi," *Critical Perspectives on Waluigi*, May 20, 2013, <https://theemptypage.wordpress.com/2013/05/20/critical-perspectives-on-waluigi/>.

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³⁷ Ibid., 89.

³⁸ Ibid., 99.

³⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 98.

⁴³ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁴ mcgrathc09, Reddit Post. October 1, 2018, 8:54pm,
[https://www.reddit.com/r/COMPLETEANARCHY/comments/9km5uf/why_does_no_one_care_about_o
ur_boy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/COMPLETEANARCHY/comments/9km5uf/why_does_no_one_care_about_ur_boy/).

It's a Bird! It's a Plane! It's Security as Pacification!

Security as Pacification in *Superman Red Son*

Meg D. Lonergan

Abstract¹

Cultural criminology acknowledges that criminology is not only produced by all participants in popular culture.² This field asserts the importance of theory in practice and in the cultural imagination.³ Mark Neocleous and others argue that there continues to be underdeveloped connections between everyday life, insecurities, and socio-cultural theories of power by criminologists and other scholars.⁴ Neocleous asserts that scholars are forcing models that do not actually fit or which are based on missed connections, like thinking of crime-fighting and war-fighting as distinct, instead of one in the same.⁵ While Neocleous and George Rigakos brought a critical theorization of security as pacification to the table, I have tried to go beyond the edges of security studies and demonstrate key elements of this theorization through a more accessible medium, the comic book *Superman Red Son*.⁶

Key words: Superman; Security; Criminology; Culture; Political Economy

This need to 'secure insecurity' is fundamental to every aspect of capitalism, from the everyday life of the citizen—subjects of capitalist policies through to the global reach of capitalist corporations. On the one hand, it reaches into the minutia of our personal, social, economic and cultural acts, and the security practices through which 'everyday insecurities' are policed [...] On the other hand, it also points to the security practices through which international insecurity is managed: power balances and international treaties, diplomacy and world order, the clash of civilizations and the nomos of the earth.⁷

Introduction

Cultural criminology is a growing field of research that acknowledges that criminology is produced not only by scholars but also by all participants in popular culture.⁸ This field asserts the importance of theory in practice and in the cultural imagination.⁹ Mark Neocleous and others argue that there continues to be underdeveloped connections between everyday life, insecurities, and socio-cultural theories of power by criminologists and other scholars.¹⁰ Neocleous asserts that connections, like thinking of crime-fighting and war-fighting as distinct, instead of one in

the same.¹¹ While Neocleous and Rigakos brought a critical theorization of security as pacification to the table, I have tried to go beyond the edges of security studies and demonstrate key elements of this theorization through a more accessible medium, the comic book *Superman Red Son*.¹²¹³

In their book *Criminology Goes to the Movies* Nicole Rafter and Michelle Brown demonstrate how “[a]ttention to these possibilities [between theory and culture] initiates interdisciplinary alliances and promises a more democratic, less exclusionary view than that of academia of what it means to do criminology and be a criminologist.”¹⁴ Similarly, Cote et. al. and the contributors to their edited collection *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization*, call for making learning an explicit part of social change. They define utopian pedagogies as “inquiries rooted in an expanded concept of struggle, one that emphasizes the importance of everyday practices and of contest over meaning in the reproduction and transformation of hegemonic power relations.”¹⁵ Thus, class struggle must incorporate cultural texts and the struggles over their meaning, as part of both understanding and thinking through theories as well as part of revolutionary praxis. Following from these intellectuals, this article seeks to speak to two audiences: an audience perhaps just beginning their academic journey in undergraduate studies; or to those with some knowledge of Superman via popular culture, and who are interested in the political economies of security but are unsure of where to start.

Cultural texts are places where we can play with ideas and simultaneously engage with the social, the political, and the cultural. Cultural texts open up a space where theories are made more accessible, aid in raising consciousness, and ultimately have the potential for revolutionary praxis. *Superman Red Son*¹⁶ takes the iconic American superhero and explores an alternate reality where Superman had crashed and was raised in the Union of Soviet Social Republics (USSR), instead of his canonic upbringing in rural Kansas. Through this alteration, the comic raises important questions about geopolitical contexts and paternal family issues, ultimately leaving the answers to these questions open to the interpretation of the audience.

My reading of *Red Son* asserts that despite the conversion of Superman from an American-capitalist to Soviet-communist superhero, security remains the dominant mode of pacification used to subdue the regular citizens (non-metahumans) of the DC Universe. Furthermore, while Lex Luthor becomes the American hero—as the continued arch nemesis of Superman—Luthor remains the true supervillain of both the United States and the global population. This article is not just an exercise in applying cultural theory to pacification, but also an endeavor to illustrate how the theoretical insights of Neocleous and Rigakos’ pacification theory can directly be seen in *Red Son* and to demonstrate these pervasive theoretical understandings by grounding them in a more accessible cultural medium.

Using a textual analysis of the comic book, I outline Neocleous’ critical theory of security as pacification¹⁷ and articulate how *Red Son* makes these ideas accessible to a broader

audience, by enshrining them in this alternative origin of the iconic Superman. Starting as a historically inverted version of the classic Superman mythology and of the Cold War, *Superman Red Son* challenges the reader to critically examine their own understandings of the Cold War, contemporary global politics, and heroes and villains. While *Superman Red Son* is not a perfect representation of a Utopic future, that does not restrict it from having an impact on inspiring future visions and realities.

Literacy as a social practice itself involves people using cultural texts and creating meaning from them.¹⁸ While Bruce discusses the importance of revisions to understanding language and thinking critically about their thinking and writing, I assert that this can be expanded to creating and playing with “revisionist texts” which rewrite historical or well-understood texts to see something about them differently.¹⁹ Bruce writes of revision: “At the heart of revision is the act of looking for other possibilities and ways of envisioning [...] Revision reframes and reveals alternatives. Revision disarms and dissects. Revision expands our awareness and enlarges our perceptions.”²⁰

The audience is encouraged by the illustrated nature of comic books as a medium to keep Superman as its protagonist by giving the most page presence and artistic detailing. *Red Son* appeals to the familiarity of Superman as known superhero—at least at the very beginning—as it gives the reader space to think about the issues being presented instead of relying on preconceived values and beliefs. This is significant in the context of the Cold War, as like the “War on Drugs,” War on Poverty,” and “War on Terror,” the Cold War was an ideological battle for the global supremacy of one of two socio-economic systems: capitalism versus communism.²¹ The Cold War, either in *Superman Red Son* or in reality, was never simply about ideology or about national security, as Neocleous notes:

It has long been the case that warfare abroad is linked, politically, ideologically, technologically, and industrially, to the maintenance of order at home; conversely, that order abroad often means warfare at home. This is not, however, some by-product of war but is, rather, a deliberate ploy to ensure that the state can keep its own citizen-subjects pacified in what is, essentially, a full-scale war against its own people.²²

Thus, the Cold War was just as much about ensuring the pacification of domestic populations as it was about pacifying the ‘evil’ threat overseas. The discourse of national and global security legitimates the use of state power for security and has become a conceptual weapon in power games between states, wherein “*Security* becomes the overriding interest and the principle above all other principles.”²³ The order of capital is an order of social insecurity.²⁴

Allegory has frequent occurrences in both the DC and Marvel superhero universes.²⁵ It is crucial that we continue to revisit, reframe, and repurpose cultural texts and narratives to teach ideas and encourage critical thinking. *Superman Red Son* accomplishes this by having its reader revisit the Cold War and reframe their perspective from the other side so to speak, as their

identification remains with the familiar protagonist, and thus aligns with the communists as opposed to their traditional position as members of capitalist societies. This is the point of departure for engaging the readers' critical thinking skills as their comfortable positions are immediately flipped, and encouraging them to rethink their understanding of the historical contexts and underlying messages of the comic book.

Perhaps the most consistent and interesting stylistic choice of *Red Son* is the seemingly deliberate refusal to engage with the lives of any regular citizens either in the USSR or the US. Their lives are more or less inconsequential to the politics and leaders on both sides of the ideological spectrum, to the events and plot development of the story, and perhaps to the larger world. This is the beauty of comics as a medium; you can see in greater detail *some* characters (such as Superman and Lex Luthor), whereas others are literally faceless, with backs turned to the audience's perspective, not fully colored in, etc. Similarly, pacification is not so much about *which* groups need to be pacified or *why*, so much as there must be a *sense of insecurity* which is ideologically defensible from a liberal position to justify "security measures." That is, limitations on liberty such as those implemented at the G20 Summit in Toronto,²⁶ including coercive tactics such as "snatch squads" to target key organizers, "'less-than-lethal' weapons," "no-go zones," "sound cannons," the banning of face covers, and kettling protestors.²⁷ The insecurity posed to capitalist institutions by the protestors requires harsh security measures to ensure the continued reproduction of capitalism,²⁸ even at the expense of constitutionally protected freedoms of expression and association, as well as freedom of movement. It is not that the protestors are a threat of bodily harm to others, as much as they pose a symbolic and actual threat to the status quo, and thus must be pacified by whatever means in order to achieve *a sense* of security.

Security as Pacification

Security as pacification is insidious. Beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, political economists and police scientists such as Patrick Colquhoun and Sir William Petty, developed the understanding that in order to control a population and harness them for their productive labour, they needed a system in place.²⁹ Rigakos describes this process as first involving the elimination of economic alternative by "privatizing communal and titled land and then implementing a system of police to enforce (indeed, inculcate) a wage-labor system. This process was dependent on the use and threat of violence in tandem with 'moral education' for workers."³⁰

Superman Red Son is an exceptional text for demonstrating all of these necessary components of pacification and how they are involved in changing an entire socio-economic system over time. This is done in seemingly two opposite directions: the USSR is communist under Stalin and later Superman, and secondly the US goes from capitalist to something that can potentially be read as socialist under President Luthor. While Superman's fall as leader of the

USSR simultaneously signals the fall of the Soviet Federation, it would be a mistake to assume that Luthor then transitions America away from capitalism and towards a socialist Utopia.

In the third act of the comic book “Red Son Setting,” Luthor inherits an America ravaged by civil war, extreme poverty, and incredible political instability. He then uses his position as both president and CEO to put the entire working population in jobs and their children in recreational activities; he drastically increases the standard of living for everyone and eliminates homelessness; he keeps on the Green Lanterns as a police force (and he manages to change even Wonder Woman’s mind about the *good* of communism for the inhabitants of Earth). Luthor deploys pacification to restore order to the revolting population. This pacification not only helps ensure Luthor’s continued political popularity and position while maintaining the system of liberal democracy, but also ensures his continued profits as the CEO of LexCorp, which manufactures a whole range of products within the DC Universe, such as weapons and defensive technologies. Even Luthor’s continued leadership serves as a reminder of the threat that Superman once posed, and the fact that there are other metahumans in existence which may once again pose a threat to the American capitalist way of life. Neocleous notes that ‘securing insecurity’ is both an essential component of the process of pacification and the (re)production of capitalism.³¹

(Consistently) Capitalist Lex Luthor

Pacification must be productive. It must create after it destroys everything from economic development, education, health care, cultural and ideological productions. Then must be built to take the place of the systems destroyed.³² It is this illusion of stability or a return to stability which helps keep the masses complacent. This is clear in *Red Son* when Luthor becomes president in 2001 and immediately installs protectionist measures: he stops trading with the rest of the world and relies on an internalized market; these policies ensure a decent wage and working conditions; he doubles the standard of living twice in a single year; and he manages to secure 100% employment and ends homelessness in the 34 states that did not succeed during the Civil War. However, our narrator Superman tells us: “[H]e wasn’t doing it for **the people**. Lex Luthor couldn’t **stand** the people. Like everything else in his miserable life, this was just the first stage in the master plan to finally eliminate me.”³³ In rebuilding American infrastructure and seemingly achieving *security* and stability, Luthor achieves the pacification necessary to ensure his ability to continue his war on Superman, continuing his presidency, and presumably his ability to profit as the chief weapons developer of the now economically prosperous United States.

Lex Luthor is the bourgeoisie embodied. He is a rich man and the owner of a corporation, who understands himself as better and more important than all people, while he accumulates his money and power from the labor and deaths of others. And importantly, as Neocleous notes,

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society.”³⁴ Thus, Luthor is compelled to continue to ensure the innovation and development of new technologies and instruments of production. The relations of production between his machines/artificial intelligence beings, human workers, and those above human form, elevates himself and Superman to gods among men. Luthor drastically shapes and reshapes domestic and international politics; demonstrating the reciprocity between pacification and accumulation both domestically and in occupied territories.³⁵

Soviet Superman

Superman does not have an alter-ego in *Red Son*. In *Red Son* he is only referred to as Comrade Superman, and later President Superman. There is no communist Clark Kent trying to live a normal human existence, only the alien with superpowers. This poses an interesting dynamic and conflict for Superman and for Soviet politics in the comic, as a fellow comrade describes how Superman’s very existence undermines communist ideals: “You’re the **opposite** of Marxist doctrine Superman. Living proof that all men **aren’t** created equal.”³⁶ Perhaps this is a misunderstanding of both Superman and equality; Superman is not a human and should thus not be taken as proof that not all men are equal. Additionally, being equal does not necessitate being identical in every way. Equality instead should be understood as equal in ability to thrive and to fulfill their potential to the fullest. Utopia is a dream of everyone’s personal fulfillment not of a legion of cookie-cutter-people. To clarify, Utopia is not “a place we might reach but [...] an ongoing process of becoming.”³⁷ Utopia, both for the purposes of *Superman Rising Son* and this article, is the ongoing process of fulfilling one’s potential and working towards better futures.

Like in the regular DC universe, Superman’s guiding principal is “doing what is right” and not allowing himself to be used as a living weapon. Despite being on the opposite end of the political spectrum from his normal position as capitalist America’s hero, in *Red Son*, Superman remains committed to this position. Simply being raised on and internalizing communist ideologies does not change Superman’s internal morality—he adamantly refuses to commit violence or be used as a tool of the state.³⁸ His guiding principle is to prevent harm, which is tested by Lex Luthor by purposefully having a satellite crash into Metropolis and almost killing *his own wife*—Lois Lane Luthor. Luckily, Superman flies in to save her (and everyone else).

Superman’s commitment to ensuring the safety of Earth’s citizens unfortunately also falls into the trap of trying to ensure their *security* as well. This is a dark turn for Superman during the middle portion of the comic wherein he feels he must rely on increasingly fascist governing policies to ensure security in the communist states. Superman’s reliance on liberal ideals is predictive of this downfall:

While [the] loss of liberty ‘for security reasons’ is quite minor compared to, say, what takes place in a fascist regime, the practices involved, the wider state of emergency to which it gives rise, and the intensification of the security obsession, have a disquieting tendency to push contemporary politics further and further towards entrenched authoritarian measures. Liberalism is not only unable to save us from this possibility, but actually had a major role in its creation and continuation.³⁹

Thus, in *Superman Red Son*, Superman’s determination to “do the right thing” by the standards of morality tightly entwined with liberalism leads him to attempt to balance *security threats* and instability against the installation of authoritarian measures. Not even Superman can achieve this theoretical balance and ends up going so far as to surgically implant thought-reprogramming devices into the brains of detractors to create his own race of pacified cyborgs—pacification and security technology literally embodied. This myth of an achievable balance between security and liberty makes possible the acceptance of all sorts of authoritarian measures by the populous because they are justified on liberal grounds.⁴⁰

During the Cold War, Luthor-laboratory monsters like Superman II and civil unrest are presented as legitimate security threats to both citizens and the state. The comic demonstrates how things determined to be a threat to the state are never value-neutral. Throughout a majority of the comic, Superman is thought of as the primary threat to the United States and much of the world from the perspective of the both Americans and their government. Neocleous reminds us that by calling anything a security issue “plays into the hands of the state, and the only way the state knows how to deal with threats to security is to tighten its grip on civil society and ratchet-up its restrictions on human freedoms.”⁴¹ Thus, consciousness raising about the hegemonic use of “security” and of the ideological falsity of liberty versus security is essential in the fight against violent authoritarian practices by the state.

In the end, Superman is pushed to suicide (although does not actually die due to his superpowers) by a note from Luthor, which tells him that perhaps he could just put the world in a glass bottle—implying that this would be the most efficient method of ensuring the Earth’s security, but entirely removing people’s liberty. This defining moment in the comic book demonstrates to the reader that the dichotomy of liberty versus security is false; there is no balance to be struck because liberty is not dependent on security—liberty is dependent on one’s ability to fulfill their potential and help to fulfill the potential of a society. *Security* is clearly demonstrated as an attack on social well-being in order to secure power and profit for the oligarchy.

Conclusion

Whether Superman is an American capitalist or Soviet communist he presents a security threat and thus becomes the justification for American development of weapons of mass destruction, as

well as the subtler forms of violence of pacification. Neocleous describes the reciprocal condition of the state, insecurity, and violence as such:

These are wars in which the battleground is the security of everyday life; wars in which ‘the gloomy old’ everyday practices of some lives must be destroyed and replaced with ‘brighter and nicer new lives’; wars against suspect communities defined as such by the state itself and said to be making the territory insecure; wars in the form of acts of security in which the state asserts its being *as a state* by insisting on itself as *the* political mechanism for the fabrication of social order.⁴²

Perhaps Superman was correct in faking his own death and leaving earth to its own devices; it is clear that it is the state that is the real supervillain to be vanquished and a new social order to be built by the proletariat from the ground up.⁴³ Not even benevolent Superman can create Utopia from a position of authority within a hierarchical system. Superman’s Soviet Union was somewhere between a religious system and fascism, and not conducive to the ideals of justice or equality which he espouses. If Utopia is really always on the horizon, a process of working towards both conditions for justice and reaching human potential as individuals and as society, then Superman had to leave when he realized he could not create a perfect society. Because a perfect society is a process of constant revision—not just a singular revolutionary moment. When Superman realized that he was reliant on pacification as security he can be understood as having realized that security versus liberty is not a balance to be achieved, but a cog in reproducing capitalist relations of exploitation; a form of perpetuating violence for more violence and onward for infinity.

The logic of security is anti-political,⁴⁴ and the logic of cultural texts is the liberty of expressing new and exciting ideas. Comic books may be commodified works of art that are mass produced by mega-corporations to sell action figures and movie tickets, but that does not limit their potential to help us think differently about how we understand the world around us and imagine the new world we want to build. By using a textual cultural analysis of the comic book *Superman Red Son*, I have demonstrated Neocleous’ theories of security as pacification in a way that is more accessible to the public outside of academia.

Notes

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² Nicole Rafter and Michelle Brown, *Criminology Goes to the Movies: Crime Theory and Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), ix.

³ *Ibid.*, x-1.

- ⁴ Mark Neocleous, "'A Brighter and Nicer New Life:' Security as Pacification," *Social & Legal Studies* 20, no. 2 (2011): 192.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Mark Millar, Dave Johnson, and Killian Plunkett, "Superman Red Son," *Red Son* 1-3, Revised edition, DC Comics (April 2014).
- ⁷ Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192. Emphasis in original text.
- ⁸ Rafter and Brown, *Criminology*, ix.
- ⁹ Ibid., x-1.
- ¹⁰ Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son."
- ¹³ *Superman Red Son* was originally published as a three-issue mini-series by DC Comics in 2003. However, my analysis is of the revised text published as a single comic in 2014.
- ¹⁴ Rafter and Brown, *Criminology*, 4.
- ¹⁵ Mark Coté, Richard J. F. Day, and Greig de Peuter, eds., *Utopian Pedagogy: Radical Experiments Against Neoliberal Globalization* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 5.
- ¹⁶ Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son."
- ¹⁷ Mark Neocleous, "Security, Liberty and the Myth of Balance: Towards a Critique of Security Politics," *Contemporary Political Theory* 6, no. 1 (2007): 131-49.
- ¹⁸ Mark Neocleous and George Rigakos, eds., *Anti-Security* (Ottawa: Red Quill Books, 2011), 32.
- ¹⁹ Heather E. Bruce, "Subversive Acts of Revision: Writing and Justice," *The English Journal* 102, no. 6 (2013): 31-9.
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- ²¹ A. V. Fedorov, "The Application of Hermeneutical Analysis to Research on the Cold War in Soviet Animation Media Texts from the Second Half of the 1940s," *Russian Social Science Review* 57, no. 3, (2016): 194-204.
- ²² Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 201.
- ²³ Neocleous, "Myth of Balance," 137.
- ²⁴ Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 192.
- ²⁵ Kevin J. Wanner, "In a World of Super-Violence, Can Pacifism Pack a Punch?: Nonviolent Superheroes and Their Implications," *The Journal of American Culture* 39, no. 2, (2016): 178.
- ²⁶ See Alessandra Renzi and Greg Elmer, "The Biopolitics of Sacrifice: Securing Infrastructure at the G20 Summit," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no.5 (2013): 45-69.
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- ³⁰ George Rigakos, *Security/Capital: A General Theory of Pacification* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3.
- ³¹ Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 194.
- ³² Ibid., 195-7.
- ³³ Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son." Emphasis in original text.
- ³⁴ Neocleous, "Security as pacification," 191.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 200; 202.
- ³⁶ Millar, Johnson, and Plunkett, "Superman Red Son." Emphasis in original text.
- ³⁷ Coté, Day, and de Peuter, *Utopian Pedagogy*, 13.

³⁸ Wanner, "Nonviolent Superheroes," 177-92.

³⁹ Neocleous, "Myth of Balance," 144.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁴¹ Ibid., 146.

⁴² Neocleous, "Security as Pacification," 203.

⁴³ Paul Blackledge, "Marxism, Nihilism, and the Problem of Ethical Politics Today," *Socialism and Democracy* 24, no. 2 (2010): 104.

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Claiming the Domains of the Natural and the Supernatural in Netflix's Occult Series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*

Shreyashi Mandal

Netflix's recent adaptation of the *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* comic-book series,¹ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (2018),² reached immense popularity not just because of magic spells, but also the politics of power and gender. Sabrina Spellman, the titular character, is the half-witch, half-mortal daughter of the late rebel priest Edward Spellman (warlock father) and Diana Regina Sawyer Spellman (mortal mother). The twenty-first-century witch is reimagined as a powerful figure who has carried the aggression faced by her community through the ages.³ She has gathered enough strength to withstand the social isolation that led to the suppression of her emotions and diminishment of her power.

Sabrina is introduced as a reimagined teenage witch seeking solutions to end gendered violence at Baxter High (the school she attends) as well as her coven.

*Sabrina: I have got this club started at school. Of Women protecting women. Sort of like a coven.*⁴

Meanwhile, Sabrina's family is preparing for her "dark baptism" on the night of the Halloween eclipse, which also happens to be her sixteenth birthday. Dark baptism is an initiation ritual where the body has to be given up to the Dark Lord in exchange for youth, supernatural power, and immortality. Sabrina has questions about granting another person the right to control and possess her body; these reservations are dismissed by adults as mere adolescent behavioural problems.

*Sabrina: I admit I have reservations about saving myself for the Dark Lord. Why does he get to decide what I do or do not do with my body?*⁵

The adults believe that although the ritual may jeopardize the witch's personal interest or happiness, and the greater good must be assured by her sacrifice. The agents in charge of manipulating Sabrina into changing her mind are also important rank holders in the coven's hierarchy. They are the High Priest and the Dark Lord, positions monopolized by men. The Dark Lord will assign a position to Sabrina where her primary role would be to answer him whenever he summons her and perform perilous tasks as instructed by him.

Although Sabrina's desire to remain partly in the mortal domain is justified, is her desire a result of mortal conditioning? As another reflection of patriarchal control, the Dark Lord has ordered the mother of demons, Miss Wardwell, to emotionally manipulate Sabrina into agreeing to his terms. She plays upon the narrative that "women are taught to fear power,"⁶ using it as a prod to exploit Sabrina. In the tenth episode, when her scheming fails, Miss Wardwell brings the town of Greendale close to annihilation by summoning the thirteen

witches who were hunted by mortals and betrayed by their own community as a sacrifice to appease the town's lust for witch-blood. Sabrina is forced by her conscience to give up her mortal life in exchange of becoming the most powerful witch who alone is capable of saving the town.

In the end, Sabrina receives only what the Dark Lord was willing to grant; she gains the status of the most powerful witch at the cost of killing her mortal-self. The loss is beautifully portrayed in a scene where her mother bemoans the death of her baby after the dark baptism. Surrendering her body unto the Lord is suggestive of fulfilling his sexual desire—her dizziness post signing *The Book of the Beast* hints at the moment of consummation. The title of the book adequately defines that Sabrina has to devote herself entirely to her Lord and her essential reality will be that of a domesticated animal; she cannot question his will. Furthermore, he has control of her sexuality and reproductivity. This oppression of her spirit is political in nature, likely to dominate Sabrina's actions in the future.⁷⁷

*The High Priest: In signing his book, The Book of the Beast, you swear to obey without any question any order you may receive from the Dark Lord...*⁸

The transformation to a complete supernatural being informs her that one cannot truly belong to another domain unless ties with the dominant, pre-existing domain are eliminated. Will Sabrina stop questioning the coven's fundamentalism? Her past dissent indicates that her actions may enable her to defeat the Dark Lord much to his dismay. First, she challenged the cannibalistic practice referred to as "the feast of the feast." Later, her trial in front of her coven for a breach of promise (broken when she ran away from her first dark baptism in the night of her sixteenth birthday), was won to secure an admission at Academy of Unseen Arts while preserving her bodily rights. The overall focus of the series on gendered violence translates to Sabrina's mortal and witch roles and threads the stories together for the viewer in an effective way.

Notes

¹ Sabrina first appeared as a character in George Gladir and Dan De-Carlo, "Archie's Madhouse" *Archie Comics* 22, Archie Comics Publishing Group (October 1962). The television series is based on the more recent comic series, Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa and Robert Hack, *Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Archie Horror (October 2014).

² *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, Season 1 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

³ Berger Helen A and Douglas Ezzy, "Mass Media and Religious Identity: A Case Study of Young Witches," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 3 (2009): 501-14.

⁴ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter One: October Country,” Season 1, Episode 1 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter Ten: The Witching Hour,” Season 1, Episode 10 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

⁷ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011).

⁸ *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, “Chapter Two: The Dark Baptism,” season 1, episode 2 (October 26, 2018), directed by Lee Toland Krieger, Netflix.

Deadpool is Normal(ly Terrible): A Queer Critique of *Deadpool 2*

Ky Pearce

In a twitter argument with a fan concerned about 2SLGBTQ+ erasure in the *Deadpool* comics, one of the comics' writers, Fabian Nicieza, wrote "[Deadpool's] brain cells [are] in CONSTANT FLUX so he is hetero one minute, gay the next, etc..."¹ This representation of non-heterosexuality is, however, not without its issues. I want to question the politics of Deadpool's particular variant of non-heterosexuality as presented in *Deadpool 2* (2018). Deadpool is currently the only 2SLGBTQ+ main character in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU),² and his film debut was excitedly awaited by 2SLGBTQ+ audiences.

The *Deadpool* films focus on Wade Wilson (Deadpool), a former special-forces operative who is soon diagnosed with terminal cancer early in the first film. A mysterious organization recruits Deadpool, promising to cure his cancer; but they do so by torturing him and turning him into a super-soldier. The remainder of the first film sees Deadpool hunt Ajax, a lead scientist from the organization, seeking revenge and a way to reverse the transformation.

Deadpool 2 begins two years later with a failed suicide. We learn that Deadpool is trying to kill himself because his love interest, Vanessa, was shot and killed by a group of criminals Deadpool was pursuing.³ After Deadpool's suicide attempt, Colossus reassembles him, he recovers, and then joins the X-Men. On his first mission, Deadpool discovers the abuse of a young mutant, Firefist, and attempts to take revenge against Firefist's tormentors. As a result, both Deadpool and Firefist are arrested and sent to a mutant prison. Deadpool soon escapes and then makes plans to free Firefist. The plan is complicated by a time-traveller named Cable who wants to kill Firefist. Firefist escapes and turns against Deadpool. Near the end of the film, Deadpool and Cable unite to save Firefist from becoming the supervillain that eventually destroys Cable's family.

Throughout *Deadpool 2*, Deadpool's non-heterosexuality is used for comedy, and to excuse bad behaviour. The most significant example of this use of comedy is Deadpool's sexual assault of Colossus, a large and hyper-masculine character. Deadpool gropes Colossus's ass when the other character embraces him in a hug. When Colossus angrily removes Deadpool's hand, Deadpool immediately returns it. Here, Deadpool's non-heterosexuality is a comedic tool. His behaviour is within the realm of expectation for toxic masculinity; but because the recipient is another man, we laugh at Colossus for not expecting such behaviour. Another example is the monologue where Deadpool announces he has "gone international" fighting "mass murderers, gangsters, unspeakable monsters. People nobody would touch."⁴ Deadpool is delighted to add,

“Except me. I’m gonna’ touch them all over.”⁵ This last sentence—said in a sexual tone—relies on the motif of 2SLGBTQ+ people as hyper-sexed predators and makes light of sexual assault. All of this also normalizes sexual assault within comedy, standing in frightening contrast against the #MeToo movement.

Beyond comedic depictions of Deadpool’s sexuality, the film also comments on sexism. Deadpool forms a team of superheroes that he names “X-Force.” He says this name is “forward thinking” and “gender neutral” as compared to “the blatant sexism in the [X-Men’s] name.”⁶ While the film may have these ‘woke moments’ speaking to sexism on a surface level, it completely lacks awareness of trans identities. Most gallingly, when Deadpool’s partner Vanessa announces that she wants to have a child, Deadpool responds by saying: “I want a boy! Or a little girl! Definitely one or the other.”⁷ This joke relies on a binary model of gender, erasing the experiences and legitimacy of those outside of the socially constructed sex and gender binaries.

The politics of Deadpool’s sexuality are a reflection of our society’s cis-heteronormativity. Scholars like Jasbir Puar and E. De Dauw discuss how people gain access to privilege through participation in white, middle class, and cis-heteronormative ideologies.⁸ Deadpool, a non-heterosexual subject, is granted access to privilege through his participation in cis-heteronormativity. As such, Deadpool’s potential queerness is easily dismissed as comedy and he gains access to personhood through his toxic-masculine gender performance, heterosexual relationship, and cis-heterosexist behaviour. He may be in “constant flux” as Niciza writes, but it is significant that Deadpool’s non-heterosexuality only emerges as comedic ploys—as a queer clown.

If any element of Deadpool is relatable to a queerness, it is the way that Deadpool is refused a happy ending. Heather Love and Sarah Ahmed have noted how queers are often disallowed happy endings,⁹ and that queer lives must be understood within narratives of loss and misery.¹⁰ Deadpool’s life is the same. When Deadpool finds love he is diagnosed with cancer. Later, when Vanessa says she wants to start a family, she is promptly murdered. However, near the end of *Deadpool 2*, Deadpool’s life is saved by the only thing he has to remember Vanessa by: a metal token that stops a bullet from piercing his heart. I interpret this as Deadpool’s heterosexual connections saving him from queerness and death, so that he can go on living with his new family of fellow superheroes.

Notes

¹ Fabian Nicieza, Twitter Post, August 12, 2015, 8:09 AM, twitter.com/FabianNicieza/status/632361488615759872.

² Marvel does include other 2SLGBTQ+ as secondary characters in their films. For example, it is heavily hinted that Valkyrie—a character in *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)—is 2SLGBTQ+. The Marvel Comic Universe has a long list of LGBTQ+ characters.

³ The blatant use and abuse of women in this film as a tool for plot development should be noted and explored in future work.

⁴ *Deadpool 2*, directed by David Leitch (Century City: 20th Century Fox, 2018), DVD.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Jasbir Paur, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 19; E. De Dauw, “Homonormativity in Marvel’s Young Avengers: Wiccan and Hulkling’s gender performance,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 9, no. 1 (2018): 64.

⁹ Heather Love, “Compulsory Happiness and Queer Existence,” *New Formations* 63 (2008): 58.

¹⁰ Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 195.

Aquaman: The Eternal Return of the Male Subject

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As if our cishetero patriarchal society lacked hegemonic representations of masculinity, or maybe those who were not abundantly notified simply needed reminding that the male subject exists and prevails. *Aquaman* (2018) is the bulwark that forbids tearing down the gender binary construct. It presents as the healthy carrier of the cis and hetero norm, in retaliation to the current ‘overproduction’ of heroines and in a historical time in which the push towards subversive representation in superhero media is at its peak.

The titular character of this Warner Bros.-produced film, Aquaman, is half man, half fish. He is the son of Atlanna, queen of Atlantis, who escaped the fate of an arranged marriage ordained by her father and found herself on firm land by the Amnesty Bay lighthouse. The queen falls in love with the lightkeeper, and they soon have a son, Arthur (Aquaman). Followed by Atlantis’s army, Atlanna must return home, knowing she will soon be executed for having broken the laws enforced by her father. Arthur stays with his father and as he grows, he discovers his powers thanks to a master from Atlantis who seeks to help him.

Meanwhile in Atlantis, Orm, Arthur’s half-brother, takes over the kingdom and wages war on the human world. An old friend of Arthur’s, Mera, who was betrothed to the king, joins Arthur and asks him for help to defeat Orm. With the help of Mera and, later Atlanna (who we find survived her fate), Aquaman manages to beat Orm, becoming King of Atlantis in order to reestablish order. Atlanna is reunited with her true love, the lighthouse keeper.

Aquaman is portrayed as the only possible ‘true hero’ because he adheres to the classic hero construction: merciful and altruistic. For example, in one of the first scenes of the movie, Arthur fights against the supervillain Black Manta (David Kane, Aquaman’s historical archenemy) in order to defend humanity from the danger of a nuclear explosion. However, he distances himself from these heroic qualities—and not only because of his superpowers. Aquaman reprises the concept of classical heroism (*καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός*), and at the same time he is deprived of the emotions characterizing heroes such as Aeneas, Ulysses, Hector, such as compassion and *pietas*.¹ This lack in the contemporary hero’s construction mirrors the cultural production of hegemonic masculinity, further intersecting the discursive production that defines true masculinity as the total refusal of the femininity that is considered its opposite. Thus, through this construction, Aquaman is just one among the many ‘true’ superheroes adhering to the re-productive norms of the cishetero patriarchal system.

Aquaman is the narrated and embodied expression of stereotypical hegemonic masculinity, which aims to portray a single kind of masculinity as desirable. In this sense, female desire is also defined along these terms. It is important to stress how much the desirability of bodies undergoes a coercive flexion that cages the rhizomatic movement² of desire: “desire longs to desire,”³ reducing its creatively queer abilities.

In the bar where he joins his father, Arthur takes selfies with a group of fans, whose burly male leader holds a mobile phone with a pink cover. Arthur amuses himself by posing for the shots

in ‘queer poses,’ that indeed make light of *his own* masculinity. This representation becomes a caricature because it is depicted in a hyperbolic way. Moreover, this masculinity is totally dependent on the existence of ‘lesser’ masculinities—Aquaman’s clothing exemplifies this. His skinny pants and bared chest unequivocally recall the attire of gay leather subculture. Further, the continuous framing of his wet and mostly unclothed body is a clear reference to the desirability of his constructed body. Using water as an eroticizing element that should mark the difference between the pornographic eroticization of the female body and the non-pornographic one of the male body produces a contradictory representation. This is in line with what Judith Halberstam defines as “prosthetic masculinity” which “has little if anything to do with biological maleness and signifies more often as a technical special effect.”⁴ In this sense, the attempt of reclaiming a marginal aesthetics has a caricatural effect that undermines heteronormativity, instead of reinforcing its expression. However, this is undermined by the film’s larger commitment to hegemonic masculinity.

Arthur’s positioning is, in fact, on the side of *otherness*. He is other with regards to humans, because he has superpowers; and he is other with regards to Atlantians, because he grew up among humans and presents as such. However, he supports the institutions, applying a kind of justice that manifests itself in the staging of violent repression. Justice, therefore, makes itself known through the use of force, which is not neutral since it is tied to the construction of hegemonic masculinity. In one of the opening scenes, Aquaman faces and kills the gang of pirates supporting Black Manta’s siege. Aquaman’s ‘job’ is to fight criminality, but how? By committing other crimes that do not appear as such only because Aquaman is part of that apparatus that is innate in the institutions. His use of violence is thereby legitimized, which in turn legitimizes violence itself.⁵ This violence used by Arthur is an expression of the regulative activity typical of biocropolitical regimes.⁶ The representation of a toxic and violent masculinity is the direct result of hegemonic masculinity.

Therefore, if any and all representations of masculinity, in particular heroic masculinity, are constructed through the normative device of heterosexuality, cisgenderism and ability based on the use of force, it is reasonable to assert that masculine representations should be produced that lie outside this device. This may be best done through the uproot and subversion of the heterosexual norm, in order to mine the foundations of masculinity in its inception.

Notes

¹ *Pietas* is the piety and religious devotion found in many classical heroes as a defining virtue.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

⁴ Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 3.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁶ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.