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In Service of a Greater Cause

The Representation of Race and Gender in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role that the cinema plays in identity formation, and how the positive representation of minority groups in the Marvel Cinematic Universe can contribute to this delicate process. Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation is central to understanding the effects of both racial and gendered prejudice on identity, and how these prejudices have been disseminated into society through so-called projects. Omi and Winant are primarily focused on race, but other theories and texts, such as Laura Mulvey and Judith Butler, will demonstrate in greater depth how projects with the same formative intent have also impacted gender and our perception of femininity. The primary texts used in my analysis are *Black Panther* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* for race, and *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* for gender. Since its launch in 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has become a cultural juggernaut, as well as a dominating force in a genre where whiteness and masculinity has long been a dominating factor. Through its depiction of black, Asian, and female superheroes in the four selected films, old preconceptions about race and gender are dismantled and replaced by new and more positive representations for these previously under-represented groups. This thesis will show what those old preconceptions were, and how these new representations have the potential of being positive influences on individual as well as social development.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Film is the most influential artform of the modern age, and presently there is no genre that draws a bigger crowd and reaps more attention than the superhero genre. The fact that superhero adaptations have come to be regarded as a genre unto themselves – when in reality they spring out of multiple genres – is in itself illustrative of how much influence they have attained in a relatively short amount of time. Science fiction, fantasy, action, and adventure are all found among the key building blocks of superhero cinema. There are also a number of subgenres that come into play, such as political thrillers, disaster movies, and even hints of romantic comedy.¹ With most genres covered, reason dictates that there should be something for everybody to enjoy in the average superhero blockbuster, but the truth is a bit more complicated than that. For a lot of people, it might be the promise of cinematic spectacle that gets them in the door, but it is the sense of familiarity that makes them invested in what is playing out on the screen before them. The superheroes might have a dominating presence in the narrative, but the characters are still relatable, and the same applies to the world they inhabit. As a white heterosexual male, it is not too difficult for me to project my likeness onto Captain America, Iron Man, Spider-Man, Thor, or the Incredible Hulk, as they all correspond perfectly with how I identify. This means that either of them can function as my onscreen surrogate, and so, when I see Captain America beating up bad guys, or Spider-Man swinging through the streets of downtown Manhattan, I see a small piece of myself up there, as well. With the majority of superheroes cast from the same mold insofar as race, gender, and sexuality goes, anyone falling outside of that demographic is having to look a lot harder to find anyone they can identify with.² Since the launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2008, more diverse representation has slowly but surely found its way onto the cinema screen, and the four films I have chosen to look at: *Black Panther* (2018), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *Black Widow* (2021), all reflect distinct changes in terms of the depiction of race and gender in the superhero genre.

These four films, as part of the MCU, are a testament to the power of representation in the media. And how people are represented is crucial because of what that representation

¹ Jeffrey A. Brown, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1-5, 63-4; Terence McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film: Projections of Power and Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 57.

² Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 2009), 151-2; Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 13-4.

conveys to people outside of the represented group. It is especially important in these films, as traditionally, people of color and women are woefully under-represented in the superhero genre. How deep that exclusionary feeling runs was made apparent when *Black Panther* came out and black schoolchildren were excitedly dancing on their desks at the mere prospect of watching the film.³ Through the character of Black Panther, not only are black children given representation in the form of a veritable black superhero; they are also given pride – black pride, in a manner that even a month-long celebration of black culture and history will have a hard time matching.⁴ To see a black superhero, and to see African culture celebrated on film in colors so rich they seem to pop off the screen, that lends a different and far more lively impression on young minds. In *Time*, Jamil Smith commented on the reaction that people of color had to the trailer for *Black Panther* when it dropped, writing that “What seems like just another entry in an endless parade of superhero movies is actually something much bigger. It hasn’t even hit theaters yet and its cultural footprint is already enormous. It’s a movie about what it means to be black in both America and Africa – and, more broadly, in the world.”⁵

Film, as a commercial product, is designed to entertain, but since the medium was first introduced at the close of the nineteenth century, it has also come to play a pivotal role in the process of identity formation.⁶ Films, through representation, can provide audiences with a sense of who they are and how they fit into the world. In our childhood, films can also plant aspirational ideas in our minds about who and what we want to become as adults. However, if not a single person on the screen looks like you or has anything in common with you from a social or cultural perspective, then this developmental process will suffer as a result. At the same time, films also influence how we tend to see people different from ourselves. This will also have social ramifications that will again influence identity formation. If an individual, because of something they saw in a film, is given a negative impression of people of color, or are made to believe that women are fundamentally subservient to men, then as a result, this impression will make most every aspect of life harder for these two groups. When looking at the ways in which film has molded ideologies around race, gender, class and sexuality in the United States, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin write that:

³ Philip J. Victor, “These kids are seeing *Black Panther* and their reaction is Marvel-ous,” *CNN*, Feb. 4, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/02/04/us/ron-clark-black-panther-dancing-students-trnd/index.html>.

⁴ Dominique Thomas, “Killmonger and the Wretched of the Earth,” in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), 64-6.

⁵ Jamil Smith, “The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther,” *Time*, Feb. 11, 2018, <https://time.com/black-panther>.

⁶ Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2021), 12, 17.

No matter what social group one might identify with, we are all constantly bombarded by images, ideas, and ideologies of straight white male superiority and centrality, and these constructs are consciously and unconsciously internalized by everyone. For straight white men, those images can reinforce feelings of superiority. For everyone else, those images and ideas can produce mild to severe self-hatred or create a psychological state in which individuals limit their own potential.⁷

This is the pervasive effect that the superhero genre, until recently, has had upon all who fall outside of the straight white male demographic. It is a hard if not outright impossible for progress to be made in relation to race and gender if our cinematic superheroes do not reflect some of the same progressive ideas that, during the last couple of centuries, have moved us into a modern society. My research will be examining how attitudes concerning race and gender in the superhero genre have changed with the release of these four films, and how the films themselves were designed to impact the groups in question.

In the twenty-first century, there have been more superhero films released on average per year than there were superhero films made throughout the entire previous century.⁸ In fact, the superhero genre has come to dominate the box office to such an extent that many prominent filmmakers have come to see them as such a threat that they have questioned their validity as cinema. In an op-ed that was published in *The New York Times* in 2019, director Martin Scorsese aired his grievances with Marvel and the superhero genre as a whole, writing that “they seem to me to be closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I’ve known and loved them throughout my life, and that in the end, I don’t think they’re cinema.”⁹ Scorsese’s frustration is reasonable, as the dominance of superhero films at the box office has had the unfortunate effect of shutting out many smaller films that fit closer to what most ascribe to the term cinema, as Marvel’s success made other studios shift their focus to replicate that success. However, the counterargument to Scorsese’s rejection of superhero films as cinema, is that they may just be the purest form of cinema to see release since the beginning of the twentieth century, as theme park rides is exactly how cinema was regarded in those early days. Film historian, Tom Gunning, in describing the “relation between films and the emergence of the great amusement parks ... at the turn of the twentieth century,” called this nascent phase a “cinema of attractions,” a form of cinema that “directly solicits spectator

⁷ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 12.

⁸ McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 1-4.

⁹ Martin Scorsese, “Martin Scorsese: I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema. Let Me Explain,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/opinion/martin-scorsese-marvel.html>.

attention ... through an exciting spectacle.”¹⁰ This is a large part of the reason why, to some, superhero films are beloved, while, to others, they are viewed as a threat to the purity of cinema. But superheroes are big business, just like theme parks, and because Hollywood is in the business of making money – just as much as they are in creating art, there are going to be just as many if not more superhero films in the years to come. It is therefore important that we put these films under the microscope and look at what they are trying to say and how, and what effect, if any, they have on our social and cultural development.

In the pursuit of that understanding, I felt it necessary to go first into the history of the cinematic superhero and its wider cultural impact, before then laying out the theories that I feel are best suited for explaining the depictions of race and gender that we see in the four selected films. In outlining the evolution of the superhero genre over the past eight decades and counting, I have chosen to focus solely on DC and Marvel, as they are by far the two most influential players on this particular stage of popular culture. There are other comic book adaptations from other comic book publishers, such as *Dick Tracy* (1990) and *The Rocketeer* (1991) to name two. While they share many of the characteristics that we commonly associate with the modern superhero figure, be it Batman or Iron Man, they were still riding a cultural wave they did not start or directly influence. Consequently, they have been sidelined in order to focus more comprehensively on the two superhero behemoths of the film and comic book industry: Marvel and DC.¹¹ To establish Marvel’s full bearing on our popular culture, and how it came to be, it is their meteoric rise in the early 2000s that is most pivotal, along with the setbacks that DC hit upon in the late 1990s.

A Moment in History: Hollywood and the Superhero Zeitgeist

Sometimes, in order to fully appreciate the magnitude of a particular subject matter, it is necessary to go back to the beginning. The western is the closest genre comparison to the popularity that the big screen superhero is enjoying today. There has always been an ebb and flow in Hollywood, of genres that have tapped into a very specific cultural nerve at the right time and have thus found huge success for a limited time. The gangster films of the early 1930s, the screwball comedy of the 1930s and ‘40s, the musical of the 1950s, and the

¹⁰ Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant-Garde,” in *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, ed. Wanda Stauven (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 383-4.

¹¹ Kevin McDonald, “The Cult of Comic-Con and the Spectacle of Superhero Marketing,” in *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital*, ed. James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 122; Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics, and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011), 165.

countless spy films of the 1960s are all examples of this tide coming and going, where people are flocking to the theater to see that one specific thing before something else comes along.¹² People are fickle, and in the annals of film history there are many examples of genres, franchises, and stars that are popular one moment and gone the next. The ability of some genres to evolve, where the form might change even as the overall themes do not, is something that gives these genres an added lease on life. Before film noir, there was the proto noir, and after film noir, came the neo-noir.¹³ The superhero genre, like the western genre, came out fully formed, so to speak, which might ultimately impact its sell-by date.

For that reason, what a lot of people are wondering today, both inside and outside of Hollywood, is where the superhero stands in relation to this ebb and flow, and if there is eventually going to be a steep decline in the popularity of the superhero genre.¹⁴ Perhaps there will even come a day when, in the course of a year or two, not a single superhero adaptation will be put out by a major Hollywood studio. It seems all but unthinkable now, but only twenty years ago this was not such a crazy notion. There is a popular but not entirely accurate saying in Hollywood, that you are “only as good as your last picture.”¹⁵ If there are enough superhero films made that fail to find an audience and therefore fail to recoup their budgets, or the market is simply oversaturated and superhero fatigue sets in, then it is not entirely unthinkable that some other genre will come along to replace it. First, however, we need to go back in history, to take a look at how the superhero genre came to be and the many hurdles it had to overcome in order to get to where it is today.

Superhero Cinema: From Obscurity to Global Phenomenon

For the contemporary superhero, success in Hollywood did not happen overnight, and when it happened, it was DC, not Marvel, that was the initial industry trailblazer. From the time of the first superhero comic book being published, to the time of the first big-budget superhero adaptation hitting theaters, four decades would pass. If there is a date of birth that can be assigned to the superhero genre as a whole, then it is April 18, 1938. That is the day issue number one of *Action Comics* hit magazine stands across the United States, sporting the

¹² Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 28-9, 135, 189.

¹³ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 38-9; Mark Bould, *Film Noir: From Fritz Lang to Fight Club* (London: Wallflower, 2005), 5.

¹⁴ Dani Di Placido, “Superhero Films Just Don’t Feel Essential Anymore,” *Forbes*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2023/03/21/superhero-films-just-dont-feel-essential-anymore/?sh=2c35415532e8>.

¹⁵ Frank Sanello, *Spielberg: The Man, the Movies, the Mythology* (Lanham: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2002), 84.

now iconic front cover of a muscular male figure with a red cape lifting a car over his head. Superman had arrived, and so too had the modern superhero. There had been other superhero-adjacent characters that had caught the public's attention prior to the Man of Steel, such as The Shadow and Doc Savage in the early 1930s, but coming out of pulp magazines, they were typically darker in tone and far less fantastical.¹⁶ These figures still shared certain key traits with the Last Son of Krypton, such as a secret identity in the case of The Shadow, and superhuman strength in the case of Doc Savage. Still, most of what we associate with the superhero genre today started with Superman in *Action Comics* number one. Thus, making it especially fitting that, forty years later, it would be *Superman: The Movie* that in 1978 set a new standard for superhero adaptations.

1978 did not mark the first appearance of a superhero – or even Superman himself – on the big screen. Before it became common practice for families to gather in front of the television on a weekly basis to catch new episodes of popular shows, serialized entertainment performed much the same function in cinemas.¹⁷ By the late 1940s, serial adaptations of both Superman and Batman had given audiences their first taste of the two characters in a live-action format, but these were B-productions made by Columbia Pictures on the cheap, and it showed. The costumes, the acting, and the special effects disclosed the low-budget aesthetics of both serials, even for the time.¹⁸ In the 1950s, when television sets started appearing in more and more American homes, the superhero was not far behind. *Adventures of Superman* ran for six seasons, from 1952 to 1958, and in 1966, Batman was introduced to the viewing public in a television adaptation overflowing with camp. The series has since become a cult favorite, but its absurdist approach to the material – far removed from the Batman of the comics – did nothing to elevate the superhero genre beyond the low-culture standing it had been saddled with since the 1930s. The *Wonder Woman* television series starring Lynda Carter that ran on CBS from 1975 to 1979 was also faced with the same criticism, labeling it and *Batman* both as “silly enactments of superhero comics.”¹⁹

Situated somewhere between the highbrow and the lowbrow, *Superman: The Movie* managed to carve out a space for itself in the cultural median, its “unprecedented success” opening the door for more superhero adaptations down the road.²⁰ The film, with its pastiche

¹⁶ John Olszowka, et al., *America in the Thirties* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 233.

¹⁷ Wheeler Winston Dixon, “Introduction: Movies and the 1940s,” in *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁸ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 1.

¹⁹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 138.

²⁰ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 17.

of superhero iconography and Norman Rockwell Americana, is the epitome of what Dwight MacDonald in 1957 called “*midcult*,” a term that sees the two extremes of high and low culture are brought together in an effort to create a wider-reaching artistic expression that is comparable to popular culture.²¹ With a cast featuring such Hollywood heavyweights as Marlon Brando, Glenn Ford, and Gene Hackman – with newcomer Christopher Reeve playing the Man of Steel – *Superman: The Movie* lent the superhero genre a gravitas it had been sorely lacking until then. Three sequels followed, but with diminishing returns. There was also the 1984 *Supergirl* spinoff, but much like a piece of Kryptonite slamming through the Earth’s atmosphere, it crashed and burned at the box office. The door that had been opened in 1978 by the arrival of Superman was slowly closing, but not before Batman got his foot in the door in 1989, which proved an even bigger game-changer.

In director Tim Burton’s incessantly dark take on the Caped Crusader, German Expressionism and gothic sensibilities were intermingled to conjure up a Gotham unlike any other. Dark though it was, *Batman* proved a massive hit, its promotional “cross media” synergy causing Bat-mania across the globe.²² Burton’s 1992 sequel, *Batman Returns*, took things in an even darker and more violent direction, which, because of promotional tie-ins selling the sequel as far more family-friendly than it ended up being, caused significant backlash from parent groups across the United States.²³ This resulted in Warner Bros. handing the directorial duties over to Joel Schumacher for the next two sequels: *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997). However, when Schumacher chose to significantly dial up the camp factor for *Batman & Robin* – in a bid to make it even more family-friendly – it bombed so badly that its director felt the need to make a public apology twenty years after the film came out, saying, “I want to apologize to every fan.”²⁴ Chris O’Donnell, who played Robin in Schumacher’s duology, had previously stated that “On *Batman Forever*, I felt like I was making a movie. The second time, I felt like I was making a kid’s toy.”²⁵ *Batman & Robin*’s failure was so massive that it undid much of the cultural acclaim the superhero genre had managed to amass over the last two decades. Furthermore, it impacted DC so severely that the company was left wandering the desert for much of the next

²¹ William Irwin, “Philosophy Engages Popular Culture: An Introduction,” in *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture*, ed. William Irwin and Jorge J.E. Garcia (London: Sage Publications, 2007) 5.

²² Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 17-8.

²³ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18; Noel Ransome, “Twenty Years Later, Joel Schumacher Is Very Sorry About *Batman & Robin*,” *Vice*, June 12, 2017, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xw8vpk/twenty-years-later-joel-schumacher-is-very-sorry-about-batman-and-robin>.

²⁴ Ransome, “Twenty Years Later.”

²⁵ Ransome, “Twenty Years Later.”

two decades, their search for cinematic redemption looking as elusive as a mirage in the shimmering heat.

A Paradigm Shift: The Fall of DC and the Rise of Marvel Studios

The Marvel Cinematic Universe is currently a cultural juggernaut, with films carrying the emblematic Marvel logo raking in a billion dollars or more on a regular basis (in pre-pandemic years), but the climb up the Hollywood ladder has been an exceedingly steep one for the company.²⁶ In the period that DC was the undisputed box office champion and the success of *Superman: The Movie* and *Batman* had a firm hand in shaping popular culture, Marvel was the equivalent of a bit player in Hollywood. The biggest success for Marvel throughout that time, was *The Incredible Hulk*. The series debuted on CBS in 1977 and ran for five seasons before it was cancelled in 1982. For two of those years, it aired alongside *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977-1979) on the same channel, but where *The Incredible Hulk* garnered enough success to create “lasting pop cultural legacies,” *The Amazing Spider-Man* did not.²⁷ The series was taken off the air after thirteen episodes across two seasons and is characteristic of the lack of creative control that Marvel had – and in certain cases continue to have – over their properties. DC was (and still is) a part of the Warner Bros. media conglomerate, which gives any DC property access to a production pipeline that will take the character in question through all the necessary hoops for a film or television series to get made without ownership ever changing hands. Marvel, at the time, did not have that in-house production company, thus forcing them to sell off the rights to some of their most popular creations. In addition to this leaving Marvel without a say in the writer’s room, it also cut them out of important “revenue streams” and further hampered the company from achieving a similar success to DC at decade’s end.²⁸ However, as meager as the 1970s had been for Marvel, things were about to get a lot worse in the 1980s and 1990s.

When Disney bought Marvel in 2009, the company paid four billion dollars to secure the deal, a stunning development considering that a mere decade earlier Marvel was headed for bankruptcy court. This was a dark chapter in the publisher’s history, but it was also where

²⁶ Nicolas Vega, “*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* has already made more than \$500 million – these are Marvel’s 10 highest grossing movies ever,” *CNBC*, Nov. 3, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/11/23/disneys-marvel-has-10-billion-dollar-films.html>.

²⁷ Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny, and Andy Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 179.

²⁸ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18; Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, 179.

some of the necessary changes that laid the foundation for its eventual success would be implemented. In the eight-year span that DC produced four big budget Batman films, Marvel characters had to be content with a handful of low budget filmic endeavors of highly questionable quality. Their most notable film in 1989, the same year that DC served up *Batman* to cinemagoers, was *The Punisher*, starring Dolph Lundgren. The Marvel film was an “unremarkable” blip on the radar, and a clear indicator that, at the time, the two companies were playing in two very different leagues.²⁹ This would become clearer still with B-producer Roger Corman’s 1994 adaptation of *The Fantastic Four*, a film that did not see the light of day until a bootleg copy surfaced years later.³⁰ However, the most harmful blow to Marvel did not come from their lack of strong cinematic representation but from the implosion of the comic book market in the late 1990s. At the start of the decade, “speculators [had] flocked to comics” as an assortment of “new creator-controlled publishing companies flooded the market.”³¹ Marvel, like a number of other publishing houses, had jumped on the bandwagon, but when the collector’s market “went into sharp decline,” the already fiscally unsound company found itself in a steep nosedive from which it seemed impossible to pull up.³² The specter of bankruptcy was pounding at Marvel’s door, and with the company on life support, the vultures in Hollywood started circling.

Marvel may have been a hard sell in 1996, but its roster of comic book characters was not. There are few things considered more valuable in Hollywood than recognizable IP (intellectual property), with the conviction being that if you have brand recognition, then half the marketing is essentially done before so much as a single frame of film is shot.³³ The Spider-Man television series in the 1970s did not do particularly well with audiences, but that did not stop comic book readers from buying Spider-Man comics – which consequently kept everyone’s favorite web-slinger in the spotlight. In the 1980s, the rights to Spider-Man therefore bounced around from one company to the next, with Orion, Cannon, and Carolco all trying to mount Spider-Man adaptations at various points and all of them coming up short. Eventually, it would be Sony Pictures that, a few years later, ended up with the film rights to the web-slinger. With Marvel running from one bankruptcy hearing to the next in the late 1990s, Sony initially made a bid to buy the entire company. When a deal could not be struck, Sony was instead able to secure the rights to Spider-Man and his extensive rogue’s gallery.

²⁹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18.

³⁰ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18.

³¹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18.

³² Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18.

³³ Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*, 1, 42.

The rights to The X-Men had already been sold to 20th Century Fox, and Universal Pictures had snatched up The Incredible Hulk.³⁴ Meanwhile, New Line Cinema (a subsidiary of Warner Bros.) also had a deal in place to produce a feature film adaptation of one of Marvel's lesser known characters: the black vampire hunter, Blade. Marvel only made twenty-five thousand dollars from their handshake with New Line, but it was with this film in 1998 that what can be deemed the second age of Marvel first began.³⁵

By the early 2000s, many of Marvel's most popular characters had been scattered to the four winds. However, because of the increased exposure this led to, with more film being made that featured well-known Marvel characters, the company was able rebuild their brand and rise to unprecedented heights in subsequent years. With *Blade* (1998), *X-Men* (2000), and *Spider-Man* (2002), Marvel started to emerge as an antithesis to DC. In 1997, *Batman & Robin* left a sour taste in most moviegoers' mouths, to which all three of these Marvel properties served as the perfect palate cleanser. It was far easier for audiences to identify with a bunch of angsty teens searching for belonging (*X-Men*) than an all-powerful alien being from a distant planet (Superman). The same can also be applied to a lone black man living on the fringes of society (*Blade*), versus a billionaire vigilante with enormous financial resources (*Batman*). When establishing the titular character in the 2002 adaptation of *Spider-Man*, director Sam Raimi intended for audiences to "identify with the human being, then blossom into the hero with him."³⁶ The classic comic book motif of *Spider-Man*, where he is "gracefully swinging between skyscrapers high above the streets of Manhattan," is heavily featured in the film, but it also shows *Spider-Man* – as Peter Parker – stressing out before a big first date, and having a hard time scraping together enough money to pay rent.³⁷ As superheroes go, he is a very human one, and we can all, to varying degrees, recognize something of ourselves in him. That can be said about all of these characters, which has long been Marvel's comic book trademark, whereas DC has traditionally existed a few steps further removed from the lives of ordinary people. In reaching the level of popularity that the superhero genre enjoys today, *Blade*, *X-Men*, and *Spider-Man* served as crucial steppingstones. Marvel's misfortune had led to them to selling off the rights to many of their most popular properties, but this was also instrumental in revitalizing the superhero genre

³⁴ Sean O'Connell, *With Great Power: How Spider-Man Conquered Hollywood During the Golden Age of Comic Book Blockbusters* (Lanham: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2022), 60-2.

³⁵ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18; Mishal Ali Zafar, "Why Marvel Made a Measly \$25,000 on Wesley Snipes' *Blade*," *Showbiz Cheat Sheet*, Oct. 15, 2021, <https://www.cheatsheet.com/entertainment/why-marvel-made-a-measly-25000-on-wesley-snipes-blade.html>.

³⁶ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 32.

³⁷ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 25.

through reinvention, and in 2005 this newfound success prompted Marvel to form their own production division, in a bid to get out from the shadow of Fox, Sony, and Universal.

Under the new Marvel Studios banner, Marvel was able to retain creative control of their characters, and they were able to recoup a significantly bigger piece of the box office pie than under their previous deals.³⁸ But Marvel was not reinstated as a successful company overnight. For the first couple of years, the offices of Marvel Studios were located “above a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Beverly Hills,” where a “young red-haired executive named Kevin Feige ... read scripts and ... consulted on the movies that other studios made with their characters.”³⁹ Multiple licensing deals were still in place, such as Universal’s “right of first refusal to distribute” all forthcoming films centered around *The Incredible Hulk*.⁴⁰ This meant their prospective character pool was notably shallower than it had been prior to the 1990s, when Marvel’s financial difficulties first began. Feige, along with longtime Marvel producer, Avi Arad, still had an ambition to develop an interconnected cinematic universe spanning multiple films, and to do so they would use a second-tier character that few people outside of the comic book fanbase had heard of, namely *Iron Man*.⁴¹

In 2008, with the release of *Iron Man*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe was officially launched. The film proved a “critical and financial triumph,” which opened the door for sequels, and for it to function as a springboard for other Marvel superheroes, such as *Thor* and *Captain America*.⁴² With the acquisition of Marvel Studios by Disney in 2009, a cinematic powerhouse was born that would challenge the concept of the modern blockbuster. In fact, it did not take long for competing Hollywood studios to send eager beaver production assistants into their film vaults to dig out anything that could be turned into a cinematic universe. DC wanted in on the action with the DCEU (the DC Extended Universe), while Universal tried to get what they called a “Dark Universe” off the ground, built around the famous Universal Monsters of the 1930s and ‘40s.⁴³ The DCEU was never able to rise to Marvel’s heights, and Universal’s Dark Universe imploded after one film: a remake of *The*

³⁸ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 19; McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 2.

³⁹ Ben Fritz, *The Big Picture: The Fight for the Future of Movies* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), 56.

⁴⁰ Sandy Schaefer, “Marvel Finally Explains Exactly How Its Hulk Deal with Universal Works,” *Comic Book Resources*, Oct. 28, 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/marvel-explains-hulk-rights-sharing-universal-studios>.

⁴¹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 19.

⁴² Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 19.

⁴³ ⁴³ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 19, 23; Joseph Zornado and Sara Reilly, *The Cinematic Superhero as Social Practice* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 46; Robert Ito, “There’s No Dark Universe Anymore, Just One Monster After Another,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 27, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/27/movies/the-invisible-man-universal.html>.

Mummy (1931), starring Tom Cruise.⁴⁴ By the time Marvel Studios released their twenty-second film in 2019, they had created the “largest [film] franchise in the history of the medium.” That twenty-second film, *Avengers: Endgame*, would also become the biggest earner of all time, taking in \$2.79 billion at the global box office (although a 2021 re-release of the sci-fi epic, *Avatar* (2009), would eventually send *Endgame* down to the number two position).⁴⁵ Marvel’s cinematic dominance has, over the last eight or ten years, been nothing short of history-making. In the summer of 2008, the launch of the MCU was deemed a gamble, but for Marvel it was a gamble that paid off in spades, leading to a new dawn for the company and a new formula for success that the rest of the entertainment industry is now striving to emulate.

The Application of Race, Gender, and Film Theory to Superhero Cinema

The theoretical aspects that run like a red thread through the four superhero films that are the basis of this thesis, also run in an identical manner through our slightly tattered but still mostly intact social fabric. As our perception of the world is molded like wet clay by the films we watch, so too are the films we watch molded by the world and the time in which they are created. This has led to a close bond developing between social studies and film studies, as the two fields are not mutually exclusive. Films like *Schindler’s List* (1993) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013) are powerful historical dramas. *Schindler’s List* is a story of survival during the Holocaust of World War II, and *12 Years a Slave* is a story of survival in the Antebellum South. They provide insight into another time and another place, and their themes are still eerily relevant today.⁴⁶ The fact that the films were made is reflective of a social change that has made us think differently about race than we did during the nineteenth or even mid-twentieth century. However, the bond between social studies and films studies can also exist on a different and more fantastical plain. *All the President’s Men* (1976) is a scathing indictment of American politics during a particularly tumultuous period, but so too is *The Omen* (1976), as a biblical allegory of the ills that political power can bring into the world. It is therefore not too difficult to see how the MCU and the films that comprise it

⁴⁴ Ana Dumaraog, “*Man of Steel* Writer Explains Why DCEU Failed To Catch Up With The MCU,” *Screen Rant*, July 23, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/mcu-dceu-movies-comparison-david-goyer-response/>; Ito, “There’s No Dark Universe Anymore.”

⁴⁵ Christine Chan, “*Endgame* is highest-grossing movie in history,” *Reuters*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/graphics/USA-FILM-AVENGERS/0100B09V0ME/index.html>; Lauren Huff, “*Avatar* overtakes *Avengers: Endgame* to once again become the top-grossing movie of all time,” *Entertainment Weekly*, March 13, 2021, <https://ew.com/movies/avatar-overtakes-avengers-endgame-top-grossing-movie-all-time>.

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speak to us and affect us on a deeper level than what the bombastic imagery of the superhero genre would usually have us believe.

In the introduction to *Film as Social Practice*, Graeme Turner postulates that “Popular films have a life beyond their theatrical runs or their re-runs on television: stars, genres, key movies become part of our personal and shared culture, our identity. Film is a social practice for its makers and its audience; in its narratives and meanings we can locate evidence of the ways in which our culture makes sense of itself.”⁴⁷ If we are to make sense of a specific cultural expression, such as the superhero film, then we need reliable sources and theories to guide us in our endeavor. A wealth of edifying material has been generated in academic pursuits, and as “scholars in various disciplines (sociology, political science, communications, history, media studies) have begun to study and theorize concepts and issues surrounding culture and ideology,” an interdisciplinary approach is needed for us to draw a conclusion.⁴⁸ Theories that deal with race and gender are by their nature, and by the nature of society, intrinsically connected. Film theory, on the other hand, is fundamental for unlocking race and gender in a cinematic setting. It is with this in mind that the following theories will be explored.

Racial Formation and the Representation of Race in the Media

In our mediated reality, ideas and ideologies are disseminated daily with the purpose of influencing beliefs, most commonly about matters related to race or gender, or, in some instances, both. This is not a revolutionary notion by any means. Since the racial concept was first weaponized by the advent of chattel slavery in colonial America, there has been a consistent push to depict whiteness as the undisputed racial hegemon, this as a means of justifying acts of racial cruelty that clash with wholesome Christian morality. The argument made by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, and which is “widely accepted in most scholarly fields,” is that race is first and foremost a social construct.⁴⁹ Race, they maintain, is a process of fabricating identities, of a ruling majority “othering” entire groups and communities for the purpose of maintaining power.⁵⁰ Racial formation theory is an attempt to explain these processes, to peel back the veil and to see them for what they are: ideological and political

⁴⁷ Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 4.

⁴⁸ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 14.

⁴⁹ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 76, 106, 132.

⁵⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 105, 132.

strategies designed to affect how we perceive the world and everyone in it, ourselves included.⁵¹

Theories have a tendency of evolving over time, as new directions spring out of old academic frameworks. Racial formation theory is no different in this regard, built as it is upon ethnicity theory, a field of study that appeared at the dawn on the twentieth century, as the United States experienced a massive inpouring of European immigrants. At the time, ethnicity theory was given the task of determining just how white those immigrants were, and how their given degree of whiteness might affect their ability to assimilate into their new nation. The “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” were welcomed with open arms by the Statue of Liberty, but ethnicity theory did not see all as equal when those same huddled masses disembarked from their overfilled ships to set foot on American soil.⁵²

Notwithstanding this problematic origin, the rejection of Puritanical and “biologicistic paradigms” in place of “anthropology and sociology” still set ethnicity theory apart from previous racial theories. Because of this, at the time, revolutionary approach, it became the first theoretic study to view race as a “socially constructed phenomenon.”⁵³ In the years leading up to the civil rights movement, the complexity and reach of ethnicity theory expanded and it attained a “position of theoretical dominance.”⁵⁴ However, the arrant failure of ethnicity theory to consider the “importance of the body as a signifier of status” during the political upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, lead to “stigma, exclusion, privilege, and violence” not being counted as part of the racial experience.⁵⁵ Rather than recognizing these factors, ethnicity theory, under the influence of “neoconservative political priorities,” embraced “colorblindness” and dismissed “race-consciousness.”⁵⁶ Subsequently, in the pursuit of greater racial awareness, it fell on racial formation theory to fill in those very important gaps.

In the interaction between societal and representational agents, racial formation theory points to “racial projects” as the prime mover of public sentiment.⁵⁷ These projects come in all shapes and sizes, from the micro to the macro, and they transpire on all levels of society as we go about our daily lives. In addition to mass mediated projects driven by political policy,

⁵¹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 111.

⁵² Loren E. Lomasky and Fernando R. Tesón, *Justice at a Distance: Extending Freedom Globally* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 96; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 21, 31.

⁵³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 21-3, 26, 76-7, 106.

⁵⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 31.

⁵⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 40.

⁵⁶ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 46.

⁵⁷ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 124-7.

there are those that, on an individual basis, set about disseminating ideas that are directly tied to – or indirectly affiliated with – race because of ideological conviction. Racial projects are effectively the boots on the ground in the war over minds, where they are connecting “what race *means* in a particular discursive or ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially *organized*, based upon that meaning.”⁵⁸ At the end of the day, what these projects are trying to achieve, is to imbue our understanding of race with a “common sense” mentality that operates in the subliminal.⁵⁹ A white man sees a black man as a threat because he has been indoctrinated through a myriad of late-night police procedurals that black men are a threat to him. The fear of the black man becomes second nature to the white man, and through that fear, hate takes root. The racial project has done its job as it has colored the perception of color.

It is important to stress that not all racial projects are racist in character, although a lot of them are, to some degree. In terms of feature films, an exceptionally racist project would be D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith paints a picture of the antebellum South that is built upon the Lost Cause myth.⁶⁰ This is a segregated Eden that is upended twice: first, by the Civil War, and in its wake, by Reconstruction. Griffith’s film is an artistic manifestation of unbridled bigotry; a weaponization of the cinema for the purpose of promoting a white supremacist agenda. For President Woodrow Wilson and untold millions across the nation, the film possessed a power comparable to that of an electrostatic discharge birthed in the midst of a thunderstorm. It was cinematic lightning caught in a bottle, and its imagery inspired a wave of racial hatred across the United States. For its Atlanta premiere on February 8, 1915, *The Birth of a Nation* would also mark the official unveiling of a restored Ku Klux Klan in the public eye, its reemergence also inspired by Griffith’s film.⁶¹

In film history, this is one of the most extreme cases, but there are also countless racist project that are less overt and still manage to inflict damage. *Superman: The Movie* is one such project. In 1978, the film was a groundbreaking big screen superhero adaptation, but no ground was broken when it comes to racial representation. The hero is white, the villain is white, the love interest is white, the henchman is white, the supporting characters are white. It

⁵⁸ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

⁵⁹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

⁶⁰ *The Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith (1915; New York, NY: Kino Lorber Inc., 2011), Blu-ray; Diane Roberts, “The Great Granddaddy of White Nationalism,” *Southern Cultures* 25, no. 3 (2019): 137-8.

⁶¹ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 84; Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), xi; Ralph W. Hood, Jr., Peter C. Hill, and Bernard Spilka, *The Psychology of Religion: Fourth Edition – An Empirical Approach* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2009), 382.

is an all-white buffet. The only black man in the film with a speaking part, is someone who looks like a pimp and, based on the three women he has sitting in his Chevrolet convertible, most likely is a pimp. At the halfway mark, when the Man of Steel makes his first public appearance in Metropolis, the black man makes a colorful comment about Superman's signature blue and red costume. His exact words are: "Say, Jim! Whoa! That's a *bad* outfit!"⁶² That is every word spoken by a black person in *Superman: The Movie*. There are other persons of color featured, but always in the background, and they drift in and out of frame in two seconds flat. The lack of any other kind of non-white representation (with a speaking part) is, at best, problematic. At worst, it is blatantly racist. It sends a subtle message to audiences that, in a film celebrating all things Americana, blackness is not American enough to warrant representation. As a bonus, because of this one black speaking part, the film also implies that a notable contingent of black people are morally lacking. This may not have been the intention of the filmmakers, but, as a racial project, this is none the less what we, the audience, are left with, as we absorb the film they made.

Racial formation theory, through the propagation of racial projects, are inscribed upon us to a greater or lesser extent through a variety of means. The effect, whether positive or negative, is solely dependent on the nature of the project. As stated by Omi and Winant: "Everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of their own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation. Thus are we inserted in a comprehensively racialized social structure. Race becomes 'common sense' – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world."⁶³ In our current multimedia reality, where we have round the clock access to an abundance of visual content, the capacity of films to actively shape our ideological perspectives is tenfold of what it was in 1915 – or even 1978. However, it is not only content creators but also audiences that decide what ideas are disseminated, as audiences have the power to influence the ideological leanings of our entertainment through what we watch or chose not to watch. The problem with this, especially when it comes to superhero films, is that the majority of audiences are white – and male, which will make it more likely that the concerns of minority groups are ignored.⁶⁴ This is true in matters of race, and it is true in matters of gender, as racial formation theory is not

⁶² *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (1978; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc., 2006), Blu-ray.

⁶³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 127.

⁶⁴ Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 60; Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 56-7; Alyssa Meyers and Sarah Shevenock, "Is Gen Z Too Cool for Marvel? Just 9% of Marvel Fans Identify as Part of the Generation," *Morning Consult*, Dec. 6, 2021, <https://morningconsult.com/2021/12/06/is-gen-z-too-cool-for-marvel>.

limited to racial issues only but extends into projects put into place to “profoundly [shape] gender oppression,” as well.⁶⁵ How these gendered projects have sought to influence our perception of gender through films and other means is further explored by Mulvey, Butler, and Brown in texts that, through similar methodology, offer crucial insight into key aspects of the female experience.

The Trouble with Gender: From Male Gazes to Female Bodies

The film camera, in the hands of a filmmaker with a gender-specific agenda, can be imbued with all the characteristics of a sexual predator. This is the claim Mulvey makes when presenting her concept of the “male gaze,” where the camera takes on many of the traits that are bouncing around inside of Norman Bates’ mind.⁶⁶ In *Psycho*, Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 masterpiece of horror and suspense, Bates is a serial killer with a debilitating mother complex who runs an out of the way motel. He is also a peeping Tom who takes great pleasure in scrutinizing the female form whenever a woman checks into one of his vacant rooms for a few hours or a day.⁶⁷ Of course, the male gaze has never brutally stabbed anyone in a shower, but its salaciousness still has much in common with the voyeuristic compulsions driving *Psycho*’s fictional serial killer. Mainstream cinema, much like Norman Bates, has consistently viewed women as “erotic spectacle.”⁶⁸ The dominance of male filmmakers in Hollywood has ensured that women, above all else, are defined by their “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” rather than by any non-superficial quality.⁶⁹ In her paper, Mulvey points to a quote by noted western director, Budd Boetticher, who said: “What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents ... In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.”⁷⁰ The woman, in this regard, is therefore nothing but an instrument to elicit an emotional response in the audience and in the male hero. Whether that emotion be lust as she is paraded in front of the camera, or anxiety as she is put into a dangerous situation, matters little. She is there to service the story, not for her story to be serviced in any way.

This objectification stands in sharp contrast to the subjective lens that the man is put under. He is, as Mulvey puts it, the “bearer of the look.”⁷¹ The man is acting on the same

⁶⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 107-8.

⁶⁶ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 750.

⁶⁷ *Psycho*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock (1960; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 2012), Blu-ray.

⁶⁸ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

⁶⁹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 746, 750.

⁷⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

⁷¹ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

erotic impulse that compels Norman Bates to press his eye against the peephole in the hope of seeing Marion Crane undressing. He is the subject, and the woman – as object – is there for his pleasure, as well as for the pleasure of the audience. To explain the pleasure derived from the act of looking, Mulvey makes reference to psychoanalysis and the Freudian concept of scopophilia. In a film, we get the sense that we are “looking in on a private world,” which, by its implication, is a forbidden act, and this then becomes a source of sexual arousal.⁷² When the male subject is actively looking, the female object is rendered passive, thus resulting in the “active/male” and the “passive/female.”⁷³ The male gaze is, by Mulvey, described as “determining,” meaning that when the man is looking, he is projecting his fantasy onto the female object.⁷⁴ This fantasy is then made real through the unique qualities of the cinema. The film camera, as an extension of the male director, and as a proxy for the male character (or characters), has the capacity of drawing the audience into the scene by shifting the focus away from the narrative and onto the object in the center of the frame. This digression grinds the narrative to a halt, but for most men it is a price they are willing to pay. Or it is what they paid to see in the first place. In her attempt at unscrambling the communication that takes place between image and audience, Mulvey makes frequent use of Hitchcock, noting Hitchcock’s use of the male gaze to create a spectatorial “unease.”⁷⁵ Norman Bates in *Psycho* is quite possibly the foremost representation of that unease, and while Mulvey’s theory demonstrated the predilection of Hollywood to present women as “raw (passive) material” for men to devour, it in no way ended the practice.⁷⁶

Perception, even when the male gaze is added to the equation, does not lie exclusively in the eyes of the beholder. In Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, a range of topics are covered that provide insight into the female experience, but what is most relevant for this thesis, is her examination of the “performative” aspects instilled in gender.⁷⁷ When we step out into the world as part of our day-to-day existence, we are all guilty of performing gender in some way or another. The way we move our bodies, and how we dress those bodies, is reflective of gender identity. Butler argues that this is not the result of biological factors but an expression of the social norms assigned to us at birth, where the male and the female are “part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who

⁷² Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 749-50.

⁷³ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750-1.

⁷⁴ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

⁷⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 755.

⁷⁶ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 756; Stephen Rebello, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Making of Psycho* (London: Marion Boyars, 2013), 93.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2007), xv.

fail to do their gender right.”⁷⁸ The prospect that there is a wrong, that social sanctions can befall those who tread outside of the established boundary between the male and the female, the masculine and the feminine, is confirmation of the presumptions that are placed upon gender as a strictly binary construct. If you identify as male, then there are certain rules that come with that, and certain behaviors you can and cannot participate in. You have to walk, dress, talk, and even think a certain way. The same applies to women. And if we, according to these manufactured mores, do our gender wrong, then we run the risk of being viewed as feminized or masculinized, labels that in both cases carry with them a negative connotation.⁷⁹

These fixed gender roles are best exemplified through drag, according to Butler, where the performative element is taken to an extreme that not only borders on parody but fully embraces it. Other cultural subgroups that, in Butler’s assessment, fall into the same category, include cross-dressers and “butch/femme identities.”⁸⁰ But it is through drag, especially, that gendered attributes are most clearly externalized and thus undermined through a “double inversion” of established gender norms.⁸¹ The implied disagreement between performer and performance, sex and gender, that is apparent in drag, subverts the heteronormative framework and cancels out the argument that gender is a biological certainty. Butler argues that it is only when an act is repeated that it becomes performance, and in order for something to be parodied, repetition is once again a requirement. The fact that gender *can* be parodied is a confirmation of its artificiality, while drag, as performance, shows the fluidity of gender overall. It is the “act of gender [that] create the idea of gender.”⁸² That subversion is called for to raise awareness of this artificiality demonstrate how ingrained the concept of gender has become. It is also important to stress that these fixed ideas of gender have all sprouted “within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality,” that we have then reaped as a collective body – either willingly or by force.⁸³ Therefore, it is only if we are able to recognize the conscious intent that has shaped the ideas of gender that they can either be overturned or accommodated through performance.

No matter how solid a theory is, it is never immune to modification or challenge. In *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Brown both modifies and challenges some of the key arguments made by Mulvey and Butler. Brown’s

⁷⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv, 144-50, 190.

⁷⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 12, 23, 186.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 187.

⁸¹ Ester Newton, *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), cited in Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 186-7.

⁸² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188-90, 202-3.

⁸³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

focus is the “modern action heroine” in film, a relatively recent addition to the mass media landscape.⁸⁴ Mulvey’s central argument, in regard to the male gaze, is that the objectification of women makes female characters passive. In the mid-1970s, when Mulvey’s theory was first introduced, this was most definitely the case in the majority of Hollywood cinema. However, during the 1980s, female characters in film underwent a notable change, and now, “She fights, she shoots, she kills, she solves the mysteries, and she rescues herself and others from dangerous situations. In short, she is in full command of the narrative – carrying the action in ways that are normally reserved for the male protagonist.”⁸⁵ But because this more active female representation still has to endure objectification, a conflict is created with Mulvey’s theory that objectification automatically renders a female character passive. To resolve the theoretical conflict this creates, Brown has further developed the “female/passive” into two new categories: the “*fetishized active*” and “*fetishized passive*.”⁸⁶ In her exploration of scopophilia, Mulvey also makes reference to fetishism, but in the Freudian sense of the word, where it is linked to the phallic and means a fear of castration. Brown’s utilization of the word is completely divorced from this idea and pertains instead to fetishism as a “cultural pathology.”⁸⁷ Today, fetishism is most commonly associated with “Whips, stilettos, thigh-high boots, corsets, authoritative uniforms, tight leather,” and other examples of the “kinky extremes of sexuality.”⁸⁸ The fetishized passive, as an embodiment of this, possesses a complexity not found in Mulvey’s passive/female. Instead, in this new iteration, “sexual norms” are challenged by women using their bodies and sexuality as a means of exploiting men susceptible to their allure.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the fetishized active is a paradox – an impossibility – when measured against Mulvey’s theory. The character is “eroticized” by the skintight attire she is put in and how she is framed, but it is “her ability to run, fight, shoot, drive, solve problems, and generally kick ass” that more than anything defines her.⁹⁰ This is the reason new thinking was called for when investigating the modern women of action cinema.

These new take-charge women also come with another novelty: their meticulously sculpted bodies. During the 1980s, heroic archetypes that in previous decades were played by

⁸⁴ Jeffrey A. Brown, *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 25.

⁸⁵ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 25.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 70.

⁸⁷ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 753; Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 68.

⁸⁸ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 68.

⁸⁹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 71.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 19, 73.

John Wayne, Steve McQueen, and Clint Eastwood, were replaced by the likes of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jean-Claude Van Damme. The introduction of the 1980s hardbody had a transformative effect on the cinematic landscape, but the hardbody was not an exclusively male attribute. To probe the “gender-destabilizing” effect that the female hardbody had on the normative perception of female beauty, Brown cites Butler and the performativity of gender.⁹¹ However, Brown takes issue with Butler’s reference to drag as a destabilizing parody of existing gender norms. Brown argues that drag can only work if audiences are aware that the artist is male. Therefore, “Rather than negating the concept of an original and natural gender,” drag reinforces it.”⁹² Superior example of destabilizing gender influences in Brown’s estimation, are the “butch and the femme,” gender identities that Butler merely glosses over.⁹³ This does not diminish Butler’s assessment of the performative facets that are fused into gender. And the female action hero, with her blending of masculine and feminine traits, is a prime example of how these characteristics come into play and sometimes clash. Muscular women, in particular, are central to this conflict, as societal norms still see muscularity as masculine – despite the capability of women to build muscle in much the same manner that men do. Much like the butch lesbian identity, the “muscular woman is seen as a gender cross-dresser,” which by itself invokes a level of performativity that automatically overrules the binary disposition.⁹⁴ If gender negates a “sex-specific absolute,” and the female action hero “must be read as masculine” because of performativity linked to gender-specific norms, then women are thus refused any other function in the cinema “other than passive.”⁹⁵ This claim could not have been made by Brown without the work first done by Mulvey and Butler, and in challenging as well as building on the knowledge that came before, new edification is engendered in a field that is ever-evolving.

Other Textual Resources: Writings on Race, Genre, and the Cinematic Superhero

The number of books, essays, and articles written about superheroes during the recent superhero boom are legion, which speaks to the overall impact of the genre on our culture. There are texts that examine specific aspects and themes reflected in the cinematic superhero, and there are texts looking at the broader scope of film and society, where the cinematic

⁹¹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 22-5.

⁹² Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 24.

⁹³ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 24.

⁹⁴ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 32.

⁹⁵ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 33.

superhero makes one or more appearances because of the cultural bearing it has been instilled with in recent years. In *Why Wakanda Matters*, a collection of essays examine the themes of *Black Panther* and the film's impact on black communities from a psychological perspective. Carolyn Cocca looks exclusively at militarism and feminism in her book, *Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film*. Joseph Zornardo and Sara Reilly, in *The Cinematic Superhero as Social Practice*, tackle the psychological implications of the superhero genre on society. Jeffrey A. Brown, in his book, *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, explores a variety of aspects, from gender and race to American exceptionalism and post-9/11 trauma. In *The Contemporary Superhero Film: Projections of Power and Identity*, Terence McSweeney pursues a similar path. Then there are texts like *America on Film* by Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, where the superhero film is discussed because of its part in the larger social and cultural conversation.⁹⁶ These are but half a dozen examples of texts written about superhero cinema during the last five or ten years and constitute a mere drop in the academic bucket.

There is also a constant publishing of essays and articles that cover the superhero genre and its continued evolution in the pop-cultural space. These are everything from Joseph Walderzak's "Damsel in Transgress: The Empowerment of the Damsel in the Marvel Cinematic Universe," to Kat Moon writing a *Time Magazine* article from the perspective of an Asian American watching *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* for the first time. The recentness of the four chosen films – out of the more than thirty feature films that currently make up the MCU, has made it necessary for me to also rely on a number of articles and news stories published on various websites. In these cases, I have tried to use trusted industry sources like *Deadline* and *The Hollywood Reporter* as much as possible, but there are also instances where I felt it necessary to employ other alternative sources to make a point or strengthen a particular argument, such as *The Daily Fandom* or the *Morning Consult*. It is an assortment of information that has been incorporated into my internal chapters to provide insight into how past representations of race and gender in the superhero genre are now being challenged by the entertainment industry's leading superhero franchise: the MCU.

⁹⁶ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 47.

Chapter 2: The Representation of Race in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Black Panther and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* both represent a notable and long overdue change in the representation of minorities in superhero cinema. The concept of race never makes for an easy discussion, but when the discussion is held in a social climate as politically polarized as ours, then the level of difficulty is increased tenfold. In 2008, Barack Obama became the first black President of the United States of America. In 2012, he was reelected. Under Obama's tenure, racist sentiment became notably more prolific. By the time Donald Trump ran for office and won in 2016, the fiery subject of racism had turned into a four-alarm fire.⁹⁷ The connection between the state of politics in the United States and Marvel may seem tenuous, but when the Marvel Cinematic Universe was launched – with the release of *Iron Man* in the same year that Obama won the presidential election – it seemed, for a moment, that the United States had entered into a post-racist phase. The general sentiment was that if a majority of Americans could go to the ballot box and elect a black president, then surely, racism could no longer be the constant crisis of yesteryear. At the time, this was also reflected in the films to come out of Marvel Studios, with both characters and storylines firmly entrenched in a post-9/11 world. The day-to-day of racism and growing prejudice seemed a million miles removed. However, the election of Trump after Obama's two presidential periods was, in the words of political pundits, a game-changer – also at Marvel. With racism and xenophobia flooding the media landscape, and with an increasing number of Americans leaning toward the political far-right, the need for greater minority representation – also in the superhero genre – seemed absolutely pressing.⁹⁸

2018's *Black Panther* was the first film in the MCU to feature a minority character as a lead, with *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* coming out three years later. *Black Panther* offered an examination of the African American experience from perspectives both internal and external to the United States. Three years later, in 2021, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* would provide a similar sort of examination of Asian and Chinese-

⁹⁷ Michael Tesler, *Post-Racial or Most-Racial?: Race and Politics in the Obama Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 2-4; Richard C. Fording and Sanford F. Schram, *Hard White: The Mainstreaming of Racism in American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 2.

⁹⁸ Evan Jones, "Representation, Identification, and Pride: Teaching with (and Through) *Black Panther*," in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), 191-2; Eliana Dockterman, "How *Shang-Chi* and the Legend of the Ten Rings Reimagines Its Characters' Racist Comic-Book Origins," *Time*, Sept. 3, 2021, <https://time.com/6094647/shang-chi-racist-origins-the-mandarin>; Smith, "The Revolutionary Power of Black Panther."

American culture.⁹⁹ As the United States has shifted into a politically fraught space where racial intolerance has become more pronounced, characters like Black Panther and Shang-Chi demonstrate the need for positive representations of these most vulnerable groups in the cinema.¹⁰⁰ In addition to reflecting the world and the segment of time in which they are made, films have the ability to “transform the real” through its “own language and its own way of making sense.”¹⁰¹ The majority of comic book adaptations has made it seem as if the world is almost exclusively white. *Black Panther* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* represent a seismic shift in this regard, painting a truthful and far more nuanced portrayal of racial minorities on the big screen. In an age of information overload, where much of that information is devoted to growing racial intolerance and building radicalized platforms, the humanizing of minorities through popular culture is not only important; it has become a matter of life and death.

Seeing Color: *Black Panther* and the Shifting of the Racial Paradigm

The superhero film has traditionally relied on a multitude of racial stereotypes and stock characters in its depiction of minorities. *Black Panther* pushes such portrayals aside and offers audiences something entirely novel: black characters with depth, and that are imbued with a sense of reality.¹⁰² Racial diversity has not been a feature commonly associated with superheroes, not in comic books and not on the big screen, and while Black Panther is not the first black superhero to be given the cinematic treatment by Hollywood, he still represents a new type of black superhero. In the late 1990s, New Line Cinema adapted both *Spawn* (1997) and *Blade* (1998) for the big screen. Both titular characters are black. However, as a servant of hell (in the case of Spawn), and a vampire hunter who is himself “half human, half vampire” (in the case of Blade), both characters more closely fit the anti-hero mold rather than the traditional superhero.¹⁰³ Furthermore, as characters with distinctly monstrous qualities, Spawn and Blade also reflect the Eurocentric belief system founded on whites being “children of God and fully-fledged human beings,” while blacks are a dehumanized “Other”

⁹⁹ Jones, “Representation, Identification, and Pride,” 195-8; Kat Moon, “*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* Made Me Feel Seen Like No Other Hollywood Blockbuster Has,” *Time*, Sept. 3, 2021, <https://time.com/6095108/shang-chi-asian-representation>.

¹⁰⁰ Vanessa Williamson and Isabella Gelfand, “Trump and racism: What do the data say?” *Brookings*, Aug. 14, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say>.

¹⁰¹ Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 46.

¹⁰² Felicia Stewart, “Cross My Heart and Hope to Die in Wakanda,” in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), 6.

¹⁰³ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 18, 126.

that needs to be controlled.¹⁰⁴ Black Panther, as a clearly defined black superhero in the traditional superhero sense, reclaims the humanity that is lost through such depictions, while T'Challa – the man inside of the Black Panther costume – subverts most every black Hollywood stereotype in the book. In place of the angry, uneducated, and criminally inclined black man, T'Challa is virtuous, well-educated, and, at all times, emotionally composed.¹⁰⁵

Killmonger, the villain of *Black Panther*, could have easily come across as an insensitive racial stereotype, as he is the angry black man prone to violence. However, rather than having him reduced to a tired cinematic trope, the film taps into his anger and outrage and shows us the damage that systemic racism can do to a black man's psyche.¹⁰⁶ In *Black Panther*, both hero and villain are used as examples of the developmental processes that occurs in the light of racial projects, with both positive and negative aspects showcased on an individual level. T'Challa has grown up in privilege, as the son of a king and the next in line to the throne of Wakanda. He is the ruler of a nation, but he is not blind to racism, nor is he entirely shielded from it. Killmonger has grown up South Central Los Angeles. He has served in the military, and he has felt firsthand the prejudice that a black body can be subjected to. This has greatly impacted Killmonger's racial identity, which again impacts his outlook on the world. The lived experiences of T'Challa and Killmonger are radically different, which in turn has made them radically different men, but outside of Africa, their blackness still unites them – as it unites the people that, until this film, have been without a superhero that in any way, shape, or form represents them.

In a modern society where popular culture is everywhere around us, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, the overall importance of representation in the cinema can hardly be overstated. As we gaze up at these larger than life figures on a massive screen while sitting in a darkened theater, they cast a light back at us that profoundly shape how we see the world and ourselves. Representation in the cinema has the ability to provide us with an anchor, a sense of belonging that might otherwise leave us adrift – like Killmonger. In his impassioned foreword to *Why Wakanda Matters*, Phillip Boutté Jr., taps into his own experiences growing up black in America, stating: “Our imaginations could only stretch as

¹⁰⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 105, 113-4; Sylvia Wynter, “Sambos and Minstrels,” *Social Text* 1, no. 1 (1979): 150-2.

¹⁰⁵ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 83-4, 101-2; Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 20, 117; Mikhail Lyubansky and Erynn Nicholson, “The Black Panther is Black,” in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), xix.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas, “Killmonger and the Wretched of the Earth,” 76-7.

far as we could imagine ourselves in characters that did not look like us.”¹⁰⁷ That is the social equivalent of being dealt a bad hand. Without affirmative representation that, from an early age, imbues us with a sense of identity – and a sense of pride in that identity, then consequently, life is made far more difficult to navigate. For untold numbers of black people, *Black Panther* has proven to be that anchor, and by eschewing racial stereotypes and providing positive racial representation, it has given the world a black superhero that all can look up to. This is the novelty that *Black Panther* brings to the superhero genre and the pop-cultural table.

“I Never Yielded!” A Brief Synopsis of *Black Panther*

The plot of *Black Panther* owes as much to Shakespeare as to modern comic books in its tale of superheroes, racial politics, and family conflict. However, before the story of the Black Panther can be told, the story of Wakanda must first be told. The film opens with the voice of a young boy asking his father to tell him the “story of home.”¹⁰⁸ The father tells the boy of how,

Millions of years ago, a meteorite made of vibranium, the strongest substance in the universe, struck the continent of Africa. Affecting the plant life around it. And when the time of men came, five tribes settled on it and called it Wakanda. The tribes lived in constant war with each other, until a warrior shaman received a vision from the Panther Goddess Bast, who led him to the Heart-Shaped Herb, a plant that granted him superhuman strength, speed, and instincts. The warrior became king and the first Black Panther, the protector of Wakanda.¹⁰⁹

Out of this half-myth, a nation was forged. And as the world of white men encroached upon the African continent, bringing with them pain and bondage under a colonial decree, the nation of Wakanda used advanced technology developed from vibranium to retreat from the world, to hide under a shield that made them entirely invisible to all on the outside. The boy asks his father if they are still hiding, to which his father answers, “Yes.”¹¹⁰ The boy then asks, “Why?”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁷ Phillip Boutté Jr., “Foreword,” in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), xix.

¹⁰⁸ *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler (2018; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc., 2018), Blu-ray.

¹⁰⁹ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

¹¹⁰ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

¹¹¹ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

We are then taken to Oakland, California, in the year 1992, where a bunch of children are playing basketball in a parking lot. Meanwhile, in the apartment building across the street, two men are busy planning an armed robbery when they are interrupted by King T'Chaka, the father of T'Challa and the current Black Panther. One of the two men is N'Jobu, the King's brother, who has been caught smuggling vibranium out of Wakanda, with the intention of staging a racial revolution. To get the vibranium out, N'Jobu also struck a deal with international arms dealer, Ulysses Klaue. This is a violation of Wakandan law, and T'Chaka – as the Black Panther – has come to escort N'Jobu back to Wakanda, where he must appear before the royal council and answer for his crimes. Later, it is revealed that, as tempers flared, the meeting turned violent and King T'Chaka was forced to kill his own brother. The King then returned to Wakanda, not knowing that one of the children in the parking lot is N'Jobu's son, Erik, who has now been left stranded in the United States, fatherless and homeless.

In the present day, the Black Panther mantle has been passed on to T'Chaka's son, T'Challa, who is only a day away from being crowned the new ruler of Wakanda following the terrorist attack that claimed his father's life in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). First, however, he must retrieve a Wakandan spy from Nigerian rebels who have abducted a small group of women, one of which is the spy – and his former lover, Nakia. Aided by Okoye, the commander of the Dora Milaje, Wakanda's all-female royal guard, the Black Panther is successful in neutralizing the rebels and freeing the captured women. He then asks Nakia to come back with him to Wakanda, to be present during the coronation ceremony.

In London, N'Jobu's son, Erik – who now goes by the name, Killmonger – has come to steal a Wakandan pickaxe on display at the Museum of Great Britain. The pickaxe, which is made from vibranium, was itself stolen from Africa at the height of British colonial power. Like his father, Killmonger has forged an alliance with Ulysses Klaue, and while the two get what they came for, they leave several dead bodies in their wake. News of the brazen theft soon reach Wakanda, who have obtained information that the pickaxe is to be sold by Klaue on the black market. T'Challa, along with Nakia and Okoye, travel to South Korea, where the deal is set to go down in an underground Busan casino. After a fight and subsequent car chase, they are finally able to finally apprehend Klaue, but not before their mission comes into conflict with a C.I.A sting operation, as the intended buyer was C.I.A operative, Everett Ross. As Klaue is taken to a local C.I.A black site for interrogation, Killmonger breaches the facility with high explosives managing to free his associate. In the ensuing firefight, more people are killed, and Agent Ross is fatally wounded as he takes a bullet intended for Nakia.

T'Challa, Nakia, and Okoye return to Wakanda, and they bring Agent Ross along with them, as only Wakandan technology can save his life. This is a violation of Wakandan protocol, as such an act threatens the secrecy that has maintained the safety of Wakandans for centuries. But T'Challa still finds it impossible to stand idly by and let a man die when there is something he can do to save him. Fractures are also beginning to show in Wakandan society, as one of T'Challa's oldest and most loyal friends demand that he, as the King of Wakanda, operate with a more assertive hand in the protection of Wakandan people.

Soon thereafter, Killmonger arrives in Wakanda, and he comes with Klaue's dead body in tow. To Killmonger, Klaue was nothing but a means to an end, and as he is led before the royal council of tribal elders, he makes a claim to the throne of Wakanda as N'Jadaka, the son of N'Jobu. He also states his intent to use vibranium and Wakandan technology to free black people from oppression, wherever they are being oppressed. And as it is Killmonger's "blood right to challenge for the mantle of king and Black Panther," a trial of ritual combat is arranged between him and T'Challa, with the winner getting the throne and all that comes with it.¹¹² T'Challa accepts, but as the two trade blows and kicks, Killmonger proves to be a too formidable fighter and T'Challa loses the challenge. Killmonger throws T'Challa's bruised and beaten body over the side of a massive waterfall, then assumes his place as the new ruler of Wakanda and the new Black Panther. Once the Heart-Shaped Herb has bestowed him with the power of the Black Panther, Killmonger orders the herbs to be destroyed, but Nakia is able to smuggle out a single leaf before the order is carried out.

Nakia and Agent Ross, along with T'Challa's mother and sister, flee into the mountains to seek refuge with the Jabari Tribe. There, they present M'Baku, the leader of the Jabari, with the Heart-Shaped Herb that Nakia was able to save. M'Baku takes the four aside. He leads them into a room where the comatose body of T'Challa is revealed, resting on a bed of ice. T'Challa's lifeless body had been found in the river by a fisherman, who then brought it to M'Baku. With the single remaining leaf of the Heart-Shaped Herb, Nakia and T'Challa's mother are able to heal the defeated king and once again bestow him with the power of the Black Panther. With the future of Wakanda on the line, T'Challa and M'Baku forge an alliance to stop Killmonger from enacting his plan to engulf the entire world in a racial war.

T'Challa then returns to the Wakandan capitol to reclaim his throne, but even as the old king returns and the royal challenge is deemed unresolved, Killmonger maintains massive support among those who were not satisfied with the old regime. Poised at the brink of civil

¹¹² *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

war, Wakandans take up arms against each other, with T'Challa and Killmonger in the middle. The violent conflagration sees both sides locked in battle, but when the Jabari join the fray, it starts to turn in T'Challa's favor. However, Killmonger refuses to give up his claim to the throne without a fight. As the royal challenge is resumed, the two men – and the two Black Panthers – square off once again, but this time it is T'Challa that comes out victorious. As Killmonger lies dying in the light of a Wakandan sunset, T'Challa offers to save his life, but the defeated Killmonger chooses instead to join his ancestors than to see his dreams unfulfilled. Impacted by his experience, and by the mistakes made by his father, T'Challa decides to break with the past and to plot a new direction for Wakanda, one that sees the nation embrace the world rather than withdraw from it. Thus, after centuries of hiding from the world, Wakanda will instead strive to improve it, with T'Challa leading the charge.

Black Panther Pounces: T'Challa and the Racial Inflection Point

The character of T'Challa, whether appearing as the Black Panther or as the benevolent ruler of Wakanda, contrasts sharply with the limited number of black superheroes that have come out of the Hollywood filmmaking machine. This is made apparent the moment he is introduced. We first see T'Challa seated in a futuristic Wakandan aircraft, his back to the camera. A news report about the death of his father is playing on the screen in front of him. As the camera pushes in, we see the Black Panther mask resting in his lap, and T'Challa's face looking pensive as he contemplates the many responsibilities he has inherited. T'Challa and Okoye, the commander of Dora Milaje, are flying into Nigeria to extract a female Wakandan spy from a band of Nigerian rebels. The spy, Nakia, is also T'Challa's former lover. Before dropping out of the aircraft to take on the rebels, Okoye says to T'Challa, "Just don't freeze when you see her."¹¹³ His reply to Okoye, with a slight grin on his face: "I never freeze." T'Challa's emotionality, disarming demeanor, and competency is a far cry from most other black action heroes and/or superheroes, where such qualities are usually in short supply. In comparison, Blade is proficient in killing vampires, but his emotional spectrum is limited to different levels of rage. The 2008 superhero film, *Hancock*, also featuring a black superhero, is another example of how the representation of blackness has suffered within this genre. In *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television*, Brown sums up Hancock thusly: "Hancock may have the powers of a superman but he is initially depicted

¹¹³ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

as an irresponsible thug. He drinks constantly, swears, is dirty and disheveled, leers at women on the street, is exceedingly violent with criminals (he has a preference for literally shoving bad guys heads up each other's asses), and he has a wanton disregard for destruction of public property."¹¹⁴ The character was originally to be played by a white actor, but when a number of big starts dropped out, Will Smith stepped in, and when he did, it "altered the racial inflection of the film."¹¹⁵

The inability or unwillingness by Hollywood to portray black superpowered characters in a positive light is especially troubling as these films, in addition to being entertainment, also function as racial (and/or racist) projects, and thereby influence people's perception of race. When blackness is repeatedly shown as a negative through the reckless and aggressive behaviors of black character, then that impression begins to take root. Omi and Winant, in their exploration of how racial projects function, state that: "Rather than envisioning a single, monolithic, and dominant racist project, we suggest that racist projects exist in a dense matrix, operating at varying scales, networked with each other in formally or informally organized ways, enveloping and penetrating contemporary social relations, institutions, identities, and experiences."¹¹⁶ Racial projects also travel, from one medium to the next, and they come in the macro and the micro. One project can be *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) kicking off a torrent of racial persecution in the United States, while another project can be someone insisting on using Barack Obama's middle name, Hussein, every time the former President's name comes up in conversation.¹¹⁷ *Black Panther*, as an "anti-racist project", provides a corrective to the harmful impressions instilled by films like *Hancock* and *Blade* as they, knowingly or unknowingly, operate under a racial matrix. When T'Challa is shown to be mourning the death of his father, or engaging in a bit of friendly banter with Okoye ("I never freeze"), these small acts are critical, and serve to homogenize a character that could easily have been perceived as too alien for white audiences to relate to.¹¹⁸ Therefore, by presenting a character that rejects the black stereotype, *Black Panther* takes on the properties of an anti-racist project as it provides an image of blackness that is designed to build understanding, empathy, and respect, rather than fear, mistrust, and hatred.

¹¹⁴ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 126-7.

¹¹⁵ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 127.

¹¹⁶ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 128.

¹¹⁷ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 128; Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 84-5; Marlow Stern, "Trevor Noah Calls Out Sean Hannity Over 'Barack Hussein Obama' Dog-Whistle Racism," *The Daily Beast*, May 15, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trevor-noah-calls-out-sean-hannity-over-barack-hussein-obama-dog-whistle-racism>.

¹¹⁸ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

While T'Challa's relatability transcends racial borders, the character is still allowed to fully embrace his black identity, thus making him a proxy for people of color. In the past there almost certainly would have been a push from studio heads to westernize aspects of *Black Panther* and its hero for easier consumption by white audiences; to make the film more bankable in the western hemisphere.¹¹⁹ However, this would have resulted in an utter betrayal of the character as well as his place in comic book history.¹²⁰ T'Challa and his Black Panther alter ego may have been created by two white men (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby), but his debut in *Fantastic Four* No. 52 happened in the summer of 1966, just as the civil rights movement was reaching a fever pitch in the United States. The name, Black Panther, also directly – and consciously – “invokes images of the Black Panther Party.”¹²¹ It was only a month prior to Black Panther's comic book debut that one of the founding figures of the Black Panther Movement, Stokely Carmichael, addressed a crowd of spectators in Greenwood, Mississippi, and said: “We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin. What we got to start saying now is Black Power! We want Black Power.”¹²² T'Challa can in many ways be seen as the personification of Carmichael's Black Power invocation, but as a product of that time and a reflection of that history rather than in the “insurrectionary” philosophy of the Black Panthers themselves.¹²³

T'Challa may have been inspired by the political activism of 1960s, but he also presents an alternative to the slave narrative that for over four hundred years has shaped black identity, whether it be through lived experiences or the trauma of shared recollection.¹²⁴ Where Black Panther is a representation of the still ongoing struggle for racial equality around the world, T'Challa is a paragon of black potential if it had not been smothered by the vile ambitions of colonialism. On the one hand he is a freedom fighter and a protector of black people, on the other he is a manifestation of the things that could have been. These aspects of the character can only be realized by allowing T'Challa to fully embrace his blackness and his Africanness, which is then echoed in the types of outfits he is seen wearing in the course of the film. The Black Panther suit is given a metaphoric link to the Black

¹¹⁹ Maryann Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow: The Racial Politics of the Movie Industry* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 52-6.

¹²⁰ Erigha, *The Hollywood Jim Crow*,

¹²¹ Thomas, “Killmonger and the Wretched of the Earth, 63.

¹²² Smith, “The Revolutionary Power of *Black Panther*,” Tina L. Ligon, “‘Turn this Town Out’: Stokely Carmichael, Black Power, and the March against Fear,” *Rediscovering Black History*, June 7, 2016, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2016/06/07/turn-this-town-out-stokely-carmichael-black-power-and-the-march-against-fear>.

¹²³ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 184.

¹²⁴ Lyubansky and Nicholson, “The Black Panther is Black,” 78-80; Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 115.

Panthers of the 1960s, while the outfits that T'Challa wears in private or as king are all representative of Africanism in one form or another. For example, when he is compelled to defend his claim to the throne through ritual combat, T'Challa dresses in a traditional tribal loincloth, and when attending royal functions, he is looking sharp in a "Nigerian senator's suit."¹²⁵ These manners of dress are all expressions that reflect T'Challa's racial identity – and his surety in that identity, with black history and tradition being weaved into the various fabrics like the brightest of threads. Therefore, when people of color sit down in a movie theater to watch *Black Panther*, they are able to slip into the hero's skin like T'Challa slipping into his Black Panther suit, the character and his appearance acting as both an audience extension and an embodiment of black history.

The reality of race in America, as opposed to the fantasy of Wakanda, is further explored through the ways in which T'Challa and Killmonger's blackness have been shaped by the most basic of human factors, such as community and a general sense of belonging. T'Challa has lived most of his life in what can only be described as a black utopia. He is no stranger to racist ideology when traveling outside of his homeland, but he is still very much shielded from the bigotry that, historically speaking, has shaped much of the western world. T'Challa can remove himself from a prejudiced world and retreat into the relative safety of Wakanda once his mission is completed, similar to how he can take off his Black Panther suit. For someone like Killmonger, i.e., most black people living in urban centers in major U.S. cities, there are few places to feel truly safe, as most police officers and other authority figures are far more likely to see black people as a threat than white people. This is a disturbing holdover from the painful days of slavery, where the practice of ascribing meaning to race formed a link between blackness and criminality that has since made it into the "occupational consciousness" of those persons policing American streets.¹²⁶ When taking into account the "strength of one's racial (or ethnic) identity," Lyubansky and Nicholson contend there are "four group characteristics" that move the needle in either direction: "size, power, discrimination, and appearance."¹²⁷ Because of these factors, the racial minority will inevitably enjoy less power than the majority, which will in turn lead to greater levels of discrimination based on specific sets of phenotypic features. For minorities, the result of

¹²⁵ Gina McIntyre, "The bold costumes of 'Black Panther' join tradition and technology," *Los Angeles Times*, Nov. 7, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-mn-costumes-black-panther-20181107-story.html>.

¹²⁶ Lisa J. Long, *Perpetual Suspects: A Critical Race Theory of Black and Mixed-Race Experiences of Policing* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), 206.

¹²⁷ Lyubansky and Nicholson, "The Black Panther is Black," 78.

these ideologically constructed obstacles is an increased sense of racial awareness, while the racial majority, who experiences little to no discrimination, will be less preoccupied with the assignment of racial labels for themselves.¹²⁸ T'Challa and Killmonger are prime examples of how this process of racialization works in practice. T'Challa is proud of his blackness and his black heritage, but his world does not revolve solely around race. Killmonger's world does revolve around race, and because of the discrimination he has experienced, he has become imprisoned within his black identity. Consequently, T'Challa is instilled with a moderate position on race, whereas Killmonger is racially radicalized through the soul-crushing trauma that racist actions inflict upon the human psyche.¹²⁹

The differing racial policies of T'Challa and Killmonger are clearly demonstrated when Killmonger, before the royal council of tribal elders, enacts his blood right to challenge T'Challa for the Wakandan crown. Previously, the two had a violent physical confrontation in South Korea, but here their oppositional worldviews are put into words that speak more directly to how their individual life experiences have put them on conflicting paths:

Killmonger: Y'all sittin' up here comfortable. Must feel good. It's about two billion people all over the world that looks like us. But their lives are a lot harder. Wakanda has the tools to liberate 'em all.

T'Challa: And what tools are those?

Killmonger: Vibranium. Your weapons.

T'Challa: Our weapons will not be used to wage war on the world. It is not our way to be judge, jury, and executioner for people who are not our own.

Killmonger: Not your own? But didn't life start here on this continent? So ain't all people your people?¹³⁰

For T'Challa, blackness is not the blanket term that it is for Killmonger. This corresponds with the “developmental model of Black identity” and the places at which the model places these two individuals.¹³¹ The model is composed of five stages: (1) pre-encounter, (2) encounter, (3) immersion-emersion, (4) internalization, (5) commitment. The pre-encounter stage relates to the period before someone has directly experienced racism, whereas the encounter stage deals with the immediate aftermath of such an incident. The immersion-emersion stage is where Killmonger resides, where “almost everything is seen through a racialized lens with an unapologetic celebration and endorsement of all aspects of

¹²⁸ Lyubansky and Nicholson, “The Black Panther is Black,” 78.

¹²⁹ Charles Athanasopoulos, “Black Radical Thought as Pathology in Black Panther,” in *Why Wakanda Matters: What Black Panther Reveals About Psychology, Identity, and Communication*, ed. Sheena C. Howard, PhD (Dallas: BenBella Books, Inc., 2021), 137-9.

¹³⁰ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray; Lyubansky and Nicholson, *The Black Panther is Black*, 81.

¹³¹ Lyubansky and Nicholson, *The Black Panther is Black*, 79.

Blackness.”¹³² The internalization stage is where racial identity is embraced and an individual has moved past the overarching idealization of blackness, thus making a “bicultural ideology” attainable.¹³³ The commitment stage is where, “in addition to maintaining an internalization identity, the person also actively engages in resisting racism and other forms of oppression.” This is where T’Challa finds himself come the film’s conclusion.¹³⁴ However, for most of the film he is positioned at the internalization stage. It is only because of the challenge posed by Killmonger and the history it has unlocked that T’Challa is able to move on to the next developmental stage and end the isolationist policy that has shielded Wakanda from the world for centuries. T’Challa’s embrace of a globalized community can therefore be seen as a commentary on the lack of multi-cultural representation in the superhero genre as a whole, where he, unlike the traditional white superhero, is a hero for all.

A Hero in His Own Story: Killmonger, Identity, and the Repercussions of Racial Radicalism

The depth of Killmonger’s racial radicalization is demonstrated in full when, in his last fight with T’Challa, he is mortally wounded with a Wakandan spear. With a finality reached, T’Challa carries the dying Killmonger into the light of a Wakandan sunset. T’Challa then offers to save the antagonist’s life, to which Killmonger declines, saying: “Just bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from the ships, ‘cause they knew death was better than bondage.”¹³⁵ In recognizing that his violent revolt is lost, Killmonger is seeing himself in the larger context of black history. And there, he is yet another casualty in the profoundly long line of men and women who have paid the ultimate price in the pursuit of freedom. The history of slavery in the United States is filled with harrowing tales of human resistance, such as the accounts of Fredrick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, whose experiences have had a profound influence on shaping black identity. The same can also be said about the post-slavery era, where Jim Crow legislation assured that the racial doctrines of the Antebellum South lived on for decades, until figures like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rosa Parks challenged them directly.¹³⁶ These stories have, in the years since, become collective memories through written accounts, witness statements, documentaries, and films,

¹³² Lyubansky and Nicholson, *The Black Panther is Black*, 79.

¹³³ Lyubansky and Nicholson, *The Black Panther is Black*, 79.

¹³⁴ Lyubansky and Nicholson, *The Black Panther is Black*, 79.

¹³⁵ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray

¹³⁶ Kristen T. Oertel, *Harriet Tubman: Slavery, the Civil War, and Civil Rights in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 19.

and it is the weight of this history, conveyed through such varied means, that Killmonger is carrying with him in this final moment.

The internalization of such (and other) historical wrongs from entirely external sources is what Alison Landsberg explores in her theory on “prosthetic memory.”¹³⁷ These memories that “have no direct connection to a person’s lived past,” still have it within themselves to profoundly affect a “person’s subjectivity and politics.”¹³⁸ It is a process that is started when, in a book, a film, or through any number of mediated channels, transgressions directly derived from history are committed against one or more individuals. The images (whether they are formed in our imagination or on the screen) are integrated into our cognitive processes, and there they begin to “blur the boundary between individual and collective memory.”¹³⁹ In a television series like *Roots* (1977), as the African slave, Kunta Kinte, is whipped for having disobeyed his Master, his pain becomes our pain as we watch the cruel tears through skin.¹⁴⁰ The subjectivity of that terrible punishment then attaches itself to us “Through the technologies of mass culture,” which makes it “possible for these memories to be acquired by anyone, regardless of skin color, ethnic background, or biology.”¹⁴¹ However, when the skin being whipped is black, then it is all but inevitable that the memory formed will be felt more acutely by black people.

Killmonger carries this prosthetic pain with him wherever he goes, and it is a pain that is further intensified by the racism that he himself has experienced in everyday life. As the character is first introduced standing in front of a massive display case of African artifacts in the Museum of Great Britain, his is a black body inside of an “historically white space,” to borrow a phrase from Claudia Rankine.¹⁴² Killmonger’s introduction is also a mirror of T’Challa’s introduction, with both men initially seen with their backs to the camera, the allusion being that the two men could have been practically mirror images if circumstances wanted it otherwise. Killmonger is scrutinizing an exhibition of African tribal masks when the museum director approaches him. After first asking her about the various tribal masks and their origin, he directs her to a lavishly decorated pickaxe that she mistakenly identifies as being native of Benin. Killmonger takes obvious pleasure in correcting the supposed expert, telling her: “Nah ... it was taken by British soldiers in Benin, but it’s from Wakanda and it’s

¹³⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2-3.

¹³⁸ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2, 20.

¹³⁹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 94.

¹⁴¹ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 2.

¹⁴² Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2015), 25.

made out of Vibranium.”¹⁴³ He then informs her that he will be taking the pickaxe off her hands, and moments later a meticulously planned heist is put into motion that leaves the museum director and others dead. In the verbal back and forth between Killmonger and the director, historical hurts are bleeding through Killmonger’s words. As this former colonial power is challenged by a black man that, no more than a century earlier, would have been a colonial subject, the crime thus becomes an act of vengeance fueled by racial radicalism.

This connects to a central part of Killmonger’s racial identity, where his radicalized perspective merges past and present into a sameness that breaks down the concept of time itself. During his conversation with the museum director, Killmonger demonstrates a significant knowledge of African history, and that historical awareness is also fundamental to how he sees himself. In Killmonger’s mind, his present-day struggle is but a continuation of the seemingly endless struggle against slavery, Jim Crow, and every other injustice that, over the centuries, has been enacted upon the black body. For this reason any action undertaken by him is entirely justified, until the racial power imbalance is thoroughly redressed. Therefore, as Killmonger lays dying under a setting Wakandan sun, he becomes a textbook case of the nebulous relationship between the lived and the recollected, as centuries of black history is condensed in the pursuit of identity. Through Killmonger’s felt connection to his ancestors, his cause and his sense of selfhood are shown to be one and the same, and as his cause is lost, he too becomes a lost cause. When Killmonger asks to be reunited with his ancestors in death rather than have to live in defeat, he is seeking a reunification with history that sees his own memory be assimilated back into the collective black body, to serve as yet another resistance cry for others to rally around.

A Wakanda State of Mind: The Beauty of Blackness in Superhero Cinema

In a climate of continued racial division, where our social discourse on race seems as heated as ever, *Black Panther* demonstrates why positive black representation in superhero films is so pivotal. There is currently no other genre in popular culture that reaps the kind of public attention and anticipation that the next Marvel outing does. For all their visually bombastic qualities, the films have been shown to resonate with people on a deeply personal level, mainly due to our ability to connect with and project ourselves onto our larger than life heroes. In his article for *TIME*, where he talks about *Black Panther*’s impact on black identity, Jamil Smith expands upon the sentiment expressed by Phillip Boutté Jr. in his

¹⁴³ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

introduction to *Why Wakanda Matters*, with Smith underlining how precious it is to be able to identify with modern superhero archetypes:

If you are reading this and you are white, seeing people who look like you in mass media probably isn't something you think about often. Every day, the culture reflects not only you but nearly infinite versions of you – executives, poets, garbage collectors, soldiers, nurses and so on. The world shows you that your possibilities are boundless ... Those of us who are not white have considerably more trouble not only finding representation of ourselves in mass media and other arenas of public life, but also finding representation that indicates that our humanity is multi-faceted. Relating to characters onscreen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us. ¹⁴⁴

For much of the twentieth century there were but a handful of parts that black men and women were given to play in films, mostly as supporting or background characters, be it a house maid, a porter, a doorman, or a servant. The types of menial jobs that most white people considered as being far beneath them. Where white cinematic superheroes have influenced white children since the 1940s (with film serials like *Captain Marvel* and *Batman* molding impressionable young minds on a regular basis), black children have simply not been provided with the same types of role models until the release of *Black Panther*. *Blade* is arguably the closest that black children have come to having a black superhero-like figure to look up to, but with *Blade* being an R-rated film, they were clearly not the intended audience.

If you go to the cinema and the only people on the screen that look like you are doing nothing but attending to white people; polishing their shoes and cleaning their houses, then it will have an effect on how you see yourself and the world. This is racial formation theory 101, and while racial projects are employed on scales both large and small, there is also a third possibility: erasure. The complete lack of representation in a specific cultural space, such as the superhero genre.¹⁴⁵ By taking all depictions of blackness off the board, the mere notion of a black superhero like T'Challa is made unimaginable for any black youth in search of a hero to look up to. In *Black Panther*'s epilogue, T'Challa pays a visit to the same inner-city neighborhood where we saw a young Killmonger playing basketball in the prologue. When T'Challa deactivates the stealth mode on his very futuristic-looking aircraft, the children drop what they are doing and run over to get a closer look. One boy stays back, and when he notices T'Challa off to the side, he asks him (with sense of wonder in his voice):

¹⁴⁴ Smith, *The Revolutionary Power Of Black Panther*.

¹⁴⁵ Boutté Jr., "Foreword," xix; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125, 128.

“who are you?”¹⁴⁶ The screen fades to black before T’Challa can provide an answer, but we all know. T’Challa is that long-sought-after role model for anyone who has grown up black in America or elsewhere.

Enter Shang-Chi: Hollywood and the First Asian Superhero

Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings is based on a Marvel comic book character that debuted in September of 1974, at the height of popularity for a novel Asian import into American pop culture: the martial arts film.¹⁴⁷ The breakthrough of martial arts cinema coincided with the mainstream embrace of blaxploitation, and comparable to the way blaxploitation infused blackness with a new cool through characters such as Shaft and Cleopatra Jones, audiences were exposed to Asian characters in a whole new and far more assertive light through martial arts films. Before unleashing their fists of fury upon cinema screens across the nation, Asian actors in American cinema were primarily relegated to playing “houseboys, railroad or laundry workers, cooks, and other assorted servants.”¹⁴⁸ It was an offensive racial stereotype created by “racist work laws” depriving Asian migrants of the same sort of opportunity for social mobility that white people enjoyed. And if a Hollywood film did feature Asian characters in a greater capacity, then, rather than casting Asian actors for the meatier roles, they would most frequently be filled by white actors in “yellowface.”¹⁴⁹ Generally, these roles would be of a villainous or otherwise shifty nature, and the films themselves would be a reflection of Asian culture through the eyes of white people with little actual knowledge of Asian culture. Until the 1970s, it was the exploits of stereotypically framed figures like Charlie Chan and Fu Manchu that most American cinemagoers associated with the phrase, “Orientalism,” but that would change the moment Bruce Lee exploded onto the cinema screen.¹⁵⁰

Global superstardom did not happen overnight for the martial artist and actor. When Bruce Lee arrived in the United States in the 1960s, the big screen was not yet ready for an Asian performer with his skillset and ambition, but he was able to land a role on the small screen, playing the “sidekick Kato in the TV show *The Green Hornet* (ABC, 1966-67).”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler, Blu-ray.

¹⁴⁷ Grady Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks: How Kung Fu Movies Swept America and Changed the World* (Austin: Mondo Books, 2021), 83; Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 139.

¹⁴⁸ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 93, 130, 139.

¹⁴⁹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 130-3, 139.

¹⁵⁰ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 93, 130, 139; Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks*, 64.

¹⁵¹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 138-9.

However, when the series was cancelled and no other real opportunities presented themselves in Hollywood, Lee returned to Hong Kong in 1970, initially for a brief “family visit.”¹⁵² But after appearing on a popular variety show where he got to demonstrate his martial arts, Lee was sought out by Hong Kong producing siblings, the Shaw Brothers. They wanted to cast him in their “threadbare production” of *The Big Boss* (1971), whose script was only a “three-page outline,” and the rest, as they say, is history.¹⁵³ The lack of Hollywood producers willing to take a chance on the Asian American actor and martial arts extraordinaire, coupled with the fact that Lee found the level of success that he did once he returned to Asia, speak to the racist attitudes that were still prevalent in the film industry in the 1960s and 1970s.

These attitudes were perfectly encapsulated in the 1993 semi-biographical film, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, where the many hurdles that Lee had to overcome to attain his eventual fame are laid out in full, with a bit of dramatic license. In this cinematic telling of Lee’s life, there is a scene where the newly arrived Chinese immigrant is taking a white American woman out on a date. The two of them go to see *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1961) at their local movie theater, where the audience is seen howling with laughter at the buffoonish Chinese landlord played by Mickey Rooney in yellowface. Bruce is the only non-white person in attendance, and he is made clearly uncomfortable by the racism on display.¹⁵⁴ It is a moment that highlights the bigotry of both the film industry and the general public, where the othering of Asians – as a racist project – is front and center in one of the most popular romantic comedies of the 1960s.¹⁵⁵ The depiction of Asians as racially inferior has a long track record in the United States. The massive inpouring of Asian immigrants in the mid- to late-nineteenth century led to a steep rise in anti-Asian sentiment, as did the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Both incidents opened the door for a rampant villainization of Asians that Hollywood freely embraced, but most disturbing of all is the fact that this racist hounding would be repeated in the twenty-first century, under a banner of pandemic outrage.¹⁵⁶

By the time *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* opened in theaters on August 15, 2021, a resurgence in hate crimes directed at Asian American communities was sweeping the United States, brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic that, in 2020, placed most of the

¹⁵² Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 139; Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks*, 56.

¹⁵³ Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks*, 56.

¹⁵⁴ *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, directed by Rob Cohen (1993; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2015), Blu-ray.

¹⁵⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 142; Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 130.

¹⁵⁶ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 131, 136.

world in lockdown. The origin of the virus in Wuhan, China, made it all too convenient for people to parade their prejudice in public, and with then U.S. President Donald Trump frequently referring to the COVID-19 virus as the “Chinese virus” or “kung flu,” an already difficult situation was further aggravated for all persons with Asian phenotypes.¹⁵⁷ According to the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, there was a roughly 150 percent increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States from 2019 to 2020. For 2021 the numbers are even more dire, with anti-Asian hate crimes seeing an unprecedented hike of 339 percent compared to the year before. The same study also points to the incendiary rhetoric of President Trump as one of the main factors for this alarming development.¹⁵⁸

Since Bruce Lee first took the world by storm, the perception of Asians have experienced a notable shift in the United States, with racial barriers starting to break down. To some, Asian American are now regarded as “honorary Whites” as they have more fully embraced their “Americanness” than other immigrant groups.¹⁵⁹ However, this adoption of American culture was still not sufficient to earn Asian Americans equal opportunity and “full acceptance” within the larger social tapestry.¹⁶⁰ Asian Americans were conclusively an Other, and come the premiere of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* in 2021, the damage done by Trump and all those looking to place blame on an entire ethnicity for a global pandemic was felt profoundly in Asian communities across the nation. This makes it as critical now as back in the 1970s that movie-going audiences be provided with a depiction of Asians that does not provide an excuse for racial persecution and groundless villainization. Theoreticians in the field of mass communication assert that in “today’s electronic world, the media has more influence on cultural ideas and ideologies than do schools, religions, and families combined.”¹⁶¹ Therefore, as identity politics have become even more divisive, it is imperative that characters like Shang-Chi, in films like *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten*

¹⁵⁷ Rachel Pistol, “Asian American Responses to Donald Trump’s Anti-Asian Rhetoric and Misuse of the History of Japanese American Incarceration,” *Comparative American Studies* 17, no. 3-4 (2020): 304-6; Katie Rogers, et al. “Trump Defends Using ‘Chinese Virus’ Label, Ignoring Growing Criticism,” *The New York Times*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/china-virus.html>.

¹⁵⁸ Kimmy Yam, “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased by nearly 150% in 2020, mostly in N.Y. and L.A., new report says,” *NBC News*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-nearly-150-2020-mostly-n-n1260264>; Kimmy Yam, “Anti-Asian hate crimes increased 339 percent nationwide last year, report says,” *NBC News*, Feb 1, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/anti-asian-hate-crimes-increased-339-percent-nationwide-last-year-repo-rcna14282>.

¹⁵⁹ Hendrix and Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks*, 56-9, 64; Yao Li and Harvey L. Nicholson Jr., “When ‘model minorities’ become ‘yellow peril,’ – Othering and the Racialization of Asian Americans in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Sociology Compass* 15, no. 2 (2021): 2.

¹⁶⁰ Li and Nicholson Jr., “When ‘model minorities’ become ‘yellow peril,’” 2.

¹⁶¹ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 12-3.

Rings, are given the ability to shift racial perspectives and, in this manner, abolish racial misconceptions that, in the information age, seem to propagate with increased intensity.

“All I Ever Wanted was a Normal Life:” A Brief Synopsis of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*

Family, loyalty, and tradition are classic themes of martial arts cinema, and these themes are also very much present in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. The film begins in ancient China, in a prologue that tells the story of warlord, Xu Wenwu, and how he came to acquire the Ten Rings, metallic bracelets of unknown origin that grant the bearer exceptional strength and eternal life. Rather than use the power of the Ten Rings for good, Wenwu uses them to strike down his enemies and conquer them at all costs. Empires fall before his feet, and men die in their thousands as his insatiable thirst for domination makes him a feared figure across continents. As the Ten Rings ensure Wenwu a deathless existence, he retreats into the shadows, from where he and his army overthrow governments and manipulate history in the pursuit of money, power, and influence.

In 1996, Wenwu goes in search of Ta Lo, a mythic land said to hold the secret to the highest level of martial arts mastery – which he wishes to possess. When he finally comes upon the hidden entrance to Ta Lo, Wenwu is met by its gate keeper – a mysterious woman whose martial arts skills are superior to his own, even as he wields the Ten Rings. Her name is Ying Li, and as the fight persists, it turns into a flirtation that will see the two fall in love. Li decides to leave her homeland of Ta Lo to live with Wenwu in his mountain stronghold. There, they marry and have two children: a son and a daughter. The boy is named Shang-Chi, the girl, Xialing. The four of them find happiness, with Wenwu finally choosing a life of peace after centuries of warring with the world. However, their life of harmony is brutally disrupted when a rival clan attacks their compound and Li is killed in defense of her children. As grief clouds his heart and his soul, Wenwu returns to his old ways. When Shang-Chi comes of age, he is put through a grueling training regime to become an assassin in his father’s army. Meanwhile his sister, Xialing, is forbidden from engaging in any martial arts training. Still, she defies her father’s wishes by training in secret. Shang-Chi, when he is fourteen years old, is then given an assignment by his father, along with a knife. He is told to go out into the world and kill a man that had a hand in his mother’s death. Shang-Chi does as he is instructed, but, with the man dead, he is wracked with guilt. This forces Shang-Chi to abandon his father and sister and go on the run, which leads him to San Francisco.

Ten years later, Shang-Chi is still living in the city by the bay, where he has made a new life for himself, with new friends, and a job working as a parking valet. His closest friend is Katy, whom he met while attending High School. She is also a co-worker of his, and her family of first, second, and third generation Chinese immigrants, has become his surrogate family. However, despite their long friendship, it is not until the two are attacked by three of Wenwu's henchmen on a city bus that Katy learns of Shang-Chi's past. The men approach Shang-Chi as he and Katy are on their way to work. They demand a jade pendant given to Shang-Chi by his mother before she was killed, and after a spectacular fight aboard a runaway bus through the streets of San Francisco, the men – although slightly bruised and battered – are able to snatch the pendant from Shang-Chi's neck and deliver it to Wenwu.

Shang-Chi knows that his sister, Xialing, is in possession of an identical pendant, and that Wenwu's men will be going after her next. Shang-Chi, who recently received a postcard sent by his sister from Macau, boards the first available flight to China, with an initially upset but eventually understanding Katy in tow. Once they arrive in Macao, they learn that Xialing is the operator of an underground fight club, set up in a skyscraper still under construction. Not knowing that his fight on the bus was filmed by a passenger and posted online, for it to then go viral, Shang-Chi is taken aback when he is made to enter the fighting ring. His opponent: his sister, Xialing. Their first reunion in years is a fraught one, with Xialing resenting her brother for abandoning her ten years earlier. She takes that rancor with her into the ring and unloads it in her kicks and punches. Shang-Chi is finally able to inform Xialing that their father is coming, and that he is after her pendant. Not wanting his help, Shang-Chi asks her about the postcard. Xialing tells him she never sent him a postcard. Then the alarm sounds as they are attacked by the Ten Rings. After another harrowing fight, mostly along the building's exterior, Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing are captured by Wenwu, who, in a bid to see his family reunited, sent Shang-Chi the postcard.

Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing are then taken up into the mountains, to Wenwu's secret compound. There, Wenwu tells them he has been in communication with his beloved wife telepathically, who has told him she is not dead but a prisoner of Ta Lo, where she is held behind a massive gate. With both jade pendants in his possession, Wenwu places them into the sockets of an ornate wooden dragon; the centerpiece of a wall-sized wooden carving. The pendants glow, before a torrent of water is discharged from out of the wood. The suspended liquid dances around Wenwu, Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing, before it drops to the floor and forms a map to Ta Lo. Still doubtful of their father's story and alarmed by his intention to rescue his late wife by any means, Shang-Chi and Xialing refuse to help. As

punishment for having turned their back on family, Wenwu has both Shang-Chi and Xialing thrown into a cell, along with Katy. They quickly realize that the only way to stop their father from doing irreparable harm to their mother's birthplace, is to get to Ta Lo first. Also imprisoned in Wenwu's private dungeon, is English ham actor, Trevor Slattery. In *Iron Man 3* (2013), Slattery was hired by a man by the name of Aldrich Killian to impersonate the Mandarin, a crime lord and terrorist that, in reality, is one of Wenwu's many guises. Unbeknown to Trevor, this was an elaborate hoax orchestrated by Killian to divert attention from his own criminal activities, and after Trevor was sent to prison for being complicit, Wenwu had the actor broken out of said prison and placed into a cell under his lock and key. Also in the cell is a creature native of Ta Lo that Trevor has named Morris. The creature is able to speak through Trevor, and explains it was born in the mythic land but that it was abducted by Wenwu during one of his many failed expeditions. The creature asks them to help it get back home, saying that it can guide them to Ta Lo's hidden entrance if given a chance.

Using the same underground tunnel system that Xialing escaped through six years ago, they break out of their cell and steal a car. After navigating a labyrinthine pathway through a living bamboo forest, Shang-Chi, Katy, Xialing, Trevor, and Morris come to the entrance of Ta Lo. Once they pass through, they find themselves in a land filled with all manner of creatures from Chinese mythology. They also come upon a village, where Shang-Chi and Xialing are greeted by their mother's sister, Ying Nan. She informs them that Wenwu is not in contact with their late mother. Instead, through the magic of the Ten Rings, Wenwu is being manipulated by an ancient evil imprisoned behind a gate that has been guarded by the villagers of Ta Lo for generations. Ying Nan explains to Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing that, "Thousands of years ago, all of our people lived in peace and prosperity, until the attack of the Dweller-in-Darkness. He came with his army, devouring every soul in their path, and with each kill [this demonic entity and his spawn] grew stronger. After decimating our largest cities, they were headed to your universe to do the same."¹⁶² But with the help of a magical protector: a dragon, the Dweller-in-Darkness was defeated and imprisoned behind a gate in the side of a mountain, where it has been lying in wait ever since. With Wenwu coming to tear down the gate, that wait is now over.

¹⁶² *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, directed by Destin Daniel Cretton (2021; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc., 2021), Blu-ray.

When Wenwu arrives in Ta Lo with his army, Shang-Chi, Katy, and Xialing join with the villagers to try to stop their father from unleashing the Dweller-in-Darkness. The battle is hard-fought, with casualties on both sides. However, when Wenwu reaches the gate and sets about punching through it using the power of his Ten Rings, the Dweller's spawn are released from the cracks forming in the gate and begin to devour fighters on both sides. The villagers and Wenwu's men are forced to unite as father and son engage in a furious fight under a gate that is beginning to buckle. When the gate finally gives way and the Dweller-in-Darkness is set free, Wenwu realizes his mistake. A winged and tentacled monstrosity of enormous proportions come out of the portal. It then sets its sights on Wenwu and Shang-Chi. Wenwu is able to save his son, but the beast locks its tentacles around him and begins to devour his soul. In his final act, Wenwu transfers the Ten Rings to Shang-Chi. As the dragon protector once again emerges to help the villagers of Ta Lo, Shang-Chi climbs upon the dragon's back, and, with Xialing at his side, he is able to vanquish the Dweller-in-Darkness before it can cross from Ta Lo and into our earthly realm. With peace restored, Shang-Chi and Katy return to San Francisco, while Xialing travels to her father's compound and assumes control of his criminal empire.

Shang-Chi Strikes: A Celebration of Asian Identity Through Martial Arts

All the many elements that make up *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* reflect facets of Chinese history and mythology, and the Chinese American experience. The film is also a love letter to martial arts cinema, which, since the 1960s, has become an important cultural component of that history. In modern action cinema, martial arts can at times seem like a cultural hodgepodge, with many films borrowing heavily from different martial arts styles and mixing them together in various creative ways. *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, in presenting the two worlds that the narrative spans, plays with this concept. When Shang-Chi is confronted by four of Wenwu's men on a San Francisco bus and, much to Katy's amazement, takes them all on, the fight choreography plays on some of the best loved fight scenes of some of the most popular Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan films of all time. Shang-Chi's first punch – in defense of Katy – is a straight punch that, through the framing and impact, could have been taken straight out of any Bruce Lee film. At the moment of contact, it can be argued that more than three hundred years of Chinese history is coursing through Shang-Chi's fist, from the development of Wing Chun in the eighteenth century, to Ip Man instructing Bruce Lee in 1950s Hong Kong, to Bruce Lee then displaying the full

extent of his pugilistic might on cinema screens in the 1970s.¹⁶³ The next martial arts legend to come along after Bruce Lee passed away in 1973, is Jackie Chan, and soon after delivering a straight punch that sends one of the henchmen flying, Shang-Chi makes full use of several stunt gags seen in multiple Jackie Chan films.¹⁶⁴ The jacket flip is the first one, where Shang-Chi flips his jacket over his head and uses it to block a punch before putting it back on as quickly as it came off. Another is Shang-Chi's acrobatic use of the handrails inside the bus, which has been a staple of Jackie Chan since the 1980s, where, in films such as *Wheels on Meals* (1984) and *Police Story* (1985), Chan is channeling silent film performers like Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd as much as he is Bruce Lee.¹⁶⁵ This gives a sense of modernity to Shang-Chi's fighting style in the bus scene in particular, but it is a modernity still very much rooted in the tradition of Hong Kong action cinema.

In *Ta Lo*, however, Shang-Chi's fighting style goes through a transformation, as his aunt, Ying Nan, teaches him in the ways of Tai Chi. Tapping into the spirituality of martial arts, the flowing movements of Tai Chi become a metaphor for Shang-Chi's personal growth, as, for years, he has struggled with the rage that was projected onto him by a father drowning in grief. Shang-Chi was trained in the martial arts to become a killer; Wenwu's blunt weapon to be directed at the men responsible for his mother's death. But in *Ta Lo* that talent for destruction is transformed into a gentler art. In training with his aunt, Shang-Chi mirrors the many Chinese men and women who practice their forms, be it in parks or other public places, in the pursuit of a healthier mind and body. Ying Nan says to Shang-Chi, as they are training: "Your mother knew who she was. Do you?"¹⁶⁶ Through Tai Chi, in addition to cleansing his body of his father's harmful influence, Shang-Chi is able to reconnect with his Chinese roots after a decade of living in San Francisco.

This loss of identity is further explored by Shang-Chi's name change. When he first arrived in the United States, Shang-Chi changed his name the more American-sounding, Shaun. Some of the Chinese inflection is retained in his new name, but key pieces, along with Shang-Chi's identity, are lost. The immense weight that names are given in Chinese culture is addressed by Wenwu during Shang-Chi, Xialing, and Katy's stay at his compound. Sitting around a table and eating, Wenwu asks about Katy's Chinese name. After a brief moment of

¹⁶³ Benjamin N. Judkins and Jon Nielson, *The Creation of Wing Chun: A Social History of the Southern Chinese Martial Arts* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 1-3, 8.

¹⁶⁴ Hendrix and Chris Poggiali, *These Fists Break Bricks*, 66, 234-8.

¹⁶⁵ *Wheels on Meals*, directed by Sammo Hung (1984; Hong Kong: Eureka Entertainment, Ltd., 2019), Blu-ray; *Police Story*, directed by Jackie Chan and Chi-Hwa Chen (1985; Hong Kong: Eureka Entertainment, Ltd., 2019), Blu-ray.

¹⁶⁶ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

hesitation, she tells him, “Ruiwen.”¹⁶⁷ Wenwu then says to her: “Names are sacred, Ruiwen. They connect us not only to ourselves but to everyone who came before.”¹⁶⁸ In Chinese society, this is the way it has been “For thousands of years, [as] names have been regarded as a means for pinpointing family relationships.”¹⁶⁹ In fact, the placement of given name last underscores how “family comes first in an individual’s identity.”¹⁷⁰ Shang-Chi removed that familial connection when he changed his name, as he wished no part of his father’s legacy. However, in doing so, his mother’s legacy was also lost in the same instant. In the flirtatious fight between Wenwu and Shang-Chi’s mother, Ying Li, at the beginning of the film, we see her Tai Chi movements flow in much the same manner that we later see in Ying Nan. When his aunt then passes those movements on to Shang-Chi by teaching him Tai Chi, the familial bond is reestablished – and, through it, a direct link to thousands of years of Chinese history.

This close connection between identity and martial arts in Chinese culture and history, has consequently turned this specialized fighting style into a racial stereotype. Nancy Wang Yuen describes in her book, *Reel Inequality*, a particularly memorable encounter she had with a “Chinese American actor in his thirties.”¹⁷¹ The actor told her that, for casting directors, “race trumps all other ‘types’ for Asian American male actors,” with the roles offered to them being variations on the “Good-looking Asian, martial arts Asian, [or the] Character Asian.”¹⁷² Or, as in the case of Simu Liu, who plays Shang-Chi: the first and the second. The first time in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* that Shang-Chi’s martial arts abilities are made the center of attention, is during bus scene. However, before the fighting starts, Katy addresses the four thugs, telling them: “You have the wrong guy! Does he look like he can fight?”¹⁷³ It turns out, Shang-Chi knows how to fight, as for the film to function, this racial stereotype had to be played up. But with Katy posing her question in the manner that she does, the impression that all Asians know martial arts is categorically disputed. Katy’s surprise when Shang-Chi’s martial arts skills are revealed further underlines the falsehood in the belief that all Chinese people know how to fight, which, over the years, has been reinforced by the continued popularity of martial arts cinema.

¹⁶⁷ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

¹⁶⁸ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

¹⁶⁹ Emma Woo Louie, *Chinese American Names: Tradition and Transition* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2008), 50.

¹⁷⁰ Louie, *Chinese American Names*, 51.

¹⁷¹ Nancy Wang Yuen, *Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018), 72.

¹⁷² Yuen, *Reel Inequality*, 72.

¹⁷³ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

All racial stereotypes are products of racial projects, but in the same way that not all racial projects are necessarily racist, so too is true of racial stereotypes.¹⁷⁴ The overriding impression that the majority of Asians are proficient in martial arts – which, to a significant degree, can be traced back to the popularity of Bruce Lee – is an emphatically empowering racial stereotype. It was through Lee that martial arts became an emblematic “vehicle for the representation/transportation of the Asian exotic into the western mainstream.”¹⁷⁵ And as later generations have carried on his legacy, this racial minority that was seen as little more than servants and busboys under a “white patriarchal capitalist culture” during Hollywood’s Golden Age, is now seen as empowered protagonists, righting wrongs through a flurry of kicks and punches.¹⁷⁶ The fact that Marvel’s first-ever superhero film to feature an Asian American lead is also a martial arts film, can be perceived as yet another example of the “reduction of Asian American actors to their race.”¹⁷⁷ However, the martial arts stereotype still has a predominantly positive effect on the representation of Asians in the cinema, as representations are not reflections of reality, but rather framing devices that shape “our sense and understanding of reality.”¹⁷⁸ Our sense and understanding of Shang-Chi paint a picture of a man whose identity is closely entwined with his practice and pursuit of martial arts, whether it be Wing Chun or Tai Chi, and while this might not feel truthful to all Asians and Asian Americans, it still presents an image of Asian empowerment that, in the here and now, is as important as it has ever been.

The Katy Situation: The Asian Diaspora and the Model Minority

Katy too, is no stranger to racial stereotyping, as her Chinese American ethnicity automatically makes her part of the “model minority.”¹⁷⁹ While Shang-Chi is living an easy-going lifestyle as a Chinese immigrant in San Francisco’s Chinatown, Katy, as a second-generation American, is demonstratively struggling with the expectations that are placed upon her shoulders as a model minority member. This phrase that on the surface seems benign, was introduced during the height of the 1960s civil rights movement, as white America found itself under increasing pressure by black community leaders demanding an

¹⁷⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 125.

¹⁷⁵ Paul Bowman, *Theorizing Bruce Lee: Film-Fantasy-Fighting-Philosophy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 35.

¹⁷⁶ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 137; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 126.

¹⁷⁷ Yuen, *Reel Inequality*, 72.

¹⁷⁸ Turner, *Films as Social Practice*, 178; Paul Bowman, *The Invention of Martial Arts: Popular Culture Between Asia and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 10.

¹⁷⁹ Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origin of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 2.

end to racial inequality. Instead of seeing the detriment of maintaining this racial divide, white America's answer was to play minorities against each other by simply elevating one race over the other.¹⁸⁰ Because the majority of Asians were not challenging the status quo to the extent that blacks were, their labeling as “*definitively not-white*” changed to “*definitively not-black*.”¹⁸¹ This was the recompense Asian Americans got for having “kept their heads down and never complained,” leading to greater social acceptance and better prospects for social mobility.¹⁸² Furthermore, as members the Asian American community finally saw the doors to the Promised Land opening before them, an internal policing developed that limited the ability of many to go their own way. Instead, they were pressured by leading community figures to “behave as praiseworthy citizens.”¹⁸³ Katy, unlike Shang-Chi, feels this pressure acutely, from friends as well as family.

Katy is not ambitious. She would much rather just enjoy life and do whatever makes her happy. She loves cars, and she loves driving them. Working as a valet and parking cars for a living is therefore a perfectly fine job for her. The first sign of disharmony between Katy and her Asian American community, is when Katy and Shang-Chi meet up with two friends, John and Soo, with Soo being an old friend from high school. Over drinks in a local pub, they reminisce about youthful indiscretions, until, at a certain point, the conversation turns from lighthearted to serious after an innocuous remark:

Katy: You know, before she was a lawyer, your girl was pretty wild.

John: What happened?

Soo: I grew up.

Katy: What's that supposed to mean?

Shang-Chi: Yeah, what's that supposed to mean?

Soo: That maybe there's a point where you're supposed to stop going on joyrides and think about start living up to your potential.¹⁸⁴

In Soo's mind, her friend's failure to grow up and pursue loftier goals than parking cars for a living – even if that is what makes her happy – is an abdication of social and familial responsibilities that are unfathomable to her. To stress her point, Soo says to Katy: “you're a

¹⁸⁰ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 2; Philip Kasinitz, “Explaining Asian American achievement,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39, no. 13 (2016): 2392.

¹⁸¹ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 2.

¹⁸² Jeff Guo, “The real reasons the U.S. became less racist toward Asian Americans,” *The Washington Post*, Nov. 29, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2016/11/29/the-real-reason-americans-stopped-spitting-on-asian-americans-and-started-praising-them>.

¹⁸³ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 3.

¹⁸⁴ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

valet driver with an honor's degree from Berkley.”¹⁸⁵ The concept of doing whatever makes you happy is never a part of the conversation, as Soo's model minority ambitions trump any other ambition that would not necessarily align with that end goal. In this way, Soo is “living with and within” a racial categorization that was created in part by the Asian community, while Katy is adamantly resisting it.¹⁸⁶

Soo's criticism is also echoed by Katy's family the next day, with her mother urging Katy find a better job, and her grandmother delivering a not too subtle hint that Katy should marry Shang-Chi and settle down. The interactions between Katy and her close-knit family are typical of immigrant families. Her grandmother, in spite of her having lived in America for several decades, is still entrenched in Chinese traditions. She also has a hard time expressing herself in any other language than Chinese. Katy, on the other hand, has trouble expressing herself in any other language than English. Her lack of ambition could therefore be seen as part of her Americanization and how she has drifted too far from her Chinese roots – even as she is part of a household where three generations of Chinese Americans are living under a single roof. When Shang-Chi and Katy travel to Macao to find Shang-Chi's sister, Xialing, they eventually come to the underground fight club that she runs – in a very much above-ground skyscraper. Once they step out of a rickety elevator (the skyscraper is still under construction), Shang-Chi and Katy are greeted by Xialing's aid and fight announcer, Jon Jon. Excited at meeting Shang-Chi after his fight aboard the bus went viral, he immediately starts talking to them in Mandarin. Katy, feeling a bit awkward at not understanding, says to him: “my Chinese sucks.”¹⁸⁷ Jon Jon's reply: “All good. I speak ABC.”¹⁸⁸ The film makes no further attempt at explaining what ABC is in reference to, but for members of Chinese American communities it is a very familiar phrase. It is short for “American-born Chinese,” and, barring cases where the speaker is using it in a “divisive and elitist way,” is an entirely neutral phrase.¹⁸⁹ This illustrates how, even two generations removed from the immigrant experience, this cultural relocation continues to affect Katy. At the same time, it is the binary influence of two vastly different cultures that has made it

¹⁸⁵ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

¹⁸⁶ Wu, *The Color of Success*, 7.

¹⁸⁷ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

¹⁸⁸ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, dir. Destin Daniel Cretton, Blu-ray.

¹⁸⁹ Moon, “*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings Made Me Feel Seen*,” Xiao-Huang Yin, “Writing a Place in American Life: The Sensibilities of American-Born Chinese as Reflected in Life Stories from the Exclusion Era,” in *Chinese American Transnationalism: The Flow of People, Resources, and Ideas Between China and America During the Exclusion Era*, ed. Sucheng Chan (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 270.

possible for Katy to resist the demands of the model minority, thus encouraging her to pursue opportunities not defined by racial stereotypes.

The Importance of Being Seen: Shang-Chi and the Tearing Down of Hollywood's Racial Barrier

For the bulk of time that Hollywood's dream factory has been cranking out fictional content for our enjoyment (and their enrichment), the vast majority of heroes featured on the big screen have been white, leaving many non-whites feeling inconsequential in the larger social picture.¹⁹⁰ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is not the first Asian-led film to come out of a major Hollywood studio, but it might be the most consequential. In 2018, Warner Bros. released *Crazy Rich Asians*, an all-Asian romantic comedy with a focus on the Asian diasporic experience, but ultimately, the film is "more of a Hollywood fantasy than a social exposé."¹⁹¹ *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, through characters such as Shang-Chi and Katy, provide Asians with a representation that go beyond stereotypes, that instead strives for a sense of realism in one of the most fantastical film franchises of all time: the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The film's director, Destin Daniel Cretton, said that he "wanted to create a character that was surprisingly relatable to anybody."¹⁹² This relatability is first and foremost generated by how the characters behave in relation to the mundane rather than the extraordinary. The fight sequences are spectacular, but martial arts, as an ingrained part of Asian culture and history, is not an uncommon pursuit in any way. The film's ultimate antagonist, the Dweller-in-Darkness, is an extraordinary sight, as a Cthulhu-like monstrosity in a superhero film with a predominantly Asian aesthetic.¹⁹³ Practicing Tai Chi, or engaging in a bit of Wing Chun sparring, is not.

Then there are the blink-and-you-miss-it moments, the micro to the macro, so to speak, like Jon Jon mentioning to Katy that he speaks American-born Chinese, or the way Wenwu underlines the importance of names in Chinese culture. This is where a familiarity is found that resonates most profoundly with Asians and those who are part of the Asian diaspora. After having seen *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, Kat Moon wrote an

¹⁹⁰ Yuen, *Reel Inequality*, 7.

¹⁹¹ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 146-8.

¹⁹² Shelly Tan, "Shang-Chi and the Fight Against the Yellow Peril," *The Washington Post*, Sept. 3, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/interactive/2021/shang-chi-asian-tropes>.

¹⁹³ Stemming from the imagination of horror author, H.P. Lovecraft, Cthulhu is one of the Great Old Ones, a tentacled leviathan and denizen of the cosmic void whose shape is so gruesome that a mere glance is enough to drive a person to madness. Cthulhu appears in several of Lovecraft's short stories published between 1928 and 1935, a collection of texts that are typically referred to as the Cthulhu Mythos.

article for *Time*, in which she discusses her experience of the film, as an Asian American: “I can’t speak for how Asian viewers of other ethnicities will respond to the film – as it’s been said over and over again, the Asian American and Pacific Islander community is not a monolith. But as a Mandarin-speaking viewer who grew up in a home with Chinese values and traditions, I was moved by its efforts at portraying characters with experiences similar to my own.”¹⁹⁴ It is this recognition of aspects unique to the Asian and Asian American experience that lends the film its overall importance, as “when it comes to representation, specificity creates authenticity.”¹⁹⁵ Thus, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* makes all those who are part of the Asian community feel seen in a way they rarely are, and that they have a value in Hollywood and the modern superhero blockbuster equal to that of the traditional white hero.

Two Cultures, One Cinematic Universe: The Impact of *Black Panther* and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*

Black Panther and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* are two films within the same cinematic universe that address some of the same social problems through distinctly different approaches. *Black Panther* is a politically penetrating commentary on racial history and a celebration of black culture. *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is primarily an exploration of the Asian diaspora and a celebration of said cultural ancestry. The political aspects are decidedly more subtle in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, with the focus instead placed on nationality versus identity, and the clash of cultures this creates. In the days leading up to the release of *Black Panther*, the air was electric and anticipation was running high. Black communities were abuzz with how the film promoted black culture in a way that had never been seen before. And *Black Panther* proved a tremendous success on all fronts. Before the theatrical release of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, Asian communities were feeling the same kind of excitement, with the hope that the film would have a similar kind of effect. In essence, what Marvel was trying to achieve with the release of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, three years after the release of *Black Panther*, was to make lightning strike twice, in terms of the public response.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe was already a pop cultural phenomenon long before the release of *Black Panther*, but when the film opened to record numbers and went on to join

¹⁹⁴ Moon, “*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* Made Me Feel Seen.”

¹⁹⁵ Moon, “*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* Made Me Feel Seen.”

the billion-dollar club, it became a phenomenon in its own right. The story and the characters were imbued with a complexity that the superhero genre, up until then, was not particularly well-known for. *Black Panther* addressed pressing social issues and it did not hold back while doing so. T'Challa was, for them, the champion that black communities had been waiting for since the film medium first matured into an elaborate storytelling device.¹⁹⁶ His name alone: Black Panther, meant immediate recognition as a fighter for black causes because of the allusion to the political organization of the 1960s. Black children may not be all that familiar with where the name came from, but the Black Panthers of the 1960s, with their political slogans and their “uniform of a black beret, black pants, powder blue shirt, black shoes, and black leather jackets” have still managed to find a place in popular culture.¹⁹⁷ *Shaft* and other blaxploitation films having adopted the black leather look and the message of “Black Power” is one such example.¹⁹⁸ Marvel’s *Black Panther* is born out of this same era, but its praising of blackness does not come at the cost of any other group. Furthermore, by inspiring audiences to think critically about race and racial history, the film is doing something that right now, on a grade school level in a number of American states, is prohibited.¹⁹⁹ The importance of *Black Panther* as a positive representation of black culture and history has therefore only increased since the film’s theatrical release five years ago.

With *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* having come out while the Covid-19 pandemic was still raging, its capacity to reach the same kind of cultural appreciation was greatly impeded. Meanwhile, because of the origin of the Covid-19 strain in Wuhan, China, and with a surge of Anti-Asian sentiment in the United States as a result, there had rarely been a greater need for an Asian superhero on the big screen than in August of 2021. In fact, five months prior to the release of *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, lead actor Simu Liu was prompted to write a column in *Variety*. The article started with the words: “I worry a lot about my parents these days.”²⁰⁰ He then went on to explain: “I fear for my parents’ safety because of a virus, although perhaps not the one you’re thinking of. I’m talking about the hate crimes being committed against Asian people at an alarming rate over the past year.”²⁰¹ The effect of the pandemic prevented *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten*

¹⁹⁶ Wallace, “Why *Black Panther* is a Defining Moment.”

¹⁹⁷ Charles E. Jones, “Reconsidering Panther History: The Untold Story,” in *The Black Panther Party Reconsidered*, ed. Charles E. Jones (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1998), 1.

¹⁹⁸ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 92.

¹⁹⁹ Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, “Why are states banning critical race theory?” *Brookings*, Nov. 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory>.

²⁰⁰ Simu Liu, “*Shang-Chi* Star Simu Liu: ‘Anti-Asian Racism is Very Real’ (Guest Column),” *Variety*, March 11, 2021, <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/shang-chi-simu-liu-anti-asian-racism-1234928348>.

²⁰¹ Liu, “*Shang-Chi* Star Simu Liu.”

Rings from replicating the massive success that *Black Panther* experienced, but it did provide Asians besieged by anti-Asian sentiment with a superhero in their image at the time when they needed it most. It goes to show that a virus is ultimately far easier to inoculate against than bigotry. However, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, as a product of popular culture, might still be able to inspire less hate and more cross-cultural understanding through its representation of Asians and Asian Americans.

Chapter 3: The Representation of Gender in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Historically speaking, superheroes have been defined as much by gender as by race, and it is not until the most recent wave of comic book adaptations that female superheroes have attained the cultural clout needed to challenge gender-specific norms that previously cast them as inferior to men. Like race, gender is an entirely human construct existing separate from our sexual selves, the masculine and the feminine being nothing more than performative acts.²⁰² However, the popular misconception that gender is somehow cemented into our most fundamental building blocks is also a constant in both comics and comic book adaptations. In terms of gender, the superhero archetype was for the most part established by the first ever character to inhabit the superhero mold as we know it today: Superman. In 1938, as this “strange visitor from another planet” shed the guise of the ordinary man and took to the skies like an all-powerful exemplar of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, he instantly became an icon, a blueprint that an entire industry would endeavor to emulate in the years to come.²⁰³ But in order for this superpowered champion of the oppressed to fully flaunt his masculinity, he needed a damsel – the more distressed, the better. The answer came in the form of Lois Lane, who, in spite of her being a journalist and no-nonsense career woman in 1930s America, still managed to constantly get herself into situations where she needed the Man of Steel to come to her rescue.²⁰⁴ Irrespective of this narrative inconsistency, it was a formula that readers responded to, and as superhero stories eventually transitioned into other mediums, such as film and television, these gender roles were increasingly bolstered in the public consciousness.²⁰⁵

The first film that in a convincing manner sold audiences on a superpowered alien being fighting for “truth, justice, and the American way,” is 1978’s *Superman: The Movie*, where the phrase, “you will believe a man can fly,” was even put into the promotional material.²⁰⁶ Its success at the box office would open the door for a wide range of superheroes in the cinema, but it would also slam the door shut for any person not having the right combination of X and Y chromosomes. This cultural celebration of superpowered men at the

²⁰² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

²⁰³ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 3, 37; Arno Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* in Superman as a Heroic Ideal,” in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?* ed. Mark D. White (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 89.

²⁰⁴ Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2016), 69-71.

²⁰⁵ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 3, 37.

²⁰⁶ Joseph Zornado and Sarah Reilly, *The Cinematic Superhero as Social Practice* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 37; *Superman: The Movie*, dir. Richard Donner, Blu-ray.

expense of similarly gifted women was not all Superman's doing, however. Also lending a hand was the critical and financial failure of 1984's *Supergirl*. Superman's Kryptonian cousin may have been the first female superhero with her name on the marquee, but she was also the first box office casualty of the superhero genre. As her film ended up an unmitigated flop, *Supergirl*'s "first great adventure" on the big screen (according to the poster) would also be her last.²⁰⁷ It would be twenty years before a major Hollywood studio – in this case, Warner Bros. – would roll the dice on another superhero adaptation where a female character takes center stage. Alas, the film the studio gambled on was *Catwoman* (2004), and, like *Supergirl*, it too proved a massive disappointment, with audiences failing to show up and critics showing it no mercy. Superheroes of the female variety had thus received two strikes on the big screen, and the third strike would be provided by Marvel's *Elektra* (2005) only a few months later. The titular character had first appeared in the 2003 adaptation of *Daredevil* at 20th Century Fox, but with *Elektra* maintaining the negative trend started in 1984 by *Supergirl*, its fate proved as tragic as any Greek play.²⁰⁸ Therefore, by the time we get to the halfway point of the first decade of the twenty-first century, the future looked anything but hopeful for all female superheroes hoping to transition into film.

The conclusion that many drew based on this trinity of flops, especially those working in the film industry, is that the majority of audiences did not care to see female protagonists in superhero films. The superhero genre has always exhibited a "preoccupation with masculinity," and this gendering of a film's critical and commercial failure exposes a misogynistic attitude that again points to a social conditioning grinding away at the public consciousness.²⁰⁹ In 2015, as Sony Pictures was attacked by North Korean hackers, a large number of emails from their internal servers were leaked to the public. One of the emails, a correspondence between "Marvel Entertainment CEO Ike Perlmutter" and "Sony executive Michael Lynton," had Perlmutter "question[ing] the profitability of a female-led superhero film."²¹⁰ For his argument, he used the failures of *Supergirl*, *Catwoman*, and *Elektra*.²¹¹ Perlmutter had no difficulty in pointing out the lackluster quality of each film in turn, but at no point did he see that as explanation for their underperformance. To him, all roads led to

²⁰⁷ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 40; Scott Mendelson, "Famous Flops: 'Supergirl' Doomed Girl-Powered Comic Book Movies," *Forbes*, May 8, 2015, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2015/05/08/famous-flops-supergirl-doomed-girl-powered-comic-book-movies/?sh=75ab23316d4d>.

²⁰⁸ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 40; McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 56.

²⁰⁹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 40; Dana Showalter, et al., *The Misogynistic Backlash Against Women-Strong Films* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 3-6.

²¹⁰ Eliana Dockterman, "Marvel CEO Says in Leaked Email That Female Superhero Movies Have Been a 'Disaster,'" *Time*, May 5, 2015, <https://time.com/3847432/marvel-ceo-leaked-email>.

²¹¹ Dockterman, "Marvel CEO Says in Leaked Email."

gender as the main culprit. This ideological reasoning completely ignores such flops as *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (1987), *Batman & Robin* (1996), and *Green Lantern* (2012), all of which featured men front and center, and had critical ratings on par with their female superhero counterparts.²¹² This “systemic sexism” is analogous the “concept of race as a marker of difference.”²¹³ In the same manner that racial minorities have been marked as an Other in the interest of elevating the racial hegemon, so too is true of the repression of women. Racism and sexism are both products of social projects designed to propagate inequality, where the “master category of race [has also] profoundly shaped gender oppression.”²¹⁴ The discriminatory views expressed by Perlmutter in his email is evidence of those projects still running – on multiple levels of our societal structures. There, they are still limiting the opportunities for women, and the fact that his email was written only a few months prior to Marvel announcing their intent to make *Captain Marvel* their first female-led superhero film in the MCU, shows the formidable challenges that any such film has to overcome in order to get made.

Four years after it was first announced, in March of 2018, the cameras rolled on *Captain Marvel*, with *Black Widow* following a year later. Together with DC’s *Wonder Woman* (2017), and Marvel’s *Black Panther*, this signaled a sea change within the industry, with more diversity filling the frame as previously marginalized stories were being explored. *Wonder Woman* also proved that quality, not gender, is what designates a box office hit.²¹⁵ Whether this dramatic new direction was motivated by the divisive talking points of the political far-right, or by the much-touted rivalry between Marvel and DC, is inconsequential. Ultimately, what matters most, is that it led to greater representation within a hugely popular genre where diversity has been sorely lacking. *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*, as the two foremost representatives of female superheroes in the MCU, have each in their own way influenced events in this sprawling domain of modern mythmaking. *Black Widow* is one of the most frequently featured characters in the MCU irrespective of gender, and *Captain*

²¹² Ana Swanson and Shelly Tan, “The biggest superhero movie flops and successes of all time,” *The Washington Post*, Aug. 14, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/08/14/the-biggest-superhero-movie-flops-and-successes-of-all-time>; Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 23.

²¹³ Schowalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 7; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 107.

²¹⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 108.

²¹⁵ Marc Graser, “Marvel Announces New Wave of Superhero Movies,” *Variety*, Oct. 28, 2014, <https://variety.com/2014/film/news/black-panther-inhumans-captain-marvel-marvel-announces-new-wave-of-superhero-movies-1201341076>; Tom Chapman, “Captain Marvel Starts Filming February 2018,” *Screen Rant*, Oct. 31, 2017, <https://screenrant.com/captain-marvel-production-filming-start-date>; Ethan Anderton, “Marvel’s *Black Widow* Movie Begins Shooting In Norway With An Intriguing Working Title,” May 29, 2019, *Slash Film*, <https://www.slashfilm.com/566724/marvels-black-widow-movie-begins-shooting-in-norway-with-an-intriguing-working-title>; McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 66.

Marvel is arguably the most powerful character to have been unleashed within its constantly evolving borders. The fact that we are now finally able to discuss *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* as films, and as part of the MCU, shows that progress has been made in this highly charged arena. However, there is still a potent vocal backlash against not only female-led superhero films but most any film featuring strong women.²¹⁶ Therefore, as *Black Widow* finally strikes out on her own after having languished in the shadow of the Avengers for more than a decade, and *Captain Marvel* takes to the skies in a breathtaking display of female might, their respective films become far more than mere entertainment. By examining gender and presenting a critique of traditional gender roles and gender biases within the superhero genre, *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* are imbued with the ability to mitigate the spread of misogynistic sentiment precisely because of the popularity of the genre they are a part of.

Captain Marvel Takes Flight: Female Empowerment and the Representation of Women in Superhero Cinema

By the time *Captain Marvel* took to the skies as part of the MCU, the superhero genre had gone from being widely regarded as a niche market to a worldwide phenomenon. The growing popularity of superheroes in the mainstream led to greater representation, thus opening the door for more diverse stories to be told. Women were included in this diversification, but, until the release of *Captain Marvel*, only in an ancillary capacity. In fact, since the launch of the MCU in 2008, eleven years would pass before a female superhero was placed on equal footing with the men in the franchise and made the headliner of her own film. The Wasp came close in 2018, in the sequel to 2015's *Ant-Man*, but three years on, she still had to share the title with her co-star, hence, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*.²¹⁷ The cinematic female superhero has been maliciously and unjustifiably knocked to the ground over past box office flops, but like the saying goes: fall seven times, stand up eight. This tenacity is also what makes *Captain Marvel* – and her alter ego, Carol Danvers – who she is. In a montage of memories extracted from her subconscious by the film's main antagonist, we see Carol fall down, again and again, only for her to get back on her feet every time. From childhood to adulthood, it is this tenacity that is Carol's defining trait. Whether as a tomboy in her youth, or as a U.S. Airforce pilot in her adulthood, she has constantly struggled against a gender bias that has forced her to work twice as hard as most men to get anywhere in testosterone rich

²¹⁶ Schowalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 31,33, 58.

²¹⁷ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 56.

environments. The character, like the film, stands as an intruder into traditionally male spaces. Within the fictional framework of the film, it is the United States Airforce that present misogynist opposition, while in reality, the role of gatekeeper is filled by the superhero genre itself. The MCU may be the biggest single franchise in cinema history, but as demonstrated by the anti-feminist pushback *Captain Marvel* received upon release, the number of people that still see the superhero as an exclusively male commodity is legion – which only increases the importance of this and other “women-strong films” in the same genre.²¹⁸

This sexist mentality is reflected not only in how *Captain Marvel* was criticized by a vocal minority after the film hit theaters, but also in the opposition it met prior to production.²¹⁹ During the development process, it was chief executive officer (CEO) Ike Perlmutter at Marvel Studios that posed the main obstacle to *Captain Marvel* getting the green light. Perlmutter’s antagonism toward female superheroes on the big screen became public knowledge in 2015, after North Korea hacked Sony Pictures and released thousands of private emails from various Hollywood producers and power brokers. His exchange with Sony executive Michael Lynton, where Perlmutter derided all previous attempts at making a female-led superhero film, revealed him as being the definition of an anti-feminist.²²⁰ Later, it was also revealed that Perlmutter’s views also prevented Marvel from featuring female villains in the MCU, and that he furthermore blocked the “inclusion of Black Widow merchandise in *Avengers* toy lines.”²²¹ Anything that might be seen as female empowerment had to be scrubbed out of existence under Perlmutter’s reign. It was only after Marvel producer and main architect of the MCU, Kevin Feige, made Marvel Studios chose between him and Perlmutter, that the latter “lost control of Marvel’s film unit.”²²² In an interview with *The Independent*, actor Mark Ruffalo recounted the story, saying that “When we did the first *Avengers*, Kevin Feige told me, ‘Listen, I might not be here tomorrow.’ And he’s like, ‘Ike does not believe that anyone will go to a female-starring super movie.’ So if I am still here tomorrow you will know that I won that battle.”²²³ When the history of Marvel Studios is

²¹⁸ Schowalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 11.

²¹⁹ Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 30-1.

²²⁰ Dockterman, “Marvel CEO Says in Leaked Email.”

²²¹ O’Hara, *Women vs Hollywood*, 174.

²²² Daniel Holloway and Matt Donnelly, “Does Kevin Feige’s Marvel Promotion Mean Ike Perlmutter’s Endgame?” *Variety*, Oct. 22, 2019, <https://variety.com/2019/biz/news/kevin-feige-ike-perlmutter-marvel-disney-1203377802>.

²²³ Adam White, “Marvel boss Kevin Feige almost quit over lack of representation, says Mark Ruffalo,” *The Independent*, Feb. 22, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/mark-ruffalo-kevin-feige-marvel-quit-representation-ike-perlmutter-disney-a9350921.html>.

written, *Captain Marvel* is therefore more than a mere film; it is also evidence of who won that battle, and why the battle had to be fought in the first place.

The criticism directed at *Captain Marvel* after its theatrical release is symptomatic of two closely linked social movements: the growing contention over identity politics, and a “patriarchal policing of quality” that puts way too much power into the hands of white men.²²⁴ As the saying goes, all art is subjective, but when a film is bombarded with negative reviews before it has opened, then this speaks to an ideological misalignment rather than anything that has to do with the qualities of the film itself.²²⁵ This toxicity stems from a privileged elite that considers any positive representation differing from their own as an existential threat. They are white, they are male, and they are completely “without awareness of their own biases and blind spots when it comes to women-strong films” – or any other marginalized group that has recently achieved a greater and more positive representation in the media.²²⁶ Actress Brie Larson, who plays the titular Captain Marvel, also ruffled a lot of white privileged feathers when she spoke out about the criticism directed at the 2018 science fiction/fantasy film, *A Wrinkle in Time*. This is a film with a predominantly black cast, based on a novel written by a female author, which spurred Larson to say: “I don’t need a 40 year-old white dude to tell me what didn’t work for him about *A Wrinkle in Time*.”²²⁷ Consequently, a full year before *Captain Marvel* was set to open in theaters, a bullseye was painted on its back. As a film with a strong female protagonist – and a superhero, at that – it was already a target of anti-feminist sentiment, but now they had extra motivation for attacking it. In spite of their hate campaign, *Captain Marvel* still went on to earn “more than \$1.2 billion at the global box office,” proving that stories of female empowerment can be universal stories – so long as it is a well-told story.²²⁸

“Higher, Further, Faster, Baby:” A Brief Synopsis of *Captain Marvel*

Memory is a pivotal player in *Captain Marvel*, the erasure and recovery of which leads to a reliance on flashbacks to fill in the gaps and bring about narrative cohesion. The film opens in a dream state, at the side of a lake, where the remnants of a crashed aircraft lie

²²⁴ Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 22.

²²⁵ Steven Zeitchik, “Captain Marvel: How the trolls always win – until they don’t,” *The Washington Post*, March 7, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/03/07/captain-marvel-how-trolls-always-win-until-they-dont>.

²²⁶ Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 22.

²²⁷ Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 24.

²²⁸ McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 56.

scattered about. Ripples of energy are tearing through sand and rock; flames are licking the air. A woman lies on the ground. It is Carol Danvers. She is dazed, there is blue blood running from her nose, while another slightly older woman wearing a brown leather jacket is standing over her, firing a gun at an unseen threat. Then the threat comes into view, through the smoke and the haze. His face is alien, monstrous. He is a Skrull. He raises his weapon and is about to fire when Carol, still dazed and bleeding, wakes up. These are the fragments of a forgotten life; disjointed memories that play on repeat. Carol's identity is also lost to her. On the planet of Hala, the capitol of the Kree empire, she is simply known as Vers. There, she is a member of Starforce, an elite unit tasked with fighting the alien Skrulls that are pushing farther and farther into Kree territory. The leader of her unit is Yon-Rogg, who has been training Carol and helping her to master the abilities given to her by the powerful Artificial Intelligence that oversees the Kree empire. Known as the Supreme Intelligence, when the AI interlinks with an individual, it delves into the unconscious and assumes the likeness of someone central in that person's subconscious. When Carol is summoned by the AI to be returned to active duty with Starforce, it appears to her as the woman from her dreams, the woman in the brown leather jacket who at this point is a stranger to her.

Back with her unit, Carol and the rest of Yon-Rogg's six-man squad are dispatched to a distant border planet to extract a spy who has infiltrated the Skrulls. However, shortly after arriving on the planet, they are ambushed. The Skrulls, as shapeshifters, have the ability to mimic any lifeform, and as Carol approaches the spy, he is revealed to be the Skrull General Talos. Carol is knocked unconscious and captured. When she wakes up, she is incapacitated inside of a Skrull spaceship and placed in a device designed to gather intelligence by extracting memories. The memories they extract from Carol are from Earth, not Hala, which confounds the Skrulls. The jumble of recollections retrieved from various points of Carol's life show a woman who has gone against the grain for most of it, and who was a pilot in the United States Airforce. This triggers a recollection of the woman in the brown leather jacket. She is Dr. Wendy Lawson, and she works on a project called Pegasus. It is Dr. Lawson the Skrulls are after, as she knows the whereabouts to a source of infinite power. By using Carol's memories, the Skrulls close in on that power, and conclude it is in the vicinity of Earth. As the ship arrives in Earth orbit, Carol manages to break free from her restraints, fight off the Skrulls, and jump into an escape pod. The pod takes fire and begins to disintegrate as it enters the atmosphere. With no craft to guide her descent, Carol crashes through the roof of a Blockbuster rental store in downtown Los Angeles.

The shelves lined with VHS tapes inside of the Blockbuster store tell us this is not in the present day. Instead, it is the year 1995. Shortly after she is done dusting herself following the rough landing, Carol has a close encounter with local law enforcement, specifically, Agent Nick Fury of S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division). The Skrulls too have made it to Earth, where they have assumed human identities. After having rigged a Kree communication device into a payphone, Carol is able to inform Yon-Rogg of what has happened. Along with the rest of her Starforce unit, set course for Earth. Carol also tries to convince Agent Fury of the alien incursion, but to no avail. It is only after one of his own agents is revealed to be a masquerading Skrull that Fury is finally convinced. Meanwhile, as previously forgotten memories keep coming back to her, Carol goes in search of her past life, as a link is starting to form between it and the power source sought by the Skrulls. One of her memories is of an old bar named Pancho's outside of Edwards Airforce Base. She steals a motorcycle and heads out into the desert, but when she walks into the bar, she is greeted by Agent Fury, who put out an all-points bulletin after her moment of delinquency. After a tête-à-tête, Carol and Fury agree to work together, to find whatever it is the Skrulls are after.

With his access to classified information, Agent Fury has found that Dr. Lawson worked on a joint NASA/USAF venture called Project Pegasus, to develop alternative power sources. The project is still active and is housed in an underground military facility. Fury flashes his badge and gets them past the gate, and there, in the records archives, they discover the plans for Dr. Lawson's faster-than-light aircraft, along with personal notes written in Kree. Dr. Lawson was killed during a test flight, and the pilot, they learn, is Carol Danvers. Without Fury knowing, Carol again contacts her Starforce unit. She tells Yon-Rogg, who is already on his way to Earth, of what she has learned. Yon-Rogg then tells her that Lawson was an undercover Kree operative, and that her Kree name was Mar-Vell. General Talos, who is on the same trail, and who has stolen the identity of the director of S.H.I.E.L.D., arrives at the military facility shortly thereafter. Fury discovers the ruse but is forced to go on the run with Carol, who steals a Quadjet to escape.

In the records archive, they were able to uncover the name of a second pilot attached to Project Pegasus: Maria Rambeau. After retiring from the Airforce, Maria moved back to her Louisiana homestead. Carol and Fury set course for the Pelican State, and once they touch down at Maria's farm, Carol is reunited with her U.S. Airforce wingman and her closest friend. It is from her that Carol learns who she really is, and that her Kree name, Vers, stems from a dog tag that splintered in half after the crash. Carol, Maria, and Maria's

daughter, Monica, go through old photographs and trinkets from their time together, but their trip down memory lane is soon interrupted – by Talos. However, this time he comes in peace. He assures Carol and Fury that he means them no harm, that he and the Skrulls are only looking for sanctuary, for a place where their people can live in peace without fear of persecution by the Kree. He also has with him the Black Box recording from the crashed aircraft flown by Carol and Dr. Lawson. They play the recording, which triggers a flash of memories for Carol. The Kree were the ones that caused the crash, that shot down Carol and Dr. Lawson as they were head for Lawson’s orbital lab. The Skrull from Carol’s dream, the one who stepped out of the smoke with his weapon primed, was in reality Yon-Rogg. The Skrull was a false memory implant placed there by the Supreme Intelligence. It was also not the Supreme Intelligence that gave Carol her powers. Instead, it was the exploding engine and her atoms fusing with the cosmic shockwave that has instilled Carol with her abilities.

However, even as the engine was destroyed in the explosion, the core that fueled it is still sitting inside of Lawson’s lab in a Kree Imperial Cruiser, cloaked in orbit. Having modified the stolen Quadjet to make it capable of spaceflight, Carol, Fury, and Maria – along with Talos and a small contingent of Skrulls – head for Lawson’s lab. There, they find more than just a power source. Also onboard is a group of Skrull refugees, including Talos’ wife and daughter. Lawson had given them sanctuary in her lab, but when she was killed, the refugees were left stranded, with nowhere to go and no one to contact. This is what Talos was after all along: his family. But with the Kree Cruiser decloaked, Yon-Rogg and the rest of Carol’s former Starfleet colleagues are able to discover their location. Carol is overpowered as Yon-Rogg activates a power inhibitor implanted in Carol’s neck. She is then forced to link up with the Supreme Intelligence as Fury, Maria, and the Skrulls are taken prisoner. The AI again tries to manipulate Carol, to break down her defenses by using memories from her childhood that shows her failing, time and again. The AI tries to convince her that without the Kree, she is weak. The AI grossly underestimates Carol’s resilience, and her refusal to give up in the face of adversity. Her sheer determination fries the inhibitor, and with full access to the cosmic energy that powers the universe itself, Carol Danvers – now as Captain Marvel – takes on her former squad and defeats them. When a Kree armada arrives shortly thereafter, Captain Marvel punches through their hulls like they were made of paper, leaving only a pair of Imperial Cruisers to return to Hala with word that Earth is off-limits. With her memory and identity restored, Carol says goodbye to Fury and Maria and heads into the cosmos to aid the Skrulls in finding a new home planet.

Through a Lens, Darkly: Genre, Superheroes, and the Framing of Gender

Framing is a critical component of all media, and framing in the superhero genre has first and foremost been epitomized by the hypersexualization of most female characters.²²⁹ In the 1970s, Laura Mulvey caused a bit of a stir by arguing that, in a “world ordered by sexual imbalance, [the] pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female.”²³⁰ It is a discriminatory practice in a discriminatory relationship, where women, as the object of male fantasy, are styled according to the wants and desires of the male gaze. Outside of the erotic thriller or the purely pornographic, it can furthermore be argued that no other female character has been styled more vigorously by the male gaze than the female superhero. Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Michael Chabon, when discussing Marvel’s *X-Men*, said that “Today’s female costumed characters tend to sport breasts so enormous that their ability to get up and walk, let alone kick telekinetic ass, would appear to be their most marvelous and improbable talent.”²³¹ In the superhero genre, the question of active and passive, subject and object, takes on an added complexity when the objectification occurs in the face of the female character being coded as active. She can be in “full command of the narrative,” yet, by framing her as an object, she is still made a casualty of the male gaze in such a way that established gender norms are maintained – in spite of her active status.²³²

A crucial moment in every superhero origin story told on the big screen, is when the main character suits up for the first time and we are given that first look at a costume that most of us recognize from the comics. In *Superman: The Movie* (as well as in *Man of Steel* thirty-five years later), Clark Kent takes to the skies in his blue tights and red cape for the first time after having learned of his origin in the Fortress of Solitude. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark goes through a lengthy process of trial and error before finally assembling the Iron Man suit that will become his trademark. These are but two examples, and both instances underline how this search for identity figure into the familiar hero’s journey, where the character crosses the “bridge between the relatable and aspirational parts of the hero myth.”²³³ The hero, at that moment, has arrived, and he is ready to step out into the world as his true self. Only then can and will the final costume be revealed. In the course of this

²²⁹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 52.

²³⁰ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

²³¹ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 51-2.

²³² Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 25, 30, 73.

²³³ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 39.

journey, if the man, at any point, should be depicted as an “erotic object,” then it would automatically constitute an anathema within the genre.²³⁴ It is therefore essential that the male superhero be framed as subject and not object in the pursuit (and eventual embrace) of this new identity. For female superheroes, when they pursue the same goal for the same reason, their self-actualization is in most cases compromised, as their defining characteristics are insignificant to the wants and desires that the “male gaze” is projecting onto them, thus making them but a canvas for sexual fantasy.²³⁵

Catwoman (2004) is a textbook example of this. In spite of the film having a lead female superhero that is clearly coded as active, it is framed exclusively through a male lens. Halle Berry stars as the feline femme that, after running afoul of her employers in a cosmetics company, is murdered, only to be resurrected by a clowder of cats tied to the Egyptian god, Bast.²³⁶ She then sets out to take revenge on those individuals who wronged her, but, like Superman (and Iron Man four years later), it is only when the main character of Patience Phillips puts on the final version of the Catwoman costume that she can truly become Catwoman. For Superman in 1978, it was the powerful and inspirational score of John Williams that heralded his ascension. For Catwoman in 2004, the music is decidedly more modern, with the beats backed up by the seductive moans of a female singer. And while the music plays, the camera performs a 360-degree tracking shot that starts at Catwoman’s high-heeled shoes, moves up along her leather-clad legs, lingers for a while at her ripped leather buttocks, slowly pans around her naked waist, lingers again at her cleavage inside of a tight leather top, then pulls into a close-up of Catwoman’s face, her lips painted with passion-red lipstick. Clark Kent is explicitly identified as the active subject in the scene where he becomes Superman. Patience Phillips, while active, is still presented as a “sexual object” when she becomes Catwoman.²³⁷ Instead of a superhero, she is an “erotic spectacle,” and the “direct recipient of the spectator’s look.”²³⁸ Her active/female status, in light of this rampant objectification, adds a level of complexity to Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze that can only be explained by also looking at Brown’s exploration of the “*fetishized active*” and “*fetishized passive*.”²³⁹

²³⁴ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 751.

²³⁵ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

²³⁶ *Catwoman*, directed by Pitof (2004; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Entertainment, Inc., 2009), Blu-ray.

²³⁷ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 750.

²³⁸ Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 751, 754.

²³⁹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 70.

This argument is instrumental to understanding the depiction of the female superhero in modern cinema, where, in the majority of films, women can be a dynamic force within the narrative and still be framed as sexual objects. The typical female superhero, because of how she is depicted through clothing and framing, is, in certain cases, as much of a fetish model as she is a defender of truth, justice, and the American way. Therefore, as a fetishized active character, she is both “desirable and threatening,” much like the relationship that exists between the female dominatrix and her male submissive.²⁴⁰ This muddles the cognitive separation between the “explicitly sexualized porn model and the ass-kicking Hollywood heroine,” and *Catwoman* is very much an illustration of this confusion at play. She can beat a man in a fight, but because of how she is dressed and how the camera frames her as she is beating him up, men still derive sexual satisfaction from watching her do so. Whether passive or active, the mass-mediated fetishizing of women has now arrived at a point where its profusion has turned it into an “institutionalized cultural condition.”²⁴¹ When the character of *Catwoman* struts around on a rooftop and the camera frames her like a female stripper on a stage, this fetishization – in addition to being an embodiment of male sexual fantasy – is also a cultural norm derived from that same fantasy.

Other female superheroes that have received a similar or identical treatment in the cinema include the characters of Elektra in both *Daredevil* (2003) and *Elektra* (2005), Sue Storm in *Fantastic Four* (2005), Silk Spectre II in *Watchmen* (2009), Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010), Diana in *Wonder Woman* (2017), and Mera in *Aquaman* (2018), to name but a few. *Captain Marvel* signals a break from this tradition, which is communicated to the audience the first time the titular character appears in an early version of the Captain Marvel costume (which, at this point in the narrative, also doubles as a Starforce uniform). In the scene, Captain Marvel (or Vers, at the time) is flanked by her Starforce colleagues. They are all walking toward a spaceship that will transport them from the planet Hala, to Torfa, where they are to retrieve a Kree spy who has infiltrated the Skrulls. The characters appear in silhouette, the camera positioned behind them. With the audience seeing the same thing that the characters in the scene are seeing, Captain Marvel and the rest of her team are coded as active subjects from the start, as we are given a “subjective” view of the scene.²⁴² The very next shot is of the group walking toward the camera, with Captain Marvel framed in a

²⁴⁰ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 69.

²⁴¹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 69.

²⁴² Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 246.

medium shot.²⁴³ We are not seeing this from the perspective of another character. This is exclusively from the point of view of the camera, which is indicative of an objective shot. However, because a level of subjectivity has already been established, Captain Marvel resists the objectification typically derived from the male gaze.²⁴⁴

This cessation of a traditionally discriminatory framing of women is also reflected in Captain Marvel's costume. As Carol Danvers discovers that her life on Hala is a lie, she redesigns her Starforce uniform to divorce herself from the Kree that have been manipulating her for the past six years. Standing on the porch of Maria Rambeau's farmhouse, and with Maria's daughter assisting in her efforts, Carol modifies the settings of her suit to replace the dominant greens characteristic of Kree society with a combination of red, blue, and gold. Carol Danvers has thus assumed her new identity; she has become Captain Marvel. Costumes have always been an integral part in the perception of superhero characters. What is most significant about the Captain Marvel costume, is that unlike so many other female superheroes of the past, it is primarily designed to enhance her physicality rather than her sexuality. According to *Captain Marvel* costume designer, Sonja Hays: "For Captain Marvel, there were two things that were obviously iconic: the starburst sign and the whole chest piece ... and then, of course, the red and blue colors. That was something we could not deviate from. There was also another thought, which was a little different from some of the comics: she was going to be much more of a tomboy ... so that it's believable that she is an actual hero and a soldier and a pilot."²⁴⁵ In the relatively brief history of big screen superhero adaptations, this approach constitutes a stark deviation from the genre bias stating that female superheroes, above all else, have to look sexy.²⁴⁶ Halle Berry's Catwoman costume is a result of that studio mandate, and so too is Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman, as she is made to wear wedge heels in the middle of No Man's Land, circa 1918.²⁴⁷ In a cinematic landscape heavily influenced by a miscellany of patriarchal proclivities, the framing and costuming in *Captain Marvel* represent a clear break with these established trends. By depicting the male and the female, the masculine and the feminine, through a more progressive and impartial lens, the film is thus offering a gender-neutral alternative to the fetishized and hypersexualized

²⁴³ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 246-8; Studio Binder, "The Ultimate Guide to Camera Shots (50+ Types of Shots and Angles in Film)," *Studio Binder*, Sept. 13, 2020, <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/ultimate-guide-to-camera-shots>.

²⁴⁴ Benschhoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 246-7.

²⁴⁵ *Marvel Studios Captain Marvel: The Official Movie Special*, ed. Jonathan Wilkins (London: Titan Books, 2019), 86.

²⁴⁶ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 12, 51.

²⁴⁷ Jill Bearup, "These Shoes Will Kill You," YouTube, 11:58, June 1, 2021, <https://youtu.be/LmfqjgNlj7Y>.

depiction of past female superheroes. Whether or not audiences are willing to receive this new pro-feminist portrayal is another matter altogether.

Super-Empowered: The Female Superhero and the Coding of Female Bodies

The gendered bias found in framing is also reallocated into another important aspect of superhero cinema: the coding of male and female bodies. When looking at the broad spectrum of superhero titles that have so far been adapted for the big screen, it is apparent that the physical representation of masculinity and femininity has hardly moved at all, even in times of constantly shifting paradigms. The image of masculinity that has been part and parcel of the superhero genre since the 1930s is based on a gender principle entrenched in the binary, with masculinity and femininity existing at each respective end of a genderized spectrum. Here, masculinity is seen as hard and powerful and dominant, while femininity, as an oppositional element, is considered soft and weak and subordinate. In this staunchly gender-coded space, the man is active, while the woman is passive.²⁴⁸ And muscularity, as it ties directly into the symbolism of “male power,” is retained exclusively as a masculine trait.²⁴⁹ The same projects that spread the message that whiteness is superior to blackness, also spread the message that men are superior to women. Women, much like people of color, experience a brutal “chattelization of the body,” where they are reduced to property for reasons rooted in misogynist ideology.²⁵⁰ In both cases, not only is the property owner male, but popular culture is working as a propagandist in disseminating this deeply divisive image. The truth of the matter is that, biologically speaking, there is nothing that prevents women from building muscle from lifting weights in the exact same manner that men do.²⁵¹ The idea that women are weaker than men and must also look weaker, is therefore nothing but a reflection of misogynist beliefs built on a foundation of lies.

The recent superhero boom in the cinema is emblematic of this misguided belief, even as a number of films feature strong women in central roles. Storm and Jean Gray in 20th Century Fox’s *X-Men* franchise (2000 – 2019) are both illustrative of this, as is Harley Quinn in 2016’s *Suicide Squad* as well as its 2021 sequel. But rarely if ever are the strengths of female characters manifested in the physical. *X-Men*’s Wolverine can slash his way through

²⁴⁸ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 21; Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 37, 51; McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 58.

²⁴⁹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 20-1; Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 248.

²⁵⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 248.

²⁵¹ Nadya Swedan, *Women’s Sports, Medicine, and Rehabilitation* (Gaithersburg: Aspen Publishers, Inc., 2002), 4.

entire battalions of men with his adamantium claws, but Storm and Jean Grey are mostly made to stand in place and stare with maximum effort – Storm, to control the weather, and Jean Grey to move objects through telekinesis or to read people’s minds. Their powers are entirely passive, whereas Wolverine’s power is as active as you can get. Harley Quinn, on the other hand, is an example of a female character with enhanced strength, yet she is not depicted as remotely muscular. She is instead hypersexualized and placed in an abusive codependent relationship with the villainous Joker.²⁵² Captain Marvel, because of her abilities, can be seen as a combination of both the mental and the physical. She can shoot photon blasts from her hands, but she is also imbued with the strength to overpower a dozen men in hand-to-hand combat if need be. To a certain extent, that strength is reflected in the character. In the superhero genre, this constitutes progress, but whenever progress brings disruption to the status quo, there will be pushback from those who, in some way or another, view this as an attack upon their belief systems.

There are many examples of this gender bias affecting creative works. In the 2018 adaptation of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, Evangeline Lilly got into spectacular shape for her role as Ant-Man’s winged partner, but most all traces of an athletic frame ended up concealed under a costume mainly designed to emphasize the female form.²⁵³ A year prior to Lilly taking on the mantle of the Wasp, Warner Bros. and DC decided to finally give Wonder Woman a film of her own, a character that in the DC universe equals both Superman and Batman in stature. The actress tasked with filling Wonder Woman’s Amazonian boots, was Gal Gadot, an Israeli actress and former model. To prepare for the role, Gadot, according to publicity, did quite a bit of training, but she did not build much in the way of muscle. Instead, her model physique was kept largely intact for when filming began. This led to an online campaign of harassment and body-shaming, as members of the Wonder Woman fan community felt Gadot was too thin to credibly portray the Amazonian warrior princess.²⁵⁴ Meanwhile, to play her Amazonian sisters in arms, a small army of athletes, bodybuilders, and fitness models were employed. The filmmakers then made sure to keep most of the athletes, bodybuilders, and fitness models in the background during the action sequence

²⁵² McSweeney, *The Contemporary Superhero Film*, 56; Zachary Ingle and David M. Suetra, *The 100 Greatest Superhero Films and TV Shows* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022), 143.

²⁵³ Erin Alexander, “Evangeline Lilly Shows Off Ripped Arms As She Gears Up to Start Filming *Ant Man and the Wasp*,” *Muscle and Fitness*, Aug. 6, 2017, <https://www.muscleandfitness.com/muscle-fitness-hers/hers-athletes-celebrities/evangeline-lilly-shows-ripped-arms-she-gears-start>.

²⁵⁴ Danielle Gay, “Gal Gadot worked out for six hours a day to achieve peak Wonder Woman fitness,” *Vogue*, June 27, 2017, <https://www.vogue.com.au/beauty/wellbeing/gal-gadot-worked-out-for-six-hours-a-day-to-achieve-peak-wonder-woman-fitness/news-story/626ff76182ff1aa44895b48e86105deb>; Carolyn Cocca, *Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 38.

where they were most heavily featured. In fact, the more muscular the bodybuilders were, the farther into the background they were placed.²⁵⁵ This exemplifies the difficulty that both Hollywood and society in general has in separating muscularity from masculinity, which, in turn, impacts all forms of gender diversity on the big screen, including *Captain Marvel*.

Power is the principal element in this sometimes clashing relationship between the masculine and the feminine. Captain Marvel, as the most powerful superhero in the MCU, is still not allowed to fully reflect that power through her physical appearance – not in the same way that male superheroes are. Brie Larson, who plays Captain Marvel, entered into a grueling nine-month training program in preparation for the part, in order to build up a physique that, within the normative bounds of gender, made her look and feel more like a superhero. According to Larson’s personal trainer: “What we tried to establish in the training was also part of character building: What’s the psychology of a character who’s basically invincible? I wanted to get as close to that as possible. Having that physical strength helped her become the character.”²⁵⁶ Brie Larson may have bulked up more than most of her female counterparts in the MCU (with the possible exception of Evangeline Lilly as the Wasp), and she certainly became physically stronger as a result, but when looking at the vast majority of male actors who have suited up as superheroes within the MCU, a notable gender discrepancy still rears its head.

The template for the male superhero, on both page and screen, is the male bodybuilders of the 1980s and 1990s. But this new hardbody was never specific to any one gender. Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger may have popularized the “muscular male body” and made it into the “central trademark” of the action genre, but, by the 1990s, female bodybuilders were also becoming a more common feature in action cinema.²⁵⁷ Championship bodybuilders Rachel McLish and Corinne Everson appeared in several action films released throughout the decade, in either starring or supporting roles, and were instrumental in making the female hardbody part of popular culture. However, it was Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) that would set the female hardbody standard. Linda Hamilton went from playing the damsel in distress in *The*

²⁵⁵ Devan Coggan, “Wonder Woman: How real-life athletes united to populate the film’s badass Amazon nation,” *Entertainment Weekly*, May 30, 2017, <https://ew.com/movies/2017/05/30/wonder-woman-athletes-amazon-nation-themyscira>; *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins (2017; Burbank, CA: Warner Bros. Studios, 2017), Blu-ray.

²⁵⁶ Matthew Jussim, “Inside Brie Larson’s Intense 9-Month Training Regimen for *Captain Marvel*,” *Men’s Journal*, <https://www.mensjournal.com/entertainment/how-brie-larson-trained-to-get-superhero-ready-for-captain-marvel>. (Accessed Jan. 24, 2023).

²⁵⁷ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 20, 26; Laurie Shulze, “On the Muscle,” in *Building Bodies*, ed. Pamela L. Moore (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 10.

Terminator (1984), to playing a tough-as-nails self-taught commando with a physique to match in the sequel. She went from being a passive female love-interest to an active female action hero. Sarah Connor thus became a feminist icon overnight, her “muscular appearance” sparking much talk in the media “about the ability of women to toughen up.”²⁵⁸ She would also inspire other tough-as-nails women in action and science fiction cinema, such as in *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).²⁵⁹ However, less than a decade after the release of *Terminator 2*, a “more traditionally feminine and sexualized body” would again replace the female hardbody – despite the lasting impression that Sarah Connor has instilled.²⁶⁰ It is this social and cultural regression that *Captain Marvel*, in 2019, is forced to contend with.

The character of Captain Marvel, as she is made to straddle this gendered chasm that has reasserted itself in terms of body image, cannot help but be impacted by the restrictions this places on her. However, there are scenes in the film in which the main character clearly flexes her muscular identity, so to speak. When Carol is confronted by General Talos at Maria Rambeau’s Louisiana farmstead, she assumes he is there to do her harm. Her body goes into a battle-ready posture that shows off her toned physique. Rather than the Starforce (and later Captain Marvel) costume that comes pre-padded, Carol is here wearing a Nine Inch Nail T-shirt and ripped jeans. This provides us with a far better sense of what the training that Brie Larson underwent ultimately resulted in. With her fists clenched and her body taut as a bowstring, there is no questioning who the most powerful person in the room is. The imposing V-shape of Carol’s muscular frame, emphasized by her broad shoulders, display a “masculinization of the female body” where any hint of the traditionally feminine is, for a moment, cast aside.²⁶¹ The normative gender roles have, in this interaction, been flipped on their head. Talos is extending Carol an olive branch and is exhibiting a deferential attitude. Carol, on the other hand, comes across as far more aggressive. Therefore, as the two of them come face to face for the purpose of de-escalation, it is Carol that is coded as masculine, and Talos as feminine, and ultimately it is Carol’s imposing physicality that sells this inversion of the gender hierarchy.

²⁵⁸ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 25-6, 28, 32.

²⁵⁹ Joseph Walderzak, “Damsel in Transgress: The Empowerment of the Damsel in the Marvel Cinematic Universe,” in *Marvel Comics into Film: Essays on Adaptations Since the 1940s*, ed. Matthew J. McEniry, et al. (Jefferson: McFarland & Company Inc., 2016), 158.

²⁶⁰ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 25.

²⁶¹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 30.

In this scene, the binary is still in effect, but with Carol appearing as masculinized, and Talos as feminized, both are consequently performing their genders in a contrary manner to established gender norms. The performance of gender in a social or cultural context is “effected with the strategic aim of maintaining gender within its binary frame.”²⁶² It is a subversion of normative behavior that maintains the binary, but as Carol is the “masculinized subject” in this encounter with Talos, it nonetheless causes a destabilization of established “gender categories.”²⁶³ Carol’s muscularity is, above all, performative. When Brie Larson got into shape to play the character, it was for the explicit purpose of it elevating her performance, of her feeling stronger and looking stronger, in order to convincingly act stronger. The issue that many have with this image of a muscular female superhero is essentially the same now as when the muscular female action hero was predominantly phased out of popular culture in the late 1990s: the (symbolic) loss of femininity, and the (symbolic) embrace of homosexuality.²⁶⁴ For Talos, the same implications apply, only with a loss of masculinity in place of femininity. For Carol, with female muscularity and queerness made part of the same all-inclusive performative package, the social stigma directed at her by the heteronormative patriarchy becomes greater still. The punishment that the female action hero of the 1990s faced for not doing her “gender right,” was her eventual erasure.²⁶⁵ The punishment that Carol Danvers – and vicariously through her, the female superhero – will face for daring to be empowered, and for daring to show it in such a fashion, is yet to be determined. If the misogyny that *Captain Marvel* faced before, during, and after its theatrical run is an indicator, then we will likely see less, not more, of the muscular female superhero in the years to come, thus causing a detriment to female representation that far exceeds the superhero genre.²⁶⁶

All-Female, All-Powerful, All-Intimidating: The Power of the Patriarchy and the Significance of *Captain Marvel*

If a female cinematic superhero is shown with the power to stop incoming missiles, mid-flight, then to some she is a feminist icon. To others, mainly those positioned on the

²⁶² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²⁶³ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 29-30, 130.

²⁶⁴ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 32.

²⁶⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 191.

²⁶⁶ Schowalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 24, 30-4, 190; Melissa Leon, “How Brie Larson’s *Captain Marvel* Made Angry White Men Lose Their Damn Minds,” *The Daily Beast*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-brie-larsons-captain-marvel-made-angry-white-men-lose-their-damn-minds>.

opposite side of the political spectrum, she amounts to an existential threat. In one of the most significant scenes in *Captain Marvel*, after the titular superhero has saved a group of Skrull refugees and singlehandedly fended off an armada of Kree spaceships coming to make war on humanity, she issues a feminist declaration that is not to be misunderstood. In the middle of the California desert, with the sun beating down on them, Carol has a dramatic showdown her one-time mentor, now enemy, Yon-Rogg. They walk toward one another in slow motion, the music building to a crescendo. It is a scene that seems to have been lifted straight out of a classic western, down to the quintessential framing of gun-ready hands resting at hip-level, waiting to draw. But instead of six-shooters, the duelists are packing ray-guns and photon-powered fists. However, Yon-Rogg harbors no illusions. He knows that Carol – now as Captain Marvel – is by far the most powerful of the two. He knows that he is fundamentally outmatched, so, in a last-ditch effort, he holsters his gun and tells Captain Marvel how proud he is of her for what she has become. He then lays down a physical challenge that could have been taken straight out of any number of 1980s action films where the manly men go mano-a-mano. Yon-Rogg tells Carol: “Turn off the light show and prove, prove to me, you can beat me without a...”²⁶⁷ That is as far as he gets before Carol hits him in the chest with a photon blast, sending him flying into a rock formation way off in the distance. As he lies squirming on the ground, she walks up to him and says, in an assured voice: “I have nothing to prove to you.”²⁶⁸ This rejection of cinematic convention denotes a shifting in the “hierarchy of power.”²⁶⁹ In this most masculine of locations – due to the genre it so clearly references – a man has not only been beaten by a woman; he has also been emphatically told that his approval or disapproval means absolutely nothing to her, one way or the other. With *Captain Marvel* overturning established gender roles in such stark conviction, a firestorm of hate and derision was all but unavoidable.

The misogynist antipathy directed at Captain Marvel took on many forms in the weeks and months following its release, from entire Twitter accounts being created to berate the film, to traditional film critics dismissing its qualities out of hand.²⁷⁰ One critic wrote: “Lacking the wit and graphic oomph that sometimes rescues the Marvel franchise from

²⁶⁷ *Captain Marvel*, directed by Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck (2019; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc., 2019), Blu-ray.

²⁶⁸ *Captain Marvel*, dir. Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, Blu-ray.

²⁶⁹ Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 34-5.

²⁷⁰ I Hate Captain Marvel (@hate_marvel), “I made an account to say I hate Captain Marvel,” *Twitter*, Aug. 16, 2019, https://twitter.com/hate_marvel/status/1162177756630671361?s=20; Showalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 30-1

terminal fatigue, *Captain Marvel* is yet another origin story for yet another superhero.”²⁷¹ What this and many other critics failed to realize is that, after more than four decades of superhero cinema, *Captain Marvel* is only the fourth ever female superhero origin story to be told on the big screen. Male superheroes have been spoiled with origin stories to the point that it has become a cliché. Not so much for female superheroes, even within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As previously noted, right now there are no less than thirty-two films in the MCU, with many more on the way. Out of those thirty-two films, ten are origin stories, but only one of them is a female superhero origin story: *Captain Marvel*. The main takeaway from this is that, until recently, the female superhero, has been the equivalent of a cinematic footnote, and that female stories are principally less important than male stories. When *Captain Marvel* came out in 2019, over seventy percent of film roles, across all genres, were filled by men, leaving women in a clear minority.²⁷² To finally provide women with their own stories in superhero cinema is therefore in and of itself a disruption of this prejudiced practice. In their introduction to *Film Analysis*, Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky state that “Even films that present themselves purely as entertainment convey a host of cultural ideas and values at a ‘hidden’ or subconscious level.”²⁷³ *Captain Marvel* is a prime example of that, and as the film champions gender equality through female empowerment, there is possibility that some of those ideas will spill out of the screen and into the real world, where they can hopefully inspire the next generation of feminist voices.

A Vindication of the Rights of Natasha Romanoff: *Black Widow* and the Concept of Gender in Superhero Cinema

Planted firmly in the contentious field of gender politics, *Black Widow* is a film where the battle of the sexes is fought on multiple levels, from the literal to the metaphorical. Since her introduction in *Iron Man 2* (2010), Black Widow (a.k.a. Natasha Romanoff) has been one of the most important figures in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. She, along with Agent Nick Fury of S.H.I.E.L.D., have functioned as the human glue of the MCU, their multiple appearances across numerous films helping to tie the various stories together. Black Widow is also the only female representation to be found in the original line-up of the Avengers, a

²⁷¹ Schowalter, *The Misogynistic Backlash*, 30.

²⁷² Morinsola Keshinro, “*Captain Marvel* introduces a powerful female lead. Young girls should see that,” *USA Today*, March 1, 2019, <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/03/01/captain-marvel-powerful-female-lead-young-girls-should-see-that-column/2842130002>.

²⁷³ Jeffrey Geiger and R.L. Rutsky, “Introduction,” in *Film Analysis: A Norton Reader*, ed. Jeffrey Geiger (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 17.

group made up of such hyper-masculine alpha males as Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, and The Incredible Hulk.²⁷⁴ Besides gender, the key aspect separating Black Widow from her male-identifying counterparts, is that they – unlike her – were all provided their own introductory films, and, following *The Avengers* in 2012, several sequels to help flesh out the characters even more. Hawkeye is the exception, as he is both male and a member of the Avengers, yet he had to make do with second billing from day one. However, due to Hawkeye being an emotionally perceptive family man (as well as a former spy with a knack for shooting a bow and arrow), he stands as a stark contradiction to the hyper-masculinity and sometimes immaturity of the other male Avengers. During the first two phases of the MCU, it therefore seemed that testosterone level corresponded directly to the likelihood of getting a superhero project greenlit at Marvel Studios. This meant that Black Widow had to wait until 2021 for her solo feature to be realized.

By then there had been several shakeups at Marvel, both within the cinematic universe and without. The ousting of Marvel CEO Ike Perlmutter in 2015 had effectively cleared the way for *Captain Marvel* and other female-fronted superhero projects at the studio, but by the time *Black Widow* got the official go-ahead in 2018, a new problem had arisen. *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the fourth and final film for the original lineup of the Avengers, had already been completed, and in the film Black Widow is placed in a position where she is forced to sacrifice herself for the greater good.²⁷⁵ The roadblocks had been cleared in terms of the internal tug-o-war at Marvel, but narratively Black Widow was painted into an entirely new corner. The character could have been resurrected in typical comic book fashion, but the solution the filmmakers ultimately landed on, was to send Black Widow on a personal side-mission that would have taken place between the events of two earlier MCU efforts: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). It was a cumbersome fix to a narrative quagmire caused by a misogynistic impediment that managed to fracture the MCU timeline. Still, in order to do right by the character and provide fans with the solo *Black Widow* film that was long overdue, this chronological shakeup within the MCU was unavoidable. All of these challenges may only amount to a minor blip on the disparity radar, but even so, they demonstrate how the misanthropic attitudes of a few of people in power can directly impact our culture and our society. The opposition directed at something as

²⁷⁴ Brown, *The Modern Superhero*, 51.

²⁷⁵ Holloway and Donnelly, “Does Kevin Feige’s Marvel Promotion Mean Ike Perlmutter’s Endgame;” Mike Fleming Jr., “Marvel Eyes Female Helmers For *Black Widow* Film: Watch For Cate Shortland,” *Deadline*, June 20, 2018, <https://deadline.com/2018/06/black-widow-movie-marvel-cate-shortland-female-directors-scarlett-johansson-1202414395>.

innocuous as a female-led superhero film can thus be viewed as a clear and present danger to our cultural and social development, as in the end, the only alternatives to progress are stagnation and decline.²⁷⁶ *Black Widow*'s difficult journey to the big screen is a testament to the pull of an anti-feminist past upon a more pro-feminist present, and as these competing ideologies have become embedded in the film's larger than life narrative, they shine a light on the many inequalities that are still associated with gender in the present day.

"I've Lived a Lot of Lives:" A Brief Synopsis of *Black Widow*

Black Widow starts out with a prologue set in Ohio in 1995, where a teenage Natasha Romanoff is posing as the older daughter of a pair of Russian spies instructed with stealing U.S. government secrets. The father in this deception is Alexei Shostakov, a once renowned super-soldier known as Red Guardian that has now been relegated to playing house, while Melina Vostokoff, a former Black Widow, is the ersatz mother to Natasha and her pretend sister, Yelena. They appear as the typical American family, and, for a fleeting moment, their suburban existence is the closest that any of them have come to a normal life. But one night, when Alexei comes home from work, the illusion is shattered. He has successfully retrieved the information they were there for, but in the process their cover has been blown. Minutes later, Natasha and Yelena are rushed out of the house and told to get in the car, as the NSA is enroute with arrest orders. The four of them make it out in the nick of time and head for a local airstrip where they have a light aircraft stashed for just such an eventuality. As they are getting the plane ready to take off, the NSA come barreling onto the tarmac in their SUVs, lights flashing, sirens blazing. A shootout and highspeed chase ensue, but in spite of Melina taking a bullet to the shoulder and Alexei having to ride on the wing of the aircraft, they all make it to Cuba and safety. Once the plane touches down, however, what little remained of the illusion of family is completely torn asunder. Under direct orders from General Dreykov, the sisters are forcefully separated and placed in the Black Widow Program, where, within the confines of the Red Room, they will be transformed into lethal assassins for the Russian state. Their childhood has ended. Now, a life of service and servitude awaits them.

Twenty-one years later, in 2016, Natasha Romanoff has broken from the path she was originally set on by the Black Widow Program. Having defected from Russian intelligence,

²⁷⁶ Richard P. Eibach and Lisa K. Libby, "Ideology of the Good Old Days: Exaggerated Perceptions of Moral Decline and Conservative Politics," in *Social and Psychological Bases of Ideology and System Justification*, ed. John T. Jost, et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 415.

Natasha is no longer an assassin but an integral member of S.H.I.E.L.D. She also finds a new surrogate family in the Avengers, a small group of superpowered individuals that she was instrumental in recruiting. But now this family too is starting to fracture. The collateral damage and massive loss of life that the small country of Sokovia experienced during the Avengers' battle against a rogue artificial intelligence in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), led to the United Nations issuing a mandate calling for stricter oversight of all enhanced peoples. The accords split the Avengers in two, with one half seeing them as legalized persecution, and the other seeing them as a necessity to ensure public safety. In *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Natasha ends up backing the opposing side, but when their resistance fails, they all become fugitives. Now, Natasha is in hiding, living off the grid in Norway while U.S. Army General Thaddeus Ross is leading the global manhunt for all rogue Avengers.

Meanwhile, in Morocco, Natasha's onetime sister, Yelena, is about to undergo a rude awakening. Unlike Natasha, Yelena was never able to escape the Black Widow Program, so now she is leading a squad of Widows on a mission to neutralize a deserter and former team member. The mission does not go as planned, however, and in the ensuing scuffle Yelena is exposed to a substance designed to counteract the latest chemical conditioning that all current Black Widows are subjected to. The gas is called Red Dust, and as Yelena breathes it in, she regains her autonomy. Yelena then grabs the remaining vials of Red Dust and flees, intent on freeing the other Widows from the chemical subjugation applied by General Dreykov. When Dreykov is informed of Yelena's betrayal, he orders the armor-clad super-soldier Taskmaster to retrieve the vials and eliminate the deserter – by whatever means necessary.

In Norway, Natasha is trying to adjust to her new life in exile. When one of her contacts drop off an electric generator and a stack of mail from her Budapest safehouse, Natasha is unwittingly implicated in Yelena's predicament. Among the letters is also a case containing the vials Yelena escaped with in Morocco. Now that the case has found its way to Natasha, she too is made a target of Taskmaster, who, because of a tracker attached to the case, is able to ambush Natasha while she is out buying fuel for her new generator. A fight ensues, where the two combatants match each other blow for blow. Natasha narrowly escapes with her life – and the vials, but she has no idea of what they are or why they are important. Among the vials she also finds a photo strip of herself and Yelena from when they were children and living in Ohio. Reading this as a call for help, Natasha travels to Budapest in order to find Yelena and get to the truth about the vials.

The two sisters are reunited in Natasha's safehouse, but not happily. Natasha and Yelena engage in a knock-down, drag-out fight, as Yelena's abandonment issues come to

light and Natasha has to bear the brunt of it. A truce is reached, after which Yelena brings Natasha up to speed on the content of vials, while also letting it slip that the Black Widow Program is active and is still being run by General Dreykov. Natasha reacts with shock and disbelief. Years ago, in order to facilitate her defection to S.H.I.E.L.D., Natasha blew up an entire building to take out Dreykov, with Dreykov's daughter, Antonia, ending up as collateral damage. Now, she learns it was all for nothing, and that the man who forcefully turned her and Yelena into killers is still alive and well, and as powerful as ever. Their catching up is interrupted by a raid on the apartment by a team of Widows, who, along with Taskmaster, are still hunting for the Red Dust at Dreykov's orders. Natasha and Yelena once again elude their pursuers after an extended chase through the streets of Budapest. They then formulate a plan to shut down the Black Widow Program for good, but in order to do so, they will need the help of their once-parents, Alexei and Melina, whose personal connection to Dreykov make them integral in taking down their adversary.

The unconventional family of four is eventually reunited, but only after a prison break, a helicopter crash, and a long hike, as Alexei was put away in a Russian prison after Dreykov turned on him, and Melina was sent to live on a remote pig farm in the Russian backwoods. At Melina's farm, Natasha and Yelena learn that Melina was and still is a central player in Dreykov's program, as Dreykov's conditioning of the Widows is largely based on Melina's mind control experiments on her drove of pigs. The old family dynamic quickly reestablishes itself, but it is a brief respite, as soon thereafter, Natasha, Yelena, and Alexei are betrayed by Melina and captured by Dreykov's soldiers.

Accompanied by Melina, the band of three are transported to Dreykov's secret aerial base. But once there, it is revealed that Natasha and Melina have switched places using state-of-the-art hi-tech face masks, thus allowing Natasha to get close to Dreykov, and Melina to sabotage the base and free Yelena and Alexei from their captors. However, Dreykov is able to see through their ruse, and in his office, he performs a violent unmasking of Natasha. He then unmask Taskmaster, to make Natasha see the consequences of her actions when, years ago, she tried to kill him. The super-soldier is Dreykov's daughter, Antonia, who barely survived Natasha's bomb. In the trauma that she suffered her father saw an opportunity to push his program to the next level. Natasha and Dreykov then engage in a brutal battle of wills, where Natasha is able to turn the tables on Dreykov by mocking him and playing on his manhood, thus provoking the great man to show his hand and reveal the full extent of his Black Widow Program. This was the intent all along. Natasha's capture and reveal was a double bluff, and now Dreykov has provided her all the information needed to track down his

global network of Widow agents for the purpose of deprogramming. The alarm sounds as Melina blows up the turbines holding the base aloft, which prompts Dreykov to order the Widows on-hand to kill Natasha while he makes his escape. A fierce brawl ensues, then Yelena shows up, and, with a bundle of Red Dust vials, she frees the Widows from their mental prison as the glass vials explode in a cloud of crimson.

Yelena then goes in pursuit of Dreykov, and as his base plummets toward the earth, he too experiences the ultimate downfall as Yelena blows up his jet carrier, killing him instantly. Knocked unconscious by the concussive wave of the explosion, Yelena is free-falling to her death when she is saved by her sister, who managed to grab a parachute before the base came crashing to the ground. Another survivor is Taskmaster, and when Natasha and Yelena touch down on terra firma, she attacks. The unstoppable killing machine is then stopped by a vial of Red Dust, as Antonia too was a victim of her father's chemical manipulations. With the battle over and Dreykov's operation terminated, Yelena, Alexei, and Melina depart in the company of the deprogrammed Widows, while Natasha remains behind to face authorities. What no one knows, is that this will be the last time they see Natasha, as in her reunion with the Avengers, she will be forced to lay down her life for an even greater cause – to stop an even greater evil. This family of spies may have only been playing family at first, but somewhere along the way, through their many trials and tribulations, familial bonds were formed that were as real as any. And in Yelena's eventual grief, the affirmation of their sisterhood is found.

Red Room Redemption: *Black Widow* and the Objective of Subjectivity

There are two possible notions that can be inferred from the name Black Widow in *Black Widow*: that the female assassins to come out of the Red Room are deadlier than the male (in reference to the black widow spider), or that without a spousal proxy (or controller) to pull their strings, the assassins are incomplete and rudderless.²⁷⁷ During the golden and silver ages of the comic book industry (1938-1970), the function of female characters was primarily to prop up the man in some way or another. Rarely were they granted any agency of their own. Lois Lane was placed into perilous situations in order for Superman to save the day, and Catwoman found herself in Gotham to provide Batman with a love interest and to quell any speculations about there being any sort of queer component to Batman's

²⁷⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 52.

relationship with Robin, the Boy Wonder.²⁷⁸ The vast majority of female comic book characters were, as a result, created as plot devices or as simple arm candy, robbing them of purpose on an individual level and reducing them to puppets in the larger narrative. This modus operandi in terms of gender was then carried over into numerous comic book adaptations, such as *Spider-Man* (2002) and *Batman Begins* (2005), where the female characters can be summed up as not only inconsequential to the overall plot but entirely ephemeral on the whole. Because of the non-consensual master-slave relationship that exists between Dreykov and his contingent of Widow assassins in *Black Widow*, the antagonist thus takes on the role of proxy for an entire culture that has sought to control and marginalize women. This makes a man like General Dreykov the perfect foil to Natasha Romanoff. When we first meet the teenage Natasha, she is sporting strands of blue in her hair. There is a bit of a punk-like attitude to her, and we immediately understand that hers is a rebellious nature. Dreykov is the polar opposite of that and can only be described as utterly authoritarian, especially in matters of gender.

The Widows' individuality, as a result of this oppressive predilection on Dreykov's part, has been eradicated. The extent of Dreykov's influence over the Widows is revealed when Yelena leads a squad of Black Widow operatives on a mission to eliminate a former teammate hiding in Morocco. The operation does not go according to plan, and in a violent scuffle with the defector, Yelena is hit with a gas that counteracts the chemical conditioning that she and her fellow Widows have been subjected to at Dreykov's hand. As Yelena later puts it: "To [Dreykov], we are just things. Weapons with no face that he can just throw away."²⁷⁹ This, when put in the context of Mulvey's male gaze, stands as a clear indictment of the power that the cinema wields over the female form.²⁸⁰ The Widows, as the subjects of chemical conditioning, and the objects of Dreykov's will, have as little say over their bodies as the women who are made to strip for the camera at the urging of male directors. In short, the Widows are Dreykov's puppets, and Dreykov is the Widows' puppeteer. It is a relationship that differs little from the patriarchy's pull upon popular culture, where film is

²⁷⁸ Alan McKee, *Textual Analysis: A Beginner's Guide* (London: Sage Publications, 2005), 77; Miriam Kent, "Catwoman in All But Name: Gender and Adaptation in Christopher Nolan's Selina Kyle," in *A Critical Companion to Christopher Nolan*, ed. Claire Parkinson and Isabelle Labrouillère (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2023), 266.

²⁷⁹ *Black Widow*, directed by Cate Shortland (2021; Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment Inc., 2021), Blu-ray.

²⁸⁰ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," 750.

both a “product and conduit” of misogyny, and where women are frequently made to dance like puppets at the end of a string.²⁸¹

The major differences between how the female characters are presented in *Black Widow*, as opposed to in a film like *Catwoman*, is that in *Black Widow*, the film camera never actively participates in the objectification of women. The Widows that are under Dreykov’s control are objects to him but never to the camera. Dreykov’s ability to snap his fingers and have an army of beautiful but deadly women do his bidding might, to some men, seem like the ultimate male power fantasy. However, because *Black Widow* has a female director in Cate Shortland, the male gaze is prevented from grabbing hold. Instead, it is replaced by Shortland’s “female gaze.”²⁸² And because Shortland, by not framing the Widows in an objectifying manner, refuses to let the camera see the Widows as mere objects, Dreykov’s actions are made all the more reprehensible as a result. Had they been paraded around in skimpy outfits and sent into situations where seduction was part of the murder plot (which, given Dreykov’s KGB background, is not only possible but highly probable), then we would have immediately stopped seeing them as victims and all empathy would have evaporated in an instant. The power of the image to control perception is every bit as influential as the power of Dreykov to control the Widows through the use of chemicals. The image is the primary conditioning tool that the spectator is subjected to in the theater, informing them of how to feel and why, and by the Widows being seen as victims of a patriarchal powerplay rather than objects to be derived pleasure from on a surface level, their plight is given a weight it would otherwise lack.²⁸³

How the Widows are made to dress is also a central part of Dreykov’s control, as the Widows all wear the same identical costume: a black skintight catsuit. This reduces the Widows to interchangeable objects and further strips them of their identity. Natasha and Yelena, when they suit up for action, don the same black catsuits as when they were a part of the Black Widow Program. Their choice of dress could be an indication that Dreykov’s conditioning runs so deep that they are yet to completely shed their formerly conscripted roles. It can also be seen as a symbolic gesture, as a way for Natasha and Yelena to take back control by wearing the uniform of their subjugation to fight their subjugator. When Natasha

²⁸¹ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 243.

²⁸² Miriam Hansen, “Chameleon and Catalyst: The Cinema as an Alternative Public Sphere,” in *The Film Cultures Reader*, ed. Graeme Turner (New York: Routledge, 2002), 412; Rebecca Radillo, “The Politics of Gender and Centralizing the Female Gaze in *Black Widow* (2021),” *The Daily Fandom*, July 14, 2021, <https://thedailyfandom.org/gender-and-the-female-gaze-black-widow-2021>.

²⁸³ Benshoff and Griffin, *America on Film*, 14-5.

was introduced into the MCU in *Iron Man 2*, she was little more than an object – there, to be desired by the eponymous Iron Man. Scarlett Johansson, the actress playing Natasha, said the catsuit she wore in *Iron Man 2* made her feel like a “piece of ass” and little more.²⁸⁴ She was even made to fight in high heels. In *Black Widow*, “Natasha eschews heels in favor of combat boots, and more often than not wears a leather jacket rather than the form-fitting black bodysuit of the Russian assassins ... This version of Natasha is all about the mission; *she* advances the narrative, and she is not being gazed upon while doing that.”²⁸⁵

Even when Natasha does put on the catsuit in *Black Widow*, it is not singularly focused on emphasizing her female anatomy. This is a costume that, within the parameters of the original design, is built to deescalate the sexualization that other male directors have frolicked in when featuring the character in films such as *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *Avengers: Endgame*.²⁸⁶ Her framing is a confirmation of this radical new intent. Yelena too, when she puts on the catsuit, modifies it with her own personal touches, such as a “multi-pocket green vest she buys halfway through the film,” and thus reintroduces the subject into the object.²⁸⁷ The sisters, in each their own way, are rediscovering themselves by breaking free of the Red Room – and, indirectly, of the superhero genre as a whole. If they were depicted as the objects of old, whether fetishized active or passive, then their attempt to bring down a power-hungry patriarchal despot would ring as hollow as a drum. The principal message of *Black Widow* is that women are no longer the playthings of men, and that the maltreatment of women in superhero cinema is not accepted here. By highlighting the victimization of the Widow assassins rather than indulge in their objectification, and by injecting the female gaze where previously the male gaze would have dominated, Natasha and the other Widows are provided subjectivity in place of what would previously have been industry-mandated sexualization. For comic book traditionalists and those who share Dreykov’s misogynist sentiment, this did not sit well.

Questioning Gender: Womanhood, Motherhood, and the Monstrous Feminine

The desire to control every facet of the female body and to influence the formation of identity is furthermore demonstrated through the compulsory hysterectomy that, during their

²⁸⁴ Radillo, “The Politics of Gender.”

²⁸⁵ Kyle D. Killian, “An Analysis of *Black Widow* (2021): Marvel’s Most Feminist Film Features Powerful Sisters and an Attenuated Male Gaze,” *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, no. 1 (2023): 108.

²⁸⁶ Radillo, “The Politics of Gender.”

²⁸⁷ Radillo, “The Politics of Gender.”

stay in the Red Room, all Widows are subjected to. For many women, the concept of motherhood is indivisible from womanhood. In their view, the role of mother is one that should be passed down from one generation to the next, within a “heterosexist framework.”²⁸⁸ This image of the fertile nurturer is imprinted upon the minds of most women from earliest childhood, first through dolls and toys, then through the entire span of the media spectrum.²⁸⁹ In *Black Widow*, this image is invoked multiple times. First, in Melina – in her assigned role as mother to Natasha and Yelena while they, along with Alexei as their father, are posing as the typical American family, in accordance with traditional family values. The father, Alexei, is the provider, while the mother, Melina, is at home, taking care of the children. For Melina, as a Black Widow, this familial scene is something she would otherwise never have. Like all Black Widows, Melina’s ability to have children of her own has been taken away – excised from her body. But the assignment has provided her with an idea of what could have been. However, once the assignment is over, reality reasserts itself. Natasha and Yelena are taken away and forcefully inducted into the Black Widow Program, where they will suffer the same fate as Melina. There is a sense of loss. When Melina, at Dreykov’s orders, is dispatched to a pig farm in the Russian countryside, where she is to conduct mind control experiments on pigs, her nurturing instincts are then transferred onto her domesticated subjects. Or, as she refers to them, “her darlings.”²⁹⁰

This manifestation of a maternal void is also present in Natasha and Yelena. Shortly after the two are reunited, they sit down at an outdoor table next to a gas station, to eat and talk and patch each other up after their encounter with Taskmaster. In the background, there are two children are kicking a ball around. Yelena looks to Natasha and asks her, “Did you ever wish for kids?” Natasha says nothing, but her silence speaks volumes. The idea is left hanging in the air, as a mournful hypothetical. The trauma they have both suffered, both physically and psychologically, is evident on both of their faces as they talk into the night. Later, the extent of their violation is further divulged in a heated discussion with their surrogate father, Alexei:

Alexei: Why the aggression, huh? Is it your time of the month?

Yelena: I don’t get my period, dipshit! I don’t have a uterus.

Natasha: Or ovaries.

²⁸⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 90, 114.

²⁸⁹ Richardson and Wearing, *Gender in the Media*, 2-4.

²⁹⁰ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

Yelena: Yeah, that's what happens when the Red Room gives you an involuntary hysterectomy; they kind of just go in, and they rip out all of your reproductive organs.²⁹¹

For the Widows, their gender identity has thus been rewritten with a scalpel. The prospect of birthing a child has been snatched from their bodies, and with it the opportunity to evolve a sense of self that, biologically speaking, conforms to the established maternalistic concepts that is part and parcel with growing up in a patriarchal society. In similar fashion to how conservative or religious doctrine can impose motherhood upon women, Dreykov has snatched motherhood away from the Widows, and he has thusly thrown their gendered identities into a state of turmoil.

Women's reproductive capabilities are frequently made the focus whenever gender is debated. Many radical feminists, as confirmation of why gender cannot be reassigned by a change of clothing or an application of makeup, argue that biology is the only determinant in the distinction between male and female. In recent years, as this discussion has raged, the TERF acronym (trans-exclusionary radical feminist) has made frequent appearances in public forums. According to the TERF manifesto, unless you are born a woman, you cannot become one through surgery or any other means, as being a woman means having the ability to give birth.²⁹² Their central argument is that pregnancy and childbirth are essential parts of the female experience. While this is undisputable, it still creates an essentialist mentality that reinforces the binary.²⁹³ Due to the hysterectomy that Natasha, Yelena, and all the women who enter the Black Widow Program are forced to endure, their status as women is thrown into question if this absolutist decree is enforced to the letter. The Widows may have been born women, but they no longer qualify as women. In the United States, many religious and right-wing conservative groups echo this belief in female essentialism, along with the idea of woman as mother above all else.²⁹⁴ Women undergo hysterectomies every year, for a multitude of reasons, and infertility among both men and women is not an uncommon occurrence in society. If our understanding of gender is limited to such an extent and imposed

²⁹¹ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

²⁹² Gillian Love, "Trans Pregnancy in a Repronormative World," in *Towards Gender Equality in Law: An Analysis of State Failures from a Global Perspective*, ed. Gizem Guney, et al. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 48-50.

²⁹³ Dawn Ennis, "J.K. Rowling Comes Out As A TERF," *Forbes*, Dec. 19, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dawnstaceyennis/2019/12/19/jk-rowling-comes-out-as-a-terf/?sh=51ce3fe85d70>; Love, "Trans Pregnancy," 49; Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 30.

²⁹⁴ Edna Keeble, *Politics and Sex: Exploring the Connections between Gender, Sexuality, and the State* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2016), 33.

with such ruthlessness, then all former and current Widows will be categorized as genderless and thus transfigured from object to “abject.”²⁹⁵

This gender-absolutist mentality, whether it be harbored by radical feminists or religious conservatives, would not and could not tolerate individuals that, according to their essentialist conviction, are neither male nor female. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva writes that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order.”²⁹⁶ Motherhood as the defining trait of womanhood does, for some, infuse a sense of identity and order to society, but to others it excludes and persecutes. Dreykov sees the Widows as dehumanized possessions, no different from a knife or a gun. They are a “natural resource” that is his to exploit.²⁹⁷ The Widows’ have already been objectified by Dreykov, but radical gender ideology is still able to add to their debasement. In her examination of the “monstrous-feminine,” Barbara Creed writes that the “abject can be experienced in various ways, one of which relates to biological bodily functions, the other of which has been inscribed in a symbolic (religious) economy.”²⁹⁸ When the body-horror imagery of an involuntary hysterectomy is combined with infertility as a symbol of mortality, then the stigma of abjection becomes even greater. Maternalistic essentialists would insist on seeing the Widows as childless, genderless imitations of true womanhood, but Natasha and Yelena’s gender identities are not defined by the forced medical procedures they have been subjected to. As the sisters are fleeing from the assassin, Taskmaster, they are forced to steal a car. Before speeding off, Natasha says to Yelena, “Put your seat belt on.”²⁹⁹ Yelena’s reply is concise: “You’re such a mom.”³⁰⁰ If Natasha is imbued with a motherly instinct despite not being physically able to reproduce, then her gender is not defined by biology. It is therefore wholly irrelevant what labels or sets of criteria a chosen few wish to assign womanhood or any other gendered designation, as identity is only ever a personal debate.

The Taskmaster Protocol: A Performative Subversion of Gendered Principles

The most significant character in *Black Widow* for illustrating the centrality of gender in popular culture, is Taskmaster. In the comics, he is Tony Masters, an assassin who is “able

²⁹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

²⁹⁶ Kristeva, *Power of Horror*, 4.

²⁹⁷ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

²⁹⁸ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” in *The Dread of Difference: Gender and the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015), 38, 40.

²⁹⁹ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

³⁰⁰ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

to [replicate] the actions of anyone he observe[s].”³⁰¹ In the film, he is a she. The performativity of gender is, as previously noted, also reflected in *Captain Marvel*, but in *Black Widow*’s Taskmaster, the performance of gender is an essential part of the character, as the narrative itself hinges upon its subversion. Butler states that “because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender.”³⁰² This is the narrative function that Taskmaster serves. The character wears a large helmet and is covered head to toe in body armor. He/she exudes a powerful combination of masculinity and menace throughout the film, which, in the third act, is used to pull the rug out from under the audiences’ feet. Not only is the character revealed to be a woman, but it is Dreykov’s daughter. It is a twist that makes perfect sense from a narrative standpoint, but it still managed to outrage a sizable quotient of the audience, who reacted with anger and disbelief at the gender-flipping.³⁰³

In the film, our first proper glimpse of Taskmaster comes as he/she ambushes Natasha on a bridge in Norway. On the run from authorities and living off the grid, she is placed in the crosshairs of the mysterious assassin when Yelena sends her a package containing the chemicals that freed her from Dreykov’s mind-control. In the dead of night, on a bridge in the middle of nowhere, Taskmaster steps out of the arctic darkness to fire a high explosive round at Natasha’s car. The vehicle careens over the railing but stops short of falling into the river. Natasha is shaken but she makes it out of the wreck in the last second before it plunges into the icy waters below. The two of them then proceed to square off in hand-to-hand combat, but even before blows are exchanged, Taskmaster is performing gender in perfect accordance with masculine expectations. His/her stance, the way he/she walks, it is all communicating to the audience that this is a male character fighting a female character. Taskmaster might be mirroring Natasha’s fighting style every step of the way, but the action and movements still avoid feminization, as the power behind the movements is such that we ascribe them with a masculine origin. This is a physical power that has been “systematically denied to women,” and it demonstrates the “association of ‘maleness’ with ‘power’” that we have been instilled with from day one.³⁰⁴ All those gendered expectations are subverted by the fact that under the heavy body armor shielding Taskmaster there is a woman.

³⁰¹ *Marvel Studios Black Widow: The Official Movie Special*, ed. Jonathan Wilkins (London: Titan Magazines, 2020), 94.

³⁰² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190.

³⁰³ Benny Stein, “*Black Widow* Writer Responds To Fan Disapproval Over Taskmaster Twist,” *The Direct*, July 14, 2021, <https://thedirect.com/article/black-widow-taskmaster-twist-dreykov>.

³⁰⁴ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 50.

By using the character Taskmaster in such a way, the film plays on perceptions of gender that, over time, have been internalized through social customs and popular media portrayals. When looking at the way people go about their lives, it is evident that the vast majority of us are locked into the Shakespearean quote that says, “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players.”³⁰⁵ In one way or another, we are all performers playing a part, whether it be those who consciously (or unconsciously) toe the normative line, or those who are forced to rebel against social constraints because of how their gender identity conflicts with heteronormative ideology. In recent years, the politics of gender have become significantly more contentious, especially in the United States, where Florida’s “so-called ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Law,” and Tennessee’s banning of drag shows (to, supposedly, safeguard “children from obscene, sexualized entertainment”), are indicative of the “cultural matrix through which gender identity” is inscribed with a “compulsory heterosexuality.”³⁰⁶ Within this strictly binary framework, Taskmaster is transgressing the parameters of gender through both appearance and action. In keeping with Butler’s assertion that there is a price to be paid for not doing gender right, the reaction from certain audience members made it seem as if the sky was falling when they learned the truth: that this physically capable and highly intimidating man is actually a woman.³⁰⁷ However, the anti-feminist wrath that was generated by the flipping of Taskmaster’s gender can be seen as more than fanboy outrage, as it also represents is a disruption of the normative that feeds directly into the concept of the abject and the monstrous-feminine.

In *Black Widow*’s climax, Taskmaster is revealed to be Dreykov’s daughter, Antonia, the innocent victim of a failed bombing plot orchestrated by Natasha. Severely injured by the bomb, Antonia is then made the subject of her father’s experiments into physical enhancements and mind-control and is transformed into a ruthlessly efficient assassin with no individuality or agency – precisely like the Widows, but with an even higher kill-rate, and with a gender identity obscured behind body armor. The unmasking of Taskmaster comes as Natasha confronts Dreykov in his secret base of operations, but instead of him expressing anger at what Natasha did to his daughter, he thanks her for providing him with what he calls

³⁰⁵ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1994), II.7.42-43.

³⁰⁶ Solcyre Burga, “Florida Set to Dramatically Expand Its ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Laws. Here’s What They Will Do,” *Time*, March 16, 2023, <https://time.com/6263694/florida-dont-say-gay-laws-expansion>; Solcyre Burga, “Tennessee Passed the Nation’s First Law Limiting Drag Shows. Here’s the Status of Anti-Drag Bills Across the U.S.,” *Time*, April 3, 2023, <https://time.com/6260421/tennessee-limiting-drag-shows-status-of-anti-drag-bills-u-s>; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxi, 24.

³⁰⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 190; Stein, “Black Widow Writer Responds.”

his “greatest weapon.”³⁰⁸ When Taskmaster’s helmet then comes off, we see a woman’s face where all previous indicators said there was a man. Her eyes are intense but deathlike, and the entire right side of her face and neck is covered in burn scars. Kristeva describes the abject as the “place where meaning collapses.” For those whose perception of gender is based on a binary “system of compulsory heterosexuality,” this is where that meaning collapses.³⁰⁹ In horror films, the abject is “produced at the border between human and inhuman, man and beast.”³¹⁰ But the abject, as a complex expression of revolt, can also be “produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not.”³¹¹ Performativity is once again key, and as Taskmaster’s indeterminate gender is fused with a defiled female countenance, the journey into the monstrous-feminine is complete. The fanboys who reacted with outrage at this shocking plot twist claimed the source of their contention was the deviation from the comic book, but it is highly probable that a socially manufactured gendered prejudice played just as much of a role in their condemnation of both film and character.

Superhero Cinema as Women’s Cinema: The Trials, Tribulations, and Triumphs of *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow*

In an interview with *The Guardian*, former *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* star, Sarah Michelle Gellar, said that “Every time a Marvel movie tries to do a female cast, it just gets torn apart ... There’s still this mentality of ‘the male superhero,’ this very backwards way of thinking.”³¹² The public reception of both *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* show that gender continues to be a hot-button issue, and that a quotient of the male population, when it comes to superheroes, feel a right of ownership that make them the gatekeepers over an entire genre. The fact that *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* were even made, is ultimately a triumph. They got the green light, made it into production, and got released when a majority of female-led superhero films do not. It was only recently that *Batgirl*, a film that was all but completed, got ruthlessly scrapped by Warner Bros. The studio chose to use the film as a tax write-off instead of adding it to their extended universe. According to the official statement, the film failed to align with the new “leadership’s strategic shift as it relates to the DC universe and

³⁰⁸ *Black Widow*, dir. Cate Shortland, Blu-ray.

³⁰⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 26.

³¹⁰ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 42.

³¹¹ Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine,” 42.

³¹² Elle Hunt, “‘A lot of the demons seem a little cheesy now’: Sarah Michelle Gellar on Buffy, her burnout and her comeback,” *The Guardian*, Jan. 30, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/jan/30/sarah-michelle-gellar-interview-wolf-pack-buffy>.

HBO Max.”³¹³ But irrespective of the motivation that consigned *Batgirl* to filmic limbo, the scrapping of a film featuring one of DC’s most beloved female comic book characters at that late a stage sets a dangerous precedent. No Batman adaptation would have ever suffered the same fate, which, at the end of the day, sends the message that female superheroes are inherently expendable and not worth the monetary risk. This marks a major setback to the representation of women in the superhero genre, and it makes *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* increasingly relevant in the discourse about gender and the roles of women in the media.

What some find difficult to accept, is that the superhero genre can no longer be thought of as a boy’s club only. Since the launching of the MCU in 2008, the genre has evolved in increments, and is now more inclusive than at any other point in its relatively short history. The genre still has a long way to go before it can be called all-inclusive, but *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* are testaments to a progressive shift, much to the dismay of that vocal minority within the fandom. Along with greater onscreen representation for women, there is also a far greater number of women that go to the theater to watch superhero films than ever before. This is in part due to comic books no longer being reserved for those with an X and a Y chromosome. Women too have gravitated toward the comic book store, and they are, according to former Marvel Editor-in-Chief, Alex Alonso, “starved for content.”³¹⁴ It is therefore only natural that more women also want to see their favorite comic book characters fighting the good fight on the big screen. In fact, women make up close to half of the audience for your average superhero blockbuster, and no Hollywood producer worth their salt would make the argument that ignoring half your audience is good for business.³¹⁵ With more women’s stories being told because of this shift in the audience demographic, superhero cinema can, as a result, also be classified as women’s cinema, a term applicable to films “made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all three.”³¹⁶ *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* tick all three of the boxes. *Captain Marvel* has a female co-directed in Anna Boden, while Cate Shortland has sole directing credit on *Black Widow*. Their fantastical stories are told from the perspectives of women, and they speak with special impetus to female audiences. However, they do not speak to female audiences only. The “cinematic image” has

³¹³ Aaron Couch, “‘Batgirl’ and ‘Scoob!: Holiday Haunt’ Scrapped at Warner Bros. Amid Cost-Savings Push,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, Aug. 2, 2022, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/batgirl-shelved-at-warner-bros-hbo-max-1235191371>.

³¹⁴ Brett Schenker, “Market Research Says 46.67% of Comic Fans are Female,” *Comics Beat*, Feb. 5, 2014, <https://www.comicsbeat.com/market-research-says-46-female-comic-fans>.

³¹⁵ Meyers and Shevenock, “Is Gen Z Too Cool for Marvel?”

³¹⁶ Alison Butler, *Women’s Cinema: The Contested Screen* (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 1.

the ability to speak to “people across boundaries of geography, nation, and belief,” implying that only individual close-mindedness would prevent either film from speaking across boundaries of gender.³¹⁷ Even then, the possibility exists that, if the images are allowed to linger long enough in the visual cortex, they will eventually penetrate, along with the messages they carry.

³¹⁷ Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 13.

Conclusion

The impact of the superhero genre on popular culture and the representation of race and gender has, since the launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2008, been significant. In a genre where, until recently, the role of protagonist was reserved for the white male, the release of *Black Panther*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* represent a radical upset to the established order. For a long time, in the superhero genre, the very idea of diversity seemed more far-fetched than a man in a red cape being “able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.”³¹⁸ The dominance of the heroic white male, with accompanying damsels, was such that alternative representations were never able to get a solid cultural foothold. Of course, this is a genre that was originally designed specifically to cater to the adolescent fantasies of young white boys, but over the years its audience has grown, and its stories have become more mature. The only thing that has remained static, is the race and gender of the super-powered figure at the center of the story – Wonder Woman being one of the few rare exceptions to come along.

It also took Marvel ten years to deviate from the traditional superhero template once the MCU was up and running. In fact, until *Black Panther*, the superheroes Marvel had chosen for the marquee had all been white and male, and within the studio there was considerable pushback at the thought of going in another direction. However, as a growing number of people in the United States and elsewhere expressed a desire to turn back the clock on race and gender to the 1950s and ‘60s, the necessity for greater representation for minorities seemed more pressing than ever. The four superhero films that are the subject of this thesis are a response to this regressive drift, as in place of the white male hero, they purposefully provide people of color and women a place of prominence in a genre where previously they were pushed to the margins.

Films, through the perception they project, function as an “organizing principle of reality” that directly impacts identity formation.³¹⁹ The superhero genre is thus placed in a unique position to affect reality because of its popularity, even if only on an individual basis. Films are given their power because of their built-in subjectivity, and because of how that subjectivity is then placed upon the spectator. When the “blurring of the boundaries between the imaginary and the real” take place in these fictional spaces, ideological convictions that

³¹⁸ Scott Bukatman, “A Song of the Urban Superhero,” in *The Superhero Reader*, ed. Charles Hatfield, et. al. (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 2013), 179.

³¹⁹ Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 151-3.

further affect identity formation can be built up or torn down as a result.³²⁰ With regard to its potential, one only needs to look to 1915 and the devastating effect *The Birth of a Nation* had on the perception of blackness in the United States. The film did not conjure racism out of thin air, but for many it acted as a release valve, providing an excuse for those with a racist inclination that lit up the night in fiery hatred. *Black Panther*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Captain Marvel* and *Black Widow* are trying to put out some of the many hateful fires still threatening to engulf us, and they are doing this by providing empowerment and positive cinematic representation to marginalized groups that have seen precious little of it in the superhero genre.

The representation of race and gender in superhero cinema has traditionally reflected the sentiments of racist and/or misogynist projects. According to racial formation theory, racial projects are the broadcasters tasked with spreading ideologically infused depictions of race to the populace, with the same basic concept also applying to gender. In the superhero genre, where the lauding of whiteness and masculinity is common, and usually happens at the cost of minorities, the projects presented in visual and/or narrative form tend to be imbued with a racist and/or misogynist quality. The work to undo the detrimental ideologies espoused by such projects can be arduous, as the projects eventually take on a life of their own – even as new anti-racist or anti-misogynist projects are presented to dispel them. To scramble broadcasts of white superiority and female subservience in our popular culture, more diversity is required to present compelling counterarguments, and platforms such as the MCU are ideally suited to do just that, as they draw in audiences in the millions that are predominantly young and represent all demographics.

Black Panther is a superhero film that acts as a rejection of the racist projects of the past. The film, through both its black protagonist and antagonist, speaks first and foremost to black audiences, as these are characters that they can recognize themselves in. However, by humanizing blackness and providing greater racial understanding through character-building and depictions of black culture, its message is ultimately intended for all. With blackness frequently reduced to inconsequential sidenotes or burdened with racial stereotyping in superhero films, *Black Panther* stands as a radical shift in a positive direction for black communities in search of better and fairer representation than they have been offered in the past. *Black Panther*'s T'Challa is a man that is very easy to like. He is as disarming as he is charismatic. Where other films featuring black superheroes in smaller or larger roles felt the

³²⁰ Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, 147, 198.

need to imbue them with fundamental character flaws to distinguish them from white superheroes, T'Challa is made to feel more real because of his genuine goodness. T'Challa is not entirely flawless, but his flaws do not define him. Killmonger, as the villain of the story, could have easily been rendered a racial caricature, but because his motivation is sound, we come to sympathize with both the character and his cause. Killmonger, with his ambition to stage a global racial revolt to tip the balance of racial power, is airing grievances felt by many people of color, thus making him an expression for their racial discontent. Meanwhile, as someone whose worldview is not clouded by anger and whose moral compass is maintained, T'Challa is made an aspirational role model for the same group of people. What this shows above all, is that in *Black Panther* both characters are essential to underscore and challenge the many complexities that constitute the racial experience, whether it be from an American perspective, or anywhere else in the world.

We see the same processes at work through the rich depiction of Asian and Asian American culture and identity in *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*. Racial misconceptions and stereotypes are addressed as elaborate action sequences fill the narrative, whether it be the fight sequence aboard the runaway San Francisco bus, or the showdown between Shang-Chi and the Dweller-in-Darkness in the mythic land of Ta Lo. However, to the majority of Asian Americans, it is the smaller moments that mattered most. To members of the Asian diaspora, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is a recognition of their unique cultural identity. This is expressed through Katy's rejection of the model minority, through Shang-Chi's Americanization and eventual immersion back into Chinese culture, and the lengthy conversation about the importance of names in Chinese society. The brief mention of ABC (American-born Chinese), a term that is familiar to most Chinese Americans but very few outside of this ethnic group, tells us this film was made specifically with Asian Americans in mind. White people have not been lacking for representation in American cinema at any point, but for Asians, it is a very different story, and *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* is a singular contribution to the rectification of that racial imbalance.

This disparity is also replicated in gender, and in *Captain Marvel*, the theories of Mulvey, Butler, and Brown address the cinematic representation of the female superhero and the limitations that she is still facing in the modern day. When compared to most if not all male superheroes, women toe a very different line in terms of body image and muscularity. The question of femininity and what precisely constitutes the ideal for female beauty is frequently and fundamentally at odds with the concept of gender equality. The fact that femininity is measured in accordance with a variable beauty standard is by itself deeply

problematic and not something male superheroes have ever had to deal with. Furthermore, where male empowerment can be visualized through muscularity, female empowerment cannot, as muscularity strips away femininity and replaces it with a masculinized countenance. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was more acceptance for muscular women in popular culture, but recently this has been rescinded, and in its place is an image of femininity that in Captain Marvel's case impedes her ability to reflect female empowerment in accordance with the rules that apply to men. That being said, the depiction of the female superhero has experienced a positive change from only a few years ago, and *Captain Marvel* very much reflects this. In place of the sexualization that was par for the course during the early 2000s, this new female superhero has instead been desexualized. As the power of Mulvey's male gaze has been rendered impotent, agency is reclaimed for the female superhero. And while there still exists a chance that she can be objectified in spite of her newly claimed agency (as a "fetishized active" character), Captain Marvel is able to resist this.³²¹

Issues concerning gender are carried over into *Black Widow*, where the concept of a gender-specific identity is called into question. The film also tackles objectification, misogyny, and toxic masculinity. The main villain, General Dreykov, is the embodiment of anti-feminist ideology, as his private army of highly trained female assassins has been conditioned to obey his every command. At one time this also included Black Widow herself: Natasha Romanoff. But even as she is able to free herself from his control, she continues to be affected by the abuse she suffered while in his service. As all Black Widows, she was forced to undergo a hysterectomy, and for many women motherhood is a central aspect of their gender identity. With the possibility of biological procreation taken away from Natasha, her sister Yelena, and all the other Widows, their gender identity is challenged – by themselves as well as all who consider the ability to give birth the defining trait of womanhood. This, coupled with Dreykov's relentless objectification, robs the Widows of their humanity as well as their gender identity. Thus, they become representations of the abject and the monstrous-feminine, as their biological lack can be seen as a violation of the binary if gender absolutism is given the final word. The performed masculinity of the villain, Taskmaster, who, by the end, is revealed to be a woman, is another manifestation of the monstrous-feminine, as she too can be seen as a disruption of the normative. This reveal, during the film's climax, caused considerable pushback from certain male segments of superhero fandom, and because it

³²¹ Brown, *Dangerous Curves*, 71-3.

echoes the criticism directed at *Captain Marvel* two years earlier, it seems that any depiction of femininity that does not fully align with normative perceptions can automatically be labeled as abject.

When looking at *Black Panther*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Black Widow* from the vantage points of race and gender, what stood out the most are the similarities in the prejudicial obstacles each film had to overcome, and the means by which this was achieved. In society, people of color and women share the same oppressor, and the oppression is enacted for the same reason, through the same set of channels. The ways by which we systematize race and gender in a larger social context is inscribed with what Omi and Winant refer to as a “common sense” quality that sees whiteness and masculinity placed at the top of an unfair hierarchical system.³²² Our popular culture is also feeling the brunt of this, even in the twenty-first century. The superhero genre, whether it be on page or screen, has long carried the torch of white male dominance. This makes the modern superhero film ideally suited for fighting the intolerance it has helped to disseminate, as its aspirational properties are already well established. By using these characters, in these films, as a formative tools, they are given the means to counter negative or harmful social trends by providing positive representation for the under-represented. Therefore, in a society where racial and gendered prejudice is on the rise due to increasing political polarization, the function of the modern-day superhero film is, in many ways, analogous to the function of the modern-day superhero, as both have the capacity to make a difference in service of a greater cause.

³²² Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 126.

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