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Superhero Fiction and Vigilante Reality: Self-Referentiality and Quixotism in Millar and Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass*

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Abstract

In Millar and Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* comics series, Dave is an ordinary kid in New York who loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends. At home, his situation is not ideal: his mother has died due to a brain haemorrhage and his relationship with his father, James Lizewski, is strained due to unresolved mourning and poor communication. The situation in his immediate social context is, moreover, rather dire: Dave is a witness of daily injustice and crime, which often leads him to wonder why there are no costumed vigilantes in the real world. When Dave creates a double-identity as a masked vigilante and eventually ventures to the streets at night to fight crime, he relies on comic books such as Spider-Man as if they were instruction manuals on how to be a superhero, but reality immediately strikes back with brutal consequences. In a way, *Kick-Ass* is an ode to a comics genre, acknowledging is most salient plot features, its wacky characters and worlds, and its history as a medium. However, this complex web of self-referential elements also configures an interesting argument of why superhero stories are, precisely, stories, and why this kind of fictional narrative is incompatible with the real world. Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold: first, the discussion focuses on analysing how *Kick-Ass* identifies, highlights and emulates elements from the superhero and vigilante archetypes, to then focus on theories of self-referentiality which allow for a study of the critical commentary that the work makes of its own medium and genre. Finally, the discussion will turn towards the ideological dimension of the work, focusing on the extent of *Kick-Ass*'s cynical take on real-life superheroes, its terms, warnings, and optimism.

Keywords: superhero, vigilante, self-referentiality, Comics Studies, comics, graphic narrative, Quixotism.

Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s *Kick-Ass* is a comics series that has enjoyed great commercial success, to the point of becoming a franchise. *Kick-Ass* was first published in 2008, and the original series is now marketed as Book One of "The Dave Lizewski Years," which comprises four volumes in total: Book Two was originally published as *Hit-Girl* (2012); Book Three, *Kick-Ass 2: Balls to the Wall* (2012), and Book Four, *Kick-Ass 3* (2014).

Two years later, Mark Millar organised an open contest for the title *Millarworld Annual*, an anthology of one-shot specials which includes the winning entries "Kick-Ass: Blindsided" (Mo and Orkiekwe 2016), "Hit-Girl: Mindy's ABCs" (Abnett and Yildirim 2016), and "Kick-Ass: Trick or Cheat" (Sayle and Ziane 2017), whose plots were consequently welcomed in the canon of Millar's original story. At the same time, two film adaptations had already been released: *Kick-Ass* (Vaugh 2010) and *Kick-Ass 2* (Wadlow 2013). The first one enjoyed a warm reception from fans and critics alike; not only did it earn over $96 million worldwide, it was also adapted into a videogame (2010) for Apple, PlayStation and Facebook gaming platforms. The second film, despite earning mainly negative reviews by critics on *The New York Times, Variety, The Guardian,* and more of the like, and audiences on platforms such as Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic, and Cinemascore, still went on to gain nominations at the EDA Awards, IGN Awards, MTV Movie Awards, and Taurus Awards. Moreover, the comics series continued on with several spin-offs centered on both new and well-known characters: "Kick-Ass: The New Girl" (2018–) features a new protagonist, Patience Lee, who takes the mantle after Dave Lizewski quits his double identity; "Hit-Girl" (2018–) serves as a sequel to the events in the original series and focuses on the eponymous co-protagonist, whose real name is Mindy McCready; "Kick-Ass vs. Hit-Girl" (2020–2021) depicts the original confrontation between Patience and Mindy; and, finally, "Crossover" (2020–) focuses on an adult Mindy who is drawn to an interdimensional convergence of Marvel, DC and Image characters. Whereas it would be presumptuous to claim that the success of a multimedia franchise such as this one is owed to one singular factor, it is possible to argue that, at least in part, the self-referential discussion on superhero comics in the original run of *Kick-Ass* enriches the story with funny nods to the genre, well-founded criticism of overused motifs, and shocking realisations that what often works in fiction cannot be applied to real life.

Book One, which compiles the first eight issues from "The Dave Lizewski Years," spans over two years in the life of its teenage protagonist. Dave is an ordinary kid who lives in New York City and loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends. At home, his situation is not ideal: his mother died due to a brain haemorrhage and his relationship with his father, James Lizewski, is strained due to unresolved mourning and poor communication. The situation in his immediate social context is, moreover, rather dire: Dave is a witness of daily injustice and crime, which often leads him to wonder why there are no costumed vigilantes in the real world. This "perfect combination of loneliness and despair" (#1, n.p.) leads him to create a double-identity as a masked vigilante: Dave buys a wetsuit on the Internet, trains himself, and eventually ventures to the streets at night to actually fight crime. While he relies on comic books such as *Spider-Man* as if they were instruction manuals on how to be a superhero, reality immediately strikes back with brutal consequences: his first attempt at fighting a band of thugs ends up in hospitalization due to severe concussions, stab wounds and the injuries sustained after being

hit by a car. Still, after processing a crisis of faith in his beloved comics and undergoing surgery and physical rehabilitation, Kick-Ass goes back on patrol. What is more, Dave creates a social media account for Kick-Ass so that people can contact him to ask for help. During a particularly dangerous encounter, he is rescued by a couple of masked vigilantes, Big Daddy and Hit-Girl, who brutally but efficiently kill all the attackers. After the two completely disregard Dave, Hit-Girl ends up convincing them that they form a "super-team" (#1, n.p.) to bring down a very powerful mafia boss. When the high-risk heist that they had planned goes horribly wrong and Hit-Girl is apparently dead after receiving multiple gunshots, Big Daddy reveals that he is just an accountant frustrated with his marriage who trained his very young daughter in martial arts and left his empty life to create a new exciting one, financing himself through selling comic books. In the end, their great mission against the mafia boss was nothing but a casual choice, simply because they "needed a villain" for their own self-narrative.

This brief summary aims at proving how comic books—and more specifically, superhero comics—are essential to the plot: not only do they serve as a trigger for the action once Dave decides to reproduce their key genre elements in real life, but they also determine and sustain the goals and aspirations of supporting characters. In a way, *Kick-Ass* is an ode to a comics genre, acknowledging is most salient plot features, its wacky characters and worlds, and its history as a medium. However, this complex web of self-referential elements also configures an interesting argument of why superhero stories are, precisely, just stories, and why this kind of fictional narrative is incompatible with the real world. Therefore, the aim of this article is twofold: first, the discussion focuses on analysing how *Kick-Ass* identifies, highlights and emulates elements from the superhero and vigilante archetypes, in order to then focus on theories of self-referentiality which allow for a study of the critical commentary that the work makes of its own medium and genre. Finally, the discussion will turn towards the ideological dimension of the work, focusing on the extent of *Kick-Ass*'s cynical take on real-life superheroes, its terms, warnings, and optimism.

1. SUPERHERO OR VIGILANTE?: A REVIEW OF ARCHETYPES

As it was previously stated, *Kick-Ass* is full of direct and explicit references to the essential elements that configure the superhero archetype, despite the fact that Dave, its protagonist, best fits the definition of a vigilante. Still, the fact that Dave tries to become a real-life superhero but only manages to become a sort of vigilante at most is part of the set of binary oppositions that the work evidences between fiction and reality, which is my focus in the third section of this study. For now, let the focus be on identifying the structural and thematic features of the superhero—and/or vigilante—genre which *Kick-Ass* foregrounds, and the effects or purposes they serve. Understanding that genres are configured following certain semantic (or thematic) and syntactic (or structural)

conventions, as a dialectical approach would allow, it is possible to interpret superhero narratives as a genre due to the similarities between characters, settings, and icons, as well as their narrative structure, themes, and effects. Still, as Jameson (1981) argues, it is impossible to separate all these formal features from the historical conditions which sustain them and assign specific meaning to them—ideologies, social paradigms, and historically-charged modes of expression (189). This classification proves useful to consider superhero narratives as a proper and established genre due to the repetition of thematic and formal devices in works from different periods —from the Golden Age (1938–1956) to the current so-called comics Renaissance—, different media (comics, film, or videogames, for example), and different artistic teams, not to mention the decisive impact that such stories have had in the popularization of the comics medium and the massification of the comics industry.

Dave Lizewski is the protagonist of *Kick-Ass*, but who is he, really? In many ways, he is a regular teenager from New York City who loves reading comics and discussing them with his friends—not that he is the class jock, but he is no geek either (#1, n.p.). He is savvy in all-things-comics and actively engages in fandom culture: he likes "*Scrubs*, Stereophonics, the Goo Goo Dolls and *Entourage*, Snow Patrol, *Heroes* and the movies of Ryan Reynolds" (#1, n.p.), and he stays updated with the latest published issues from his favourite comics series, as well as their film adaptations. Being male and a teen, he even meets the stereotypical demographic which was the key target audience of superhero comics for decades, and he suffers typical teenage problems: he is a victim of bullying in high-school, and he has an unrequited crush on a girl. Finally, his mother passed away not long ago, which has not only devastated him but also derailed his relationship with his father. Even before putting on a mask, Dave already shares key characteristics with well-known superheroes: Peter Parker (*Spider-Man*) and Clark Kent (*Superman*) are also perceived as 'lame' by their regular peers and have unrequited feelings for Mary Jane and Lois Lane, respectively; Barry Allen (*The Flash*) is a comics fan who also struggles with people who make him feel inferior; Bruce Wayne (*Batman*) is famously an orphan who has not allowed himself to cope with his parents' deaths, and Matt Murdock (*Daredevil*) finds strong motivations to do vigilante work in New York after the unfair death of his father.

And yet, Dave fails to see the many parallels between his life and the origin stories of comics superheroes. In fact, he laments that "there was nothing in [his] history to suggest the typical hero's journey. No radioactive spiders or refugee status from a doomed alien world," and even though his mother died when he was younger, "she was killed by an aneurysm as opposed to a hitman" (#1, n.p.). Therefore, Dave perceives that his life holds no remarkable milestone or event which makes him feel closer to a protagonist, least of all a superhero; as figure 1 shows, Dave's everyday consists of a numbing routine, emotional detachment from his father, and the solace of escapism through TV,

videogames and comics. What can be stated in Dave's favour is that the lack of fantastic elements or great evil organisations is, in fact, a key semantic element of superhero origin stories. However, the fact that he fits a demographic stereotype, his loneliness and sense of isolation both at home and school, and his strong moral calling to "follow his dreams and maybe do a little good at the same time" (#1, n.p.) can be directly connected with the origin stories of superheroes such as the ones mentioned above, albeit some slight displacements due to the realistic approach of Millar and Romita Jr.'s story.

Fig. 1. Dave's daily life and his need to escape reality © Image Comics, 2018.
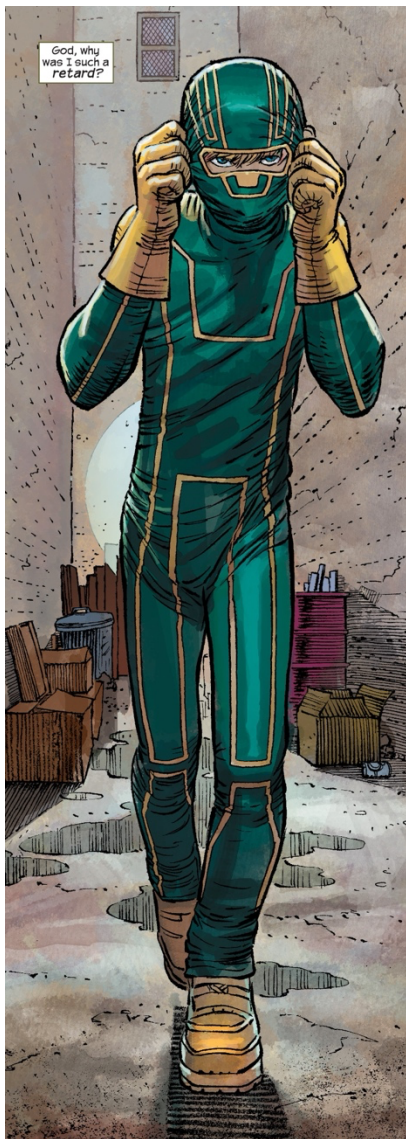
Then, when Dave tries on his rudimentary costume for the first time—following, once again, the steps of many heroes such as Spider-Man, Daredevil, Superman, and more recently Ms. Marvel, who also make their costumes by themselves—, he realises "how far off the mark the comic books had been. / It didn't take a trauma to make you wear a mask. It didn't take your parents getting shot... / ...or cosmic rays or a power ring... / Just the perfect combination of loneliness and despair" (#1, n.p.). Despite the fact that he is still unable to see the connection between his personal situation and superhero origin stories, he reaches an effective conclusion: there is an inner conflict to every superhero which they compensate for by creating a double-identity. Therefore, while, for instance, Peter Parker and Matt Murdock must learn to value the simple things in life instead of letting their ambition carry them away by the grandiose natures of Spider-Man and Daredevil, Dave's struggle lies on the unresolved trauma left by his mother's death, the lack of belonging in his social circle, and the anxious frustration of not knowing what career path he wants to follow in the future. In other words, Kick-Ass the hero is born out of Dave's disconformity with the world and with himself.

Still, the greatest objection against Dave's status as a superhero remains: he does not have superpowers.[1] And certainly, "[m]ythic tropes introduced by the superheroes of the late 1930s and 40s still exist, but since the groundbreaking revisions introduced by Frank Miller and Alan Moore in the late 1980s, they have also become increasingly inverted, questioned, and all out parodied" (Ndalianis 2009, 8), so it is possible that superhero characters do not necessarily meet all the archetypal requirements to be defined as such. For instance, neither Bruce Wayne (*Batman*), nor Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) or Hank Pym (*Ant-Man*), technically have superhuman powers, but there seems to be no contestation of their status as superheroes due to their grand heroic deeds. Therefore, perhaps supernatural powers make textbook superheroes, but a superhero's mission and purpose is what makes them heroic. Above all, superheroes "promote themselves as divine figures of retribution, offering both the promise of transcendent justice in place of equality (enabled by their superpower) and physicality in place of rationality (accentuated by their formfitting costumes) as conduits to truth (beating, sometimes literally, the truth out of

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[1] In the movie adaptation directed by Vaughn (2010), there are significant differences. The protagonist gains superpowers of a sort, since his spine suffers damage and he is unable to feel physical pain. What initially could be regarded as a disability, soon turns into an outstanding characteristic which makes Dave special and even superior to his peers, instead of being a common teen or a loser. Moreover, in the comics Dave's romantic advances on the girl he likes are brushed off and she even cuts all connection with him after finding out that he had been pretending to be gay so as to get closer to her. In the film, Dave gets away with it and he ends up having sex with her. It is fair to state that the movie adaptation grants Dave with better fighting odds, more charismatic traits, and a happy ending fit for a manly Hollywood hero. The comics, however, depict a much direr reality for the protagonist.

the villain)" (Bainbridge 2009, 67). Therefore, despite the fact that superheroes fight in the name of justice, they still need, more often than not, to wear a mask, use a codename, and develop a double identity to avoid the actual legal and social consequences of their (heroic) actions as individuals.

On the one hand, these last two elements are precisely why this full justification of why Dave is a superhero is not necessary to comics readers, as he clearly fulfils the two most easily identifiable traits of a superhero's double-identity: a code name and a costume. Whereas the code name—"Kick-Ass"—is not born out of particular features connected with Dave's personal identity, his costume reveals the type of missions he wishes to partake in, his (lack of) powers, his working-class origin, and maybe even his personality. As figure 2 shows, Kick-Ass's costume is as simple and plain as Dave himself on the one hand, while also being functional enough for a New York City neighbourhood vigilante.[2] There are no magical items, no tactical armour, and no complex weapons: everything Kick-Ass relies on is his wish to be a superhero and do "superhero stuff," patrolling the streets of his neighbourhood at night, or helping the people of New York City who request his intervention through his social media account.

However, given Dave's working-class background, the great emphasis on his status as just a normal teenager, and the fact that he mainly operates as Kick-Ass at night within the confines of his neighbourhood administering justice as he sees fit, he seems to be closer to a vigilante than an actual superhero. For instance, characters such as Rorschach from *The Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons, 1986–1987), the Punisher (created by Gerry Conway, John Romita Sr. and Ross Andru in 1974), and many characters from *Sin City* (Miller, 1991–1992) fit this description, and not coincidentally, the gloomy tone and the explicitly violent panels of these series are also more similar to the brutal violence and realistic consequences of pretending to be a superhero in *Kick-Ass*. After all, Kick-Ass deals with the complexities of real-life heroism

Fig. 2. Kick-Ass takes to the streets
© Image Comics, 2018.

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[2] The urban setting is, precisely, another semantic element that Kick-Ass shares with other superheroes: Spider-Man, Batman, or Daredevil, for instance, could potentially fight villains in natural settings or even outer space, but their character development and their powers are dependent on urban infrastructure.

like no other comic series in its genre: Dave is beaten up and tortured, he ends up with severe wounds and broken bones, he requires surgery and, not surprisingly, it takes him a long time to recover each time he gets hurt. However, once he trains and improves his fighting skills, he also becomes an agent of unrestrained violence. For example, he breaks a wooden stick against the face of a fellow vigilante who betrayed him, and then assists Hit-Girl in using a flamethrower against a band of thugs before she starts shooting indiscriminately until everyone in the bad guy's lair is dead.

Dave claims that he does not have too much in common with the superheroes in the comics he avidly reads while in fact he does, but then he acts and performs the role of Kick-Ass as if he was a superhero, when the term 'vigilante' seems to fit him best. Just like the Punisher, Rorschach, or Deadpool, Kick-Ass challenges both parts of the term 'superhero': he has no powers, so he is not "super," and he tiptoes the boundary between violence and morality, so he is not fully "heroic." According to Gavin Weston (2013), "[d]iscussions over the appropriate use of force, the use of fatal force, the morality of vigilantism, the relationship between the state and vigilantes, hero worship and other issues are common arcs in popular comic series," and readers assume a role akin to that of a voyeur as they watch "the traumatic event that justifies the [protagonist's] reaction. Witnessing the atrocity and hearing the thoughts of those engaged forces us to take a particular side, adopt a particular perspective. In this way, justice is fetishized" (228). Therefore, Dave's grey morality, as well as his own justifications for the inappropriate use of physical violence, fit the flawed logic of comic book vigilantes: sometimes, the greater good requires doing dark things.

Dave feels a moral calling to be a superhero, to actively fight for his community and try to prevent innocents from being harmed, thus fitting the archetype since superheroes, essentially, offer salvation to humanity on Earth while configuring utopian possibilities which connect morality, urban life, and technology and science (Ndalianis 2009, 6). However, Dave's methods stem from his frustration with the state of things and a general distrust of society, which lead him to take matters into his own hands and break the law. Following Weston (2013) again, most superheroes rely on and reinforce the existing judicial system, since they operate as police officers even though they do not exactly follow the law (225). However, they do not usually punish criminals: in general, the use of force serves the purpose of turning criminals over to the police, and superheroes do not install their own system or impose their own authority over judicial institutions. "Vigilantes on the other hand often disagree with aspects of the judicial system and enact punishment (often through killing offenders). The line between arrest and punishment is generally the line that divides the superhero from the vigilante" (Weston 2013, 225). Whereas the boundaries between superheroic deeds and vigilantism are sometimes blurry, for superheroes are also "dedicated to a program of justice that often (but not always) takes the form of vigilantism" (Saunders 2021, 200), Dave/Kick-Ass's disillusionment, the

questionable morality of his ways, and his unrestrained use of force against criminals are typical comic-book vigilante traits.

The comparisons drawn between *Kick-Ass* and other exemplars of superhero comics fit the archetypal categorisations of several scholars, who have provided different definitions and highlighted a variety of key elements to this type of characters. For instance, Reynolds (1992) devises a seven-part definition of superhero, which includes a separation from society, godlike powers, their devotion to justice greater than respect for the law, a contrast with mundane surroundings, a contrast with a mundane alter-ego, a devotion to the state, and mythical stories which use magic and science indiscriminately (16). Yet, a thorough review of all the semantic and syntactic components which establish *Kick-Ass* as part of the superhero/vigilante genre falls out of scope for an article such as this one. This quick review of the basic elements of the superhero and vigilante archetypes does not aim at claiming that Kick-Ass must not considered as a superhero by readers and critics alike, since no one really doubts that. However, this step has been necessary in order to explain how and to what extent he has imitated or put into practice the features of the comic books he reads, not only for his flawed perception of himself, but because of the contrast between fiction and the real world.

2. Self-Referentiality and Quixotism in *Kick-Ass*

Although initially Dave mentions his fascination for comics in light terms, as an obvious refuge from the hollow routine and his lack of emotional connection with his father (see figure 1), the more pressure he feels at home or school, the more enraptured and captivated he becomes by the medium: "What's interesting is how obsessive I got around exam time, downloading whatever I couldn't afford to buy and spending every spare moment on the comic book message boards" (#1, n.p.). Dave's unmeasured indulgence in escapism leads him to an epiphany: "Why do you think nobody's ever tried to be a superhero before? ... Putting on a mask and helping people isn't impossible. ... Why do people want to be Paris Hilton and nobody wants to be Spider-Man?" (#1, n.p.). In other words, Dave asks himself why is it that there are no real life superheroes when, in truth, comics portray real life issues: on a daily basis, people need help, and facing crime for a good cause does not seem like an impossible task. Moreover, the life of a superhero is extremely exciting, as opposed to that of some career paths that Dave has considered for his future, such as being a lawyer, a bank manager, or "a burger-flipper" (#1, n.p.). Dave's obsession with comics has led him to believe that the plots and the outcomes of superhero/vigilante work are logical enough to be reproduced in the real world.

This inability to distinguish between the real and fictional worlds, and the absolute idealisation of the latter, is by no means a contemporary concern: as a matter of fact, Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) laid the foundations for a set of character archetypes deeply connected to reflexivity, and this is the reason why many studies of this process

become inevitably linked to the seventeenth-century Spanish literary classic. Among the many reflexive devices which operate in *Don Quixote*, the fascination for reading and the impulse to recreate fictional stories in real life—even at the expense of facing harsh consequences—, seems the protagonist's most remarkable trait, which he shares with Dave Lizewski. Despite the radical differences between them in terms of artistic medium, historical period—seventeenth century in Spain vs. the 2000s in the United States—, or their age —an elderly man vs. a teenager—, both characters are devoted to popular narratives from their respective socio-historical contexts who idealise the stories which allow them to escape from their mundane reality, and thus, self-referentiality operates by exploring the role that literature and comics have in people's lives and the influence these works have on the way readers interpret reality.

Self-referentiality operates in works discussing their own medium in terms of modes, genres, conventions, agents, consumers, institutions, and more. Self-referentiality is, then, a process by which a fictional work connects itself with other works of the same medium in order to discuss relevant features, practices and conventions of the medium itself: it is literature about literature, films about film, and so on (Pardo 2015, 51–54). Therefore, self-referential works do not (necessarily or directly) draw attention to themselves as artifacts, representation, or fiction, but they do make reference to the tradition, the institution, the conventions of literature, theatre, cinema, etc. Instead of discussing the novel, play, or film itself, a self-referential work discusses literature, theatre, cinema, or comics, in a broader sense, and it establishes meaningful connections within its own medium through transtextuality. This is the reason why intertextuality is often confused with self-referentiality, and fairly enough, there is a degree of correspondence between this type of reflexivity and Gérard Genette's theory of transtextuality. Starting from his definition of a transtextual relation as "all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts" (Genette 1982, 1), self-referentiality consists of the quality of a fictional work which connects it with other exemplars of the medium, mode, or genre; it is a reference to literature within literature, to film within film, or to comics within comics.

In the case of *Kick-Ass*, the fact that superhero comics are a source of escapism for Dave is explicitly established from the very beginning, since not only is he mourning his mother's passing, he also has to endure a strained relationship with his dad and the bullying he is subjected to at school. The connection between comics and alienation works in both directions: on the one hand, Dave resorts to comics as a way of evading his difficult situation at home but, on the other hand, the fact that he is an avid comics reader is the reason why he is bullied at school. As it was stated in the previous section, Dave explicitly expresses the link between the dull, tragic and pessimistic mood at his home and his need to escape it by reading comics, so "[he is] sure [readers] can see the attraction that comic books held for [him]" (#1, n.p.). As figure 3 shows, not only does Dave express

how deeply obsessed he became with comics, buying as many as he could afford and reading even more online, he also begins to draw "a career plan" (n.p.). Out of his great enthusiasm for superhero comics and the desolation he feels due to his personal context, Dave begins thinking about superheroes as a logical and appealing solution for his own situation and the rest of society:

> I always wondered why nobody did it before me. I mean, all those comic book movies and television shows, you'd think at least one eccentric loner would have stitched himself a costume. Is everyday life really so exciting? Are schools and offices really so thrilling that I'm the only one who ever fantasized about this? C'mon. Be honest with yourself. We all planned to be a superhero at some point in our lives. (#1, n.p.)
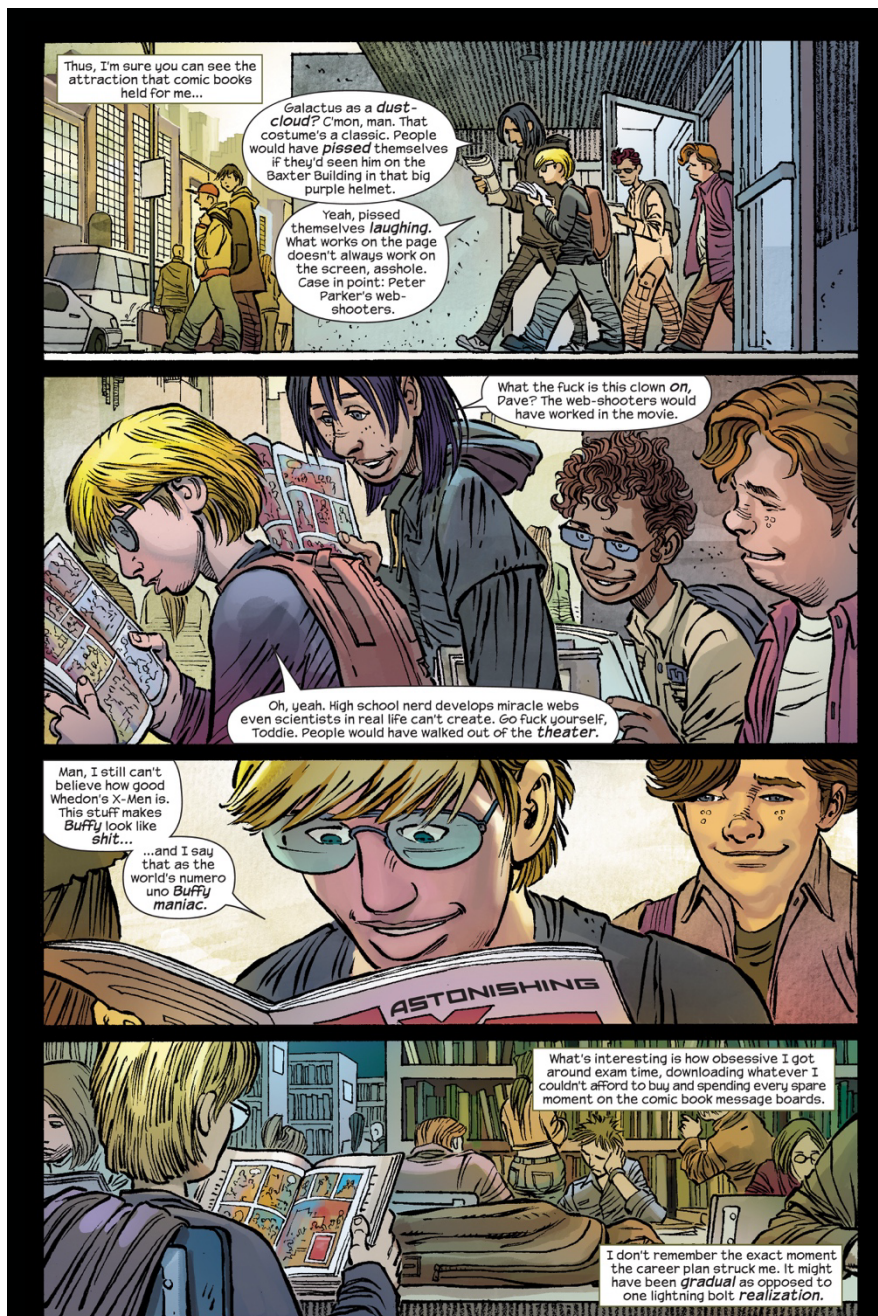

Fig. 3. Dave's fascination for comic books © Image Comics, 2018.

Dave's disillusion with life could not be clearer. The last remnants of possible counter-arguments to quit the ambition of becoming a real-life superhero are obliterated by means of the rhetorical questions quoted above. Putting on a homemade costume and a mask to become a superhero might seem idiotic in the real world, arguably just as idiotic as it is for Don Quixote to put on a whole knightly armour set in the sixteenth century, but Dave regards this as the one true existential purpose he has been waiting for his entire young life, while also firmly believing that everyone else has this same quixotic impulse in them. As opposed to Don Quixote, however, Dave is not delusional—at least not pathologically. Dave has an overcoming urge to become a superhero and he becomes obsessed with living the sort of (mis)adventures associated with fighting one-on-one against crime despite the danger, the beatings and the conflicts that these secret activities bring onto his real life as a normal teenager.

Moreover, once he crafts a costume and starts patrolling the city streets at night in a vigilante fashion, reality crashes down on him—quite literally. Dave is badly beaten up by a gang, gets run over by a car, and witnesses another 'superhero wannabe' plummet down to the ground from atop a building after jumping off completely convinced he would be able to fly. Despite a brief period of hesitation in which he questions his ambition, and even burns some of the comics which gave him the idea to become 'Kick-Ass,' his idealised view of superheroes encourages him to continue his dangerous patrolling. Consequently, Dave's insistence that reality can operate under the same rules as comics never ceases, for he perceives and interprets reality according to the narrative patterns of superhero comics mentioned in section 1.

In this sense, the self-referential dimension in *Kick-Ass* adds a new layer, as the protagonist purposefully recreates all the features in this definition, explicitly basing himself on superhero comics: Dave adopts the name of Kick-Ass; he crafts his own suit in secret, paying particular attention to the mask, as his identity shall remain hidden; his 'superheroic' activities are carried out at night in an urban environment (in this case, his neighbourhood), and he eventually earns a side-kick (a little girl named Mindy) as well as a mentor who trains them in combat and provides them with more efficient weapons and tools to fight crime. In other words, Dave fulfils all the basic requirements of the superhero archetype—including having a tragic backstory, and a disinterested moral mission which begins as a quest to help defenceless people but ends up forcing him to confront his own greatest weaknesses.

The migration of reflexive devices from literary tradition (in this case, *Don Quixote*) to new popular narrative media (*Kick*-Ass) can be traced in accordance with thematic and philosophical trends. Both works present an avid reader of fictional narratives of the same medium these works belong to, with a clear intention of parodying the conventions of said narratives. Whereas Don Quixote's fascination with chivalric literature becomes the basis of Cervantes's criticism, Dave's love for superhero comics serves Millar and

Romita Jr. to expose the conventions of these comics. However, as Pedro Javier Pardo argues about *Don Quixote*, the most successful aspect of exposing genres in such a way is that parody is realised through a reader figure who embodies this kind of books' language and worldview: these characters perceive and interpret reality according to literary models, and so, when reality evidences the character's inadequacy, they are discredited (2022, 115; my translation). Therefore, as a superhero comic, *Kick-Ass* not only exposes the basic elements of the genre, but it also performs a thorough examination of their validity in real life in the face of particular sets of moral principles and cultural contexts deeply connected with popular culture.

At the same time, just like *Don Quixote* establishes a dialogue with previous literature, with romance, and with chivalry books (Pardo, 2022, 117; my translation), *Kick-Ass* connects to the larger traditions and conventions of superhero comics, addressing characteristic traits of Marvel comics in different historical stages. Moreover, Kick-Ass provides relevant glimpses of the role which comics have in contemporary popular culture, particularly in connection with escapism and the idealisation of the fictional world as a mental strategy to face the hardships and dullness of normal life. Ultimately, what Pardo states concerning Don Quixote also holds true to Kick-Ass: Cervantes does not want us to be Don Quixote or share his confusion regarding chivalry books, which is why he makes us aware of the literary and fictional nature of the text in our hands (2022, 135; my translation). By the end of vol. 1, Dave is highly conscious of what he needs to sacrifice in order to keep on acting as a superhero, and he willingly embraces it in what seems to be a moment of great mental clarity, since he is able to evaluate the repercussion of his actions in a larger scale. As a conclusion to vol. 1, he states, "I'd started a trend and all across the country a whole gang of imitators were dressing up and fighting crime because I'd made it fashionable. I'd reshaped the world the way I'd always wanted it, and it doesn't get much better than that" (#8, n.p.).

In a way, this reads as the clichéd happy ending of superhero comics, where the villain is defeated and the protagonist's greatest achievement is, actually, that they have become a better version of themselves—in Dave's case, by understanding that life is not, actually, fiction. However, in order to believe this in connection with Dave's life, the facts that he is still getting bullied at school, that his romantic prospects have been completely shattered, and that his father has started a casual sexual relationship with a woman as a coping mechanism for the loss of his wife must be overlooked. Therefore, Dave's perceived success at becoming a comics character is grounded on his absolute delusion and abstraction from reality; even though Dave's adventures continue, the looming threat of reality is more present than ever, as life is not, in fact, a comic book.

3. REALITY CHECK: THE FEASIBILITY OF REAL-LIFE VIGILANTISM

Unlike Dave or Don Quixote, most real-life readers are aware that fictional stories have an internal logic and structure which leads to satisfactory conclusions within that fictional world. Despite the fact that readers often connect on a personal level to their favourite fictional characters, the boundary is seldom crossed—otherwise, perhaps news articles about superhero/vigilante copycats would show up more often. The personal correspondence that comics readers might make between characters and themselves does not usually consist on an overlapping of identities, but rather, on a means of reflection or meditation about the actual dynamics of the real world. According to Weston (2013), "[s]uperhero-genre stories are not cultural directives to be imitated, but instead tools for thinking about society. This being the case, we are as likely to avoid reprehensible qualities from the villains of comic books as we are to draw upon the admirable qualities of heroes" (229). However, is that actually the case? Should superhero comics serve as a moral compass?

To Dave Lizewski, they do—and that is precisely why the story systematically presents him with obstacles in which his comic-book ideals result maladaptive in the unpredictable, grim, and brutal real world. Firstly, if reality worked like comics, Dave's sense of heroism would be praised by his peers or the general population, but in reality it only serves to make him look like an idiot. In fact, there is an explicit reference in the story to how superheroes are morally superior whereas real people are "assholes" (#5, n.p.); therefore, real-life superheroes could never be successful, since the real world does not play by the rules. Rather than being heroic, real-life superheroes must rely on they resourcefulness, which is precisely what Dave and Hit-Girl do by murdering all the thugs, since they are unable by all means to detain them or prevent them from continuing their illegal business.

Secondly, in superhero comics the protagonist is subjected to a test of character in which they must prove that they are deserving of their power. A true superhero's strength does not come from their powers, but their heart. And initially, it seems like Dave is going to follow the path of righteousness: "No way. I'm not going to kill anybody. I'm supposed to be a fucking superhero" (#6, n.p.). This initial intention to abide by the superhero code of conduct is completely abandoned by issue #8, when his life and Hit-Girl's depend on their dexterity and strength. It seems that, in the real world, there is no room for the soft-hearted.

Some other key features of the superhero genre are also inverted. For instance, the role of the side-kick is usually given to a person younger than the protagonist whose role is to support them—e.g., Batman and Robin, Flash and Kid Flash, Captain Marvel and Ms. Marvel, Green Arrow and Speedy, and more of the like. In this case, however, Hit-Girl is the one who has the best skills and the initiative, and Kick-Ass ends up helping her and learning from her. Moreover, in superhero comics, the protagonist's hidden identity is a

means to protect themselves, but in *Kick-Ass* the fact that Dave hides his identity is the trigger for very dangerous situations in which either thugs do not know he is just a kid pretending to be a hero, or one of his acquaintances does not recognise him and sells him out to the bad guys. The main traits of the superhero's archenemy are also noteworthy, since in comics these characters are mighty and respectable, but in *Kick-Ass* he is just a geek like us" (#8, n.p.).

Finally, perhaps the biggest contrast between the way superhero comics work as opposed to the real world is the nature of the hero's mission. Characters such as Superman, Batman, Iron Man, Captain America, or Captain Marvel are usually tasked with the great mission of saving the city, the country, the world, or even the universe. Dave, however, gets involved in the business of a criminal organisation but ultimately his fight turns out to be about the preservation of a stack of comics. On the one hand, this apparently insubstantial goal might not be enough to validate Dave's hero's journey. On the other hand, this moment does weave a beautiful metaphor on the role and the value that these narratives hold for their readers and fans. After all, Dave's mission was not simply about safe-guarding a bunch of comics issues, but to him the fight is for the worlds they contain, and the communities they bring together. What these characters are protecting is one of the greatest things which provide meaning to their lives.

For all its grim depictions of the real world and the brutal situations that the protagonist goes through, *Kick-Ass* ends in a rather optimistic tone: Dave and Mindy complete their mission, and they continue their vigilante patrols, earning a positive reputation. It seems that the work has its cake, and eats it, too: for all its denouncing of maladaptive imitations of fictional tropes and motifs, the final message is that dreams do come true—albeit not in the way one might have originally imagined. However, in a social analysis of vigilantism, Weston (2013) questions, like in *Kick-Ass*, why there are almost no cases of vigilantism, and he argues that "[t]o become reality, what is needed is a trigger: a social reality that motivates us to act and search for fitting cultural models as we endeavour to right perceived social wrongs" (232–33). Therefore, in a society of relative comfort and safety, these activities result unappealing to the majority, particularly to a working-class whose dissatisfaction with the status quo, politics, or similar systemic issues, does not necessarily evoke an anti-state sentiment (229). Additionally, the key demographic of comics readers does not consist of people undergoing such extreme poverty that they are motivated into vigilantism: "[c]omic books perhaps then satisfy what little need there is for heroism in many readers' lives" (229).

According to Weston (2013), the ever-present discussion on the nature and the foundations of heroism in superhero comics allow readers to question "the rightness and pitfalls of social bandits and vigilantes" to the point in which "we are shown the complexity of the moral decisions encountered by protagonists. Such awareness does not necessarily lend itself to copycats. It lends itself to the appraisal of the rightness of such actions"

(229). Countries such as the United States, Japan and those in Western Europe, which are the ones which register the largest sale numbers, have strong judicial systems which are trusted by the majority of the population. This, to Weston, undermines the need for vigilantism, as these individuals would be, on the one hand, severely penalised, and on the other, judged as morally dubious or downright wrong (232). What is more, apparently the limited number of people who dress as superheroes in public do so not with the intention of fighting crime, but doing good in other ways, except perhaps for Phoenix Jones.

Despite the low probability that Dave's quixotic tendencies become an actual trend in the real world, it has been proven that superhero vigilantism is not inexistent in the real world. When Phoenix Jones fought crime in Seattle between 2011 and 2014, he did so in a superhero costume and he seemed to operate in a way quite similar to Dave Lizewski's, patrolling the streets and occasionally engaging in hand-to-hand combat (Ronson 2011). However, far from becoming involved with large mafia organisations, Phoenix Jones still operated within US laws: "for example, in order to follow due process, he either has to have the victim of a crime ask for assistance or a suspected criminal has to use violence against him first in order for him to be able to use force" (Weston 2019, 96). What is more, Phoenix Jones inspired other individuals, such as the Red Dragon, and soon enough the first real-world superhero ensemble patrolled the streets of Seattle, the Rain City Superhero Movement (Real Life Superheroes 2011). Similarly, South London's Bromley Batman also gained media attention for putting on a costume consisting of a mask, black clothes, and a bandana to stop muggings and assaults in his area (Glanfield 2015). Despite being short-lived attempts at vigilantism, and despite not having superpowers or dismantling international criminal operations, all of these people arise from "a desire or need to provide protection or justice," and "the most abundant source of vigilante blueprints is through the media" (Weston 2019, 97). Perhaps Millar's playful approach at the power of comics and the stubbornness and sense of self-worth of copycats was not too far-fetched, after all; still, as Weston proves, the behaviours of these few individuals are by no means unbound from the law, and their actual access to resources is considerably restricted.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that there are many examples of how fictional works have inspired technological advances, and at the same time, real life is a constant source of inspiration for fictional works, and *Kick-Ass* is no exception. In an interview, Mark Millar explains how he drew inspiration from personal experiences to create Dave: Millar, an avid comics reader himself, also struggled with unrequited love during his adolescence, his own mother died when he was precisely fourteen years old, and the economic situation at home was really rough for him and his brother (Clowes 2010). As it turns out, *Kick-Ass* is more autobiographical than it seems; when he was fifteen years old, Millar and his friends often skipped studying for school in order to keep on reading *Batman* comics: "[w]e wanted to become superheroes like Batman. It was pathetic. We

were five years too old really to be doing this. [*Kick-Ass*] was really about what would have happened if we hadn't come to our senses and actually gone out and done this" (Childress 2010).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Dave Lizewski's relationship with superhero comics is, in many ways, not unlike that of other fans: comics are a source of entertainment, inspiration, and a cultural meeting point. At its most optimistic and socially adaptive pole, comics also serve as a tool to reflect about real life and the real world despite the fantastical elements in this type of narratives. Superhero comics fulfil a social role, highlighting cultural identities and values: this has been proved, for instance, by means of sales numbers in the face of difficult situations such as the Great Depression, given the immense popularity of superhero comics during the Golden Age in the times of WWII (Smith 2018, 131). Some key features, such as the superhero's righteous mission and their double identity, are meant to show the heroes' most human side and reveal inner struggles which readers can empathise with. Dual identities, more specifically, are a point of audience identification: Bruce Wayne is an apathetic man who turns into a tragic hero of sorts as Batman; Matt Murdock is a calm and patient man who then turns into a ruthless vigilante as Daredevil. Most superheroes have a mild-mannered alter ego that fans can relate to and use to examine their own flaws. As Fingeroth (2004) states, the secret identity functions as an empowering statement: "Don't underestimate me. I may not be who you think I am" (60). Therefore, the self-referential discussion of the social role of comics in *Kick-Ass* not only shows certain aspects of fandom culture, but also explores the critical connection readers establish between the real world and the fantastic or science-fictional reality of comic book characters to still find themselves in those panels.

On the other hand, and in a less cheerful tone, self-referentiality also operates in *Kick-Ass* to show the consequences of making the quixotic mistake of applying the rules of fiction to real life. The danger Dave puts himself into and the horrific pain he undergoes prove systematically that putting on a mask and patrolling the streets at night in the real world will not turn him into a superhero. At best, this course of action makes Dave a vigilante; at worst, it leaves him in hospital. Despite the fact that the story is ultimately optimistic, *Kick-Ass* does not adopt a moralistic tone: since this is not a story aimed at teens necessarily, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality serves to portray a decaying, nasty, and vulgar world where those who have the biggest weapons and the most ammunition win.

However, unlike Don Quixote, who does not get a knightly happy ending, Dave manages to succeed in his first mission as Kick-Ass and grow as a person: by the end of vol. 1, he has found his true-calling, has made peace with the fact that the girl he likes does not like him back, and even his father seems to be moving on and starting a

relationship with a new woman. The self-referential contrast in *Kick-Ass* argues that real life will never be like comic books because it is not ideal, but it still allows its main character to achieve his dream in his own way. As Saunders states, perhaps a cynic would understand that superpowers such as flying are just as unlikely as the heroes' ethical perfection, but the dream of a superhero is not simply about wielding the powers of the gods and being all-righteous: "[i]t's also a dream about men and women who never give up the struggle to be good (2011, 143). Therefore, Kick-Ass might never be more than a vigilante, and his desire to do the right thing might involve criminal activity and the use of brute force, but perhaps that the most a real-life 'superhero' can ever do.

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The Franchise Devouring Itself: A Critical Analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Reflexive Turn

Miguel Sebastián Martín

Abstract

This article proposes that a "reflexive turn," which is particularly visible in some of the MCU's new streaming series, has taken place with the beginning of the franchise's Phase Four, the first phase of the new Multiverse Saga. Taking the first seasons of *She-Hulk*, *What If...?*, *WandaVision* and *Loki* as illustrations, my analytic focus falls on the reflexive devices and the narrative structures of these four series, which together seem to have established the grounds for a recurring metafictional allegory whereby the diegetic multiverse is made analogous to the franchise's own "multiverse" of complexly interrelated narratives. Thus seen, my interpretation of each of the series pays special attention to how reflexivity has allowed the MCU to speak about itself in this transitional moment, in a way that ambivalently reflects not only about the franchise's continuing dominance within the contemporary culture industry, but also about fears and concerns that the franchise's power may not last very long if it loses its narrative coherence along the way. It is in this sense that the Marvel Cinematic Universe seems to have started devouring itself, turning into a kind of "narcissistic" and "autophagic" narrative precisely at the time when it is beginning to generate a sense of exhaustion and saturation among its fans and followers. Although the reflexive elements of these four series acknowledge this sentiment in ways that approximate self-parody and self-critique, in the end they all arrive at the cynical and/or conformist conclusion that, for better or for worse, there is no alternative to the franchise's planned continuation.

Keywords: Marvel Cinematic Universe, reflexivity, metafictional allegory, TV series, superhero, superheroine, streaming platform.

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Like the mythical Ouroboros—which now lends its name to a character in the new season of the *Loki* series—, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is beginning to look like an all-encompassing, supradimensional being that cannot help but to eat itself moving forward. The size and significance of this mega-franchise need not be argued: the record-breaking box-office earnings of its individual instalments and the attempted development of similar franchise projects by other producers like DC speak for themselves. What perhaps makes it more interesting is that, given such commercial and popular success, the MCU has offered a paradigm whereby Hollywood has continued to reassert its global

hegemony by "rebooting" itself in a manner that, somewhat ironically, everything is turned into an interconnected series of reboots, remakes and rewrites (see Archer 2019). Indeed, the franchise stands as an ever more complex transmedia narrative which, at this point, increasingly relies on a web of intertextual references and reflexive devices so as to maintain a semblance of continuity and cohesion across its different productions (see Taylor for an approach to the MCU's "intertextual aesthetic"). Thus, partly because of its design, I here propose that the MCU has recently taken a "reflexive turn," becoming a somewhat "narcissistic narrative," to borrow Linda Hutcheon's (1980) phrase; that is, it has become a narrative which is increasingly preoccupied with itself and its power, its tropes and its structures, its past and future instalments, in an increasingly harder—and perhaps futile—effort to knit a thread that can hold together the totality. On one level, the increasing narrative reflexivity of the MCU may be taken as a reified symptom of broader dynamics inherited from the century-old logics of a culture industry (see Adorno and Horkheimer 2016), of certain superhero comics series (see Klock 2002, 122–52, and Coogan 2006, 214–18), and of convergence culture (see Jenkins 2006). However, on another level, this same reflexivity—which often approximates a self-conscious self-critique—also opens a space for understanding today's culture industry from within the giant snake's entrails, exemplifying mass culture's dialectical nature as both commodity and critique, reification and utopia (see Jameson 1979).

Thus seen, the MCU would not solely be interesting as the most popular and influential instance of superhero storytelling today, but also as an increasingly reflexive narrative that ambivalently reflects upon its own narrative structure and its powerful position as the hegemonic franchise of the early-twenty-first-century culture industry—sometimes more playfully, and sometimes more critically; sometimes more literally, and sometimes more allegorically. Probing into this phenomenon, this article specifically proposes that the reflexive turn taken by the MCU's narratives has become most evident with the beginning of the franchise's Phase Four—and specifically, even more evident in the new Disney+ series, as this is a format that offers more space for narrative complexity than feature films, to the extent of predisposing a certain degree of narrative self-consciousness (see Mittel 2015, 41). After the conclusion of the Infinity Saga, which encompassed the first three Phases from 2008 to 2019, the current Phase Four has inaugurated a new saga —the Multiverse Saga— that is scheduled to reach a Phase Six, to be concluded sometime before the end of the 2020s. In this way, the reflexive turn happens at a transitional moment in the MCU, a time in which production is not only expanding but also pivoting towards streaming series, which—relative to their role and number within the first saga—are now both more numerous and more central to the new Multiverse Saga.

This moment of expanding and intensifying production, however, also seems to be a moment of crisis, which certain MCU series seem to acknowledge indirectly, in the sense that it is not yet clear whether the Multiverse Saga will truly hold together the

fictional multiverse that it promises to deliver, or whether it will end up by splintering the earlier universe's apparent cohesion, therefore failing to maintain the popular and commercial success of the Infinity Saga. Indeed, recent headlines across different magazines and newspapers have foretold—perhaps prematurely—"the death of the MCU," and even the academic journal *Science Fiction Film and Television* has launched a call for papers meditating upon the MCU's presumed demise (see Canavan 2023). In this regard, the MCU's reflexive turn is here seen as a response to—and a symptom of—this moment, in which the franchise seems forced to renegotiate its relationship with its viewers so as to prevent alienating them. In providing illustrations of this phenomenon, this article privileges two recent series—*WandaVision* (2021) and the first season of *Loki* (2021)—as the most allegorically sophisticated and ideologically ambivalent instances of the franchise's reflexive turn, even though there are others that exemplify the franchise's reflexivity in simpler ways, such as *What If...?* (2021) or *She-Hulk* (2022), to which I refer first as illustrations of two basic kinds of reflexivity. Overall, my main argument is that the MCU's intensified reflexivity seems to betray a certain sense of saturation with the franchise, a certain nostalgia for its finished first saga, and even an oppressive sense of entrapment within its still-unfolding structure. In other words, these series' different kinds of reflexivity are here taken as emblems of an ambivalent type of attachment toward the franchise during a moment when the coherence and sustainability of the whole seems to be at stake, although—at least for the time being—the MCU relentlessly slouches over our contemporary cultural landscape with the massive inertia of a capitalist hyperobject—to borrow Timothy Morton's (2013) term.

1. REFLEXIVITY IN THE MULTIVERSE: THE SELF-CONSCIOUS AND THE SELF-REFERENTIAL

Before delving into the series themselves, it is first necessary to disentangle a potential conceptual confusion about the "reflexive" turn to be studied here, as there is an alphabet soup of formal concepts which broadly seem synonymous but should be distinguished for a more rigorous use. Besides the "reflexive," it is just as common to speak of "self-reflexive" narratives, "metafiction" or any other term that recombines either or both of the "self" and "meta" prefixes, but here I shall use a specific terminological framework that will be useful in distinguishing between degrees.[1] In this regard, following Pedro Javier Pardo's works (2011, 2015), I take *reflexivity* to be the umbrella term which conceptualizes any artwork that refers to its medium generally or to itself specifically, and then,

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[1] Many of the pioneering studies in this area favoured the term "metafiction" (see Scholesn 1979, Waughn 1984, or Imhof 1986), others used "self-conscious" (such as Alter), some later studies turned to using "reflexivity" (see Stam), and some more recent theorizations (such as Wolf) even speak of a "metareferential turn" in contemporary culture, which may be found to correlate, on a macro- scale, to the reflexive turn here examined.

accordingly, I shall distinguish between two kinds of reflexivity: *self-referentiality* and *self-consciousness*. From this framework, the former—self-referentiality—would name any narrative that refers to its medium, genre or platform generally speaking, whereas the later—self-consciousness—would refer to any narrative that refers to itself individually, bringing attention to its own fictional status. Evidently, self-referentiality is the most common of the two, as the first degree of reflexivity, and then self-consciousness would often be a kind of "self-referentiality squared" in which the reference to the medium is redoubled, turned into a reflection upon itself as an individual artwork (Pardo 2015, 51). This distinction by degrees seems essential insofar as not everything that is popularly called "meta"—not every reflexive narrative, that is—would automatically entail the estranging effect of the Brechtian theatre or of certain postmodern novels. Whereas self-referentiality need not disrupt the illusion whatsoever, self-consciousness —as expressed in devices such as the fourth wall break or the metalepsis—would entail an estranging effect, a temporary and/or relative distancing between the reader/viewer and the narrative, which momentarily flaunts the narrative's fictional and mediated nature—or, in this specific case, flaunts its position within a certain transmedia franchise.

If we carry this distinction into the context of the MCU, self-consciousness and self-referentiality both seem rare, although there are two series that stand out. First, the only textbook example of overt self-consciousness would be one Phase Four series, *She-Hulk*. Here, the titular character and narrator systematically speaks to the camera and addresses the spectators to discuss the series itself, with generally comedic comments. Furthermore, by the season finale—entitled "Whose Show Is This?"—, She-Hulk herself impossibly jumps out of her slot in the streaming platform (Fig. 1), and finds her way into Marvel Studios to discuss and demand a change in her still ongoing story, in a paradigmatic example of what Gérard Gennette (1980) defined as a "metalepsis" (236). This is a self-conscious device that may be traced as far back as to Miguel de Unamuno's *Niebla* (see Pardo 2011, 155), a novel in which a character met the author, but in this case the tone and intent of the confrontation is radically different, more comic than tragic. Looking for one "Kevin" that seems to be in charge—a reference to the MCU's own Kevin Feige—, She-Hulk gets to the building's leading room—an empty room wallpapered with screens that are displaying MCU films—, and, suddenly, a surveillance-camera-like robot emerges from an overhead hatch (Fig. 2). A disembodied voice introduces itself as K.E.V.I.N.—which stands for "Knowledge Enhanced Visual Interconnectivity Nexus"—, and asks her:

> Were you expecting a man?
> SHE-HULK: Yeah, why would I expect a giant AI brain and not a man? Wait, so you're the one making all the decisions here?
> K.E.V.I.N.: I will answer your questions, but you must first transform back to Jennifer.
> S-H: Why?

K: You are very expensive.

S-H: Oh, sure.

K: But wait until the camera is off you. The visual effects team has moved on to another project. ...

K: Thank you. And to answer your question... Yes, I make the decisions. I possess the most advanced entertainment algorithm in the world, and it produces near-perfect products.

S-H: Near perfect?

K: Some are better than others, but I leave that debate up to the Internet. (19'55"–20'43")

The scene then continues with She-Hulk's demand that she must have a better ending befitting a comedy like hers, rather than live through the unfolding tragedy, and K.E.V.I.N. reluctantly accepts. However, the robot gets more defensive and inflexible when She-Hulk changes the topic and begins to mock the MCU's apparent obsession with "daddy issues," alluding to the origin stories of male superheroes such as Iron Man, Captain America, *et al.*, as most of these rely on a conflict with a paternal figure—a timeless cliché repeated *ad nauseam* in the MCU and beyond. In this regard, She-Hulk may be seen as the paradigmatically self-conscious MCU superhero, as her defining conflict is neither with a parent nor with any (super)villainous character, but rather with the most clichéd (and, in this case, also most patriarchal) tropes of the genre and franchise to which she herself belongs.
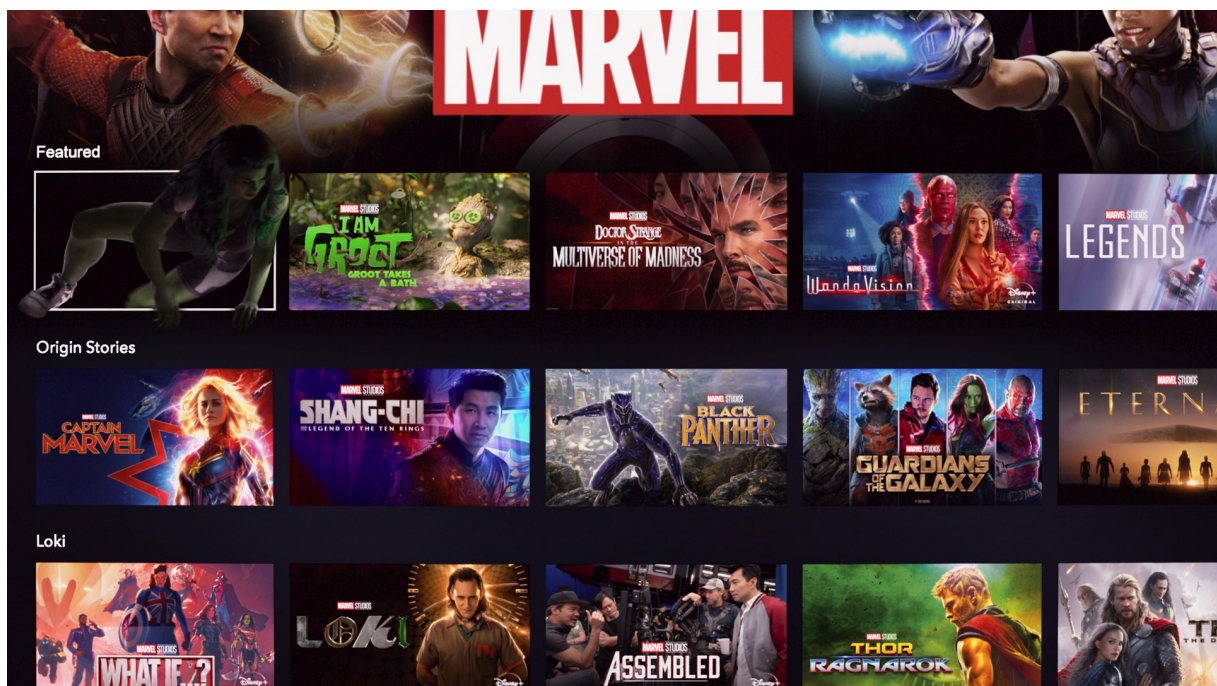

Fig. 1. Screen capture from Coiro, Kat, dir. 2022. *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law*. Season 1, episode 9, "Whose Show Is This?" Released October 13, 2022 on Disney+.

Fig. 2. Screen capture from *She-Hulk: Attorney-at-Law* © Disney, 2022.

In this climactic scene that I have taken as illustration, *She-Hulk* uses its self-consciousness to engage in self-deprecating humor, which partly explains why a rather recalcitrant sector of the fandom rejected the series, as though they were offended by its mildly self-critical commentary—or, perhaps, discontent with the fact that a supposedly second-rate superheroine is openly laughing at the MCU's big men.[2] However, other than She-Hulk's complaints about the low budget of her show, and some comments that—in a very generous interpretation—could be said to satirize the patriarchal tropes of superhero narratives, *She-Hulk*'s self-conscious comments are, in the end, part of a playful sitcom with no interest in any profound (self-)critique of the MCU—as this critical kind of reflexivity is to be found elsewhere. Still, *She-Hulk*'s science-fictional way of representing the authority of the MCU as K.E.V.I.N. is rather revealing, especially as it has echoes in other Phase Four series that pursue similar analogies with more depth. In this self-conscious characterization of the franchise, *She-Hulk* appears to imagine the MCU as a hidden structure of power; not entirely human but still a humanized, human-made (and thus perhaps fallible) machine; not easily graspable in its technical functioning yet on the whole operating by very common-sense (and perhaps banal) logics; and not very rational despite overestimating its rational (but perhaps too calculating) capabilities. With this,

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[2] *She-Hulk* is an exceptional series within the MCU in the sense that it is a series created, directed and written mostly by women. This perhaps explains the underlying misogyny of frequent complaints that the series is "superficial," "vain," and "not funny," with a common grievance being its supposedly "unfair" treatment of men (see She-Hulk's IMDb reviews for a sample of suchlike opinions).

She-Hulk seems to be, in its own way, acknowledging a certain feeling of exhaustion with the franchise, a sentiment that is circumvented, rather than criticized, with self-conscious humor. Within *She-Hulk*, of course, this self-deprecating characterization is confined to a single scene, but we shall find that, in series like *WandaVision* and *Loki*, this ambivalently self-critical way of imagining the MCU grows in narrative importance and shifts to a tragic register, even approximating a dystopian (self-)denunciation in *Loki*.

Nevertheless, before turning to those cases, it is worth examining another Phase Four series in which reflexivity is also relatively playful and simple, though more illustrative of the self-referential than of the self-conscious: the anthology series *What If...?* As a kind of introduction to the possibilities of the multiverse, this series is composed of short, animated stories that follow the consequences of a certain divergence from the main MCU storyline. In this manner, the show is from the outset self-referential vis-à-vis speculative fiction, insofar as it asks the genre's paradigmatic "what if" (something happened differently) to certain parts of a story that is already premised on the MCU's larger "what if" (superheroes existed in contemporary Earth). The first episode, for instance, takes us into a world without a Captain America, and a Captain Carter instead (Fig. 3). For the faithful MCU spectators, this entails an implicit game of comparisons that occasionally slips through conversations, especially insofar as the characters often talk about the reversal in gender roles that their situation entails, even though they themselves are unaware—unlike the self-conscious She-Hulk—of their own fictionality. With this specular structure whereby each episode's narrative mirrors the franchise's, and with an omniscient narrator—a supradimensional deity called the Watcher (Fig. 4)—who explicitly reflects upon these stories *as stories*, *What If...?* is only self-conscious in an implicit way, especially because any potential self-consciousness is naturalized as a characteristic of this narrator's god-like position over the multiverse, which prevents his comments from having the fourth-wall breaking effect of She-Hulk's. Indeed, the Watcher's routine is to conclude each episode by saying, as he does in the first, that "these are my stories. I observe all that transpires here, but I do not, cannot, will not interfere. For I am... the Watcher" (28'46"–29'06")—however, the fact that this becomes his signature goodbye prevents any estrangement that could be triggered by the analogy. Furthermore, even though, as in *She-Hulk*, the season finale also contains a metalepsis—another break of diegetic levels that is *potentially* estranging and self-conscious, insofar as the Watcher *descends* into the diegetic world—, in *What If...?* this happens for reasons that are also justified and naturalized by the Watcher's divine role within the fictional multiverse, leaving any self-conscious connotations implicit. Besides, The Watcher does not irrupt into the narrative to criticize it *à la* She-Hulk, but to summon all the main characters from each of the episode's universes, so that they unite against a threat against the multiverse—an alternate version of a known villain, Ultron, who had been defeated in the MCU's First Saga. Nevertheless, the fact that the self-consciousness of the Watcher's

character and role is re-contained within the narrative's own terms does not mean that we cannot interpret it as having self-conscious connotations, even if implicitly and allegorically.

Fig. 3. Screen capture from Andrews, Bryan, dir. 2021. *What If…?* Season 1, episode 1, "What If… Captain Carter Were the First Avenger?" Released August 11, 2021 on Disney+.

Fig. 4. Screen capture from *What If…?* © Disney, 2021.

On a surface level, *What If...?* would be, first and foremost, a clear-cut case of the MCU's use of the multiverse as a convenient vehicle whereby it can reboot its past stories. In this case, the assembly of a team of superheroes who are fated to confront an apocalyptic threat—which was already the plot of the Infinity Saga—is here restaged on the multiverse, with some minor tweaks that make it sufficiently faithful for the more nostalgic spectators, and sufficiently original and playful for the more saturated followers. Furthermore, and most importantly for this article's concern with reflexivity, the specular narrative structure of *What If...?* is one simple illustration of a recurring, reflexive analogy that is implicitly established between the parallel timelines of the multiverse, and the parallel storytelling of the MCU's different films and series—an analogy that is also present in a series like *Loki*. In this case, if we interpret the Watcher as an allegorical MCU showrunner—not literal like K.E.V.I.N., but readable as such by way of its powerful position above the multiverse—, *What If...?* seems to suggest several things about the MCU's current situation. First and foremost, the series may be taken to say that, if the franchise wants to redress a potential splintering of narrative cohesion, the new Multiverse Saga shall need something like the Watcher's intervention into the fictional multiverse—an authoritative intervention which, as is usually the case with superhero narratives in the neoliberal age, ultimately defends the *status quo* both literally and ideologically.[3] For the Watcher, the multiverse must be defended to remain as it has always been, and the new superheroes must try to change as little as possible so as to avoid paradoxes in the fabric of space-time; for the MCU, the whole franchise must be able to reboot anew, but still change as little as possible so as to remain a coherent and recognizable narrative which is therefore marketable and controllable as a unified brand. Thus, as a supradimensional kind of neoliberal autocrat, the Watcher seems to be chanting a "there is no alternative" (to the universe's and the franchise's order), a very (anti)political statement that gains a semblance of divine ineffability because of the character's totalizing, cosmic scope. The extent to which *What If...?* can be said to suggest this, however, is no more than as a symptom, likely unintentional, although the recurrence of this analogy can make us suspect otherwise.

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[3] In a wide-ranging study of twenty-first-century American cinema's superheroes, Dan Hassler-Forest (2012) reached a conclusion that still seems relevant when thinking of the MCU's tropes and dynamics. As he argued, ambivalent exceptions notwithstanding, "the overwhelming majority of narratives and characters ... points toward a more disturbing worldview in which the nostalgic desire for an earlier form of modern capitalism is accompanied by patriarchal forms of authority. These figures display an attitude towards other cultures and ethnicities that is usually patronizing at best, and openly racist at worst. And although these franchises certainly provide the individual subject with a site where the contradictions of postmodernity can be negotiated metaphorically from within the safety of an unrealistic, allegorical context, it does so in a way that is entirely dictated by the text's status as a branded commercial commodity" (mobi file location 3454–3459).

Within the bigger picture of Phase Four, similar analogies have, in fact, appeared in other series, often with more depth of connotations, developed into complex allegories. In this first section, we have observed that *She-Hulk* and to an extent *What If...?* are—although with varying degrees of overtness—the series with the most unambiguously self-conscious devices, such as fourth-wall breaks, metalepses, and specular narrative structures, making them clear cases of a formally playful use of such devices. However, the exceptionally overt nature of their reflexivity does not preclude that other series can be interpreted to have similar connotations that may—in subtler ways—bring spectators and critics back into thinking upon the franchise itself in ways that go deeper than playfulness. In this regard, my basic proposition in the next sections is that much of the world-building of shows such as *WandaVision* or *Loki* is readable as what Pardo terms "metafictional allegories" (2011, 168): narratives where self-consciousness emerges from a web of analogies between roles and dynamics within the diegetic world, and roles and dynamics within the MCU franchise as such. Thus understood, these diegetic other-worlds still bring audiences back to reflecting upon the franchise and/or the narrative in question, although more indirectly, by way of speculative fiction's more allegorical kind of estrangement (see Suvin and Miéville for estrangement-focused definitions of the genre). As opposed to both *She-Hulk* and *What If...?*, the two series that we now examine are characterized by a self-consciousness vis-à-vis the franchise that is *markedly more allegorical* but also *much more central* for the plot and themes, going beyond the narratively anecdotal and/or peripheral figurations of the MCU's power that we found in K.E.V.I.N. or the Watcher. In crafting their respective diegetic worlds, Phase Four series like *Wanda-Vision* and *Loki* seem to be indirectly imagining their franchise as a multiverse, weaving complex metafictional allegories in which the MCU is, more or less indirectly, speaking about itself.

2. The TV-Within-the-TV in *WandaVision*: A Metafictional Allegory of Affects

Within the landscape of the MCU's reflexive turn, *WandaVision* is perhaps the one that puts the heart into its reflexivity, deeply entangling narrative form and affect. First and foremost, this series is a clear showcase of specifically televisual self-referentiality: a TV series about TV, with a nested or specular structure that features a TV-show-within-the-TV-show. Indeed, *WandaVision* is not only a show about the life of the superhero marriage formed by Wanda and Vision, but also a show about a televisual broadcast that is produced by Wanda's powers—hence the title's pun. This self-referentiality, however, is not directly turned back upon the franchise in an overtly self-conscious way, as it is justified by the series' own internal logics: it is Wanda's powers, her feelings and her imagination which are responsible for the creation of a TV-within-the-TV. Grief-stricken by Vision's murder at the hands of arch-villain Thanos—back in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), one of the last films of the first saga—, Wanda constructs her own televisual reality

in denial of his demise, trying to simulate their lost future together. Thus, Wanda reimagines and reanimates her beloved Vision, now alive and with her, and together they experience the suburban, marital "utopia" of the American sitcoms that used to fascinate and comfort her as a child.

Here, the fact that Wanda herself is positioned as the show-within-the-show's showrunner, with other people as either her characters or her spectators, paves the way for a metafictional allegory where the MCU implicitly reflects upon itself in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Infinity Saga. Seen through this lens, Wanda's grief can be interpreted as an echo of the MCU's fans and followers' own grief and nostalgia over the end of the first saga. Life without Vision now seems meaningless to her, and this feeling seems analogous with the potential sensation of meaninglessness that can emerge during the beginning of a new MCU saga in which the old referents are being discarded and/or replaced, the past seems forgotten, and the future appears, at the very least, confusing, if not also hopeless. Against these feelings, Wanda's response here is to deny any changes and to enforce order—to use her own power to herd characters and spectators into a corral fenced by well-known narrative structures that give her a sense of safety in a moment of uncertainty and fear. Nonetheless, Wanda's attempt at control is doomed to fail from the outset, and *WandaVision*'s whole story takes viewers through the widening gaps in her control, and ultimately towards the collapse of her bubble reality—a collapse that is full of self-conscious connotations, as an echo of the franchise's own foretold death.

If we first look more closely at *WandaVision*'s show-within-the-show, most of it is a compendium of sitcom styles across the decades, with each succeeding episode imitating a different format in its style, changing everything from color and sound quality to set and costume designs (Fig. 5). In fact, as per the creators' acknowledgment (see Baruh 2021), the first six episodes—out of a total of nine in the whole series—imitate and pay homage to the style of, respectively, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961), *Bewitched* (1964), *The Brady Bunch* (1969), *Family Ties* (1982), *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000), and *Modern Family* (2009) (see Sánchez-Asenjo 2023 for a closer analysis of this dimension of the series). At first, however, before any shifts in format, the intradiegetic series seems indistinguishable from the series as such, mirroring and reinforcing the characters' (and viewers') initial entrapment within the bubble reality, since Wanda's sitcom is not revealed to be an intradiegetic broadcast up until the closing scene of the first episode. Here, in a paradigmatic example of a visual *mise-en-abyme*—another typically reflexive device—, the image changes to a contemporary aspect ratio and color just as Wanda's show's end credits roll, and a digital zoom out reveals that this show is in fact being watched by someone else, who is taking notes in some high-tech facility, presumably as confounded as a first-time viewer of *WandaVision* who is still unaware of the series' specular structure (Fig. 6).

Fig. 5. Screen capture from Shakman, Matt, dir. 2021. *WandaVision* Season 1, episode 1, "Filmed Before a Live Studio Audience." Released January 15, 2021 on Disney+.

Fig. 6. Screen capture from *WandaVision* © Disney, 2021.

Only after this first episode—and gradually—do viewers find out that a military research and surveillance team from S.W.O.R.D.—a fictitious U.S. counterterrorism agency—is monitoring Wanda and her sitcom because she has trapped the entire village of Westview

within an impassable magical forcefield created by her powers, which have been unexpectedly amplified by her intense grief. Furthermore, as the S.W.O.R.D. team eventually discovers, Wanda is exerting absolute control within Westview, modifying physical reality at will, and mind-controlling everyone to play their role within the sitcom-like suburban "utopia" that she has invoked for herself and Vision. In this way, at first, everything that the S.W.O.R.D. team can do is to tune in to Wanda's show, as this is the only way of knowing what goes on inside, even if partially. More generally speaking, then, the whole situation presented by *WandaVision*'s first episodes is one where the painful reality of Vision's death—and the First Saga's end—has been repressed and replaced by a sophisticated "bubble reality" invoked by Wanda's imagination, an imagination which to some extent resembles those of the most nostalgic and conservative fans in her attachments and impulses. Indeed, this is an imagination which tries to deny the death of a character and the end of a whole storyline—that of the First Saga—, while constructing a future based on an idealized dream of a non-existent past—be that the American dream of old sitcoms, Wanda's dreamed life with Vision, or the viewers' own dreams for the MCU. *WandaVision* therefore meditates upon how, just when reality (or fiction) seems to change the most, impulses to stop and even reverse change inevitably appear —nostalgic and conservative impulses which not only try to keep the old referents alive, but also seek to impose some structure—the structure of genre clichés and televisual formats, in this case—upon a life that otherwise feels lacking and pointless.

Although Wanda's show-within-the-show initially takes the spotlight, the remainder of the series gradually opens its narrative perspective from the inside to the outside of Westview—from the intradiegetic show to the main diegetic world, that is—, in a focal shift that allows viewers to distance themselves from Wanda's all-American sitcom "utopia." Indeed, Wanda's Westview is very soon revealed to be nothing but the ultimate dystopia: first, it is a painful mind-prison for all of its human hostages, who long to be freed from their roles in the sitcom but are helpless to even express this feeling. Furthermore, and more tragically for Wanda herself, her dream turns out to be unsustainable, doomed to implode as soon as Vision discovers that he is but Wanda's imagined version of himself—and that his true self is irremediably dead. Thus, as episodes advance, the initial loop of tightly codified episodes-within-the-episodes breaks apart, not only because Wanda begins to lose her sense of control as she is questioned by Vision—i.e., by her own creation—, but also because other people within Westview begin to be able resist Wanda's mind control, and the S.W.O.R.D. team outside begins to discover ways of breaking into the village. In this down-spiral toward the collapse of the bubble reality—which parallels the deterioration of Wanda and Vision's relationship—, the two titular characters' most self-conscious moment coincides with the time when the series mimics the style of *Modern Family*, the last sitcom to be imitated by Wanda's Westview broadcast in all kinds of details, even the opening credits' font (Fig. 7). In the manner of

mockumentary-styled sitcoms like *The Office*—another potential reference—, *Modern Family* is known for featuring confessional asides to the camera by the characters and these asides, in Wanda and Vision's case, become overtly anti-illusionist, especially because it is here when Vision fully awakens to the nature of the whole simulation—in an episode that is obnoxiously entitled "Breaking the Fourth Wall." With the illusion broken, in the last episodes of *WandaVision*, the broadcast ends, but the magical prison remains. Therefore, all that remains is the much less reflexive story of Wanda's struggle to retain control as she is besieged by enemies within and without her bubble reality, until, ultimately, she is part forced and part convinced to relinquish control, just as she finally comes to terms with Vision's passing. With Westview's liberation and Wanda's escape, the series ends, having provided an interestingly ambivalent backstory for Wanda's subsequent turn from superhero to supervillain.[4]

Fig. 7. Screen capture from Shakman, Matt, dir. 2021. *WandaVision*. Season 1, episode 7, "Breaking the Fourth Wall." Released February 19, 2021 on Disney+.

What does this story say if we conclude by re-reading it as a metafictional allegory? If we now consider its entire narrative trajectory, *WandaVision* does not stop at simply echoing fans and followers' grief over the First Saga's end, but it also reflects upon alternative responses to such a transition, ultimately suggesting which is the better response. In this

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[4] Wanda would become the main villain of a later MCU film, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). Here, however, in comparison to *WandaVision*, the character's nuances are radically simplified and one might say squandered, since her grief and her longing to be a mother is rather problematically — if not misogynistically— treated as cause of a multiverse-wrecking "madness."

regard, Wanda's authoritarian reaction is presented as undesirable and tragically self-defeating, whereas S.W.O.R.D.'s damage control operation ultimately emerges as the lesser evil, the best way of preserving the *status quo* moving forward. Still, ambivalences abound in this *a priori* clear-cut equation. For starters, Wanda's attachment to what is irremediably gone makes her profoundly understandable in the eyes of fans and followers with a strong attachment to the finished Infinity Saga, who may therefore empathize with her desire for returning to an idealized past, and rewriting it to fit her desires, almost in the manner of a fanfiction. At the same time, the fact that Wanda is positioned as certain fans' representative and hero—the showrunner to enforce their desires—is what paves the way for a more effective chastisement, which first recognizes an "inconvenient" sentiment but then dictates a more "proper" solution. Ultimately, the impersonal apparatus of S.W.O.R.D.—a military institution that is made even more impersonal by the fact that sympathetic, relatable characters within it are shown as the exception—takes control of the situation and saves the day, in what could be readable as a somewhat cynical or simply conformist acceptance of established power. Allegorically, then, it could seem that *WandaVision* conveys a fear of losing control—of Marvel Studios losing control of its product over to the impulses and desires of its more dedicated fans and followers, or losing control over to the more autonomous, directorial showrunner that is evoked by Wanda. If the franchise were to surrender itself to these, it would collapse in on itself, as this story suggests, so it follows that the MCU is better off by entrusting itself to the anonymous, technocratic control of a corporation's calculations—whether those are S.W.O.R.D.'s or, allegorically, Marvel Studios'. Thus, in an implicit interpellation to the MCU fans, *WandaVision* could even seem to surreptitiously say something like "yes, we know that you feel like you could do better if you—or someone *who cares*, like Wanda—were in control, and that you fear that we're about to destroy the object of your love, but in the end you must trust us: the devil you know…" And indeed, Wanda's story again brings home the neoliberal conclusion: that there is no alternative… to corporate-controlled franchise culture. Any attempt to redo culture around anything other than the continuation of business as usual shall fail… and if you put your heart and your ideals into it, like Wanda does, it shall be nothing but helpless self-sabotage.

3. The MCU as Dystopia in *Loki*: A Metafictional Allegory of Power

If *WandaVision* takes Wanda as a scapegoat of any impulses to stop or reverse the franchise's relentless advance, and then has an impersonal institution emerging as the safer solution; *Loki* interestingly reverses the terms, framing a bureaucracy as the dystopia. In another version of the same metafictional allegory, *Loki* takes its viewers deep inside a supradimensional apparatus of power which oversees the whole multiverse—an institution whose mission is to prevent reality from ever splintering into multiple bubble realities, or "branching timelines," as they are called. This is the Time Variance Authority, or

TVA, a secret institution with headquarters in a realm outside of space-time itself, and above the standard laws of physics, which absolutely dwarfs the power of any individual superhero. In the very beginning of the series, the titular character—the *a priori* almighty Loki—is detained with surprising ease by the TVA's police, and taken to their HQ to be trialed for disrupting the so-called "sacred timeline"—i.e., for taking a decision that diverged with what the character of Loki already did in the MCU's First Saga. As Loki is informed after a rigged mock-trial, the TVA's own method for securing multiversal order is by "pruning" any divergent branches—a cute gardening euphemism for erasing any variant individuals from the face of the universe, exiling them from existence with a ridiculously normalized but still brutal procedure (Fig. 8). However, on condition of collaborating with the TVA, Loki cannily saves himself from pruning, and with him, viewers shall get to know the inside of the TVA in its day-to-day operations. Throughout the majority of the series, then, viewers shall find themselves trapped inside a parodically Kafkaesque and retro-futuristic version of a repressive bureaucracy which—despite its quasi-divine position—is still ridiculed for its alienating impersonality, its procedural pomposity, and its absurd rigidity, something that is hilariously captured by an admissions security that at times caricaturizes an airport's. Indeed, the TVA—which is not satirized and exposed in the manner of a classic dystopia, but rather *mocked* benignly and playfully—has all the worst features of any other bureaucratic institution, and Loki shall discover all of this alongside his assigned supervisor, a funnily easy-mannered, workaholic bureaucrat called Mobius who has apparently known no life other than the TVA.

Fig. 8. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki*. Season 1, episode 1, "Glorious Purpose." Released June 9, 2021 on Disney+.

Loki's metafictional allegory, then, is less about a showrunner's and/or a fan's relationship to the franchise, and much more about the corporation's supposedly godlike power over its cinematic universe, which seems logical given that this series is not set in a bubble world within the main diegesis—like *WandaVision* was—, but rather in a world *above* the main diegesis, establishing an inversely symmetrical allegory that has, accordingly, other implications. If we assume that Marvel Studios is being allegorically reimagined as the TVA by way of their position as managers of a multiverse, it would seem that the MCU is parodying itself as a ridiculously dystopian apparatus of power: a purely repressive institution that—rather than creating or even recreating anything—devotes itself to the destruction of "dangerous" alternatives to its pre-established plans. The tone with which Miss Minutes—the TVA's AI mascot—explains this mission to newcomers like Loki is perhaps what best condenses the TVA's characterization—and indirectly, the MCU's self-characterization—as a force that is just as sublime as it is ridiculous:

> Welcome to the Time Variance Authority. I'm Miss Minutes, and it's my job to catch you up before you stand trial for your crimes. ...
>
> Long ago, there was a vast Multiversal war. Countless unique timelines battled each other for supremacy, nearly resulting in the total destruction of... well, everything. But then, the all-knowing Timekeepers emerged, bringing peace by re-organizing the Multiverse into a single timeline, the Sacred Timeline. Now, the Timekeepers protect and preserve the proper flow of time for everyone and everything. But sometimes, people like you veer off the path the Timekeepers created. We call those variants. Maybe you started an uprising, or were just late for work; whatever it was, stepping off your path created a Nexus event, which, left unchecked, could branch off into madness, leading to another Multiversal war! But don't worry, to make sure that doesn't happen, the Timekeepers created the TVA and all its incredible workers! The TVA has stepped in to fix your mistake, and set time back on its predetermined path. Now that your actions have left you without a place on the timeline, you must stand trial for your offenses. So sit tight and we'll get you in front of a judge in no time! ...
>
> TVA - For all time, always! (09'23"–11'12")

For greater narrative irony, Miss Minutes' explanations are illustrated by a cartoon that the proud Loki dismisses as "bunkum": in it, the Timekeepers are featured as three alien-looking deities who heroically hold the universe's thread (Fig. 9), and the emergence of a chaotic multiverse is posed as the ultimate, apocalyptic danger that would set off all alarms (Fig. 10). Thus, again we find an echo of the fear that the multiverse's could pose a threat for the franchise's coherence and continuation, though in a new allegorical shape. Here, in a manner that indirectly speaks of the franchise's—and by extension, the culture industry's—drive to monopolize and absorb all of fiction and art's divergent possibilities into a single, commodified brand, the TVA seems to caricature much of what Marvel Studios already does to secure control of its multiverse—i.e., of its transmedia franchise. Indeed, like the TVA, Marvel Studios also employs a whole army of workers who together enforce the continuation of a timeline's planned development, in what is perhaps as much a collective creative process as it is a process of top-down supervision

of production—not to mention the company's strategies to prune both online pirates (the real-life variants) and the competition's franchises (the real-life branching timelines). The TVA's timekeepers, then, would be but a cartoonish reflection of the company's gate-keeping role in contemporary Hollywood—and even an echo of Marvel Studios's three main producers at the time: Kevin Feige, Louis D'Esposito and Victoria Alonso.

Fig. 9. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki.* Season 1, episode 1, "Glorious Purpose." Released June 9, 2021 on Disney+.
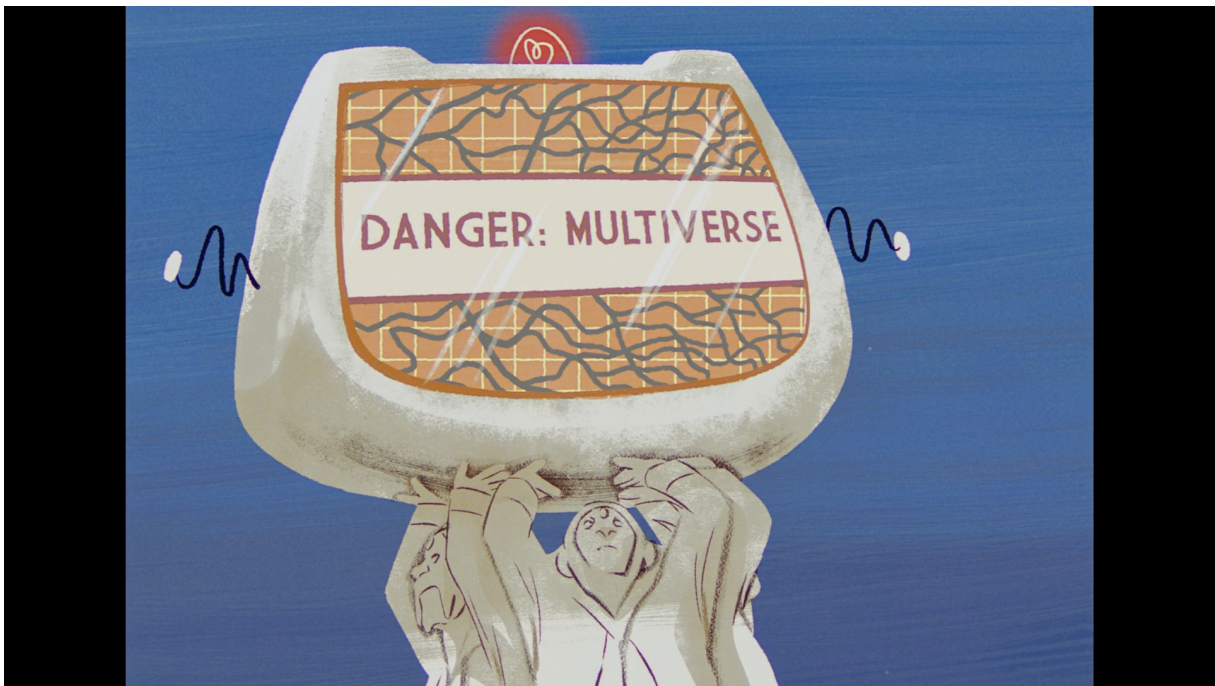

Fig. 10. Screen capture from *Loki* © Disney, 2021.

The series' story is, in the first season, driven forward by Loki and Mobius's search for an especially troublesome variant of Loki himself called Sylvie—up until they find her, and Loki escapes from the TVA with her, forming an *a priori* reluctant partnership that evolves into an oddly pseudo-narcissistic "situationship." After spending her whole life as a variant on the run, Sylvie's purpose is to destroy the TVA, and Loki is easily recruited for this. However, when they eventually get to the Timekeepers themselves, it turns out that these supposed deities were insentient automatons: fronts for an unknown someone else who controls the TVA from the shadows. This is, of course, an almost clichéd plot-twist in the fictions of financialized capitalism, where control is almost always abstracted from the apparent figureheads—and something that seems to apply to Marvel too, considering the doubtful reasons behind the ousting of former executive-producer Victoria Alonso.[5] In *Loki*, the revelation that the timekeepers are a façade of the real power comes as a shock to some TVA insiders as well, but authorities decide to keep it as a convenient illusion—and prune those unwilling to collaborate, including Loki and Sylvie. Unexpectedly, however, their pruning does not entail death, but rather exile to a realm "at the end of time." And it is here that, quite conveniently, Sylvie and Loki finally find the TVA's puppet master in hiding.

This mysterious man—as he calmly explains to his visitors—first created the TVA so as to avoid an all-out war with variants of himself that would be—not unlike him—driven to controlling the multiverse. For this reason, this man goes by the pretentious epithet of "He Who Remains"—at the end of time, after the war, and above everything. Making a rather cynical case for his system—again, better the devil you know than the variants you do not—and offering Loki and Sylvie to take on his role, He Who Remains makes Loki doubt, but—after some struggle between the co-protagonists—Sylvie kills him trying to end the TVA, as she planned. At this point in the season finale, however, everything falls apart in such a way that any sense of victory for Sylvie is radically undermined. Indeed, from a window behind He Who Remains's dead body, the camera slowly takes us towards an omniscient view of the sacred timeline, now splintering at an uncontrollable speed into a growing number of branches (Fig. 11). Furthermore, back in the TVA, Loki finds himself surrounded by people who cannot remember him and—worse—confronted by a giant statue of He Who Remains, in what is presumably the sign of a takeover by an evil version of the man (Fig. 12). With such an image closing the season, it seems that another attempt to break the *status quo* has again backfired and worsened everything—again bringing home the nefarious neoliberal conclusion. Here, the MCU might have—in a very indirect and allegorical manner—acknowledged that it behaves like a dystopia which

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[5] Although it remains unclear why she was fired, there is speculation that it had to do with either or both her involvement in the production of *Argentina 1985*, or with certain political comments that involved Disney (see Kit 2023).

entraps even those who are apparently powerful, but ultimately it returns to the idea that there is no alternative. And is there, indeed, any alternative to the MCU's overwhelming dominance, in today's Hollywood? *Loki*, at least, appears to say that the only alternative is the multiverse's implosion.

Fig. 11. Screen capture from Herron, Kate, dir. 2021. *Loki*. Season 1, episode 6, "For All Time. Always." Released July 14, 2021 on Disney+.

Fig. 12. Screen capture from *Loki* © Disney, 2021.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Demonstrating the existence of a reflexive turn in the MCU's Phase Four, and illustrating the different manifestations of this phenomenon across four streaming series, this article has provided the bases for a critical analysis of this aspect of the MCU's production. In so doing, I have focused on how narrative reflexivity relates back to the present state of franchise, ambivalently reflecting both upon the MCU's continuing power and upon certain concerns in this moment of apparent crisis and exhaustion. *She-Hulk* and *What If…?*, first, were taken as two illustrative cases of the formal possibilities and modes of reflexivity, considering that they are the most overt and formally playful in this regard. The ideological depth of their reflexivity, however, remained superficial for such playfulness, making them cases in which, simply put, the MCU mocks itself rather benignly and anecdotally. *WandaVision* and *Loki*, on the other hand, were privileged as two examples in which reflexivity is more indirect—present in the form of metafictional allegories—but also more profound and wide-ranging in ideological implications, making them ambivalently (self-)critical towards aspects of the franchise and its management. In this regard, *WandaVision* seemed to focus on fans and followers' nostalgia over the end of the Infinity Saga, which seemed to be refracted through Wanda's grief, whereas *Loki* shifted the scope upwards, towards the MCU's power as figured through the TVA, which allegorically paints Marvel Studios as a repressive apparatus of power that very ineffectively and even ridiculously tries to rule over an entire multiverse. In various ways, then, these Phase Four series seem to betray a concern with—and perhaps also a cynicism toward—the MCU's apparent crisis and potential collapse, allegorically reimagining certain of the franchise's dynamics and inertias as if it too behaved in the way of a splintering, troubled multiverse.

For reasons of length and scope, this approach might deserve a deeper development beyond this article, in order to encompass the franchise's reflexive narratives beyond Phase Four, both in its past and—perhaps especially—in its future instalments, where the MCU might continue to use its narratives as a means to indirectly process and project its own problems. Furthermore, future studies of the franchise might also wish to consider how the reflexivity of the MCU's productions ties back to the well-established presence of reflexivity in superhero comics, something that Lucía Bausela Buccianti (2023) has recently done from the same theoretical framework (see also the earlier observations of Klock 2002, 122–52, and Coogan 2006, 214–18). Finally, a key question is left impending in this essay, because it is a question that can only be answered by the franchise itself: will reflexivity establish itself as a formal feature of the MCU after this apparent turn, or will Phase Four be, perhaps, only a reflexive moment rather than a turn, a passing phenomenon that has emerged in this transitional moment in between phases? One might, in this regard, expect that the Multiverse Saga will continue to use its titular image as the cornerstone of more metafictional allegories. Or, perhaps, if the doomsayers are proven

right anytime soon, this reflexivity might retrospectively become readable as a symptom of the franchise's impending decline and death—and it would not be a surprise to see that self-consciousness is once again a response to exhaustion, as in John Barth. Nevertheless, whatever our expectations be, it still seems that the MCU shall keep on churning out more products, clogging the market, and influencing audiovisual production generally, so if we are to understand the superhero genre today and—more broadly—the culture industry, we must keep an eye on the franchise, and particularly on what it says about itself, sometimes despite itself.

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A Transformational Figure:
Optimus Prime in Popular Culture 2006–2018[1]

Cenate Pruitt

Abstract

Since the introduction of the Transformers franchise in 1984, the character of Optimus Prime has served as the leader of the heroic Autobot faction, but also as the "face" of the series in popular culture. This paper explores the character's conceptual origins as a superhero robot, and takes an in-depth look at various representations of Optimus Prime in Transformers media during the pivotal years 2006–2018. Particular attention is paid to the various roles Prime serves in fiction, from idealistic journeyman to all-American action hero to war-weary veteran to wise mentor. The character's status as a celebrity is also discussed.

Keywords: Transformers, toys, franchise, transmedia, veteran, action hero.

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1. Introduction

The 2011 White House Correspondents' Dinner holds a noteworthy place in American political history, often represented as a pivotal event in Donald Trump's decision to run for President of the United States (Roberts 2023; Kirk 2016). It was the zenith of the "birther" conspiracy, an allegation that then-President Barack Obama was not a native-born US citizen and thus ineligible to hold office (Taddonio 2016). As a spoof of the conspiracies, Obama was introduced to the crowd not with "Hail to the Chief" but with Rick Derringer's "Real American," a bombastic rock song and walkout music for pro wrestler Hulk Hogan. A video package superimposed patriotic images over the American flag; Uncle Sam, cowboys and Mount Rushmore alongside a bouncing copy of Obama's "long form" birth certificate. The joke was clear—Obama was indeed a "real American." As the video

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continued, the images of classic Americana were replaced with more contemporary icons; basketball legend Michael Jordan, 1970s stuntman Evel Knievel, and Optimus Prime, fearless leader of the heroic Autobots from the 1980s *Transformers* cartoon (C-SPAN 2011). Two years later, Miss USA 2013 Erin Brady appeared in the Miss Universe Pageant "National Costume Contest" wearing a red, white, and blue ensemble seemingly inspired by the cinematic version of Optimus Prime. Despite Brady's excitement at "becom[ing] a [T]ransformer" (Miss USA 2013) the outfit was largely met with puzzlement and mockery in the media, referred to as "Optimus Sub-Prime" and questioning what American sensibilities a "Japanese toy" could possibly represent (Styles 2013; Gutierrez 2013).

The association between Optimus Prime and American values was not novel at that point; a 2009 issue of IDW Publishing's *The Transformers* comic series reimagined artist Shepard Fairey's iconic "CHANGE" poster to feature the Autobot leader, captioned "CHANGE INTO A TRUCK" (Doyle 2009), while multiple pieces of official art have featured Prime posing with the flag of the United States (Coller 2009; Su 2004) or in the guise of Uncle Sam (Milx and Su 2005). Beyond that, many aspects of the character are quintessentially American—he is an immigrant, he sports the red, white, and blue colors of the US flag, he speaks with an American accent, and the 18-wheeler is itself an American symbol (Wilson 2012). Even the character's Japanese name, "Convoy," evokes the 1978 trucker movie, which was a massive hit in that country (American Film Institute 2021). This paper explores the enduring nature of Optimus Prime as a *character* beyond his status as cartoon hero or action figure. Successful marketing of Optimus Prime and the *Transformers* franchise in the 1980s created room for a revival in the early 2000s, propelling the character of Optimus Prime into a celebrity in his own right.

With forty years of content to draw from, our focus needs to be narrowed. 2006 was chosen as a starting point as it represented a shift in how the brand was marketed. From 2001-2006, the main *Transformers* series (*Robots in Disguise, Armada, Energon,* and *Cybertron*) were toy-driven and kid-oriented. The cartoons followed the toys, focusing extensively on play features and regularly introducing new products as was done in the 1980s. Meanwhile, the growing influence of the adult *Transformers* fandom was becoming clear; Dreamwave Productions had a successful licensed *Transformers* comic between 2002 and 2004, and a series of reissued 1980s figures were sold at Toys 'R' Us. The most important element of using 2006 as a starting point, however, is the development and production of Michael Bay's *Transformers*, arriving in theaters in July 2007. Rather than attempting to accurately depict the toys on-screen, these toys would be based on the film's designs. This "media-first" approach would become the 'new normal' for the franchise going forward.

The year 2018 was chosen as the end date because it represented another large-scale reset for the franchise; IDW Publishing's long running "neo-G1" comic universe

concluded, *Bumblebee* represented a dramatic reset of the live-action film series, the animated *Rescue Bots* and *Robots in Disguise* series both ended, and Hasbro launched a major redevelopment of the collector-oriented *Transformers: Generations* toy line. In short, 2006-2018 represents a decade of significant experimentation and transformation for the franchise, and Optimus Prime was a central part of that process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL FRAMING

The *Transformers* franchise can be understood using Jenkins' (2009) concept of "transmedia storytelling," where "integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purposes of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience." Specific characters can then become transmedia figures in their own right; Thon & Pearson (2022) identify Sherlock Holmes as a well-known and long-running example. Such characters can be understood as a template for storytellers; while critical elements of Holmes remain constant (e.g. the name "Sherlock Holmes" or a recognizable variation and the role of "detective/crimefighter") other elements are mutable; Holmes has been portrayed by men, women, and Muppets, depicted as young and muscular or old and feeble, worked alongside Dr. Watson, Batman, and the Ghostbusters, and so forth. Meetings between these variants of a character are sometimes part of the narrative itself; *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* is a recent example. Such stories, for Jenkins, reward fans for their "mastery" and knowledge of the source materials beyond the pleasures inherent in the story.

2.1 THEORIZING TOYS AS TEXTS

Jenkins (2009) identifies *Star Wars* action figures as a "minimal" aspect of that franchise's transmedia delivery but acknowledges that stories may emerge through play. *Star Wars,* however, began as a film first and then expanded outward while *Transformers* began as a toy line, with fiction emerging from various transmedia marketing efforts. To further explore Optimus Prime as a toy <u>and</u> as a transmedia character in his own right, I draw upon three primary concepts; narrativization (Fleming 1996), toyesis (Bainbridge 2010) and Critical Action Figure Studies (CAFS) (Alexandratos and Yezbick 2018). The first of the three, narrativization, primarily applies to toys that represent characters from an extant work. The narrative is "baked into" the toy and informs how the end user will engage with it. Fleming uses the example of GI Joe, the original "action figure." The 1960s GI Joe was largely a narrative-free toy - indeed, the name itself indicated a degree of genericism—but the 1980s *GI Joe: A Real American Hero* franchise presented a narrative where each figure represents a distinct character (1996, 162–63). The toy is not just "a sailor," "he" is Hector X. Delgado, codename Shipwreck. Similar to Jenkins, Fleming observes that keeping track of the myriad characters and factions requires dedicated knowledge

on the part of a child, with a degree of complexity that allows kids to explore adult themes and "transcend… bleakness while nevertheless recognizing it" (1996, 146).

"Toyesis" refers to the way a toy can have "multiple origins across multiple media platforms, generating the production of more media texts around them" essentially fusing transmedia storytelling with narrativization (Bainbridge 2010, 33). The original "Generation One" era (1984–1991, "G1") of the *Transformers* franchise did this from the start via cartoons, a comic book series, a theatrical movie, and other ancillary material, all providing slightly different interpretations of what *Transformers* "is." Bainbridge links this practice to G1 but also to the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe; the *Guardians of the Galaxy* characters were obscure prior to the film's release, but through a multi-pronged toyesis approach, Rocket Raccoon was simultaneously re-introduced in a comic book from Marvel, an action figure from Hasbro, and an episode of DisneyXD's *Avengers Assemble*, ensuring that by the time the film hit theaters, core audiences would recognize the spunky rodent (Bainbridge 2016).

Finally, CAFS explores action figures as a distinct form of material culture. Action figures are "spreadable," extending official stories and enabling consumers to create their own imagined adventures. Product lines continually expand to reflect the narrative. Batman brings along Robin, the Joker, and the Batmobile; each Bat-series will inevitably reimagine and reproduce such elements. As nostalgia increasingly drives the development of action figures, they become "less toy-like and more redundantly iconic through perpetual reboots, overhauls, and reimaginings" (Alexandratos and Yezbick 2020, 112), losing "playable" action features (lights and sounds, "kung-fu grip") in favor of increasing fidelity to source material. The initial waves of "Marvel Legends" toys (2002-2006) were designed to reflect specific "famous moments" from the comics, relying on fans' knowledge of the source material as marketing tool. A final element is a paradox; toys are both disposable ephemera and collectible investments. Dedicated collectors become akin to museum curators, organizing their collections in ways that reflect their individual preferences and knowledge of the material (see Figure 1 below for a modest example). Toys can take on speculative/commodity status as well, drawing significant sums on eBay or at collectible shows.

2.2 TRANSFORMERS IN ACADEMIC LITERATURE

Dalkavouki (2018) identifies three primary areas of research on *Transformers*. First, exploring the international production (Fast and Örnebring 2017; Zhao and Murdock 1996; Owczarski 2017; Lukinbeal 2019) and transmedia distribution of the brand (Fleming 1996; Cowan 2023; Wolski 2022). Second, content analyses of the fiction, particularly American/Western anxieties about technology (Varney 2002; Wilson 2012), militarism (Cserkits 2021; Mirrlees 2017; Banglani 2018), and masculinity (McNamee and Miley 2017; Weigard

2011; Bacon 2011, 2012). Third, the *Transformers* fandom; focused largely on nostalgic adult collectors in Western societies (Meakins 2014; Fast 2012; Geraghty 2008, 2010, 2011).

A critical point of Dalkavouki's overview is the myopic focus on the 1980s cartoon and the live-action films to the near-total exclusion of other iterations. Expanding the literature into other parts of the franchise is an explicit goal of this paper; the discussion of *Transformers: Animated* that follows is effectively the first peer-reviewed material covering that series. I add a developing line of inquiry; Optimus Prime as referential symbol. These papers rarely interrogate the franchise but reflect the impact of Optimus Prime in popular consciousness. Several computer science researchers utilize Prime as an example of a "benign" artificial intelligence due to his honor, integrity, and "human" personality (Banks 2020; von Davier 2019; Reich 2009), while child psychologists consider his status as a role model for children, exploring what utility that popularity might have in educational contexts (Round, Baker, and Rayner 2017; Ohtake 2016; O'Byrne et al. 2018).

3. WAR DAWN: OPTIMUS PRIME'S SUPERHERO ORIGINS

While this piece focuses on Optimus Prime, the broader origins of *Transformers* are deeply tied to superhero fiction. The toy sold worldwide as Optimus Prime began in Japan as "Battle Convoy," released in 1982 by the Takara corporation as part of the *Diaclone* toy line. A Hasbro employee attending the 1983 Tokyo Toy Show spotted the toys and *Diaclone* along with several other Japanese lines would be licensed and integrated into the first two years of the *Transformers* franchise (Bainbridge 2010; Geraghty 2010). Other converting-robot toy lines would be sold in the West, most notably *GoBots*, but none were as impactful or long-lasting as *Transformers* (Varney 2002; Bainbridge 2016).

One explanation for this success is the role of Marvel Comics in creating the core narrative. Editor-in-chief Jim Shooter developed the franchise's premise, with writer Bob Budiansky single-handedly drafting character profiles for the entire product line over the Thanksgiving 1983 holiday weekend (Shooter 2011a; 2011b). This seemingly rushed origin was perhaps the secret ingredient—the *Transformers* were robotic superheroes, not clumsy *Buck Rogers* throwbacks. Their names were evocative; "Bumblebee" and "Starscream" as opposed to "Reekon" or "Tank." Each toy's packaging described the character's personality and powers, plus statistics representing their physical and intellectual capabilities. The disparate toys were given a unified pseudo-*anime* aesthetic by artists Shohei Kohara and Floro Dery. Optimus Prime's character model ended up becoming particularly iconic - a powerful, red, white, and blue physique, protective facemask, smokestack shoulders, truck window chest and chrome grill abs; visual traits that would later be identified as "essential brand elements" to the character (Transformers Global Brand Team 2017). Much like Superman's cape, costume, and "S" symbol, these elements can vary stylistically across iterations but remain a consistent part of the template.

These character concepts and designs formed the story bible for the *Transformers* cartoon. The show was co-produced by Marvel and Sunbow Productions, a division of Hasbro's advertising agency, and distributed by Claster Television, a Hasbro subsidiary. Arriving in September 1984 during Reagan-era deregulation of TV advertising, *The Transformers* joined *GI Joe: A Real American Hero, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe,* and other show-length toy commercials in the rapidly developing space of first-run syndication (Geraghty 2010; Brown 2023). *The Transformers* was an enormous success, despite criticism from parents' groups and academics about the show's violent content and relatively mature plotlines, which were intentionally designed to set it apart from the competing *Challenge of the GoBots* (Aitken 1986; Geraghty 2010). This marketing push culminated with 1986's *The Transformers: The Movie*, which continued the cartoon's narrative, introducing new characters/toys and killing off discontinued products including Optimus Prime in the process. A letter-writing campaign from outraged children (and parents) allegedly pushed Hasbro to resurrect the Autobot leader, making it clear how popular the character had already become (Horgen 2006; Lonergan 2015; Brown 2023).

One last aspect of Optimus Prime's popularity during the initial phase of *Transformers* fever was actor Peter Cullen's vocal performance, which he described as "tough enough to be gentle" (Sicard 2023). This element was important enough that producers of the 2007 film brought him back to the role, in part to address fan anxieties about the reimagining of the franchise (Ryan 2012; Geraghty 2011). Cullen then leveraged this importance to the fans, stating he would not have participated if the film had not met his own standards for the character (Breznican 2007). Cullen would voice Prime in almost every significant piece of *Transformers* media between 2007 and 2018, creating an "aural continuity" between incarnations. When Cullen was not used, the role was usually filled by voice actor Jon Bailey, doing a carefully honed impression (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). In 2024, Cullen was recognized with a Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award "for his enduring contributions as a voice actor in television and film," specifically citing his work as Optimus Prime (and as Eeyore from Disney's *Winnie the Pooh* franchise) (Moye 2023).

4. Child's Play—Optimus in the Toy Aisle

The original Optimus Prime toy was removed from shelves after 1985, a decision given narrative context via *The Transformers: The Movie*. As noted above, Hasbro course-corrected and in 1988 "Powermaster Optimus Prime" was released. An ad for the *Transformers* comics told viewers that Optimus was returning as a "Powermaster" and to read the comic book to discover how, while a later ad displayed the toy's action features. As one of the first *Transformers* toys to represent a "returning" character; Powermaster Optimus Prime had to establish visual continuity with what Optimus Prime "looked like." The windscreen-and-grille look of Prime's torso was created through sculpted detail rather than parts of the truck mode, reinforcing them as part of the character's "look." Over the

next thirty-five years, toys sold as Optimus Prime would offer variations on the theme, with concurrent fiction presenting each iteration as "Optimus Prime," all sharing core personality traits and story elements (brave, strong, Autobot leader, dying to protect Earth). In this way, the 1984 Optimus Prime toy created a template from which future toys and narratives could be iterated. Figure 1 serves to illustrate this consistent, yet varied, aesthetic process.

Fig. 1. An armada of Optimus Prime figures from the author's collection. A reproduction of the original 1984 figure is roughly in the center. Note the use of "essential brand elements"—color schemes, chest windows, and helmet designs. Photo by the author.

In 2006 with the live-action movie nearing release, Hasbro invested in putting the G1 characters back on store shelves. Two different Optimus Primes were released in the *Transformers: Classics* line, a smaller figure meant to directly evoke the 1984 release and a larger one with a bulkier build, styled after a modern cabover truck. These two toys would then be marketed as "G1 Optimus" alongside later film- and television-based figures. While the live-action films and television series discussed below had their own dedicated product lines, packaging, and branding, the *Generations* toy line (2010-ongoing) actively relied on fans' transmedia knowledge. The initial series included an Optimus Prime based on the *War for Cybertron* video game, an updated version of G1 Decepticon

Thrust, and newcomer Autobot Drift, who had recently been introduced in the IDW comics. In this way, the *Generations* branding could serve as nostalgia bait or to promote the less-visible transmedia elements of the franchise.

5. OPTIMUS PRIME IN FICTION

This section will focus on three areas; the IDW Publications comics, where Optimus Prime is a morally-conflicted figure who explores questions of power and ideology; the live-action films, where Optimus Prime is an aggressive action hero, and the various television series from the era, where Optimus Prime varies in portrayal from a superheroic defender of near-future Detroit to film-inspired weary warrior to a revered mentor for the next generation of Autobots. This section is not exhaustive, but offers an overview of significant English-language elements of the franchise.

5.1 CHAOS THEORY: OPTIMUS PRIME AND THE IDW COMICS

IDW's "Phase One" (2005–2012) reinvented the Autobot/Decepticon war as a conspiracy thriller before culminating in a Decepticon conquest of Earth with the Autobots laid low. In these stories, Optimus Prime remains strong and fearless, although he is occasionally gripped by doubt as his forces are outmatched by the Decepticons. Following a final epic battle, IDW's "Phase Two" storylines (2012–2018) explores the origins of the Transformers' war as well as what happens when that war finally ends. This era is considered by many fans to be the peak of the franchise's storytelling and garnered significant critical acclaim (Sims 2015; 2016b; 2016a; Dalkavouki 2018).

Phase Two's pre-war stories feature Orion Pax, a police officer who will one day become Optimus Prime. Transformer society is governed by an elaborate caste system tied to whatever one converts into; aircraft are high-status, animals are worthless—a metaphor for how human societies treat those who are "unable to contribute," according to writer James Roberts (Kibble-White 2016). Pax chafes under this unjust system, befriending the dissident proletarian author Megatron. Their friendship ruptures over political applications of violence, leading inevitably to war and Pax's transformation into Optimus Prime, Autobot leader.

After the war, Prime must come to grips with the destruction his war unleashed on the galaxy. Transformers are a pariah species, as other civilizations consider their mere *presence* to be a threat. Shaken by the violence carried out by those who trusted a "Prime," he resumes life as Orion Pax for a time, before new threats lead him to reclaim the title, in the hopes he can create a new legacy of peace. However, Prime's deep desire to atone for the destruction of the war leads him to forcibly annex Earth into a *Star Trek*-like alliance of Transformer worlds. Prime becomes increasingly authoritarian as his most loyal followers begin to regard him as a sort of god-king. In the final story arc, Prime

abandons violence and chooses the path of compassion, sacrificing his life to save Earth from recurrent *Transformers* antagonist Unicron. This is an admittedly extensive summary of thirteen calendar years' worth of comic books, but it is important to demonstrate the potential depth of characterization that can be applied to Optimus Prime.

Most of Optimus Prime's appearances in Phase Two were written by a single author, John Barber. This continued and consistent authorial focus allowed for a deep exploration of the character, an identifiable "voice," and expansion of the "template." This Optimus Prime contains multitudes; the traditional red-white-and-blue good guy, a conflicted hero questioning his own legacy, and a self-righteous zealot. Most intriguingly, the storyline where Optimus Prime becomes increasingly fascist in his attempts to protect Earth occurs in parallel with a storyline where Megatron renounces violence and seeks redemption for his acts of galactic tyranny. By flipping the roles of these two leaders, both are given new levels of depth and nuance, exploring questions of power and politics usually far beyond a "toy comic."

5.2 *PURE BAYHEM: OPTIMUS PRIME AND THE LIVE-ACTION FILMS*

Much has been written about how Optimus Prime is portrayed in the live-action films. One line of academic inquiry explores Prime as a patriarch or father figure; Bacon (2012) situates the Autobot/Decepticon conflict as a battle over reproductive power, with Optimus Prime representing a masculine desire to control the Decepticons' feminized reproductive capability. Wilson (2012) presents a similarly Freudian-Lacanian take on the character, with Optimus Prime described as a sort of living phallus, "[p]atriarchal, machinic, ultraviolent, gigantic, all-powerful… the ultimate 'vehicular vehicle'" (354). Weigard (2011) addresses Prime's role as a father figure to Shia LeBoeuf's Sam Witwicky, particularly compared to Sam's buffoonish human father, an analysis that dovetails with Wilson's observation that *all* of the male characters across Michael Bay's broader cinematic career are "intellectually one-dimensional" and "manly (but chronically unmanned)," (Wilson 2012, 362) a panoply of goofballs and bunglers.

Revisiting the question from the introduction, Wilson specifically identifies Optimus Prime as hyper-American. "He has an American-English accent; he is a Mack Truck… and his exterior boasts the bright colors of the American flag" (354–55). The live-action film series as American political project is the other recurring topic of academic discussion. Mirrlees (2017) situates the films in the broader context of the relationship between Hollywood and the United States Department of Defense. In *Revenge of the Fallen* and *Dark of the Moon* (2011) Optimus Prime and the Autobots explicitly subjugate themselves to the oversight of the military, working to hunt down and execute rogue Decepticons. Banglani (2018) connects this alliance to post-9/11 narratives about Muslim immigrants, arguing that Optimus Prime, despite his seeming American-ness, still must answer to

humanity for the actions of his enemies, and only has value to his allies in the US government until the Decepticon threat is neutralized.

Director Michael Bay identified 2014's *Transformers: Age of Extinction* not as a fourth film in the series, but rather as the first film in a "new trilogy," with dramatic changes to the casts; virtually all the Transformers aside from Optimus Prime and Bumblebee were replaced with new characters/toys (Alter 2014). In this quasi-reboot framework, Optimus Prime's physical appearance changes dramatically; while the "essential brand elements" remain broadly consistent, his overall design is more reminiscent of a medieval knight, complete with massive sword and shield, his color palette is darker, and his truck form is significantly more aggressive. The Decepticons are largely absent in *Extinction,* supplanted by a sinister CIA faction dedicated to hunting and killing all Transformers on Earth and their allies; a tech company using Transformer corpses to build military technology and the rogue Transformer assassin Lockdown. At the end of the film, Prime launches himself into space, promising to find and destroy his own creators. In the fifth film, *The Last Knight,* Optimus is absent for much of the first act before returning to Earth as a corrupted servant of an alien villain. Only Bumblebee's courage can snap him out of this state, just in time to confront a resurrected Megatron and prevent the destruction of Earth.

In these two films, not only does Prime's appearance change dramatically, but so does his attitude towards humanity. Hunted by the very humans he fought to protect, Optimus Prime is seething with anger and a desire for revenge, a trait that is unusual for the character, but a common one for action-movie protagonists (e.g. John Wick, The Bride from *Kill Bill*, etc.). Lukinbeal (2019) ties this reimagining of Optimus Prime's motives to the broader success of American action films in international markets. Revenge, it seems, is an internationally-spoken language.

5.3 OPTIMUS PRIME AS FUTURISTIC SUPERHERO: TRANSFORMERS: ANIMATED

Transformers: Animated (2007–2009) aired concurrently with the first two live-action films as well as the tail end of IDW's Phase One comics. *Animated* presented the Autobots as superheroes, protecting Detroit from costumed supervillains and the Decepticons. Optimus is reimagined in several ways; while the essential visual cues remain, the overall design is highly stylized in a manner reminiscent of *Batman: The Animated Series.* Instead of an 18-wheeler, he is a fire truck, using a high-tech firefighter's ax instead of the character's familiar "ion blaster" (a large black rifle). He is not voiced with the gravitas of Peter Cullen, but with youthful verve by David Kaye, previously known in the franchise as the voice of Megatron in the *Beast Wars* and "Unicron Trilogy" cartoon series. Most significantly for the narrative, this Optimus Prime is an inexperienced junior officer, easily overmatched by even a single Decepticon. Throughout the series, he follows a Campbell-style "hero's journey," culminating in a final battle where, in true superhero fashion,

Prime refuses to kill Megatron, instead forcing him to stand trial for his crimes. More than any other iteration of the character, *Animated* Optimus Prime hews the closest to the traditional conception of a "superhero."

Despite being met with controversy due to its radical aesthetic shift, *Animated* is now regarded by fans as one of the best series in franchise history, beating *The Transformers* (1984) and *Beast Wars* in a large (but wholly unofficial) online fan poll (TFWiki.net: The Transformers Wiki, n.d.; Sixo [@SixoTF] 2024). The series is deeply underrepresented in academic literature; Glascock's (2013) study of verbal aggression in children's programming is the sole work involving the series; at least one episode was included in the data set, but specifics of the show (including identifying how many episodes under review or which ones were selected) are not discussed in the paper.

5.4 Tying It All Together(?): The Aligned Continuity as Transmedia Experiment

The "Aligned" continuity was an attempt to create a singular transmedia narrative for all *Transformers* fiction; videogames, comics, and cartoons would all tell pieces of a single story, start to finish. Developed by then-Hasbro employees Aaron Archer and Rik Alvarez, the 354-page "Binder of Revelation" production bible combined elements from prior eras of *Transformers* into a coherent whole, and it would have driven the franchise for a decade. Central to this plan was "The Hub Network," a 2010 venture between Hasbro and Discovery Networks. The Hub was a family-oriented cable network with transmedia Hasbro franchises as flagship programs, most notably *Transformers: Prime* and *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* ("Hub Network - Transformers Wiki," n.d.; Discovery Communications 2010). For a variety of reasons beyond the scope of this paper, the plan failed, but much of the fiction released between 2010 and 2018 can broadly be fit into its narrative. While this era of *Transformers* fiction ran for the better part of a decade, it is significantly under-researched in the literature. The animated series have been included in broader analyses of children's programming without being directly commented on (Godsey 2022; Kol 2021). Only an article on the tie-in *Transformers: Exodus* novel explores any narrative themes. That text focuses on the novel's depiction of the political origins of the Transformers' war, particularly the use of violence against corrupt governments (Mutia and Sandika 2022).

The *War for Cybertron* (WFC) video games (2010's *War for Cybertron* and 2012's *Fall of Cybertron*) feature Peter Cullen as Optimus Prime, one of a rotating cast of protagonists, as the narrative switches between individuals and factions. A significant part of Prime's role in the game is a moral dilemma: Can he defeat Megatron without destroying Cybertron in the process? Otherwise, he is generally his "classic" self—war-weary but determined, committed to the safety of his troops at the risk of his own life.

Transformers: Prime attempted to adapt the intense tone of the films to television; the pilot begins with the execution of Autobot Cliffjumper by Decepticon Starscream.

Prime was more willing than any of its animated predecessors to deal with the reality of war, at least on a level suitable for a TV-Y7 rating (Pruitt 2012). Cullen retains the role of Optimus Prime, tired of war but determined to defend Earth against the Decepticons and the ever-present evil entity Unicron, dying and being reborn and then dying again, something that had by this time become an accepted part of the Optimus "template."

The other two television series that make up the Aligned continuity, *Rescue Bots* and *Robots in Disguise* have a very different take on Optimus Prime. *Rescue Bots* was explicitly aimed at preschoolers and the plots revolve around "rookie" Autobots learning to coexist with humanity. Prime acts as a "special guest star" with his appearances treated as "event" episodes, with his role largely reduced to sagely warning the cast of some impending danger—or introducing a new Autobot to the cast.

Robots In Disguise, while officially a sequel to *Prime*, has a dramatically different animation style and tone, bright and cheerful where *Prime* was moody and grim. Optimus Prime is dead, and the show focuses on Bumblebee, who leads a small team of Autobots. Nevertheless, Bumblebee spends much of the early series anxiously second-guessing himself as to what Prime would do. Eventually, Prime is reborn (again) but recognizes Bumblebee's growth, appointing him leader, and serving as an advisor instead. This "distant mentor" version of Optimus would become more common in *Transformers* fiction post-2018, particularly as Bumblebee is increasingly centered as a "best friend/big brother" to young audiences.

6. Optimus Prime, Celebrity

As the *Transformers* franchise has grown in popularity, Optimus Prime is akin to Darth Vader or Kermit the Frog, fictional transmedia characters who are treated as celebrities. His "wheel prints" can be found in cement outside the TCL Chinese Theater in Los Angeles alongside Peter Cullen's handprints (BeyondTheMarqueeShow 2014). Optimus Prime is the second individual (and first robot) presented with a "Lifetime Achievement Award" from Nickelodeon's "Kids Choice Awards" (Nickelodeon 2023). Visitors to the Universal Studios theme parks can meet him daily outside *Transformers: The Ride-3D* (Ricci 2021). As this article was under revision, television series *The Masked Singer* held a *Transformers*-themed episode where Optimus Prime interacted with the cast and provided clues as to performers' identities (Byrd 2024).

By the time *Transformers* hit theaters in 2007, the concept of a fictional character as a celebrity was fairly well-rooted; McGowan (2019) details the ways that animation studios in the early twentieth century presented Betty Boop, Bugs Bunny and the like as "movie stars" in their own right. Donald Duck received an honorable discharge from the U.S. Navy in 1984, having joined up in 1941's "Donald Gets Drafted" (Shales 1984). In an unusual and enlightening example, Della Carpini and Williams (1994) cite 1990's *Earth Day Special*, where Bugs Bunny and the Muppets are credited on equal standing with

Bette Midler and Robin Williams. Celebrity astronomer Carl Sagan appears as himself, while *Ghostbusters'* Egon Spengler (Harold Ramis) and *Back to the Future's* "Doc" Brown (Christopher Lloyd) are presented as Sagan's scientific equals.

Beyond serving as ambassador for the franchise, there is an entire subcategory of Optimus Prime toys which convert into officially licensed replicas of other products. The 2006 *Transformers: Alternators* figure is a 1:24 scale Dodge Ram SRT-10, which Takara insisted be sold as Optimus Prime since pickup trucks are otherwise unpopular in Japan. Similar products from this era include Optimus Prime as a Nike sneaker, a Sony PlayStation, and an iPod dock. Simply mixing a product with the *Transformers* franchise is not enough, the "star power" of Optimus Prime is part of the appeal.

Disney Label "Mickey Mouse Trailer" (2009) is particularly noteworthy for *not* being Optimus Prime. The robot mode resembles Mickey Mouse wearing an Optimus Prime costume; the bulbous feet, gloved hands, and head shape are Mickey while the chest windows, abdomen grill, and general color blocking are Optimus Prime. Even the Autobot icon is altered into a likeness of a mouse's head. Mickey himself is perched atop the robot's head. In truck mode, the vehicle resembles Optimus, but Mickey is in the driver's seat. Here at last we see the limits of Optimus Prime's "celebrity" status; the face of *Transformers* is reduced to a (literal) vehicle for Disney.

7. CONCLUSION—OPTIMUS PRIME, PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Two very interesting Optimus Prime toys were announced together in August 2023; "Missing Link" Optimus Prime is a highly-detailed update of the original 1984 figure with contemporary engineering and articulation, while "Toyota Lunar Cruiser" Optimus Prime converts into the likeness of a Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) moon buggy (Fallon 2023). Missing Link Optimus refines a toy of the past to the standards of the present, while Lunar Cruiser Optimus looks to the future. Both toys maintain visual continuity with one another; despite the real Lunar Cruiser being white with massive grey tires, the Optimus Prime version achieves the familiar red/grey/blue robot mode by cleverly stowing the vehicle's exterior panels.

Across the nearly 40-year span of the *Transformers* franchise, Optimus Prime has remained a central figure. One key to Prime's longevity as a pop-culture icon is his mutability. Optimus Prime can serve whatever needs the story requires; all-American action hero, Christlike martyr, political activist, war-weary veteran, wise father figure, or celebrity spokesmachine, while retaining his core characterization of strength, courage and dignity. He can become a sneaker, a pickup truck, or a sportscar and remain a recognizable robot thanks to his superhero-like visual elements. This mutability is in many ways a direct consequence of the transmedia nature of the franchise, transforming (pun *very much intended*) a clever robot toy into something more, much more, than meets the eye.

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1982. *Diaclone* "Battle Convoy" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by Takara.

1984–1987. *The Transformers* animated television series. Produced by Marvel Productions and Sunbow Productions, distributed in the US by Claster Television. Syndication.

1984–1991. *The Transformers* comic series (US). Written by Bill Mantlo (1-2), Ralph Macchio (1), Jim Salicrup (2-4), Bob Budiansky (5-55) and Simon Furman (56-80) Marvel Comics. 80 issues.

1984–1985. *The Transformers* "Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.

1986. *The Transformers: The Movie* animated film. Produced by Marvel Productions and Sunbow Productions, distributed by De Laurentiis Entertainment Group.

1988. *The Transformers* "Powermaster Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.

2005–2006. *The Transformers: Infiltration* comic series. Written by Simon Furman. IDW Publishing. Six issues.

2006. *Transformers: Alternators* "Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.

2006. *Transformers: Classics* Voyager-Class "Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold internationally by Hasbro under license from Takara.

2007. *Transformers* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

2007. *Transformers Sports Label* "Convoy featuring Nike Free 7.0" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.

2007. *Transformers Music Label* "Optimus Prime –speakers for iPod" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.

2007–2009. *Transformers: Animated* animated television series. Produced by Cartoon Network Studios and Hasbro Entertainment, broadcast by Cartoon Network.

2007. *The Transformers: Spotlight Optimus Prime* comic book. Written by Simon Furman. IDW Publishing. One issue.

2008–2009. *The Transformers: All Hail Megatron* comic series. IDW Publishing. 16 issues.

2009. *Transformers Disney Label* "Mickey Mouse Trailer" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy.

2009. *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

2010. *Transformers: War for Cybertron* video game. Developed by High Moon Studios, published by Activision (Windows/Playstation 3/Xbox 360).

2010. *Transformers: Generations* "Cybertronian Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold by Hasbro under license from Takara.

2010. *Transformers: Exodus* novel. Written by Alex Irvine, published by Del Rey Books.

2010–2013. *Transformers: Prime* animated television series. Produced by K/O Paper Productions, Darby Pop Productions, and Hasbro Studios, distributed by The Hub/Discovery Communications.

2011. *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

2011–2016. *Transformers: Rescue Bots* animated television series. Produced by Atomic Cartoons, Darby Pop Productions, and Hasbro Studios, distributed by The Hub/Discovery Communications.

2011. *The Transformers, Volume 5: Chaos Theory* trade paperback. Written by Mike Costa and James Roberts. IDW Publishing.

2011. *Transformers: The Death of Optimus Prime* comic book. Written by James Roberts and John Barber. IDW Publishing. One issue.

2012. *Transformers: Fall of Cybertron* video game. Developed by High Moon Studios, published by Activision (Windows/Playstation 3/Playstation 4/Xbox 360)

2012. *The Transformers: Autocracy* digital comic. Written by Flint Dille and Chris Metzen. IDW Publishing. Twelve issues.

2012. *Transformers: The Ride—3D* theme park attraction. Universal Studios Hollywood.

2014. *Transformers: Age of Extinction* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

2015. "Optimus Prime featuring Original PlayStation" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by Takara.

2015–2017. *Transformers: Robots in Disguise* animated television series. Produced by Darby Pop Productions and Hasbro Studios, distributed by Cartoon Network.

2016–2018. *Optimus Prime* comic series. Written by John Barber. IDW Publishing. 25 issues.

2017. *Transformers: The Last Knight* theatrical film. Directed by Michael Bay, distributed by Paramount Pictures.

2018. *Transformers: Unicron* comic series. Written by John Barber. IDW Publishing. Seven issues.

2024. "Lunar Cruiser Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy, US distribution by Hasbro Pulse.

2024. *Transformers: Missing Link* "Optimus Prime" action figure. Manufactured and sold in Japan by TakaraTomy, US distribution by Hasbro Pulse.

We Create Our Own Demons:
The MCU's Illusion of Progressivism

Alex Yost

Abstract

This article explores examples of early films and characterizations in the Marvel Cinematic Universe that claim to present progressive depictions of minority cultures and races, yet fall short, as well as later installments that endeavor to provide more effective minority representations. Films such as *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* are examined for their problematic representations of Arabs, while *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* develop their African, Black, and Latinx characters with a much more genuinely progressive push. Utilizing race and cultural theory from the likes of Fredrick Aldama, Penelope Ingram, Evelyn Alsultany, and Ramzi Fawaz, this essay analyzes *Iron Man's* repackaging of Arab stereotypes under the guise of progressivism, *Black Panther's* Afrofuturist calls for Black solidarity in the face of a purportedly post-race society, and *Wakanda Forever's* exploration of the racial and generational trauma caused by the colonization of the Americas. Each of these works is also analyzed for how they reflect their contemporary cultural moment. From *Iron Man's* proximity to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, to *Black Panther's* development within an increasingly vocal anti-Black, anti-Latinx America, it is important to understand how the illusory progressivism with which we develop fictional minority characters can actually serve to further entrench racial and ethnic stereotypes and hurt the communities it intends to protect.

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1. Introduction

Marvel's *Iron Man 3* opens with the haunting tagline, "we create our own demons," a sentiment which has major implications within the confines of the film, wherein Tony Stark must face the consequences of his past mistakes, but it has even more drastic, wider implications for the world of American cinema at large. Pop-culture has the weighty task of representing and reflecting societal values within its cultural-historic moment. When pop-cultural works fail to live up to this task, it can become a dangerous vehicle of misinformation and misrepresentation. The demonization of American political enemies in film has long been a hoary method of fostering racial and political propaganda, attempting to construct a shared sense of purpose in its domestic (primarily white) audiences (Harvard 2014). Every one of white America's racial and political rivals has undergone a

period of cinematic vilification: The Japanese, Russians, Native Americans, African Americans, Mexicans, etc. Few peoples have been exempt from American cinema's brand of nationalistic, jingoistic persecution (Weikle 2020).

Historically, representations of racial minorities in film have either been plagued by persistent negative stereotypes, limited to roles of regulation, or have been essentially nonexistent (Clark 1969). Cinematic minority depictions of the Middle East, for example, have largely been dramatized and relegated to scenes of the fantastical and magical, and/or as a backward, uncivilized desert wasteland. Films like *Dune* (1984)*, Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)*, Aladdin* (1992), and *The Mummy* (1999) fictionalize the Middle East in just such a light, portraying their Arab and Arab-coded characters in such a limited scope and with such regularity that these shallow caricatures of Arabs in film have become the persistent stereotypes of Arabs in audience perception (Shaheen 2003; Alsultany 2013). In similar fashion, and thoroughly documented by cultural critics such as Donald Bogle and Frederick Aldama, Black and Latinx actors have long been relegated to the roles of slaves, thugs, and sidekicks (Bogle 2001; Aldama 2019; Facciani et. al. 2015). It wasn't until the Blaxploitation and L.A. Rebellion art movements of the 1970s and 80s that artists were able to take steps to affect changes in the socio-political roots of American cinema's minority representation, a move in cinema that Bogle dubs "A Black New Wave" which nonetheless "failed to create a diversity of images. For the new African American cinema to be vital, it had to … move beyond the 'hood' to include … varied aspects of Black life" (Bogle 2001, 312–14), moves which have since been taking place in films of the twenty-first century.

These moves and changes can be clearly mapped through the progression of superhero films since the 1980s. In the decades following the highly popular *Superman* (1978) and *Batman* (1989), mainstream superhero films and television shows have quickly and steadily become more inclusive and diverse in their minority representation. Films and shows around the turn of the twenty-first century, including *The Crow* (1994), *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (1995), *Men in Black* (1997), *Spawn* (1997), *Steel* (1997), *Blade* (1998), *X-Men* (2000), *The Incredibles* (2004), *Heroes* (2006-2010), and *Batman Begins* (2008), have greatly contributed to a drastic uptick in the importance of diverse representation in superhero films (Katz 2021; Facciani, et. al. 2015) and paved the way for the mega blockbuster DC Extended Universe and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Undeniably the more successfully cohesive of the two, the MCU has seen one long story through a variety of cultural movements and changes. From 2008's *Iron Man* to 2023's *The Marvels*, these cultural changes are reflected in the evolution of minority representation in these films over time.

The Iron Man series are earlier films in the MCU that were developed and released in the years following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and, as such, the *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 3* (2013) filmmakers utilized the contemporaneous War on Terror and

established Arab stereotypes to tell their story, though purporting in interviews to be self-aware and meta-critical of their depiction of Arab characters. The films lean heavily into racial Arab stereotypes and make use of satire and sardonicism in their attempt to criticize Western audiences' willingness to accept conventional stereotypical minority representations (Chitwood 2019). Despite their intended criticism, the Iron Man films ultimately fail in their goal thanks to a lack of authenticity of diversity in the filmmaker's construction of representations of minority characters—something Aldama calls a lack of *will to style* (Aldama 2017, 89). Instead, they end up re-emphasizing and repackaging racist minority stereotypes without ever truly getting around to any substantial changes, and effectively fostering these stereotypes in the minds of general audiences and merely emboldening the spirit of American militarism, nationalism, and an ideology of Western superiority.

These issues are not representative of the MCU as a whole, however. Embracing Bogle's call for variation and Aldama's hope-filled notion of a "definite heartbeat" in the general trajectory of Latinx representation (Aldama 2019, *ix–x*), more recent MCU films such as *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) offer far more diverse representations of minorities, successfully circumventing the damaging African and Mesoamerican stereotypes that dog the Arab representations in *Iron Man*. By embracing an authenticity of diversity and focusing on building well-rounded *human* characters, *Black Panther* runs where *Iron Man* stumbled: successfully constructing stories about racial minority characters and modern cultural issues without furthering harmful internalized racist tropes.

2. GROUNDING FANTASY IN REALITY

Obviously, comic books and their film counterparts are not exactly known for their realism, but Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott hold to the representational capacity of the comics medium, where "anything that can be drawn can be believed—often if not most times with little or no attention to verisimilitude between what is represented on the page and what we perceive in the three-dimensional world beyond" (Fawaz and Scott 2018, 201). They're fantastical, they're wonderfully creative, and sometimes flat out weird, but, most importantly, they are not depictions of reality. Locations are fabricated, situations are exaggerated, and the characters depicted are extraordinary, dramatic, and over-the-top. But in the late twentieth century, live-action television and film adaptations of comic books began to change all of that. These adaptations broke from the campy Gold/Silver Age comic style of entertainment, most notably with Tim Burton's *Batman* series, and brought superheroes to prominence with general audiences. Dramatic depictions of comic characters, darker adult themes, and rubber-nippled super-suits helped repopularize the genre (Johnson 2023). At the turn of the 21st century, gritty, grounded, big-budget superhero films were dominating the big and small screens. Films such as *X-Men,*

Unbreakable (2000), *Spider-Man* (2002), *V for Vendetta* (2005), and *Batman Begins* were a far cry from their comic book origins and twentieth century film counterparts in one major regard: filmmakers took great pains to ground these stories in a convincing, credible reflection of our own reality. While superheroes today have now become more comfortable in bringing back magic, ethereal superpowers, and an airy comic-bookish sense of wonder, there was a long stretch of time where film adaptations of superheroes were painstakingly "realistic." Batman went from spandex to Kevlar and military grade armor. Iron Man hand-made his suits on screen to prove their realism to the audience. Heroes spent time learning how to fight, how to hone their individual skills, and "scientific" jargon like gene mutation and gamma radiation were used to ground the notion of superpowers. This style of superhero film was incredibly popular and quickly became the standard for 21st century comics-to-movie adaptations.

Grounding superheroes in a reality that directly reflects our own and basing superpowers in science (fiction) resulted in major changes. Superhero films became immensely popular and lucrative. Where superheroes had once been relegated to the nerdy fringes of society, these films officially brought them to the mainstream. But films such as these are more than simple pop entertainment; as Adilifu Nama reminds us, they are a "powerful lens by which to observe the collective racial desires, constructs, fantasies, and fears circulating throughout American society" (Nama 2008, 2), and with this newfound surge in popularity comes an ideological problem. These sorts of films feed into the subconscious minds of general audiences a subtle notion that they are scientific, and therefore authentic, representations of our reality. These stories were no longer wild fantasies relegated to the wacky pages of comics, they were depicted as "real life," and by pushing this gritty realism formula, what we see on-screen is intended to be real, making their depiction of racial representation in their films all the more important.

The superhero film genre in general, Katherine Cox contends, can move audiences to unconsciously internalize these fictitious experiences and use these films to live a hybrid life by

> [Occupying] the liminal space between ordinary citizen and extraordinary sovereign, [which] becomes refigured as a nexus in which consumer and character overlap. This situates the superhero genre as a distinctive site of… fantasy where consumers re-experience the affective entanglements produced by membership of a shared intimate public through their own entanglement with the hero. (Cox 2020, 98)

While Cox obviously does not mean that there are those that believe Iron Man is actually flying around out there in our reality, by overlaying the comic-film narrative on a simulated reality instead of an overtly fictional universe, the Iron Man films, and other reality-based action-hero stories like them, subtly influence the viewer's perception of both their simulated and actual realities. These are the stories that seem "innocuous because they're fantastic and unreal; yet… because they transpose our reality into a fictional

world, [they] have considerable power to structure and guide our response to the social landscape" (Ingram 2023, 15). This sort of structural work doesn't happen instantaneously, of course; influence of this nature requires constant ideological exposure to a multitude of films, shows, streaming networks, news outlets, etc., all feeding a common narrative. Media is directly involved in the production and transformation of ideologies, and through these media events, the Western view of Eastern cultures is delicately filtered in an effort to allow white American audiences to view other(ed) cultures through a comfortable Western lens (Said 2003; Hall 1981; Lockman 2004).

3. SITUATIONAL REALISM

3.1 IRON MAN AND THE WAR ON TERROR

Beyond this new aesthetic realism, the MCU is also grounded in *situational* realism. From the get-go, *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* make use of early-2000s American audiences' familiarity with Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda terrorist video propaganda and imagery. The depictions of the fictional Middle Eastern terrorist organization, The Ten Rings, as well as their leader, The Mandarin, draw very stark visual parallels between their simulated reality and our actual reality. The terrorist imagery in the films is intentionally paralleled with the familiar imagery of al-Qaeda propagandized hostage execution videos that were widely circulated for the first decade of the 2000s. With these methods, *Iron Man* intentionally positions itself as an analog for American nationalism and Stark becomes a stand-in for the US military and War on Terror campaign, through whom the white American audience gets to experience a sense of patriotic pride (Jenkins and Secker 2022).

The Mandarin has never been free of this problematic, deliberately filtered stereotyping. When he was introduced in Marvel's *Iron Man* comics back in 1964, he was a stereotypical Far East Asian villain of indeterminate nationality, emblematic of the Yellow Peril era of filmmaking. The United States' battle against communism at the height of the Vietnam War and fear of being overwhelmed by the relatively high populations of the Far East Asian countries contributed greatly to this oriental racist fear (Semmerling 2006). In 2013's *Iron Man 3*, Ben Kingsley portrays a Middle Eastern version of the character, reflecting the filmmaker's desire to updated to reflect the "Arab Peril" of the current sociopolitical climate.

3.2 BLACK PANTHER AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Ten years after *Iron Man* was first released, Ryan Coogler developed *Black Panther* and allowed the film to explore the more magical, mystical side of comic book lore by combining the familiar technologically grounded superhero with the ancestrally powered heart-shaped herb. Despite this foray into magic and mysticism, *Black Panther* works just as hard as the Iron Man series to ground itself in situational realism. The film opens with

the 1992 televised broadcast of the LA riots, incited in response to the brutal beating of Rodney King at the hands of racist police. Immediately juxtaposed by the fight between King T'Chaka and N'Jobu (a fight later taken up by their respective sons, T'Challa and N'Jadaka (Killmonger)), the scene embodies the Black infighting that has been a major source of contention in the Civil Rights movement since the 1960s. The Civil Rights movement has been characterized by different forms of activism, popularly narrowed to the peaceful, righteous activism of Martin Luther King Jr. and the more violent, iconoclastic methods of Malcom X. Each of these Civil Rights leaders fought for equality and liberty in different ways, each disagreeing with the other's methods, but seeking the same ends (Song 2024). Fast-forward to the 2010s, and the work of the Civil Rights movement is still in full swing. Racial unrest is being stoked by the election of the United States' first Black president, Barack Obama, his racially antagonistic successor, and the steady rise of racist police brutality across the nation. This is the real-world context in which *Black Panther* is framed and grounded.

Because of the palpable racial tension of the 2010s, representation in *Black Panther* was under major scrutiny from the beginning. Unlike *Iron Man*, which started the MCU and was under relatively little pressure to fairly represent its minority characters, *Black Panther* was released at the height of the MCU's popularity and advertised itself as the first majority Black cast-and-crew-led superhero film, garnering immediate attention and criticism from all sides. Capturing the cultural vibe surrounding the film, Jamil Smith describes *Black Panther* as

> Not just a movie about a black superhero; it's very much a black movie… serving a black audience that has long gone under-represented. For so long, films that depict a reality where whiteness isn't the default have been ghettoized, marketed largely to audiences of color as niche entertainment, instead of as… mainstream. (Smith 2018, para. 29)

The regressive socio-political moment in which *Black Panther* grounds itself creates a meta-critical situation, much like the Iron Man series did, though *Black Panther* nurtures a tone of struggle and resistance.

Grounding *Black Panther* in a cultural moment that is so much closer to home creates a simulated reality with which many Americans can more easily identify. Where *Iron Man* acts as a criticism of how Americans perceive foreigners and the Middle East, *Black Panther* criticizes how we perceive and treat people in our own backyard. The final scene in *Black Panther* sees T'Challa addressing the UN, stating that "Wakanda will no longer watch from the shadows… We will work to be an example of how we… should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence" (Coogler 2018, PAGE), driving home the film's main call to action both in-story and in our reality.

Namor and Latinx Civil Rights

Wakanda Forever, the second film in the Black Panther series, incorporates another historically marginalized community: the Yucatec Mayans. A fictional community that has been in hiding since the 1500s, the Talokanil, the people that inhabit the underwater city of Talokan, managed to escape the genocidal destruction that the Spanish and other European conquerors inflicted on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, providing the Talokanil with the recourse necessary to develop their society free from the effects of colonialization.

The representation of the Indigenous Mesoamerican peoples in cinema is convoluted and layered. In American cinema, Latinx representation is problematic, often reducing representation to a singular image, flattening both white and Black Mexican actors and characters into the generic "Hispanic," which reinforces a simplistic lack of an authentic diversity of representation (Aldama 2017). But in Mexico and other Latin American countries where Indigenous Mesoamerican ancestry is still prevalent, the history of Spanish colonialist imperialism has embedded a system of color-based racism tied to the phenotypical characteristics of Mesoamerican Indigeneity where lighter-skinned *mestizos* are privileged over the darker-skinned *morenos*. Mexican cinema and media have long suppressed representation of Indigenous *morenos* in favor of lighter-skinned *mestizo* Latinx actors (García Blizzard 2022, 4).

In his autoethnography, *Orgullo Prieto (Brown-Skin Pride)* (2022), Tenoch Huerta discusses the racist issues he has faced throughout his life, his experiences with and feelings about racial bigotry in Mexico and Latin America, and what it meant for Maya representation that he is able to land roles such as that of Namor in *Wakanda Forever*. An authentic diversity of representation is important to Huerta, who argues that it is in seeing someone that looks like you reflected in media that promotes the aspiration to fight oppressive systems. But "[t]hose that [perpetuate] Mexico's systemic racism… [are] not the light-skinned people, but the other brown-skinned people like me who grew up… as victims of the ideologies and myths that affect one group to the benefit of another" (Huerta 2022, 148), Huerta states, discussing the ways in which systemic racism in Mexico creates a racial caste system, much like that of the United States, that is unintentionally preserved by the very people it oppresses. *Wakanda Forever's* Mesoamerican representation consisted almost entirely of these *moreno* Latinx actors, rather than Mexico's traditional reliance on white *mestizo* Latinx actors, prompting a familiar media-storm in Mexico about Marvel's "forced diversity" in Latinx representation (Ramirez 2022, 13–15).

Grounding the Marvel Cinematic Universe series in these sorts of current sociopolitical events adds a tangible level of realism to the films that suggests to viewers that they understand what exactly is at stake. Our heroes, the world they inhabit, and the conflicts that they are fighting are designed to reflect our reality, so it only follows that the representations of minorities in the films, are also *meant to be real*.

4. SIMPLIFIED COMPLEX REPRESENTATION

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the sudden rush of political/war dramas in film and television did not depict Arabs with the usual absolutist wave of vilification that had become a hallmark of twentieth century American cinema. In fact, the U.S. president at the time, George W. Bush, made it a point to publicly decry the conflation of Arabs and Muslims with terrorism in an attempt to curb the inevitable acts of racial violence against Arab Americans, reasoning,

> The terrorists are traitors to their own faith, trying… to hijack Islam itself. The enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists… The face of terror is not the true faith of Islam… Islam is peace. These terrorists don't represent peace. They represent evil and war. (Bush 2001)

And while there was, of course, plenty of Arab and Muslim vilification in news media, film and television had an equal and opposite wave of sympathetic representation wherein Arab characters were portrayed as the victims of injustice in the wake of post 9/11 racist hatred (Semmerling 2006; Alsultany 2013).

On the surface, this unprecedented move looks like progress and a victory for diversity and inclusion. But this notion was nothing more than the *illusion* of progress. In a move that Evelyn Alsultany has dubbed Simplified Complex Representation, media began to include depictions of Arab minorities that "appear[ed] to challenge or complicate former stereotypes and contribute to a multicultural or post-race illusion. Yet… programs that employ simplified complex representational strategies promote logics that legitimize racist policies and practices" (Alsultany 2012, 21).

Alsultany identifies several such strategies in post 9/11 representation, including:

- Inserting the Patriotic Arab or Muslim
- Sympathizing with the Plight of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11
- Flipping the Enemy, and
- Humanizing the Terrorist

These are the forms of representation that seem progressive, meaningful, and forward-thinking, but can be, in effect, just as shallow and damaging as the evil terrorist stereotype.

"We create our own demons" is a major recurring theme in *Iron Man 3*. Aldrich Killian and through him, the screenwriters, took every trope that they knew Americans fear about the Middle East and constructed a boogeyman, an uber-terrorist in the form of the Mandarin. The Mandarin is depicted in what Jack Shaheen (1997) calls the "Instant Ali Baba kit… [A] robed actor with dark sunglasses, fake black beard, exaggerated nose… and checkered burnooses" (172). His character is designed as an Osama bin Laden clone in order to evoke that same sense of dread that news footage of bin Laden evoked in Western audiences. The Mandarin even spreads fear in a way that was common in post 9/11

American life: anonymity. "You don't know who I am, you don't know where I am, and you'll never see me coming" (Black 2013) is one of The Mandarin's propagandized quotes that embodies the panic of the early 2000s. Sowing the seeds of mistrust within its enemy is a hallmark of terrorism, but it is more than just an intimidation line about terrorists hiding among us. It's a verbalization of America's tendency to vilify and hate that which it does not understand. In these ways, *Iron Man 3* deliberately draws attention to this Western construction of the Mandarin as the embodiment of all things Middle Eastern. In the MCU, the Mandarin is not the actual leader of the Ten Rings (at least not until Marvel retconned the character, including the real Mandarin in 2021's *Shang-Chi*). Killian literally creates the Mandarin as a scapegoat to cover up his illegal bioweapon experiments. In this way, Killian hijacks Americans' conceptualizations of the Middle East and uses them for his own benefit. Throughout the film, hints are dropped about the identity of the Mandarin. First in the "we create our own demons" tag line, then again in one of The Mandarin's terrorist propaganda films, which features the Mandarin ruminating on the inauthenticity of Chinese fortune cookies. Just as the fortune cookie and the Mandarin are constructed in the minds of Western audiences, so too is the concept of the Middle East as a hub of terrorism (Said 2003; Lockman 2004).

Despite *Iron Man 3's* ironic depictions of the Mandarin, the Iron Man series falls victim to Alsultany's Simplified Complex Representations, which work to simply repackage and reenforce damaging stereotypes. Even though it is a film series that is so blatantly militarized and propagandized, and in spite of the deliberate stereotyping of the Mandarin, the Iron Man series tries hard to avoid representing all its Arab characters as terrorists. Tony Stark's entire reason for fighting is born out of the death of his Arab savior, Ho Yinsen. Yinsen is a representation of one of the good, patriotic Arab friends-of-America that Bush referenced in his speech. He is the only Arab character in the film willing to help Tony Stark in his fight against the Ten Rings. Allegorically, Yinsen is supportive of American militarism in the form of Tony Stark, and, as such, he represents an unsubtle ideological binary built by American cinema: Arabs are either friends of America, or they are terrorists. The Iron Man films generalize and fictionalize their Arab terrorist characters, removing the religious extremism aspect entirely, vaguely defining their language differences, and aside from being in Afghanistan, they avoid mention of any actual Middle Eastern locations. In the same vein, the non-terrorist Arabs in the Iron Man films are depicted as little more than genericized victims of the War on Terror. These innocent Arabs are hapless civilians caught in the middle of a conflict in which they are not a part, yet the established binary leaves no room for Arabs that do not take sides in the fight.

These Simplified Complex Representations give the illusion that American cinema is providing a greater variety of representations of Arabs in the film. However, all this achieves is the minimization of Arab existence, enforcing the reductive binary of friend or foe. Yinsen is not considered good or bad based on his relationship to the Middle East

but based on his relationship to America. The filmmaker's garish parading of a false diversity helps it seem like they are being inclusive in this regard, but since it's wrapped up in the more easily digested cautionary message about the dangers of Arab terrorism, the sentiment falls flat.

The Simplified Complex Representations in the Iron Man series recreate another problematic binary identified by Edward Said: that of the technologically and intellectually superior West over the analog, unintelligent East (Said 2003). From the beginning of the film, this binary forms the core of the Iron Man franchise. Stark makes the best technology, creating advanced and horrifyingly efficient weaponry systems in the name of American military defense. The U.S. is the pinnacle of technological advancement, and everyone wants their piece of the pie. The Ten Rings steal Tony's weapons and Tony himself, and they make it their goal to get their hands on his finished armor. Meanwhile, they themselves are literally living in caves and tents, eating gruel and warming themselves by trashcan fires. They are depicted as not being able to build weapons or utilize technology on their own. In fact, in the months that Tony is supposed to be building a missile for them, he instead builds an entire suit of armor right under their noses.

Tony's mentor and fellow U.S. military industrialist, Obadiah Stane, is ultimately revealed to be the bankroller and instigator of the terrorists' acts. Stane condescendingly notes that "technology [has] always been [their] Achilles heel in this part of the world" (Favreau 2008), as he manages to hoodwink his terrorists, utilizing superior technology to paralyze and kill them, thereby ensuring that he is the only one benefiting from their collaboration. As the Ten Rings are the stand-in for the Middle East and Stane/Stark for the U.S., then in Stane's act of paralyzing and eliminating the Ten Rings, the U.S. has both literally and figuratively stripped the Middle East of its agency, infantilizing and exploiting an entire culture for profit.

While these instances of representation, the good Arab, the Arab victim, and even the terrorist/Mandarin technically achieve the screenwriters' goal of providing a multifaceted, however limited, view of Arab characters, the issue with these representations, and the issue facing those that see these representations as improvements over the traditional stereotypes, is that they are still representing Arabs as part of the system of terrorism with no alternative representation. Within the entire Iron Man franchise, there is not a single Arab character that is not presented as either inept pawns or victims, or as perpetrators of violence themselves, while the numerous white characters are free to develop and remain apart from the conflict.

5. ACTUAL COMPLEX REPRESENTATION

5.1 BLACK PANTHER AND BLACK REPRESENTATION

On the other end of the spectrum, the Black Panther series sought to deliberately disrupt traditional stereotypes by building an expansive story of minority excellence, ingenuity, justice, and geopolitics. Straying from the common post-racial pretext, the Black Panther series tackles the generational effects colonialism, oppressive racist systems, and slavery head-on, directly addressing the European conquest and exploitation of African and Mesoamerican peoples. Ramzi Fawaz argues that in pitting the superhero against social issues such as racism and minority misrepresentation, we "[reduce] the figure to an instrument of social justice… rather than a site of popular fantasy where the kinds of solidarities required to transform the conditions that enabled these atrocities could be brought into being" (Fawaz 2016, 235). It is these solidarities and reimagined social conditions that *Black Panther* brings to the table, doing away with any postracial posturing or misrepresentations of a postracial society. Race is important and, to those of us living with raced labels, a societal war is being fought against an ingrained, systemic enemy, but presenting the story as a simple hero-vs.-issue narrative is reductive and could have actually served to hurt the cause. To get around that, the stories told in these films are of layered, intricate, human characters that each have their own story to tell, and which present *Actual* Complex Representations of minorities that do not fall into the same pitfalls that they do in *Iron Man*. Without leaning into stereotypes, the Black Panther series creates a fascinating world in which an authentic diversity of minority representation, and the social issues analyzed within, are both dynamic and real.

Traditionally, the Simplified Complex Representational act of flipping the enemy has been used to shock the audience by playing on racial expectations, usually to the same artificially progressive effect as we see with the Obadiah Stane reveal in *Iron Man* (Alsultany 2013). While still playing off racial expectations with characters like Ulysses Klaue, *Black Panther* makes use of minority villain characters in Killmonger and Namor to subvert this issue. The use of a villain that claims the same raced status as the heroes avoids the issue of the representational power imbalance that comes from pitting white characters against minorities. Furthermore, the characters and villains do not stand in for such binary positions as good vs. evil. Throughout the film we see these characters grapple with their own understandings of identity, justice, and revenge without reducing them to a series of civil rights positional stand-ins. These characters are more complicated than that.

In both Black Panther films, we see regular use of interpersonal and political conflict with our heroic characters. T'Chaka kills his own brother and abandons young Killmonger in 1990s Oakland, all in order to protect Wakanda and himself. T'Challa makes reserved and naïve choices out of loyalty to the memory of his father in order to protect the status quo. His interactions with Killmonger enable him to see the error of Wakanda's isolationist ways, and the detrimental effect that it has had on non-Wakandan diasporic Black communities worldwide. Even though he agrees with Killmonger's mission, he

cannot abide his means and therefore "cannot rest while [Killmonger] sits on the throne. He is a monster of [Wakanda's] own making" (Coogler 2018) and as such, presents a threat to the balance that T'Challa is sworn to protect. And even though he defeats Killmonger, T'Challa does not leave his battle the same man. The notion that everything he believes is based on a lie and that the villain that he just killed was right weighs heavily on T'Challa, who ultimately decides to move forward with a version of Killmonger's plan, hybridized with the humanitarian goals of Nakia. What really makes Killmonger's representation complex, however, is that the movie isn't an anti-revolution story just because they villainized the Black man that wanted to incite global Black revolution against their white oppressors, it's a story about how Black communities can work together and the best ways in which they can support and carry out their obligations to one another (Johnson 2018). It's a story about what revolution could look like. T'Challa chooses to incite revolution by using Wakanda's wealth to free diasporic Black people through the provision of humanitarian aid and educational and cultural outreach. In this way, T'Challa allows them to liberate themselves and each other.

The villains in the Black Panther films are famously complex. While they are depicted as "villains" in the traditional sense of a comic book movie, Killmonger's and Namor's roles function less like the clear-cut warped reflections of the hero that we see with Stark and Stane, and more like speculative doubles which depict a what-might-have-been version of T'Challa. This creates authentic interpersonal interactions that continually pull the characters in morally ambiguous directions. Like T'Challa and Shuri, Killmonger and Namor are driven by a strong sense of justice. And even though Killmonger ultimately cannot see past his desire for vengeance and power, both he and Namor seek to liberate their respective peoples from oppressive racist systems. In framing Black Panther's villains so, "[Ryan] Coogler shines a bright light on... how Black Americans endure the real-life consequences of [the psychic scars of slavery] in the present day. Killmonger's... rage over how he and other Black people across the world have been disenfranchised and disempowered is justifiable" and is therefore relatable to modern American audiences (Smith 2018, n.p.).

In the wake of the *Black Panther* release, social media was flooded with viral tags like #killmongerwasright. Killmonger's mission and motivations rang true for so many people, that many considered Killmonger to be more hero than villain. *Wakanda Forever* explores this moral ambiguity by imbuing Shuri with a deeply personal tie to Killmonger. As Shuri takes on the mantle of Black Panther, we see her subconsciously siding with Killmonger's way of thinking as she meets with him on the Ancestral Plane, a sympathetic point of view that eventually helps her find common ground with Namor.

5.2 NAMOR AND LATINX REPRESENTATION

The Wakandans recognize their fight in the Talokanil culture, one that was not so lucky as to completely escape persecution and oppression. Talokan is a Mesoamerican utopic society that is nevertheless more of a retreat more than a paradise. Due to Spanish oppression, the Talokanil were driven underwater in order to survive rather than evolving as a "natural," sheltered powerhouse like Wakanda. In challenging the use of Simplified Complex Representations and demanding Actual Complex Representation, we, as the audiences being represented, can push back against white hegemonic systems that maintain "their backwards, insipid, indefensible arguments… [that] it is impossible to dismantle the racist systems that they have worked so hard to support" (Huerta 2022). As Huerta and Ingram make very clear, every act of authentically diverse representation in television, film, and literature offers alternative versions of race and racial identity that serve to resist hegemonic whiteness and the misrepresentations of minorities that they have long perpetuated (Huerta 2022; Ingram 2023). Coogler develops Namor is a complicated character whose anger and hatred of the surface world empowers him to play a geopolitical war game and pit his perceived enemies against one another. He wants what's best for his people and is willing to do anything in his considerable power to make that happen.

In this way, Coogler frames the character of Namor, who blends Killmonger's justifiable anger with T'Challa's righteous devotion to his people, as a speculative double of T'Challa and Wakanda, focusing on Huerta's call to utilize racial representation as a method of resistance. Depicting Mesoamerican history and mythology as a dynamic force of power rather than the remains of a victimized Indigenous population was Huerta's and Coogler's ultimate goal in their interpretation of Talokan (Coogler and Geek Culture 2022, n.p.). They wanted to pull focus away from Atlantis and its Eurocentric, Greco-Roman roots, and deliver a society that depicted the other side of Wakanda's racially progressive nation. When it was announced that Marvel would be adapting Atlantis to Mesoamerican mythology, there was a general feeling of unease concerning the way Mayan representation would be depicted. Critics like David Anderson famously made their concerns known on social media: "If you [Marvel Studios] imply the achievements of the Maya people were in anyway due to a connection with Atlantis, you are implying that indigenous Americans needed help from Europeans to have that success" (Anderson 2022). But Marvel Studios was way ahead of him. Ryan Coogler's deliberate pivot away from Atlantis' European roots denies the imperialism that the original myth advocates, wherein Atlantis worked tirelessly and selflessly to "civilize" the rest of the non-European world.

This Latinxfuturization of Atlantis, morphing it into the technologically advanced Mayan haven of Talokan, does much the same for Indolatino representation as the Afrofuturization of Wakanda does for African representation in superhero films (Aguilar 2022). Without the incorporation of a white European crutch, the Talokanil's techno-cultural advancement is allowed to be attributed to their own intelligence and ingenuity,

rather than being the "beneficial" byproduct of European imperialization. Similarly, in their endeavor to avoid stereotyping the Maya, both in cultural depiction and physical costuming, Marvel Studios made sure to enlist the help of cultural experts with ties to Maya heritage, including Dr. Gerardo Aldana and the Mayan cultural-historian group known as Maya K'ajlay. Maya K'ajlay were intentional in their ahistorical depiction of Talokan and Namor (Coogler and Geek Culture 2022; Leachman 2023)

Because Aldana and Maya K'ajlay derived the Talokanil's wardrobe and cultural representations from ancient Maya depictions of K'uk'ulkan, some critics of the film contend that adaptations of Mayan garb are, in themselves, an act of racial stereotyping. This argument falls in line with the numerous arguments surrounding Wakandan costuming throughout the series, which allege that depicting African tribes in primitive, "uncivilized" ethnic attire, dressed as monkeys and running around with clubs and spears is racist and appropriative (Slaats 2018). What these arguments fail to take into account, however, is that the notion of traditional "ethnic" attire being primitive is very much a white Western mindset of correctness and is, in itself, a racist act of imposition on the part of white supremacy (Ziyad 2018). Throughout the Black Panther series, we see instances of traditional African practices, traditions, and symbology that have been hybridized with modern/futuristic technology, blending "[m]etaphysics and aesthetics… together in Coogler's production in ways that extend and develop Afrofuturist readings of the film" (Ingram 2023, 291). Cloaks that function as shields, beads and sand tables that act as communication devices, spears and clubs that have been incorporated into energy weapons, and even water drums that operate the Wakandan border shield.

Wakanda Forever depicts the same advancements in Maya technology and society, with an advanced tech-driven city of steppe pyramids, a man-made underwater sun and ocean-current highways, as well as advanced vibranium Mayan weaponry and armor. This hybridization of traditional cultural aspects and modern technology is peak Afro/Latinxfuturism at work: the speculative-fictional rendering of what these two civilizations could have built had they not succumbed to European colonialization; the type of civilization that Namor could only dream of as he ruminates upon the history of the Maya and African peoples and which reflects the current cultural lament of what might have been.

6. CONCLUSION

In every one of *Black Panther's* characters, there is a layered sense of identity, internal conflict, and uncertainty. In establishing an authentic diversity of minority representation in these films, we get legitimately complex, well-rounded minority characters of depth, and the producers of *Black Panther* undermine the representational issues that come with earlier entries in the MCU and American cinema at large, avoiding simplistic, regressive methods of representation. *Black Panther* allows its characters to just be

characters. Complex, human, and representatives of minority cultures long relegated to the margins, all depicted with their own developed sense of identity and agency. By creating stories that actively avoid utilizing minority representation as a gimmick and are concerned more with creating an intentionally complex story about and with Black and Latinx people instead of using them as cultural props, the Black Panther films create a successful space of viable minority representation.

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Queering the American (Super)Hero in Cassandra Clare's Shadowhunters Novels

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Abstract

This article presents Alec Lightwood in Cassandra Clare's Shadowhunters Young Adult urban fantasy novels as a character that questions and subverts the tenets underpinning the association between exceptionalism and heroicity in American culture, thus fostering a reworking of the myth of the superhero in the nation's twenty-first-century imagination. In his trajectory from closeted gay boy to hero of several wars and leader of the Shadowhunters, Alec queers the hegemonic American heroic ideal by subverting the paradigm of heteronormative masculinity conventionally associated with it and promotes a model of heroism that champions cooperation, empathy, and personal feelings. After clarifying how Shadowhunter traditions mirror American national core values and introducing the Nephilim as a particular kind of (super)heroes that expose the way those values can lead to corruption and destruction if deployed to supremacist ends, I describe Alec's atypical heroism, grounded in the inseparability of the private and the public and encouraging a rethinking of what makes the America strong and good. I also explore the unusual importance given in Clare's novels to a hero's romantic and family life as a means for exploring—through Alec's queerness—the contribution of the instrumentalization of love and family to the preservation of hegemonic ideals and its negative impact on the imagined future of the nation.

Keywords: YA literature, Young Adult, queerness, queer hero, literature.

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This article presents Alec Lightwood in Cassandra Clare's Shadowhunters Young Adult urban fantasy novels as a character that questions and subverts the tenets underpinning the association between exceptionalism and heroicity in American culture, thus fostering a reworking of the myth of the superhero in the nation's twenty-first-century imagination. Superhero narratives—especially in cinematic adaptations—continue to affirm (white) heterosexual masculinity as the dominant cultural position and identity in the post-millennial United States, a function that, as Jeffrey Allan Brown (2019) remarks, is part and parcel of the genre's nostalgic association with the nation's tradition of exceptionalism (71 and 90–91). Based on the several similarities between Clare's fictional world and American society, I argue that, in his trajectory from closeted gay boy to hero of several wars and leader of the Shadowhunters, Alec queers the hegemonic American heroic ideal

by overturning the paradigm of heteronormative masculinity conventionally associated with it and promoting a model of heroism that champions cooperation, empathy, and personal feelings.

The Shadowhunters, or Nephilim, are part-angel/part-human warriors ordained to protect humanity from demons and unruly Downworlders—warlocks, vampires, were-wolves, and faeries. They are a global but isolated community, with most members carrying out their mandate from Institutes scattered around the world and a secret home country, Idris, in the heart of Continental Europe.[1] Encouraged by the strict adherence to ancient laws and traditions, "a certain blood-and-thunder machismo [creeps] in uncomfortably around the edges of Shadowhunter culture ... [a] narrative of inborn strength and supremacy ... that always threaten[s] to resurface among the Nephilim" (Clare and Chu 2020, 70) and that, in the instalments of Clare's saga set in the present-day United States, brings them on the verge of self-destruction. A teenage New Yorker who, together with his friends, starts breaking the law as much to prevent the end of the Nephilim as to protect the person he loves, Alec is the character that best highlights the tensions and contradictions that vex both Shadowhunter and American society. Despite being a secondary or marginal character in most of Clare's books, his personal story of growth rewrites the criteria that regulate who can represent the nation and (re)define its values.[2]

I begin by clarifying how Shadowhunter traditions mirror American national core values and introducing the Nephilim as a particular kind of (super)heroes that expose the way those values can lead to corruption and destruction if deployed to supremacist ends. I then explore the two areas in which Alec's atypical heroism results more subversive of American dominant ideas of heroic masculinity. Firstly, I describe how Alec's

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[1] This aspect is emphasized also by the recurrence of a limited range of family names through books set in different historical periods, which helps readers link characters from a certain series with their ancestors and realize that Shadowhunter families are ultimately all related to one another. Alec belongs to one of the oldest Nephilim families. His ancestors, who appear in the *The Infernal Devices* (2010–2013) and *The Last Hours* (2020–2023), brought equal praise and shame to the family name. Emblematically, Alec's parents rehabilitate themselves by accepting exile to the New York Institute after taking part in the failed Uprising led by Valentine Morgenstern, but their attitudes towards Downworlders radically change only after Alec openly commits to his relationship with Magnus.

[2] *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007–2014) revolves around Clary Fairchild who, after discovering that she is Nephilim, leads her peers from the New York Institute (among which Alec) in the fight against her father, Valentine Morgenstern, and later her stepbrother, Jonathan, who both want the Nephilim to rule over Downworld. Its sequel, *The Dark Artifices* (2016–2018) is set in Los Angeles five years later, where Emma Carstairs and Julian Blackthorn must protect their relationship, family and, eventually, all Shadowhunters from the dangerous alliance between the Cohort and the realms of Faerie. *The Infernal Devices* (set in 1878 London) and *The Last Hours* (set in 1903 London and Paris) are prequels to *The Mortal Instruments* that narrate the story of the warlock Tessa Grey and her children respectively. *The Eldest Curses* (2019–) is the spinoff trilogy where Alec and Magnus become the protagonists, a development that might have been encouraged by the characters' increased popularity following the *Shadowhunters* TV series.

understanding of the private and the public as inseparable encourages a rethinking of what makes a Shadowhunter—and by proxy the United States—strong and good. Secondly, I present the unusual importance given in Clare's novels to a hero's romantic and family life as a means for exposing—through Alec's queerness—the contribution of (super)heroes to the preservation of hegemonic discourses on love and family that prevent the emergence of an American society in which differences and change are not dreaded but valued and indispensable for the nation's future prosperity.

1. SHADOWHUNTERS, (SUPER)HEROES, AND A HOUSE DIVIDED

As Heike Paul (2014) argues, the United States have historically imagined and projected themselves as an inherently good country, characterized by a sense of political and moral superiority. Narratives of destiny and exceptionalism, however, have also prevented the establishment of a just and cohesive community, especially from a racial perspective (12–14). The Shadowhunters reproduce, in a fantasy world, Americans' self-image as God's chosen ones with a mission of divine calling. The order is named after Jonathan Shadowhunter, who received its legendary mandate to protect humanity from demons from the Angel Raziel. While Clare imagines a post-racial society (Ho 2018, 142–43), her novels recuperate a critique of racial discrimination in the United States through the tensions between the Nephilim, who have historically shown an obsession with purity, and traditional fantasy races, namely werewolves, vampires, warlocks, and faeries. Until the late 1800s, Shadowhunters could gain wealth and prestige by freely hunting and killing Downworlders, which reflects the history of Native and Black Americans. In a way that evokes the one-drop rule principle in twentieth-century United States (Ho 2018, 147–48), while having one Nephilim parent is enough to be considered a Shadowhunter, 'biracial' children are extremely rare and subject to violent discrimination. Despite improvements in the last century, racial tensions and fears have regularly been exploited by conservative individuals or groups in the Clave (the Nephilim's political body) to attempt a return to the old order. Consequently, instead of concerning themselves exclusively with demons, Shadowhunters are regularly dragged into civil wars that drastically reduce their number and ultimately risk annihilating them, such as the Mortal War and the Dark War in *The Mortal Instruments* series (2007–2014).

In a semeiotic reverse of the Cold War, the Cold Peace is the name of the terrible relationships between the Nephilim and the faeries after the latter are defeated in the Dark War. The conservative Clave faction known as the Cohort exploits this tense situation to gain support and campaign for the enforcement of a harsher state of police and severe restrictions to Downworlders' rights, including a register of all warlocks and internment camps for werewolves. Arguably, this process mirrors the rise of far-right populism in the real United States. After another fratricidal battle toward the end of *The Dark Artifices* trilogy (2016-2018), the Cohort refuses to recognize the new Consul, its younger

members threaten to kill themselves if Idris is not surrendered to them, and finally barricade themselves in the country, cutting all communications with the other Nephilim worldwide. Idris thus fulfils its status of heterotopian place not only, as described by Eva Opperman (2018), by concealing Shadowhunters from mundanes (410), but also and especially by symbolizing the state of crisis within the Shadowhunter society.

The new Consul that the Cohort rejects is Alec. Despite being the eldest son of a respected family and the hero of several wars, Alec fails to embody the "old traditions, ... the way things always have been and always should be" (Clare 2018, 831) by being openly gay and in a committed relationship with Magnus Bane, one of the oldest and most powerful warlocks in the world. Since his first steps in politics five years earlier,[3] Alec has incessantly worked to dismantle unjust laws and guarantee freedom to Shadowhunters and Downworlders alike, a commitment of which his first actions as an adult warrior in the Mortal War are clearly emblematic: the Nephilim win the War thanks to the Alliance rune, which binds them to a Downworlder partner allowing both to share their respective powers. This rune discredits the Shadowhunters' obsession with blood purity by literally rehabilitating miscegenation as strength and a means for survival. Minutes before the battle, Alec asks Magnus to be his partner, on the field and implicitly in life, by drawing the rune on the warlock's skin and kissing him in front of all the assembled Nephilim and Downworlders.

By choosing a public occasion for coming out even to his parents, Alec unwittingly lays the basis for a reworking of the national paradigm of heroism that redefines its associated ideal of masculinity—from the emphasis on physical strength and heterosexuality to the marginal role of love and family in a hero's life. In finding a sense of belonging with Magnus (Clare and Brennan 2020, 444) and refusing to follow the heteronormative directives of Shadowhunter traditions, Alec exemplifies queer reorientation in both the senses described by Sara Ahmed (2006): "a question not only about how we 'find our way' but how we come to 'feel at home'" (7). Both because and despite of his sexuality and his stance on Shadowhunters-Downworlders relationships, after the Dark War Alec becomes a role model and source of inspiration for an increasing number of Nephilim, especially the new generations (Clare and Brennan 2016, 557; 2020, 374; Clare and Chu 2020, 156), thus embodying hope for a reformed society. Furthermore, as the leader of the progressive Nephilim in exile, Alec enacts the critically utopian potential of the fantasy genre in the American cultural imaginary that Jes Battis (2007) describes as the ability to "[imagine] new ethical possibilities for us" (259). The values that Alec represents by living an openly queer life and engaging in activism with Downworlders enshrine, depending on the perspective, "what never was" (259)—a society where everyone enjoys equal

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[3] In terms of political participation, the Nephilim are a highly democratic society where decisions are made collectively by all Nephilim aged eighteen and above.

rights—"or what *always already* is" (259 original emphasis)—since American values have theoretically always supported equality of rights but were never fully applied because of the ongoing presence of reactionary forces.

Confirming Battis's (2007) claim that fantasy literature emerges from structures of melancholy, with their inherent elements of mourning, loss and exclusion, and that queer characters are the "most sophisticated and transgressive" outcome of this process (3), Alec is the hero that better articulates this tension between a real and an imagined America in Clare's fictional universe. Like most fantasy quests, the Shadowhunters' attempt to restore a lasting peace is organized around what Battis defines as "a scene of psychic lack that can only be recuperated through mythical discourse" (10): the lack of a community truly capable of living by its own founding values. In this framework, the imbrication of the personal with the political in Alec's life represents what Battis describes as

> [t]he ultimately liberatory task of the queer fantasy hero [which] is not just to have the last word, but to rewrite the *legal* or *national* lack—the quest to be fulfilled—as his or her own psychic lack, … the partial object to be recovered, the gender to be revealed, or the personal history to be reclaimed. (11, original emphasis)

Asked by his father, Robert, whether he would be interested in taking over his position of Inquisitor, Alec immediately fantasizes about what he could achieve as the second most powerful person in the Clave: "having a hand in the making of the Law, … put some sort of dent in the Cold Peace. Being able … to get married" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 447). When the Shadowhunter crisis escalates and he directly becomes Consul, Alec marries Magnus in a matter of days, thus fulfilling the liberatory quest of the queer fantasy hero of rewriting Shadowhunter history by simultaneously reclaiming his personal history and having the last word against the Cohort, at least in the short term.

As the first and last line of defense in the eternal war between good and evil, Shadowhunters perform a similar function to that of superheroes, stock characters that have been shaping the notion of exceptionality in the American cultural imagination—and worldwide—for almost a century. Natalie Underberg-Goode (2022) describes superheroes as characterized by "a pro-social and selfless mission, special powers, secret identity, and a costume featuring symbolism" (15). While Shadowhunters fulfil the first of these conditions, they are closer to the superhuman than the supernatural, as their powers are essentially non-magical and consist in enhanced human abilities obtained by means of a Spartan physical training and angelic runes drawn on their skin. Most of these marks are not permanent, therefore Shadowhunters basically look like heavily scarred or tattooed mundanes. They also do not wear any distinctive costume, but a rather simple, black leather gear aimed at protecting them from poisonous demon ichor. Like all Downworlders, they make themselves and their institutions invisible to mundanes through a light magic called glamour.

Moreover, while superheroes promote a model of exceptionalism closer to the cult of the strong leader—a cult that appeals only the most conservative of the Nephilim—Shadowhunter values evoke ancient mythologies and tribal societies that predate the individualistic value system of the patriarchal and capitalist modern world, as symbolized by their runes and exclusive use of cold weapons.[4] Therefore, Shadowhunters were not created to be lone warriors but a 'collective subject' that needs cooperation to survive. Accordingly, Alec's model of leadership is the opposite of the cult of personality: his major achievement is a political alliance between Shadowhunters and Downworlders that with the Cold Peace becomes an international point of reference and support against the increasing conservatism of the Clave. He believes that, to be stronger, "[w]e have to trust people, … [n]ot just people we love. We have to believe in people, and we have to defend them. As many people as possible" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 413), which also means giving everyone the agency and the power to question the law. While this philosophy is not without risks, it is the only way for the Nephilim to fulfil their role of protectors without it escalating into assumption of exceptionalism. Faithful to his ideals, after resolving a crisis in Buenos Aires, Alec refuses to become head of the local Institute, encouraging instead a change of leadership in the city, and once he becomes Consul he remains approachable, treating all Shadowhunters and Downworlders as his equals.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that righteous Shadowhunters uphold values that are essentially human. For example, the sense of morality that they very much need to fulfil their mission is a human quality, and not an angelic gift, which evokes the way Superman became the ultimate standard for American heroes and guardian of the national values thanks to his Texan upbringing rather than his Kryptonian origins (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, 84). To my purposes here, and in alignment with the importance of romance in Clare's novels, it is useful to notice that to love in human terms is another crucial ability for the Nephilim, as Magnus explains very well when he says:

> they have the blood of angels in them, and the love of angels is a high and holy thing … I look at Alec and I feel like Lucifer in *Paradise Lost*. "A *bashed the Devil stood, And felt how awful goodness is*." He meant … "Awful" as in inspiring awe. And awe is well and good, but it's poison to love. Love has to be between equals. (Clare 2014, 383, original emphasis)

By repeatedly choosing Magnus above everything else, Alec personifies the triumph of human love, the one that makes you simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, and

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[4] The rune on the cover of *The Mortal Instruments* books, a symbol of the entire Shadowhunter universe, is the Enkeli (Finnish for 'angel') or Angelic Power rune, one of the most powerful marks, used to turn weapons lethal against demons and to initiate the young Nephilim. The rune is a reworking of the Futhark rune ᛟ which means "heritary, land, possession" (Page 1987, 15). The symbol's connection to ancient tribal cultures, distinctive identity and sense of belonging is demonstrated also by its adoption as logo by the racing car brand Cupra to mark its independence from the Seat and Volkswagen parent companies (LogoDesignerTV 2018).

consequently undermines the kind of exceptionalism promoted by representations of superheroes that conventionally restrain from focusing on romance and foreground individual displays of heroism instead.

2. The Making of an Atypical Hero

As explained earlier, since Clare's fantasy world closely intermingles with the real world, it is possible to conflate the Shadowhunters with the American people and see their heroes as the equivalent of superheroes, hence as an embodiment of the nation's core values. Because heroism is immanent in the Nephilim's nature and mission, Shadowhunter heroes are Nephilim who perform much greater feats than the ordinary demon hunting, such as literally saving the world. Alec becomes a hero by fighting first in the Mortal War and soon after in the battle of the Burren and the Dark War, following which he progressively comes to represent the best of the Nephilim's and by proxy of the (often unfulfilled) American principles. However, in addition to saving the world and the Shadowhunters from destruction, Alec always has the personal goal of protecting or saving Magnus. For example, in the Dark War, while other Shadowhunters heroically fight and/or die in Alicante, Idris' capital, Alec and his friends defeat the enemy in the demonic realm of Edom, where Alec has dragged them primarily to save a kidnapped Magnus. This imbrication of private life with public duty—even more evident in the spinoff series *The Eldest Curses* (2019-) that tells Alec and Magnus's adventures as a couple—represents a net deviation from the conventional arch of the American (super)hero, especially if we consider that Alec is gay.

As Underberg-Goode (2022) explains, in western tradition, superheroes are a modern revision of those heroic mythological figures that have historically mediated our understanding of the world and our actions in it, providing order to our lives and illustrating the "process of personal struggle and triumph, growth and transformation, and quest fulfilment" (19). With specific reference to American culture, superheroes were born to reflect concerns such as nationalism, social stability, and changing gender roles and, more broadly, "important human concerns [such as] crime and punishment, ethics and justice, and the responsibility of the individual vis-à-vis society" (19). It follows, as Brown (2016) underlines, that these stories have traditionally promoted a bourgeois ideology, by contributing to the creating and upholding of a patriarchal value system. For this reason, as a "rudimentary fantasy of masculine empowerment" (133), most superheroes are male and, especially when they personify the nation, heterosexual. As Brown summarizes, the superhero "is stronger than anyone, defeats every villain, is always in the right, and gets the girl" (131), all conditions that clash with the possibility of a gay superhero, firstly

because he would not be interested in women and secondly because this would overturn the conventional relegation of queer fictional characters to the role of helper or villain.[5]

Alec not only deviates from the heteronormative patterns of superheroism but also, and more importantly, becomes a hero through a gradual, painful process of exploration and acceptance of his sexuality. It is in this respect emblematic that prior to meeting Magnus, Alec has never killed a demon. His initial status of second-rate warrior thus hints at the fact that, to become a real hero, Alec first needs to defeat his own demons, namely his interiorized homophobia. At the beginning of *The Mortal Instruments*, Alec is an insecure eighteen-year-old with a platonic crush on his foster brother Jace and afflicted by a mix of dread and guilt for not being able to meet his father's expectations: Robert "used to joke insistently about Alec and girls. It was too painful to respond to those comments. Alec talked less and less" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 446). At first, therefore, Alec appears as the stereotypical closeted gay boy, destined to remain Jace's sidekick—a role that, as Neil Shyminsky (2011) reminds us, conventionally served the purpose of reinforcing the ideological association of the main superhero with heteronormative values (289).

As Brown (2016) argues, however, as a "ritualized presentation of masculinization," the emergence of a superhero relies precisely on "[t]he shift from 'less-than-ordinary' to 'extraordinary' masculinity" (134). The great emphasis that this moment of (bodily) transformation receives in contemporary cinematic adaptations of comics stories betrays the ongoing importance that the genre "[aligns] with the valorization of traditional masculine ideals such as physical strength, resiliency, power, and heterosexual desirability" (134). Queering this process, the moment that can be seen as marking the beginning of Alec's long shift from less-than-ordinary to extraordinary does not involve any bodily transformation and instead centralizes vulnerability and emotions: having failed his real first attempt at killing a demon, Alec spends one night "in a delirium of pain and poison … watching Magnus' face in the light of the rising sun [while the warlock heals him] … and thinking how oddly beautiful he was" (Clare n.d., n.p.). Soon after, on Alec's initiative, the couple starts dating and Alec starts killing demons, often to protect Magnus. Along with his sexuality, Alec is progressively forced to admit that peace and justice can be achieved only by fighting the Clave's politics along with the enemy (Clare 2014, 390).

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[5] An exhaustive comparative analysis of queer superhero narratives would require much more space than this article can provide, especially following the range of new and diverse characters that have appeared in Marvel comics and movies since the 2010s. I limit myself to noticing that, while queer readings and/or revisions of long-running characters such Captain America and Batman mostly rely on either faultlines— that is, on problems and contradictions generated by the strategic repetitions that turn superheroes into mythical figures—or the presence of sexually ambiguous secondary characters (see Later 2019 and Shyminsky 2011, respectively), Alec is an instance of YA fantasy hero that is constructed unquestionably queer from the very beginning. In this regard, see also Robert Bittner's (2016) argument about the (im)possibility of any character just "happening to be" queer (206–207).

Alec's first steps at self-discovery take center stage in *The Red Scrolls of Magic* (2019), the first book of *The Eldest Curses* that follows his romantic-turned-adventurous vacation throughout Europe with Magnus. The novel unapologetically foregrounds queer romance right from its cover, which as Battis (2021) explains, "marks the first instance of a primary queer couple on a popular YA fantasy novel cover, depicted as a couple in no uncertain terms" (55). Alec's heroic duty is thus presented as inseparable from and often a threat to his private life: what should have been an occasion to figure out if and how he and Magnus can be together despite their differences suddenly turns into a mission to save Magnus from a demonic cult that he founded centuries ago as a joke. For the first time, Alec has to act alone to protect the person that he loves the most, by going against his Shadowhunter upbringing and beliefs. Queer sexual desire plays a central role in twisting the way this process unfolds, helping subvert conventional paradigms of heroic heterosexual masculinity. The traditionally restrained representation of the superhero's love life, due among other things to the fact that the superhero usually avoids getting too close to his potential love interest to ensure her protection (Shyminsky 2011, 294), is replaced by the search and achievement of total queer sexual fulfilment, as emphasized by the fact that bad news and enemy attacks invariably interrupt Alec's attempts at having sex with Magnus.

The multi-layered symbolism of the train in American culture contributes to portraying the complexity of Alec's inextricable relationships with both love and danger. As Aliya Whiteley (2013) explains, in American movies trains can symbolize several things, from romance and suspense to adventure and action (n.p.). Early in *The Red Scrolls of Magic*, all these meanings conflate in the Orient Express, on which Alec and Magnus travel overnight from Paris to Venice. Clare could not choose a more appropriate setting for Alec's first individual display of heroism and a first romantic trip in which he does his best to find out more about Magnus's mysterious past. While Magnus eye-witnessed its early splendor and presently recognizes the Orient Express as the nostalgic relic of a long-gone era, for Alec the train is still a novel, fascinating opportunity for romance and adventure. The Express was created to provide wealthy western travelers with a gateway to the East. If we consider that Magnus is a Euro-Asian man whose story Alec longs to discover, the train both maintains his original function and reworks it from an American perspective: since to Alec, Magnus' Asianness represents the West, rather than the East, the journey takes the contours of a frontier romance, in which the idyllic mood of a luscious dinner through the French countryside followed by a sexy making-out session in the shower is suddenly interrupted by demons.

With this first direct personal attack since the beginning of their vacation, the Orient Express brusquely transforms into the equally iconic setting of a battle between good and evil, with Alec fighting a horde of demons on top of the speeding train to save Magnus. This 'race to the rescue'—a cross reference to an action movie staple as old as American

cinema itself—immediately aligns Alec with a wide array of popular (super)heroes—from Spider-Man and Batman to Indiana Jones and Ethan Hunt, but also betrays the script according to which spectacular feats are aimed at making the hero desirable to his heterosexual love interest: Alec is not trying to save a damsel in distress, but a man who is already his boyfriend and far more powerful than him (and semi-immortal). Furthermore, as is often the case with Alec's early steps as a hero, the episode results in a half-failure. Alec almost dies (again) from demon poison but not after managing to free Magnus, who then uses his magic to save them both. While this might seem to undermine Alec's status of hero, I argue that, in the broader context of his romantic vacation, Alec's anticlimactic performance serves the purpose of branding him as a hero that stands out for having "the truest heart ... and the strongest faith in other people" (Clare 2014, 394–95) rather than for his exceptional physical prowess. It is unsurprising, then, that Alec eventually saves Magnus from the cultists not with a particularly heroic gesture but by proving that he knows him well enough to recognize him among dozens of magical replicas. He also sets the cultist leader free instead of delivering her to the Clave, which frames him as a hero for whom justice is always accompanied by mercy. That Alec is setting an example is confirmed by the fact that five years later a werewolf who witnesses his fight on top of the train calls for his help in Buenos Aires as the only Shadowhunter that she trusts—an episode to which I return later.

3. ENTER THE HERO'S FAMILY

In *The Lost Book of the White* (2020), Alec and Magnus's adventures resume with parenting responsibilities added to the list of Alec's atypical preoccupations for a hero. This time, his philosophy that union is strength is even more important to guarantee that when the mission is over their son, Max, still has at least one parent. While the couple's Shadowhunter friends accompany them first to Shanghai and then to Diyu (hell in Chinese mythology) to heal Magnus from a wound imparted with a mysterious magical spear, the last heroic call is still Alec's. Acting on a hunch, he asks Magnus to use the Alliance rune again and, when he literally throws himself on the magic spear in the remote chance of sparing Magnus from death, their conjoined powers overcome the magic of the weapon, preventing it from killing Alec. Two years later, as he is about to adopt another child, Alec remains as selfless as uncharacteristically focused on his romantic life for a hero: during a two-days mission in Buenos Aires, Alec constantly thinks of home, watching pictures of Magnus and Max to remind himself "what he was fighting for" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 396). This, however. does not stop him from risking his life saving all the werewolves women trapped in a collapsing building, an event for which he is hailed as a hero but that he summarizes to Magnus as "[nothing] exciting ... I found Rafe [sic. their new child]. I missed you. I came home. ... All I did was think about being worthy of coming home to you, ... [i]t was nothing much" (457). In light of the fact that soon after

Alec and Magnus will finally get married, it might seem that Clare ultimately represents queer love in conservative terms, that is, as aping heteronormative relationships. Contrary to that, I maintain that Alec and Magnus's multiracial and queer family exposes and subverts the ideological exploitation of love, family, and children in western hegemonic discourses of reproductive futurism, unmasking both the role that such discourses play in the Clave's schism and the contribution of superhero narratives to upholding conservative ideals.

Overall, Clare's saga foregrounds love as the universal language of the heart. From this perspective, Alec's insistence on having the right to an egalitarian marriage should not be seen as an assimilation of queer love to heteronormative social canons but rather as a testimony to David M. Halperin's (2019) claim that all love is inherently queer, in that it is a highly individual experience and radically incommensurable with established social forms (419). After all, the problem for Alec is not marrying a man—since same-sex marriage among Shadowhunters has always been so unthinkable that it has never been explicitly prohibited by law—but marrying a warlock. Alec and Magnus's wedding ritual is presented as the celebration of a union between cleaving souls that occurs regardless of the ceremony itself (Clare 2018, 862). This conceptualization on marriage is offered also by Mogan, a couple of ancient faerie weaponsmiths who gives Alec and Magnus matching swords that only soulmates can wield in *The Lost Book of the White*. One of the faeries addresses Alec as Magnus's husband and, when Alec shyly explains that they are not married, replies: "Do you see rings on *our* hands? And yet Mo Ye and I have been married since before the sea was salt" (Clare and Chu 2020, 179, original emphasis). Therefore, when Alec marks his skin with the wedding runes that symbolize his unbreakable union to Magnus, those runes perform the function that Ahmed (2006) ascribes to the lines that over time "become the external trace of an interior world," making visible "[w]hat we follow, what we do" (18). By marrying a Downworlder, however, Alec also queers said function by transforming his wedding runes into marks that refuse to blindly reproduce the restricting, inherited significance of pureblood Shadowhunter marriage and reorient their meaning toward union rather than exclusion.

Alec and Magnus's children are equally subversive of Shadowhunter laws and traditions. As Ahmed (2010) points out, the queer family is a decision, not a point on a (straight) line (114). Max's and Raphael's adoptions both involve a conversation between Alec and Magnus. Additionally, like every child in a queer family, their arrival is not quite ordinary and, additionally, follows a history of rejection. Max is abandoned for being a warlock when he is only a few months old, and Raphael, despite being a Nephilim orphan of the Dark War, is raised by a werewolf woman when the Buenos Aires Institute is taken over by Clive Breakspear (a member of the Cohort)—a clear example of how corrupted laws punish those whom they should protect the most. In this context, Alec and Magnus's family aligns with Ahmed's description of the queer family as a dwelling place where

children inherit points of deviation from the norm but these deviations do not lead to exclusion (114). Rather, they are celebrated as strengths: having experienced the walls of the New York Institute as a prison and thought of himself for a long time as a cause of unhappiness to his parents, Alec is committed to never reproduce the same situation in his own house (Clare and Brennan 2020, 446). Consequently, he thinks that Max and Raphael should be free of constructing their own identities, regardless of conventional expectations. While Magnus is willing to teach Raphael some simple magic tricks, Alec agrees to give Max a Shadowhunter training.

In Alec and Magnus's queer family children are not resources to exploit to perpetuate a patriarchal status quo but independent people bound to and taken care of by their parents based on unconditional love. This approach clashes with the old beliefs enacted by the youngest members of the Cohort. For example, to demonstrate that they are not bluffing when they threaten suicide to force Alec and his supporters out of Idris, a Cohort girl kills herself without hesitation upon her leader's command, who then shouts to Alec: "Can you build your new Clave on the blood of dead children?" (Clare 2018, 832). These words exemplify how the new generations are instrumentalized and exploited in a society shaped by ideals of purity and supremacy—ideals that lead to civil war and self-destruction. Alec's commitment to redressing this situation, both politically and as a parent, is symbolized by his actions in battle precisely in Buenos Aires, soon after he coincidentally meets Raphael. During his mission there, Alec dismantles a collaboration between a warlock and Breakspear's mercenaries aimed at experimenting on werewolf women to find a way for warlocks to reproduce. Raphael leads him to the place where the experiments are carried out and, in the attempt to protect Alec, is almost killed by Breakspear, who does not hesitate to hit a child with his full strength. In response, Alec breaks Breakspear's hand (Clare and Brennan 2020, 430)—literally the hand of a corrupted law that supports and is supported by an ideological exploitation of biological reproduction—thus symbolically breaking the cycle of hegemonic traditions that prevent his and other unconventional families from being acknowledged. As a fellow Nephilim in a relationship with a faery tells him in *The Lost Book of the White*, "Your family ... just by existing, by being so prominent in the Clave, you are doing much. *Your* family—if the Clave is to survive, that is their future. It must be" (Clare and Chu 2020, 351, original emphasis)—words that prove true when Alec becomes Consul.

The multiple levels on which Alec's family violates Shadowhunter traditions manifest also in the way most of the times Alec is simultaneously discriminated for being gay and in love with a Downworlder. For example, Breakspear calls Lily, the vampire woman who accompanies Alec to Buenos Aires, his "Downworlder whore" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 365). Since Magnus's prominent position as a warlock makes it very unlikely that Breakspear does not know that Alec's partner is a man, his slur/assumption betrays a simultaneous contempt for both Downworlders and gay love, a love whose name

Breakspear does not dare to speak. Soon after Max is adopted, the same interplay between miscegenation and queerness in unsettling Nephilim mores spurs a Shadowhunter girl to ask Alec's sister when she will give her parents "a real grandchild" (Clare and Brennan 2020, 407). To the objection that Max is not imaginary, the girl replies:

> A Shadowhunter child, to teach our ways. Nobody would give those people a Shadowhunter child. Imagine a warlock around one of our little ones! And that kind of behavior. Children are so impressionable. It wouldn't be right. (407)

"Those people" and "that kind of behavior" equally refer to Alec and Magnus's sexuality and to the fact that Magnus and Max are warlocks, making it difficult to determine whether and which one of these deviations from Shadowhunter normative life patterns trumps the other. As Ahmed (2006) argues, heterosexuality serves the purpose and mechanism of social reproduction, illustrated by the straight vertical and horizontal (blood)lines of family trees, by allowing for the replication of the father's biological and cultural image (83). It thus "becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life" (86), a requirement that implicitly frames children as resources. Alec's family exposes these mechanisms and rewrites the Nephilim's concept of a good family. In biological terms, Alec appears as a reproductive 'dead end' not only for being gay but also for choosing Magnus as his partner, since warlocks cannot reproduce. Therefore, his ability, to paraphrase Ahmed, to "return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good" (21) relies exclusively on the possibility of this return to follow unconventional directions, such as having his adopted warlock son (another reproductive dead end) recognized as equal to a Shadowhunter biological child.

Against all odds, this possibility materializes when Alec's father manifests his acceptance of the warlock baby with a funny innuendo that acquires significant implications if Alec's family is to embody the future of the Clave. Since the child's skin is blue, like Alec's eyes and Magnus's magic, Robert asks Magnus whether he has magically made the baby for him and Alec (Clare and Brennan 2016, 553–54). By welcoming the possibility that magic was used to give a Shadowhunter-Downworlder same-sex couple the equivalent of a biological child, Robert is equating this reproductive path to heteronormative Nephilim parent-child blood relationships, and this despite the baby in question being a warlock. The Lightwoods' acceptance of the child as their equal is further demonstrated by their suggestion to name him Max after their late youngest child, thus officially making a warlock part of a Shadowhunter family. What might appear as an attempt at assimilation that leaves the Shadowhunters' alleged superiority unchallenged is in actuality an offer of affection and protection to a child that has been abandoned with the note "Who could ever love it?" (528). After all, the Lightwoods are aware that the naming might be only temporary, since warlocks choose their own name when they are old enough to define their identity.

Even more interesting is the way in which, by being adopted in a Shadowhunter family, Max potentially enters and expands the Nephilim—and by proxy American—canons of patriotic heroism. Max's skin is described as "[t]he blue of Captain America's suit" (Clare and Brennan 2016, 528). This analogy projects Max, a child who has no way of conventionally reproducing his Shadowhunter fathers' inheritance (neither biologically nor in socio-cultural terms) as the future of the core values of the American-like Nephilim society personified by Alec. As Barbara Brownie and Danny Graydon (2016) explain, Captain America's costume presents him as "an embodiment of American pride and superiority, a character created as a defender of the values of the United States" (56). However, differently from other superheroes, who maintain ownership of their costumes and associated roles, the identity of a national personification such as Captain America is the result of an "act of appropriation," planned and regulated by those national authorities that carefully chose him as a candidate worthy of representing the nation and entrusted him with a costume that allows him to become a national symbol across time (58). While the above-mentioned analogy endows Max with the same function, the fact that, contrary to Captain America, Max owns his blue skin subversively makes him a natural candidate for embodying the nation and its values, despite the fact that most Shadowhunters would never entrust a warlock with that power. Moreover, the possibility that a warlock could finally uphold and personify Shadowhunter values makes Max an emblem of the positive, profound changes effected by his unconventional family. By being semi-immortal, Max projects these changes into a potentially endless future, even more consistently than the way the static national symbol of the American flag survives across time through Captain American's iconic stars-and-stripes costume.

4. Conclusions

Raised to believe in the Nephilim's exceptionality and superiority over mundanes and Downworlders, Alec has to accept his queer identity and love for a warlock in order to become a man and a true hero. As the laws of his people reveal themselves a threat to Shadowhunters, too, Alec understands that war and injustice are caused not by nonconformity to Nephilim traditions, but by the latter's dependence on immobilism, systemic racism, and heteronormative notions of reproductive futurism. By embracing the true, positive values of the Nephilim, such as their human capacity for compassion and selflessness, in what are currently the latest pages of Clare's fantasy saga Alec finally appears as a confident man, unafraid to confesses that

> when one day people look back on me and what my life meant, I don't want them to say, "Alec Lightwood fought in the Dark War" or even "Alec Lightwood was Consul once." I want them to think, "Alec Lightwood loved one man so much he changed the world for him." (Clare 2018, 856)

Since Shadowhunter society mirrors the national core values of the United States, Alec encourages Clare's readers to question the association of heroicity with the dominant idea of masculinity that (super)heroes have contributed perpetuating for at least a century, in comics and especially on the big screen. Whereas male (super)heroes are expected to show physical prowess, relative emotional detachment and heterosexual desirability, Alec embodies new paradigms of strength and righteousness, rooted in the coexistence of authority and kindness, power and feelings.

Because Shadowhunter mores discriminate against queer people as much as against Downworlders, Alec, Magnus and their children highlight the intersectionality of oppression and the inextricable relationship between private and public good. As a queer fantasy hero with a complex and carefully explored coming-of-age journey, Alec challenges the normative traditions upheld by the Cohort and by far-right Americans with peace politics based on mutual respect, cooperation, and equality, and a family united not by blood but by choices and unconditional love. Through his position as Consul and the rise of his family as a symbol of the future of the Clave, Alec allows a gay man with interracial adoptive children to represent the Nephilim and the United States and (re)define their core values. Thanks to the speculative potential of the fantasy genre, Clare's readers can thus witness the dawn of a new hopeful age in which everybody can participate in the making of a more just nation.

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ALWAYS ROOTING FOR THE ANTIHERO: A DIVE INTO THE EVOLUTION OF TAYLOR SWIFT'S POETIC PERSONA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyze how Taylor Swift's public persona has evolved over the last years, from her beginnings in the music industry to her latest works. To do so, we have studied some of the lyrics of her songs with the objective of understanding the three phases Swift has gone through in the creation of her personal brand: damsel in distress, hero and anti-hero. We have examined how, in her first albums, Swift portrayed herself as a naïve, young, woman always hoping to be rescued by her prince. Later, we have delved into how she depicts herself as a hero, so we have analyzed the coincidences between Campbell's hero's journey and some of the tracks in the album *1989*. Finally, we have focused on how, since 2017, Taylor Swift embodies the anti-hero, reviewing the shared traits between Swift's poetic persona and these characters of questionable morality. To this end, we have used some theoretical tools such as textual analysis or Greimas' actantial scheme and we have considered some of the most relevant studies on damsels in distress, the hero and the anti-hero.

Keywords: lyrics, popular music, pop music, antiheroine, Taylor Swift.

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Few artists today can dream of Taylor Swift's level of fame, as she has established herself almost as a bastion of American culture. The singer's rise in popularity has been unstoppable in recent years, especially since the release of her latest studio album, *Midnights* (2022).[1] The album catapulted her to the top of every chart, making her the most listened-to artist in the world on the Spotify platform, with over 26.1 billion global streams during 2023 (Spotify 2023; Chan 2023). Moreover, Swift stands as the sole recipient of the Grammy Award for *Album of the Year* on four occasions, and her world tour (*The Eras Tour*) has garnered international acclaim, with the songwriter achieving the remarkable feat of selling out every venue in record time. Such overwhelming demand has even resulted in technical difficulties, with platforms like Ticketmaster experiencing system failures during ticket sales (Ticketmaster 2022).

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[1] During the writing of this paper, another album, *The Tortured Poets Department,* has been announced, with an anticipated release date of April 19th, 2024.

But what has made Taylor Swift the cultural landmark she is today? While offering a definitive response to this inquiry remains elusive, it is apparent that her songwriting skills have significantly contributed to her success. In this regard, multiple relevant artists, such as Billy Joel or Paul McCartney, have addressed her talent and even admitted her influence in their own works (Ahlgrim 2023). Furthermore, the construction of a strong poetic persona in her lyrics, rooted in widely recognized archetypes, might have significantly contributed to her prominence. Consequently, this paper aims to explore the evolution of the lyric I in Taylor Swift's songs over the last two decades. This entails a preeminently literary analysis of Swift's compositions. While the treatment of song lyrics as poetry may engender some controversy, due to inherent disparities between the two forms of artistic expression, there are already multiple examples of this type of study. An exemplary illustration can be found in the notable scholarly work titled *The Poetics of American Song Lyrics* (Pence 2012).

To accomplish this objective, an examination of select song lyrics will be undertaken, aimed at delineating three distinct phases in Swift's development of her poetic persona: the damsel in distress, the hero, and the anti-hero. Methodologically, textual analysis will be deployed as a primary tool, which is used to understand how people make sense of the world around them (McKee 2003, 1), and can reveal information about how particular groups are represented by society (31). Additionally, pertinent literature on archetypal figures such as damsels in distress (Adamou 2011; Idris 2013), heroes (Campbell 2008; Vogler 1998), and anti-heroes (Freire 2022) will be consulted. Another valuable theoretical tool that will be used in this study is the actancial model proposed by Algirdas G. Greimas (1973), despite its traditional association with narratology rather than lyricism. Given Swift's adeptness in storytelling (Gallo 2023; Lee 2023; Spencer 2023) and in creating credible characters, this analytical framework is deemed relevant.

It is noteworthy to acknowledge that Taylor Swift has defined her songwriting as "confessional" (Tayleesi 2018). Consequently, listeners have readily engaged in a process of identification, often attributing the persona depicted within her lyrics—frequently represented solely by the pronoun "I"—with the artist herself. Such a phenomenon of transference is usually observed within the realm of poetic expression and "can be understood as the result of a sort of contract: the author pretends to be the speaking 'I' in the poem, the reader joins the game" (Winko 2010, 228).

Returning to Greimas' proposed methodology, he divides the spheres of action of the characters in a story into seven roles, referred to as *actants* (Greimas 1973, 80). We will specifically concentrate on the role of the *object* (defined as what the subject desires) and the *subject*, described as "someone who performs the action" (Greimas 1973, 265).

It is imperative to clarify that the objective of this research is not, at any time, to make an analysis of the reception of Swift's songs nor of the aesthetics that accompany her through her different eras as the archetype she embodies evolves. However,

occasional reference to events from her public life will be indispensable to elucidate the transformation in the construction of the character associated with her poetic self. Likewise, selective mention of Swift's artistic appearance during specific junctures is pertinent as they serve to better comprehend the archetypal representations found through her lyrics. We also need to specify that, throughout this paper, we will refer mostly to Swift's original songs and not to her re-recordings. This decision is based on our assertion that the evolution of her poetic persona has been a process that has unfolded chronologically, and considering her versions would only obscure this progression.

1. Young, Sweet, Innocent Damsel in Distress

Afsari and Omrani make an archetypal reading of the damsel in distress and assert that it is one of the most traditional archetypes in literature, characterized as someone "who is always vulnerable, and in need of rescue" (2015, 11). Similarly, Idris (2013, 138) emphasizes the recurrence of this archetype, delineating it as the antithesis of the knight in shining armor, which together constitute the two poles of gender representation in traditional narratives. Thus, the damsel in distress "is a woman who is young, beautiful, naïve, vulnerable and sexually attractive, and is always in need of a man to save her life or chastity" (Idris 2013, 138). In addition, the researcher delves into the etymological roots of the term and affirms that

> [s]he is dominated by the patriarchal figure, either a dominating father, or a monster, or a villain, and on the verge of losing her life or virginity. She is unprotected against such forces and is entirely dependent upon a man, traditionally referred to as "Knight in Shining Armor," for physical protection, social standing and emotional support. (Idris 2013, 139)

Recent portrayals of female characters continue to exhibit manifestations of the damsel in distress archetype. For instance, notwithstanding the fact that "each new generation of Disney princesses reflects the cultural shifts associated with the respective feminist waves" (McDonough 2017, 12), there are not few that embody each and every one of the requirements of this archetype.

Ramaswamy posits that the damsel in distress, which she equates to the typical princess in fairy tales, "is a romantic figure whose role in the narrative is passive. Her function is to be rescued from a villain, human or monster, by the prince" (2014, 163). Notably, the author underscores the archetype's inherent passivity, emphasizing that, while she may be relevant in the plot, she seldom emerges as the main character.

Christina Adamou (2011) also stresses the inactivity inherent to the damsel in distress and she explains that the heroes' love interest can "aid the plot and development of the main characters" and tend to "offer themselves to the heroes at the end of the film as prizes for their bravery and skills" (Adamou 2011, 103). In the same vein, Betty Kaklamanidou highlights that "there are still superhero narratives which prefer to 'use' women as the leading man's object of affection and/or 'damsels in distress'" (2011, 61).

In light of these observations, it can be deduced that the predominant attributes of this archetype revolve around notions of beauty and passivity. Typically depicted as a youthful, innocent woman, she appears as the object of the male protagonist's sexual desires (or love, in more sweetened versions). In addition, her ability to wait is usually also part of the equation, since her passivity renders her reliant solely on the arrival of the gentleman who will rescue her from her dismal fate. Essentially, the archetype of the damsel in distress usually fits the "object" actant, a passive element devoid of narrative agency that has no other function in the story than to be what the hero desires.

In her first studio albums, Swift depicts herself precisely as a damsel in distress or a princess in need of rescue. In them, she tends to embody the passivity typical of this archetype, so that motifs such as an exacerbated emotionality or waiting are recurrent throughout her lyrics, as will be shown below. While Taylor Swift's self-titled first studio album features certain songs where the poetic persona embodies the archetype of the damsel in distress, such as "Teardrops on My Guitar," we contend that the character undergoes a more profound and compelling development from her second album onward. Consequently, the lyrics of her debut album will not be subjected to further in-depth analysis.

Fearless (2008), the artist's second record, is the one that possibly best illustrates the idea of Swift as a damsel in distress. In the song that launched the singer to stardom, "Love Story," the American envisions herself as the protagonist in a *Romeo and Juliet*-esque narrative, embodying the role of a good girl yearning to be saved (Figure 1). Key verses from "Love Story," such as "Romeo, take me somewhere we can be alone /I'll be waiting, all there's left to do is run /You'll be the prince and I'll be the princess" (Swift 2009, track 9) or "But I got tired of waiting/ Wondering if you were ever coming around" delve into the motif of waiting, inaction and the need for a rescue. Likewise, the song "White Horse," also from *Fearless,* recreates a similar fantasy. However, in this case, Swift's dream is shattered when the "prince" in her narrative abandons her. Here, the singer conveys the innocence characteristic of damsels in distress, coupled with a sense of helplessness and incapacitation. Expressing her inability to act upon falling in love, Swift laments "Maybe I was naive, got lost in your eyes/ And never really had a chance" (Swift 2009, track 11). Once again, the absence of agency in her character is evident, as the poetic self assumes the role of the object within Greimas's actantial schema (1973, 80).

In addition, it seems pertinent to emphasize that, in this album, the singer demonstrates meticulous attention to the scenery, as her narratives unfold within a realm of fantasy evocative of medieval literary traditions, legends, and fairy tales (Figure 1). In this sense, it is worth mentioning that the song "Forever & Always" begins with the well-known phrase "Once upon a time" (Swift 2009, track 17).

Fig. 1. Frame from the music video for "Love Story" © Big Machine Records, LLC, 2008.

Waiting becomes a *leitmotiv* of the album, appearing repeatedly in other songs such as "Come in with the rain" (Swift 2009, track 4) ("I'll leave my window open/ 'Cause I'm too tired at night to call your name./ Just know I'm right here hoping/ that you'll come in with the rain"), where the poetic persona resigns agency to such an extent that she re-frains from even calling out to her beloved. Furthermore, in the bonus track "Today was a fairytale," included in the album re-record—*Fearless* Taylor's Version—(Swift 2021, track 20), explicit reference is made to the archetype under discussion, commencing with the lines: "Today was a fairytale, you were the prince/ I used to be a damsel in distress."

Although on her third studio album, *Speak Now* (2010), Swift continues to portray herself as a fairytale princess, her capacity for action is somewhat greater than on *Fearless*. Despite the continued thematic presence of waiting, shifts in aesthetics and emotional expression distance her from the role of damsel in distress previously portrayed. The character embodied by Swift is no longer able to actualize the actant "object," and transitions to the active "subject," assuming the central role in the narratives she presents. This evolution is rendered evident in tracks such as "Back to December," where she confesses, "Maybe this is wishful thinking, probably mindless dreaming, but if we loved again I swear I'd love you right" (Swift 2010, track 3). The use of a verb as powerful

as "I swear," in the active voice, signifies a transformation in her lyrical style and, consequently, in her poetic persona. Similarly, in "The story of us," Swift articulates, "I used to know my place was the spot next to you. / Now, I'm searching the room for an empty seat" (Swift 2010, track 7). There is a departure from the prior depiction of herself as a peripheral figure, seeking a place beside her lover, to actively searching a spot of her own. The utilization of action verbs serves to blur the passivity associated with the singer's persona in her earlier compositions.

In her subsequent album, *Red* (2012), Swift has notably forsaken the archetype of the damsel in distress, yet has not fully reached the next phase in the evolution of her poetic persona. In fact, the song "I knew you were trouble" commences with the formula "Once upon a time" (Swift 2012, track 4), traditionally associated to fairy tales, as we have previously stated. However, in this album, her romantic partner no longer monopolizes the narrative spotlight and, in her reflections on love affairs, she assumes a protagonist role, equal to his. Two illustrative instances suffice to elucidate this transition. In "State of grace," Swift writes: "So you were never a saint and I loved in shades of wrong" (Swift 2012, track 1), thereby eschewing idealized portrayals of her lover. On the other hand, the song "Treacherous" begins with an imperative: "Put your lips close to mine" (Swift 2012, track 3), accentuating the lyric-I's agency. Henceforth, she unequivocally occupies the position of the "subject," rather than the "object." In the transitional album that *Red* represents, bridging her former country-style recordings with the emergent pop sounds, Swift progressively assumes the mantle of the hero, a transformation fully realized in her next album, *1989*, to be discussed herein.

2. THE HERO AND HER QUEST

Northrop Frye defines the *archetype* as "a symbol which connects one poem to another and thereby helps to unify our literary experience" (Frye 1957, 99–100) and few symbols can be found to be more stable than the figure of the hero. As Bruce Meyer points out, "the universality of the term *hero* seems to suggest that it is a concept of capital significance for our imagination" (2008, 48) and, consequently, numerous researchers have reflected on their importance. Jung, for one, regards the victory of the hero as "the long-hoped-for and expected triumph of consciousness over the unconscious" (Jung 1969, 167), while Frye endeavors to categorize heroes based on their power of action (Frye 1957, 366).

But if there is anyone who has undertaken an exhaustive exploration of the figure of the hero, it is undoubtedly Joseph Campbell. For the critic, the hero "is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms" (2008, 39). In his work *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, Campbell delineates the stages of the hero's journey, positing a common narrative structure shared by heroic protagonists across different temporal and

spatial contexts. Moreover, "the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation - initiation - return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth" (49). Building upon Campbell's framework, Christopher Vogler (1998) simplifies the stages of the hero's quest, offering a more accessible approach for analysis. For him, the initial phase encompasses stages such as "ordinary world," "call to adventure," "refusal of the call," "meeting with the mentor" and "crossing the first threshold." In the second part of the hero's journey, the protagonist enters a new world (literally or metaphorically) and will have to face the dangers he encounters there. Vogler differentiates four moments: "test, allies, enemies," "approach to the inmost Cave," "Ordeal" and "Reward" (Vogler 1998, 19–23). Finally, the last stage includes "The road back," "Resurrection" and "Return with the Elixir" (1998, 23–26).

Upon comprehending the theoretical framework of the hero's journey, a critical examination of Taylor Swift's fifth studio album, *1989* (2014), will be undertaken. Hitherto, the artist had been progressively reshaping her poetic persona from that of a conventional damsel in distress to one imbued with greater autonomy. However, in *1989*, Swift appears to portray herself as the hero, entering a novel world and encountering adventures. While we do not attribute deliberate intentionality to Taylor Swift in replicating the various stages of the hero's journey, it is worth noting that throughout *1989* a significant number of songs could readily be associated with the diverse phases of this narrative archetype. The ensuing analysis elucidates this phenomenon.

The album begins with "Welcome to New York," an anthem in which the artist recounts her arrival in New York City. This track encapsulates the sensation of embarking upon a novel chapter in her life, evoking feelings of surprise and novelty, as articulated in the chorus: "It's a new soundtrack, I could dance to this beat, beat forevermore./ The lights are so bright, but they never blind me, me./ Welcome to New York, it's been waitin' for you" (Swift 2014, track 1). This initial track could easily represent the crossing of the first threshold: the ordinary world, shown in her previous albums, is left behind. The lyrical composition epitomizes a significant juncture, characterized by a transition from the comfort and familiarity of the known realm to the unexplored domain of novel experiences and adventures.

In the second part of the monomyth, the hero must face a succession of trials. In the track "Out of the Woods" (Swift 2014, track 4), the singer ponders whether she is out of danger yet. Swift undergoes a series of challenges akin to those endured by traditional heroes in their quests. Moreover, on this path of trials, the hero encounters various characters, some of whom assume the roles of allies while others adopt adversarial positions. In "You Are In Love" (Swift 2014, track 15), Swift reflects upon falling in love with her best friend. Conversely, "Bad blood" explores themes of betrayal and disillusionment, as the protagonist grapples with the aftermath of being deceived by a once-trusted confidant.

The lyrics depict Swift's lamentation over the treachery, encapsulated in inquiries, such as "Did you have to do this/ … Did you have to hit me/ Where I'm weak?" (Swift 2014, track 8), and reflections upon the tarnished relationship, symbolized by the metaphor of rusting, once-shiny aspects of their bond. As she travels along the path of the trials, the poetic self steadily approaches the profound depths of the darkest cave. Throughout this journey, she asserts that she is incessantly pursued, as articulated by the artist in the lyrics of "I know places": "Cause they got the cages, they got the boxes and guns / They are the hunters, we are the foxes and we run" (Swift 2014, track 12).

Finally, Swift's poetic persona enters the inmost cave, an experience she discusses in "Wonderland." As Vogler (1998) notes,

> In mythology the Inmost Cave may represent the land of the dead. The hero may have to descend into hell to rescue a loved one (Orpheus), into a cave to fight a dragon and win a treasure (Sigurd in Norse myth), or into a labyrinth to confront a monster (Theseus and the Minotaur). (20)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the artist references the metaphorical fall down a rabbit hole in "Wonderland" (Swift 2014, track 14). Within this cave, the traditional hero must confront their deepest fear, a moment that continues to be recounted in the same track. Swift reflects on this encounter by stating: "Didn't you calm my fears with a Cheshire cat smile?/ Ooh, didn't it all seem new and excitin'?/ I felt your arms twistin' around me/ It's all fun and games 'til somebody loses their mind" (Swift 2014, track 14). The realization that a once-loved person has succumbed to madness prompts Swift to acknowledge the necessity of returning home, which represents the final phase of the hero's journey: "I reached for you, but you were gone/ I knew I had to go back home."

At this juncture, the traditional hero, heavily wounded after the battle, appears to undergo a symbolic death, emblematic of a transformative process. In Vogler's words "the hero, who has been to the realm of the dead, must be reborn and cleansed in one last Ordeal of death and Resurrection before returning to the Ordinary World of the living" (1998, 24). This experience finds vivid depiction in the song "Clean." Within this composition, Swift's poetic persona, embodying the hero in their ultimate battle, explains how she thought she was about to die, which paradoxically served to purify her:

> Hung my head as I lost the war/ and the sky turned black like a perfect storm./ The rain came pouring down,/ when I was drownin', that's when I could finally breathe./ And by mornin', gone was any trace of you,/ I think I am finally clean. (Swift 2014, track 13)

The concluding phase of the hero's journey entails the return to the ordinary realm bearing the elixir acquired through the battle. The hero must come back to the ordinary world "but the journey is meaningless unless she brings back some Elixir, treasure, or lesson from the Special World" (Vogler 1998, 25). Swift expresses that idea of acquiring insights from her journey in "New Romantics," where she sings "We cry tears of mascara in the bathroom./ Honey, life is just a classroom" (Swift 2014, track 16). Within this track, Swift

reflects on embodying a new paradigm of romance, departing from the conventional romanticism depicted in her earlier albums, with highly established and polarized gender roles. She asserts "we're the new romantics," ending the song (and the album, as this is its last track) with the learned lesson from her journey: "The best people in life are free."

2.1 THE HERO'S DEATH

Following this comprehensive analysis, it would appear evident that, in *1989*, Taylor Swift assumed the role of the central protagonist within her narrative. Moreover, parallels can be discerned between the scenes she depicts in her songs and the various stages of the heroic monomyth. However, towards the conclusion of the *1989* era, a pivotal event transpired, catalyzing a profound shift in the promotion of her music and personal brand. While the preceding analysis has primarily focused on scrutinizing the lyrics of Swift's songs, endeavoring to minimize references to external events, it is imperative to address here an episode that significantly impacted Taylor Swift's career trajectory. This occurrence profoundly influenced the evolution of her personal brand and, consequently, the portrayal of her poetic persona reflected in her lyrics.

In 2016, rapper Kanye West was preparing the release of his new album, *The life of Pablo*. Allegedly, West intended to include a provocative line about Taylor Swift in the song "Famous" (West 2016, track 4), insinuating that they should have sex at some point. The rapper purportedly informed Swift of this impending lyric. Nevertheless, upon the song's release, the lyrics diverged from the communication Swift received, leading her to publicly express discomfort, particularly denouncing the line "I made that bitch famous," which she claimed she never authorized. West's then-wife, Kim Kardashian, posted to social media an edited video of the call between Kanye and Taylor, where the artist appeared to give her consent. This episode precipitated a widespread backlash against Swift and the hashtag #TaylorSwiftIsOverParty became a global trending topic on Twitter. The posts were accompanied by an inundation of derogatory comments and adorned with snake emojis across Swift's social media platforms. In all the chaos, Swift opted for a strategic withdrawal, deleting all her social media posts and unfollowing everyone. The image of hero was dead. This incident would trigger the last stage of Swift's public persona evolution, which is also represented by a change in the treatment of the poetic I in her lyrics.

3. "ALWAYS RISING FROM THE ASHES:" THE ANTIHERO IS FORGED

The figure of the antihero holds considerable intrigue for researchers, given its profound impact on consumers of such narratives. Various scholars have endeavored to elucidate the reasons underlying the irresistible allure of these morally ambiguous characters. Drawing upon cognitive psychology, some researchers, such as Albert Bandura (1986,

1991, 1999, 2001), propose that individuals are able to enjoy this type of characters through a mechanism termed *moral disengagement*. This process allows them to temporarily suspend their moral judgments, enabling them to appreciate and engage with characters who defy conventional ethical norms. Other scholars, such as Jonathan Cohen (2001, 2006), contend that empathy plays a central role in fostering a connection with antiheroes, as audiences identify with their complexities and internal conflicts. More recent research, focused on the so-called *Affective Disposition Theory*, suggests that this phenomenon occurs because we tend to be more permissive with those characters that, from the start, we like. Scholars such as Raney (2003, 2004, 2017) and Zillmann (1991, 1995, 2000) have contributed to this line of inquiry.

Be that as it may, it seems clear that audiences are drawn to the enigmatic allure of antiheroes. Alfonso Freire Sánchez defines the antihero as

> that character who is the protagonist of a narrative, with their own purposes, whose *leitmotiv* is revenge or the search for their identity, and who is characterized by moral ambiguity, excessive pride, the presence of inner conflict and an uninhibited, solitary and skeptical behavior … . Among their traits, they stand out for their strategist mentality, superior intelligence and a feeling of incessant uneasiness. In their arc of redemption they will align their purposes with the common good or with a greater cause and, thanks to their fortitude and resilience, they will achieve their goals regardless of the means and outside the established law, even if they must sacrifice themselves to achieve them[2]. (Freire 2022, 37–38)

Although many of the ideas outlined by Freire resonate with our understanding, we find ourselves unable to fully align with all of them. One point of contention pertains to the notion that the antihero must invariably opt to fight for the common good or a noble cause. Contrary to this perspective, we assert that an antihero may exhibit identical traits to those of a villain in terms of moral outlook. The fundamental distinction lies in the structural role they assume within the narrative framework: antiheroes are protagonists, whereas villains are necessarily antagonists. Hence, the narrative of antiheroes' exploits typically employs an internal focalization (usually fixed) according to Genettean nomenclature (Genette 1983, 241).

Furthermore, we maintain that antiheroes ought to offer glimpses of positive attributes, albeit not necessarily aligned with the common good. Rather, it suffices for audiences to discern expressions of love and self-sacrifice towards a significant individual. Upon closer examination, such acts may stem from a predominantly selfish impulse, as the loss of a beloved figure constitutes a personal loss. However, as consumers of narratives, we derive satisfaction from witnessing such actions, thus positing that the redemption arc of the antihero ultimately centers on love. Notwithstanding these points of dissimilarity, we can agree on a good part of the features proposed by Freire.

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[2] Since there is no official version of this text in English, my translation will be offered henceforth.

Although Taylor Swift is not a fictional character, in the music industry, "the construction of the personal brand and the narrative is as or more important than that in the construction of literary or cinematographic characters" (Freire 2022, 133). Moreover, a discernible correlation exists between "the development of the personal brand of musical artists and current trends in audiovisual narrative." Undoubtedly, there has been a noticeable proliferation in recent years of narratives featuring characters of dubious morality who nonetheless captivate audiences (Vaage 2016, xi). In fact, many researchers have stated that this is "a recent phenomenon, a product of post-modernity" (Freire 2022, 53). Examples of this are the characters of Joe Goldberg, from the Netflix series *You*; Villanelle, from *Killing Eve*; Walter White, from *Breaking Bad*; or Thomas Shelby, from *Peaky Blinders*, the oldest of these series being *Breaking Bad*, which premiered in 2008.

But how does this relate to the American singer? Following the tarnishing of Swift's reputation subsequent to the incident involving West and Kardashian, the restoration of her hero archetype became markedly challenging. Consequently, her personal image underwent a perceptible shift towards a darker aesthetic in her clothes, music videos and, notably, in her lyrics. As a result of this change in her social status and her public persona, the anti-hero was born, an image that she has maintained to this day and that vertebrates, to a greater or lesser extent, her current discography. At this point of the study, it is crucial to underscore that the two albums penned by Swift during the pandemic, *folklore* and *evermore,* diverge significantly from the trajectory previously outlined. These albums manifest as markedly intimate creations, emerging amidst a period of confinement, wherein the depiction of the anti-hero archetype is less pronounced compared to Swift's earlier (and later) works. However, as will be expounded upon subsequently, the portrayal of the antihero is imbued with considerable complexity, characterized, among other facets, by the presence of inner turmoil. In this regard, by delving into her fears and vulnerabilities, these albums hold substantial potential to enrich the narrative of the poetic persona that Taylor Swift has been cultivating since 2017.

Examining how the distinctive traits of this narrative archetype manifest in her music, it becomes apparent that antiheroes do not typically undergo the conventional "call to adventure" characteristic of the hero's journey; rather, are forced to it, often driven by motives of vengeance. Swift's return to the public eye, after three years without releasing music, was initiated with the single "Look What You Made Me Do," which would eventually become part of her sixth studio album, *reputation* (2017). The opening verses of this single unequivocally convey Swift's sense of betrayal and the ensuing sentiment of anger she experiences:

> I don't like your little games/ Don't like your tilted stage/ The role you made me play/ Of the fool, no, I don't like you. / I don't like your perfect crime/ How you laugh when you lie/ You said the gun was mine/ Isn't cool, no, I don't like you. (Swift 2017, track 6)

In the same song, the singer asserts "All I think about is karma. And then, the world moves on, but one thing's for sure: maybe I got mine but you'll all get yours." The desire for vengeance that initiates the antihero's story arc is articulated from its outset, aligning with the events that had transpired in the artist's personal life.

Another of the antihero's characteristics, as mentioned in previous pages, is moral ambiguity: antiheroes are capable of feeling positive emotions and behaving commendably but, at the same time, they can carry out the most despicable actions. This narrative motif is exemplified in numerous compositions by Swift since 2017. To illustrate, in "Getaway Car," the singer-songwriter paints herself as a traitor: "We were jet-set, Bonnie and Clyde (Oh-oh)/ until I switched to the other side, to the other side./ It's no surprise I turned you in (Oh-oh)/ 'Cause us traitors never win" (Swift 2017, track 9). Moreover, in the song "I did something bad," Swift self-figures as an evil and manipulative woman ("I never trust a narcissist, but they love me/ So I play 'em like a violin/ And I make it look, oh, so easy" [Swift 2017, track 3]) exhibiting an absence of remorse for the transgressions committed, as articulated in her declaration "I don't regret it one bit 'cause he had it coming." In this track, Swift makes a display of a "Machiavellian and persuasive personality" (Freire 2022, 90), one of the traits frequently associated with antiheroes. Furthermore, as posited by the researcher, the antihero tends to be a prideful character, potentially bordering on narcissism. Swift demonstrates that kind of behavior in "I think he knows" (a song from her album *Lover*), by saying "He's so obsessed with me and, boy, I understand" (Swift 2019, track 6) or in *ME!*, as she states "I promise that you'll never find another like me" (Swift 2019, track 16).

However (and this is imperative to understand the depth of this type of character), the antihero is a tormented being, gnawed by an inner conflict as they see their own flaws and feel terrified of being ostracized from society again. In "The Archer," from her *Lover* album, Swift sings "Who could ever leave me, darling? But who could stay?" (Swift 2019, track 5). This anxious sentiment is echoed in other recordings, such as "Delicate," from *reputation*, where Swift asks her lover, filled with dread, "Is it cool that I said all that? Is it chill that you're in my head? 'Cause I know that it's delicate" (Swift 2017, track 5). Lastly, in *Midnights* (2022), the album wherein the antihero archetype reaches its zenith within Swift's narrative, the song "Antihero" emerges as a prominent feature. In this song (we cannot overlook the title), the artist grapples with the looming specter of abandonment: "I wake up screaming from dreaming,/ One day, I'll watch as you're leaving/ 'Cause you got tired of my scheming" (Swift 2022, track 3). In the same album, also the song "Mastermind" delves in this feeling, as she states that she has been scheming since childhood to make people love her. Swift's acute awareness of her own flaws engenders a sense of vulnerability. This human side, "delicate," as she terms it, is what, to a great extent, balances the scales and makes her the antiheroic protagonist and never a villainous antagonist.

Furthermore, the tormented psyche of the antihero emerges as a prominent thematic concern explored by the artist across her albums *folklore* (2020) and *evermore* (2020). Although we will not conduct an exhaustive analysis of the lyrics (as this alone could lead to a separate study), we can highlight certain songs resonating with the anxious sentiments under discussion. "Mirrorball" (Swift 2020b, track 6) and "This Is Me Trying" (Swift 2020b, track 9), featured in *folklore*, exemplify this phenomenon. Similarly, the anguish stemming from self-awareness of one's divergence and internal darkness finds poignant expression in compositions within *evermore,* notably evidenced in "Tolerate It" (Swift 2020a track 5).

Another element typical of the antihero is the emphasis on their sexuality (Freire 2022, 90). In addition, the character's behavior is quite uninhibited. In stark contrast to the Swift of the first albums, characterized by innocence, the persona portrayed by the artist now exudes a significantly more sensual demeanor, evident in her discography through songs such as "Dress," from *reputation* (with lines as "Carve your name into my bedpost/ 'Cause I don't want you like a best friend/ Only bought this dress so you could take it off" [Swift 2017, track 12]) or *False God,* from *Lover* (which features lines such as "The altar is my hips/ even if it's a false god" [Swift 2019, track 13]).

Sexuality is also very present in the song "Vigilante Shit," from *Midnights*, where Swift uses the double meaning attributable to "do" in the phrase "You did some bad things, but I'm the worst of them" (Swift 2022, track 8). In addition, the performance staging of this song on her tour seems straight out of the film *Chicago* (2002), and contrasts wildly with the costuming and performance of songs from older albums (see a comparison in Figure 2).

Fig. 2. Performance of the song "Vigilante Shit" (left) and "Enchanted" (right) in *The Eras Tour.*

One last feature that is utterly inherent to the figure of the antihero is their high intelligence and that they are, first and foremost, strategists. Swift concludes her last studio album so far with the song "Mastermind" which, by the way, begins with the phrase

"once upon a time," thus closing the cycle that began in her first albums, where the setting was that of a fairy tale. In this recording, the artist confesses that she is, precisely, a great tactician who had it all planned from the beginning:

> What if I told you none of it was accidental?/ And the first night that you saw me/ Nothing was gonna stop me./ I laid the groundwork, and then/ just like clockwork/ the dominoes cascaded in a line./ What if I told you I'm a mastermind?/ And now you're mine./ It was all by design/ 'Cause I'm a mastermind. (Swift 2022, track 13)

But, once again, she lets us glimpse her deepest fears as she shouts out her most profound confession in the song's bridge:

> No one wanted to play with me as a little kid/ so I've been scheming like a criminal ever since/ to make them love me and make it seem effortless./ This is the first time I've felt the need to confess./ And I swear/ I'm only cryptic and Machiavellian/ 'Cause I care. (Swift 2022, track 13)

The hero died with the fall of her reputation and her desire for revenge and, since then, the artist has been scheming as if she were a villain. But we, as the audience, know the truth: there is goodness within her, there are the contradictions inherent in someone afraid of losing, there is love. Swift's arc of redemption is completed with the stitches that run through her albums, full of love, desire and capacity for self-giving, songs in which she assures us that "I would die for you in secret" (Swift 2020b, track 15). We, as the audience, align ourselves with her and acknowledge the verity: "it must be exhausting always rooting for the antihero" (Swift 2022, track 3).

4. Conclusion

This paper intended to explore the evolution of Taylor Swift's poetic persona through the analysis of selected lyrics from her songs. Throughout her career, Swift has presented her poetic self in various forms, resonating with archetypal figures such as the damsel in distress, the hero, and the antihero. Initially depicted as a passive fairy-tale princess, the artist undergoes a transformation, emerging as a self-empowered heroine, notably exemplified in her album *1989*. Subsequent to a public incident that tarnished her public image, Swift embraces the antihero archetype, delving into more intricate and multifaceted emotional landscapes within her lyrics. This thematic shift parallels the contemporary cinematic trend favoring antiheroic characters.

This study has only been intended as an introductory overview of the subject matter and, as such, has certain limitations that must be addressed. The primary objective of this research was to provide a broad panorama of the development of Taylor Swift's poetic persona by employing literary archetypes. Consequently, some aspects are in need of a more in-depth exploration and some song lyrics have been excluded in favor of achieving an overall picture of this evolution. Nevertheless, the study invites further investigation into the particular development of these archetypes. Additionally, a

reception-oriented analysis becomes imperative, particularly given Taylor Swift's current prominence. Furthermore, complementing this study with interdisciplinary approaches would enrich understanding of various facets shaping Taylor Swift's public persona, including her music videos, aesthetics, and public portrayal in the media.

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POTENTIAL AND POWER IN BLACK SUPERHERO FILM COMEDIES

Thomas Britt

ABSTRACT

This article revisits a small subgrouping of Black superhero comedy films that were critically denounced at the time of their release but which merit reevaluation in light of contemporary calls to move away from an overemphasis on traumatic narratives in twenty-first-century Black films. Whereas films and other media fixated on Black trauma frame their characters' experiences mostly through the abusive and dominant power of individuals and institutions that wield racialized violence, Black superhero comedy films are useful in reframing expectations for the power and potential of their characters. Robert Townsend's *The Meteor Man* (1993), Mike Binder's *Blankman* (1994), and Louis CK's *Pootie Tang* (2001) are films in which the absurdity of the titular heroes, that is the way they stand out against prevailing norms, provides both the characters and their communities with a salvific equilibrium. Functioning in part as parodies of conventional superhero narratives, these films share events such as threats to family and/or community, the acquisition or construction of costumes specific to crime-fighting, and uneasy relationships between the news media and the superheroes saving cities. To varying degrees, all of these elements are played for laughs. The movies also share some of the exaggerated aesthetic conventions of comic books and film/television treatments of superhero stories, further reiterating the relationship between these broad comedies and their source material. However, my particular interest in analyzing the characterizations and plots of these films is in how they positively express the way the Black superhero figure realizes and fulfills his purpose, transcending the schemes and systems of criminals and other powerful figures that would bring him down.

Keywords: superhero, Black cinema, African American, race, comedy.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, Sean Yoes of *The AFRO* reflected on "A Golden Age of Black Cinema" that was coming into decisive focus as the decade closed. Lauding trailblazing filmmakers like Spike Lee and emerging talents including Kelvin Harrison, Jr., Yoes argues that for decades many Black films have been beacons of dual success—both artistic and financial—even if the film industry, with its "fiscal intricacies, political machinations and blatant racism make for an often toxic milieu" that is reluctant to recognize the excellence on display (Yoes 2019). Ryan Coogler's superhero film *Black Panther* (2018), whose box office success Yoes cites as implicit evidence that the viability of Black films should no

longer be questioned within that "toxic milieu," could be seen as a late-in-the-decade triumph that established stratospheric new standards for what a Black film could achieve at the global box office and among film critics and bodies awarding film accolades.

Yet even critics and commentators regarding the film as an unqualified success often praise the film in a way that characterizes Coogler's achievement through the lens of corporate consciousness and sells short its other features. For example, Mark Hughes from *Forbes* opines that *Black Panther* is "a great film with all of the necessary elements for blockbuster success, with the added benefit of caring about diversity," observing that the diversity in *Black Panther* "activates large mainstream audiences who might otherwise be tired of watching 'the adventures of amazing white men who are better at everything than everybody else!'" (Hughes 2018).

Hughes' assessment of *Black Panther* is couched in progressive ideas, but his treatment of diversity as a kind of value-added modification that motivates an easily led mass audience suggests that the film succeeds largely through its consumers being seen through a cynical industrial process rather than existing as aspirational human beings who could relate to the adventure onscreen. Indeed, as an industrial product, *Black Panther* is a narrative controlled by a global business giant (Marvel Studios, owned by The Walt Disney Company), which means that the narrative possibilities and ideas therein are not likely to take risks potentially damaging to the franchise overall. A much more incisive evaluation of *Black Panther*'s success appeared in 2020 when Shakeena Johnson argued in *The Independent* that the film refreshingly resists an overriding trend of movies throughout most of the twenty-tens, which is that "the most fertile ground for black cinema has been trauma" (Johnson 2020). *Black Panther* is exceptional, Johnson argues, because it features "black people living happy, healthy lives," a type of film that she specifically "challenge[s] Hollywood to make more of"…"films that leave us laughing" (Johnson 2020).

This article appends Johnson's call to action, revisiting a small subgrouping of Black superhero comedy films that were critically denounced at the time of their release but which merit reevaluation in light of Johnson's challenge and similar contemporary critiques of twenty-first century "Black trauma porn" that have appeared in *The Guardian* (Okundaye 2021), *OkayAfrica* (Nkumane 2020), and elsewhere. Whereas films and other media fixated on Black trauma frame their characters' experiences mostly through the abusive and dominant power of individuals and institutions that wield racialized violence, Black superhero comedy films are useful in reframing expectations for the power and potential of their characters.

Robert Townsend's *The Meteor Man* (1993), Mike Binder's *Blankman* (1994), and Louis CK's *Pootie Tang* (2001) are films in which the absurdity of the titular heroes, that is the way they stand out against prevailing norms, provides both the characters and their communities with a salvific equilibrium. Functioning in part as parodies of conventional

superhero narratives, these films share events such as threats to family and/or community, the acquisition or construction of costumes specific to crime-fighting and uneasy relationships between the news media and the superheroes saving cities. To varying degrees, all of these elements are played for laughs. As written-for-the-screen superheroes not developed under the DC/Marvel duopoly and produced at low-to-middle-range budgets, these films are more fluid and less beholden to narrative and corporate conventions than much of the current superhero screen stories, and therefore freer to lean into absurd comedy. At the same time, the movies also share some of the exaggerated aesthetic conventions of comic books and past film/television treatment of superhero stories, further reiterating the relationship between these broad comedies and their source material. However, my particular interest in analyzing the characterizations and plots of these films is in how they positively express the way the Black superhero figure realizes and fulfills his purpose, transcending the schemes and systems of criminals and other powerful figures that would bring him down. The most recent of this group of films was released in 2001, which means these films represent a bygone state of the American film industry before both production and box office receipts of comic book and superhero films drastically increased during the past quarter-century (Kidman 2019, 184–85).

There is an overarching optimism within the characters of Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang that positions each one as capable of pursuing his destiny despite institutional corruption and injustice. Whereas so many contemporary dramas and superhero narratives are weighed down by the trauma of overwhelming power imbalances and their violent causes and effects, the comic mode of *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* highlights the characters' potential to succeed as both an emblem and a force of good that becomes a universal cause, vanquishing the threats they face. After reviewing the origins of these films and relevant philosophical, racial, and psychological dualisms, I explore three components of the Black superhero comedy narratives: formative experiences that result in recognition as superheroes, the internal conflicts the heroes face (in conjunction with external threats), and their movements towards a unified consciousness, at ease with themselves and their communities.

As the preceding context for the article involves excellence in Black cinema and the recent overemphasis of Black trauma in film and other media, it is important to assess what qualifies *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* as Black films, and to what degree. As for the condition of having a Black artist at the helm of the production, *The Meteor Man* is the most fully Black-authored film of the group, as Robert Townsend wrote, directed, produced, and starred in the film. *Blankman* exists somewhere in between a Black-authored film and a non-Black-authored film, as the film was co-written by Damon Wayans, who wrote and performed for the groundbreaking series *In Living Color* (1990-1994), a program that featured sketches about skewed superheroes. *Blankman* was directed by a non-Black filmmaker, Mike Binder, but Wayans and *In Living Color* associate

David Alan Grier starred in the film, preserving the authorial intent of their sketch comedy series. Finally, *Pootie Tang* is only tangentially a Black-authored film, as non-Black filmmaker Louis C.K. is credited as a writer and director. However, the film was adapted from a sketch on another Black comedy series, *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000), and a writer and director of that series, Black television multi-hyphenate Ali LeRoi, re-edited the film as he superseded writer/director Louis C.K. during post-production. Because of the various involvements of Townsend, Wayans, Grier, and LeRoi, as well as other circumstances involving the contributions of other crew and the contributions of on-screen talent, all three of the films will be considered varyingly Black-authored films for the purposes of the analysis, with an acknowledgment that other perspectives were also involved in significant roles.

2. DUALISMS

The theoretical backdrop for these absurd superhero characters and their (individual and communal) reconciliations includes philosophical, racial, and psychological dualisms. Historically, the earliest of these is Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness" as articulated in the influential 1807 book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Tom Rockmore characterizes the pathway to the "unhappy consciousness" as flowing from Hegel's observations about the "master-slave relation … [as] a struggle between two persons locked in an unequal relationship" (Rockmore 1997, 72). The power imbalance at the center of the relationship between master and slave is relevant to any number of Black trauma narratives, but it is the path out of the master-slave dialectic and towards self-realization, beginning with stoicism and skepticism, that undergirds the Black superhero comedies considered in this article. Hegel writes:

> In Stoicism, self-consciousness is the simple freedom of itself. In Scepticism, this freedom becomes a reality, negates the other side of determinate existence, but really duplicates itself, and now knows itself to be a duality. Consequently, the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one. The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet in its unity: the *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being. (Hegel 1977, 126)

This "Unhappy Consciousness," which Alberto Moreiras summarizes as that which occurs when "the subject [is] autonomous and sovereign" yet "also knows that [its] particularity and finitude makes a mockery of [its] universal pretension" (2022), figures into *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* as the three mortal men with specific moral codes vacillate between an inherent individual embodiment of those codes and the realization that becoming a universal exemplar of those codes reveals their finitude and limits. Gerard Aching's "ontogenetic reading of the master-slave relationship" involves

examining "the ways in which power and its internalization affect subjects [as] a first step toward appreciating their desire and quests for the freedom of self-mastery" (2012, 917).

The next pertinent dualism is a racial one that is often contextualized within the concept of the master-slave relation within America and at times linked to Hegel's exposition on that very relation. W.E.B. Du Bois' "double consciousness"[1] introduced at the beginning of the 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk* speaks to the conflicted or restricted self-perception of Black Americans:

> The Negro is ... gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Du Bois 1994, 2)

Though each of the protagonists considered here is a Black American character, Du Bois' racial dualism mostly occurs at the level of subtext, with most of the narrative events in the films suggesting that, ironically, one of the burdens these superheroes need not feel is the "revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 1994, 2) in bifurcated racial terms. Each man exists within a Black-majority or racially integrated community, and racial tension is almost nonexistent in the plots. However, these Black superheroes embody a twoness that separates them from their families and neighbors in such a way that they experience another kind of double consciousness, that of the man in the uniform versus the man out of uniform or the crime-fighter versus the everyday citizen. Each film features scenes during which the once thankful attention of the community becomes a scrutinizing force that suggests these superheroes have not lived up to their potential and they must be cast out or sublimated to a lesser function or place within their society.

The final dualism informing these Black superhero comedies is a more recent psychological framework developed by David Wall Rice, relating to racial identity among African American males. In the Foreword to Rice's book *Balance: Advancing Identity Theory by Engaging the Black Male Adolescent*, Edmund W. Gordon summarizes Rice's tripartite "identity stasis" structure in which Black men "orchestrate ... three mechanisms" (2008, xiii) consisting of the "Identity Dilemma Articulation" in which self-representation is a struggle of double consciousness, the "Unadulterated Presentation of Self" as a true self-representation free of doubling or "competing models," and the "Burden of Proof Assumption" in which self-representation either substantiates or subverts others' definitions of self (Gordon 2008, xiii). Rice advances this framework in the cause of achieving

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[1] For existing writing on double consciousness and superhero/comic narratives, see Michael D. Kennedy's "Black Panther, White Supremacy, and Double Consciousness," Shannon Luders-Manuel's "Black Panther and Double Consciousness," Jon Fortt's "Spider-Man and the Black Experience: Nobody Knows Who You Are," and "Black Lightning Always Strikes Twice!—Double-Consciousness as a Super-Power" by Osvaldo Oyola.

equilibrium, stating that "These components and building blocks ... are exemplars of bifurcated identity constructions that represent the awareness of identities to be negotiated, defiance in the face of negotiation and responsibility of identity assumption respectively" (2008, 7). As superhero characters who also share their communities' mundane existence, Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang each negotiate their private and public identities while attempting to bring equilibrium to their communities in conflict. All three steps of Rice's stasis structure are present as the three superheroes negotiate their identities within their communities.

3. TRANSFORMATIONS

The experiences that transform Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang into superheroes all play upon innate qualities that exist within their characters' psychologies and behaviors. In *The Meteor Man*, Jefferson "Jeff" Reed (Townsend) is a musician and a teacher who avoids conflict as a rule. The structure of the film makes clear that Jeff is on a collision course with his destiny as a superhero, as the opening sequence of the film takes place in outer space, with the action of a meteor and an explosion implied to have pending effects on Earth, on Washington, D.C., where the film is primarily set. A shot of the statue of Abraham Lincoln being hosed off at the Lincoln Memorial serves as a subtle inversion of Civil Rights Movement imagery, suggesting that this film takes place in a version of Washington, D.C., in which racial double consciousness is not as pressing an issue as it has been for previous generations of Black Americans.

Despite the post-racial impression of the film, the first act of the narrative includes several variations on having awareness of rules or of attempting to assimilate and meet the expectations of others, as opposed to standing out individually. One supporting character, Jeff's neighbor Earnest Moses (James Earl Jones), tries on several wigs that seem to be made for someone of a different racial identity than his own and scan as unconvincing as he models them in his apartment. Another character, the rogue Michael Anderson (Eddie Griffin), a friend of Jeff, has invented an audience response device that will measure the way the crowd will respond at his concert, the effect of which would be a minimization of artistic experimentation. An administrator at Jeff's school tells him to teach "only from the books and not your philosophy on life," reiterating the responsibility to the outer, imposed rather than inner, personalist standards and codes for individual behavior and leadership. Even the title of a comic book within the plot, the *Faceless Crusader*, rounds out this impression of anonymity, of causes followed through in a way that negates the individual consciousness.

When the destined meteor meets Jeff on the street at night, the phenomenon seems to directly respond to the peril he and his community face: a gang of criminals known as the Golden Lords. Just after Jeff's dangerous encounter with the Golden Lords, the green meteor appears from space and directly hits Jeff in his body, which graphically absorbs

the foreign object. At this moment, he is both a meteor and a man, another kind of double consciousness that complicates his careful assimilative path. With the powers the meteor grants him, including super strength, X-ray vision, absorption of knowledge through touching books, and the capability to fly, Jeff is no longer able to be a faceless crusader because his powers are so distinctive and heightened above those around him. Although he asks his family to keep his powers a secret, it is not long before his mother has shared the news with the entire community, who gathers to praise Meteor Man and seek his help in protecting them.

Blankman differs from *Meteor Man* because the protagonist, a stereotypically nerdy Darryl Walker (Wayans) is already more conspicuously absurd than Jeff and because the viewer sees Darryl as a child (Michael Wayans) in a sequence where his innate geekiness combines with his love for Batman to portend an unlikely future as a superhero. While watching the classic *Batman* television series, Darryl responds to a laundry detergent advertisement, arguing that "Borax won't work unless you [include] active enzymes," marking himself as a geek for the viewer as well as for his less nerdy older brother Kevin Walker. Though Darryl is preternaturally skilled at inventing and amassing knowledge about mechanics and chemistry, his inventions are often an outgrowth of his clumsiness and tendency to act with passion before practicality. He rigs the antenna with kitchen implements to better see *Batman*, but in the process, he floods the house. Like *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman* also includes regular allusions to existing superhero intellectual properties, with the animated credit sequence of *Blankman* paying out in the graphic style of superhero graphic narratives and television series, visual associations that run throughout the film.

Darryl's transformation into *Blankman* is less spectacular than Jeff's absorption of a meteor, but his motivation to fight crime is arguably stronger. Men working for mobster Michael "The Suit" Minelli (John Polito) murder Darryl and Kevin's civic-minded grandmother Eleanor (Lynne Thigpen), and as a result of this loss, Darryl experiences a changing awareness of the effects of criminality in his city, taking up a personal mission to fight crime. His first act of protection, throwing a criminal off of a train to prevent him from further assaulting a woman, occurs without any gadgets or costume, or accouterment that will later be a part of the Blankman persona. After this encounter, Darryl bemoans the effects of crime on the neighborhood and the need to fight back, to which Kevin responds that he cannot just be a vigilante. When Darryl counters that Batman fought back, Kevin again discourages his brother by pointing out, "that was fantasy. He had everything. You live in reality. You got nothin'. You're no Batman."

Darryl, however, already possesses resourcefulness and a wellspring of mechanical and scientific knowledge that provide everything he needs to create the tools of a superhero. Though his materials consist of kitchen appliances, flowery fabric from his grandmother's home, and cast-off electronics and candy tins no one else would think to save,

Darryl can rise to the occasion and become Blankman, named as such because he acts before even considering what he should be called and because another early act of heroism, delivering a baby, leaves him speechless, "blank." Darryl's insistence that his identity as *Blankman* is kept a secret conforms to the long tradition of discretion among superheroes as well as *The Meteor Man*'s playful evocation of the impossibility of such a veil.

Pootie Tang (Lance Crouther) is the most absurd of the trio of Black superheroes, in part because he appears to have always, from early childhood onward, been equipped with most of the characterization that marks him as a hero to his community. His transformation is not triggered by an object from space or the effects of urban crime on his family. Every moment of Pootie's young life is played for laughs, and every constituent of his superhero persona, including his clothes, his manner of speech and movement, and his effect on women, is accounted for within the childhood section of the narrative. Paralleling the way his entire persona appears to have been present from childhood, the cinematic influences for Pootie as a film character have been long-established within popular culture. The memory of Rudy Ray Moore and his character Dolemite doubtless inform the urban hero characterization of Pootie, though *Pootie Tang* subverts the raunchiness of Blaxploitation films like *Dolemite* (1975) by making Pootie conspicuously wholesome and resistant to the city's temptations.

Pootie Tang is narrated by Trucky (J.B. Smoove), Pootie's trusted friend, who informs the audience that from an early age, Pootie's distinctive way of speaking was noticeable to everyone around him, baffling scientists and doctors. Trucky's words are visually illustrated by a newspaper cover story featuring Pootie as a baby with the headline, "Baby speaks new language." Trucky encapsulates Pootie's distinctive speech thus: Pootie is simply "too cool for words." Not once in *Pootie Tang* does the protagonist (who, crucially, has always been named Pootie Tang and need not adopt a new moniker to be a superhero) speak in any identifiable language, despite most of those around him speaking English. However, this does not create a barrier to understanding in most cases, as the meaning of Pootie's patois is communicated through the preeminence of his persona (nearly everyone knows and celebrates him) and his equally disarming good-guy actions. Pootie's crime-fighting technique is a combination of dancing that dodges and deflects bullets and slapping his opponents, usually with a belt gifted to him by his late father Daddy Tang (Chris Rock). In another comic tweak of racialized trauma, Trucky tells the viewer that Pootie can beat his foes "like the LAPD," reversing the power imbalance that resulted in the real-life trauma of the Rodney King beating.

The belt and Daddy Tang are central to Pootie's transformation into a superhero. Originally used by his father to discipline him in the home and outside of it, the belt is omnipresent as a tool for correcting behavior. It can appear independently of its wielder. *Pootie Tang* sends up the traumatic scenes that appear in some superhero origin stories

by having Daddy Tang mauled in a steel mill by a gorilla, seemingly a *Mad Libs*-style industrial accident scenario. On his deathbed, Daddy Tang warns Pootie of the toughness of his urban environment, saying, "You got drugs, crime, gorillas" and then hands him the corrective belt, warning him not to let the ladies come between him and the belt.

4. CONFLICTS AND THREATENED IDENTITIES

Jeff's meteor, Darryl's grief over his grandmother, and Pootie's receiving of his father's belt are moments that usher in new superhero statuses that complicate each character's life. In the context of Rice's "Identity Dilemma Articulation," it could be said that each of these individuals experiences "the realization of a bifurcation of identity that creates a dilemma" (Rice 2008, 55) and that new mechanism is the cost of becoming a superhero. In a sense, each of them temporarily loses the "Unadulterated Presentation of Self" and engages in the "Burden of Proof Assumption" to validate or invalidate the expectations of others in his society.

Jeff, initially an optimistic and cautious school teacher, cannot ignore his newly empowered awareness of how dire the conditions of his community truly are. For example, in a scene set among colleagues at his school, he attempts to defend the goodness of the children they teach. Yet his X-ray vision allows him to see through buildings and to observe the criminal actions that those students are carrying out. His realization of the younger generation's corruption includes many confrontations with the Golden Lords, a gang that controls two younger factions called the Junior Lords and the Baby Lords.

Meteor Man's powers remove Jeff's ability to evade the reality of the streets, which is a central part of his dramatic arc. Before his transformation, Jeff disagrees with his father Ted (Robert Guillaume) about the most effective way to react to crime in the neighborhood. Ted advocates direct confrontation, in his words not "crossing the street" for anyone. Jeff supports conflict avoidance, crossing the street to avoid criminals. Townsend's script cannily juxtaposes the street-level conditions with the ascendancy of the criminal conglomerate to depict the destructive effects of corporatized criminal power on everyday citizens. The Golden Lords are but one cog in an organization featuring international drug figures, all seemingly run by a white American boss. Though *The Meteor Man*'s primary real-world concern is "Black-on-Black crime" (a recurring phrase within the film), the scenes featuring The Golden Lords illustrate the assimilating tradeoffs that these criminals have chosen to make in order to gain access to the otherwise non-Black power structure. The visible sign of this assimilation is that all of the Golden Lords, Junior Lords, and Baby Lords have dyed their hair blonde.

Meteor Man is a reluctant superhero whose commitment to the crime-fighting consciousness only takes shape late into the narrative after a community leader is attacked. Still possessing his internal conflict concerning the choice to confront or avoid crime, Jeff chooses a Utilitarian approach that would lead to beneficial outcomes for the greatest

number of community members. For instance, when he intercedes in a shootout between gang members and law enforcement officers, he says to them, "Put your weapons down. I want to talk to both sides." They comply, and that unlikely armistice turns into a kind of alliance by the end of the film. He also uses his power to plant an urban garden with massive, comically oversized vegetables that will feed many—a direct contrast with the toxic and parasitic effects of the Golden Lords.

As a brilliant, geeky inventor, *Blankman*'s Darryl experiences a dilemma between his desire to fight crime and the practical option of self-preservation, as he is not suited for many of the physical confrontations in the film. In becoming Blankman, he navigates this dilemma by leaning into his skill for invention so that his uniform and tools/weapons can make up for any deficiency in fighting skills or strength. In Hegelian terms, Darryl is too stoic and not skeptical enough to meet the reality of the city that he lives in and on whose behalf he fights. That his would-be opponents include mobsters and powerful politicians, his idealized vision of his potential effectiveness is a liability. Three consecutive scenes in the film, taking place before he is officially named Blankman, illustrate his journey into Unhappy Consciousness.

In the first of these, Darryl intervenes as a man beats a woman in an alley at night. When he takes the place of the woman, he is severely beaten, a narrative event that is played for laughs, with the joke turning on Darryl's being called "Susan" and exclaiming in a high-pitched stereotypically effeminate voice. The threat escalates as Darryl dares the man to shoot him, which happens several times, but his custom-made uniform blocks the bullets. Pointing this out, though, allows the assailant to plan to shoot him in his unprotected head, and Darryl nearly experiences a gunshot to the head, saved only by his brother Kevin's intervention.

The next scene finds law enforcement officers laughing uproariously at Darryl as he asks to speak with "the Commissioner" in the manner Batman would confer with his longtime ally Commissioner James "Jim" Gordon. Here, Darryl mistakes the kind of crime-fighting alliance that only exists in fiction for a realistic option, and he also assumes that the volition to fight crime allows him to gain entry into the upper echelons of the criminal justice system. The final scene of this type finds Darryl denying in front of a psychiatrist that he fights crime at all, only offering evidence of being a geek but revealing no aspirations to be a hero. He later tells Kevin this obfuscation was necessary to preserve his secret identity.

Pootie Tang's internal conflict is less complicated because his ever-present distinctive characterization and his powerful belt are efficient in beating back threats such as drug dealers and characters such as Dirty Dee (Reg E. Cathey), who is a street heavy and also (as Trucky informs the viewer) does the dirty work for corporate America, the film's ultimate villain. In a sense, Pootie is an update of the Jefferson Pierce/Black Lightning graphic narrative character type, which Adilifu Nama describes thus:

> When danger appeared or when justice was needed, Jefferson would don an Afro wig attached to a mask, squeeze into a bluish body suit accented with lightning bolts, slide on his buccaneer boots, check his power belt, and then hit the streets as Black Lightning. Dressed to impress, Jefferson would proceed to kick and shock various henchmen and their crime lords into submission. Despite his nearly laughable disco-chic look and the embarrassingly awkward black jargon Jefferson adopted when he became Black Lightning, he articulated a serious set of class and racial politics. (Nama 2011, 25)

A key difference between Pootie Tang and Jefferson as Black Lightning is that Pootie's look and jargon are consistent from childhood onward, never needing to be made more "laughable" because they are already perfectly absurd and therefore effective.

Part of *Pootie Tang*'s attention to class politics involves Pootie declining lucrative endorsement deals. Pootie's community image includes public service announcements in which he discourages children from partaking in products such as cigarettes, fast food, and malt liquor. An analyst for LecterCorp, a conglomerate responsible for multiple addictive and toxic products, observes about Pootie, "For the first time someone is getting to these kids, and it's killing us." As a response to Pootie's influence on the youth, the company offers him twenty million dollars for a yearlong endorsement of Pork Chunk cereal with the caveat that he records no more public service announcements. Pootie declines and hits the company ambassador with his belt for saying that the children are no more than "dollar signs."

Therefore, like *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman*, the narrative of *Pootie Tang* involves a mélange of antagonists from street-level players to corporate and/or criminal bosses. It is LecterCorp associate Ireenie (Jennifer Coolidge), however, who cleaves Pootie's identity by seducing him and separating him from his belt. The seduction montage is formally distinct within the film, including fragmented shots of a candle being lit and then producing hypnotic smoke against a black backdrop, cut together with footage of Pootie signing away his image and likeness to LecterCorp and losing his belt. The effect of this moment, which breaks the one piece of advice Daddy Tang offered Pootie as he lay on his deathbed, is that Pootie now seems to endorse the toxic products and loses the trust of the public, who now see him as a negative influence on their children.

The cultural conflicts and threatened identities experienced by Jeff/Meteor Man and Darryl/Blankman harness certain aspects of the negative outlook chronicled in *The State of Black America* installments from 1993/1994 which were the years of their films' production and release. *The State of Black America* is an annually released report from the National Urban League, which has been publishing the report since 1976. In *The State of Black America 1994*, Lenneal J. Henderson writes:

> African Americans look towards the twenty-first century in a besieged, beleaguered, and beguiled urban milieu. They are besieged by perennial disparity in income, net financial worth, housing, education, employment, health care, and quality of life, and by the ever-increasing encroachment of crime, violence, drugs, and anomie among its young. They are beleaguered

by the ravages of economic decline reflecting economic erosion in America. And they are be-
guiled by promises of policymakers at all levels of government to address these severe chal-
lenges. (1994, 11)

All of the sectors and factors that Henderson summarizes are present in the two films,
lending a certain kind of realism to the story worlds and the stakes of the plot. Yet the
overriding comical, absurd tone of *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman* means that reality is
always secondary to fantasy, which, upon reflection is an important distinction as pre-
sent-day superhero films "make a conscious turn toward realism, which distances them
from the fantastical excesses of earlier superhero films" (McSweeney 2020, 25). The con-
clusions of the films make clear the filmmakers' interest in the comically fantastic rather
than the grimly realistic.

After Jeff's uniform is stolen and he begins to lose his powers, he appears to be more
at odds with himself than ever before. Having risked his life and reputation, as well as
the safety of his family, to become an intervening hero despite his preference for non-
intervention, Meteor Man faces being exiled from the community. At this moment, he
asks his community members who have chosen self-preservation, "How can you com-
plain when you do nothing?" and later explains to Michael that the "hero factor" is "no
pain, no fear of confrontation." He chooses to face the Golden Lords unadorned by his
uniform and uncertain of his powers, completing his transition away from evasiveness to
virtuous confrontation. The final battle, which involves a proto-bullet time special effect,
martial arts, and runway modeling, is a fantastic spectacle that completes Jeff's move-
ment toward a unified consciousness and inspires his community to action.

In *Blankman*, Darryl also finds that the higher his profile rises as Blankman, the
more blowback he risks from mobsters, law enforcement figures, and the community at
large. Despite his foiling a bank robbery that would deplete the finances of city workers,
Blankman is not able to save the Mayor or preserve the bank. This series of events makes
Blankman a figure of public scorn, to a greater degree than Jeff experiences in *The Meteor
Man*. When Kevin reasons to Darryl that he does not have to be a hero and that he should
just be like everyone else, Darryl seems to know that he no longer has that option. As in
The Meteor Man, the concluding events are defined by the comic spectacle, in this case,
with Darryl and Kevin confined to a tank that is quickly filling with water. Facing death
by drowning, Darryl inverts a popular idiom relating to optimism and pessimism, saying
to Kevin that the water tank is not half full, it's half empty. Darryl's love interest, Kimberly
Jonz (Robin Givens) comments that one of Blankman's assets is that he maintains his
"sense of humor in a time of crisis," which is another contributing factor to the film's
comical tone.

The final setback of the movie employs this technique reflexively, as Blankman
mourns the loss of his beloved robot assistant, J-5 (an anthropomorphized washing ma-
chine). His reaction to J-5's destruction, which is the result of enduring a bomb blast that

would have killed the human characters, is rendered in exaggeratedly traumatic terms. The busy visual approach to the scene alternates between a subjective view of J-5's dying vision, reactions of Kimberly and Kevin (now a Robin-style sidekick called Other Guy), and a God's-eye view in the form of a crane shot that moves upwards to the sky framing Blankman's anguished cry. This moment, which again pokes fun at the conventional traumatic scene origin story for superheroes, sets up a final confrontation with the mobsters that is a showcase for Blankman's absurd tools/weapons, such as a plunger, rocket-powered rollerblades, and motorized nunchucks.

An irony of *Pootie Tang*'s plot is that while his superhero identity is generally longer-lasting and more stable than the vacillating hero consciousness of Meteor Man and Blankman, his exile in a time of crisis is also more concrete. After losing his belt and the trust of the public, Pootie is a disheveled figure. Like a shell of himself, he walks the street listlessly as his pants fall from his waist (a parodic literalization of the effects of losing his empowered belt object). The site of his identity restoration is a farm, where the decidedly non-urban milieu allows him to tend to a farm by painting and cleaning farmhouse windows and doing agricultural work. Scenes of him nurturing crops and growing a cornstalk echo *The Meteor Man*'s urban garden.

The subsequent death of the corn is played somewhat like *Blankman*'s death of J-5, as the corn is anthropomorphized into Daddy Tang, absurdly styled as a large ear of corn. Daddy Tang upbraids Pootie for running away from his problems in the city, and the viewer sees evidence of the unrest that has resulted from his absence. His late mother appears to him as a cow, encouraging Pootie to "teach the world right from wrong" and to "love the world at the same time." In a final revelation, his father discloses that the belt is not special, after all. It is, rather, the goodness in Pootie's heart that makes him special. This vision of his deceased parents is the key to Pootie's unified consciousness. His return to the city to take down an army of corporate-styled clones (Pootie-alikes) is a visual representation of identity stasis as he reclaims his singular standing in the community.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have suggested that the narratives of Black superhero comedies *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* are emblematic of a road not often taken by Black American films, particularly movies more invested in Black trauma or those that elevate social realism above fantasy. The critical opinion of all three works is decidedly low, with even a superhero/graphic narrative expert Adilifu Nama concluding that *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman* are "some of the most questionable cinematic representations of black superheroes ever presented" (Nama 2011, 137) and famous American critic Roger Ebert opining that *Pootie Tang* "is not bad so much as inexplicable" as well as "not in a releasable condition." In retrospect, however, what these films achieve is a form of comic storytelling that seems to respond to the contemporary lack of light-hearted, inspirational

films featuring Black superheroes in a cultural moment fixated on Black trauma. Returning to the success of *Black Panther*, Angela Kinamore identifies "a critical need for more inspiring films and books to be developed and published" as a rebuke to "Ancestors [being] told that they would never be free, and that their descendants would always live in bondage" (Kinamore 2019, 153). By reframing expectations for the power and potential of absurd superhero characters, the three films that are the subject of this essay use comedy to liberate audiences from a persistent mindset of trauma that serves corporate interests and keeps consumers depressed, docile, and uninterested in exploring their own heroic potential.

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TIME TRAVEL AND TELEOLOGY:
MORALITY, SOCIETY, AND THE LIFE OF LUCAS BISHOP

Justin Martin

ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on a rarely analyzed superhero within the X-Men universe: the time-traveling mutant and law enforcement officer Lucas Bishop. Through highlighting core narrative themes consistent throughout his various depictions in comics and animation through the lens of a constructivist approach to sociomoral development (Social Cognitive Domain Theory; SCDT), the author contends that the character's complexity and multifaceted nature potentially has implications for understanding superheroes like Bishop as subjects worthy of scholarly and pedagogical inquiry. The narrative themes examined in support of this argument pertain to (1) how different dystopian social orders or arrangements potentially inform his morally relevant decisions, (2) the distinction between the arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of mutants in interactions bearing on human rights, and (3) the potential parallels between Bishop's morally relevant decisions and related research on sociomoral development.

Keywords: dystopian, morality, X-Men, time travel, moralality, superhero, development, society, social convention.

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Growing up in a dystopian future where mutants were feared, hunted, imprisoned, and often killed, Lucas Bishop wished he could prevent the events leading to such an oppressive future (*X Factor #27*, 2005, 4). Although the threats and missions changed over the years, most of his morally relevant decisions have been made with this aim in mind. Through utilizing a constructivist approach to social and moral development to highlight common narrative themes throughout his depictions from childhood to adulthood, the essay situates the character as a complex individual whose diverse social experiences may have implications for scholarly and pedagogical inquiry. These themes include the (1) navigation of differing social orders or arrangements and their relationship to his morally relevant judgments, (2) distinction between arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of mutants, and (3) parallels between his morally relevant decisions and general expectations of sociomoral decision making capacities based on developmental research. As relevant, they are explored across comic and/or animated series narratives.

Since their debut in 1963, X-Men narratives have—through interrogating the origins of, consequences of, and ambiguities concerning fear and hatred as social facts—provided different perspectives on what it means to live in a just society (Darowski 2014, 1; Grimstead Krizner Porter and Clayton, 2024, 14; Purcell 2021, 138; Smith 2014, 66). These perspectives are articulated, defended, and challenged within a fictional universe coming to terms with robust genetic differences between mutants (individuals born with a wide array of abilities) and non-mutant humans. Collectively, the emphasis on the relationship between genetic differences and what they might mean for building and maintaining just societies animate the narratives by exploring themes related to oppression, alienation, individual and state violence, medical ethics, and the restriction or elimination of human rights (Bufficero 2016, 220–21; Grimstead Krizner Porter and Clayton, 2024, 10–11, 14; Purcell 2021, 138; Smith 2014, 66). These emphases may partially explain the wide applicability of the mutant metaphor to various social groups (Darowski 2014, 1). Thus, to the extent some of these mutants become superheroes, their missions are inherently more complex due to the nature of their powers and the challenges of using those powers to protect those who may fear and/or question the merits of their existence.

1. A TIME-TRAVELER'S TELOS

First appearing in *Uncanny X-Men #282* (1991, 21), Bishop is a time-traveling mutant from a dystopian future who has spent time as both friend and foe of the mutant superhero team the X-Men, although considerably more time as the former. As a member of the mutant police force known as the Xavier Security Enforcers (X.S.E), Bishop was responsible for locating and arresting mutants deemed threats to the social order. In his time, exterminating mutants was the status quo. When a criminal mutant known as Trevor Fitzroy, who steals the energy of mutants, escapes from prison and into the past, Bishop's pursuit eventually leads him to Fitzroy who is battling the X-Men (Stewart 2023). This is the precipitating event through which he is introduced to the X-Men team.

After officially joining the team in *Uncanny X-Men* #287 (1992, 22), Bishop worked alongside and saved the X-Men (and non-mutant humans) on multiple occasions, cementing his status as a valuable member of the team. Things changed, however, when the mutant Hope Summers was born, as he believed she was the cause of the events leading to the dystopian future he grew up in as well as the unjust imprisonment and subsequent death of his parents (*X-Factor #27*, 2008, 4; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 9, 12; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #2*, 2009, 6–7). Based on this assumption, he betrayed the X-Men, and tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to kill Hope. Despite his conviction concerning her responsibility for his dystopian future, there are times where he appears to consider the moral implications of the succeeding and question if it is worth it (e.g., *Uncanny X-Men #494*, 2008, 2; *Cable, #24*, 2010, 28; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #3*,

2009, 22). Eventually, Bishop rejoined the X-Men to assist them with safeguarding their dignity while also protecting humanity (Stewart 2023).

Sixty years after his introduction, the precipitating events surrounding his travel to the past (and the X-Men's present), as well as the societal backdrop against which those events occur, were revealed in *X-Men: Legends #5* and *#6* (2023). Readers learn that Bishop is responsible for Fitzroy's escape from prison, as he sought his assistance to help break out mutants who were unjustly imprisoned. Seemingly understanding the risks of aligning with such a dangerous mutant, Bishop believed the ends justified the means, as he refused to hunt down and detain mutants who posed no threat. For Bishop, detaining dangerous mutants, which was supposed to be the job, was one thing. Going after innocent mutants was something entirely different. He was also against the use of sentinels, who are highly adaptive, cold, and calculating robots, to bring in mutants, a practice that was supposed to have ended. His morally relevant mission to defy authority proved costly, however, as aligning with Fitroy eventually leads to the escape of many dangerous mutants into the past and the death of many people, including two of his fellow XSE members and best friends, Malcolm and Randall.

The present essay explores Bishop as a complex character who is informed by and challenges his varying social orders, a perspective suggested by narrative themes that tend to link his varied appearances, portrayals, and narrative arcs. When explaining the motivation for centering *X-Men: Legends* #5 and #6 (2023) in Bishop's future, co-creator Whilce Portacio notes that he wanted to situate Bishop's character and personality against the backdrop of the maximum security prison The Pool, its prisoners, and their families. For Portacio, the sense of purpose animating Bishop's actions comes from both being born to survive in such a harsh world while also possessing a heart built for a more peaceful one (Schreur 2022). And when explaining the impetus for exploring Bishop's upbringing and its role in his mission to kill the mutant messiah Hope in the *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* (2009), Duane Swierczynski describes Bishop as a tragic hero who is committed to doing what he believes is necessary to save lives despite everyone else believing he is wrong (Richards 2009).

In line with these notions of Bishop as multifaceted and significantly influenced by particular social arrangements, the present essay utilizes a constructivist approach to the development and application of social and moral judgments, Social Cognitive Domain Theory (SCDT; Smetana Jambon and Ball 2014, 24–29; Turiel 1998, 903–909; Turiel 2008, 25–29), to illustrate how Bishop's experiences and decisions parallel the nature and nuances of the conceptual distinction people tend to make between matters of convention and morality. In this sense, the paper builds on previous scholarship exploring superheroes such as Black Panther and Luke Cage, whose morally relevant missions are coterminous with the society or community in which they live (Martin 2023a, 60–75; Martin Killian and Letizia 2023, 210–14). By focusing on the development of the convention-

morality distinction and its parallels with Bishop's experiences as a time-traveler, the essay differs from previous scholarship interrogating his role in the perpetuation of popular notions and stereotypes concerning urban crime, poverty, and the carceral state (Lund 2015, 42–51). These valid considerations notwithstanding, the essay focuses less on what Bishop may signify sociologically and more on his relevance for thinking about the psychological foundations of social and moral judgments.

Support for this kind of parallelism comes from a constructivist informed analysis of his morally relevant experiences in different social arrangements, differences in the arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of persons elucidated by these social arrangements, and the extent his morally relevant choices may be informed by developmental research. In keeping with previous scholarship (Martin 2021, 28–32; 2023a, 76–83; 2023c, 23–30; Martin Killian and Letizia, 2023, 219–21), the analysis concludes with some implications for a developmental analysis of Bishop that considers the relationship between moral and societal concepts across varying social arrangements. These implications are consistent with the view that superhero narratives have the potential to stimulate scholarly and pedagogical inquiry pertaining to new social arrangements. Although the origins of his dystopian future vary across mediums (e.g., Hope killing a million people versus the assassination of a political figure), both portrayals are relevant to the present analysis.

2. SOCIAL ORDER, CONVENTION, AND MORALITY

Cassandra Sharp (2017, 423) argues that people use stories to make sense of normative expectations of the legal system, and this is especially the case with comics and graphic novels due to the narrative affordances of the visual medium. Consistent with this view, in addition to accounting for the symbolic importance of X-Men narratives, understanding the relevance of a character like Bishop should also consider his differing orientations toward the social order, broadly defined as the outcome of the combined attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, behaviors, and institutions of its members who vary in their interpretations of their experiences within and the meaning of the society in which they live (Frank 1944, 474; Innes 2003, 6). Its influence on individuals' lives notwithstanding, scholars note that social order is dynamic and subject to alterations as ideas, values, assumptions, and behaviors change (Frank 1944, 474–75; Innes 2003, 6). As a time traveler, Bishop's frequent navigation of different social arrangements provides a window into how members within a society contribute to the relational norms constitutive of their wider social order. At the same time, as a mutant operating within and outside the contours of the law, his narratives often complicate and challenge the notion of social order by highlighting both the (1) relationship between a society's general conception of persons (e.g., who they are at their core, the necessary social conditions for them to change for the betterment of society, etc.) and its resultant social order and (2) societal

implications of distorting this relationship (e.g., immoral or unethical practices leading to some without a sense of purpose and feeling devalued).

On the one hand, Bishop, as a member of law enforcement and an employee of the state, participates in practices that produce social order and organization (Innes 2003, 151). The law enforcement agency, X.S.E., was founded as part of a government initiative to allow mutants to police themselves (*Uncanny X-Men #287*, 1992, 10), a social arrangement he believes is important for the safety of mutants in both time periods (*Civil War: X-Men #1*, 2006, 14; *X-Men Legends #5, 2023*, 5). Yet at the same time, he frequently challenges and operates outside the social order when he deems it morally necessary or obligatory (e.g., as a defender of innocent and persecuted mutants)—a tendency suggested to characterize human social life more broadly (Nucci 2019, 74; Turiel 2002, 288). Moreover, in line with Frank's warning of the dangers of social orders largely characterized by the inhumane treatment of some of its members (1944, 475–77), Bishop's willingness to rebel against the prevailing social order to preserve the dignity of mutants suggests a similar sentiment or belief. To the extent the social order he sometimes protests lacks or tries to eliminate spaces for its members to freely congregate and interact in contexts that allow for the exchanging and debating of different views on important matters, one could view Bishop's activities as consistent with Miczo's (2016, 3–4, 13–14) conception of superheroes: ethical agents whose morally relevant actions preserve the public sphere while also protect the vulnerable. On multiple occasions, Bishop's morally relevant missions are motivated by the preservation of individual dignity and disruption of social order.

In the two-part miniseries "Days of Future Past" (*X-Men: The Animated Series*; Houston 1993*; XMTAS*), he tries to alter his social order by traveling to the past to prevent the assassination of a politician that eventually leads to the creation of a new law and social order where mutants (and eventually other humans) are subjugated by the authorities controlling the sentinels. In a later miniseries ("One Man's Worth"; *XMTAS*, Houston 1995), Master Mold, a machine in Bishop's future responsible for producing sentinels to keep the mutant population subjugated, sends Fitzroy and Bantam to 1959 to assassinate Charles Xavier (Professor X) so that he does not form the X-Men, who subsequently influence the mutant rebels he encounters during his time. In other words, he wants to eliminate substantive challenges to the social order he upholds. Bishop learns of this plot and tries to prevent the assassination. He not only risks his life to alter social arrangements deemed unjust; he is willing to try again if the first attempt is unsuccessful (e.g., "One Man's Worth: Part 2," *XMTAS*, Houston 1995, 12:55).

In this manner, viewing Bishop as a time traveling superhero who works within his varying social arrangements to give mutants treated unfairly a place within the public sphere affords pedagogical opportunities to examine the dynamic nature of his relationship to the differing societal contexts in which he operates. In addition to differing along dystopian dimensions (e.g., present societies where mutants are considerably more free

versus future societies where they are subjugated and hunted through authoritarian governments), they differ in terms of authority relations (e.g. mutants unfairly treated in institutions where humans are in charge of mutants' daily activities and wellbeing versus institutions with state-sanctioned mutants policing other mutants). Further, these contexts are associated with varied social experiences concerning his orientation toward the law and social order.

Childhood examples include (1) attacking guards in an attempt to stop them from branding his baby sister Shard's skin with an "M" on her face (a requirement for mutants in the camp; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 11), (2) threatening to attack an X.S.E officer once arrested if they do not let him see his sister (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #2*, 2009, 15), and (3) stealing food and power cells to survive (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 20; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #2*, 2009, 1–5, 13). Adulthood examples include (1) defying his boss and the prison warden in an effort to free mutants imprisoned unjustly (*X-Men Legends #5*, 2023; *X-Men Legends #6*, 2023), (2) attacking sentinels either as a mutant tracker working for the State ("Days of Future Past: Part 1"; *XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 06:17) or prisoner ("Future X"; *Wolverine and the X-Men; WATXM*, Filippi 2009, 14:50) to prevent others from being harmed, (3) actively seeking to alter the prevailing social order in his future by preventing the assassinations of key individuals ("Days of Future Past," *XMTAS*, Houston 1993; "One Man's Worth"; *XMTAS*, Houston 1995), and (4) his apparent frustration at others for not doing enough to alter the unjust social order. Concerning the latter, when Bishop returns to the future in "One Man's Worth: Part 2" (*XMTAS*, Houston 1995, 04:38), he is initially unaware that it is now different due to his failure to prevent Professor X's murder in the previous episode. Perplexed as to why there is no mutant rebellion in this future fighting against Master Mold, Forge tells him that rebellion against Master Mold is not something mutants do. When Bishop's sister Shard urges Bishop not to take his frustration out on Forge because he is not to blame for the current social arrangements, he replies, "nobody ever is" before pushing him to the ground. Thus, different social or societal arrangements, and Bishop's beliefs about their legitimacy, often inform his diverse morally relevant judgments.

The importance of navigating different social arrangements for his moral understanding is further suggested by the juxtaposition of the Manhattan of his present (the X-Men's future) and that of his past (the X-Men's present) and an important turning point in the ongoing disagreements between him and the X-Men since his arrival to their time, as told in *Uncanny X-Men* #288 (1992). During a visit to Manhattan, he is taken back by how different the borough looks in this time compared to his, where it was a tenement for those deemed the worst of society. People didn't strive to live there, but to live elsewhere (9–10). His description of this time's Manhattan as "extraordinary" and "transformed" is not hyperbole, as the Pool, the maximum security prison he helped maintain in his time was located in this same Manhattan (*Uncanny X-Men* #287, 1992, 15).

Upon discovering one of the dangerous criminals who escaped the Pool due to Fitzroy's actions (*X-Men: Legends* #6, 2023, 9, 13–15), a fight ensues and Bishop kills him. Right before he kills him, Storm intervenes and tries to convince him that he does not have to kill him. Bishop disregards her appeal by himself appealing to the criminal's hundreds of deceased victims—both civilians and X.S.E. officers alike. Angry, Storm tells him that X-Men do not kill, prioritize the welfare of all human life to the extent possible, and that the laws of this time are different from those of his time. She also tells him that he can only blame Fitzroy and the dangerous mutants who escaped for so much of the destruction brought upon Manhattan. He is partly responsible as well (*Uncanny X-Men* #288, 1992, 14–17).

Storm's appeal, which echoes previous disagreements he concerning the merits of retributive justice (e.g., *Uncanny X-Men* #287, 1992, 6–8) is eventually successful. Presumably reflecting on the differences between the social arrangements characteristic of "future" and "past" Manhattan and what they might mean for his moral understanding, he kneels and sobs before replying, "It's all so different. So very, very different" (*Uncanny X-Men* #288, 1992, 17). He goes on to intimate that X.S.E. had so much authority and legitimacy during his time that civilians would run at the sight of them. Therefore, there was never a risk of civilian injury so it was not a consideration they factored in when apprehending criminals. *Uncanny X-Men* #292 (1992, 10) provides further evidence that the X-Men's more restrictive approach to the use of force is having an effect, as he mentions to the Warlocks during an altercation that he is not used to handling civil insurrections with only his hands.

Although not as thoroughly explored as in the comics, his juxtaposition of the differing social arrangements is also present in "Days of Future Past: Part 1" (*XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 09:44), once he time-travels for the first time. Based on the conditions of the streets and buildings, he initially believes that the time travel did not work. But upon observing an unfamiliar social interaction, children running down the street playing together in the daylight, he is convinced it did work. Collectively, these experiences contribute to the multifaceted nature of Bishop's superhero mission by highlighting his struggles with navigating the relationship between social arrangements, violence, and the morally relevant treatment of persons across two societies that, while similar in some ways (e.g., dilapidated buildings, dangerous criminals and villains), are different in others (e.g., prevalence of mutants policing themselves, presence of civilians amidst superhero activity, different beliefs concerning the use of violence, peaceful social relations as part of everyday life). Broadly speaking, he goes from a child referring to mutants as "destiny freaks" who disrupted the social order by "pushing" for new mutants to be born to reverse their dwindling population—efforts that he attributes to the birth of Hope (*X Factor* #27, 2005, 4)—to an adult balancing between the despair of his upbringing and the promise of helping build a better future for mutants.

2.1 DISTINGUISHING CONVENTION FROM MORALITY

But what are the conceptual building blocks of these social orders or arrangements? According to SCDT (Smetana Jambon and Ball 2014, 24–29; Turiel 1998, 903–909; Turiel 2008, 25–29), individuals largely make sense of their acts involving and relations between persons using conceptual domains that differ according to the nature of those acts and relations. These conceptual domains include distinguishing criteria that systematically inform their judgments about the different ways people treat and are treated by others. Judgments of acts and relations within the *moral* domain, such as those involving hitting and taking things from others, tend to be understood as generalizable, independent of rules and authorities, and inalterable. In contrast, acts and relations in the *conventional* or *societal* domain (henceforth used interchangeably), such as those involving forms of greeting, attire, and maintaining orderly traffic, tend to be understood as contextual, alterable, and dependent upon the existence of rules or authority dictates. Whereas the moral domain pertains to social interactions related to people's welfare, fair treatment, and inalienable rights, the societal domain pertains to social interactions based on the regulation, facilitation, and efficiency of social groups and systems (Smetana and Yoo 2022, 20; for discussion concerning the philosophical and social interactional bases of this distinction, see Turiel 1983, 34–49; Turiel Killen and Helwig 1987, 167–89). Considering Bishop's roles as a X.S.E. officer and mutant tracker largely responsible for hunting, apprehending, and institutionalizing mutants on behalf of the government, relatively more attention is given to the rule or authority-(in)dependence than criterion.

The importance of taking distinguishing criteria into account when trying to understand how people make sense of their social interactions is underscored due to certain symmetries and asymmetries in evaluating moral and societal events. In terms of the former, violations of both moral and societal norms are often evaluated in terms of right and wrong and both are often viewed as punishable (Yoo and Smetana 2022, 874). For the latter, sometimes conventional transgressions may be viewed as *more* wrong, serious, or deserving of punishment than moral ones (Tisak and Turiel 1988, 356). However neither instance provides sufficient evidence concerning whether individuals are *defining* or *conceptualizing* various social interactions differently. This notion is consistent with the finding from a meta-analysis that children made greater distinctions between moral and conventional acts using generalizability, inalterability, and rule or authority independence judgements, rather than judgments of the act's acceptability or deservingness of punishment (Smetana and Yoo 2022, 22; Yoo and Smetana 2022, 875, 883). Applying this to Bishop's apparent understanding of moral and societal considerations relevant to his dystopian social context, the focus should be on what his narrative journey suggests about the *qualitative* distinctions he appears to make between what's moral and what's

legal, when to obey and when to disobey regulatory authorities on societal and moral grounds respectively, and so forth.

As a law enforcement officer, Bishop engages in many social interactions that, according to SCDT, people typically classify as either societal (conventional) or moral (Turiel 1983, 34–49; Turiel Killen and Helwig 1987, 167–89). In "Days of Future Past: Part I" (*XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 03:37), viewers are introduced to Bishop as a tracker and capturer of rebel mutants, responsible for taking them to a mutant termination center in 2055 New York City. As an agent of the state, he works to uphold law and order and works alongside the sentinels to achieve such order. To the extent these acts are derived by laws and dictated by authorities, they can be reasonably understood as falling within the societal domain. Moreover, Bishop is cognizant of the non-legal aspects of conventional social interactions, as his response to Wolverine—whom he just captured—suggests. When Wolverine tells him that Sentinels want to kill all mutants, Bishop confidently pushes back, claiming they only kill rebels, and treat the "rest of us just fine" ("Days of Future Past: Part I;" *XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 04:51). Unbeknownst to Bishop, he fulfilled his mutant rebel quota by apprehending Wolverine and the two mutants. Once they reach the termination center, the sentinels escort Bishop inside with the others. The mutants attack the sentinel and when it appears it is about to kill Wolverine, Bishop intervenes and (presumably) saves his life. He similarly intervenes and saves mutants from Sentinels in a later storyline, "One Man's Worth" (*XMTAS*, Houston 1995). Acts related to the use and prevention of harm are generally constitutive of the moral domain.

Unlike empirical investigations of people's understanding of the distinction between moral and societal events, which, collectively, assess responses to various acts along three dimensions—*evaluations* (e.g., Is it OK to commit the act?), *justifications* (e.g., Why or why not?), and *criterion judgments* (e.g., Rule-Independence; Would it be OK to commit the act if there was no rule/law prohibiting it?)—one cannot know for certain whether Bishop distinguishes between societal and moral considerations in ways consonant with SCDT's research findings. Nonetheless, a set of findings spanning decades (e.g., for reviews, see Turiel 2002; Smetana Jambon and Ball 2014; Smetana and Yoo 2022) supports a reasonable expectation that generally, adults are sufficiently cognizant of criteria such as generalizability, rule or law contingency, and inalterability, and (2) frequently use one or more of these criteria to both categorize the nature of the interactions they participate in and observe, and determine the contours of their behaviors within those interactions. Moreover, as suggested throughout the following analysis, the consistency and conditions by which Bishop chooses to violate institutional authority and put his life in harm's way for the sake of others suggest that on some level, these criteria bear on his understanding of what it means to be a mutant law enforcement officer or tracker who grew up in and tries to alter the fundamental bases of social relations (e.g., between humans and mutants, the government and mutants, etc.) within his society.

3. DYSTOPIAN SOCIAL ORDER

Although he is arguably most known for his time with the X-Men in their "present," SCDT's emphasis on the primacy of social interaction and attending to the constitutive features of those interactions (e.g., how it feels, to both the victim and observer, when innocent people are harmed; Smetana Jambon and Ball 2014, 24–29; Turiel 1998, 903–909; Turiel 2008, 25–29) suggests that an adequate accounting of the character requires at least some understanding of the society he grew up in and the distorted social relations that constitute the backdrop against which his belief in both the (1) social order (2) conditions in which altering it are justified, occur. Bishop was born into and grew up in a dystopian society (*Uncanny X-Men #494*, 2008, 2; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 6) whose social arrangements largely stem from the premise that people are deeply flawed. Within these fictional societies the primacy and implications of fear coexist in tension with those of hope (Bucciferro 2016, 220–21; Smith 2014, 73). Unlike utopian societies–which are structured around assumptions of human perfectibility (and thus its members focus on creating the ideal society)–dystopian societies highlight how individuals strive to create better, albeit still flawed, societies (Sisk 2005, 606–607). Thus, the despair felt within a populace of a society that has "hit rock bottom" in terms of human rights and other abuses, is portrayed in relation to the vision of the society being altered in ways that reflect a more just and humane orientation toward social relations and arrangements.

These fictional societies reflect another tension relevant to the present analysis: between just and unjust social arrangements (Gottlieb 2001, 13, 21). As individuals (e.g., government leaders) attempt to respond to a societal crisis, they design authoritarian norms, laws, and institutions to achieve robust social stability (Gottlieb 2001, 9; Sisk 2005, 606). Moreover, these dystopian societies, explored across various comics, graphic novels, and films based on them, consistently highlight many of the themes relevant for the present analysis. Themes that, as suggested by some of those responsible for communicating Bishop's stories to the wider culture, should be considered when trying to understand and evaluate his morally relevant actions (Richards 2009; Schreur 2022). For one, dystopian societies are sometimes characterized by the use of unethical medical experiments which victimize those being controlled (Rossell 2023, 134; Rubin 2013, 87). Two, they tend to be characterized by the imposition of order through violent means (Phillips and Strobl 2022, 823; Sharp 2017, 409). Three, dystopian societies are often rife with institutionalized abuses and corruption (Cortiel and Oehme 2015, 5; Rubin 2013, 86; Sharp 2017, 410). Four, some societies are characterized by uncertainty concerning the nature of the threats posed by certain decisions or individuals (Cortiel and Oehme 2015, 18). Lastly, these societies, despite the proliferation and maintenance of extremely unjust social arrangements, also depict certain individuals, decisions, and events in a manner

that communicates hopeful possibilities and inspired imaginations for creating better, future social arrangements (Rossell 2023, 143; Sharp 2017, 410–11).

As discussed above and below, these features are evident across Bishop's narrative journey in one way or another. For instance, he is subjected to facial branding/scarring against his will (unethical medical treatment), often motivated to prevent an authoritarian future (order through violence), and challenges the state on moral grounds (institutionalized corruption). These and other events occur against the backdrop of robust ambiguity concerning the nature of the threat mutants pose to humans and society, the "best" way to address the threat—perceived or actual, and whether mutants should work on behalf of and alongside humans (uncertainty) and if so, in what manner. Lastly, whether he is viewed as a hero or villain by his peers, he is committed to the belief that there is a better way for mutants to live that includes improved welfare, fair treatment under the law, and respect for their human rights (hope).

In many ways, the contours of Bishop's morally relevant journey are influenced by governmental responses to immoral acts committed by mutants. In the comics *X-Men: Messiah CompleX* (2007–2008), a crossover event including multiple *X*-titles (*New X-Men*, *Uncanny X-Men*, *X-Factor*, and *X-Men*), and *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* (2009), the precipitating crisis is a mutant killing a million humans. In "Days of Future Past: Part 2," (*XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 04:22), a mutant assassinates Senator Kelly. These governments typically respond to (the perception of) mutant threats by deploying mutant-hunting sentinels (e.g.,"Days of Future Past: Part 2,"*XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 04:43; "Future X," *WATXM*, Filippi 2009, 02:53), and in some cases, other mutants (e.g., *X-Men: Legends* #5, 6) and army-backed superhumans (e.g., "One Man's Worth: Part 1," *XMTAS*, Houston 1995, 06:55).

When Bishop travels to the past and informs the X-Men of the events contributing to his future ("Days of Future Past: Part 2," *XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 04:22), he describes some features of dystopian societies and the social order mentioned above. Wanting protection and retribution and blaming mutants as a group for the acts of one, wider society demands decisive action. This results in the passage of the Mutant Control Law, authorizing the use of mutant-hunting sentinels. These sentinels kill many mutants who try to defend themselves and detain those fortunate to survive. In other words, there was an authoritarian response to a societal crisis based on the need to alleviate fear and restore social stability and characterized by oppressive and unjust social arrangements (Gottlieb 2001, 9, 13, 21). But the dangers of authoritarian social arrangements do not end there. Consistent with the assumed flawed nature of humanity (Sisk 2005, 606) and the warnings of distorting social arrangements in the service of social order (Frank 1944, 475–77), the authority apparatus overreaches. The sentinels eventually do the same to non-mutant humans as well and establish a sort of new world order. This is one way in which dystopian superhero media provides a cautionary tale regarding social relations (Smith 2014,

73). Regardless of the event that essentially sets the dystopian social arrangements into motion, Bishop grows up to frequently participate in maintaining social stability in response to these kinds of crises.

Similar events are depicted in *Days of Future Past* (*Uncanny X-Men* #141, 1980; *Uncanny X-Men* #142, 1981), where an assassination of a US senator leads to authoritarian laws and social arrangements leading to the limiting of mutants' human rights and in some cases, death. Consistent with the idea that the mutant metaphor is widely applicable (Darowski 2014, 1), scholars argue that the events in the comic parallel significant events throughout human history, both globally (e.g., Industrialism, World War II) and locally (e.g., Civil Rights Movement, privatized military and police and the rise of the carceral state in 1970s–1980s New York; Purcell 2021, 141; Smith 2014, 70–74). Although Bishop was not a focal character in the comic, the themes explored and the dystopian social arrangements depicted mirror those he experiences growing up.

3.1 MUTANTS, MORALITY, AND ARBITRARINESS

For Martin (2022, 76, 84), dystopian fiction affords opportunities for readers and viewers to wrestle with, consider, and examine characters' social interactions that bear on the moral and immoral treatment of others. Such an affordance is made salient through the narrative depictions of how moral (e.g., harm, justice, and human rights) and nonmoral (e.g., rules, laws, authority) concepts are applied within varying social arrangements. Similarly, Sharp (2017, 408, 411) discusses the potential of dystopian fiction for interrogations of both the nature of the law itself and the relationship between law and morality. Focusing more on group dynamics, Bucciferro (2016, 218) suggests that an important aspect of the *Days of Future Past* film (Singer 2014) is its portrayal of between group power relations informed by "othering" beliefs–beliefs that help maintain and legitimize one group's discrimination of the other. Although genetic differences set the contours of the main narrative events involving both the X-Men and Bishop specifically, it is necessary to account for the *nature* of these genetic differences and their potential implications for social order and regulation. Since these genetic differences often manifest in robust and unpredictable abilities that can alter the state of non-mutant humans' physical (e.g., manipulating magnetism, the weather), psychological (e.g., mind control), and social (e.g., creating alternate universes) reality, mutants experience some of the same "societal uneasiness" characteristic of superheroes. Scholars argue that, due to their superpowers, superheroes may be best understood as sovereign agents operating within and outside of society's legal and moral frameworks as they see fit. Their missions, while in pursuit of justice and the common good, reflect their sovereignty to the extent that they, like governments, have the ability to determine when the use of violence to maintain social order is legitimate. A related feature of sovereignty is the ability to define a social event as constituting a state of exception, understood as an event so significant or threatening to

citizens' or humanity's existence that local and national laws are suspended in order for the superheroes to deal with the threat–by any means deemed necessary (Bainbridge 2020, 70, 73; Curtis 2016, 108). Although different with their emphasis on genetic variations and the mutant metaphor, X-Men narratives are similar to superhero narratives in that they both address themes related to the relationship between law and morality.

Along these lines, a recurring theme animating the varying social arrangements that at times influence Bishop's decisions and at other times are influenced by Bishop's challenges to the prevailing social order is the *discrepancy between the moral and arbitrary treatment of mutants*. Considering the moral treatment of others concerns a belief in their inherent dignity and worth, one can argue their immoral treatment concerns the absence or suspension of such a belief. Or put another way, treating others morally is inversely related to an arbitrary view of them during relevant social relations or interactions. It is easy to treat others arbitrarily (immorally)—to objectify, devalue, and discard them—when we primarily or fundamentally relate to them in arbitrary ways. They are arbitrary in the sense that the same function can be achieved through alternate decisions (Smetana 1983, 134–35). Thus, understanding Bishop is intricately linked to what his actions suggest about treating persons as ends and not means.

For the purposes of the present essay, this discrepancy applies to social relations or interactions that have a (clear) bearing on the (dis)respect for others' human rights. The arbitrary treatment of mutants (and non-mutant humans) in terms of being denied entry into a store because it closed one minute ago (arbitrary in the sense that the store could just as easily had a store hours policy of remaining open for another 30 minutes), for instance, is not relevant to the present discussion. But if the arbitrary treatment of mutants was instead due to genetic discrimination (e.g., the store was open but refused to let them in for no reason other than their DNA), then this social interaction would be relevant to the present discussion. And considering the ubiquity of the latter form of arbitrary treatment—as suggested by the levels of state violence towards, social control of, and unethical experimentation on those deemed disposable in both X-Men and other dystopian fiction (e.g., Bucciferro 2016, 218; Phillips and Strobl 2022, 823–24, 832–36; Rossell 2023, 134; Rubin 2013, 86–89; Sharp 2017, 408–410; Smith 2014, 67–72)—Bishop's ability to operate inside and outside of these social arrangements affords unique opportunities for scholarly and pedagogical inquiry.

As suggested through the examples below, the kind of arbitrary treatment mutants in Bishop's time are subjected to (and at times he is subjected to), comes with a dual sense of precarity and vulnerability, as the way they are subjugated, abused, and dehumanized can seemingly change at the whims of the governing or authority apparatus. How easy can it be, for instance, for mutants to go from at least having the appearance of the opportunity to defend oneself against crimes alleged by the state (e.g., *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 5) to be deemed guilty (or even sentenced to death) once an

accusation has been made? Or what if one day, guards are not only given free-reign to physically assault mutants in the camps without fear of being held to account (e.g., *X-Men #206*, 2007, 1), but to kill them and/or their family outside the camps regardless if they are mutants? To treat others morally and in a non-arbitrary way, is to establish robust buffers against such "on the whim" treatment, as the person's dignity, and the consequences of violating said dignity, feature heavily in one's understanding and treatment of others.

One more clarification is worth noting. Unlike psychological forms of arbitrary social relations, which pertain to individuals' use of personal discretion (e.g., Person A choosing to associate with or befriend Person B and not Person C), social or societal forms of arbitrary relations pertain to more "group level" decisions in terms of social norms, institutions, rules, etc. Examples could be norms or policies around people congregating in particular public (e.g., parks) or private (e.g., places of employment) spaces, which can vary for a host of seemingly discretionary or non-substantive reasons. From place to place or situation to situation, it is reasonable to expect norms in these areas to vary, such as the number of people who can congregate in certain public spaces in a particular city can vary depending on the time of day (e.g., fewer at night) and number of people who can fraternize during a common area at work can vary by place of employment.

For SCDT, both forms contribute to individuals' development of social understanding (for examples of social interactions and conversations informing children's understandings in these areas, see Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 9–24). The present paper, by highlighting how the authority apparatus decides to treat and not treat mutants, contends that the types of arbitrary social relations germane to Bishop's development of social and moral understanding have qualities more in line with the latter form. Moreover, the contours of these arbitrary social relations are coterminous with a conception of mutants that reduces them to powerful threats that must be subdued, stripped of human rights, and if necessary, eliminated. Whether it is the use of power dampers (e.g., *X-Factor*, *#26*, 2007, 22) used in the mutant relocation camp of Bishop's childhood or inhibitor collars used in the mutant prison of Bishop's adulthood (e.g., "Future X," *WATXM*, Filippi 2009, 06:18), to be a mutant in Bishop's future is often dehumanizing. Bishop describes the camp, which is also where he was born and grew up until he was seven, as a place notorious for being unsanitary and illegally experimenting on mutants. His parents were sentenced there after being convicted for defending themselves against a sentinel; a trial he recalls that "lasted three seconds" (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #1, 2009, 5).

Another example of arbitrary treatment comes in the form of allocating resources. Once Bishop finds what he believes is the last mutant camp on earth, he is eventually reunited with his grandmother and sister, who also escaped Sheepshead Bay (i.e., the mutant camp he was born and grew up in). This camp was supported by the little money the government provided for their own schools and farms. But once the new government

decided to cut funding, they were left to fend for themselves, and his grandmother, whose ailing body could not take living on the streets, died (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #2*, 2009, 11).

Messiah CompleX further underscores the significance of arbitrary social relations in understanding the plight of mutants in Bishop's dystopian society by highlighting how they are viewed and treated by the guards overseeing the camp. For instance, persons presumed to be injured are worthy of assistance from guards insofar as their results from a mutant scanner are negative (*X-Factor, #26*, 2007, 9), and guards can physically assault mutants at the camp with no fear of being held accountable (*X-Men #206*, 2007, 1). What they apparently cannot do, however, is form intimate bonds with them. One might argue that the former interaction is consistent with an arbitrary treatment of mutants, whereas the latter is inconsistent with such treatment as it could lead to a guard caring about the dignity, personhood, and well-being of a mutant. When mutants in the camp revolted against the sentinels to fight for their freedom and dignity in the Summers' Rebellion during Bishop's childhood, both of his parents were killed. As he witnessed both of their deaths at the hands of sentinels, he remarks that it was as if his parents were born to die (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #1, 2009, 16). Considering their (1) attempts to hide from the government, (2) subsequent trial which included procedural but not substantive due process (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #1, 2009, 5), (3) treatment at the camp, and (4) the ease by which their lives were discarded during the rebellion, it is important to view these formative experiences in the young Bishop's development against a social back-drop seeped in arbitrary social relations that bear on persons human rights.

One way to view the moral-societal distinction concerning arbitrary social relations is illustrated through the discrepancy between Bishop's view of his relationship with the sentinels (and by extension, their governing authority) and how the governing authority views him. As noted, Bishop was treated like any other mutant the moment he fulfilled his "captured mutant" quota ("Days of Future Past," *XMTAS*, Houston 1993, 05:09). This meant that he was not only "relieved" of his duties as a tracker, but was not considered a mutant to be tracked, and thus imprisoned. Another mutant, the inventor Forge, experiences a similar arbitrary treatment at the hands of sentinels in "One Man's Worth: Part 2" (*XMTAS*, Houston 1995, 06:56), despite his plea that he's been "loyal to the Master."

This notion that mutants can be treated arbitrarily by regulatory authorities due to reducing them to powers and threats is also prevalent in the various depictions of mutants as coerced research subjects or victims of dehumanizing procedures. As a child, Bishop experienced such treatment through receiving an "M" inscription on his face (as did the other mutant detainees) to mark him as mutant, with the ink serving an additional function of altering his DNA (e.g., *X-Men* #206, 2007, 11; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #1, 2009, 10). As an adult prisoner in the animated series *WATXM*, he learns of this place called the Tower where prisoners are taken to have their powers mechanically

reproduced (e.g., *WATXM*; "Future X," Filippi 2009, 13:10). And in a later episode (*WATXM*; "Badlands," Murphy 2009, 00:30), he is hunted by a new-breed of hunter-like sentinels more efficient than previous versions, partly due to the mutant antagonist Bolivar Trask capturing and studying Wolverine in the series' present (i.e., Bishop's past).

Lastly, it is worth noting how arbitrary social relations manifest when it comes to communication. One of the more interesting features of the dystopian society of Bishop's childhood is its insistence on *erasing* mutants from everyday discourse. As a guard remarks in *X-Factor* #26 (2007, 16), the government shuts down all mentions of mutants, and all print and recorded references of them are deleted. Moreover, when two mutants, Jamie Maddrox (Multiple Man) and Layla Miller visit the mutant relocation camp Bishop grew up in (*New X-Men* #44, 2007, 11), the first thing they notice is there are no mutants visible, nor are people talking about mutants.

Such treatment of mutants is broadly consistent with the notion of symbolic annihilation. Pertaining to how the poor treatment of particular minorities within popular communication can contribute to those groups' symbolic erasure, the concept is important for understanding the relationship between media and social reality (Coleman and Yochim 2008, 4922–23). Although the treatment of mutants—which include no media treatment or discourse— is more extreme than, say, poor media treatment by way of mutant stereotypes and limited discourse, both contexts share an underlying assumption relevant to the present discussion. In both contexts, there is an assumption, explicit or implicit, that it is acceptable to treat the erased group in arbitrary ways, seeing that to talk with and about them in ways that highlight their humanity necessitates interacting with them substantively (i.e., by upholding human rights). Such treatment of mutants makes the kind of participation in the public sphere Miczo (2016, 3) believes animates superheroes' decisions to help others practically impossible and thus may partially explain Bishop's insistence on altering these social arrangements.

4. DEVELOPMENTAL CAPACITIES FOR MORALLY RELEVANT DECISION MAKING

Consistent with Martin's explorations of the potential relationship between superhero media and child development (e.g., 2021a, 28–32; 2023a, 66–69; 2023b, 269–70; 2023c, 23–30), research on children's sociomoral development suggests that a young Bishop has certain capacities enabling him to evaluate various social events experienced and observed within his society while also distinguishing between their core features (for detailed discussions of relevant research, see Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 35–57). Despite the general changes described below being based on everyday social interactions typical of "normal" societies, the essay contends that even in dystopian societies, broad parallels can be drawn between the features of social interactions common in these distorted societies and those typical of "normal" societies. The aim here, then, is not to argue for a 1-to-1 correspondence, but explore how the same concepts (e.g., harm, fairness, human

rights, legality, and authority) may be applied by real and fictional persons in typical and atypical societies to make sense of the varied social interactions and relationships informing their development. The second aim is to suggest a rough developmental sketch of Bishop's morally relevant judgments by drawing parallels between sociomoral competencies generally presumed to be present in children and how their changes or elaborations with age may help explain some of the decisions Bishop makes as an adult. Although the apparent emphasis on age seven and older (e.g., *X Factor* #27, 2008; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #2, 2009) may be merely coincidental, it is worth noting that multiple sociomoral competencies are believed to emerge or become more clearly discernible around the age of seven—a notion explored in previous work on children's understanding of superhero media (Martin 2021, 28; 2021b, 1, 3–4; 2023c, 13).

4.1 BISHOP'S CHILDHOOD

Broadly speaking, research suggests that by around age seven and older, children show changes in their social and moral understanding that may have a bearing on understanding how a young Bishop tries to make sense of his social experiences (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 35–67). In the realm of societal (conventional) understanding, for instance, third and fourth graders demonstrate a greater awareness of inconsistencies or contradictions concerning the use of enforcement of certain norms or conventions and may question their purpose altogether. In the realm of morality, second through fifth graders' moral understandings tend to include more systematic links between an agent's actions and the responses or reactions of the victim (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 37, 48; Turiel 1983, 106–108). Thus, by around seven, may begin to apply a more critical lens to some aspects of their societal and moral judgments.

Concerning the ability to distinguish societal and moral acts, research suggests that older children's distinctions are more consistent and widely applied across varying situations compared to those of preschoolers. Whereas preschoolers' applications of criterion judgments (e.g., rule or authority independence, generalizability, and inalterability) are apparently more susceptible to limitations due to general cognitive abilities and familiarity with social interactions, these limitations are overcome with age (Smetana and Yoo 2022, 24–25; Yoo and Smetana 2022, 883–85). Given the amount of violence and human rights abuses Bishop witnesses and experiences growing up, it is also worth noting that children more easily distinguish moral acts from societal acts when those moral acts include social interactions resulting in physical harm. Moreover, Nucci and Itlen-Gee (2021, 48) argue that increasing the salience of moral consequences may contribute to children's improved moral understanding. This may help explain why when older children are asked to evaluate acts in certain situations involving a conflict between moral and nonmoral considerations, they sometimes have difficulty integrating the nonmoral

elements of the situation into their reasoning and instead base their judgments of the situation on the most salient moral elements of harm or welfare (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 51–52).

A young Bishop's dystopian social context, largely characterized by social arrangements differing in both degree (e.g., level of fear experienced by and harm towards mutants) and kind (e.g., erased from various modes of communication, conceived as disposable objects instead of dignified persons), affords opportunities to explore, through scholarly and pedagogical inquiry, how some of his early social experiences might contribute to his understanding of the above-mentioned capacities. His experiences with unjust imprisonment, violence (human-mutant, sentimental-mutant, etc.), and human rights abuses, and attempts to understand these events–as suggested by his reflections on the events leading to the mutant camps, the Summers' Rebellion, the loss of his parents and grandmother, and the government's treatment of mutants (e.g., *X-Factor* #26, 2007, 22; *X-Men* #206, 2007, 1–2; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #1, 2009, 15–16; *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop* #2, 2009, 11, 13)–could reasonably have a bearing on his moral understanding via increased salience of moral consequences (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 48). When reflecting on what he observed as a child once he escaped the mutant camp, he recalls that he had "no skills, no abilities, no frame of reference for the insanity around" him (*Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #1*, 2009, 20). A constructivist approach to understanding his relevant social interactions inside and outside of the mutant camp may elucidate both the nature of this "insanity" and what it might mean for his developing understanding of the role of societal and moral considerations in social relations.

This potential "salience effect" would likely also inform his understanding of the delta between the arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of persons. Combining this salience with the capacity to pay more attention to inconsistencies or contradictions concerning conventional or societal rules and norms (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 37, 48; Turiel 1983, 106–108) and the instances of his breaking the law or challenging conventional authority in other ways to survive or protect others yields interesting implications. One might, for instance, consider how a young Bishop's development under these social arrangements help illustrate his (presumed) application of the authority-independence criterion when thinking about when to deviate from or challenge conventional authorities (e.g., for reviews of research concerning this and other criteria, see Turiel 2002; Smetana Jambon and Ball 2014; Smetana and Yoo 2022).

4.2 BISHOP'S ADOLESCENCE AND ADULTHOOD

In terms of morality, Nucci and Ilten-Gee (2021 48, 54) suggests that with age, moral considerations, particularly concerning fair treatment, are more broadly applied in the sense that they are not as tied to direct reciprocal exchange (e.g., where fairness is more strictly or narrowing construed to involve tit-for-tat social interactions to repay someone in

kind)—as was the case with older children. Fairness considerations are also construed in a more nuanced or flexible manner, evident in more appeals to equity and not solely equality when evaluating certain situations. And unlike older children, older adolescents tend to both (1) account for moral and nonmoral considerations when evaluating social events that have both kinds of conflicting elements and (2) reason about those situations in ways that logically resolve ambiguities or uncertainties that may arise when weighing those competing elements.

In young or emerging adulthood, research suggests that individuals develop an understanding of conventions as necessary for the coordination of social interactions among groups of individuals living together. Such coordination is based on widely shared knowledge of the group's conventions that allow for predictable social interactions important for the efficient functioning of the social system. It is also based on individuals' voluntary participation in those conventions (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 45; Turiel 1983, 111–12).

In sum, by the time readers are introduced to a Lucas Bishop who appears to be a late adolescent or young (emerging) adult in *Lives and Times of Lucas Bishop #2* (2009), findings suggest that one should reasonably expect him to have widely applied, elaborated, and nuanced understandings of both societal and moral concepts, as well as the ability to weigh them against each other in systematic ways when experiencing social situations where they conflict. As with his childhood experiences, the social arrangements characterizing his adulthood, centered largely around the discrepancies between arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of mutants, provide opportunities for scholarly and pedagogical inquiry. Considering depictions of his adulthood are more numerous and varied than those of his childhood, opportunities abound for analyses that try to illuminate the relationships that potentially exist between different social arrangements and his morally relevant decisions within those arrangements.

It is evident when reading or watching these depictions that when he construes a social arrangement as unjust, he challenges the responsible authorities by trying to alter those arrangements. This theme of challenging authority for moral reasons is the basis for *X-Men: Legends #5* and *#6* (2023), and the origins of his plan point not only to his motivation but to what he is willing to risk to preserve the dignity of others. To the extent reflecting on his role in maintaining social order within the Pool earlier in *X-Men: Legends #5* (2023, 5) indicate his wrestling with the morality of his job as an X.S.E. officer, the fact that the strategic dimensions of his plan was inspired by a rat suggests he did not need much to "push" him toward rebelling against his social order. Whereas one could reasonably assume that for many people witnessing a small rodent find a way to infiltrate the Pool (*X-Men: Legends #5*, 2023, 20) may not necessarily lead to a belief that mutants could be *broken out* of the Pool, for him it was all the inspiration he needed: "… what it meant to me was *hope*." This might be what Duane Swierczynski had in mind when

describing Bishop as a tragic hero committed to saving lives no matter the cost (Richards 2009)—a notion that, for both scholarly and pedagogical reasons, warrants serious consideration regarding the relationship between societal and moral goals.

Moreover, his actions across narratives suggest that his motivations are largely or primarily moral, and thus generally consistent with the view that rule or authority independence plays a definitional role in the understanding of social and moral events (Smetana and Yoo 2022, 22; Yoo and Smetana 2022, 875, 883). This was the case when (1) he disobeyed the prison warden as a member of XSE and collaborated with a dangerous and unpredictable prisoner to free mutants detailed unjustly (*X-Men: Legends #5*, 2023, 19; *X-Men: Legends* #6, 2023, 2), (2) traveled to the past to prevent assassinations in an attempt to avoid dystopian social orders ("Days of Future Past: Part 1," *XMTAS*, Houston 1993; "One Man's Worth: Part 1," *XMTAS*, Houston 1995), and (3) attacked sentinels to protect others' welfare ("Days of Future Past: Part 1" *XMTAS*, Houston 1995; "Future X," *WATXM*, Filippi 2009). This belief that moral actions should not be bound by regulatory authorities is further suggested by his criticism of mutants who he feels are not doing enough to alter the prevailing social order ("One Man's Worth: Part 2," *XMTAS*, Houston 1995, 05:40). As mentioned above, these actions, while conceptually consistent in the sense of prioritizing moral over societal considerations, occurred across various roles and social arrangements, including Bishop as an agent of the state working with humans (*X-Men Legends* #5, 2023) and sentinels ("Days of Future Past," *XMTAS*, Houston 1993), and as a prisoner ("Future X," *WATXM*, Filippi 2009).

As noted above, however, conceptually delineating between moral and conventional considerations is just part of the story of adulthood sociomoral development. In addition to a more elaborated and nuanced understanding of the purpose of conventions within societies, adults are generally expected to acknowledge and rationally adjudicate social situations where moral and nonmoral considerations are in conflict (Nucci and Ilten-Gee 2021, 45, 48, 54; Turiel 1983, 111–12). Therefore, to the extent media depictions of social arrangements informing his morally relevant decisions include potentially conflicting moral and nonmoral considerations (e.g., working alongside or to apprehend mutant rebels, following the orders of the prison warden or conspiring to break out innocent people, killing or not killing the mutant he believes causes the events leading to his dystopian society, etc.), scholarly analyses may help to elucidate how Bishop might be weighing moral considerations around harm, justice, and human rights against societal or conventional considerations related to laws and regulatory authorities. And as his writers suggest, the social arrangements constitutive of his experiences growing up in the camps (Richards 2009) and the "micro ecosystem" known as the Pool (Schreur 2022) may play especially important roles in this regard.

5. Implications for a Developmental Analysis

Consonant with previous arguments for the use of superhero media as a context for scholarly and pedagogical activities (Martin 2021, 28–32; 2023a, 76–83; 2023c, 23–30; Martin, Killian and Letizia 2023, 219–21), the essay concludes with three tentative suggestions for using stimulus events from Bishop's narrative journey as a basis or at least a relevant supplementary context for examining theory and research related to the development of social and moral understanding. Each suggestion focuses on a specific narrative theme discussed above as it pertains to the distinction between matters of morality and matters of society or convention. As with the above analysis, the focus is on the rule or authority-independence criterion–although the suggestions can reasonably apply to the generalizability and inalterability criteria as well.

5.1 *SOCIAL ORDERS (ARRANGEMENTS) AND MORALLY RELEVANT DECISIONS*

SCDT contends that thought heterogeneity best explains the development and application of individuals' sociomoral understanding across varying contexts, evidenced by the interactive relationship between sociomoral events and judgments about those events, and the ability to conceptually alter the meaning of events with new information, different "background" assumptions, and so forth (Turiel, Killen and Helwig 1987, 184–89). Relatedly, Nucci (2019, 74) argues that because the person-(social) context relationship is dynamic, understanding the persons' morally relevant decisions within those contexts must account for not only the influences of the context on those decisions, but how individuals influence contexts and thus contribute to the transformation of society. As Bishop's narrative journey attests, to the extent societies consist of unjust social arrangements, some individuals within those societies should be expected to try to alter them for moral reasons (Turiel 2002, 288).

Therefore, scholarly and pedagogical investigations concerning Bishop's morally relevant decision making should account for the social conditions in which those decisions are made as well as the dynamic nature of the decisions-conditions relationship. As suggested elsewhere (Martin 2023a, 78–82), superhero narratives afford opportunities to view this dynamism "up close," as their use of their powers for the good of others can potentially affect social interactions well beyond the initial encounter. For the superhero Luke Cage, for instance, Martin notes how his superpowers allow him to initiate novel or atypical social interactions and arrangements due to being bulletproof in a manner consistent with the prioritization of the public sphere (Miczo 2016, 3–4, 13–14).

Similarly, Bishop's powers (energy absorption and redirection), coupled with his ability to time travel provides opportunities to examine how social interactions and arrangements relate to his actions to safeguard the life and dignity of innocents. When considering (1) the diverse contexts he finds himself in—in terms of location or type of society (e.g., his dystopian future vs. the past) and his position within a particular social interaction or arrangement (e.g., agent of state or prisoner, working alongside humans or

sentinels, etc.)—as well as (2) the importance of the authority independence criterion for moral understanding, inquiries and activities can examine whether altering features of these arrangements could reasonably influence Bishop's decisions and how. If mutants' human rights were still being violated within his society's prevailing social order, for instance, yet the physical harm perpetrated against mutants was substantially reduced or even eliminated, would this reasonably affect his superhero mission and if so, how? Would any aspects of his evaluation of mutants' oppressive state remain the same? Analogs to this kind of situation can be presented to participants and students alike as hypothetical sociomoral vignettes where people are asked to predict, evaluate, and justify their evaluations of Bishop's decisions in these contexts. They can respond to a vignette that describes Bishop's social context in a manner consistent with media portrayals as well as other vignettes that manipulate a feature relevant to a moral (e.g., the amount of harm caused, etc.) and/or societal (e.g., the nature or legitimacy of the regulatory authority) goal or consideration.

5.2 ARBITRARY AND NON-ARBITRARY TREATMENT OF PERSONS

Manipulations of harm and authority considerations can also inform analyses of people's understandings of the distinction between the arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of persons. Additionally, manipulations concerning the magnitude of the precipitating event as well as the knowledge surrounding the event can provide useful contexts for scholars and educators to explore people's understandings of the morally relevant treatment of persons. For instance, activities can examine how people's views of a fictional government's response to a hypothetical casualty event may be informed by the number of lives killed by a mutant or the act's level of brutality. As discussed elsewhere (Martin 2023c, 28), the contours of certain morally relevant decisions may be further elicited by varying how knowledgeable relevant persons are of the causes of an event. In the case of Bishop's dystopian future, this could take the form of whether governmental officials responsible for responding to the crisis and reestablishing societal stability actually know which individual or group of individuals (mutant or otherwise) was responsible.

5.3 DEVELOPMENTAL CAPACITIES FOR SOCIOMORAL UNDERSTANDING

Lastly, these two themes can be examined, either separately or together, from a developmental perspective. Focusing on Bishop's media portrayals, comparative analyses can be conducted between the features of the social arrangements characteristic of Bishop's dystopian future as a child and as an adult (e.g., how the environments and relationships are depicted artistically, stylistically, what elements are emphasized through characters' dialogue, etc.), and the potential influence of these features on his apparent understanding of the distinction between moral and societal considerations. Similar comparisons

can be investigated concerning the arbitrary and non-arbitrary treatment of mutants, either separately or in conjunction with the features of the social arrangements. In keeping with the above analyses and implications, the comparisons can focus on potential child-adult differences in understanding morality (1) as independent of regulatory authorities and (2) in situations where moral and nonmoral considerations conflict.

6. CONCLUSION

Although he has received little scholarly attention to date, Bishop's narrative journey, as portrayed through childhood and adulthood experiences navigating and trying to understand the features of and reasons for his dystopian society, offers numerous opportunities for scholarly and pedagogical activities. Through highlighting some key events in his journey from a constructivist perspective on social and moral development, the paper elucidated some of these opportunities. By trying to understand the nature of the decisions made by such a complex and multifaceted character—one who, despite occupying various positions within and outside of the law across dystopian and non-dystopian social arrangements, consistently fights to alter them in the face of injustice—we may come to a slightly better understanding of ourselves. An understanding that, hopefully, leads to a better future.

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THE DARK KNIGHT AT FIFTEEN:
AN INTERSECTIONAL RETROSPECTIVE[1]

Erin Casey-Williams

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ABSTRACT

Characters within *The Dark Knight* access intersectional, systemic privileges linked to the performance of masculinity, whiteness, neoliberal class consciousness, and heteronormativity. Using cultural studies as the framework and intersectionality as the point of departure, this paper interrogates how kyriarchy—a way to understand intersecting layers of privilege—buttresses neoliberal ideologies, especially in the first decade of the 21st century. Hegemonic masculinity is both reinforced and reinvented in a homosocial erotic triangle between Batman, Harvey Dent, and Bruce Wayne, which is subsequently shattered by the Joker, a queer failed masculine subject who fosters intimacy through excessive violence. Even this powerful disruption, however, emerges from the intersecting privileges of a cis white man and contrasts sharply with both the situations of Black characters in the film and lived encounters between Black Americans and the State. Batman's appropriation of Blackness in his suit, juxtaposed with the undeniable whiteness read on his bared chin, signals a privilege that allows him to act outside the law, reinventing kyriarchal and neoliberal sovereign exceptionalism. Examining *The Dark Knight* through the lenses of cultural studies and intersectionality allows a better understanding of systemic inequality as conveyed through media, which is crucial to undoing conferred dominance and the exploitative hegemony of our world.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity, gender, kyriarchy, Batman, sexuality.

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Fifteen years before *Oppenheimer* (2023), Christopher Nolan wrote, produced, and directed "the most successful comic book film ever made" (Dixon and Graham 2017, 18). *The Dark Knight* came out in 2008, the middle installment in a gritty and realistic Batman trilogy, reimagined for the post-9/11 zeitgeist. *The Dark Knight* has inspired abundant scholarship, encompassing engagements with international law (Ip 2011; MacFarlane 2014), ethics (McGowan 2009), religious studies (Bellinger 2013; Fradley 2013), and genre expression (Burke 2016; McSweeney 2020). This paper analyzes *The Dark Knight* through the lens of cultural studies, specifically examining how characters access intersectional,

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[1] I wish to thank reviewers of earlier versions of this paper for their invaluable insights and numerous first-year students for watching, talking, and writing about *The Dark Knight*.

systemic privileges linked to the performance of masculinity, Whiteness, neoliberal class consciousness, and heteronormativity. This argument extends existing scholarship on the gender, class, sexual, and racial politics of the film and explores how it both buttresses and evolves hegemonic ideology.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the term "intersectionality" in 1991 to describe the experiences of women of color who were uniquely oppressed within the American legal system, not only because of gender or race but specifically because of the *convergences* of gender *and* race. Crenshaw was building on the work of writers like bell hooks (1984) and Angela Davis (1983), who exposed the ways Black women were denied full access to either womanhood or Blackness and were subordinated within both second-wave feminism and the Black freedom struggle (Hill Collins 2020). Patricia Hill Collins further elucidated the "matrix[es] of domination" through which individuals are systemically oppressed according to not just gender and race, but also sexuality, gender identity, class, age, ability, and more (Hill Collins 1990). Intersectional theory is offered as an alternative to the additive model of oppression, arguing that unique modes of repression are exercised on individuals with multiple subordinated identities, who are subsequently marginalized by or excluded from full participation in the dominant culture's institutions, including education, healthcare, government, work, media, etc.

As a concept, intersectionality has been massively influential, as reflected in initiatives to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging on both college and corporate campuses. Its impact can also be seen in how members of the political alt-right weaponize the term to obfuscate systemic inequality and distort the lived realities of individuals (Hill Collins 2020; Keaton et al 2023). As an analytic tool, intersectionality has allowed the critique of cultural practices and social structures related to medicine, reproductive justice, human rights, and social protest. It has additionally enabled the critique of cultural artifacts, as can be seen in recent work on "misogynoir" or the hatred of Black women and its permutations in media (Baily 2016; Young 2022). Intersectional analysis always functions as both inquiry and praxis, meaning that intellectual work must support political action, and vice versa; this allows one to fully describe and thus challenge the inequalities of the current world (Hill Collins 2020, 220). One recent consequence of intersectional theory involves not only analyzing ideologies of oppression, but also the ways hegemonic systems are buttressed through social constructs that often go unmarked because of their perceived universality, like Whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) proposed "kyriarchy" as a tool to understand the intersections of privilege, or how patriarchy, classism, ableism, Whiteness, and more discursively reinscribe ideology (Fiorenza 2006, 119). The term comes from Greek,

meaning "rule of the emperor, lord, slave master, or husband," and Fiorenza pinpoints its emergence in ancient Greece (and later Rome), when citizens realized their political and social ascendancy required the economic exploitation of others, specifically women and slaves (ibid, 152). What followed was an "Othering" through the construction of social categories like gender, race, caste, and more, which allowed the political and cultural subjugation of individuals based on invented groupings (ibid, 203). Kyriarchy became the social hegemony, a counterpart to the economic dominance of capitalism described by Antonio Gramsci; it was not only exercised with brutal physicality by the powerful, but also internalized by the dominated, "through education, socialization," and other cultural processes (ibid, 196). Analyzing cultural artifacts and their production can elucidate how "culture gets mobilized to forward the interests and power of the ruling classes" (Wilson 2018, 684); in other words, it can demystify and deconstruct how power is both conferred and exercised. A kyriarchal analysis examines how societal power arises from a confluence of class markers intersecting with gender performance, racial identity, sexual activity, and cultural cachet.

Kyriarchy as an intersectional alternative to patriarchy better accounts for the socio-political system that is alive and well in our modern era, especially in America (ibid, 171). Fiorenza writes that, within a kyriarchy, "every individual is *structurally* positioned within social, cultural, economic, [and] political… systems by virtue of birth," while also occupying a "*subject position* [that] is variable, open to intervention, and changeable, but also limited by hegemonic structures of domination" (2010, 219). Rather than imagining society as a two-dimensional hierarchy, it can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional pyramidal network of constantly shifting "nodal points" (ibid). One's access to the top, or to social dominance, can shift up, down, or laterally depending on identity expression or social association in any given circumstance; importantly, then, one can find themselves simultaneously privileged and subjugated on the basis of different but interlocking elements of their identity. Helpful here is Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) conceptualization of the three kinds of capital that structure society—which, in a kyriarchal framework, are three ways to access and exercise social power: economic, which relates to money, income, and inherited wealth; social, which includes any resources and advantages received from people we associate with; and cultural, which refers to class position and includes elements like education, skill, and mannerisms. Kyriarchy helpfully explains how resistance to dominance is often subsumed within a larger hegemonic system: gender rebellion can be co-opted by systems of class and/or racial privilege; racial rebellion can be defanged by systems of educational and/or class privilege; class rebellion can be assuaged by racial and gender privilege, for example.

Kyriarchy can also be understood as the social enactment of neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism began as a set of economic policies but, over the last 50 years or so, has become "a normative order of reason," an inescapable "governing rationality [that]

transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves" (Brown 2015, 28). Individuals consider themselves economic actors in a sphere of privatization and deregulation, which (ostensibly) guarantees personal freedom (Harvey 2005, 65). Social services and safety nets are gutted to encourage entrepreneurialism, efficiency, and productivity, which results in the monetization of both identity and existence. Neoliberalism turns all interactions into hyper-individualized competitions in which one entity wins (social, economic, or cultural capital) and another loses (ibid; Wilson 2018). This effectively erases systemic inequality and dehistorizes the individual experience under the illusion of economic meritocracy. Neoliberalism supports many traditional elements of kyriarchy: class status is secured and perpetuated by tax cuts for the rich; education remains out of reach for many given the rising costs of college tuition; the authority of patriarchal figures in politics and the corporate sector are ensured by the circulation of dark money in American elections (Elias & Beasley 2009; Steger & Roy 2021). It becomes difficult to imagine a world outside capitalism, or its current permutations in neoliberal hegemony, which incidentally reinforces traditional systems of dominance while insisting that inequality has been overcome in the democratization of exchange.

Any attempt to increase equity must attend to not only undoing oppression and exclusion but also rescinding "conferred dominance" and preferential treatment awarded to individuals because of their kyriarchal positioning (McIntosh 1989). While class, gender, and race/ethnicity are in some ways distinct, they are also mutually constituted and deeply connected to—in unique and sometimes surprising ways—sexuality, religion, ability, etc. All are significant cogs—though some may be larger or more forceful—within a many-faceted machine of social dominance and individual identity construction that informs the current neoliberal hegemony. And yet, hegemony is always in contestation, is always under threat, and thus always needs to both reinscribe itself and remain mutable. The slipperiness of dominance makes it radically unstable, as seen in cultural artifacts like superhero films (Fischer 2006; Hassler-Forest 2012; Bridges et al 2023). Although superhero cinema reintroduces cultural values previously conveyed in Western cinema—grim courage and determination, loner individualism, and often violent administration of (one's own brand of) justice—it does so in new and often unexpected ways (Cantor 2016; Burke 2016; McGowan 2009). Superheroes' inevitable victory over anti-American threats works to reinforce traditional traits into a new neoliberal ideology, and yet neoliberal ideologies can often affect the performance and consequences of these traits.

The Dark Knight provides insights into both traditional and unexpected permutations of neoliberal kyriarchy. The year of its release is considered both the pinnacle of neoliberalism and its greatest failure, culminating in the global economic collapse. *The Dark Knight* explicitly responds to the trauma of 9/11 and Bush-era policies regarding torture, rendition, and surveillance (Fradley 2013; MacFarlane 2014; Phillips 2010),

seeming to demonstrate neoliberalism's incompatibility with democracy. While some see Nolan's film as a critique of conservative policies (Ip 2011, 229), others find it to be unapologetically supportive of authoritarianism (Bosh 2016; Zornado & Reilly 2021, 168). Still others see its political ambiguity as a strategy to maximize audience appeal and profit (Burke 2013, 35; Fradley 2010, 19). In any case, it functions as a microcosm of neoliberal kyriarchy, mirroring the shifting priorities and attempts to consolidate power that characterized the times. Given *The Dark Knight*'s almost exclusively male cast, the best place to start parsing the kyriarchal elements of *The Dark Knight* is through an understanding of the film's interactions with and constructions of masculinity.

Hegemonic—also called dominant, idealized, preferred, or toxic—masculinity describes the specific behaviors that reflect (local, regional, or global) society's ideal man (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). It is an amorphous but real set of cultural expectations to which boys and men must conform if they want to seem deserving of the privileges associated with their gender identity. Although more complex than traditional social scripts, it often includes elements of them, such as performances of physical strength, aggression, stoicism, and self-reliance. It allows "the winning and holding of [social] power and the formation (and destruction) of other groups in that process" (Donaldson 1993, 644). Hegemonic masculinity is determined within relationships between men, where gendered performances are negotiated through the policing of the self and others and the often violent rejection of subordinate masculinities or associations with femininity (as in the bullying of gender non-conforming children or the practice of "playing hurt") (Messner 1995; Trujillo 1995). *The Dark Knight* has an almost exclusively male cast, and Bruce's identity is constructed not only in the interactions between Bruce and his father figures—Alfred Pennyworth and Lucius Fox—but also in Batman's encounters with his peers and adversaries, Harvey Dent and the Joker.

2. HOMOSOCIAL MASCULINITIES

At the beginning of the film, Batman's crusade against Gotham's organized criminal underclass is drawing to a close, with Gordon on the brink of seizing the "mob's life savings" using Batman's irradiated bills (0:11:09). Batman bends gun barrels, displaying exceptional physical strength bestowed by his cutting-edge, armored suit, (0:09:15). In the first scene featuring an unmasked and unarmored Bruce, he stitches his own wounds alone in his bunker, demonstrating self-sufficiency, physical toughness, and emotion stoicism (0:12:43–0:12:50). His butler, Alfred, approaches and scolds him for sloppiness, incredulous that Bruce was injured by a dog and not the tiger he first suspected. Bruce emphasizes that it was a "big dog," so as to not besmirch his masculinity; the scene is played as a joke, but when Bruce discards his t-shirt, illustrating a muscle-slabbed back marred by scars and bruises, the film's endorsement of traditional masculine embodiment is quite serious. Most superhero films prominently feature the protagonists' muscle-bound

physique, even if physical strength is not required of that particular superhero (Connell 2020). The fact that Batman's physical strength comes not just from the suit demonstrates that Bruce's body is "the tool of his feats as well as the sign of his belonging" to superheroic masculinity (Roblou 2012, 79).

Such masculinity is initially reinforced not only in Alfred's gaze but also in that of the audience, who see that the chiseled musculature of his armor only reflects what lies beneath: Batman's masculine power is an extension of Bruce's powerful masculinity. A similar scene plays out later in the film with Lucius Fox, who handles Batman's technical needs while as serving as Wayne Enterprises' CEO. When Bruce asks him to engineer a way to be picked up by a plane without it having to land, Lucius smiles at the challenge (0:27:50). He similarly builds Bruce a new suit, admonishing that he should "read the instructions" before playing with its (deadly) features (0:28:17). It is, later, Alfred's idea to use an entire troop of ballerinas as an alibi, a position that only makes sense if women are homogenous, easily controlled, and largely silent (0:28:48). Alfred alludes to his own history supporting British colonialism when hunting a bandit in the forests of Burma, whom he claims is beyond reason and logic (0:54:28). The environmental degradation and violence of such histories is held up as necessary when Alfred indicates that the only way to catch the bandit was to "burn the forest down" (1:39:19). These are the father figures that encourage Bruce's extra-legal heroism and traditional performances of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by physical exceptionalism, sexual promiscuity, and eminent social status. This is further illustrated when Lucius defends Bruce against a lawyer who has discovered his secret alter ego: "You think that your client—one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the world—is secretly a vigilante who spends his nights beating criminals to a pulp with his bare hands, and your plan is to blackmail this person? Good luck" (0:58:02). However, Lucius and Alfred are not the most central masculine relationships that characterize the film.

Although Bruce is the hegemonically male core of Batman, his public performance takes on the form of a promiscuous dilettante, escorting the Russian prima ballerina to dinner and arriving late to a fundraiser with three objectified, silent women as his date (0:19:40; 0:44:28; Bosch 2015, 47). This is contrasted with Harvey Dent, who is constructed as Batman's mirror as well as Bruce's rival. Like Bruce, Harvey is in love with Rachel Dawes; like Batman, he is uncompromising in pursuit of justice: Gordon tells Batman "I hear [Dent's] as stubborn as you are" (0:11:31). His masculinity is, at first glance, less dominant than Bruce's: his commitment to Rachel is monogamous and he works within Gotham's legal structures as the District Attorney. Yet, in Harvey's first scene, a mob witness fires a gun point-black at him during cross-examination (0:15:15). When the gun jams, Harvey punches the witness in the face, dismantles the gun and stares down the boss who ordered the hit: "If you wanna kill a public servant … I recommend you buy American" (0:15:25). Unbothered by his brush with death, Harvey responds to threats

with instinctual physical violence, is uncowed by danger, and seems a quintessential patriotic American, conventionally attractive and smug. Although Bruce is poised to mock and emasculate Harvey—"Really, so you're into… ballet" (0:19:45)—he finds himself drawn in by the latter's unwavering support of Batman: "Gotham City's proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what is right" (0:20:19). While Harvey pontificates about the need for and drives of Batman, Bruce's face shows an explicit softening (0:20:36-0:21:01). Harvey is configured throughout the film as "Gotham's white knight," beloved by the public, the one incorruptible public servant standing for truth and justice (0:17:45, 2:14:52, 2:22:35). He sacrifices himself as a decoy, pretending to be Batman, and the camera angle, pointing at him from below as he raises his chin, reinforces his status as the emergent hero of the film (1:12:07). Harvey is charismatic, confident, and always interested in a lightly competitive game of chance—which he is guaranteed to win because of his father's lucky (double-sided) coin (1:44:14). He is emblematic of a shifting and perhaps equitably hegemonic masculinity, supported by State power and neoliberal competition.

It is not too much of a stretch to find Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) relevant to this interaction, as well as to the elision of the female lead (who only appears in 11 of the film's 152 minutes; Kvaran 2016, 220-221). Rachel is the superficial, heteronormative excuse for the men to connect in the truly important homosocial relationship that allows "introjection and incorporation [to form] the link between the apparently dissimilar processes of desire and identification" (Sedgwick 1985, 24). Harvey admires, protects, and identifies with Batman, which leads to Bruce's admiration for and identification with Harvey. It is an erotic triangle one degree removed from Sedgwick's: rather than two men using a woman as the third term to exercise homoerotic desire and construct their own identity, the triangle occurs between Bruce, Harvey, and Batman. In Sedgwick's theorization, there is a "stylized female who functions as a subject of action but not of thought [Batman]; a stylized male who functions as pure object [Harvey]; and a less stylized male speaker that functions as a subject of thought but not of action [Bruce]" (ibid, 32). This monolithically male triangle is poised to "save" Gotham from the criminal underclass and corrupt officials alike. It provides access to a masculinity that is mutually reinforcing and strengthens the dominant kyriarchal class and power structures (ibid, 26).

The Joker disrupts the ostensibly heteronormative but charged homosocial relationship that informs the film's new hegemonic masculinity. Scholars have struggled to identify the appeal and cultural resonance of the Joker. Some see him as a terrorist in his use of violent home videos or his willingness to blow himself up (Klaven 2008; Chang 2008; Stevens 2008; 0:43:09, 0:25:38); others see him as a Satanic figure tempting Gotham's citizens into selfish immorality (Boscaljon 2013; Bellinger 2013). When viewed in terms of sexuality, however, the Joker emerges as a queer subject that "convey[s] and challeng[es] the models of masculinity on offer in the superhero film" (Easton 2013, 39). Unlike Brue's

billionaire elegance or Harvey's middle-class charisma, the Joker is a garish mashup of butch and femme traits in his custom three-piece suit, dyed hair, make-up, and violent but giggling persona. He is a disabled drag queen performing camp and masochistically wooing Batman's violent attention (1:24:04; Barounis 2013, 317). The Joker tempts Batman to murder him at least twice, but not because it would require Batman to break his personal code (1:22:13, 2:13:06): "Do you wanna know why I use a knife? Guns are too quick… You see, in their last moments, people show you who they really are" (1:33:09-1:33:30). The Joker is desperate to be seen by the object of his erotic obsession: Batman, whose violence inspires him, whose presence "completes" him, and with whom he desires to struggle forever (1:28:07, 2:14:01). If the supervillain "interposes himself in the hero's narrative of finding true love and happiness" (Easton 2013, 42), in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker not only interposes himself within the heteronormative love triangle but within the homosocial one as well.

The Joker's status as a failed masculine subject explains the violence he so gleefully embraces and scholars' associations of him with mass shooters (Race Davis 2014). Just as in the case of mass shooters, no origin story or explanatory trauma is provided for this character: "he is angry and violent for no explained reason" and cannot be "influenced, persuaded, or bargained with" (ibid, 32, 34). Mass shooters tend to resort to violence when they feel their masculinity is threatened or destabilized, and they do it as well to establish bonds with or dominance over other men (Katz 2013, 1:04:10). The Joker's race and apparent nationality also support the association; if he is a terrorist at all, he is a home-grown, domestic terrorist, rising out of Gotham's underworld rather than religious extremism half a world away. Because the object of the Joker's affections—Batman—is so enmeshed in hegemonic masculinity, the only way to draw his attention and achieve intimacy is through violence. This is also why the Joker is so successful in turning Harvey to criminality—hence the complete disruption of the hegemonic, homosocial triangle. By the end of the film, Harvey has not only lost Rachel, but also the continent masculine body that allowed him to obtain social status (McGowan 2009, par. 49). He is now Joker's mirror, rather than Batman's, and he resorts to extreme violence, threatening Gordon's children, to reassert his own (failing) masculinity (2:17:54).

By the film's end, Harvey kills according to his own whims, no matter what his now non-double-sided coin indicates. In the hospital, Dent tells the Joker, "[Heads] You live. [Tails] You die," but later he shoots Batman even when the coin flip comes up heads (1:50:58, 2:19:07). He also tells the corrupt cop Ramirez that she will "live to fight another day," but we later learn there are "five dead, two of them cops" (2:03:35, 2:21:34). Harvey's need to dominate, once obtained through the performance of hegemonic masculinity, is now fulfilled by hyper-violence, especially over Batman—whom he insists on shooting—rather than the monstrous feminized Other of the Joker, whom he allows to live. No longer can Harvey use Batman, or Bruce use Harvey, to construct their masculine identities and

consolidate social power; the homosocial triangle is demolished by violent homoeroticism. The film provides the insight that the suppression of homoerotic impulse and its sublimation into compulsory heterosexuality and homosocial bonds of dominance leads to proliferations of extreme violence.

3. KYRIARCHICAL PRIVILEGE

The three male figures at the heart of *The Dark Knight* represent three competing and fraught spaces in the neoliberal socioeconomic system, which shed light on the ways gender dominance is reinforced by and dependent on socioeconomic status in a modern kyriarchy. Bruce is interested in the reproduction of capital, illustrated in his implicit authority over the Wayne business empire. Despite Lucius's nominal role as the company's CEO, Bruce is the one to initiate deals with foreign nationals (only to look at their books) and reassigns whole departments (R&D) without informing Lucius or explaining himself (0:18:55; 0:59:22). In his links to various submissive women and his deferred relationship with Rachel, Bruce is not a traditional patriarchal authority but, instead, a sexual consumerist. Such class markers extend to his alter ego; Batman is a part, or at least uses the tools, of the extremely wealthy, although not in relation to women. He claims the right to pursue vigilante justice because his armor is not cheap "hockey pads" (0:10:29; Barounis 2013, 315). Capital provides a position of extra-legal exceptionalism, buttresses the association of superheroism with masculinity, and involves the protection of property and consolation of wealth—Batman is dedicated, after all, to eradicating the flow of capital to those organized criminals that challenge the status quo.

Harvey, in turn, is symbolic of bourgeois patriarchy in his proposed marriage to Rachel, which will ensure social reproduction, and in his role as a civil servant prosecuting mob peons over theft and petty crime: "The head guys make bail, sure. But the mid-level guys, they can't. They can't afford to be off the streets long enough for trial and appeal. They'll cut deals that include some jail time. Think of all you can do with 18 months of clean streets" (0:40:59; Boscaljon 2013, 55). It is telling that Harvey does not similarly pursue reparations from Batman, even though the latter destroys thousands of dollars worth of public and personal property and is obviously well-funded given his vehicle, armor, and tools. The middle-class, represented by Harvey, respects and aspires to the position of the ultra-wealthy, just as the district attorney Harvey supports and protects Batman's masculinist pursuit of extra-legal justice. Such support can only be explained by the intersection of government with neoliberal ideology, itself strongly inflected by traits associated with Western masculinity: individualism, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurialism (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, 19). Harvey is the product of a neoliberal middle-class, invested in personal responsibility and suspicious of governmental authorities, as when he dismisses the mayor's cautions and critiques Gordon's specialized unit (0:41:20; 0:17:10). There is a sense that Harvey is "Gotham's true hero" because he is

paradigmatically middle-class, always striving to climb socially (as when he makes reservations at an exclusive restaurant) and consolidate capital (as when he attends Bruce's fundraising dinner), yet uncomfortable associating with the ultra-wealthy one-percent: "Harvey Dent, scourge of the underworld, scared stiff by the trust fund brigade" (0:19:23; 0:43:48).

The Joker represents anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal logic, which adds a layer of meaning to his disruption of the homosocial love trial identified above. During the bank heist at the beginning of the film, he is dressed in threadbare clothes and a stained clown mask, which he trades in for a custom purple suit that, while not necessarily "cheap," is definitely without labels (0:03:56; 0:23:38; 1:24:02). This signals his existence outside the system of commodity fetish where "unbound desire" becomes attached to a commercial object that is "eviscerated of its substance and history, and reduced to the state of marking a difference" (Baudrillard 1972, 81). The lack of labels means the suit is devoid of the social cache and status identification that labels provide. Later in the film, the Joker demonstrates "animosity toward private property" when he burns a 30-foot-tall stack of cash; such material is only useful to send a message (Boscaljon 2013, 55). The Joker's rejection of capital is intersected by his rejection of heteronormativity, continent bodies, and legal order. He wants destruction, not reproduction, of both capital and the State; he wants anarchy devoid of signs and systems of exchange beyond those of violence. But it is significant that even this rebellion is centered in a cis White man, which allows his rebellious class and gender position to be read not only as powerful but ultimately desirable, and explains the Joker's cultural influence (as reflected in the posthumous Academy Award Heath Ledger received for his interpretation, and the character's continued popularity; Heifetz 2021).

Contrast, for instance, the Joker's characterization in the film to that of Gambol, the only Black criminal overlord. Gambol is depicted as vindictive and rageful; he is more offended by the Joker's theft than the other (White) mob bosses (Italian, Chechan) and offers a reward for the capture of "the clown," alive or dead (0:25:43). Gambol is then killed within the first half hour of the film; he is the mobster most easily overcome by the Joker's disruptive rebelliousness (0:31:08). This is not necessarily because he is unable to enact hegemonic masculinity alongside capitalist ambition. In the neoliberal logic of the film, as well as in traditional performances of masculinity, anger toward and punishment of theft is legitimized. His anger instead becomes read as his inability to transcend the emotionality associated with his race. If Black men are read as hyperviolent or criminal, in both media and the wider world, it is a criminality associated with impulse and disorganization rather than logic and control (Collins 2004; Hall et al. 2016; DuVerney 2016).

The other Black men in the film are Lucius Fox, played by Morgan Freeman, and an unnamed prisoner who appears late in the film. Lucius is admired by wide swaths of African-American film audiences because of his economic success in an oppressively White

world and because of Freeman's "star status"; yet even in that success he serves and is subordinate to Bruce/Batman (Claverie 2017, 160). Perhaps more worrisome, Lucius acts as the film's moral compass, especially at the end, when he criticizes the surveillance system: "Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous... This is wrong" (1:55:50–1:56:28). This is similar to the behavior demonstrated by the unnamed criminal later in the film. When presented with the option to blow up a boat of civilians to save his own life, the large, scarred, and tattooed Black man plays on audience expectations of criminal stereotypes: "You don't want to die, but you don't know how to take a life... Give it to me and I'll do what you should've did 10 minutes ago" (2:10:06–2:11:25). However, he throws the detonator out the open window before turning away from the suited White warden with a disgusted sneer. Lucius and the prisoner only *seem* to challenge racial stereotypes and traditional figurations of morality; presenting White citizens and traditional heroes are fallible, whereas Black men—criminal or CEO—must be above reproach. Black men can *only* be admired in the world of the film because of their ethical exceptionalism; they must be better than those around them if they are to access any kind of screen time or social capital. It is additionally significant that the Black convict demonstrates his ethical nobility in a willingness to sacrifice his own life to preserve that of white strangers. This act hovers perilously close to Uncle Tom-like Black obsequiousness that characterized earlier cinema, from Cullen's comforting of Jackson at the end of *The Defiant Ones* (1958) to the sacrifice of Dick Hallorann in *The Shining* (Snead 1994; Guerrero 1993; Coleman 2022).

The moral ambiguity demonstrated by Batman (and, at times, Harvey) becomes a form of racial privilege; White men are admired for breaking the law and transgressing ethical boundaries in a way that is unavailable to people of color (McIntosh 1989). Although certain superheroes have become synonymous with Whiteness (even those whose Whiteness cannot be read on their bodies, like Spider-Man; Tyree and Jacobs 2014, 1), Batman's indisputable whiteness is legible on his naked chin and mouth. Such only emphasizes his appropriation of blackness, signaled in his suit; the film reproduces racialized color symbolism where whiteness symbolizes innocence and purity and Blackness evil and depravity (Moore 1988, 270). The (ostensible) violence of Blackness can only take the form of heroism when it is centered around and reinforced by Whiteness. If Harvey was Gotham's White (middle-class, hegemonically male) knight, then Batman is "not our hero. He's a silent guardian; a watchful protector. A Dark Knight" (2:24:24). Batman's suit works as an inverse of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), in which Batman can do the wickedness associated with Blackness because his innocence and superior intentions are assumed, due to his white skin. He may exist outside of the legal justice system, but this exceptionalism does not make him vulnerable, as it does Agamben's *homo sacer* (1998), or poor Black bodies in America (Lamont Hill 2016). Instead, it makes

him invincible—a new and modern permutation of Agamben's sovereign exceptionalism and neoliberal kyriarchy.

This is the direct and inescapable opposite of the experience of Black and Indigenous People of Color in America. Recent psychological studies reveal most Americans, including but not limited to police officers, are implicitly biased against young men of color, and these biases go beyond typical associations of Blackness with criminality (Hall, Hall, & Perry 2016, 176–77, 178). Americans also perceive Black children as older than they actually are, as in the case of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old assumed to be in his 20s when killed by a White police officer in Cleveland, Ohio (ibid, 176). Black men are also assumed to be an especially dangerous combination of subhuman and superhuman, evident in Darren Wilson's testimony about Michael Brown's shooting in Ferguson, Missouri: "I shoot a series of shots. I don't know how many I shot, I just know I shot it [*sic*]"; "It looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him" (Lamont Hill 2016, 12). Wilson also said that holding on to Brown made him feel "like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan" (Hall, Hall, & Perry 2016, 177). When Black men are seen as exceptionally strong, that strength is associated with alien animality; bullets don't penetrate because Black men are not fully human. This thinking allows the murder of individuals like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd to be dismissed or diminished because of the victims' assumed criminality, drug use, or threat to White officers.

Batman in *The Dark Knight* anticipates such ideology except in reverse, illustrating the pinnacle of neoliberal kyriarchy. Batman's altruistic intentions are assumed (due to his white skin), even when he is breaking the law; any losses of control he exhibits are excused, like his assault on the Joker while the latter is in police custody (1:29:39). Even though this film's new suit is supposedly lighter weight but less resistant to guns, knives, etc., Batman survives being stabbed, shot, attacked by dogs, and falling several stories in the film's final scenes; he is never again shown needing medical care (0:28:20; 2:09:19, 2:19:08). Like Michael Brown, Batman is considered in many ways superheroic, and yet his humanity is never in question despite the fact that he is dressed as a literal animal. This superhumanism is extended to any hegemonically masculine figure in the film, as can be seen in Harvey's ride in the back of a police van through the tunnels of Gotham. Although he is unsecured, and shown being physically shaken, he escapes the fate of Freddie Grey, whose rough ride in the back of a police van had tragically different results in Baltimore, in April of 2015 (1:18:02).

Narratively, Batman and Harvey's privileged kyriarchal positions protect them from harm. If, as Marc Lamont Hill (2016) argues, to be "nobody" is to occupy an intersectional identity that makes one vulnerable to overt and systemic State violence, as well as State negligence and abandonment, then Batman is not just the inverse of "nobody"; he

becomes the most essential "somebody" (xvii-xix). And, if Black bodies are made utterly vulnerable to State violence because of the intersections of race, class, education, gender, nationality, and religion, then Batman's privilege must be understood as more than that of just race or class or masculinity. Bruce/Batman occupies the elite class, performs shifting articulations of hegemonic masculinity, and functions with impunity because of the privileges of kyriarchy. His is a continent and able body reinforced by better-than-military equipment and legible in its Whiteness as acting with State-sanctioned (or at least State-permitted) violence. The antiheroism that Batman occupies in the film's conclusion, which allows him to be seen as a hero precisely because he adopts the appearance of a villain, can only be explained by the concept of kyriarchy. It is a privilege that is intersected and buttressed by class, education, maleness, Whiteness, nationalism, and ableism. If ancient kyriarchy was rule of the emperor, lord, slave master, and husband, then modern, neoliberal kyriarchy is the exceptionalism of hegemonic masculinity, Whiteness, and cultural-economic status; such an intersectional identity allows individuals to transcend State authority and moral imperatives, while remaining appealing to the general audience in both their desired social position and introjected subjectivity.

4. Conclusion

As the world—and neoliberalism and its attendant supports in kyriarchy—evolves, we need to keep examining not just the conspicuous absences within media narratives regarding race, gender, disability, and more, but also the ways certain films allow a glimpse into the structures of exceptionality and privilege that characterize society at a given moment. I hope that this paper has allowed such insight; *The Dark Knight*, still a cultural touchstone, will remain a valuable snapshot of intersecting systems of dominance and oppression at a particular moment in the early twenty-first century that remains crucial in the developments and reinscriptions of neoliberal hegemony. Identifying such structures can help dismantle them and evolve the dialectical movement of cinematic history towards equity, inclusivity, and accessibility. Perhaps now, in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, and #MeToo, we can demand more of our media, including representations that envision a society built on networks of shared power and resources, rather than loner individuality and physical invulnerability. It remains to be seen if such a world is possible within the cinematic superhero genre, but it is a challenge worth pursuing.

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THE S DOES NOT STAND FOR "SHAME":
THE JOINT MAKING OF A QUEER SUPERGIRL

Christina Dokou

ABSTRACT

One of the major changes that mark twenty-first-century superhero depictions is the introduction of inclusive standards—whether race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—in new or existing reinterpreted characters. Accordingly, the CW network series *Supergirl* (2015–2021), chronicling the adventures of Superman's cousin, became famous for powerfully challenging the comic-universe canon of the titular heroine's sexuality, albeit despite the intentions of its producers. When, during Season 2, the show cast Katie McGrath as Lena Luthor, the good sister of Superman's arch-nemesis, Lex Luthor, the actress's strong lesbian appeal colored the friendship intended between her character and Kara Danvers/Supergirl (played by Melissa Benoist), so that their bond was immediately coded by viewers—even non-LGBTIQ+ ones—as deeply romantic. While, however, fans clamored that "there is no heterosexual explanation" for the two women's relationship and demanded that it—and Supergirl's bisexuality—be acknowledged as canon in the CW and the DC comics universes, the writers/producers of the show gaslighted such expectations to the end by pairing Lena or Kara with male partners and insisting on their being just "friends," earning the show the title of "the biggest queerbait in television history." This paper, therefore, reads "SuperCorp" both as a sign of the times regarding popular culture attitudes for queer superheroes, and a significant occasion of what Henry Jenkins has termed the "textual poaching" ethics of twenty-first century media fandom, with consumer creations actually impacting back upon the production process itself.

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Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise, the fans assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons. Undaunted by traditional conceptions of literary and intellectual property, fans raid mass culture, claiming its materials for their own use, reworking them as the basis for their own cultural creations and social interactions. (Jenkins 2012, 18)

1. INTRODUCTION: QUEER FAN CULTURE AND ITS INFLUENCE ON *SUPERGIRL*

Henry Jenkins's (2012) hat-tipping to the creative power of millennial/Gen Z "textual poachers" has by now become an established variable in considerations of popular culture industries, but also fan identity formation. As Johanna Church (2023) observes:

> Fandom of any kind, whether related to sports, movies, or television, is similar to a social identity in that the subject of an individual's fandom becomes part of the individual's self-concept. That self-concept, in turn, is influenced by the individuals' knowledge of/confidence in their membership within a social group, which is then strengthened by their level of engagement in online forums and other forms of social media. (215)

Especially when it comes to queer fandom, the boon of reinventing oneself dialectically in pop culture, the social media, and beyond is corroborated by the link Jenkins (2012) observes between fan ideologies and queer/feminist studies (x–xi). At the same time, the recent "shift in focus from the evidence of queerness and the intentions of creators to the harmful effects of this perceived act of exploitation and homophobia" highlights the importance of fan affect as identity-formative (McDermott 2019, 118). It is such a case of creative fandom poaching as "undaunted" identity affirmation that this paper examines, namely the example of "SuperCorp," the femslash ship[1] engendered by the CBS/CW Network series *Supergirl* (2015–2021). The series chronicles the adventures of Kara Zor-El, Superman's younger cousin in DC Comics, set in the fictional location of National City. *Supergirl* became a social media/platform darling due to the fan perception of the friendship between the titular protagonist and Lena Luthor, arch-villain Lex Luthor's half-sister, as a romantic lesbian pairing.

Fan speculation, fiction and art on this relationship between Supergirl/Kara (played by Melissa Benoist) and Lena (Katie McGrath), dubbed "SuperCorp" as a fusion of "Supergirl" and "LuthorCorp" (the Luthors' flagship company), single-handedly carried the show's ratings for five of its six seasons and generated spectacular amounts of fandom material. SuperCorp was the most popular femslash ship on Tumblr in 2017 and 2018 (Hicks 2020, 223) and the tenth most popular show on Tweeter (now X), averaging 40-50.000 tweets a week, with McGrath being the most popular actress across the entire website in 2017 (292). Anna DeGalan (2018) notes the incredible profusion of SuperCorp fan art on numerous popular sites, such as Reddit and DeviantArt (15), while there are thousands of fanmade videos—"cracks," trailers, shorts, compilations or "Vines"—on video-sharing platforms, with thousands, sometimes millions of views each, giving us "A Hundred Reasons to Ship Supercorp" (KG honorarybard 2020a and 2020b), or earnestly arguing "Why Kara and Lena Are Soulmates" (NerdLife), along with 217,580 posts on Instagram ("#Supercorp" 2023, n.p.). On the highly popular queer fanfiction site *An Archive*

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[1] The term "femslash" indicates a romantic pairing involving two women. "Ship" is short for "relationship" but can be used as a verb ("shipping") to indicate fan perception of two characters as a romantic pair.

of Our Own (AO3), SuperCorp generated over eight thousand entries (Hicks 2020, 303), which strongly signals the rising visibility of traditionally underrepresented lesbians in pop media culture (Ng and Russo 2017, 1.16) and, especially, in the fanboy-oriented comics domain, with "female superheroes becoming vehicles of female power fantasies and queer desire" (Hicks 2020, 291). SuperCorp, then, helps an old character transition to times when, in Marica Orrù's words, "old values coexist with new popular culture topics and new social themes" and the new heroes representing them "come with old and new medias, believe in equality, freely express their sexuality, fight for political correctness and defend diversity" (2023, 1).

The exceptional popularity of SuperCorp appears disproportionate to critical ratings of the show: a mere 6.2 average in *IMDb* ("*Supergirl*: Ratings" 2023, n.p.) and a 46% audience score on *Rotten Tomatoes*, though critics gave it a resounding positive 90% on the "Tomatometer" (2022, n.p.) largely prompted by the shows' socially-aware politics. One would then be compelled to seek the *whence* of this extreme popularity of SuperCorp (among other popular shows with explicit lesbian pairings) in the *frisson* created by the writers of the show. They would offer visual and textual romantic cues with no possible heterosexual explanation in one moment, coding the twain as queer, and at the next gaslight fans with the insistence that the two women are just "friends," to the point where fans became rightfully enraged with what they perceived "as perhaps the biggest, worst example of queerbait in modern television history" (Laguerre-Lewis 2021, n.p.; also, abnormallyadam 2021). Granted, queer coding—that is, giving a character behavior and personality traits perceived by audiences as queer regardless of the character's (stated or unstated) gender and sexuality—may happen intentionally or accidentally on the part of the producers. Nevertheless, queerbaiting is always purposeful in its attempts to attract LGBTIQ+ audiences, and hence perceived as a sign of disrespect by fans regardless of their sexual identity, as it happened with *Supergirl* (Fierra 2019, n.p.; Liszewiski 2017, n.p.; Stacy 2020, n.p.). In fact, for all its toxic effect on queer identity formation and validation, queerbaiting is by now established as a ubiquitous marketing practice in popular culture industry (McDermott 2021, 848–50). Industry practices might also explain why SuperCorp was refused canonical validation: as Alex Zalben notes (2020, n.p.), a lesbian or bisexual Supergirl "would be the sort of thing that would rapidly work its way all the way to the top of the AT&T chain [the company that owns DC Comics] and be promptly shut down," since corporations bank on cautious conservativism in order not to alienate lucrative mainstream audiences. Such practices have been resonating with wider culture, where the real-life experience of lesbian individuals is often "denied or doubted," purposefully mis-interpreted "as a type of intense bonding between women" (Seidman 2004, 144). Even worse, "[h]omonegative tropes dominate representation of lesbian women on television. The evilness and death tropes (based on the dead lesbian syndrome) emerged from criticism about television depictions of lesbian supporting characters as villainous

or expendable" (Parker et al. 2020, 396). Validating SuperCorp, then, instead of queerbaiting, would fly in the face of multiple homonormative cultural industry injunctions.

Yet what is interesting is not just that queer fandom rebelled defiantly against corporate homophobia, but how their influence actually helped *rewrite* the show while it was still in the making. It is a paradigmatic case of textual poaching having evolved into a burgeoning "participatory culture," where "more groups assert control over the processes of cultural production and circulation" (Jenkins 2012, xxi). Furthermore, Super-Corp constitutes a case of transmedial convergence, as fan ascription of queerness upon Supergirl is not just based on the TV show, but reappropriates elements already present in the Golden Age inception of her character. It is also a paradigmatic case of working out the limitations of the oppositional model of fan culture, namely addressing the "tension between fascination and frustration, suggesting that fans are involved in a process of negotiation with the rights holders, seeking to influence the text where they may," and signaling their appreciation of a cultural text even by "claiming the right to retell the stories in their own terms" (Jenkins 2012, xxi). In that sense, the Kara/Lena fan femslash evinces what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identified as "queer shame": acknowledged homophobia which nevertheless functions "as a near-inexhaustible source of transformational energy," fueling queer performative activism (1993, 4). Politically, this kind of shame can serve the expedient non-fixity of queerness, as it "generates and legitimizes the place of identity—the *question* of identity—at the origin of the impulse to the performative, but does so without giving that identity-space the standing of an essence" (Sedgwick 1993, 14). In simultaneously claiming queerness and denying its shameful aspect, therefore, this conception of queer performativity as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" would be a fitting tool to examine the aforementioned love/hate relationship of queer fandom to producers (1993, 15). Sara Ahmed (2014) concurs by noting how such "negative affect" (her term for "shame") galvanizes queer bodies into forming activist communities among themselves, (101), but also, notably, inventing ways of negotiating their place within "the circuits of exchange within global capitalism" (165).

Hence, one reads the desire of queer fandom to make SuperCorp "endgame" and "canon" as implicated with queerbaiting and homonegativity. Although essentially pernicious, queerbaiting could be the impetus for action towards a more empowered affirmation for queer minorities, while also serving corporate interests. Instead of a simplistic oppositional schema, we could instead envision a positioning of the queer self/ves *in juxtaposition* to the hegemonic and also in *symbiosis* to it: from opponents to partners or, as Lena put it, "a Luthor and a Super working together" (*Supergirl*, S02E05). After all, for Alexander Doty, queerness in popular culture is "less an essential, waiting-to-be-discovered property than the result of acts of production or reception" (1993, xi). In today's universe of unprecedented rapid-response and networking capacities, fans do not have to

take gaslighting or the "Bury Your Gays" trope passively, but respond powerfully as a nation united by the same negative affect forces that would isolate them.

One accordingly could see "SuperCorp" as the queering of the term "Supergirl" (and the superhero conventions and tropes) through a bricolage by fans, comic-book authors, and network producers/writers alike, predicated upon what Eve Ng names "queer contextuality, referring to how both the current and previous landscapes of LGBT media narratives inform evaluations of particular texts" (2017, 1.3). Instead of being daunted into silence by the rampant machismo of traditional comics culture, fandom selectively repurposes that very tradition towards identity-affirming creations.

2. SUPER-SHAMING AND ITS ORIGINS

What is particularly interesting in the case of Supergirl in this battle of representational affects is, of course, that her history of (queered) shame is precisely predicated on her being the most super-powerful body on Earth while, simultaneously, belonging to what is traditionally known as "the weaker sex." The Golden Age Supergirl debuted in 1959 in *Action Comics* #252 with an inherent heteronormativity problem: marketed as an "adorkable" Super-variant targeted at teen girls, she was still too strong to fit normative femininity. Hence, "Supergirl's early stories attempt to resolve her difference by continually seeking a male partner for her. Time and again, however, Supergirl's power makes the task impossible" (Hicks 2020, 297). The shame factor is embodied in Supergirl's first "boyfriend," an annoyingly "all-American" kid named Dick Wilson ("Richard Malverne" 2023, n.p.). Dick develops an interest in Supergirl because he accidentally takes a picture of her flying and then dedicates his life to proving, through a number of schemes, that his classmate Linda Lee (the alias of the Golden Age Supergirl) is an alien superheroine: the exposure of an accidental photograph leads to a hunt for the "exposure" of her secret identity, conflating her superpowers with some form of shame that must remain hidden. Furthermore, this shame is coded as sexual and gendered, since Dick also develops amorous feelings for Supergirl, and the two even date for a while, as a concession to all-powerful heteronormativity. Dick's attraction to Supergirl "highlights the metaphorical link between her sexuality and her powers. It also emphasizes the sexualization of Supergirl's secrets" (Hicks 2020, 296). Yet, in the end, the attempt to harness Supergirl's threatening unfeminine difference via a number of male suitors, from Dick to Batman, proves futile, as she is physiologically impossible to contain within heteronormative narratives of masculine superiority and control. This holds equally true for the television show, where Kara confesses that, during her first make-out session with a classmate, she broke his nose (S02, E14). The popular association of the nose with the penis suggests a logical chain of thought: as the "Girl of Steel" is invulnerable *everywhere*, heterosexual penetration threatens castration, affirming that "Supergirl's 'true' sexual self ... has obvious vagina dentata connotations" (Hicks 2020, 297–98). In his study of *The Supergirls*,

Mike Madrid traces through Supergirl's multiple (re-)incarnations as alien, robot, magical wish-come-true, or highly sexualized, autonomous, and more-powerful-than-Superman tweener her impossibility of conforming to submissive feminine standards no matter the occasion, revealing the comics Supergirl as quintessentially queer (2009, 94–99)—hence, not alien to the idea of a SuperCorp.

The decades-long standstill of Supergirl against patriarchy would only shift in the late twentieth century, as queer fandom gained force and recognition in popular culture. As Kara Kvaran notes, the homophobic trend of the decades-long rule of the Comics Code Authority on the mainstream, fanboy-oriented comics industry "has changed in the past decade, as Marvel and DC Comics have both made an effort to include homosexual characters and storylines in their major titles, and in recent years, the depiction of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in comics has vastly improved" (2014, 142). This trend gained considerable support from Comics/Queer Studies critics who have argued that the superheroic body has always already been not only "supersexed," that is, overly charged with gendered eroticism, but also inherently queer in its affiliation with alien/mutant/freak/monstrous Otherness[2]:

> As a biological misfit, the superhero inhabits a body that deviates from real-life bodies and may therefore queer mainstream views of gender and sexuality rooted in references to the physical body. As a social outcast who must hide or sublimate a secret (and occasionally sexual) identity and is burdened by the great responsibilities that come with superhuman powers, the superhero has the potential to queer normative notions of male and female corporeality despite its overt promotion of an idealized and hypersexualized heteronormative body. (Stein 2018, 20)

One could then argue that what SuperCorp fans did was paradoxically, both against the grain of queerbaiting shaming *mores*, and yet essentially already inherent to the character's constitutive "super" femininity.

3. CODING AND BAITING: *SUPERGIRL* PRODUCERS AND FANS

Signaling its awareness of such a dynamic to engage potential queer viewers, the CW show makes use of the "queer" (baiting) trope right from episode 1. Kara Danvers (Supergirl's civilian identity in the show), after her first, forced public super-feat (read: "outing"), tries to reveal her super status to Winn Schott, a co-worker attracted to her. However, he assumes she's coming out to him as a lesbian: "This conversation between the two friends was written as a direct nod to the LGBTQA+ community since the phrasing

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[2] Here Otherness, as theorized by a series of philosophers, is taken as a necessary intersubjective constituent of identity, applicable to all categories predicated on some form of difference such as race, gender, sexuality, culture, or ethics, and eliciting bias against those deviating from the normative constitution of these categories.

used by Kara is similar to a 'coming out' narrative, even down to her nervous behavior of stuttering her words and her movement of pacing on the rooftop of CatCo World Wide Media" (DeGalan 2018, 6). Even though Kara refutes Winn's conclusion with an emphatic "I'm not gay!" the fact that Winn serves as the equivalent for Dick Wilson signals an admission on the part of the show's writers that sexual dynamics are no longer heteronormatively granted. Instead of hiding in shame, this Super comes out confidently; instead of using that shame as a fulcrum-point to lay a romantic and controlling heteronormative claim to Supergirl, this "Dick" yields to her superiority from the start, coding it furthermore as queer. The lesbian "coming out" trope is used again, as DeGalan notes (2018, 5), in Kara's subsequent conversation with her adoptive sister Alex, who wishes to keep Kara's superpowers hidden in order to protect her. Kara describing her first public use of her superpowers as "[s]cared, but good scared. Like, like that moment right before you kiss someone for the first time" (S01, E01) links superpowers and sexuality with "someone," not necessarily male, in a precarious way that echoes Ahmed's negative affect of shaming desire. Yet Kara leaving open possibilities of what her "coming out" "means" embraces the heroine's twenty-first-century potential "as a narrative whose meanings emerge from its ability to provoke controversy and sanction multiple readings" (Stein 2018, 31).

The gesture then initiates a dialogue with queer(-friendly) fans whom the producers/writers expect to be already versed in comics and sub-textual poaching, like crack videos or slash/shipper fiction. Studies on queer superhero shipping (by Bolling 2014; also Schott 2010, among many) evince "how the public recognition of the superhero as a queer figure has transitioned from twentieth-century attempts to subvert the mainstream reading of hypersexualized yet heteronormative body images and gendered narratives to the more pervasive (yet still controversial) current embrace of the figure's queer potentials" (Stein 2018, 16). Thus, the show is seen as consciously setting up a challenge with its queer audience to read Supergirl as lesbian or bisexual, even despite her denial—which is why this snippet from the pilot episode is one of the first things challenged and mocked in fan creations, such as the video series by the highly popular "Queen of Crack," Niki Sky (2016).

The challenge was bolstered by the show's notable showcasing of sensitive social issues, which garnered it four GLAAD Media Award nominations for 2017 and 2020–2022 (*IMDb*, "*Supergirl*: Awards" 2023, n.p.): "Throughout its six-season run, the show tackled nuanced themes like trans rights, BLM, and fascism, through a feminist/queer lens. It also showcased female friendships without relying on familiar tropes, like the 'mean girls' or 'enemies-to-friends' clichés" (Church 2023, 213–14). Alex, the sister who kept Kara "in the closet," comes out (S02, E05) as a "powerful, supportive, and protective" lesbian (Hicks 2020, 303), amplifying Kara's queer vibes:

> Alex's embracing of her sexuality is portrayed in such a way that when she "comes out" to her sister, we as an audience can see that this scene is structure almost exactly like how Kara's acceptance of her new identity as Supergirl. Knowing all of this, we can conclude Kara's embracing of her Supergirl identity is scripted to be seen as a queer narrative, while Kara is hegemonically "straight" character, Supergirl is an undeniably a queer character. (DeGalan 2018, 6)

Buoyed by enthusiastic fan responses, Alex's lesbianism became a main show subplot, culminating in a happy wedding to her African-American partner, Kelly Olsen, and their adoption of an alien child as the close of the show's final season six. Other key queer characters include the lesbian cop Maggie Sawyer; the half-alien transgender superhero Dreamer, played by trans actress Nicole Maines, whose moniker combines queerness with allegorizing on the rights of immigrant children raised in America (which, technically, both Supers are); and her boyfriend, Brainiac-5, something of a queer overkill as a computer-alien hybrid encompassing multiple selves, including a lesbian. There was even a "SuperCat" lesbian ship scenario between Kara and her domineering employer, the flamboyant "Queen of All Media" Cat Grant, "portrayed by 1990s postfeminist icon Calista Flockhart" (Hicks 2020, 302), who also matriarchally officiated Kara's "coming out" by coining her "Supergirl" moniker (S01, E01). In that sense, the show could be said to possess a quality sought after, according to Michael McDermott, by many queer fans, i.e., diversity instead of the usual token representation of *one* minority individual embodying "every experience, every trait, every perspective" (2021, 846).

The introduction of the character of Lena Luthor, however, played by Irish actress Katie McGrath (S02, E01) was the pivotal moment for queer fan poaching. Originally there for a mere three-episode arc, McGrath's character was meant to serve the show's habit of reversing known Superman tropes by presenting a good and ethical Luthor who would be not the Super's arch-enemy but a good friend. Nevertheless, McGrath's Lena resonated so much with fans that the producers saw fit not only to make her a permanent key character, but to gradually elevate her intense friendship with Supergirl to the *primus mobile* of the show's plot arks. Specifically, Lena's trajectory was linked to, and shaped by, perceived and measurable queer fan responses to the show, as noted in the *Supercorp Shipping Wiki*:

> Supercorp is one of the most popular and common ships in the Supergirl fandom. The moments where Kara consoles Lena at L Corp, CatCo or most any time they get close on screen, the actors have been noted by fans as having chemistry. On AO3, Supercorp is the most written ship for Lena, and the most written for Kara. It is also the most written ship in the Supergirl (TV 2015) tag. Moreover, it is also the most written femslash ship and the 32nd most written on the site overall. (n.p.)

A fundamental part of it was due to the actress portraying Lena Luthor: "The emotional drama of the friendship that develops between both Lena and Kara as well as Lena and Supergirl is bolstered by these tensions and by the onscreen chemistry between

Benoist/Supergirl and McGrath/Lena. This in turn fuels fans' championing of a romantic interpretation of the two's relationship" (Hicks 2020, 302). Noted for her alabaster skin, McGrath "has her whiteness regularly fetishized within fan art created by Supercorp ship-pers, who often present her as either significantly paler than Kara, on occasion, without any skin color at all" (Hicks 2020, 304). This whiteness, coupled with McGrath's irrepress-ible Dublin "posh" accent and poise, along with the Luthor predatoriness of her role, strongly gesture towards the tradition of female vampires which, since Sheridan LeFanu's 1872 *Carmilla*, has linked vampirism to "marginalized sexual behaviors," pre-dominantly lesbianism (Borgia 2016, 110). McGrath, a charismatic actress with the odd ability to queer every role she's ever played, came to the show already credited with two successful lesbian roles and a vigorous queer fan following in tow, and proceeded to bom-bard Kara with every lesbian-coded stare or gesture imaginable, including a celebrated sexy lip bite while inviting her "only friend" to her fundraising gala (S02, E05). For DeGa-lan, "when you consider the acting cues McGrath uses to convey chemistry with Kara Danvers, in terms of lip bites, lingering eyes, stuttering in speech, accidental sexual in-nuendos, breath hitches, etc., it becomes abundantly clear to the fandom that their 'ship-ping' of SuperCorp has some legitimacy within the show" (2018, 19). Even though she claimed she initially had no perception of any lesbian undertones to her role (Mitovich 2017, n.p.), McGrath became the most supportive cast member of the right of fans to read the show as they saw fit, and was reciprocally "hailed by fans as 'captain' of the Super-corp ship" (Laguerre-Lewis 2021, n.p.), "signing fan art and meeting with Supercorp fans, with Melissa Benoist … later following suit" (Church 2023, 223).

Furthermore, the gestures used to express Kara and Lena's "friendship" were from the start engineered to parallel tropes of heterosexual superhero romance. Supergirl's frequent rescues of Lena often involve the iconic "bridal carry" pose and, in a particularly lesbian-leaning episode involving a romantic *Titanic* allusion (S03, E05), Kara would ra-ther risk dropping half a cargo plane loaded with poison in National City's water supply than drop Lena trapped in the other half of the hull. In turn, Lena's sultrily-delivered phrase that "Supergirl may have saved me, but, Kara Danvers, you are my hero!" (S02, E12) was reiterated in the linked CW superhero show *Legends of Tomorrow* during the wedding of Barry Allen, better known as the superhero The Flash, as a marriage vow by his bride Iris (S03, E08). These coding clues alone would be sufficient to debunk any het-erosexual explanation for all fans with an even rudimentary knowledge of comics.

4. QUEERING THE POWER DYNAMICS: DAMSEL, YES, DISTRESS, NO

The queerest of elements, as per the present analysis, however, comes from the way Su-pergirl as a sign is repositioned according to millennial/GenZ standards through her les-bian pairing to Lena: the staple for any heretofore romantic relationship with a (su-per)hero has been gendered inequality between them and their partner, as he is the

savior, she the damsel in distress. Yet here it is Lena who emerges as the dominant part-
ner, and as such presents an affirmative model for queer dealings with dominant societal
forces such as heteronormativity or corporate culture, one based on equality-in-differ-
ence and versatility. Described by McGrath as "a badass" and "a powerhouse" (Mitovich
2017, n.p.) whose friendship with Kara allows her "to be honest and vulnerable" (Hatchett
2021, n.p.), Lena becomes a metonymy for the "Supercorp fandom ... organized around
the figure of Lena Luthor rather than Supergirl" (Hicks 2020, 307). As shall be shown, this
inverted dynamic turns SuperCorp into a case of what Adrienne Rich hailed as an em-
powering, nurturing "lesbian continuum" free from phallogocentric violent hierarchies,
"a range ... of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact a woman has had or con-
sciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman" (1980, 648).

A brunette to Supergirl's blonde, Lena exemplifies the darker, worldlier, and mood-
ier of the pair as per the "Hair Contrast Duo" trope predominant in pop-fiction lesbian
pairings (*Tropedia*, 2023, n.p.). As Olivia Hicks observes, "the potential threat of Super-
girl's strength is nullified by Lena's intelligence and wealth" that often saves Supergirl's
life (2020, 310), and "even the name 'Supercorp'—an amalgamation of 'Supergirl' and 'L-
Corp,' Lena's company, which is in turn easily reinterpreted as a reference to lesbianism
(*The L Word*)—alludes to the erotic appeal of superpowered and/or superpowerful female
bodies" (306–07). One could even suggest that the choice of "Corp" showcases Lena's
body as a synecdoche of the infinite resources and capacity of her corporation in the same
way a hegemon's body would be seen as a supra-human synecdoche of their kingdom.
Lena's stylish dark androgynous business suits, contrasted to Kara's submissive multi-
layered pastels "portraying passive femininity" (DeGalan 2018, 12), are a sartorial match
for the iconic Super-suit. From "BFFs forever!"—an ironic exclamation offered by
McGrath during one of her first interviews, indicating that the term was queered from the
beginning (Lena Thorul 2022)—Lena moves to becoming Kara's "boss"—a loaded term
that Kara seems to delight in repeating, and to which Lena responds with a texted heart
emoji (S03, E01)—to manifesting witch powers and becoming perhaps the most effective
of the Superfriends in season six. With quotes like "Oh, I know I'm the best!" (S04, E02)
and "I've never stood behind a man" (S02, E18), McGrath's Lena dominated the show as
a lesbian sexual trigger. This is both well-documented both in fan reactions and
McGrath's own sassy retort, when told that she is "in love with Lena": "Wouldn't you
be?" (Mitovich 2017, n.p.). No wonder McGrath was nominated for "Choice: Scene
Stealer" at the 2018 Teen Choice Awards for her galvanizing portrayal.

Beyond the purely physical domain, Lena is the one who most boldly yet judiciously
questions Supergirl's moral authority and motives, even accusing her of having "a god
complex" (S03, E18). Contrasted with that, shy, babyface Kara is shown becoming mes-
merized or flustered around Lena, even to the point of almost outing herself as Supergirl
during their second meeting when she blurts out accidentally "I flew here—on...a...bus"

(S02, E03). Kara's often risible attempts to mask the use of her powers around Lena (as in S04, E02) recall the Golden-Age Supergirl's submissiveness, who would "exercise power through spectacles that displace it, either by rendering it invisible, or by attributing it to a masculine source" (Link 2013, 1180). Indicative of Kara's status in the relationship is her being labeled in all kinds of Supercorp fan creations as "puppy": *An Archive of Our Own* alone lists a combined 296 works with Kara as, or associated with, a puppy, or exhibiting puppy-like behavior (2023)—which, given that McGrath is an enthusiastic dog owner who refers to dogs consistently as "puppies," only highlights the idea of an erotic roleplay between "mistress" and "submissive."

Lena has a further advantage in being portrayed as more experienced in sexual relationships with men and always carrying a strong erotic chemistry when it comes to her women "friends." By contrast, the Girl of Steel is a suitor-bruising "Iron Maiden," which explains the need to romantically involve her with Mon-El in season two: as a Daxamite from the same planetary system as Krypton, Mon-El is the closest physiologically to a non-incestuous super-male that could deflower the virginal Kara. Played winningly by Chris Wood, Benoist's real-life husband, Mon-El is nevertheless told off as "a lying jackass" who disrespects, undermines and demeans Kara (S03, E15). The fact that he was hated by fans precisely for his old-school male lead traits confirms how the relationship paradigms have shifted in the twenty-first century: for Hicks, "The unpopularity of the pairing of Supergirl and Mon-El … relative to the popularity of Supercorp suggests it is out of step with the desires of a significant portion of the show's audience" (2020, 303), and explains the subsequent harried defenestration of that "love eternal" (S02, E22). The schema could in fact encompass all other heterosexual pairings to which the two women were subjected by CW's producers to exorcise SuperCorp, yet were dropped when fans rejected them riotously. In fact, the show's final desperate attempt to make Kara heterosexual, the reporter William Dey, became so hated by exasperated fans (Palat 2020, n.p.) that his character not only got another girlfriend, but was also subsequently murdered by Lex Luthor for good measure (S06, E18). Similarly, when Jack Spheer, Lena's former business partner/lover and her professed "Kryptonite," falls prey to a villainess manipulating his nanotechnology, Lena herself chooses to kill him to save Supergirl, after which she is comforted by a very intimate hug and promise of forever protection and support by Kara (S02, E18). In fact, evincing the influence of SuperCorp shippers on the show, a much later episode revises completely Lena's hybrid partnership with Jack, whom she abandons because she wants to be "the Luthor that shares her home with a Kryptonian! That helps her put the world back together instead of tearing it apart!" (S05, E06). Making Supergirl's "outing" the occasion for Lena's move to National City in intentional pursuit of a relationship oddly described as "sharing a home" rephrases their "friendship" drastically as irresistible lesbian attraction, and repurposes the show's heteronormative interjections into ways for the two women to become (romantically) linked.

Queer fan appreciation for Lena strongly centered around her darker traits, especially the highly-eroticized "redeemed bad girl" trope. In the final episode of season four (E22), Lena even shoots in cold blood her evil brother, whom she idolized as a child, to prevent him from further harming the world and Supergirl. With his dying breath, Lex tells Lena that Kara is Supergirl, goading Lena into seeing this as a violation of her most intimate trust and sending her in a supervillainous revenge spin in season five, foreshadowed by her previous self-assessment as a having "the emotional range of Medea" (S03, E12), a murderess infamously triggered by betrayed love. Lena's extreme reaction is indeed paradigmatic of "a woman scorned": she punches Supergirl in virtual reality (S05, E01) and even uses kryptonite on her for real, only stopping short of murder (S05, E08). In contrast, Kara, when faced with the possibility of physically assaulting Lena's weaponized bunker, simply raises her hands in surrender, something she had never done with any other opponent (S05, E08). As if those coded clues about the nature of Lena's ire weren't enough, the CW writers, compelled by fan anger over the damaged relationship, retrospectively rewrote Lena's motive for shooting Lex. At the pivotal moment her clandestine grudge (and her fratricide) is revealed, she screams tearfully at Supergirl "I killed my brother for you, for our friendship, you understand what you've done?!" (S05, E07). Since at that moment Kara is in Supergirl costume and the two are alone in the Fortress of Solitude (the Kryptonians' iconic hideaway in the North Pole), it appears as if Lena's motives were altruistic. However, when Lena shot her brother, she did not know Kara was Supergirl. Ergo, "you" and "our friendship," further contextualized by Lena's earlier description of Kara as "someone you love" that goes on to "betray you," are in fact directed at Kara Danvers, not world-saving, and point to an emotion generated by Kara strong enough to turn ethical Lena into a fratricide (S05, E07). Even Lena's eventual attempts to apologize and excuse herself (S05, E19 and S06, E01) are verbally constructed to intimate retrospectively that her project, "Non Nocere," a mind-controlling implant used to excise violent or scary emotions from the human brain, was meant to be used on herself to get rid of her enormous "hurt" over Kara's betrayal, the magnitude of which could only accord with passionate love. While Hicks reads Kara keeping her identity secret as a form of domination over Lena, reciprocally "Supergirl's lack of knowledge about Lena results in a lack of control that undermines her powers, mirroring her loss of power in the relationship" (2020, 309). Kara's propitiatory position is further highlighted by her constantly tearful apologies and her unwavering protectiveness of an increasingly hostile Lena. Notable among such occasions, and clearly written as a nod to the SuperCorp fandom, is the show's celebrated 100th episode, a parody of *It's a Wonderful Life*: offered the chance by a magical imp friend to do over her life, Kara chooses to fix her "betrayal" of Lena (instead of, say, saving Krypton or preventing Mon-El from leaving Earth), leading to a series of variable relationship scenarios (S05, E13). While none of the alternative realities features explicit lesbianism, Kara's driving impetus, the profundity of her

interactions with the various Lenas, and the devastating results of not being in Lena's life in one of them (with Lena being turned into a literally heartless cyborg dictator) parallel George Bailey's iconic attempts at rebuilding his relationship with his loving family. The allusion solidly casts the two women's bond as far more than "friendship," even queering the show's use of the word itself (as indicated also by fan perception of the loaded term, for example in the tongue-in-cheek hijacking of the word "friend" in the SuperCorp Mexican soap-opera parody film by Vale 2020; or the playful deconstruction of the term by QTPQueen 2021, among other creations).

It can be inferred, therefore, that the inversion of the power relationship between the Super and the Luthor resonates doubly in terms of the queer fandom's relationship to shame: first, it allows Supergirl to bypass the shameful impasse of having to yield her super self to an inferior masculinity, by offering a relationship of equals that is outside of gender hierarchies. Secondly, the resolution—albeit after a long and very troubled course—of the revelation of Kara's super (and queer-coded) secret to Lena paved the way for the broader, happily effected, "coming out" gesture that would come in the show's final episode. Their relationship faced literally the worst possible scenarios, and still survived and improved, giving hope to queer fans that their own coming out would eventually not alienate the ones they hold dearest, but in fact strengthen their bonds.

5. THE ALTERNATE UNIVERSES OF "#SUPERCORP: ENDGAME"

In season six, the queer fans' unwavering support of McGrath's Lena and SuperCorp became the formative plot paragon, as a repentant Lena is reinstated as Supergirl's savior from certain death, her challenging conscience over bad decisions (S06, E14), magical partner in crimefighting, and sharer of intimate moments of affection. Scenes like their potsticker dinner, charged with lesbian sexual innuendos about Lena sticking her fingers into Kara's mouth (S06, E14); and especially Benoist leaning towards McGrath at a 10" angle, as if about to kiss her, when Supergirl is reunited with her friends after her imprisonment in the Phantom Zone dimension (S06, E08), reverberated through lesbian fans creating countless memes, cracks, and fanfiction references as the moment when "the Maid of Might" became the Maid that Might.

Accordingly, when it became known that season six was going to conclude *Supergirl*, queer fan demand for "SuperCorp: Endgame" became so vocal and insistent, that it was expected the CW producers would respond with some gesture of acknowledgment to the show's more loyal ratings supporters. The final episode, "Kara" (S06, E20), focuses on the wedding of Alex to her partner and the reunion of all the Superfriends, with auspicious paths established for each one. But it is also where Lena and Cat Grant help Kara resolve her mounting distress with her life, an arc set up throughout season six, in a way that reads as a specific effort on the part of the writers to appease the SuperCorp fandom short of canonizing Endgame. Lena shows up at the wedding in a completely out-of-

context glamorous outfit with a plunging bra-less neckline, and initiates a heartfelt talk with Kara, who confesses she constructed Supergirl to hide her true self from public view—a confession paralleling accounts of closeted queer shame. With Lena's support a tearful Kara overcomes her fears, telling Lena that, "of all the friends I've ever had, you have ... challenged me the most"); then Lena takes her by the shoulders and caresses them slightly – the closest to a lover's touch the fans would ever get—before the two embrace. Immediately after, Kara takes off and abandons her glasses, effectively coming out of the closet as both Supergirl and Kara Danvers. McGrath's own summation of the scene as noting "the difference" between the former, guilt-driven Lena, and her blossoming eventual self (Hatchett 2021, n.p.) makes the final episode as much "Lena" as it is "Kara," setting up the couple as the fundamental unit of the show. Kara and Lena are shown discursively "poaching" their inherited shame—the Luthor criminal legacy and the glasses given to Kara by her adoptive parents to hide her superpowers, respectively—to create whole new and liberated selves, thus encouraging queer fandom to do the same with the queerbaiting of produced canon.

The intentional queer nod of that scene is affirmed also by its immediately-preceding desperate phone call by Kara to Cat Grant, who reveals that she has known Kara's secret all along, ending the agony of "telling" on the latter's part that is identical to a gay coming out scene. Cat even helps Kara express herself by offering two characteristic words for how the latter is feeling: "Bi...furcated? Inauthentic?" Flockhart's intentional pause after "bi" is a wink to fans for the acknowledgment of Supergirl's bisexuality, bringing the show full circle to the pilot episode and Kara's "I'm not gay!" on CatCo's rooftop, now repurposed as the initiator of Supergirl's process of self-acceptance. The show's conclusion thus becomes an instance, according to Ramzi Fawaz, "when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture and, in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies" (qtd. in Stein 2018, 24).

In that way, despite the denial of a clear canonization of SuperCorp that left many queer fans frustrated (Harrington 2021, n.p.; Zalben 2021), the challenge for restorative and shame-free production was answered by effectively relinquishing power to creative queer fandom, allowing them space to read the ending as they wished. And the fans responded, even to the point of wresting control away from the CW and DC. As told by Church, "On November 17, 2021, something exceptional happened in the realm of TV fandom: lesbian fans of the TV show *Supergirl*—a CW drama based on the bisexual DC character—created an alternate ending to the series" (2023, 213). Taking advantage of social media technology and the time difference between airings of the show across the U.S.,

> ... a faction flipped the script by writing a new, queer ending and presented it as fact. For 24 h following the finale, fans on Twitter falsely broadcast 'Supercorp kissed' to the world. Rather than accepting a truth they did not support, the Supercorp fandom rewrote the show's

conclusion, transmuting their feelings of anger and betrayal over being Queerbaited into an alternate, reconciling narrative. (Church 2023, 214)

Church analyzes extensively the roots, mechanics, and impact of that gesture as a moment of queer fan triumph against CW gaslighting, thus in a sense repeating the inversion of the power relationship between the superhero and their love interest that *Supergirl* was all about. Questioning the concept of the canon as invincible orthodoxy that is exclusively producer-derived, LGBTIQ+ fandom offered a new paradigm of the reciprocal relationship between powerful creators and smart, tactical consumers enabled through twenty-first century media and ethics.

6. CONCLUSION

The queerbaiting by *Supergirl*'s producers served the show's ratings while maintaining the heteronormative DC canon, but also generated anti-shame discourses for LGBTIQ+ visibility among queer fans that decisively revise past renderings of the character. The creation and promulgation of SuperCorp, an alternative reading of the "friendship" between Kara Danvers (Supergirl) and Lena Luthor as a romantic relationship of equals in the TV show in fact became a vehicle for the resolution of a number of canonical issues related to superpowered heroines: "Within the Supercorp fandom, Supergirl's power is less a problem than it is a solution, and superpowered female sexuality is not a source of anxiety but rather a cause for very enthusiastic celebration" (Hicks 2020, 312). Given that creative fan "confessions are important statements of existence" (Hicks 2020, 311), Super-Corp fans were empowered not only as a minority, but also as consumers on the receiving end of media broadcasting. This became particularly evident in the ambivalent conclusion of the show, that not only signaled a clear coded concession to queer fans, but also gave fandom the opportunity for a massive case of character poaching: "Rather than relying on showrunners to validate their feelings, the Supercorp fandom took back the narrative and rewrote the script—literally. Their version of events was met with an outpouring of queer joy and pride from the fandom, with tweets and retweets from the supportive online community helping to divert attention from the unsatisfying original narrative" (Church 2023, 227). Queer fandom, then, proved an equal opponent to shaming corporate practices, while participatory in their product. One could even further register this impact of queering the comics canon in events outside the show, for example, in the publication of DC Comics's limited series *Dark Knights of Steel* (Taylor and Putri 2021-2022) that, shortly after *Supergirl*'s conclusion, gave the world a lesbian Supergirl character openly in a love relationship with Wonder Woman. McDermott, speaking about the value of positive affect to queer fans facing queerbaiting, concludes that "perhaps the attachments to queerness for fans can serve not as a political identity or a history of censorship and punishment, but as hope. This hope is both a critical affect and a methodology, not always a heteronormative futurity" (2021, 856). And, as fans know, the big "S" on the Supers' chest,

"the crest for the House of El, … translates to the words 'Stronger Together' in Kryptonian and represents a symbol for hope to the people of Earth" (DeGalan 2018, 2).

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MISCELLANEA

ANHAGA, OR: THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUEST IN ANNE CARSON'S "KINDS OF WATER"

Aitana Monzón-Blasco

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Anne Carson's lyrical essay "Kinds of Water" (1995) as a case of a transmodern text concerned with the consequences of posthumanist suffering, such as the lack of affection or human connection. Establishing a continuum between epistemology and anthropology, Carson presents water as an ungraspable symbol, as a pretext for critical inquiry, self-discover, and acceptance. Taking this element as limitless and fluid, we aim to analyse certain paradoxes related to H2O that psychologically and linguistically affect the narrative voice. These are materiality and fluidity, but also the dichotomy between excess and absence, as well as movement and stillness.

1. INTRODUCTION

In medieval symbolism, the ocean is seen as a vast desert of water (Muela 2007, 150). Its space, its time or its fluidity have been sufficient motifs to build a whole poetics that deals with the very flow of existence, the transcendental search for knowledge. Deserts of water or deserts of soil act as a reminder of the insignificance of bodies—whether corporeal or textual—and make the human wonder about the great paradigm of thought. But how can one take shelter amid their spatial or metaphorical immensity? How can one avoid the grooves or the boundaries that separate land from water, while emerging unscathed? Heraclitus's (2001) famous quotation declaring that "[y]ou cannot step in the same river twice, for neither you nor water will be the same (121), could shelter the Canadian contemporary work that will be analysed in this essay. The ungraspable but at the same time overflowing nature of water, as well as its mutability, may serve as a pretext for critical inquiry, self-discovery and a search that transcends the fluvial space, ignoring any physical or psychological barrier. "[M]editation and water are wedded together" (Melville 2003, 12) and for this reason, as we contemplate the flowing of the waves, we simultaneously reach an individual and universal presence, for an invisible force urges us to

transcend. Carson's "Kinds of Water" envisions this element as a process by which the narrator mourns, dissolves, confronts herself, dissociates or drifts. This process involves the culmination of an experience of contemplative or meditative nature, a longing or, in Medieval terms, a *quest* towards its gnoseology.

Carson's aphoristic essay establishes a continuum between human existence and water. For her, "[k]inds of water drown us" (1995, 165). If everything is made of water, then our bodies, like linguistic constructions, flow and are in continuous permutability, subconsciously craving to reach an origin in which everything is disembodied, free of physical limits that prevent the overflow of thought or fluid matter. Virginia Woolf (2000) once wrote that "there are tides in the body" (240). By *tides*, we may assume anthropological concerns, desires, impulses, reactions to one's consciousness. Thus, we will see how water stands as a deterritorialised space (Neimanis 2017, 19), an illusion in which to reflect upon those mysterious, abstract *loomings* that have fascinated humankind for as long as there has been textual evidence. Water has existed before civilisation. Somehow, when the narrator dives into its depths, she seeks pre-existence, the return to a figurative Pangaea, to a unification or pre-word or pre-border feeling. If *to swim* is to accept that the present must return to an origin without delimitations—since there is no establishment, no oppressive, binary hierarchy—, then *to drown* shall be to be aware of that anthropocentric, dualistic oppression. In other words, the self, once it has entered the water as in an illusion, warns—from that other utopian and original side—against the dangers of naming borders and insistently tries to dilute forms, to undo them.

Symbolically, the immensity of the sea provokes fear and, at the same time, an irreparable desire to drown, to submerge ourselves in its infinite undulations and possibilities. As Linton (2010) points out, "water is what we make of it" (3). In such a case, we will say that this fluid exists because there is a preconceived idea of water when we invoke it, when we use it as a channel in our search for transcendence. Carson's text accepts water as an emotional and intellectual nourishment, as a healing power of retreat and redemption. Entering the fluvial means crawling towards the unknown but original, returning to the centre of every image, idea or thought. If "[l]as aguas simbolizan la suma universal de las virtualidades … , [el] depósito de todas las posibilidades de existencia [y] preceden a toda forma [sosteniendo] toda creación" (Eliade 1986, 165), we can add that this creation must be textual, formal and corporeal in order to be complete, because once any form has been separated from the water, it loses its virtuality and "cae bajo la ley del Tiempo y de la Vida; adquiere límites" (166).

Anne Carson's "Kinds of Water: An Essay on the Road to Compostela" forms part of a collection of essays published in 1995 under the title *Plainwater*. Written in a context that could be regarded as *transmodern*, water, its quintessential symbol, acts as a transitional process, a deviation, a transcorporeal flow. Our rational capacity cannot explain the intangible or the absolute. However, we can perceive that which overflows the limits,

such as water, but also gender or the existential void itself. Water, like the concept of transmodernity, does not stagnate, as it requires a fluid, complex and hybrid way of thinking that is under construction. In Rodríguez Magda's (2004) words, "[t]odo estado inestable causa ansiedad, suscita un anhelo de resolución" (17). Perhaps in "Kinds of Water" there is certain anxiety to transcend, to reach the unknown and in that process the narrative voice looks for her mystical origin.

However, in our transmodern context, the absolute is not the whole anymore, but the void, which is preceded by grief and abandonment, as we are told at the beginning of the essay. Surrounded by electronic gadgets, by interconnectivity, the human being is intrinsically a wanderer of body and thought. This is the case of Carson's work, a diaristic essay in which aphorisms predominate in a search for self-knowledge and the acceptance of the loss of a body, an idea or water. And this is also why a transmodern discourse on water is complex to achieve, for its centrality must refer to "[el] vacío, la ausencia, el simulacro" (Rodríguez Magda 2004, 17). As in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, here the narrator is discouraged by the lost values of her society, such as affection, care, or oral communication. Therefore, we shall be attentive to the silence, to what precedes the text, to the loss of the loved body. The voice works from what is not known or has been lost on a tangible level, towards the unknown and ungraspable. That is why we will see how the narrator resorts to the mythical figure of the wanderer who, in her journey or inner exile, recognises herself and wonders about futility, disassociation or longing in this search for water, which may be geographical or symbolic. Thereupon, the aim of this dissertation is to discuss Anne Carson's exploration of the symbolism of water in "Kinds of Water" by analysing certain paradoxes attributed to that element, such as movement and stillness; excess and absence; or materiality and fluidity as confluent in the narrator's identity and in her epistemological quest.

2. Can a pilgrim hold the water?

"Clothe yourself, the water is deep" (Carson 1995, 118). With this *captatio benevolentiae,* Anne Carson warns us in the introduction to "Kinds of Water" of the tone that the text will take on. In the form of an aphoristic diary, the Canadian author uses the mythical motif of pilgrimage to elaborate a discourse based on the loss of a loved one. One of this essay's main themes is the disappearance of the male figure of authority, such as the husband, father, or brother. Starting from here, it is not surprising that we are led into the text with the notion that "[w]ater is something you cannot hold. Like men" (117).

Throughout the essay, the idea of water acts as a symbol of self-knowledge and acceptance of loss or mourning. Hence the irony of the narrator's unconscious effort to define, enclose, sustain water. Mourning, like any liquid, overflows and is intangible, incorporeal. It floods bodies and subdues the identity of those who name it. It is an emotional and epistemological process that symbolises the eternal human obsession to reach

the infinite or that which has no explanation and dwells beyond understanding. This obsession could be referred to as *posthuman suffering*, for there is certainly a personal and transcendent longing of seeing oneself "incapable of fully knowing [one's] self (epistemologically, ontologically or biologically) without the aid of technological systems" (Miccoli 2017, n.p.). As in "The Glass Essay," published in 1995, the narrator resorts to isolating herself in nature to know herself and cope with loss, as the beloved body always appears as an entity dependent on technology. In the text, the narrative voice recalls the presence of Eros through the photographs or selfies that appear as flashes with the designation "Nude #1," "Nude #2," and so on. In another case, the memory of the father figure is conditioned by dementia and appears tied to an electronic device in a hospital. This would explain why the narrator turns to the natural environment for a possible remedy, process, or regeneration, away from any non-organic adornments. Perhaps water acts as a unitary vehicle, recalling its relativity and fluidity, which is nothing but a metaphor for all ontology. "Kinds of Water" begins with the Eurocentric division of body and mind, thus establishing a rigid and omnipotent boundary when we read that the beloved body, in this case the father, "has lost the use of some of the parts of his body and of his mind" (Carson 1995, 119).

The melancholy over the wasted organic body in contemporary Western society uncovers an emotional lack in the care system and reinforces the utilitarianism from which the narrator will try to flee. While the beginning of the essay is slightly influenced by a possible cybernetic-posthuman longing, by the conclusion of the narrative one arrives at the notion that body and mind are inseparable. Holding water, then, will prove impossible. Water, like knowledge, overflows. Too much knowledge can lead to emotional or even physical sinking, "[f]or an intact virgin can develop the skill of diving into deep water but a woman who has known love will drown" (117).

The liquid state with which the narrator presents bodies and things not only encounters a natural barrier that intrinsically separates the solid from the liquid—as we shall comment on later—but being a narrative about the Camino de Santiago, the narrator will have problems crossing an invisible barrier: the linguistic one. Proof of this is the sentence in which the difficulty of translating water is expressed by not knowing "the word for drowned" (124). All bodies are water or that is the narrator's wish. That is why she inserts fluvial nouns that question the rigidity of the material. These elements can be organic and indicate a liquid existence/resistance, as is the case with "river" (124), "waterfall," "falls," "water," "drops," (128) "rain," "sea," "tears" (130). Let us not forget, however, the "not rain" (136), for it announces another of the themes that we will deal with in this work: the absence of water is also a disembodied presence that overflows the text. In this regard, we do observe a constant individual—but universal—consciousness rooted in the idea of identity that seeks to transcend, to be liminal or to position herself in the background. This could explain the choice to include a narratee, as occurs in "[y]ou will

see this as the journey proceeds, see him sailing through danger" (126), or in "[y]ou would not see me—I lie in the dark listening, swirling" (128).

The image of the pilgrim seeing or being seen is not fortuitous. As a diaristic essay, in each of the sections there is an introductory aphorism that acts as an epigraph. The section referring to the arrival at Compostela, at the end of the wandering, is preceded by Machado's famous lines saying that "*the eye you see isn't/ an eye because you see it/ it's an eye because it sees you*" (1995, 183). The eye is used by Carson not as an external element, but as the gateway to an inner, mystical knowledge capable of disavowing the automaton and instantaneous responses of transmodern society. In Rodríguez Magda's (2004) words, "andar desorientados es un mirar sin ver, el anhelo de trascendencia nos habla de una visión interior más plena" (157). This establishes the idea of the search for water through the gaze as an anchor for thought and sanity. "Kinds of Water" is riddled with semantic constructions that link the body to water, thus dissolving its boundaries, as can be seen in "[m]orning drifts on" (Carson 1995, 128), "street disolving" and "we filter westward," which introduce the idea of movement and direction that will be discussed later. For the narrator, everything overflows outside and inside the body, which is why she observes the "[r]ain during the night" (135). Contrasting the idea of movement with stillness, as well as measuring its materiality, at a certain point we read the expression "a pool of thoughts" (130), which reinforces the search for a recipient that could fill all emptiness.

Apart from water, another recurring symbol in Carson's work is glass. On repeated occasions, Carson's poetics is built around this dual symbol, as it recalls the fragility and the reflection of the narrative voice. At the beginning of the essay, we read a quotation from Machado, saying that "*the good thing is we know/ the glasses are for drinking*" (1995, 124). The glass acts as an insulating element or as a mirror. Mythically, it is an element of containment linked to water –ergo, to Narcissus's myth. Both elements are ambivalent and imply discontinuity, as they contain and absorb images, while at the same time reflect the consciousness of those who approach them (Cirlot 2001, 211). According to Rae, within Carson's work, this motif reflects "the speaker's mental and emotional states, out of fragments of biography, theology and literary analysis" (Rae 2011, 167). Water is the juxtaposition of glass. However, its liquid character does not allow for fragility, but for fluidity and regeneration. Why, then, does the voice resort to Machado's aphorism? A glass, if it does not break, contains water that can be drunk. Along the way, the pilgrim feels thirsty. But if water symbolises knowledge, then the pilgrim will drink knowledge. And if the glass is empty, then the glass will be the only material element that can contain both the ungraspable—the emptiness, the mourning—and the regenerating liquid.

"Kinds of water drown us. Kinds of water do not" (Carson 1995, 130). The depth of water recalls the depth of the knowledge of absence. The narrator sees herself "like

someone testing the depth of a well" (122). The image of the glass inaugurates the incorporation of other containers that may hold water. We find objects such as a "gaffe" (124), a "jar" (130) or "a goatskin bag (*odra*)" (146), but there are also constructions such as "canals," (160) "aqueducts" (138) or "bridge[s]" (132). These reinforce the changing, fluid nature of H$_2$O and act as liminal elements between stillness and movement. They symbolise the diffuse or ambiguous, for they unite as well as separate; they establish boundaries as well as erase them. The contrast between the materiality of these constructions and the lightness of water and knowledge leads the voice to wonder about depth and grief. She laments the fragility of glass and stone, saying that "the mechanisms that keep us from drowning are so fragile: and why us?" (128) On containment and the impossibility of transcending the material, she thinks that "we live by keeping water caught in the trap of the heart" (139). We could consider in Anne Carson, a connoisseur of Medieval French poetry, to be including this "heart" as a double symbol, for in Cirlot's words, the glass or crystal cup is used as "a symbol of the human heart … , as a material of expression of the surrounds of 'wrapping' around the mystic Centre" (119). Letting the water flow or trapping it in a container is the same as letting the memory of a non-existent body flow or sink into the deepest well. Not to delimit. Not to dematerialise water, the body, memory, or knowledge. The attraction of the abyss, of the ungraspable or of absolute knowledge is the main obsession of the pilgrim or *anhaga*. Letting go as the greatest act of love and resilience to dispossess oneself and reach an ascetic state that breaks with the material excesses of contemporaneity.

3. ANHAGA, or: The Transmodern Elegeia

The reflective and personal character of the pilgrimage motif pervades the pages of "Kinds of Water" and is reminiscent of the old Anglo-Saxon elegies, as well as of the first testimonies written on papyrus, parchment, or stone. The medium is not what is sought here, but the message, which is always the same: to sing what is lost. Mourning accompanies the wanderer and expatriate bard or, using Anglo-Saxon terminology, the *anhaga* ("The Wanderer"). In the essay, the narrator is more than a pilgrim, for she adopts the role of the chronicler of her own self-knowledge, and in detailing her experiences along the way, she is capturing her contemporaneity. The high content of lyrical structures such as "[w]ater abandons itself" (Carson 1995, 156), "[p]ilgrims were people in scientific exile" (131) or "[e]vening falls" (125) demonstrate that she not only observes and walks with the purpose of reaching Finisterre, but that she also grieves. She is completely aware of the loss and of the symbolic constructions she is noting down along the journey. Aphorisms such as "[p]ilgrims were people who got the right verb" (139), full of irony and double meanings, remind us of the gnomic lines used in old Anglo-Saxon elegies, for they consisted of meaningful and memorable short maxims (Gomes 2019, 19). In this sense, "Kinds of Water" should be treated as an elegy, for this term comes from the Greek *elegeia*, being

"a mournful or plaintive poem ... of sorrow and lamentation" (Online Etymology Dictionary 2022, n.p.). From this traditional form, it is important to perceive the narrator's subversion and gender analysis when she places herself in an embodied state, thus contrasting the disembodied nature of water. Combining these two forms, she confirms the liminality of water, of bodies and of knowledge. On the one hand, she makes clear that being a woman, she occupies a symbolic space. On the other hand, she rescues and gives substance to the notion that, since ancient times, women have been weaving stories. However, while perpetuating the image of women as eternally dependent on male abandonment, in "Kinds of Water" the narrator takes action, walks, and in her wandering, she names things, asks questions, and seems to reach a conclusion to her epistemological quest. Knowledge and loss open like a scar tearing the water.

Knowledge as a direction towards oneself is present in the pilgrim's internal exile. If in "The Wanderer" the voice constantly asks himself "[w]here are my kindred" (90), in Carson's essay, the narrator searches for the origin—or loss– of identity and of communication in a society devoid of affection or community. Therefore, she asks: "[w]hat is a man" (139), "[w]hat are we doing here, and why are our hearts invisible?," and "[w]hat is the conversation of lovers?" (142). The understanding of one's own identity and the lack of communication between bodies leaves a trace of alienation. Cid, the male character in the essay, who accompanies the narrator on her way to Santiago, "is not the one who feels alien" (131), which serves as a reminder that there are emotional limits that are not given a name, and which also refers to the Romantic notion of the attraction to the abyss and the construction of an individuality alien to any community. Just like emotional limits, the linguistic barrier also causes unease for it entails the impossibility of translating certain Spanish expressions such as "*[n]o me mates con tomate, mátame con bacalao*" (180) or "*[y] la paloma volvió a él a la hora de la tarde*[1]" (167). This impossibility of translation produces estrangement and alienation, undermining any attempt to remain united to the Other through speech. Nevertheless, throughout the text, communication and self-consciousness are key to the journey's process, for the narrator says that "I am a pilgrim (not a novelist) and the only story I have to tell is the road itself" (152).

Wandering implies a yearning for knowledge, a quest towards the intangible and transcendence. "Pilgrims were people wondering" and wandering (133). There is in Carson a correlation between body, water, and language that is in constant circulation. In this sense, we could speak of a linguistic journey. The more one wants to know, the more

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[1] We could translate these idioms as "do not kill me with tomato but with cod, referring to something impossible to believe. We must not forget about the Biblical references which are present all throughout the essay. In this case, we have pointed out a fragment from Gen. 8:10, which could be translated as "the dove came back at evening."

one fears and, therefore, the more one is aware of the pain, absence, and vital anguish intrinsic to the human species in general and to the *anhaga* in particular. With clear references to St. Augustine's mystical concerns, the voice addresses the reader and exposes her fears about the importance of communication as a human process:

> I am telling you this because a conversation is a journey, and what gives it value is fear. You come to understand travel because you have had conversations, not vice versa. What is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning. (141)

The tone of the essay gradually acquires a mystical tone, which is related to the epigraphs that introduce each section and refer to, mostly mystic-ascetic poets. The journey, as a vital motif, requires affection and communication with our fellow human beings. The pilgrimage's mysticism here lies in the critique of earthly wealth against the value of what is true, that is, the eternal and heavenly. The *camino*, for Carson, is a linguistic and meta-reflexive journey, for she wonders about limits and their cognitive scope when the voice says that the *camino* "has a language, but not one I know. It has a story, but I am in it. So are you. And to realize this is a moment of some sadness. … I am asking you to study the dark" (152). In Anne Carson's essay, what is said is as important as the silences hidden behind the questions. Silence refers to water, to the liminal, to loss, to a pre-body or a pre-textual experience. It also alludes to the barrenness of a technological age, which seems to be excessive in interconnectivity and networks but ironically, turns out to be cold and dehumanising. This emptiness is nothing more than an extension of the lost values of a whole generation and this has to do with the desire to transcend, for "[l]os valores no son una cosa más entre las cosas, no suceden, expresan una parte del sentido del mundo, y con ello … el de lo inexpresable, aquello que no se dice, sino que se muestra, esto es: lo místico" (Rodríguez Magda 2004, 140).

Caroline Bergvall, in her multidisciplinary exilic work *Drift*, resorts to questions of direction and arrival such as "[w]hat is north. Is it a direction or a process" (127) or "[w]hat is a solid structure. The hard boundary that one crashes into" (137) to compare materiality with emptiness, as well as containment with overflowing. These questions are reminiscent of Carson's eagerness to break down the membrane between what is corporeal and what is immaterial or the fate and origin of knowledge itself. It seems ironic, nonetheless, that this movement revolves around the flow of water in an essay describing the contemplation of pilgrimage, so to say, of dry land. The waters symbolise the *fons et origo* that precedes all creation (Cirlot 2001, 365). For Carson, water is a process, a flow that filters loss, abandonment, emotional or creative drift and the dissolution of bodies or earthly limitations for the sake of overcoming mourning. Like the pilgrim or wanderer, the movement is dual, for it involves wondering as well as wandering in that transcorporeal flow of knowledge. Internal exile is the natural response to psychological imprisonment. If water solidifies becoming glass, it paralyses the body's motion and the purpose for the journey. Water symbolises both death and rebirth (Eliot 2001, 16; Eliade 1986, 165). In

another of the essays that form *Plainwater*, "Water Margins: An Essay on Swimming by My Brother," the stagnation of H_2O recalls death, for we read that "[t]he water is dark and waits in its motionless kingdoms" (Carson 1995, 233). This liquid takes on different shapes and personalities along the way, resonating in the narrator's psyche. Applying Frazer's laws of contagion and similarity, water acts as a mythical element mirroring the voice's consciousness (Frazer 1998, 173). The body of water, whether in "drops," "waterfall," or "tears," implies a deterritorialisation that would explain the return of beings to a dissolved, permeable and abstract state, incapable of establishing divisions or oppressive norms. That is why we read that "I cannot read maps—why press a seal on running water" (Carson 1995, 123). Dissolving all constraining elements, the narrator glimpses a possible regeneration at the end of the essay. This brings us back to Heraclitus's quotation, for in Carson's words, "[p]ilgrims were people to whom things happened that happened only once" (167). For this reason, it is necessary to go deeper into the *camino*, for she urges us not to "come back the way you went. Come a new way" (123).

4. THE FEMALE MYSTIQUE

Hunger is a recurring motif in Anne Carson's work, as is thirst. The lack of fluids or food in the body makes it succumb, find itself helpless and disposed from its ontology. Love for the Other, for water or for the road is what keeps the narrator going. Throughout the journey, the pilgrim searches for her metaphysical nourishment, so that "[t]here is no question I am someone starving. There is no question I am making this journey to find out what that appetite is" (143). The absence of the tangible image of water, the allusion to the desert (138) or to the idea of "[n]ot rain ... Water is less, and less" (136) induces abandonment and the possibility of "drowning on the Meseta" (156). Dispossessing one-self entails entering a liquid place, moldable and far from any boundary. "Water abandons itself" (156), like a body "*[s]e abandona*" (178). The loss for the beloved body, for communication or water leads the voice to a state of decreation, that is, of making the created pass into the uncreated, to the renunciation of the material, to exile from space and the body (Weil 57). The renunciation of material goods, as well as of the flesh leads the narrator to embark on a self-imposed path of meditation and penance (166). To undo the self, "one must move through the self to the very inside of its definition" (Carson 2005, 179).

Abandonment as a response to conscious grief. Abandonment as a result of failed communication. That is why the absent presence of water, in its mythical and original dimension, symbolises a return to the animal instinct, to the community, to the roots. Penance is a process, just as knowing water is a process. Understanding is a burden, an obstacle and a stillness. That is why it is necessary to keep walking. Throughout the essay, there are explicit allusions to this feeling, as we read in "[p]enance is one form we find, one form we insist on" (Carson 1995, 174) and "[w]hat is the relation of rage to

penance? Of entanglement? … I am not one to interfere, but sadness is sadness" (171). Grief, as the infinite fluid of human existence, is the central motif of the essay. The mystique of the journey implies a new direction: entering the unknown of one's own ontology. The immensity, the infinity of wandering through arid lands, will lead the narrator to wonder if there is a possible destination—external and internal. Yet here is the paradox: the constant presence of the absence of water will bring a possible regeneration, so that "we are not at the end" (186). The narrator constantly questions herself about her own existence, removed from the non-existence of the beloved body and, in turn, contemplates herself from a superior, unfolded position, when she says that "[h]ow surprised I am to be entangled in the knowledge of some other animal. I know the animal. Does it mean I hand myself over? What is knowing?" (175).

Knowing the animal means knowing the fall, the instinct, the survival, the thirst. In the case of Anne Carson, we might be helped by Emily Dickinson's lines which exclaim that "[w]ater is taught by thirst … Love, by memorial mould" (2016, 86). This is the peak of self-reflection in "Kinds of Water," as it questions the imprisonment, the self-imposition of cognitive and corporeal barriers that deprive the narrator of free movement, making her responsible for the disappearance of the male body and intangible existence. Accepting thirst means understanding and accepting loss. Although the journey begins with a self-imposed sacrifice, as we are told that "I prayed and fasted" (Carson 1995, 122), along the way, the voice sheds guilt and understands that it is necessary to accept that which is unknown or unattainable. Openly Christian, the voice states that the way to get to the bottom of things is through the inner look. To unload the invisible weight of the brother's death and the disappearance of the father's conscience, the narrator needs to let go of her own corporeality, for the flesh encloses and limits. That is why "I prayed and fasted. I read the mystics. I studied the martyrs" (122). This explains why each diaristic entry contains a maxim alluding to water or fire, to the absence or presence of meditative poets such as Machado, Zeami or Kan-ami. The absence of water entails exercising one's conscience and questioning one's own existence. Hence the importance of the fluvial idea because it acts as "an answer as water into thirst" (123).

There are certain symbols that appear from time to time in the essay that reinforce the existence of water insofar as they embody its absence. At one point, we are told that Cid hardly needs to drink because he was born in the "desert" (138) and, unlike the narrator, perhaps he would have entered that liminal state of the self earlier, once he had understood the lightness of being and the physical impossibility of transcendence. As for the punishment of the flesh, the "knives" (137) are reminiscent of the pilgrim's sacrifice, of his wounds or of blood, another liquid that makes corporeal existence possible. The knife, physically and metaphorically, describes pain. Like drought, pain makes understanding impossible.

The image of fire is also interesting, as it rarely appears with its own word, but with semantic allusions such as "I stand, mind burning" (147) or "[w]hat is the fear inside language? No accident of the body can make it stop burning" (157). Burning implies a movement, as does "drowning" (149). If sinking implies a realisation of anthropocentric oppression, then burning implies rebirth. In the same way, when the body goes into fire or water, organic regeneration is possible. Not so the soul, for in mysticism, fire is the true vehicle for reaching God, knowledge and penance. According to Cirlot (2001), fire is "a mediator between forms which vanish and forms in creation" (105). In this sense, "like water, [it is] a symbol of transformation and regeneration" (105). If a body cannot cross the same river twice, neither can it cross the same fire twice. The experience of mourning, like the experience of regeneration, must be unique, non-transferable, free of forms and attachments. Approaching these elements implies abandoning one's own entity for the survival of the spirit. They are thus cooperating agents, complementary and necessary to achieve this generational rebirth, and their relationship makes their coexistence possible.

5. CONCLUSION

Anne Carson's *camino* in "Kinds of Water" (1995) entails a rite of passage to accept and understand grief. The repeated allusions to both the overflow and the absence of water act as a symbolic baptism to which the narrator exposes herself. A baptism of self-knowledge and penance after the loss of the beloved body. Going into the water means leaving behind any form, image or oppressive preconception of the material to accept a liquid state. As Carson writes, "[y]ou can lead a pilgrim to water" (1995, 157). The journey ends in Finisterre, which means tempting the body to drown, for only in the absolute can the metaphysical depths of things be known. But water, like bodies, also abandons itself. In this sense, abandoning oneself would mean acquiring certain immateriality which has been dispossessed of all ontology, knowledge, and memory. Devoid of affection, language or understanding, the narrator withdraws into external contemplation—at once individual and universal—and mystical meditation. Her language becomes more self-reflexive as her diaristic essay progresses, but it also becomes fragmented, aphoristic, and hesitant. In this process, water is an element that leads unconsciously to knowledge. It also acts as a superior and transcendental force and implies the total dissolution of the barriers that oppress or limit. The search for water as *fons et origo* becomes a symbolic and penitent act, a pretext for the pilgrimage.

The road to Santiago de Compostela also produces a sense of alienation that separates the *anhaga* from other beings and makes her more reflective and critical of contemporary society. The narrator falls prey to mourning and *posthuman suffering*, as she contemplates the organic waste which is subordinated to a hospital machine and wonders about the futility of the flesh and the survival of knowledge. But if there is something that

increases the mourning, it is not the absence of mourning, the infinitude or the emptiness, but the transmodern irony of living in a hyperconnected and transversal context in which linguistic or semantic, corporeal or affective closeness is being lost. Eventually, the road is left behind and the pilgrim's transcendental and epistemological quest endures. That is why Carson writes: "How is a pilgrim like a No play? His end is not the point" (184). Realising that the absolute cannot be reached is the lesson of the road. And therefore, the pilgrim becomes aware of the expiration of the body and its insignificance in an increasingly individualistic and cynical society. However, like all cyclical processes, water reminds us of death and resurrection. So, the pilgrim, the *anhaga* or the wanderer, once she is in front of the vastness of the end of the *camino*, shall proclaim that "[i]n my beginning is my end … In my end is my beginning" (Eliot 1971, 12-19).

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