



Hot Pants and Spandex Suits:
Gender in American Superhero Comics

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Leicester

by
Esther De Dauw (MA, BA)
Department of English
University of Leicester
February 2017

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Esther De Dauw**

This thesis analyses the representation of gender and its intersection with sexuality and race by examining twelve mainstream comic book superheroes in their socio-historical context, particularly those published by the ‘Big Two’ publishers in the industry:

Marvel and DC. The superheroes are: Superman, Captain America, Iron Man, Supergirl, Wonder Woman, Wiccan, Hulkling, Batwoman, Black Panther, Falcon, Storm and Ms Marvel. Focusing on superheroes’ first appearance in World War II up to their current iterations, this thesis discusses how superheroes have changed and adapted to either match or challenge prevailing ideas about gender, including dominant views on masculinity and femininity in the US military, attitudes to American national identity and the Other, homonormativity and minority communities. Engaging with Butler’s theory of gender performance and Critical Race Theory, this thesis extends existing comic scholarship by moving beyond justification or condemnation of the genre. It contends that superheroes create gendered scripts that are increasingly pro-diversity, supporting gender, sexual and racial equality, and yet fail to construct anti-hegemonic narratives that challenge the status quo.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr Emma Parker and Dr Sarah Graham for their expert advice and guidance. Thank you for your unfaltering encouragement as well as your brilliant and insightful comments on my work.

I would also like to thank Rachel Quinney, who helped me make sense of my own thoughts and contributed to the analysis of the visual materials in this thesis, and Sarah Stevens, who allowed me to use her as a guinea pig for conference papers and research ideas with unfailing good humour.

I want to thank my mother, Godelieve Vandenhoven, and my sisters, Ruth and Maria De Dauw, as well as my brother and his wife, Dries De Dauw and Sarah De Visscher, for their emotional, mental and financial support. I genuinely do not think I would have made it through without your faith in me.

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Introduction

For almost eighty years, superheroes have been a part of American media and are now considered a staple of American culture, increasingly exported to international audiences in several different mass media formats. Originally appearing in comic books, superheroes have also appeared in syndicated newspaper strips and radio serials and continue to appear in animated cartoons, TV series, films and original web content. Increasingly, audiences are accessing the superhero outside of comic book content, especially with the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008 – ongoing), hereafter referred to as the MCU, although comics is still the primary form superheroes appear in.¹ This thesis examines twelve superheroes: Superman, Captain America, Iron Man, Supergirl, Wonder Woman, Wiccan, Hulkling, Batwoman, Black Panther, Falcon, Storm and Ms Marvel, all published either by Marvel or DC, primarily through the lens of the American superhero comic book, although references to other superhero content will be made when appropriate.

Situated at the intersection of comic studies, cultural studies and theories of intersectionality, this thesis discusses comics in their socio-historical context and determines how they are informed by dominant gender ideology in the American cultural landscape. Using Karen Barad's concept of intra-action, this thesis understands American culture as consisting of subcultures that "interpenetrate and mutually transform each other."² However, within those processes of mutual construction, a dominant cultural narrative arises that remains culturally exalted and presents itself as the unquestionable 'norm' by which those subcultures should measure themselves. This norm solidifies into a hegemony containing intersections of structural oppression and privilege. To discuss these differing levels of oppression and privilege, this thesis uses the concept of intersectionality first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw.³ In particular, it is concerned with applying an intersectional framework to American superheroes, mostly in their comic book format, in order to map comic books' representation of gender. This thesis begins from a theoretical standpoint that gender and race are

¹ The current Marvel Cinematic Universe consists of the following films, in chronological order: *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avengers* (2011), *Avengers Assemble* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Ant-Man* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Doctor Strange* (2016).

² Nikka Lykke, *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 51.

³ Lykke, *Feminist Studies*, 51.

unequivocally enmeshed and that to analyse identity representation inevitably requires the investigation of intersectional dynamics. Predominantly concerned with the construction of identity categories and the representation of such identities, it considers these categories as constructed by social context and its power structures. As Catherine A. MacKinnon discusses, identity categories are “authentic instruments of inequality” and inevitably used to reinforce existing power relations.⁴ Societal structures that present themselves as neutral, for example, supposedly gender-neutral legal systems, are inevitably complicit in maintaining those power relations, as discussed by Dean Spade.⁵ The limitations of an intersectional approach are varied, but of interest here, as articulated by Crenshaw, Sumi Cho and Leslie McCall is “the eponymous “et cetera” problem – that is, the number of categories and kinds of subjects (e.g., privileged or subordinate?) stipulated or implied by an intersectional approach.”⁶ This thesis is foregrounds identities of gender, race (and nationality) and sexuality, focusing less on other categories such as class and (dis)ability. It also remains focused on the institutional level of society, as opposed to an individual or local communities approach. This prioritizes the impact of (American) cultural hegemony and social context on comic books to avoid ahistorical readings. This thesis combines an intersectional framework with a ‘production of culture’ perspective, which Casey Brienza argues for in his article ‘Producing Comics Culture: A Sociological Approach to the Study of Comics,’ foregrounding the social practices of spectating and producing which constitute and are constituted by intersectional categories of (social) identity.⁷ In this context, the broad term ‘American culture’ or ‘American society’ is used to denote the privileged and institutionalised identity narrative, which is conceptualised as white-male-as-norm.

Superheroes and their bodies represent idealised versions of gender. According to Aaron Taylor, the superhero body, or superbody, is of special interest as it is “a culturally produced body that could potentially defy all traditional and normalizing

⁴ Catherine A. MacKinnon, “Intersectionality as Method: A Note,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 34:4 (2013), 1023.

⁵ Dean Spade, “Intersectional Resistance and Law Reform,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38:4 (2013), 1031-55.

⁶ Sumi Cho, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and Leslie McCall, “Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Applications, and Praxis,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38:4 (2013), 787.

⁷ Brienza, Casey. “Producing Comics Culture: A Sociological Approach to the Study of Comics.” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 1:2 (2010). Doi: 10.1080/21504857.2010.528638

readings. These are bodies beyond limits – perhaps without limits.”⁸ Such bodies, existing beyond the realm of the ordinary, could signify and project gender in new and unique ways, potentially transcending established gender markers and creating new identities beyond the scope of traditional gender roles. Using Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, this thesis considers gender as culturally constructed. As Butler writes, gender is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts in a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”⁹ Gender is not biologically defined but is constructed by culture and its gender discourse, which frames itself as based on ‘natural,’ biological sex. Michel Foucault writes that society’s “hold on sex is maintained through language, or rather through the acts of discourse that creates from the very fact that it is articulated, a rule of law.”¹⁰ Sex is the biological body on which gender discourse claims it bases its construction of the gender binary. Foucault writes that because society establishes a discourse on sex or the body, this discourse determines the boundaries and categories of its existence. Butler, when discussing Foucault, further extrapolates “that disciplinary discourse manages and makes use of [individuals, but] it also actively constitutes them.”¹¹ Discourse constructs biological bodies because it is impossible to access the body outside of discourse or language, which defines culture’s gender roles and stereotypes. Discourse continually produces bodies informed and created by gender roles, for example in mass media such as comics, and over time, they appear ‘natural’ instead of artificially produced. There is no gender outside of that artificial construct because gender “identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its result.”¹² Discourse creates or classifies behavioural patterns as biologically determined by gender, which results in subjects being pressured into behaving according to those gendered patterns. In effect, gender is created through the performance of social behaviour classified as gendered. As Butler writes, biological sex does not create “social meanings as additive properties, but rather is *replaced* by the social meanings it takes on” (original emphasis).¹³ Natural gender roles based on

⁸ Aaron Taylor, “‘He’s Gotta Be Strong, and He’s Gotta Be Fast, and He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life:’ Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:2 (2007), 345.

⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 45.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality 1: The Will to Knowledge* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1998), 83.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 50.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 34.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 5.

biological imperatives do not exist because biological sex is replaced by culturally constructed gender roles.

Drawing on Lisa Duggan's theory of homonormativity, this thesis will further investigate how the performance of gender by queer characters can create conservative narratives. Duggan defines homonormativity as the privatization of a specific gay culture.

Homonormativity: a politics that does not contest dominant or heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.¹⁴

Homonormativity upholds heteronormativity by incorporating acceptable forms of gay identity into the hegemony instead of challenging it. Jasbir K. Puar further builds on this concept, considering homonormativity as the simulation of heteronormativity accessed through white, middle-class privilege, generated further through homonormative Islamophobia in the wake of the terrorist attack on 9/11. This is a process "whereby homonormative and queer gay men can enact forms of national, racial, or other belongings, by contributing to a collective vilification of Muslims."¹⁵ Homonationalism, as Puar coined it, is a process whereby nationalism is conflated with Islamophobia and terrorism with Islam, which ensures that the white American, middle-class gay community can access certain forms of citizenship, by 'siding' against terrorism and Islam. This homonormative Islamophobia in turn generates heteronormativity because the civil rights this community are given access to are connected to the production of the nuclear family such as adoption and marriage, which benefits the state.

The third most important theoretical framework employed by the thesis is whiteness or white performance as used in Critical Race Theory.¹⁶ Karla Martin writes that "[whiteness] is often centred as the norm, as the unspoken standard that everyone

¹⁴ Lisa Duggan, "The New Homosexuality: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 179.

¹⁵ Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007), 21.

¹⁶ Richard Delgado et al, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 5.

else should conform to and be judged by.”¹⁷ Framed as the norm, behaviour that does not fit white behavioural patterns is marked as deviant or excessive and becomes the excuse to bar non-white people from white spaces. As discussed in *Unhooking from Whiteness* (2013), the dominant white hegemony, “is the privileging of ideas, interests, values, beliefs, assumptions, images and norms associated with Whites.”¹⁸ Whiteness is a set of behaviours and interests that are not only associated with the white community and its hegemony, but also serve that white community at the cost of racial minorities’ oppression. It is behaviour that is committed to maintaining the hegemony. Black characters who act white further normalize the idea that whiteness is a natural, biological norm that non-white people violate.

A Brief History of Comics

As this thesis uses a socio-historical framework and focuses on historical evolutions in the superhero genre, a basic understanding of how the comic book industry has evolved in the eighty years of its existence is required. The comic book, as the dominant and original progenitor of the superhero, has informed the construction of the superhero as a concept. The following discussion of the industry’s history will focus on its general evolution and the companies now known as DC and Marvel.¹⁹ Both DC and Marvel have had extensive interaction with their fanbase. For example, during the 1960s Marvel published letters from fans in the back section of comic books, allowing fans to respond to each other. Fans often bonded together to produce magazines, called fanzines, while Marvel and DC editors, as well as writers and artists, would provide interviews or exclusive content for such fan-produced works.²⁰ The growing popularity of the internet in the 1990s made fanzines redundant as it was cheaper and easier for fans to communicate via online message boards and websites. To cater to the way fans

¹⁷ Karla Martin, “Privileging Privilege With the Hope of Accessing Privilege” in *Unhooking from Whiteness*, ed. Brad Profilio, Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski (Rotterdam: SensePublishers, 2013), 53.

¹⁸ Cleveland Hayes et al, “Toward a Lesser Shade of White: 12 Steps Towards More Authentic Race Awareness” in *Unhooking from Whiteness*, ed. Brad Profilio, Julie Gorlewski and David Gorlewski (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2013), 6.

¹⁹ For more in-depth discussion of the evolution of the genre and the industry as a whole, see Bradford W. Wright’s excellent analysis in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* as well as Amy Nyberg’s comprehensive and exceptional *Seal of Approval: the Origins and History of the Comics Code*.

²⁰ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 252.

have responded to comics, specifically fan culture's need to document the industry and its canon, DC and Marvel have published collected volumes, focusing on comics and characters' development, often using the terms Golden (1935-1956), Silver (1956-1970), Bronze (1970-1984), Dark (1984-1998) and Modern (1998-now) Age. The exact dates of such ages (and the use of this classification) are regularly debated in online communities, but the industry generally accepts them. In comic scholarship, as Orion Ussner Kidder points out, this "model of American comic-book history is quite contentious."²¹ Discussing the "extremely articulate critique of that model" by Benjamin Woo, Kidder writes that Woo "contends that the terms are inherently antithetical to academic rigor."²² As Kidder states, agreement with this analysis does not preclude the usefulness of such terms in comic book scholarship considering its use by the industry, professionals, fans, creators and experts. When discussing history and comics, these terms are inescapable and will be used in this thesis when appropriate.

In June 1938, DC published *Action Comics #1* with the very first printed image of Superman on the cover. At this time, comics were a fairly new medium and mostly consisted of collections of reprinted syndicated newspaper strips with few original storylines. Publishers began to pay artists and writers for new comic book content, which eventually led to the publication of Superman. The quick and immense success of this character launched the superhero genre in comic books, which dominated the industry for nearly fifteen years. As Wright explains, "most comic books titles sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issues" and "each issue of *Action Comics* (featuring one Superman story each) regularly sold about 900,000 copies per month."²³ Aware of Superman's success, the market quickly became saturated with other superheroes and imitations, which heralded the beginning of the Golden Age of Comics. While there exists a nostalgic reverence for Golden Age stories, the quality of the material is often questionable. Most of the artwork produced at this time seems less sophisticated compared to the elaborate splash pages of contemporary comics. Most artists considered comic book work as a way to make money while they worked on their real art or until they were contracted to illustrate syndicated newspaper strips, which were more respectable. In Golden Age illustrations, the background is often blank and there is a lack of detail in objects in the foreground. There is a wooden quality to the

²¹ Orion Ussner Kidder, "Useful Play: Historicization in Alan Moore's *Supreme* and Warren Ellis/John Cassaday's *Planetary*," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 21:1 (2010), 77.

²² Ibid.

²³ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 13.

characters' bodies, most visible in stoic facial expression. Part of this can be attributed to the low quality of the paper and the cheap printing process, which would have blurred any detail in the artist's original composition.

The term 'Golden Age' reflects the industry's unprecedented (and unrepeated) financial and commercial success.²⁴ Comics were popular with publishers because they were cheap to produce. Artists and writers often worked as freelancers and sold their finished product to publishers while some banded together to form studios or 'shops'. These shops functioned as an assembly line with the writing, drawing, colouring, lettering and inking of the work divided among contributors. The finished product, including copyright, would be sold to a publisher, who would continue to commission the shop for new issues. At this time, the medium was dismissed as low brow mass entertainment by most people outside and inside the industry. Sold cheaply, they were affordable to the largest demographic in the 1930s: the working poor.

At the beginning, superheroes were often left-wing and vocal defenders of social justice and the working class. In the 1930s, a large part of the population abandoned the "Victorian middle-class axiom" and had to turn to blue collar work or were not employed at all.²⁵ After the stock market crash, the working class expanded, as did the working poor and the unemployed. As a result, the common man was the blue collar, working-class man and the mass media of the time focused on working-class heroes. Bradford W. Wright explains that "[from] Depression-era popular culture, there came a passionate celebration of the common man."²⁶ Superheroes fit into that celebration and attempted to combat social evils that created poverty and crime. They functioned as a power fantasy for the economically disenfranchised, which contributed to their popularity. However, the superhero genre became less popular after the end of World War II even as comic books such as jungle, crime or Western books continued to flourish. In part, this is because many superhero comics focused on the war, either fighting America's enemies abroad or at home. After the war, superheroes and working-class values lost their appeal. In the 1950s, America became increasingly middle class. Robert Genter writes that "the country transformed from a goods-producing society to a service-centred one and the American worker transformed from the brawny, industrial labourer from the turn-of-the-century into the conformist white-collar worker of the

²⁴ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 31.

²⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 10.

²⁶ Ibid.

1950s.”²⁷ At this time, mass media catered to the middle class and they had no need for a working class hero.

Not only did comics become less popular due to a changed demographic and competing mass media formats, such as television, the growing controversy around comic books and their possible link to juvenile crime contributed to declining sales numbers throughout the 1950s. According to Thomas Hine, comic books were incredibly popular mostly among young teenagers and children, but contained increasingly violent and disturbing content. Because they were so cheap, they were often purchased by children with their own pocket money, without parental oversight, and children often brought comics to school and swapped them.²⁸ This decreased parental control over the content children consumed. Increasingly, the industry came under fire for corrupting the nation’s youth. In 1953, the United States Senate created the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency to examine the extent of juvenile crime and its causes. Many comic book publishers were called on to testify as well as educators and child care professionals, including child psychologist Dr Frederick Wertham. While the committee concluded that there was not enough evidence to suggest that comic books directly caused juvenile crime, the report heavily implied they were a contributing influence. Several states attempted to pass legislation to ban comic books, which were defeated in court because of constitutional concerns regarding censorship.²⁹ The situation escalated when Wertham published his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), based on Wertham’s experiences working with criminally convicted children and young people. While his book did not use a scientific method (it often misrepresented or twisted evidence and failed to reference anything, which prevented his work from being substantiated by other parties), it was incredibly popular. *Seduction of the Innocent* presents compelling anecdotal evidence and Wertham’s genuine concern for children’s developmental processes and mental health clearly shines through. Wertham focused on crime and horror comics as the source of juvenile crime and he also despised superheroes. He believed they were fascist and taught children, especially young girls, unnatural gender roles.³⁰ Pressure on the industry increased when schools and church groups organised public comic book burnings and retailers refused to sell

²⁷ Robert Genter, “‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility:’ Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:6 (2007), 963.

²⁸ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 231-232.

²⁹ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 175.

³⁰ Frederick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart, 1954), 192.

comic books. In response, the industry founded the Comics Code Authority, hereafter referred to as the CCA, to regulate its output, which made comics increasingly conservative in its representation of American values and gender roles.

The CCA, inadvertently, made the industry and the genre much more conservative than initially intended. It consisted of a main administrator in charge of an expansive team of child care professionals. Publishers were required to pay a membership fee as well as a submission fee for every issue. Some publishers opted out of the CCA. For example, Dell comics maintained that its line of education comics had always been beyond reproach and refused to associate its brand with less reputable publishers. However, most publishers did not enjoy such a positive reputation and retailers would refuse to sell comics that did not bear the CCA seal of approval. The approval process could be time consuming as rejected comics would have to be edited or changed entirely and then re-submitted. These delays could take up to two months or longer, at which time the comic missed the publication deadline and the publisher could no longer charge advertisement space at full rate. This happened several times to EC, a publisher specializing in horror comics, which contributed to their departure from the industry.³¹ It was in the publisher's best interest to strictly adhere to the code to prevent these delays, which meant the submission of images as conservative as possible to ensure approval. Horror and crime series were immediately cancelled, detective comics eliminated violence and produced only stories that respected authority while jungle books removed nudity.³² The CCA contributed to the creation of increasingly conservative comic books, which caused already declining comic book sales to plummet even further. Several publishers perished in this environment and those that survived returned to the older superhero genre to boost sales.

The late 1950s saw a resurgence of the superhero genre, which became dominated by whimsical stories using 'what if?' scenarios and fantastical technology, often mixing science fiction and fantasy. In this sense, the Silver Age (1956-1970) refers to a time when the CCA was in control, resulting in identifiable narrative trends such as time travel, space travel and alternate dimensions, which are still very much a staple of the genre today. In terms of gender, the CCA required that men and women fulfilled traditional gender roles to fit in with traditional American values. Female

³¹ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The Origins and History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 122 – 123.

³² Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 104-128.

characters were heavily censored for advocating abnormal gender behaviour. Gay characters were either extremely closeted or non-existent. The code explicitly prohibited the depiction of “[illicit] sex relations” and “sexual abnormalities.”³³ This referred to sexual relations outside of marriage and adultery, which were a staple of pre-code detective and crime comics, as well as homosexuality. While some superheroes have retro-actively been identified as gay, like the Rawhide Kid in *Rawhide Kid* (1955-1957, 1960-1979), no superheroes were openly gay during this time. The CCA also specified that “[ridicule] or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.”³⁴ Black characters were incredibly rare in the Golden Age and most characters of colour at that time were racist stereotypes. Particularly Japanese and other Asian characters were presented as monstrous, an evil racial Other white America had to defend itself against, reflecting fears about race during World War II. While attempting to block racism in comics was a positive step forward, the overzealous application of the code resulted in narratives dealing with the negative consequences of racism or promoting racial harmony were also cut and most non-white characters were erased from comic book pages altogether.³⁵

The CCA’s control of the industry could not last in the following decades when changes in America’s cultural landscape influenced mass media, including comics and the CCA. The Civil Rights movement in the 1960s campaigned to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and secure their citizenship rights through legislation. The Vietnam War (1955-1975) led to growing anti-war sentiment and disillusionment with American power. With the invention of the first oral contraceptive pill in 1960s and the rise of Second Wave feminism, which argued for greater political, financial and social freedom for women, contemporary attitudes towards sex became less conservative. Simultaneously, the Stonewall Riots in 1969 generated a radical Gay Liberation movement compared to the more sedate homophile movement, which argued that gay people could be assimilated into heteronormative society. The Gay Liberation movement sought more direct political change by seeking to validate non-traditional gender roles and identities. The 1960s witnessed changes towards more progressive social attitudes about sex, race and gender as well as more critical attitudes towards the government and traditional power structures. The CCA,

³³ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 168.

³⁴ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 167.

³⁵ Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 177.

which prohibited comics from depicting authority in a negative light, racial disharmony or criticism of American values, could not have hoped to survive in a world so completely disillusioned with American institutions. Throughout the 1960s, publishers pushed the limits of the code, submitting less conservative issues, while the CCA increasingly interpreted the code in less conservative ways.

In 1970-71, which is considered the beginning of the Bronze Age, the code was updated to match changing attitudes and the increased presence of violence in mass media such as television, radio and magazines, allowing occasional criminality, suggestions of seduction and racial disharmony. Female characters could wear more revealing clothing and implied sexual contact was permitted. However, it still prohibited “violations of good taste or decency,” which was sufficiently vague enough to leave its application open to interpretation.³⁶ The ‘Marriage and Sex’ section stipulated that “[sex] perversion or any inference to the same,” which was code for homosexuality, “is strictly forbidden.”³⁷ The code effectively prevented comics from engaging openly with queer characters and, as a result, Marvel created a ‘subtle’ gay character in 1979 called Northstar, a member of Alpha flight, the Canadian superhero team.³⁸ His civilian identity was Jean-Paul Beaubier, a French-Canadian Olympic skier, who was never seen dating women because he was too focused on his career to commit to a relationship. During the 1980s, Northstar displayed symptoms reminiscent of AIDS, but the storyline was suppressed by Marvel editors as AIDS was still considered to be a ‘gay disease’ and supposedly would have outed Northstar to the general audience. Instead, his illness became a cosmic disturbance interfering with his mutant powers.³⁹ The new code did not update its previous restrictions on religion or race and the Bronze Age saw the rise of the Black superhero. These Black superheroes, such as Black Panther (1966), Falcon (1969), John Stewart as the Green Lantern (1971) and Power Man (1972) were the first attempts to create Black superheroes who actually resembled real-life minorities. Unfortunately, as Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales write, these characters were not as progressive as Black readers might have hoped for.

³⁶ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 173.

³⁷ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 174.

³⁸ He first appeared in *Uncanny X-Men* in 1979 and was part of the *Alpha Flight* series’ main cast, which began publication in 1983.

³⁹ Gareth Schott, “From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Superheroes” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 1:1 (2010), 23.

In the 1970s, these attempts to introduce Black faces left many Black comic book readers unsatisfied. Black characters were often given a heavy-handed stigma that immediately marked them as the ‘racial’ character, especially with their names, Black Panther, Black Lightning, The Black racer, Brother Voodoo, Black Goliath, Black Vulcan, Black Spider.⁴⁰

Black superheroes suffered from tokenism and being ‘marked’ as the single Black superhero. These stereotypes persisted through the 1980s and 1990s, although they became increasingly diluted because of growing social awareness. The 1970s’ code was not as conservative as previous iterations and the CCA did not apply it as stringently as it did in the 1950s. Comics became more violent, especially towards female characters. The code did state that rape or sexual assault “shall never be shown or suggested” but physical violence against female characters continued to rise.⁴¹ The 1980s saw the publication of several seminal works such as *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) by Frank Miller, *Watchmen* (1986-1987) by Alan Moore and David Gibbons as well as *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988) by Alan Moore and Brian Bolland. These works contained high levels of violence, as well as anti-establishment sentiments, which would have made them unpublishable only twenty years earlier but which the increased normalization of violence and sexual images in the American media of the 1980s allowed. These publications are often considered the first products of the Dark Age of Comics and the impact they had on the industry is substantial. They contributed to the growing cultural notion that comics had to be more realistic, which meant ‘gritty’ and dark compared to the more camp, fantastical variety of the Silver and Bronze Age. These dark comic books were considered more adult, appealing to an audience of older teenagers and young adults.⁴²

In 1989, the code was updated again to reflect the increased acceptability of adult themes in comic and made no mention of sexual perversity or homosexuality. In 1992, Northstar finally came out of the closet, although his sexuality was hardly ever mentioned or alluded to again in subsequent publications, aside from a storyline where

⁴⁰ Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales, “Black Comics and Social Media Economics: New Media, New Production Models” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 67-68.

⁴¹ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 174.

⁴² Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 285-295.

his sister, Aurora, who suffered from a split personality, accepted his sexuality in one identity and rejected it in another. In 2002, Northstar admitted to having an unrequited crush on X-Men member Iceman. Gareth Schott, in his excellent analysis of the character, writes that “[while] Northstar was initially held up as a gay icon, his impact quickly faded with fewer appearances, some as only a secondary character. Northstar did resurface, only to be killed, resurrected, brainwashed, saved and then cured.”⁴³ Northstar’s progressive potential was lost as he never seemed to rise above tokenism. Instead, his ‘subtle’ sexuality is exemplary of how, for most of comic book history, gay superheroes were invisible, which has only changed slightly in the last twenty years. Some gay superheroes have had their sexuality confirmed by editors or authors but have not openly stated or acted on their sexuality in any publication, such as the Rawhide Kid and Catman from *Secret Six* (2008-2012) who was confirmed as bisexual by author Gail Simone.⁴⁴

At the start of the Modern Age in 1998, DC and Marvel increasingly began to publish issues or titles without the CCA seal of approval as cultural sentiments no longer required it and the process to acquire it remained costly.⁴⁵ By the early 2000s, the code was entirely disregarded. In theory, comics were now allowed to include any kind of material they wanted. However, only a few superheroes are openly gay. Most gay superheroes are either in a relationship or are perpetually single, pining after a straight character and simply never meeting another gay person, as if the gay community is non-existent in the comic book universe. When a gay romantic relationship presents itself, it is often a long-term, committed relationship. The most famous example is undoubtedly the Midnighter/Apollo couple, two characters from *The Authority* (1999-2010), published by Wildstorm, now a subsidiary of DC. Prior to the New 52 reboot in 2011, Apollo and Midnighter were in a long-term relationship with an adopted child. After the reboot, the two characters appeared in *Stormwatch* (2011-2014) where the characters’ long-term relationship was removed from continuity. They briefly dated, but broke up and the *Midnighter* series (2015) only hints at future reconciliation. The DC reboot in 2011 introduced new gay superheroes such as Bunker (team member of the Teen Titans), and Gravity Kid and Power Boy (members of the Legion Academy), but these

⁴³ Schott, “From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation,” 22.

⁴⁴ Gail Simone, “Who was the bisexual man? Or is that off the table now that Secret Six is done?” *Ape in a Cape: Ask me anything, anything except that*, October 4, 2011, accessed October 14, 2016, <http://gailsimone.tumblr.com/post/11015369976/who-was-the-bisexual-man-or-is-that-off-the>.

⁴⁵ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 105.

new gay superheroes have received very little media attention and have not appeared in many publications. In 2007, Renee Montoya, an established lesbian character in the DC universe resigned from the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD) after being outed at work and became the new Question. Post-reboot, she appeared once again as a member of the GCPD instead of a superhero in 2015. In 2010, Batwoman was marketed as DC's first openly lesbian superhero to hold her own titular comic and was explicitly framed as DC's high-profile lesbian character, intended to be part of DC's regular line-up and slotted to join the planned *Justice League* comic before it was turned into a mini-series.

In 2012, Northstar received considerable media attention when Marvel announced his wedding to his long-term partner, Kyle Jinadu, in order to celebrate New York's legislation of gay marriage in 2011. The wedding received an extraordinary amount of publicity from Marvel who promoted it with the tagline "Save the Date" as the event of the year.⁴⁶ This kind of attention can be problematic. Would a marriage between two heterosexual characters draw the same sort of attention? The wedding between Superman and Lois Lane in 1996 certainly did, but that was a relationship with sixty years of history.⁴⁷ If most heterosexual couples would not receive this kind of attention, the attention that Marvel's 'gay' wedding received can be read as a celebration of progressive values or an attempt to cash in on current events, targeting a new potential audience, and de-radicalising its potential. Marvel was eager to present the wedding as a representation of how comics were becoming more progressive and in-tune with contemporary morals and values. In comparison, Batwoman's impending wedding to her partner, Maggie Sawyer, was cancelled in 2013 by DC editors, who rationalized the decision by claiming superheroes in general should not have happy personal lives. Another long-term romantic couple in the Marvel Universe are Wiccan and Hulkling, two members of the Young Avengers superhero team who became engaged in 2012. In the Marvel universe, one of the more convoluted storylines detailed in *All New X-Men* (2012-ongoing), the X-Men from the past travel to the future and young Jean Grey discovers that Ice Man is gay by reading his mind. The team discusses how the Ice Man from the future (meaning, the current Marvel timeline) never came out or even seemed to realize that he was gay and how Jean's discovery has potentially

⁴⁶ Marvel, "Save the Date: Landmark X-Men Marriage," *Marvel*, June 1, 2012, accessed October 14, 2016, http://marvel.com/news/comics/18770/save_the_date_landmark_x-men_marriage a.

⁴⁷ Dan Jurgens et al, *Superman: The Wedding Album* (New York: DC, 1996).

altered Ice Man's future. However, the comic does not address Jean's violation of Ice Man's privacy and the potential dangers of outing someone without their permission and consent. It seems that in the 2010s, gay superheroes are simultaneously gaining and losing ground.

In the Dark and Modern Age, more Black characters joined the ranks of the superhero community, such as War Machine (1979), Cyborg (1980), Steel (1993) and Batwing (2011), and while many directly engaged with racism, they also had increasingly varied storylines. Nonetheless, these superheroes of colour, no matter their strength or weaknesses, often take a backseat to white superheroes. As Albert S. Fu explains, "[despite] the creation of numerous heroes of colour, it is still the Caucasian- 'looking' aliens (Superman), mutants (most of the X-Men) and talented humans (Batman) that are *mainstream* heroes."⁴⁸ Black superheroes are still less popular and well-known, often side-lined in favour of white superheroes. When superheroes are lifted from the comic book pages to star in TV shows and films, non-Black characters of colour are often white-washed, for example, casting the white Elizabeth Olsen as the Scarlet Witch, who is originally Romani, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). While comics have a long history of promoting acceptance and tolerance, they have failed to represent gender or racial equality through their characters.

Comics Criticism

In *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (2013), Hannah Miodrag discusses the evolution of Anglophone comic scholarship, which she identifies as a young discipline compared to European comic criticism. According to Miodrag, the Anglophone field has two dominant strands of research: documentation of comic history and justificatory strategies attempting to legitimise the medium as a source of research. Furthermore, she links the field to "the ascendancy of cultural studies," specifically, "the arena of the Bowling Green State University hub and *Journal of Popular Culture*."⁴⁹ This, along with comic scholarship, has been jumpstarted by non-academic "practitioner-theorists" whose work, although seminal, is considered theoretically unsophisticated, such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*

⁴⁸ Albert S. Fu, "Fear of a black Spider-Man: racebending and the colour-line in superhero (re)casting," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6:3 (2015), 271.

⁴⁹ Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 4-5.

(1993), which delves into comic history and the development of the art form.⁵⁰ Building on this tradition, Miodrag claims, comic scholarship has often failed to engage with academic theory and discourse “that might usefully inform their otherwise insightful observations and commentary” and instead “[abandoned] scholarly rigour in favour of respectful repetition.”⁵¹ Miodrag acknowledges that, increasingly, comic scholarship is engaging with academic theory and benefits from a more critical attitude in its analysis of the medium, which her work contributes to.

Currently, comic scholarship has seen a rise in scholars connecting comics to socio-historical developments and academic theory, while practitioner-theorists and other non-academic experts in the field are presenting increasingly complex work, such as Danny Graydon who works closely with The Superhero Project, organising opportunities for collaboration and publication. For example, ‘The Superhero: 2nd Global Meeting’ conference in 2016 saw a large mix of interdisciplinary papers touching on toxic masculinity, gender performance, moral relativism and linguistics in comics. The University of Dundee comic studies community focuses on the intersection of literary theory and comics, and, in collaboration with Manchester Metropolitan University, organised ‘The Seventh International Conference of Graphic Novels and Comics: The Graphic Gothic’ to focus on elements of the Gothic occurring in comics. Additionally, both the journals *Studies in Comics* (2010-ongoing) and *The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (2010-ongoing) are publishing sophisticated scholarly work, such as Paul Petrovic’s ‘Queer Resistance, Gender Performance and “Coming out” of the Panel Borders in Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III’s *Batwoman: Elegy*,’ which uses comic theory of the gutter space and queer theory to discuss the representation of Batwoman’s identity. While there is an increased focus on gender identity and performativity in comic scholarship, there is no comparative historical overview of the way comics’ representation of gender is influenced by traditional gender roles and its intersection with sexuality and race in order to establish comics’ ability to create progressive or conservative narratives. This thesis fills that gap by examining the cultural and historical context in which comics are produced.

When comic scholarship intersects with gender theory, academic writing tends to focus on female characters even though comics are considered to be masculine objects: stories about men made by men for other men, containing a script of normative

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Miodrag, *Comics and Language*, 5.

masculine behaviour and identity. Friedrich Weltzien opines that “the superhero is concerned with the construction of a certain role model of manliness.”⁵² Stating that the superhero story only creates a certain model of masculinity implies that the genre automatically frames masculinity as the universal experience and the neutral, common state of being. Carol A. Stabile agrees that “[the] superhero is first and foremost a man, because only men are understood to be protectors in US culture and only men have the balls to lead,” which is an attitude perpetuated by comics.⁵³ Stabile points out how, according to traditional American narratives about gender, men are protectors and women need to be protected which means that only men can inhabit the role of the superhero. The ability to protect also depends on the ability to be violent and aggressive, which is considered a masculine trait. The idea that violence is inherently masculine is part of the American hegemony. R.W. Connell states that, while there are several different forms of masculinity present in the American cultural landscape, one version of masculinity is “culturally exalted.”⁵⁴ This form of masculinity is the hegemonic masculinity, which “can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”⁵⁵ The masculine ideal legitimizes the existence of the patriarchy by providing a rationale for the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Men’s supposed natural capacity for violence is part of the construction of men as protectors and women as victims.

The dominant configuration of masculinity in the American landscape is increasingly infused with hypermasculinity, a concept first described in the social sciences by Donald L. Mosher and Mark Sirkin in 1984. Hypermasculinity is understood as “a gender-based ideology of exaggerated beliefs about what it is to be man.”⁵⁶ This ideology contains “four inter-related beliefs, namely toughness as emotional self-control, violence as manly, danger as exciting and calloused attitudes toward women and sex.”⁵⁷ The four elements that construct hypermasculinity are

⁵² Friedrich Weltzien, “Masque-*ulinities*: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre,” *Fashion Theory* 9:2 (2005), 231.

⁵³ Carole A. Stabile, “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies:’ Sexism and Superheroes,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6:1 (2009), 87.

⁵⁴ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 77.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Vokey et al, “An Analysis of Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements,” *Sex Roles* 68:9 (2013), 562.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

considered to “reflect a man’s desire to appear powerful and to be dominant in interactions with men, women and the environment,” especially the way violence is used as “an acceptable expression of masculine power and dominance.”⁵⁸

Hypermasculinity is often discussed as the source of violence in interpersonal relationships, especially towards women, dangerous driving as well as other risk-taking behaviour that men statistically engage in more consistently than women. These same attributes are also considered to be part of toxic masculinity, a reformulation of hypermasculinity read as specifically damaging to men themselves. For example, toxic masculinity considers the way the lack of emotional freedom damages men’s ability to understand, express and fulfil their emotional needs, leading to a higher suicide rate amongst men.⁵⁹ Considering the tendency to kill and maim female characters, base narrative tension and excitement on the level of danger the superhero is in, and the glorification of violence, it can be argued that comics perpetuate hypermasculinity in terms of narrative structure and genre tropes. Whether or not male characters fully exhibit hypermasculine behaviour is a more complex issue.

Regarding the superhero as a masculine concept has caused academic research to focus on conceptualizing the female superhero as separate from *the* superhero. In her article, ‘The Body Unbound: Empowered, Heroism and Body Image,’ Ruth J. Beerman draws a distinction between female superheroes and superheroines. According to Beerman, the differences exist in the way roles are gendered: “[female] superheroes are characters like a male character, but who simply happen to be women, serving more as a sidekick or supporting character to the lead, male superhero (such as Supergirl).”⁶⁰ Supergirl is classified as a female superhero because she exists as Superman’s foil, an answer to the question ‘what if Superman was a girl?’ Superheroines, by comparison, have their own identities, infused with femininity and womanhood, apart from a male superhero, such as Wonder Woman. While such classification can be a useful tool to discuss female characters and their representation of femininity, this thesis will not distinguish between the two. The idea that characters who are “like a male character, but who simply happen to be women” have less value because they are sidekicks or supportive characters, plays into cultural notions of gendered labour that continually

⁵⁸ Vokey, “Hyper-Masculinity in Magazine Advertisements,” 563.

⁵⁹ Alex E. Crosby et al, “Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours Among Adults Aged ≥ 18 Years – United States, 2008-2009,” *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, October 21, 2011, accessed October 14, 2016, <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss6013a1.htm>.

⁶⁰ Ruth J. Beerman, “The Body Unbound: Empowered, Heroism and Body Image,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 3:2 (2012), 203.

devalue the work women have been consigned to: the care for the home, the domestic sphere, the supportive role.⁶¹ While a lack of what Beerman called superheroines is problematic, it is equally dubious to dismiss supportive characters because they fulfil a stereotypically female role.

Traditionally, female superheroes have always had different kinds of power compared to male superheroes. Comics emphasise the need for physical strength and the ability to participate in physical combat, which female superheroes typically do not do, framing their powers as weaker compared to their male counterparts. Mike Madrid writes that female superheroes “in comic books have historically been given weaker powers.”⁶² But how is ‘weaker’ defined? Assuming that ‘weaker’ refers to physical strength, it means that comics have fallen into the trap of valuing physical strength over other abilities, no matter their actual effectiveness in combat.⁶³ Most female characters do not look as physically powerful as male characters do, adding to the interpretation of female bodies as weaker and less resilient than male bodies. For instance, despite their great physical capabilities, Supergirl and Wonder Woman rarely have the sculpted musculature that male superheroes often have. It would break with the fragile feminine stereotype to see them as physically powerful and providing female characters with non-physical powers adds to the preservation of female superheroes’ “good looks.” Mike Madrid writes that a female superhero “will look like a supermodel if she possesses what is known as ‘strike a pose and point’ powers. For as mighty as the X-Men’s Storm is, she strikes a pose, extends a hand, unleashes a lightning bolt, and looks great. Just like posing for a picture in *Vogue*.”⁶⁴ Female superheroes can still be glamorous, beautiful and sexy in the heat of combat. Even when defeating supervillains, they can still be read as sex objects.

In terms of progressive politics, comics have long contained an intriguing contradiction. Stories focusing on superhero teams such as the X-Men are often understood as endorsing diversity and socially liberal attitudes with “the metaphor and message that drives *Uncanny X-Men* and its related titles [being] that of tolerance and

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 291.

⁶³ Consider the Scarlet Witch, who can alter the fabric of reality, compared to Captain America who can punch people really hard and yet, is considered more capable.

⁶⁴ Madrid, *The Supergirls*, 292.

acceptance,” as Neil Shyminsky writes.⁶⁵ Yet, simultaneously, comics have often been dismissed as outdated, sexist and racist by mainstream popular culture, leading to comic scholarship’s previous preoccupation with defending the genre as worthy of academic study. With the current MCU’s popularity, there is a growing backlash against Marvel and DC for racist and sexist portrayals in comics, films and TV as evidenced by articles such as “The Superhero Diversity Problem” by Julianna Aucoin published on the Harvard Political Review website.⁶⁶ In terms of sexism, the two most common tropes associated with female characters in comics identified by fans and non-academic experts, or practitioner-theorists, are fridge-ing and The Brokeback Pose. Fridge-ing, derived from the phrase ‘Women in Refrigerators,’ refers to the way female characters are often killed to further the main male character’s plot or character development. Comic writer Gail Simone first coined the term in response to *Green Lantern #54* (1994), where the main character returned from a mission and found his girlfriend murdered and stuffed in the fridge. In 1999, Simone used the phrase as the name for her website, which listed names of ‘fridged’ female characters.⁶⁷ While some fans argued that violently killing women was not a sexist trend because characters who die usually come back from the dead, John Bartol, in an article posted on the original website, pointed out that characters returning from the dead are usually male and coined the term ‘dead men defrosting.’⁶⁸ Fridge-ing as a concept can also be applied to Black characters who are killed to further the white characters’ plot and emotional development. For example, in 2016, the Black superhero War Machine was killed in Marvel’s *Civil War II* and his death becomes a source of conflict between the white female Captain Marvel and the white male Iron Man. The comic delights in demonstrating the anguish Captain Marvel and Iron Man experience at War Machine’s death, as well as their struggle to grieve and move on. Such narratives where the death of a Black character is fetishized as trauma porn for the white characters and presumably white, mainstream audience, fits into a disturbing trend in the industry and its fan subculture, often referred to as nerd culture, where extreme right attitudes are gaining a foothold. This is exemplified in the

⁶⁵ Neil Shyminsky, “Mutant Readers, Reading Mutants: Appropriation, Assimilation and the X-Men,” *International Journal of Comic Art* 8:2 (2006), 1.

⁶⁶ Julianna Aucoin “The Superhero Diversity Problem,” *Harvard Political Review*, October 24, 2014, accessed November 8, 2016, <http://harvardpolitics.com/books-arts/superhero-diversity-problem/>.

⁶⁷ *Women in Refrigerators*, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.lby3.com/wir/index.html>.

⁶⁸ John Bartol “Dead Men Defrosting,” *Women in Refrigerators*, March 1999, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.lby3.com/wir/r-jbartol2.html>.

glorification of Hydra, a fictional Nazi organisation, with fans shouting 'Hail Hydra' at conventions and wearing the Hydra logo on their clothing.

The second trope is The Brokeback Pose, a term used to identify a common pose for female characters, which highlights both their buttocks and their breasts. Often, the only way a real person could achieve such a pose would be through a broken spine, hence the name. This trope was first identified by female fans in online communities in 2012, resulting in several articles discussing the phenomenon on websites such as ComicsBeat and TheGeekTwins, which have a significant following.⁶⁹ Although the first Brokeback Pose ever published has yet to be identified, the trend seems to occur as far back as the beginning of the Bronze Age when sexualized images of female characters became more acceptable. While not all the poses identified as Brokeback are so extreme that the character's back would have to be broken to achieve them, all of them are clearly uncomfortable or degrading. In her analysis of "24 titles/144 issues/14,599 panels" Carolyn Cocca found that "almost every issue contains sexually objectifying portrayals of women."⁷⁰ Responses from the industry and other fans who claim that there is nothing sexist about such poses led to the creation of The Hawkeye Initiative in December 2012. The Hawkeye Initiative is a collaboration between several fan artists and artists working in the industry who re-draw Brokeback Poses with superhero Clint Barton, also known as Hawkeye. Drawn with a male character, the poses become obviously physically impossible and ridiculous, highlighting both the sexism of such poses and the way it has been normalized, made invisible when applied to female characters.⁷¹

Academics such as Gareth Schott, Rob Lendrum and Ramzi Fawaz have focused on the development of gay characters in comics, pointing out that gay superheroes still perpetuate stereotypes or function as token characters. Both Schott and Fawaz, as well as Kara Kvaran, discuss Northstar as the token gay man and briefly touch on the Rawhide Kid as an example of stereotypes used to imply a character is gay without openly stating so in the text. Kvaran believes that superheroes who openly state their homosexuality in the text allow for more realistic interpretation and that, despite their limitations, their inclusion is a good sign for further progress in American culture. Gay

⁶⁹ The Beat, "Welcome to the Brokeback Pose," *The Beat: The News Blog of Comics Culture*, December 11, 2009, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.comicsbeat.com/welcome-to-the-brokeback-pose/>.

⁷⁰ Carolyn Cocca, "'The BrokeBack Test': A Quantitative and Qualitative Analysis of Portrayals of Women in Mainstream Superhero Comics, 1993-2013," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5:4 (2004), 411.

⁷¹ "The Hawkeye Initiative," accessed October 13, 2016, <http://thehawkeyeinitiative.com/>.

characters, as discussed, have been invisible in comics and openly gay superheroes have only been present in recent years, suggesting increased liberal attitudes to gender and sexuality in American society. However, most academic scholarship focuses either on the ways in which characters are positive representation, such as Petrovic's work, or the ways in which these characters remain token characters who fail to challenge stereotypes, such as Schott's work. This thesis focuses on the representation of specific gay characters, such as Billy (Wiccan), Teddy (Hulkling) and Batwoman, and analyses how their positive representation fails to challenge stereotypes and fits into a discourse that heteronormalizes gay people. Doing so, this thesis makes clear that representation is not enough in order to create an anti-homophobic narrative because resisting homonormativity is an ongoing process that requires consistent research into the forms homophobia takes in response to increased liberal attitudes.

The academic research on Black superheroes has been in a similar vein to the work on gay characters, identifying positive representation vs. negative stereotyping. It seems incongruent that narratives traditionally focused on fighting evil, including social evils such as racism, would struggle so much to represent racial equality or non-racist narratives. Discussing this discrepancy, Marc Singer analysed *The Legion of Superheroes* comic series (1958-1994), especially the issues produced during the Silver Age. The Legion was an intergalactic superhero team focused on defending the entire galaxy from evil and the team prided itself on their refusal to discriminate against any race. However, Singer notes that "the Legion's supposed racial diversity was mitigated – if not virtually negated – by the fact that, of all the races represented in the comic, only one group existed in real life: the white characters who comprised the bulk of the Legion."⁷² White characters were both human and aliens, while characters of colour were blue, green or purple and "by locating [racial diversity] in protean characters who serve as free-floating signifiers for the racial 'other' without representing any real-world race," *The Legion of Superheroes* never addresses the white supremacy inherent in American culture, nor does it tackle any real racial issues.⁷³ Instead, it "perfectly illustrates the contradictory treatment of race in many superhero comics: Torn between sci-fi fantasy and cultural reality, *Legion* ultimately erases all racial and sexual differences with the very same characters that it claims analogize our world's

⁷² Marc Singer, "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," *African American Review* 36:1 (2002), 110.

⁷³ Ibid.

diversity.”⁷⁴ The comic preached diversity and acceptance of the racial Other, but never represented racial diversity in any meaningful way, supporting an ideology of equality without compromising the privilege of white hegemony. This tendency to use white characters as imaginary aliens or minorities that in no way resemble any real-world ethnicities continues to plague the comic book world.

The most well-known version of “superhero comics [representing] every fantastic race possible, as means of ignoring real ones” are the *X-Men* comics.⁷⁵ The first issue of the *X-Men* came out in September 1963 and its original team consisted of five mutant team members: Cyclops, Marvel Girl, Angel and Beast led by Charles Xavier. While later iterations of the group included characters such as Storm (an African American woman) and Kitty Pryde (a Jewish woman), all of the original characters were white and the bulk of the team has always been comprised of white characters. Nonetheless, they represent the mutant community, a racial minority often victimized by discriminatory rhetoric and violent assault. This has led many critics, and a large part of the audience, to read *X-Men* comics as analogies for the experiences of racial minorities or LGBTQA+ minorities.⁷⁶ For example, as mutants, the X-Men’s “anti-oppressive message can be applied to any person or peoples suffering from one or another form of oppression in a hegemonic political system,” including the “victims of racist, sexist or homophobic violence.”⁷⁷ While an argument can be made that *X-Men* comics promote racial equality because they encourage identification and sympathy with oppressed minorities, Shyminsky’s point that “within a genre whose creators and readers are nearly uniformly white males, the X-Men *actually* solicit identification from a similarly young, white and male leadership, allowing these readers to misidentify themselves as ‘other’” and leading comics to “not only [fail] to adequately *redress* issues of inequality – it actually *reinforces* inequality” (original emphasis).⁷⁸ Because the X-Men are generally young, white males, the comic fails to identify the oppressive hegemony as white and patriarchal while concealing how young, white people can be complicit in its construction. It allows the reader to recognize that the treatment of minorities is unfair on an intellectual level and through this recognition identify themselves as progressive without needing to commit to any self-reflection that would

⁷⁴ Singer, “Black Skins,” 112.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ LGBTQA+ is an umbrella term which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer, Asexual and other non-straight identities.

⁷⁷ Shyminsky, ‘Mutant Readers,’ 387.

⁷⁸ Shyminsky, ‘Mutant Readers,’ 389.

unpack internalized racism. The *X-Men* comics inadvertently encourage their readership to interpret the dismantling of white male privilege as minority oppression, which perpetuates the white male hegemony.

Comic books increasingly present a more diverse cast, which is often used by the publishers to present themselves as progressive. For example, the wedding between Northstar and Kyle Jinadu in 2013 and changing the traditionally male character Thor into a woman in 2015 were decisions consciously promoted by Marvel as deliberate moves to bring more diversity into comics. The introduction of the female African American Riri Williams as the new Iron Man in 2016 also fits into Marvel's deliberate rebranding as a company invested in diversity. Comic books have championed equality and diversity whilst retaining sexist and racist attitudes in continually changing ways. This thesis examines the gender roles present in American superhero comics and to what extent they conform to or challenge hegemonic, conservative gender ideology. Building on established comic criticism, it will further the field's understanding of the way comics create progressive or conservative narratives in terms of gender.

General Structure

Chapter One, 'Superheroes and Masculinity,' maps out the ideal masculinity perpetuated in comics, which is closely tied to notions of whiteness, American nationality as well as technological and scientific advancement by analysing three well-known superheroes. The first subsection, The Phallic Body: Superman and Masculinity in America, analyses Superman, the very first superhero and the original embodiment of the superhero concept. Appearing in comics, radio serials, newspaper strip cartoons, video games, TV series and films, Superman is one of the most well-known and identifiable characters in modern culture. The stylized chevron on his chest has become a logo that denotes his character and mythos. Every reboot of his origin story has maintained the same basic elements, the consistency of which, as well as his fixed appearance and supporting cast, has turned him into an icon.⁷⁹ Since his first publication in 1938, he has never been out of print, representing a continuum of the male body in mass media. Focusing on class, American national identity and the status of the immigrant, this subsection analyses Superman's masculinity. It also focuses on how

⁷⁹ Paul Levitz, *The Golden Age of DC Comics: 1935-1956* (Maine: Taschen Benedikt Verlag GmbH, 2013), 26-30.

visual elements, such as the chevron on his chest and the underwear worn over his tights, can contribute to his gender construction.

The second subsection discusses Captain America and Iron Man. In 1941, nine months before America entered World War II, Steve Rogers became Captain America. While Superman could not fight on the frontlines, Captain America was part of a military squad on the European front, engaging Nazi enemies on super-secret missions.⁸⁰ Dressed in the colours and motifs of the American flag, he seemed to fight as the living embodiment of America itself, encoding and perpetuating ideals of masculinity in the process. Widespread American cultural beliefs concerning the military, masculinity and scientific and technological developments intersect in the character of Captain America, specifically, his origin story, which will be the main focus of the analysis. The same can be said for Iron Man, who literally embodies technological innovation through his robotic suit. This section teases out different forms of masculine embodiment, specifically in light of Captain America and Iron Man's artificially constructed bodies. This chapter concludes that in terms of masculinity, comics promote conservative gender role behaviour, which limits their ability to present anti-hegemonic narratives.

Chapter Two, 'The Female Body,' examines the femininity represented by female superheroes outside of the fridge-ing phenomenon and the Brokeback trope. As discussed previously, scholarship identifies a common trend in comic books to literally side-line female superheroes in combat. Chapter Two analyses what female superheroes who are physical combatants signify. In *Barbie Dolls and Porn Stars: Supergirl and the Plasticisation of the Female Super Body*, the analysis of Supergirl offers a discussion of the way male and female superheroes' design differs. Supergirl was selected because, as a 'what if' version of Superman, the way she differs from him will more accurately point to categorical differences between female and male superheroes. Discussing the 1950s *KleenTeen* and the increasing sexualisation of young girls, this subsection focuses on Supergirl's relationship with her male cousin and counterpart, Superman. It formulates a theory of bodily plasticity required for the construction of the female body.

⁸⁰ Superman is too powerful and would end the war immediately. He could not sustain a frontline story for the duration of the war. Additionally, there was a concerted effort not to bring too many superheroes to the frontlines to preserve the heroism of the common soldier.

The second subsection, focuses on Wonder Woman, who, while not the very first female superhero, was the first to reach a large audience.⁸¹ She has been in print continually since her creation in 1941 and has an enormous presence in popular culture. As a female soldier and physical combatant, Wonder Woman was designed as a celebration of femininity. Picking up from Supergirl's embodiment of young femininity, this subsection focuses on the depiction of Wonder Woman's body in light of her super strength and speed. Considering the perception of women's bodies as weak, Wonder Woman's powers have the potential to challenge the status quo, depending on the way her body is depicted. Chapter Two posits that female superheroes, by their very existence, complicate the traditional masculine warrior ideal as exclusively masculine and are often depicted in ways that diminish that complexity to reduce the challenge they pose to traditional gender roles.

Chapter Three, 'Gay Characters and Social Progress,' analyses the intersection of gender and homosexual identity. The first subsection, Wiccan and Hulkling: The Rise of Homonormativity, discusses how Marvel introduced a young gay couple to its audience and how they interact with the forces of homonormativity and homonationalism in American culture. Billy and Teddy represent the performance of heteronormative gender roles in gay relationships in media as a route to social acceptance, or low-risk engagement with LGBTQA+ representation by the producers of mass media. This subsection argues that outside of domesticated heteronormative gender roles, Billy and Teddy represent damaging stereotypes of the predatory gay man and gay men as lacking in masculinity.⁸²

The second subsection, Externalizing the Queer: Batwoman's Monstrous Doubles, identifies Batwoman as a Gothic lesbian. She is consistently doubled and cast as the Other through her relationship with her twin sister, Beth. Despite her status as the hero, Batwoman is consistently depicted as the dark twin who enacts masculinity and is openly gay. Her villains are nearly all monstrous mothers, seeking to escape the bounds of the homo/heteronormative and transgress traditional feminine roles. Batwoman continually seeks to escape the monstrous and reach safety in the homonormative. Her failure to represent the homonormative is presented as a gender transgression, which must be punished through violence and death. This chapter concludes that the inclusion

⁸¹ The very first female superhero was Fantomah, first published in 1940.

⁸² A slightly modified version of this subsection will be published by The Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics, date to be determined.

of gay characters alone is not enough to present an anti-homophobic or anti-hegemonic narrative.

Chapter Four focuses on the intersection of gender and race. The first subsection of Chapter Four, Seeking the Black Superhero: Black Panther, Falcon and the Black Community, discusses Kenneth Ghee's concept of the culture bound hero as the only true hero of colour. Ghee seeks to locate a Black superhero who presents an anti-racist narrative through his or her loyalty to their Black community while fighting the white oppressive hegemony. This discussion is used to analyse Black Panther and Falcon as Black male superheroes and how they signify Black masculinity. Black Panther and Falcon were selected because of their publication history, which is longer and more consistent than that of most other Black superheroes. Black Panther's representation of the racial Other is significantly informed by his status as a non-American, African superhero. In contrast, Falcon was the first African American superhero. Because American nationality is such an important part of the construction of white superhero masculinity, it is important to see how it informs the construction of Black superhero masculinity.

The second subsection, Intersectional Identity: Storm and Ms Marvel, focuses on the construction of femininity and its intersection with race, in light of Ghee's concept of the culture bound superhero. This subsection analyses how community-focused narratives can present anti-racist narratives and how understanding intersectional identities is fundamental to the construction of such narratives. Storm, as a member of the X-Men, intersects with issues surrounding the use of white characters as representations of race, which has characterized the treatment of racial minorities in comics for decades. Additionally, she has been continually in print since her creation in 1975. Ms Marvel, Kamala Khan, first published in 2014, is a more recent representation of how gender and race intersect in the wake of the widespread Islamophobia in post 9/11 American society. By examining the construction of non-white characters as either performing whiteness, racial stereotypes or a complex racial reality, this chapter illustrates that pro-diversity narratives do not automatically challenge the racist status quo.

Superheroes and comics, as products of American culture, are subject to the same forces that influence the American cultural landscape in general. Comics contain the social divisions of American society itself. At the moment, American society is both increasingly conservative and liberal, with opposing forces in mass media and politics

contributing to the disappearance of the moderate, in part facilitated by the rise of neoliberalism. Duggan discusses how neoliberalism has increasingly defined the federalist state as a mode of non-interference, safeguarding the freedom of the market, which directly curtails the freedom or wellbeing of individuals as legislation or action protecting individuals' interests is considered intrusive or coercive. As Duggan says, "neoliberalism shrinks the scope of democracy dramatically in all areas of material production and distribution."⁸³ Because neoliberalism limits the scope in which the state can interfere with public life, it also limits the way it can combat institutionalized sexism and racism. So, while neoliberalism might promote a politics that stresses freedom from government intrusion and, by implication, the right to freely chose the ways in which people live their lives, it also sustains policies that limit people's freedom and civil liberties. Neoliberalism's confluence of progressive rhetoric, conservative politics and free economics has created a society that increasingly views itself as progressive even while its cultural and societal forces are increasingly conservative and work to de-radicalize progressive opposition. This has also contributed to an increasingly polarized America where progressives are increasingly progressive and conservatives are increasingly conservative. In *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches*, Nolan McCarthy, Keith T. Poole, and Howard Rosenthal discuss how, through the rise of neoliberalism, American society is increasingly divided along an "economic liberal-conservative ideological dimension."⁸⁴ This dimension is present in politics, popular culture and wider attitudes in American culture. Polarization's accelerative effect means that it is consistently expanding at an increasingly faster pace. Briefly put: conservatives are becoming more conservative and liberals are becoming more liberal while the middle ground slowly vanishes. Comic books, incorporating both conservative forces by their adherence to the white male norm and liberal forces by their message of tolerance and equality, are emblematic of how American society is increasingly polarized as well as simultaneously liberal and conservative.

⁸³ Duggan, "The New Homosexuality," 178.

⁸⁴ Nolan McCarthy, Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, *Polarized America: The Dance of Ideology and Unequal Riches* (London: The MIT Press, 2016), 187.

Chapter One: Superheroes and Masculinity

This chapter analyses the male superhero and the representations of masculinity in American superhero comic books. It discusses three well-known male superheroes: Superman, Captain America and Iron Man. It examines the way masculinity has typically been created in the conventions of the superhero genre and what cultural forces have affected that construction. By analysing the ideal masculinity these superheroes provide, this chapter demonstrates how the superhero's masculinity is constructed through notions of American nationhood during World War II and the Cold War, military hegemony and scientific discovery. Superheroes use this construction of masculinity to function as power fantasies compensating for the cyclical idea of masculinity in a state of crisis.

The Phallic Body: Superman and Masculinity in America

Superman began his career in 1938, following the Depression and President Roosevelt's New Deal, which relied on government spending for social support and reform. According to Bradford W. Wright, Superman initially "championed social reform and government assistance to the poor," which, "sometimes led him into conflict with the legal and political establishment," especially corrupt local government officials.¹ Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, sons of first generation immigrant parents, and written for an American audience made up out of immigrants and their descendants, Superman was a power fantasy of the disenfranchised attempting to gain access to dominant social strata through qualities provided by their 'old world' heritage. He often advocated for tolerance and understanding, giving speeches about the importance of America as a cultural melting pot, to combat the growing anti-Semitism and anti-immigration stances of the 1930s. Superman also represented the impoverished populace, resembling the physicality of the working-class created through back-breaking manual labour with large arms, shoulders and chests. His civilian identity as a journalist also aligned him with the working class. While there were schools of journalism offering training and formal education in the 1930s, academic qualifications

¹ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 12-13.

were not necessary or common. Anyone could work as a journalist.² Additionally, journalists often wrote in favour of public and social reform, attempting to convince their audience of a specific point of view by interpreting events and providing context, as David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit suggest.³ In his identity as Clark Kent, the journalist, Superman had a good excuse to investigate any and all social problems in Metropolis. Moreover, it left Clark's educational background vague. It was possible, but not necessary, for Clark to have received higher or any education. If Clark was relatively uneducated or self-educated, he would fit even better into the working-class mould whilst championing the cause. His background, established in the late 1940s, as the son of farmers living in a poor rural community, further cements his alliance with the working class during the Golden Age (1935-1956). During World War II, Superman encouraged people to buy war bonds and join the military. In one storyline, he attempted to join the military as Clark Kent, but accidentally used his powers to read the eye-test chart in the next room, resulting in a dismissal because of poor vision. Barred from combat, he fought to protect the home front from spies and invading forces, encouraging his readers to do the same.

For most of the Golden Age, Superman's body is big but lacks detail.⁴ His muscle definition is nearly invisible in the early comics. There are only vague outlines underneath the uniform, mostly pectorals and quadriceps. To a contemporary audience, Superman looks stocky in these drawings, reflecting the increase in average height from the 1930s to now. Superman's physical powers seem to stem from his wide chest, round shoulders and beefy upper arms, implying that big muscles are synonymous with strength and capability. His body exudes a moral strength associated with the honest working man, which fits his origins as the common man's hero. Throughout the years, Superman's general appearance has remained relatively unchanged, allowing the image of his costume, appearance and chest chevron (as a logo) to become fixed. Looking back on his first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938), he is still recognizable to a modern audience. On the cover, there is a man in a blue body-suit, red underwear, boots, cape and the S-chevron on his chest. There is little detail in the background or foreground to distract from the central figure: Superman holding a car aloft and crashing it into an embankment. Two of the three other figures are fleeing the scene while the

² Arthur Lawrence, *Journalism as a Profession* (Memphis: General Books LLC, 2013 [1903]), 1.

³ David H. Weaver and G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *The American Journalist: A Portrait of U.S. News People and Their Work* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 7.

⁴ Jerry Siegel et al, *Action Comics #1* (New York: DC Comics, 1938), cover.

third seems to be cowering in place. Considering the class tensions at the time and Superman's common man's origins, it is significant that Superman is depicted smashing a car, a luxury item not many could afford in the 1930s.

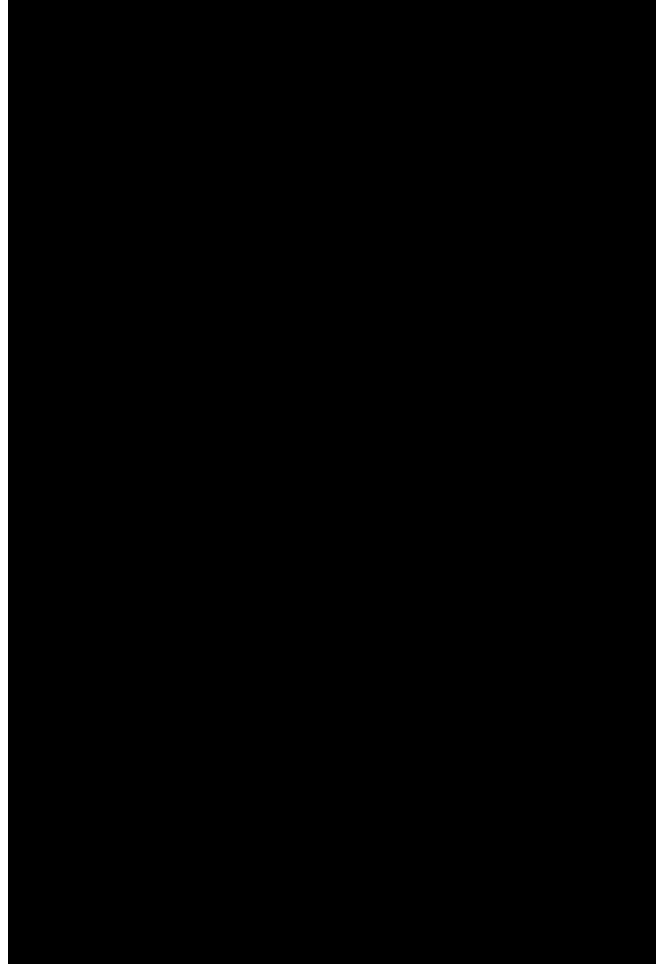


Image 1.1: Action Comics #1 Cover © 1938 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Superman's status as a working-class champion changed in the early 1950s, when, increasingly, men worked in middle-class white collar office jobs. At this time, superheroes lost their appeal, while mystery, horror and western comics became extremely popular, as discussed in the Introduction. In order to appeal to a changed audience, superheroes had to change as well. With education becoming more available as a means to and result of social mobility, cultural values began to incorporate the idea that education could contribute to a man's masculinity, which was no longer defined by physical prowess. Instead, it focused on a man's ability to survive in the corporate

environment, providing for his family from behind a desk. Initially, this created anxiety about “the feminizing effects of a new and growing sector of the economy – the white collar worker, the organization and advertising man – who sat at a desk all day, physically inactive and under great stress,” as Anne Fausto-Sterling writes.⁵ This anxiety was compounded, as Clark Davis discusses, by the fact that the modern middle-class struggled to find a familiar construct of masculinity in corporate culture as most men were no longer self-employed. Instead of the familiar concept of the middle-class American man who worked hard and could make his own way because of the freedom offered by American society, the middle-class man was increasingly employed by other middle-class men, much like the working class had been. With society returning to middle-class cultural values, the new reality of men in the work place had to be reconciled with an old-fashioned construction of middle-class masculinity as self-employed.⁶ Corporate culture quickly developed its own narrative of middle-class masculinity. Instead of being self-employed, “advancement up the corporate ladder had become a legitimate route to the attainment of virtuous manhood.”⁷ Corporations presented their office work as requiring specific male attributes and, therefore, climbing the corporate ladder became a sign of superior masculinity over other, weaker, less masculine men. For those men who failed to achieve corporate success, the construction of acceptable middle-class masculinity remained a problem. Denied advancement or promotion, their masculinity had to depend on something else. Davis writes how masculinity, “increasingly centred on activities outside the workplace.”⁸ Middle-class men were encouraged to find hobbies and they now had the leisure time to indulge in activities such as fishing, hunting and sports. Additionally, men were encouraged to attend the gym regularly to harden the body softened from sitting behind a desk all day.

To fit in with his audience, Superman also became a figure of middle-class masculinity. Because of the growing importance placed on education, journalists were increasingly required to possess formal education and qualifications, and they were less likely to argue for social reform in favour of the working class’ benefit. Clark Kent became an educated, middle-class son of working-class parents, symbolizing the

⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 198.

⁶ Clark Davis, “The Corporate Reconstruction of Middle-Class Manhood” in *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, ed. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York and London: Routledge, 2001), 202-203.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

potential of social mobility for the white working class in the 1950s. Instead of fighting for social programs and reform, Superman fought to preserve the status quo and American values. At this time, his fight for 'truth and justice' became 'for truth, justice and the American way,' highlighting Superman's loyalty to America during Cold War tensions, especially in light of his immigrant status.⁹ Despite constant anxieties towards immigrants in conservative circles, the immigrant experience is one of the fundamental elements of American identity. According to Gary Engle, "all Americans have an immediate sense of their origins elsewhere," meaning they have a keen awareness of their ancestry existing outside America.¹⁰ While new immigrants struggle with the need to assimilate and the preservation of their heritage, Superman presents the ideal myth of how white immigrants can use their non-American heritage to become successful while internalizing American values. In this sense, Superman is representative of the American Dream because, as Danny Fingeroth points out, he had superpowers that were "actually only attained because he came to Earth – on Krypton, he and his people had none."¹¹ As an alien from the planet Krypton, Superman's Kryptonian physiology powered by the Milky Way's yellow sun gives him powers such as superspeed, superstrength, laser vision, x-ray vision, invulnerability, ice breath and flight, but those powers only exist because he came to America.

In the 1950s, Superman's exceptionality as a result of arriving in America was highlighted in the comics through Superman's newfound allegiance to America alone, instead of all Allies in World War II. In part, this loyalty can remain unquestioned because there is no apparent impulse for Superman to abandon America and return to Krypton. He knows little of its culture and has no tangible connection to it, such as relatives who have remained there. He grew up without any kind of Kryptonian community and, as an adult, has defended Earth against other Kryptonians who tried to settle there, preventing any potential immigrant community to which he can belong. Lori Maguire points out that "we can also note the preoccupation with Krypton at this

⁹ Erik Lundegaard, "Truth, Justice and (Fill in the Blank)," *The New York Times*, June 30, 2006, accessed October 14, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/30/opinion/30lundegaard.html?_r=0.

¹⁰ Gary Engle, "What Makes Superman So Darned American?," *Xavier School I.B. English 2012*, July 13, 2010, accessed October 14, 2016, <https://xsibenglish2012.wordpress.com/2010/07/13/what-makes-superman-so-darned-american/>.

¹¹ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (London, New Delhi, et al: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004), 56.

time and the villains that Superman faced from there.”¹² Kryptonian culture increasingly served as an allegory for the Soviet Union, presented as anti-American: cold and heartless. Luckily, Superman always defeats whatever Kryptonian element is threatening the status quo and re-establishes America’s moral and cultural superiority. Engle considers forsaking the past and ties to the past in favour of current loyalties to be part of the American cultural consciousness:

Thus the American identity is ordered around the psychological experience of forsaking or losing the past for the opportunity of reinventing oneself in the future. This makes the orphan a potent symbol of the American character. Orphans aren’t merely free to reinvent themselves. They are obliged to do so.¹³

Being both an immigrant and an orphan, Superman can completely reinvent himself. Without any Kryptonian community to instil Kryptonian culture and values in him, Superman can easily pick and choose which parts of his heritage to uphold. In the 1950s, he had no emotional connection to his heritage and knows little of what Kryptonian society was like. Being adopted by American parents gives him an anchor to America and the American way of life. Isolated from Kryptonian culture and immersed in American culture, encouraged by his human, American father to use his Kryptonian abilities in service to mankind, Superman is completely assimilated into American culture.

In the first Cold War era, mostly coinciding with comics’ Silver Age (1956-1970), Superman increasingly fought to protect America from threatening outside forces, such as hostile aliens serving as a metaphor for communism and nuclear armament. During this time, Superman’s powers increase, reflecting the growth of American strength and the increasing paranoia of possible outside threats. Paul R. Kohl writes that “Superman emerged from the era of the Second World War with new

¹² Lori Maguire, “Supervillains and Cold war Tensions in the 1950s” in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc, Publishers, 2012), 18.

¹³ Engle, “What Makes Superman,” <https://xsibenglish2012.wordpress.com/2010/07/13/what-makes-superman-so-damned-american/>.

powers, much as his home country did.”¹⁴ Reflecting popular American sentiments about America’s position in the world, Superman had seemingly become all-powerful. However, with Superman’s new powers there came a new element that could stop him for good: kryptonite, which became necessary to maintain suspense in Superman narratives. As Kohl says, initially, Superman “could not fly, only leap and a bursting shell *could* penetrate his skin. A *deus ex machina* weakness was not necessary for a character that was not yet all-powerful.”¹⁵ Symbolizing the super-powered United States of America, Superman can only be threatened by Kryptonite, a radioactive substance symbolizing anxieties about the Soviet Union and its nuclear capabilities. As pieces of Krypton’s rock core subjected to cosmic radiation that makes it toxic to Superman, Kryptonite is a part of Superman’s home world come back to menace him and his adopted country. This would become a striking theme throughout the 1950s, reflecting American fears about the Cold War and the Red Scare in the form of immigrants or American-born individuals penetrating American society and destroying it from within.

Superman’s increase in power and abilities in the Silver Age was accompanied by an increasingly slimmer body, compared to his body in the Golden Age, while his muscle definition increased. His abdominal muscles tend to have more detail while his shoulders are less comically round. His chest remains the focus of his strength, wide and with defined pectoral muscles, but his waist has narrowed and he looks less stocky. Instead of the working class physique from the Golden Age, Superman possesses the middle-class body crafted in the gym.¹⁶ While Superman does not need to go to the gym because his powers and physical body are created by the yellow sun, his body does conform to white, middle-class, gym-built aesthetic, as seen in the following image.¹⁷

¹⁴ Paul R. Kohl, “The Struggle Within: Superman’s Difficult Transition into the Age of Relevance” in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 104.

¹⁵ Kohl, “The Struggle Within,” 105.

¹⁶ Not to be confused with the gym culture of, say, young black men in RNB or hip hop culture who create powerful bodies in order to compensate for a lack of cultural or social power, or, the tradition of young working class men who take up boxing as a way to empower themselves.

¹⁷ Curt Swan et al, *Action Comics #241* (New York: DC Comics, 1958), cover.

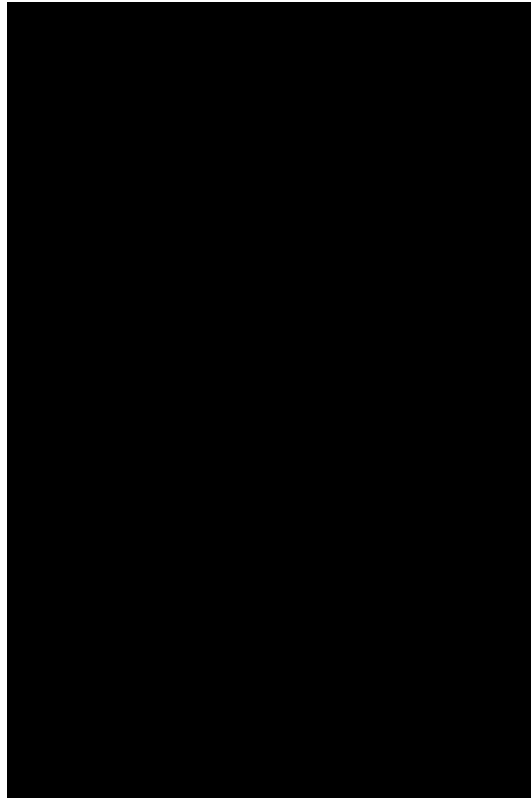


Image 1.2: Action Comics #241 Cover © 1958 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

The fascination with muscular bodies has always been present in Western culture, evidenced by the warrior of the classical world and the strong man circus figure. In the first days of cinema, popular recordings involved a strong man flexing and posing in front of the camera. The modern equivalent of the strong man is the bodybuilder, which became a popular figure as the action hero in the 1980s. Like the bodybuilding hero, Superman's muscle definition increased during the Bronze Age (1970-1984) and Dark Age (1984-1998) and panels from those periods demonstrate an increased focus on details in general, partly thanks to innovations in printing techniques, as seen on the cover of *Red Tornado #1* (1985).¹⁸

¹⁸ Kurt Busiek et al, *Red Tornado #1* (New York: DC Comics, 1985), cover.

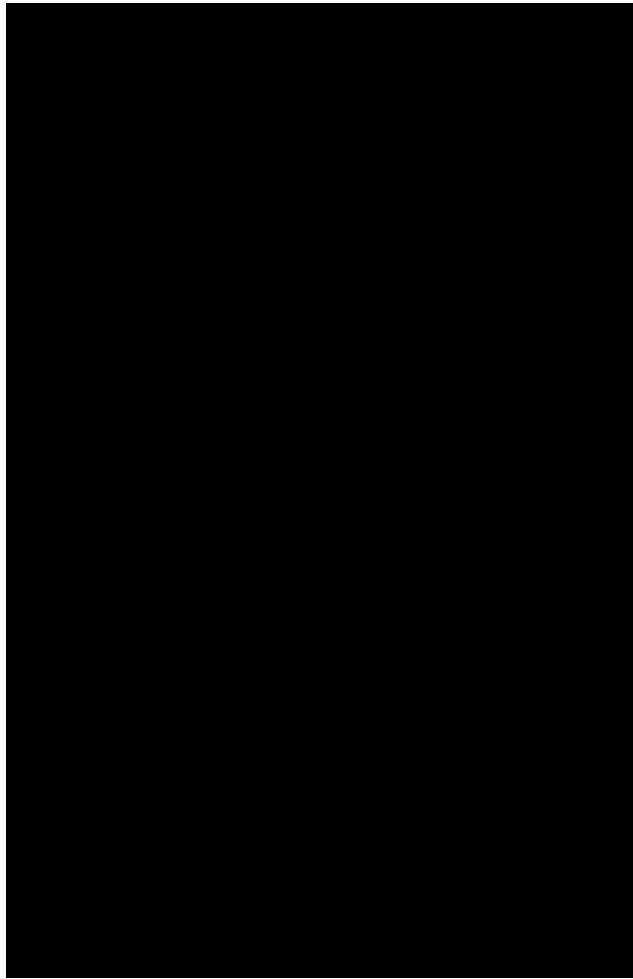


Image 1.3: Red Tornado #1 Cover © 1985 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

The rise of the bodybuilding action hero also coincides with the rise of the villain who is part of the establishment or institutionalised bodies of power in the United States. During the 1950s, at the height of the CCA's power, such villains were impossible but the 1980s allowed for a less patriotic Superman who reflected society's increasing questioning of American values and government. While Superman continued to uphold American values throughout the 1990s and 2000s, he officially refused to accept American citizenship in 2011 and declared himself to be a citizen of the world. However, Superman continues to exist as an American symbol because his American upbringing creates a very Western perspective on the world. Moreover, Clark Kent remains an American citizen. While, initially, Clark Kent was simply a foil, a weakling disguise, more recent versions of the character consider Superman a public role with Clark Kent as the private, real person underneath. As Clark Kent states in the TV series,

Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman (1993-1997), “Superman is what I can do. Clark is who I am.”¹⁹ In the industry and fan communities, there is an ongoing debate considering which of the identities is the ‘real’ one or if Clark/Superman’s true identity is a mix of the two. But, as Randy Duncan points out: “[in] all versions, he is Clark Kent before he creates the identity of Superman. In all versions the moral examples and guidance of Jonathan and Martha Kent mould his character.”²⁰ Even if Clark Kent is not the ‘real’ identity, he is a vital part of Superman’s identity and his rural, small-town upbringing in the American Midwest marks him as quintessentially American. His renunciation of American citizenship merely pays lip service to an international audience. Time and again, Superman’s American nationality is a fundamental part of the middle-class masculinity he constructs, which is also informed by his possession of the ultimate masculine body.

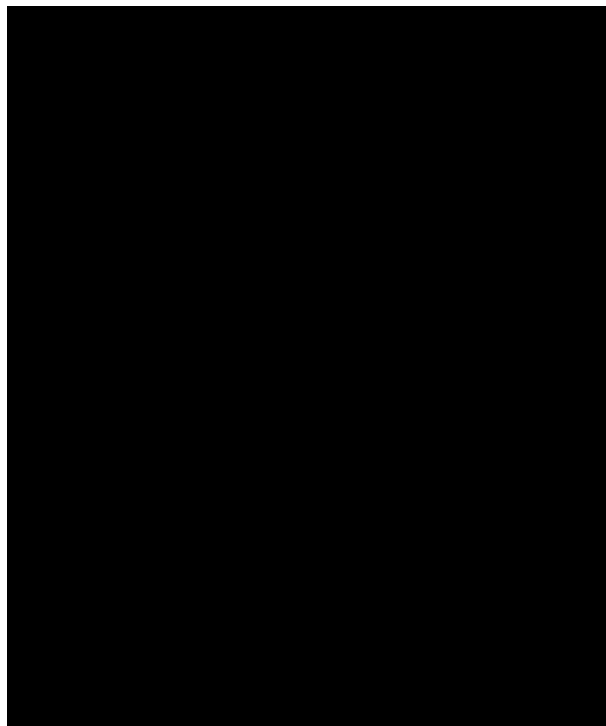


Image 1.4: Superman Unchained #5 © 2014 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

¹⁹ *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, “Tempus Fugitive,” 2:18, directed by James R. Bagdonas, written by Jack Weinstein et al, ABC, March 26, 1995.

²⁰ Randy Duncan, “Traveling Hopefully in Search of American National Identity: The ‘Grounded’ Superman as a 21st Century Picaro,” in *The Ages of Superman: Essays on the Man of Steel in Changing Times*, ed. Joseph J. Darowski (Jefferson and London: McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012), 223.

The Modern Age (1998-now) has made voyeuristically detailed comic art, like the previous panel taken from *Superman Unchained #5* (2014), ubiquitous. This image reflects the most recent updates to Superman's look and advances in digital art in contemporary times, culminating in wide, background-heavy splash panels and close-ups.²¹ In this panel, which is a full-page spread in the actual comic, Superman's muscular definition is incredibly detailed. Despite the skin-tight appearance of the body suit, the costume looks bulkier and sturdier compared to previous iterations. In *Superman: He'l on Earth* (2013), Superman calls it "kryptonian battle armor" and discusses how it reacts only to Kryptonian DNA.²² At all times, the whole of the uniform can retract in the S-chevron, easily hidden underneath his civilian clothing, reflecting audiences' awareness of increasingly sophisticated technology. It also demonstrates how, following the terrorist attack on 9/11 in 2001, American society began to highlight the traditional link between the military and technology again. Superman's costume has been significantly militarized in appearance. Aside from its explicit purpose as 'battle armor,' its thin black lines give the impression of interlocking armoured panels. The high collar, with red piping, is reminiscent of a formal military uniform collar. The usual underwear worn over his tights has been re-imagined as a belt pointing to his crotch: a sudden deviation from what has become a staple of the genre. In fact, the underwear is so popular and emblematic of the superhero that, in their *Holy Musical Batman* musical, Starkid Productions had all their superhero characters wear y-fronts over their tights.²³ What used to be a reference to the strong man's costume has become a major element of the genre, identified as the Underwear of Power trope by fans.²⁴ For years, few artists deviated from this trope, especially in regards to the Superman costume. In fact, when the creative team for the Superman film *Man of Steel* (2013) revealed their new costume design in a preview, some fans expressed outrage at the use of darker and more muted colours and the replacement of the traditional underwear with the belt. Superman's costume, as part of his mythos, must stay true to the original. The question asked here is, what does the Underwear of Power do that makes it so important? Aside from being a conventional staple, it fulfils an important function in the construction of Superman's masculinity.

²¹ Scott Snyder et al, *Superman Unchained #5* (New York: DC Comics, 2013).

²² Scott Lobdell et al, *Superman: H'el on Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 2013).

²³ Nick Gage et al, "Holy Musical Batman," *Starkid Productions*, April 12, 2012, accessed June 12, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hmZhMeY5L44&list=PL96B8289ADF77A8C4>.

²⁴ TV Tropes, "Main/Underwear of Power," *TvTropes.org*, accessed June 26, 2014, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/UnderwearOfPower>.

Superman's masculinity is partially constructed through the voyeuristic depiction of his body in his skin-tight costume. Aaron Taylor suggests that the superbodily, with its bulging muscles and endlessly, panel after panel, reproduced physicality, is fetishized. There is an unmistakable element of spectacle inherent in drawing and producing such detailed musculature; a process which "undermines the virility of the male superheroes."²⁵ According to Taylor, the element of spectacle, the invitation to *look* upon the body is emasculating as "the reader is invited to ogle the bodies of these men in much the same way as the bodies of the women."²⁶ Being reduced to an object the audience is only encouraged to look at instead of a subject the audience is encouraged to identify or sympathise with is dehumanising. He identifies the sexualisation of male characters as a force that denies male superheroes a powerful, autonomous sexuality because "[in] a fictional universe in which any part of the anatomy has the potential to be super-powered, the superpenis is still strictly taboo."²⁷ This certainly would have been the case in the 1950s when the CCA forbade any type of obscenity. It is the fetishization and dehumanizing impulse of the voyeuristic gaze that endangers the authority of the superhero. Taylor claims that the castration of the superhero only reinforces his emasculation and sexualisation, reducing him to the objectified state of many female characters.

While it is true that being reduced to a sexual object is dehumanizing, the lack of a superpenis does not contribute to the emasculation of the male superhero. There is no explicit drawing of the superpenis for the exact reason Taylor puts forward in his essay: to be drawn explicitly, sexually, is dehumanizing and undermines the authority of the superhero. While Taylor seems to subscribe to the idea that the superpenis cannot be read sexually, only in terms of power, drawing a characters' genitals lends itself to voyeuristic, sexual, objectifying and dehumanizing readings. Furthermore, there is no need to draw the superpenis because it is inescapably present through its absence. The reader's eyes are constantly drawn towards the area where the penis would be, because the skin-tight bodysuit of the hero tends to be one single colour, except for the chevron and the underwear. The Underwear of Power consistently frames the crotch and the penis to make drawing an actual bulge unnecessary. Drawing a penis would further reduce the superhero to a sex object and sabotage the superbodily's purpose: to inspire

²⁵ Aaron Taylor, "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:2 (2007), 352.

²⁶ Taylor, "Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," 355.

²⁷ Taylor, "Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body," 352.

subject-desire in the reader. The male superhero is not drawn as a sexual object, but as a powerful subject, even accounting for the eroticism present in voyeuristic close-ups. Adding a stylized penis would undermine that carefully navigated difference. Taking into account that the main target audience of comics still consists of heterosexual, white, male teenagers (and that, in wider American culture, the presupposed audience of mainstream media is always white, heterosexual and male because that is the cultural norm), drawing a superpenis would imply a homo-erotic subtext. By only implying the existence of the superpenis, the superhero comic can deflect such homoerotic interpretations. The absence of the superpenis is a refusal to portray the superhero in a sexualized manner and dehumanize him. Peter Lehman writes that this silence on and refusal to engage with the male body as sexual is “a symptom of homophobia: this subject, the silence seems to say, can be of interest only to gay men.”²⁸ When the main audience is believed to consist of straight men, any homoerotic implications must be eliminated to prevent the alienation of the straight audience, who could not possibly be interested in the male body as a sexual body.

The absence of the bulge, but the presence of the underwear, can then be understood as a way for the superpenis to be simultaneously present and absent to safeguard the hero’s masculinity but to prohibit the male gaze. In this manner, the underwear functions as a visual representation of the ‘no-homo’ response. The phrase ‘no homo’ was first coined in the hip hop industry where it was used for straight audience affirmation. According to Joshua R. Brown, the ‘no homo’-response “functions to negate a supposed misconception or misconstrued reading (...). In saying something that the speaker might think will be understood as ‘homosexual,’ the added ‘no homo’ disqualifies such a misunderstanding for the audience.”²⁹ In other words, the ‘no homo’-response is a linguistic tool used by men to distance themselves from homosexuality. When men in an established social group behave in a manner that the group’s understanding of gender roles and sexual behaviour interprets as gay or feminine, the ‘no homo’-response quickly reframes that behaviour as masculine by denying any homosexual intention. This equates heterosexuality with masculinity. As Brown points out, “[the] problem is not necessarily that you commit a sexual

²⁸ Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Detroit: Wayne State university Press, 2007), 219.

²⁹ Joshua R. Brown, “No Homo,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 58:3 (2011), 300-301.

transgression, but that you have committed a gender transgression.”³⁰ The group’s construction of masculinity depends on its connection to heterosexuality, which means members of the group cannot be both homosexual and masculine. The homosexual group is identified as the non-masculine Other, implying that gay men are not real men and only straight men are real men. The widely adopted use of ‘no homo’ by American popular culture at large indicates that these beliefs concerning masculinity and heterosexuality are present in American society. Through the ‘Underwear of Power,’ Superman also perpetuates the idea that homosexuality and masculinity are mutually exclusive.

The construction of masculinity as fundamentally incompatible with homosexuality is enforced through consistent identification of (groups of) men as non-masculine by a male group attempting to assert their masculinity. In *On Language and Sexual Politics*, Deborah Cameron analyses the conversation of a group of four men and finds that an important part of masculine discourse is the identification of other men as gay, meaning “failing to measure up to the groups’ standard of masculinity.”³¹ By identifying others as homosexual, they re-affirm their own heterosexual masculinity. Cameron observes how the young men “are impelled, paradoxically, to talk about men’s bodies as a way of demonstrating their own total lack of sexual interest in those bodies.”³² Men are encouraged to look at men in order to define masculinity as what it is not: homosexual. The group’s identification of themselves as masculine depends on warding off the homosexual, as if it could infect their heterosexual group and render them all non-masculine. Of course, looking and gazing inevitably imply interest and ‘no homo’ is used to ward off the suspicions that the speaker looked sexually instead of analytically. In this manner, ‘no homo’ serves to normalise or heterosexualise gazing at male bodies to avoid homosexual panic. Brown asserts that “[given] the frequency of the phrase, it has become ritualized as a sort of incantation, protecting the speaker from interpretations of their own words.”³³ For comics, the Underwear of Power has become a ritualized incantation to protect the audience from homosexual panic at appreciating heavily detailed masculine musculature. However, as Taylor’s essay confirms, it is possible to read the male superhero as sexualised (and thus, emasculated). As a visual medium, comics demand that both the artist and the audience engage with men’s bodies.

³⁰ Brown, “No Homo,” 306.

³¹ Deborah Cameron, *On Language and Sexual Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 66.

³² Cameron, *On Language*, 68.

³³ Brown, “No Homo,” 301.

Conforming to American ideas about masculinity and sexual interest, these artists and their audiences also have to demonstrate “a total lack of sexual interest in those bodies” to ensure that this depiction is never interpreted as sexually attractive.³⁴ Covering up the superpenis is a visual ritual to prevent the superpenis from dominating the page and sexualizing the superhero. The artist portrays the masculine body in lavish detail as a demonstration of the superhero’s masculine, gym-built physique necessary to maintain his masculinity while the covered penis attempts to prohibit a homoerotic interpretation of the image. The underwear and detail-less bulge (if there is a bulge at all) frame the male body as non-homosexual. The Underwear of Power demonstrates a total lack of sexual interest in the male body and thus, serves as a ‘no homo’-response to discourse that can be interpreted as non-heterosexual and thus, non-masculine.

Covering up the superpenis serves to protect the masculinity of the superhero, his audience and his creators as the superpenis is a source of both homosexual panic and penis anxiety. According to Lehman, in contemporary American society, people “are asked either to be in awe of the powerful spectacle of phallic male sexuality or to feel pity for, be ashamed of, or laugh at its vulnerable, failed opposite.”³⁵ The penis is either the superpenis or the micropenis. The real biological penis is always the micropenis as the superpenis is not a physical, material thing, but is actually the phallus. According to Stephen Frosh, the phallus is “that which is taken to be the sign of difference, privileging one sex over the other, producing divergent subjectivities,” which is culturally defined.³⁶ The phallus is not the actual penis, but everything that a culture or society has deemed masculine, especially the masculine qualities that provide dominance or superiority over everything that is non-masculine or feminine. This masculine quality has been retro-actively rooted in the penis in order to provide a ‘natural’ and ‘biologically determined’ narrative rationalizing the oppression of femininity and those groups of men who do not possess the cultural masculine ideal. Because the ultimate masculine signifier has been conflated with the image of the penis, the phallus exists as a cultural idea of the penis enlarged and dominating its surroundings. The biological penis cannot achieve such mastery and becomes irrelevant when compared to its cultural counterpart, except as an image that can smash the phallic illusion and castrate its supposed owner. Displaying a hard penis may achieve the effect

³⁴ Cameron, *On Language*, 68.

³⁵ Lehman, *Running Scared*, 218.

³⁶ Stephen Frosh, *Sexual Difference: Masculinity and Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 66.

of the phallus, but also contains the possibility of its destruction through the spectre of the soft, biological penis. Being confronted with Superman's bulge would create anxiety in the (assumed male) audience no matter the size of the bulge. If the reader reads the bulge as too small, it would indicate that Superman is in possession of the micropenis, which would undermine Superman's phallic effect, the domination of his environment, and destroy his potential as a powerful subject fantasy. If the reader saw the bulge as too big, Superman would be in possession of the superpenis and, because of the phallus binary, identify the reader as possessing the micropenis, which creates penis anxiety. The Underwear of Power masks the bulge, simultaneously emphasizing the presence of the penis while rendering it invisible and making Superman safe for male consumption.³⁷

Considering the importance of the 'Underwear of Power,' the decision to slowly fade it out in comics needs to be considered. In the last two decades, new superhero designs and old superhero re-designs such as Batman and Superman have not included the 'Underwear of Power,' even though most merchandise consistently depicts these heroes with their underwear because it is iconic. Instead, superheroes now have a belt as a move away from 'gimmicky' superhero styles, which are considered old-fashioned, towards a more 'realistic' depiction of the superhero who has rationalized the costume's look. For example, as a non-superpowered person, Batman needs a utility belt to store his equipment. Why would Superman need one? If it is a question of practicality, does the advantage of limited storage space weigh up against the risk of having a part of his costume easily grabbed while grappling with a villain? The belt exists because of contemporary comic aesthetics, which focuses on making an image as realistic as possible. The Underwear of Power is considered old-fashioned, but its effect is crucial to the success of male superhero characters and the belt does the same job. It both draws and deflects attention away from the crotch.

Reconsider the image of the modern Superman. With the audience looking up at Superman, the crotch towers over the reader and yet, it is the chest that undoubtedly dominates the image.³⁸ Even as the crotch is at the centre of the page, its Ken-doll-like appearance redirects the reader to the overwhelmingly large chest. The use of yellow in

³⁷ The refusal to display the penis must also be considered in light of the age of the target audience. While most readers tend to be older teenagers, some readers are children. Any sexual overtones would be scrubbed for such a young audience, especially children's comics, which explains why, when there is a bulge in evidence, they are mostly found in more 'serious' comics aimed at (young) adults.

³⁸ Snyder, *Superman Unchained* #5.

the S-chevron in a panel dominated by blue and red also draws the reader's eye. This image clearly demonstrates how the male superhero body conforms to an inverted triangle: the immense chest dipping into a slim waist, with no bulge to disturb the clean, geometrical lines. Superman's overwhelming and dominating power, his phallus, is not found in the crotch, but in the chest, which becomes the site of all male power. In *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*, Susan Bordo discusses how "in classical Western art, the convention has been to represent the heroic body as muscular, but the actual penis as rather small."³⁹ Bordo further discusses how minimizing and covering up the penis in Western art originated in Descartes' dualist discourse which placed nature opposite culture: animal vs man and the body vs the mind. The penis was considered to be part of nature and the body. Covering it up was interpreted as a move towards reason, linking rationality with masculinity as opposed to femininity, which was rooted in processes of menstruation and pregnancy causing hysteria.⁴⁰ The chest, like the phallus, is the site of power and intelligence, providing dominance over other, weaker biological bodies. The 'Underwear of Power,' combined with the increasingly detailed muscular definition of the chest ensures that the superhero conforms to that model. The belt is another step in that direction as the bulge becomes less visible without a brightly coloured cloth to draw attention to it. The penis becomes invisible and the chest undeniable, highlighted by the chevron.

In comics, and in the previous panel, the most prominent feature of the superhero's chest is his chevron, which becomes the symbol of the superhero identity. Its position on the chest points to the chest as the area most closely associated with that power and as the signifier of the superhero's status and phallus. According to Bordo, it is not simply "visual or verbal allusion to penis-like anatomical features that makes [anything] a phallic symbol" but "the suggestion of masculine authority and power" representing those attributes culturally defined as masculine and superior. With the rise of gym culture and its consistent glorification of highly defined pectoral muscles, the chest has become the phallus and comics perpetuate this discourse. The chest is always huge and hard, impenetrable and masculine. In effect, the superhero possesses an inverted triangle body shape, which creates the image of the ultimate masculine body. While this masculine body has musculature that resembles the physicality crafted in the

³⁹ Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), 75.

⁴⁰ Some, like Plato and Freud, identified the womb as the source of hysteria, the opposite of reason.

gym, Superman possesses it naturally. He never has to work-out or train. The masculine must always project the illusion of being natural or innate, especially when it is artificially constructed. Throughout the decades, Superman's body has changed to match cultural ideas concerning ideal masculinity, especially in the way the male body is considered to signify superior masculinity. Currently, with the Underwear of Power and the chest as phallus, his inverted triangle body shape signals his masculine dominance to the reader.

Man-Made Anatomy: Captain America and Iron Man's Artificial Superbodies

One of the ways that hegemonic masculinity provides a rationale for the patriarchy, which favours men, is that femininity needs to be protected by the masculine. Superman perpetuates this discourse via the Underwear of Power, the phallic body and his superpowers. An important element of hegemonic masculinity's projection of strength is that masculinity's strength is natural and innate. Superman's superpowers and masculinity are obviously inherent, but even when male superheroes have powers that originate outside the masculine body, the narrative will frame these powers as a discovery or reflection of intrinsic masculinity, as evidenced through Captain America and Iron Man.

Captain America entered the world in 1941 and left it again in 1949, when World War II ended and the American audience lost its appetite for wartime stories. Most of the initial run was written and drawn during wartime and focused on Steve Rogers, a sickly young art student consistently rejected from the army because of his poor health. Eventually the army selects him for Project Rebirth, an experimental procedure intended to produce a supersoldier. The creator of the formula is murdered immediately after the procedure, leaving Steve as the only supersoldier. He is sent to the front as part of a regular army battalion and has to hide his identity as Captain America from his fellow soldiers. In 1953, Marvel attempted to revive the character in *Captain America: Commie Smasher!*, which was cancelled in 1954. In later years, the series was considered an embarrassment because of its low quality and Red Scare pandering. In 1972, when the continuity established in the new *Captain America* series (1964-2014) began to clash extensively with the events of the 1950s' series, Marvel retconned the universe. Supposedly, in the 1950s, several people had operated as Captain America, the most famous operative being William Burnside. The *Captain America: Commie*

Smasher! series refers to him as Steve Rogers because Burnside had his name legally changed and underwent surgery to make himself look and sound like Steve. He injected himself with the superserum but without the stabilizing effects of the chemical and radiological treatments, Burnside became paranoid and fanatically racist, retroactively explaining away Captain America's attitude in the 1950s. In the meantime, the original Captain America, Steve Rogers, had been recast as a 'man out of time.' During his final mission, Steve crashed his ship in the Arctic and went into suspended animation, waking up twenty years later in *Tales of Suspense* #59 (1964) and *The Avengers* #4 (1964). Steve continued to appear as Captain America in *Tales of Suspense* (1959-1968) until the series was cancelled. He continued to appear in *Captain America* until Steve lost his youth and relinquished the superhero title in 2014. The *All-New Captain America* (2015) detailed the ascension of Sam Wilson to the role of Captain America. Currently, with Steve Rogers' return to the title, there are two Captain America titles in publication, *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2015-ongoing) and *Captain America: Steve Rogers* (2015-ongoing).

By preserving his 1940s origins, Cap's identity remains linked to World War II which allows him to function as a positive symbol of America's moral superiority and power. World War II, as Jason Dittmer writes, "has long served as a touchstone for Americans seeking to ground an identity of both power and innocence during periods in which American power has been tainted or delegitimized (such as the post-Vietnam era)."⁴¹ In the American cultural landscape, World War II is the good war. It was a time when American power was used to support values propagated as quintessentially American, such as democracy and freedom. Captain America's association with World War II allows him to embody all those virtues and identifies Steve Rogers as the real Captain America in the face of imposters who have been treated with poor imitations of the serum, such as Burnside. Another attempt to create a second supersoldier was the Anti-Cap, a volunteer for the navy's supersoldier program in the early 2000s, whose existing mental health problems were exacerbated by the process. These consistent failures to recreate the serum and the treatment successfully, despite scientific advancements in the Marvel universe, beg the question: is it that the serum has never been adequately reproduced, or, is there something specific about Steve Rogers that

⁴¹ Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 94.

made the serum work?⁴² The comics themselves often imply the latter rather than the former and the 2011 film *Captain America: The First Avenger* has the creator of the serum, Dr Erskine, clearly state that the serum only magnifies what already exists on the inside. Burnside, a product of McCarthyism, became incredibly violent and paranoid. The Anti-Cap's mental health issues, as well as untreated emotional and psychological trauma, increased significantly. Steve, growing up in the struggles of the recession and with a strong sense of duty to his country, became the perfect American soldier. Despite his frail and 'unmanly' stature, Steve attempted to volunteer for the army multiple times, even though deployment would have meant certain death for someone with his health. When that failed, he willingly submitted himself to horrendous scientific experiments that could have killed him. He is portrayed as daring, determined and heroic. In other words, the narrative implies that he already possessed all the qualities associated with American warrior masculinity. He only required a superbody to match, which was provided by the military and its scientific advancements.

⁴² Aside from the fact that Marvel cannot allow widespread dissemination of the super-serum within the comic universe to preserve Captain America's superhero status.



Image 1.5: Pre-Serum Steve ©
2011 Marvel Comics.

**[Image removed due to copyright
restrictions]**

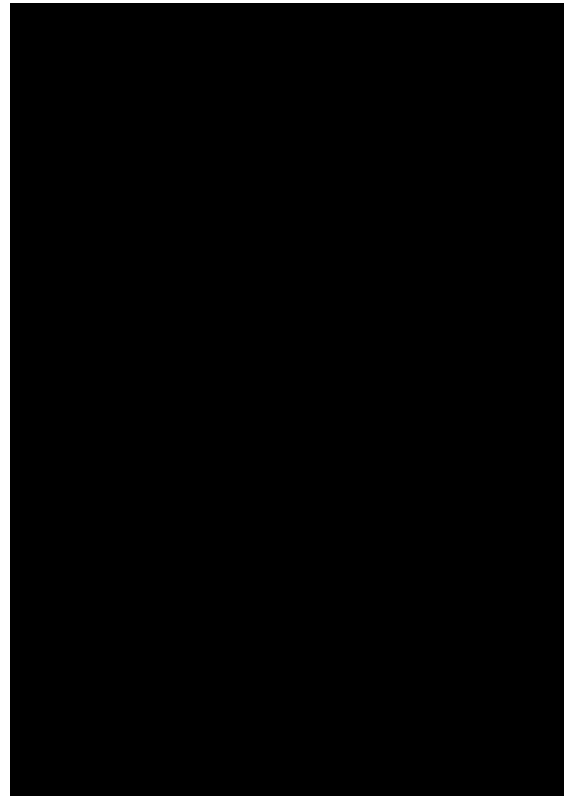


Image 1.6: Post-Serum Steve ©
2011 Marvel Comics.

**[Image removed due to copyright
restrictions]**

Both these panels were taken from *Captain America: Reborn* (2011), which reiterates Steve's 1940s origin story, most likely to coincide with the promotion and marketing for the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011).⁴³ On the left, there is a panel of Steve Rogers before he was injected with the superserum. It is cut from a medium-sized panel and displays Steve's pre-serum body as small and ill-defined, especially compared to the image on the right, which is a cropped full-page spread. The pre-serum panel is saturated with brown, a muted colour. Steve's body seems ready to fade into the background. His arms and legs are very thin, much like his waist. The leanness of his belly can be attributed to malnourishment, but could also be an artistic choice to prevent Steve from appearing too feminine in this slender form. However, looking more closely, we can see that even pre-serum Steve's body has well-defined musculature: his pectorals are so pronounced, they cover his sternum and his ribcage is

⁴³ Ed Brubaker et al, *Captain America: Reborn* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011).

covered by a layer of fat because we cannot see any definition of his individual ribs. Steve's body, demonstrating his physical weakness, nonetheless has potential for muscularity, hinting at the innate masculinity the serum will uncover. Pre-serum Steve's limited musculature is nothing compared to the muscle-ridden powerhouse he becomes. While the panel on the right is one of the many full-page spreads demonstrating Captain America's massive physique throughout the *Captain America: Reborn* volume, pre-serum Steve is never drawn in such a dominating way. The use of a full-page spread immediately after medium and small-sized panels of pre-serum Steve's diminutive body only reinforces the idea of pre-serum Steve as puny and Captain America as powerful and masculine. This panel has a vibrant blue colour and the lightning bolt adds to the sense of power, while glinting off Captain America's immensely disproportionate muscles. He has a powerful, active stance that adds dynamism. The group of muscles on the left of his abs do not exist in the human body while his abs are so large, they cover his belly button, which was pronounced in the panel on the left. His face is smaller than his pectorals and he is so large, he would not be able to touch his own armpits. In this sense, his masculine body certainly conforms to the body most superheroes have.

Erskine's superserum did not only make Steve bigger, it empowered and masculinized him. In this manner, the comic follows a narrative popular in the American cultural landscape of the 1940s, which presented the war as a way to reinvigorate men. As a result of the Depression, which heavily impacted the working class' ability to feed themselves, a significant number of men were rejected from the first draft because of poor health and physical condition. Subsequent drafts redefined body standards and instituted training methods geared to beefing up the male body while ad campaigns admonished citizens to take care of their health by taking the right kind of supplements and doing men's work. Simultaneously, as Christina Jarvis documents, the military boasted that soldiers "in all branches of the service commonly experienced remarkable physical transformation" and that "basic training not only increased muscle tone and overall strength, but also contributed to greater stamina and better cardiovascular fitness."⁴⁴ Captain America fits into this 1940s narrative about male bodies in the military and scientific advancements, such as x-rays, vitamin supplements and protein potions, improving bodily health. This narrative of soldiers gaining physical strength, as well as the economic growth that occurred through

⁴⁴ Christina S. Jarvis, *The Male Body At War: American Masculinity During World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010), 65-66.

households doubling their income with men entering the military and women entering the workplace, “contributed to the sense that World War II had reinvigorated and masculinized the nation.”⁴⁵ Similarly, Steve is masculinized by the military and scientific advancement. This idea of masculine invigoration and transformation infuses Captain America’s origin story and remains part of the character. In this 2011 retelling of the origin story, the masculine transformation is underlined by the fact that, unlike most spreads or large panels focusing on superhero bodies, the above blue panel draws the focus of the reader to the crotch, which has a prominent bulge and is in the middle of the page. The lightning, aside from conveying power, is also a frame guiding the reader’s gaze towards the bulge. The only noticeable figure in the background is at crotch level. Steve’s whole body seems to curve towards his crotch, as does the rest of the room, including the Tesla coil behind him. The added string detail to his boxer shorts, missing from pre-serum Steve’s boxers, also serves to draw in the reader’s gaze. And yet, the chest still unquestionably dominates the page through its sheer size, symbolizing Steve’s masculinity and warrior potential. This narrative of empowerment via the military and the war, popular in the 1940s, has remained part of American military masculinity, as evidenced by the military’s recruitment slogan of “Be All You Can Be” from the 1980s until the early 2000s. Masculinity became increasingly focused on the purposeful creation of a masculine body via the military’s bodily narrative in the 1940s, which continued in the 1950s and 1960s. In the 1970s and 1980s, progress made by feminism and other activists created the perception that white men were living in an increasingly feminized society, which resulted in the increased popularity of bodybuilding as a route to masculinity in mainstream culture.

The bodybuilder action hero popular in the 1980s, such as Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood* (1982) and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* (1985), contributed to the kind of body superheroes are now expected to have. According to Harrison G. Pope Jr., Katherine A. Phillips and Roberto Olivardia, in *The Adonis Complex*, a bodybuilder’s physique “is characterized by well-developed chest and arm muscles, with wide shoulders tapering down to a narrow waist.”⁴⁶ The bodybuilder has the inverted triangle body shape superheroes also have. In *Spectacular Bodies*, Yvonne

⁴⁵ Jarvis, *The Male Body At War*, 186.

⁴⁶ Harrison G. Pope Jr., Katherine A. Phillips and Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat, and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys* (New York et al: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 30.

Tasker writes that the bodybuilder is always “clearly marked as *manufactured*.”⁴⁷ It is carefully, consciously constructed instead of naturally occurring because as *The Adonis Complex* states, “the male body simply cannot exceed a certain level of muscularity without the help of steroids or other chemicals” which is certainly the case here.⁴⁸ Without steroids, or a superserum, a body like this would not be possible. Steroids, used in cycles and at high dosages, combined with any kind of work-out schedule, changes the body drastically in the space of a few weeks. The *Adonis Complex* describes this body as simultaneously visible and invisible:

[Steroids] have created athletes, actors and models bigger and stronger than any ordinary man, and the media have promulgated their images everywhere. These images have glorified the steroid-pumped body, portraying it as a model of health, athletic prowess, hard work and dedication – while almost never admitting that it was a product of dangerous chemicals.⁴⁹

Because these bodies are promoted as the natural result of hard work, the viewing audience is not aware that these bodies are made by steroids. The steroid body is far more present in American culture than assumed by American audiences because the media frames these bodies as the result of hard work instead of chemicals. Captain America certainly follows in that tradition, as Dittmer points out:

While the ‘super-soldier serum’ is responsible for his physique, the success of Captain America in crime fighting is clearly attributed to his hard work (...) Indeed, *Captain America* comics are laced with images of the Captain practicing his acrobatic maneuvers [sic] or lifting weights. While the drugs given to him by the U.S. government may have advantaged his start, his continued success is scripted as attributable to his continued hard work.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 78.

⁴⁸ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*, 125.

⁴⁹ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*, 102.

⁵⁰ Jason Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 95:3 (2005), 629 – 630.

Even though the audience is aware that Steve's body is artificially produced, the narrative implies that his innate masculinity has made his transformation possible, while his continued hard work maintains the superboddy. The discipline and self-control required for this hard work and body maintenance is also a sign of superior masculinity. Here is where cultural ideas about the malleability of human bodies and the creation of technology intersect. The artificially created body, which brings out innate and natural masculinity, allows Steve to maintain his masculine body by lifting weights and working out, which are framed as a form of body and masculinity maintenance. The comics maintain a contradictory duality: Steve as a technological product requires maintenance to keep his artificially constructed masculine body in mint condition and as a natural body sustained through innate masculinity's capacity for hard work and self-discipline.

Captain America embodies a masculinity that is both innate (masculine virtues) and artificially created (the superserum enhanced body), gained by joining the military, the ultimate signifier of American hegemony. According to Aaron Belkin, for some individuals "military service certifies one's competence, trustworthiness or authenticity" and represents "beliefs, practices and attributes which enable individuals to legitimize their claim to authority by associating themselves with the military."⁵¹ Military masculinity is associated with authority and validated masculinity consisting of bravery, strength and loyalty to one's country. Steve's desire to join the military demonstrates his need to affirm his innate masculinity in the face of his non-masculine body. His eventual rank of captain and subsequent masculine body only prove his status, which also proves his quintessential American exceptionality, because, as Belkin states, "[military] masculinity is often portrayed as a central element of the American melting pot, a site where citizens come together, become soldiers and defend the nation as to minimize foreign threat."⁵² The military is a large part of the American masculine cultural identity and it allows Steve, as Captain America, to embody the values of America itself.

⁵¹ Aaron Belkin, *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire 1898-2001* (London: Hurst & Company, 2012), 3.

⁵² Belkin, *Bring Me Men*, 5.

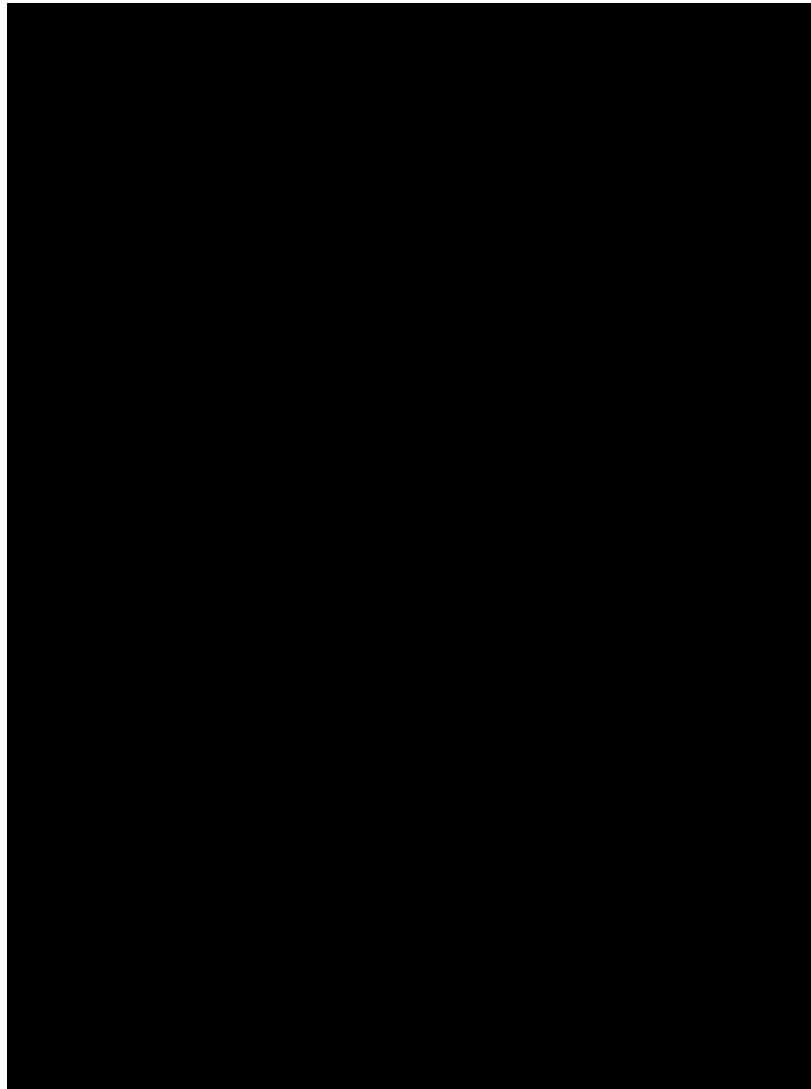


Image 1.7: Castaway in Dimension Z © 2013 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Representing America as the embodiment of the living nation makes Steve Rogers the exemplary nationalist superhero. Dittmer defines the nationalist superhero as a hero who “explicitly identifies himself or herself as a representative and defender of a specific nation-state, often through his or her name, uniform and mission.”⁵³ Captain America dresses in the colours and motifs of the American flag: red and blue, the stars and stripes, as seen in the image above.⁵⁴ The star even functions as a chevron to further underline his phallic chest and his superhero identity rooted in American military victory. This further enhances Captain America’s masculinity through the gendered

⁵³ Jason Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, 7.

⁵⁴ Rick Remender et al, *Captain America: Castaway in Dimension Z* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2013).

divide between nation and state that reflects cultural gender roles. Dittmer writes that in “gendered reading of national security culture, it is the ‘soft’ feminine nation that is to be protected by the ‘hard’ masculine state.”⁵⁵ The soft feminine nation, the homestead where the women and children reside, needs to be protected by the state, the masculine institutions built and maintained by men such as the government and the military. The nation/state divide mirrors the gender dynamics present in the ideal of the nuclear family and the masculine ideal of the warrior: the masculine father/husband/warrior protects the female/mother/civilian. According to Belkin, this protection co-exists with the annihilation of the feminine in the warrior:

Femininity is coded as an arbitrary, fictional construction which represents weakness, subordination, emotionalism, dependency and disloyalty. These traits are framed as dangerous aspects of the unmasculine that warriors must reject at all costs if they are to acquire enough strength to defend national security.⁵⁶

In the gender binary, the non-masculine is the feminine and therefore must be eliminated in case it corrupts the masculine.

As a nationalist superhero, Captain America embodies the ultimate warrior and both the protection and destruction of women is central to that identity. The tension between these two contradictory impulses is present in the *Captain America* comics through the contrast between female villains and female allies. The female villain is often a femme fatale who attempts to seduce the hero away from his duty and into evil. While they inevitably fail to seduce Captain America, such women must be destroyed.⁵⁷ The female allies are either female superheroes, support characters who share the superhero’s commitment to his duty or the civilian girlfriend. While, as the good woman, these female characters deserve protection, to be protected means to be removed from the narrative. To prevent these women from being kidnapped, harmed or otherwise used against him, and from being a distraction, they must be rejected and eliminated. Therefore, despite the protection of the ‘good’ feminine as key to warrior masculinity, Captain America often exists in isolation from the female. He tends to

⁵⁵ Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, 28.

⁵⁶ Belkin, *Bring Me Men*, 26.

⁵⁷ Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, 24-45.

work in male-dominated teams, such as the Avengers, or in team-ups with Bucky Barnes or Sam Wilson. Like many superheroes, Captain America is also consistently single or in on-again-off-again relationships with a woman to support ‘hetero-heroism’ in comics, which Dittmer defines as “the role of the nationalist superhero’s body in [representing] the relationship between masculinities and heterosexual domesticity.”⁵⁸ As a superhero embodying the American ideal, the American soldier, Captain America has to reflect or embody the conflation of masculinity and heterosexuality as well as the idealization of the family unit where the mother provides domesticity and the father provides protection from the outside world. Captain America is often shown longing for that heteronormative lifestyle symbolized via the nuclear family and yet is constantly single because of “his inability to fulfil his girlfriend’s emotional needs because of his intense devotion to duty and the obviously never-ending requirements of that job.”⁵⁹ Because Captain America is the embodiment of the perfect, ideal soldier, he can never stop being that soldier. While he protects the homestead, he will never be able to leave the front lines to return to that homestead and is therefore incapable of being domesticated by any female partners. He continually chases the dream of heterosexual domesticity, but never achieves it. He simultaneously supports heteronormativity while maintaining a masculinity devoid of the female.

The destruction of the feminine is not only required in warrior masculinity, and by extension, the military institution, but also in scientific discovery, both of which are inextricably linked in the figure of Captain America. During World War II and the following decades, the United States coupled the demands of military defence to scientific advancement with the federal government providing most of the funding for research and development.⁶⁰ According to Brian Easlea, this connection between the military and scientific innovation already existed in scientific discourse itself, which often uses language and metaphors involving military terms of conquest, specifically, the masculine conquest of the feminine.⁶¹ This masculine scientific discourse intertwines with the gendered nation/state discourse, where nature is represented as the feminine nation and scientific discovery as the masculine institutions build on the conquest of the nation. Steve’s masculinization, symbolizing the masculinization of

⁵⁸ Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, 35.

⁵⁹ Dittmer, *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, 36.

⁶⁰ Brian Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable: Masculinity, Scientists and the Nuclear Arms Race* (London: Pluto Press, 1983).

⁶¹ Mark Moss, *The Media and the Models of Masculinity* (New York et al: Lexington Books, 2011), 9.

America itself, represents both the conquest of the weak and female body/nation/nature by the strong and male mind/state/scientific progress.

The impulse underlying cultural representations of the body, scientific advancements and the construction of masculinity is fuelled by the masculine desire to control feminine procreative power. Based on some of Phyllis Chesler's work, Easlea goes on to theorize that, in scientific discourse, creation must be expressed in masculine terms, meaning aggression and destruction. For instance, Robert Oppenheimer was dubbed 'the father of the atomic bomb' and successful bomb tests were coded in terms of delivering baby boys. For example, in July 1945, the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, received news of the success of the plutonium bomb's test via a note, which stated: "Doctor has just returned most enthusiastic and confident that the little boy is as husky as his big brother."⁶² The desire to conquer feminine nature is a desire to usurp her procreative power through the creation of something purely masculine by the masculine, meaning, scientific and technological innovation. Mark Moss further theorizes this idea of technology as male procreation and states that "[whether] on the inside with electronics or on the outside with design, technology is a surrogate for biological creation. Technology, in most of its manifestations, is what a man can do."⁶³ What this kind of discourse implies is that, what women can do is a bodily destiny, an accident of gender that requires no real effort and can easily be replaced by superior male creations which require dedication, determination and masculine power. According to Daniel Jaffe, "[in] our present culture, it may be that a degradation of the role of motherhood has accompanied a transition from agrarian to technological predominance."⁶⁴ Technological predominance in Western culture has legitimized male procreation over female procreation as one is considered purposeful technological mastery and the other accidental biological destiny.

Technology as masculine procreation can be traced back to womb envy, a concept in psychoanalysis developed by Melanie Klein and Karen Horney.⁶⁵ Womb envy is the envy of women's procreative ability and, theoretically, causes cultural sentiments that favour the male. For example, the idea that the public sphere is masculine and equating the cerebral with the male while reducing the female to her

⁶² Easlea, *Fathering the Unthinkable*, 96.

⁶³ Moss, *Models of Masculinity*, 139.

⁶⁴ Daniel S. Jaffe, "The Masculine Envy of Woman's Procreative Function," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 16 (1986), 534.

⁶⁵ For a more in-depth discussion of womb envy, see Karen Horney's *Feminine Psychology* (1993 [1922]) as well as Melanie Klein's *Envy and Gratitude: A Study of Unconscious Sources* (2013 [1957]).

(procreative) biology as set out in Descartes' dualist discourse. Another consequence would be that men are constantly compensating for their lack of biological procreativity and "have to create other things outside themselves to compete with the potent symbol and actuality of women's biological and emotional creativity."⁶⁶ By excluding the female, scientific discourse and technological innovation can be framed as a solely male enterprise; a masculine way of procreating.⁶⁷ Jacqueline Stevens connects womb envy to the creation of the phallus as a cultural signification for male virility and power. She frames the phallus as "compensatory masculine myths about phallic power and even birth-giving abilities."⁶⁸ Connecting the phallus to birth-giving abilities provides for another insight into the importance of the penis-bulge in the blue panel from *Captain America: Reborn*. It marks him as a virile, male product of masculine procreation. The creation of the white, American supersoldier with an innate superior masculinity is framed as the product of American ingenuity, the American military institution, scientific procreation and the elimination or conquest of the female. Captain America's artificial body brings all these strands together.

One of the most artificial bodies in superhero comics is the body of Iron Man and the cultural forces that helped to construct it are very similar to those embodied by Captain America. Tony Stark's superhero persona, Iron Man, first appeared in *Tales of Suspense* #39 in 1963, during the Cold War and its reconstruction of middle-class masculinity. As a genius, rich industrialist, Tony becomes the Iron Man after he is captured by insurgents who demand he builds weapons for them. He promises he will and, instead, uses the material they provide to create the Iron Man suit and escape. With the suit, he goes on to fight crime and international villains. Initially, most of his enemies were explicitly communist and Tony functioned as a justification for capitalist ideology following the 1950s era of cultural conservatism and capitalist enterprise. As a rich business owner, he promoted the American Dream and validated capitalist ideology. Tony embodied some of the cultural fears surrounding masculinity and the status of the self-made man in an increasingly consumer focused society. As mentioned previously, the 1950s saw the birth of the corporate middle-class even while the ideal of the business-owner and self-made man persisted. Michael Kimmel writes:

⁶⁶ Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), 100.

⁶⁷ The elimination of the female in scientific discourse also contributes to the systematic erasure of women's contributions to science.

⁶⁸ Jacqueline Stevens, "Pregnancy Envy and the Politics of Compensatory Masculinities," *Politics and Gender* 1:2 (2005), 289.

The central characteristic of being self-made was that the proving ground was the public sphere, especially the workplace. And the workplace was a man's world (and a native-born white man's world at that). If manhood could be proved, it had to be proved in the eyes of other men.⁶⁹

The most prominent feature of the self-made man was his success in the free market, proving his masculinity to other men who had access to the public and professional sphere. Tony proved that, even in the 1960s, when corporate culture had become the norm, it was still possible for the self-made man to make his fortune in America. In this sense, Tony perpetuated the American Dream of hard work as an automatic gateway to wealth. His technological success was part of this capitalist construct, connecting progress and innovation to the free market, which in turn funded his scientific research. Therefore, Tony did not conform to the usual relationship between scientists and the United States government, as much scientific research is funded by the military and the federal government.

Even before World War II, scientific communities expressed concerns about the motives behind military funding and many struggled to reconcile their own progressive, liberal beliefs with the death and destruction their work caused. In the 1950s, with McCarthyism and the Red Scare, refusal to participate in weapon projects could result in accusations of un-Americanism, communist sympathies and incarceration.⁷⁰ Tony, as a free entrepreneur, exists in opposition to the government and its insistence on complete control over scientific discourse. As Robert Genter writes, "one of the main narrative threads of *Iron Man* concerns Stark's continuing problems with military officials who are trying to control his research and who begin questioning his loyalty."⁷¹ During most of the comics, his wealth protected him from real governmental control and allowed him to continue his work, even when he turned away from weapons manufacture and focused on the production of consumer goods.

By the 1960s, technological advancement had given birth to consumer culture, with new technological products aimed at housewives to help them produce cleaner and

⁶⁹ Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20.

⁷⁰ Robert Genter, "'With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility': Cold War Comics and the Birth of Marvel Comics," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:6 (2007), 968.

⁷¹ Ibid.

better homes. Simultaneously, consumer culture urged men to amass greater wealth in order to purchase more things for the home and prove their manhood through the possession and acquisition of status symbols. However, wealth and consumer culture increasingly created anxiety about the condition of masculinity in America. Raised in comfort and affluence instead of the strenuous conditions of the past, so said the cultural narrative, prevented boys from becoming hard, masculine citizens strong enough to withstand the tide of communism. K.A. Cuordileone writes that people were “increasingly struggling with the fear that Americans were growing too soft and self-indulgent next to their hard-driving, self-denying Spartan enemies in the U.S.S.R.”⁷² Cultural anxiety about the soft man was rooted in anxiety about the corrupting power of femininity in two forms: affluence in the form of luxury and the domineering mother. Mark Moss writes that manhood can be questioned over “worry over decadence, and importantly, the subsuming of hardiness in favour of luxury.”⁷³ Luxury, like femininity, is seen as corrosive, erasing the hardiness required to construct masculinity, making it soft. Luxury and femininity are linked as both carry cultural connotations of excess. As Helen M. Malson points out, “Lacan (among others) has illustrated [that] woman generically has been made to signify excess.”⁷⁴ Luxury is also seen as excess and is therefore rendered feminine. Excessive feminine influence on male children was also blamed on the mother. The domestic sphere was seen as female and the absolute authority the mother wielded in the home became a source of anxiety. Many mothers, whose influence was considered too powerful, were diagnosed with Momism, a supposedly severe pathological condition that caused mothers to “make psychological wrecks of their own children – *particularly boys*.”⁷⁵ Mass media claimed that Momism prevailed among middle-class women who were full-time mothers and homemakers and failed in their femininity by not being content with their place in the home. Momistic mothers created weak, neurotic and ‘soft’ men who would be susceptible to homosexual and communist influences. Both the fear of excess and the fear of undue motherly influence on male children should have been dissolved through the concept of togetherness. Cuordileone discusses how the 1950s encouraged a return to the home; a

⁷² K.A. Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture in the Cold War* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 23.

⁷³ Moss, *Models of Masculinity*, 7.

⁷⁴ Helen M. Malson, “Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess” in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*, ed. Jane M. Ussher (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 236-237.

⁷⁵ Hans Seibald, *Momism: The Silent Disease of America* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1976), 3.

cultural sentiment called ‘togetherness’ urging married couples to do everything together to create a stable and loving home. This would allow men the opportunity to teach their sons how to be men and masculinise the domestic sphere to counter the corrosive potential of wealth and femininity without masculine discipline. However, the rise of corporate culture required men to prove their masculinity through their career, masculine hobbies and gym-built bodies and men were once again driven out of the home. In the cultural narrative, child-rearing remained women’s business.

Tony simultaneously represented those fears and laid them to rest. He inherited his company and a large family fortune from his parents, placing him in the ‘old world,’ upper-class society even while calling to mind images of hardworking, family-owned businesses. He grew up in the affluence and comfort of the upper-middle-class home, ruled by the mother, both the American Dream and its nightmarish double. Representing the fear of weak masculinity fostered in such homes, pre-Iron Man Tony Stark was described as a playboy who drank too much and partied too hard. The narrative implies that Tony is from a long line of men who have been serially weakened by luxury and feminine influence, lacking a strong male role model to look up to. While the precise context of the Cold War has faded from the narrative, fears of weak masculinity in light of a ‘feminized’ society, with luxury and coddling mothers, are still current. In post-9/11 culture, many of the anxieties and fears present in Cold War culture have returned, including the state of panic about a possible crisis in masculinity caused by luxury, excess and femininity.⁷⁶ In the *Iron Man* movie franchise, particularly the first film released in 2008, luxury and femininity are used to portray the pre-Iron Man Tony Stark as lacking in masculinity, which is necessary to highlight the powerful masculinity of the Iron Man by contrast. When he is kidnapped, cut off from his wealth and luxury, only given the equipment necessary to build weapons for his kidnappers, he finally has the harsh environment needed to cultivate superior masculinity. In these hardening conditions, he is able to construct a new, powerful, hard body and he literally becomes the self-made man. The creation of the Iron Man is a transformation from soft and inadequate masculinity to superior hard masculinity. The suit exists as an artificial, self-constructed, hard body.

In the cultural domain, the hard, artificial body exists most recognizably through the action figure, which the Iron Man suit resembles. *The Adonis Complex* documents

⁷⁶ Cuordileone, *Manhood and American Political Culture*, 245.

the changes in bodily dimensions for action figures, as representative for ideal body sizes, over the last thirty years. In the G.I. Joe Evolution 1 image, there are three action figures depicted. From left to right, they are the G.I. Joe released in 1964, 1974 and 1991 respectively. The musculature of the chest becomes increasingly detailed, with the 1991 example almost looking dehydrated considering how pronounced his muscles are. After 1964, the waist began to shrink while the chest, shoulders and biceps slowly began to expand. The G.I. Joe figures released in the 1990s exemplify this evolution, as seen in image 1.9: G.I. Joe Evolution 2.⁷⁷

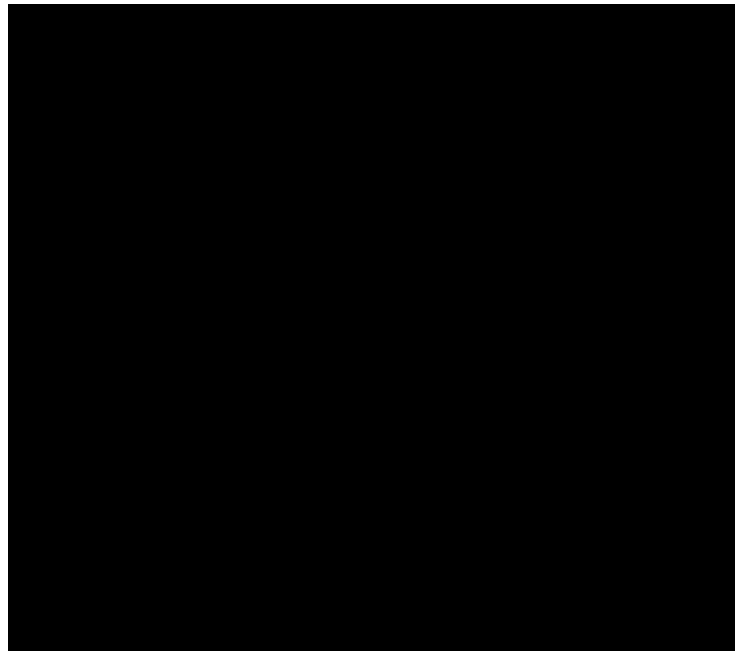


Image 1.8: G.I. Joe Evolution 1 © 2002 Captured Moments.

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⁷⁷ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*, 42.

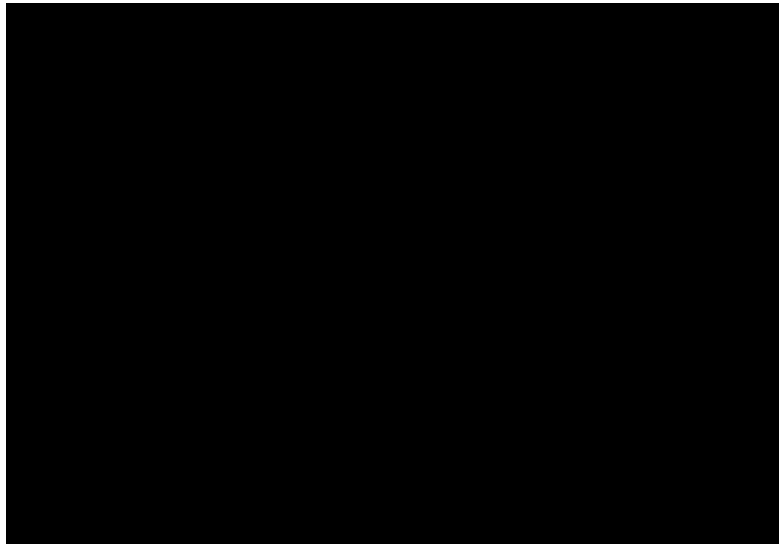


Image 1.9: G.I. Joe Evolution 2 © 2002 Captured Moments.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

The action figure on the far right, produced mid-1990s, is obscenely large. While most of the other G.I. Joes are at least a reasonable size (if not musculature), the last G.I. Joe does not have a body any man could reasonably be expected to possess. In fact, Pope, Phillips and Olivardia concluded in *The Adonis Complex* that, if he had been “full-sized, he would have a 55-inch chest and 27-inch bicep. His bicep, in other words, is almost as big as his waist – and bigger than that of most competition bodybuilders.”⁷⁸ As discussed previously, certain body sizes and shapes cannot be achieved without chemical intervention. The implications of these changes in body size promoted to young children are immense as “the ideal male body has evolved in only about thirty years from a normal and reasonably attainable figure (...) to a hugely muscular figure that we believe no man could attain without massive doses of steroids.”⁷⁹ In only thirty years, the ideal male body changed to resemble that of the bodybuilding action hero. This body, while promoted as the result of masculine perseverance and discipline: the male conquest over the unruly, excessive female-created natural body, is actually the product of unhealthy and dangerous chemicals. Pope, Phillips and Olivardia explain this growing obsession with muscularity through the theory of ‘threatened masculinity’:

⁷⁸ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*, 42.

⁷⁹ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*, 43-44.

Women can enter formerly all-male military schools, join formerly all-male clubs, and win elective offices once held almost exclusively by men. Women have become less dependent upon men for money, power, and self-esteem. What, then, do men have left to distinguish themselves, to mark their masculinity? One of the few attributes left, one of the few grounds on which women can never match men, is muscularity. Therefore, we hypothesize that the body is growing in relative importance as a defining feature of masculinity.⁸⁰

Because the measure of masculinity depends on competition with other men and the elimination of the feminine, women's penetration into formerly all-male spaces forces men to compete with women. Through bodybuilding, specifically the creation of large and lavishly detailed musculature, men attempt to create an exclusively all-male space where they can safely compete against each other. This provides legitimacy to the hard body as a necessary component for constructing masculinity as it includes the elimination of the female from male spaces. Comparing the G.I. Joe evolutions to the evolution of the Iron Man suit, it becomes clear that the Iron Man experiences similar changes.

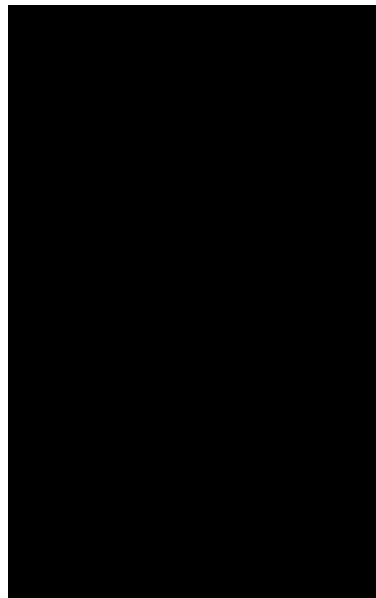


Image 1.10: Original Iron Man © 1963 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

⁸⁰ Pope, *The Andonis Complex*, 50.

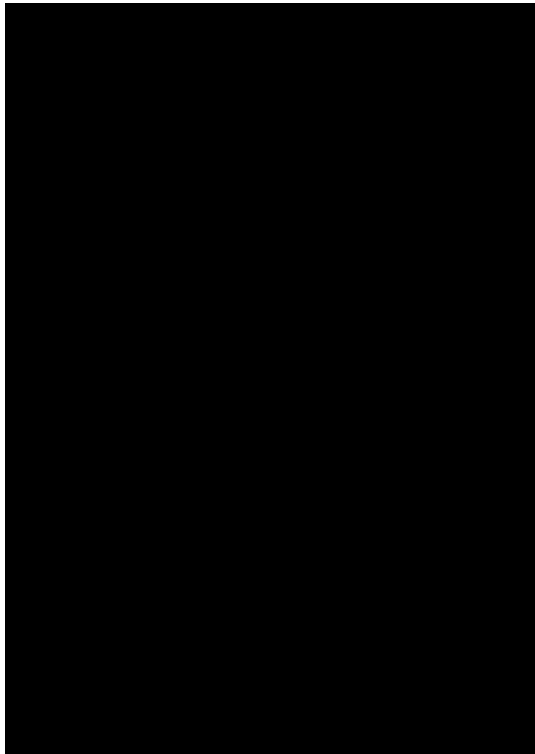


Image 1.11: 80s Iron Man © 1983
Marvel Comics.

**[Image removed due to copyright
restrictions]**

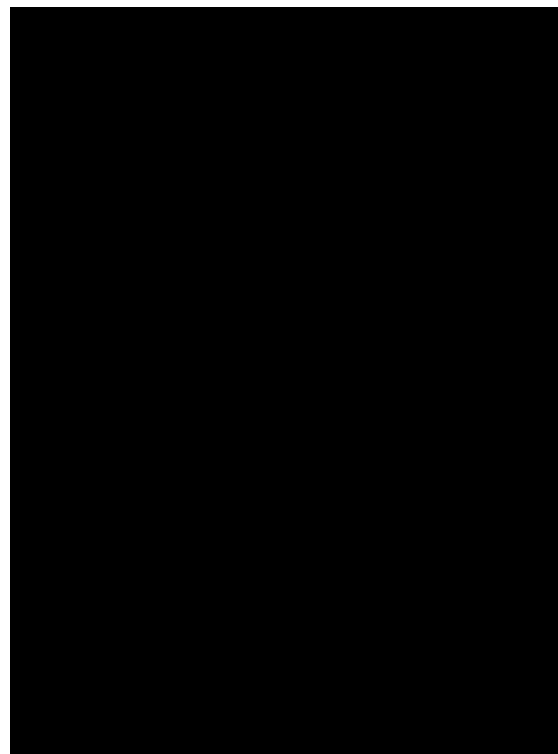


Image 1.12: Modern Iron Man ©
2013 Marvel Comics.

**[Image removed due to copyright
restrictions]**

The first image is a modern rendering of the suit as it first appeared in 1963 and was chosen because it embodies the very beginning of Stark's development as Iron Man.⁸¹ The image on the left is from 1983, displaying a significant shift away from the original design when the representation of the male body in popular media changed significantly.⁸² The image on the right is from 2013, one of the most recent iterations of the suit.⁸³ The 1963 model is the largest and there is no significant difference in size between the 1983 and the 2013 model. This seems to contradict the evolution documented in *The Adonis Complex*, but a close examination of the torso shapes reveals an increase in chest size along with a decrease in waist size, creating the inverted triangle shape caused by bodybuilding and steroid use. The 1983 and 2013 models have this familiar shape, which the 1963 version lacks as it pre-dates this development in the representation of male bodies, which dates from the 1970s-1980s. Not only are the sizes

⁸¹ Warren Ellis et al, *Iron Man: Extremis* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2013).

⁸² Catherine Saunders et al, *Marvel: Year by Year, A Visual Chronicle* (New York: DK Publishing, 2013).

⁸³ Ellis, *Iron Man: Extremis*.

of the suits important, but their design also speaks to their purpose, which is infused with meaning about masculinity. Technology and masculinity have always been connected, as demonstrated by the discussion of Easlea's work previously, and this connection is embodied by the Iron Man suits the same way the cultural concept of the car has come to signify the connection between masculinity and technology. Moss considers how, "[for] many men, the car is the most visible symbol of how they wish others to see them (...). For many men, the car has become a key masculine identifier," as well as, "a significant means of empowerment, autonomy."⁸⁴ Cars symbolize a man's masculinity. It is no coincidence that cars with a powerful engine or large exterior frames are called 'muscle cars' as in popular culture large muscles symbolize power, whether that is physical, social or political power. The Iron Man and its structure embody Tony's masculinity as well as his autonomy and empowerment.

The original suit is made completely out of metal, because of the limited resources available at the time of its production, and is mostly a faceless monolith. Judging from the joints and the size of the panels, the suit has very little flexibility or manoeuvrability. It is large and powerful, crude but intimidating. The suit was built for a single purpose: to break down walls. It did not require anything besides raw power. As the signification of Tony's transformation into hard masculinity, the purpose of this specific iteration of the suit was to underline the power and masculinity gained during his escape. Additionally, in the 1950s, following the raw destructive power of scientific progress displayed during World War II, technology and science were equated with a destructive power that humanity had a moral duty to master. Tony's masculinity was embodied through the Iron Man suit as the mastery of technological power and science. The second design from 1983 is more futuristic. It is sleeker, aside from its massive, pointy shoulder pads in line with the 1980s Space Age fashion trends. The most immediate and notable differences between this design and the 1963 one is its shape and the amount of detail, similar to the development in action figures documented in *The Adonis Complex*. Iron Man's 1983 suit, with its inverted triangle body shape and muscular detail follows the bodybuilding trend. It seems unnecessary for a suit made of metal to have a sculpted chest and oblique muscles. The suit looks like it has been poured onto Tony's chest and subsequently hardened into the shape of his muscular body, further supporting Iron Man's signification of the bodybuilding body. The 2013

⁸⁴ Moss, *Models of Masculinity*, 144-145.

model, while having a similar shape to the 1983 model, has a more exaggerated triangle shape and looks much harder. The texture resembles the look of a steel or iron alloy and the suit actually looks like a robotic exoskeleton. The shoulder pads have been rounded out, adding bulk in the shoulders while the smaller, interlocking panels seem to give it a higher level of flexibility than both the 1963 and the 1983 models. The level of detail has increased again, as the joint mechanisms are clearly visible in the gauntlet, elbow joints and kneepads. The details of the technological elements of the suit stand in for muscular definition. The suit seems perfectly capable of flexing its muscles. The level of detail in technological embodiment solidifies the link between technology and masculinity, specifically, the male body. The ultimate masculine body has transcended human limitations. Instead of using technology to improve on the human body, as with Captain America, an entirely new body can be constructed: harder, more powerful and more masculine than ever. It embodies masculinity and its link to science, power and aggression.

The production of technology is also connected to the idea of the self-made man. Moss discusses how the self-made man engages in processes of self-modification, where “[autonomy] and making something different with one’s hands are also significant.”⁸⁵ Self-modification through technological means are relevant to the construction of the self-made man’s masculinity because it involves the creation of, and by the male. As previously discussed, male scientific discourse is imbued with the desire to procreate masculinity through masculinity. Moss states that “[a] specific version of the American entrepreneur and the self-made man is often focused on technology. More specifically, it lingers around the appropriation of different kinds of technology in order to harness some kind of power.”⁸⁶ In this quote, Moss links technology, masculinity and consumerism. It is the appropriation of technology, and its creation, that harnesses power and masculinity. Throughout the years, the Iron Man suit has changed significantly and become more sophisticated and elaborate, corresponding to scientific advancement and cultural discourse’s dissemination of it. This reinvention of the suit allows Tony to continually reconstruct his masculinity. It also demonstrates his wealth and ability to financially support the reconstruction or purchase of this artificial body, which fits into Kimmel’s “cycle of ‘conspicuous consumption’ – the frenzied and competitive consumption of expensive items that demonstrate high

⁸⁵ Moss, *Models of Masculinity*, 143.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

status.”⁸⁷ In consumer culture, consumption is always a status symbol. The continual reconstruction of the Iron Man suits is a consumption of technology that demonstrates Tony’s high status and masculinity. He treats the suits the same way consumer culture discards highly advanced technological items the second a similar item with a few improvements is produced. Its artificial nature, in consumer culture, implies that it is a body for sale and with enough money or technological prowess anyone could possess it. This promotes the idea that superior masculinity is available to everyone. It only needs to be cultivated, which implies that masculinity is actually innate and the inability to produce it is a flaw in someone’s gender configuration. Mike Featherstone writes that “[with] appearance being taken as a reflex of the self, penalties of bodily neglect are a lowering of one’s acceptability as a person, as well as an indication of laziness, low self-esteem and even moral failure.”⁸⁸ In a culture where dieting, bodybuilding and cosmetic surgery can change your appearance completely and is becoming increasingly available to a wider audience, not participating in appearance-based gender identity is suspicious. As this body is a body that anyone can possess, not having it must be a lack of desire to possess it, implying a lack of innate masculinity. The Iron Man suit is simultaneously unique and generic: it is superior, but also for sale.

Conclusion

Superman, Captain America and Iron Man demonstrate how superheroes perpetuate a pre-existing script for ideal masculinity. This construction is predicated on the elimination of the feminine, which includes anything outside the boundaries of masculine behaviour, anything that is soft, weak, connected to nature and biology or the domestic sphere. Through the inverted triangle body shape, emphasized by the chest chevron and the ‘Underwear of Power,’ the superhero constructs a powerful body reflecting an innate masculinity, representing the mastery over the (feminine, natural) body via masculine technology and science. The evolution of the masculine ideal in America between the 1940s and contemporary times reflects an evolution in consumer culture’s influence on all levels of society. Increasingly, gender identity is defined by how much can be earned, spent and bought. Conflated with masculinity, men are

⁸⁷ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 78.

⁸⁸ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture” in *The Body: Social Progress and Cultural Theory*, ed. Mike Featherstone et al (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 186.

encouraged to buy their way into ideal masculinity by rising through the corporate ladder, providing for their family, being able to purchase luxury items and status symbols. From the 1940s working class, masculinity's connection to the military and technology, to the 1950s rise of the middle class, Cold War sentiments and Momism paranoia, the 1960s/70s growth of occupational consumer culture and Second Wave feminism, the 1980s and 1990s bodybuilding action hero, masculinity has evolved to continually produce bigger and 'better' bodies. Underlying this evolution is the increasing faith in technological advancements' capability to improve the human body beyond its natural capacities, as if feminine nature can continually be upgraded or replaced by masculine technological prowess. The superhero movies of the 2000s and 2010s have perpetuated this ideal masculinity. At *The Superhero 2* conference in Oxford in 2016, Daniel Connell and Drew Murphy each presented papers on hypermasculinity in superhero films. They discussed how, every time a new X-Men or Wolverine film is released, audiences marvel at Hugh Jackman's ability to be bigger and more muscular, especially now he is in his late 40s.⁸⁹ Chris Pratt's transformation from chunky Andy Dwyer in *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015) to superhero Peter Quin in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) with a six pack and massive pectorals was widely covered by news outlets and entertainment magazines. Robert Downey Jr, whose portrayal of Iron Man made the superhero more famous than ever before, has maintained a striking physique for the films even though Tony wears a robotic suit and would not necessarily need such a superhero body.⁹⁰ Increasingly, no matter which media format is being accessed, the superbody is there, bigger and more powerful than ever before.

Considering the discussion of hypermasculinity in the introduction, it is clear that the elements used to construct the superhero are similar to the elements present in hypermasculinity: elimination of the female and violence as inherently masculine, which is reproduced in powerful bodies. If hypermasculinity is concerned with the total control of the male's environment, superheroes seem emblematic of hypermasculinity and all its negative effects in culture. In *The Adonis Complex*, it becomes clear that the huge bodies promulgated everywhere causes many young men to develop negative self-images and addictions to bodybuilding and steroids. Steroids' psychological effects

⁸⁹ Daniel Connell, "Presentations of Hypermasculinity in Comic Book Cinema" (paper presented at The Superhero 2, Oxford University, September 9-11, 2016).

⁹⁰ Drew Murphy, "Days of Future Past: Queer Identities and the X-Men" (paper presented at The Superhero 2, Oxford University, September 9-11, 2016).

resemble paranoia and hypermasculine frames of thought, which also encourages violence towards those presented as not possessing masculinity, such as women, gay men and men of colour.⁹¹ Simultaneously, the increasingly powerful masculine body continually exists side by side with masculinity's constant state of anxiety about its own strength. In the 1930s and 1940s, many men could not afford to feed their families or themselves, lost physical strength and became malnourished even while mass media constantly produced images of the physically powerful working-class body. This was replaced by the image of the soldier, who was reinvigorated and re-masculinized through his military service but whose double – the conscientious objector and the shell-shock sufferer – haunted American society. In the 1950s, men were becoming too soft and weak as a result of luxury and had to go camping, fishing or hunting to become harder and stronger. Counterculture and the panic about Momism in the 1960s produced a crisis about long-haired and soft men who refused military service side by side with corporate culture and the rise of corporate masculinity. In the 1980s and 1990s, masculinity was under siege through the slow deconstruction of male privilege and the bodybuilding action hero quickly appeared to reinforce the idea of the male as the protector of the female. In contemporary times, a brief glance at websites, such as rooshv.com, and blogs, such as athefist.wordpress.com, will prove that many men are convinced they are living in a time when feminism means oppression of the masculine instead of equality of the sexes.⁹² 'If only we could go back to the good old days when men were men and women were women.' But, as Chapter One shows, there were no good old days and the toxic ideas and constraints of patriarchal hegemonic masculinity have always forced men into a state of panic and crisis which they had to compensate for.

Superheroes offer compensatory images of powerful masculinity as well as scripts on masculine behaviour countering the narratives of masculinity in crisis. In many ways, they are a power fantasy attempting to purge male anxiety. Superman would never be anxious about his status as a man. He might suffer from existential angst in relation to his humanity, or what it means to be human when one is undoubtedly alien, but *Superman* is always a man. He might come close to defeat, but is always victorious. Captain America and Iron Man continually construct their own

⁹¹ Pope, *The Adonis Complex*.

⁹² *Roosh V*, accessed October 13, 2016, <http://www.rooshv.com/>
The Atheist, accessed October 13, 2016, <https://athefist.wordpress.com/>

masculinity and do not need to be told how. Somehow, they possess the innate knowledge required to forge masculinity on their own terms. They might take a beating, but they always come out on top, like real men do. They are admired and loved by the sheer virtue of their production of ideal masculinity. In comic books and other forms of mass media, the superhero remains at the top of the social hierarchy, dominating all others in their universe. This domination must be ultimate and complete. Masculinity is predicated on control of the feminine and the ability to inflict violence, which is framed as necessary for the protection of the weak. The ideal masculinity promoted in superhero comic books overlaps with some behavioural patterns and ideology associated with hypermasculinity, such as violence as inherently masculine, elimination of the feminine and risk-taking behaviour as heroic masculinity, but also includes an insistence on American nationality and wealth as a gateway to power in consumer culture. This ideal masculinity fits into hegemonic and heteronormative gender roles, perpetuating the status quo.

Chapter Two: The Female Body

This chapter examines the femininity represented by two female combatant superheroes, Supergirl and Wonder Woman. It analyses the way femininity and womanhood are represented outside the stereotypes previously identified in comics, such as Brokeback, Fridge-ing and the ‘strike a pose and point’ powers. Through understanding the socio-historical context in which these superheroes have existed, this chapter examines the ways in which these female superheroes conform to or challenge dominant ideas surrounding gender identity and their appropriate gender roles. While female superheroes do perpetuate stereotypes about women and femininity, they are inherently disruptive to the heteropatriarchal status quo on which the genre of superheroes rests: the male soldier/warrior/protector and the female civilian.

Barbie Dolls and Porn Stars: Supergirl and the Plasticisation of the Female Super Body

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, America was transforming into a new consumer society, which promoted the idea of the teenager as a good consumer to combat a perceived rise in juvenile crime. Michael Barson and Steven Heller document how “a kinder, gentler, *nicer* sort of American teenager who we will dub the KleenTeen – was being imagined, refined and promoted by the popular arts.”¹ This new teenager served as the direct opposite of the juvenile delinquent dominating the cultural landscape in the late 1940s and early 1950s. The juvenile delinquent, as a cultural construct, reflected rising fears about America’s moral fibre and whether future American citizens would be able to safeguard the American way of life.² The charges aimed at young girls, specifically, were mostly about sex and prostitution, revealing a preoccupation with women’s chastity and procreative abilities. Women were expected to function as a moral compass and their ‘corruption’ seemed especially sinister and demoralizing. If young girls, as the media reported, did not value their virtue, spread venereal disease and had increasing numbers of illegitimate children, how could they raise virtuous citizens or construct the ideal American nuclear family in order to withstand the threat

¹ Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Teenage Confidential: An Illustrated History of the American Teen* (New York: Barnes & Nobles Publishing, inc., 1998), 12.

² According to Thomas Hine in *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, the rise in juvenile crime reported in the papers in the 1930s and 1940s was not substantiated by statistics or corporeal evidence.

of communism and the breakdown of civilization? Early 1950s mass media promoted the KleeTeen as a virtuous alternative that young children could look up to and aspire to be, a socially acceptable construct of femininity and teenage consumer culture. The KleeTeen functioned as a new consumer and advertisements increasingly targeted teenagers instead of their parents. Most of the adds aimed at female KleeTeens concerned the growing commercialization of romance. The teenager became a dedicated romantic for whom dating was an important financial endeavour and part of his or her civic duty.³ Girl KleeTeens had to financially invest in femininity by buying products like cosmetics and fashionable clothes. In return, the boy KleeTeen would spend money on the date, equating her monetary value with his own status displays. During the date, he would press for romantic or sexual contact and she would establish the boundaries of that contact, guarding her chastity. This financial exchange bolstered heteropatriarchal norms surrounding men and women's sexual behaviour and supported the assumed inevitable construction of the nuclear family. For girls, it was a demonstration of maintaining beauty with a budget, which American culture considered to be a moral obligation to her country, community and the men in her life. The quintessential KleeTeen magazine, *Seventeen*, "as it ventured further and further into the post-war era, increasingly promoted male approval and marriage, cornerstones of traditional models of gender relations."⁴ Fashion, virtue and femininity were qualities young women had to cultivate to gain male approval and to resist any possible communist influences penetrating American society.

In this context, Supergirl first appeared in *Action Comics* #252 in 1959. *Action Comics* served as a monthly comic book where writers experimented with new characters and plotlines outside of the 'official' storylines, which would eventually be identified as canonical. By introducing Supergirl in *Action Comics*, it would be easy to drop her if she failed to satisfy readers. The introduction of a superpowered girl in the comic was the last attempt in a long line of new strategies to cash in on the steady popularity of Superman inspired comics. After World War II, Westerns, horror and jungle comics had become extremely popular, but sales waned after the introduction of the CCA in 1954 and superheroes became popular again, as discussed in the Introduction. With declining sales in other genres, precipitating a need for renewed

³ Ibid.

⁴ Kelley Massoni, *Fashioning Teenagers: A Cultural History of Seventeen Magazine* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012), 158.

profits, DC attempted to expand the Superman universe by adding related titles. This meant new stories focusing on Kryptonian culture, Superman's adventures as a young man (Superboy), as well as his pets (Krypto the Superdog and a superpowered monkey). The expansion of the Superman universe was an attempt to create a family centred around Superman, which would fit into popular Cold War media focused on the family. Adding a female character, especially a harmless 'little sister' archetype, would further cement the expanding Superman cast as a family unit resisting threatening outside forces. *Action Comics* had several storylines focusing on a Supergirl, to test the appeal on their audience. For example, in one story Lois Lane briefly became Supergirl and in another, Supergirl was created through magic. The character who would eventually take on the Supergirl title in a more permanent capacity was Kara Zor-El, also known as Linda Lee Danvers.

Adding a female character had to be handled carefully as the CCA heavily policed female characters, far more so than male characters. The 1954 version of the code had a 'costume' section that stated, "[females] shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities."⁵ While the same section also stated that, in general, "[nudity] in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure," there were no rules specifically aimed at containing male bodies.⁶ At no point did the code include a rule that male bodies should not be exaggerated, allowing the rise of extremely exaggerated musculature and unrealistic portrayals of male bodies, as discussed in Chapter One. The first administrator, Judge Charles F. Murphy, took his position very seriously and a large number of the changes the code wrought in its first few months concerned the drawing of female characters. In 1954, "Murphy told reporters that more than a quarter of the changes involved 'reducing feminine curves to more natural dimensions' and having clothing cover a 'respectable amount of the female body.'"⁷ Considering how strictly Judge Murphy interpreted the code and the time consuming nature of the approval process, Supergirl's creators had to make sure she fit the standards of the CCA. Therefore, she had to fit into the wholesome KleenTeen model. The KleenTeen would never take her clothes off in front of boys or participate in indecent or morally suspicious behaviour. Like many superheroes in the code-created Silver Age (1956-1970), Supergirl had imaginary, impossible and

⁵ Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 168-173.

⁶ This phrase also appeared in the 1971 version but not in the 1989 one.

⁷ Nyberg, *Seal of Approval*, 114.

wholesome adventures with no lasting impact on the narrative. Tailored for a supposed female audience, those adventures were filled with romance even while Supergirl remained chaste. She was pretty, conventionally feminine and subservient to the (male) authority figures in her life. To the guardians of teenage culture and the CCA, she seemed harmless. However, her debut on the cover of *Action Comics* #252 (1959) creates some sense of ambiguity about her place in the Superman mythos.⁸



Image 2.1: Action Comics #252 Cover © 1959 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

To reinforce the idea that Supergirl is just like Superman and is part of his family, she essentially functions as his female counterpart. The chevron on her chest indicates her connection to him and marks her as affiliated with his franchise. On her introductory cover, she is even mimicking his typical flying-pose. Underneath the title, Supergirl is centred on the page and ascending from a crashed rocket, while Superman

⁸ Curt Swan et al, *Action Comics* #252 (New York: DC Comics, 1959), cover.

descends from the left. Judging from the angle of the rocket and the direction of the smoke, Supergirl has just hurled onto the scene from the right, directly opposite to Superman. He is angled away from her and is pushed to the side with his left elbow off-page, as if she has forced him out. Supergirl's arrival negates Superman's status as the solitary survivor of Krypton. The phrase "and I have all your powers" could also be interpreted as "I have taken your powers from you" rather than "I have the same powers as you." The question "Is She Friend or Foe?" printed on the cover frames her arrival as a possible challenge to the existing order, implying that her very existence has shifted the balance of power away from Superman.⁹ However, Superman is placed higher, looking down on her, which symbolizes his position above her in the superhero hierarchy. He has arrived on the scene under his own power while Supergirl had to be brought in by a rocket. The rocket, a phallic symbol sent to Earth by Supergirl's father, conveys that Supergirl is a male-sanctioned new character. In the Cold War KleenTeen atmosphere, Supergirl could not have arrived on Earth without her father's permission. She has been brought from one male sphere of influence into another: transferred from her father to her male cousin's power. Superman also claims that she must be an illusion and she could not really have the same powers as him, making the reader doubt the accuracy of her claims. The hierarchical structure is also re-affirmed by her name: Supergirl. Superman is more than a man: he is the ultimate masculine figure. Supergirl, however, is a *girl*, which relegates her to the position of the infant.

Supergirl is consistently coded as a child. While she is meant to have Superman's strength, she does not have the physicality to match and is portrayed as slimmer and shorter. Not only does this play into gender stereotypes about women's bodies being smaller and weaker than men's, but also frames her as a young girl-child. Her cape is much shorter than his and younger superheroes typically have smaller capes or no capes at all. Her flowing knee-high skirt, with bare legs underneath further codes her as a child because only children went bare-legged under skirts in the 1950s. Short skirts were, traditionally, only worn by children. But with the rise of the teenager as a consumer, many fashion companies created teen clothing lines specifically geared towards girls younger than college-age women, who wore longer, more respectable skirts. According to Thomas Hine, this specific kind of "clothing indicated young people's acceptance, and even celebration, of less-than-adult status in society."¹⁰ At an

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 231-232.

age where only a few decades earlier, they would have been expected to contribute to the household and take on adult responsibilities, teenagers had become in-between creatures and their clothing reflected that. The KleeenTeen especially was considered more innocent, wholesome and naïve. Consequently, Supergirl's slightly parted legs also seem innocent and girlish as she appears completely unconcerned with suggestions of impropriety or sexual innuendo. She maintained this attitude throughout the 1950s and 1960s. No matter how many boyfriends or potential love interests Supergirl had, and there were quite a few for both Supergirl and her secret identity, Linda Lee Danvers, there were no sexual elements to any of the stories. For at least two decades, Supergirl seemed content to float around in the whimsically romantic storylines of the KleeenTeen. By 1972, a decade after the first stirrings of second wave feminism, Supergirl finally attempted to grow up. Now in her early twenties, she moved to San Francisco to lead a more independent life away from Superman and her adoptive parents' influence. However, there was some uncertainty about the direction her character should take. Constantly changing careers, boyfriends and superhero costumes, Supergirl never seems to alight on a fixed, solid and mature identity. Supergirl's costume changed almost every issue and fans were encouraged to send in their own costume designs, revealing how her creative team was more concerned with what she looked like than her superheroism.¹¹

¹¹ Mike Sekowsky et al, *Adventure Comics* #397 (New York: DC Comics, 1971).



Image 2.2: Adventure Comics #397 Cover © 1970 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Compared to the stability of Superman's longstanding and successful career as a newspaper journalist, his stable love interest Lois Lane and his iconic costume, Supergirl's instability is telling of DC editorial confusion over what to do with a female superhero considering the new and changing gender roles arising in the wake of Second Wave feminism. They were aware of the greater sexual freedom for women, as evidenced by Supergirl's many boyfriends, and the increasing educational and professional opportunities for women, hence Supergirl's college education and multiple jobs. However, it is clear that they did not know how to solidify this into a modern feminine identity without resorting to negative stereotypes. As a result, Supergirl was flaky and more obsessed with the look of her costume than her duties as a superhero during the entirety of the Bronze Age (1970-1984). Compared to male superheroes' longstanding, purposeful and well-established careers, female superheroes are volatile, constantly gripped by change. Eventually, in the crossover event called *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-1986), Supergirl sacrifices herself in an attempt to save the

multiverse. Unfortunately, all the alternate universes melt into one main universe, which the heroes do manage to save, but nobody remembers Supergirl or her sacrifice. Arguably, this version of Supergirl fits into the fridge-ing stereotype where women are killed only to further the plot, rendering their deaths meaningless.

Crisis on Infinite Earths was an attempt to reboot the DC universe and make all the different continuities easier to understand for new audiences. Supergirl did not become part of this new continuity and remained out of print during most of the Dark Age (1984-1998). In 2004, during the Modern Age (1998-now), Supergirl returned as Superman's older niece, younger than him because she was trapped in suspended animation for two or three decades. This Supergirl physically resembled her original 1950s look, with the skirt, although she now had a bare midriff. A second series based on this storyline was launched in 2005 and the *New 52* reboot (2011) established a *Supergirl* series with its first issue published in 2014. This new series maintained elements from the 2004 run, such as the fact that Supergirl was a teenager on Krypton when Superman was a baby but, because of suspended animation, she is still a teenager when she lands on Earth. This reversal of the age dynamic only reinforces the idea that Supergirl will never grow up because even her baby cousin became an adult before she did. Aside from her connection to her male cousin and their shared heritage, her eternal physical attractiveness and youth are the only aspects that remain unchanged in Supergirl. She remains the little blonde Barbie-doll who never really grows up. Mike Madrid writes that Supergirl "is not a woman, and therein is the secret of her appeal. Supergirl isn't a threatening Superwoman, who might develop ideas of her own. She is the sweet kid sister."¹² No matter how much time passes, Supergirl remains a young superpowered *girl*. Cartoons and comics typically freeze time or exist in a non-specific 'neverwhen,' which lacks historical awareness and is simultaneously occurring right now, at the time of reading, and in whatever chronological order the events unfold in the comic universe, as discussed by Orion Ussner Kidder.¹³ This means that superheroes often age incredibly slowly or not at all and yet, long-established sidekicks do grow up. The most famous of these is Nightwing, who fought crime as Robin, Batman's sidekick, during his childhood. Supergirl, however, never really goes on to establish an adult identity separate from her adult male counterpart.

¹² Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 84.

¹³ Orion Ussner Kidder, "Useful Play: Historicization in Alan Moore's *Supreme* and Warren Ellis/John Cassaday's *Planetary*," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 21:1 (2010), 77.

Supergirl never grows up and, in fact, cannot grow up as her youth is a vital part of her identity as a female superhero. According to Hine, “[the] concept of the teenager rests in turn on the idea of the adolescent as a not quite competent person, beset by stress and hormones.”¹⁴ Supergirl, as a female teenager, is often portrayed as silly, incompetent and volatile. This made Superman’s parental relationship with her inevitable because she could not be expected to control herself and her powers. It demonstrates Hine’s point that cultural notions about teenagers “emerged as useful ways of explaining and controlling youthful behaviour.”¹⁵ Because Supergirl is a silly teenager, she needs the adult Superman to parent her, not only to make sure she does not accidentally hurt herself or others, but also to make sure she does not rebel. Being a teenager is considered an inevitable period of transition, marked by “surliness, self-absorption [and] rebelliousness.”¹⁶ In American media, teenagers signify the fear that the young will strike out against the established order and displace the adults as the authority, which they will inevitably do when they grow up. Therefore, framing youth as a lack of maturity and decision making capabilities provides a legitimate reason for the social and legal control of teenagers by adults. Supergirl, who ages but never grows up, is a perpetual teenager and thus stuck in the cyclical nature of rebellion and control inherent in young characters, full of youth’s potential and anxieties. Her age implies that she is good and obedient, for now.¹⁷ *Supergirl* is purposely kept young, either as a teenager or young adult, because it provides a reasonable rationale for other characters to assume parental control over her even while her youth is used to signify her femininity. Youth is culturally connected to femininity as both are “conceived as passive, immature and vulnerable,” while adulthood is a male space associated with rationality, control and stability.¹⁸ Like femininity, youth is a state of constant change that needs to be controlled. An adult woman transgresses gender roles by inhabiting a male space, which is why Superwoman is a villain. Adult women are often erased from public spaces because they lack the young and fit body associated with femininity. In current contemporary American society, women in adulthood or old age are associated with ugliness: the sagging and decaying old body.

¹⁴ Hine, *The Rise and Fall*, 4.

¹⁵ Hine, *The Rise and Fall*, 27.

¹⁶ Hine, *The Rise and Fall*, 30.

¹⁷ It is significant that almost every incarnation of *Superwoman* has been evil and out of control, such as an alternative universe Lois Lane who is part of the Injustice League.

¹⁸ Martin Mac an Ghaill and Chris Haywood, *Gender, Culture and Society: Contemporary Femininities and Masculinities* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 98.

In consumer culture, women are encouraged to consume anti-aging creams and to undertake cosmetic surgery as a way to stay young and attain an ideal of beauty conflated with specific notions of femininity epitomized by the Barbie Doll. In *Barbie Culture*, Mary F. Rogers theorizes that “Barbie is a body centered [sic] selfhood, increasingly shaped by technologies extending way beyond the plastic surgeon’s office. She represents the plastic selfhood celebrated in mass advertising.”¹⁹ Barbie represents the selfhood that is dependent on the construction of the body as malleable, an unruly biology that needs to be controlled by technological advancement, which is coded as a masculine force controlling feminine nature. The image of Barbie recreates the biological body as plastic and does away with its imperfections and excesses. Helen M. Malson writes that the body’s excess is most obviously identified in menstruation and body fat, which “comes to stand for all that is negative about the body” because “body fat is also culturally and physiologically related to the reproductive female body.”²⁰ While women in general are often made to embody excess, as discussed in Chapter One, the large woman in particular is seen as wanting and being too much. Above all, she is too sexual and represents the fear of being consumed or drained of masculine virility. Women’s procreative power is framed as something that saps men’s virility and is a form of feminine excess, as Jane M. Ussher discusses in *Managing the Monstrous Feminine*:

The apparently uncontained fecund body, with its creases and curves, secretions and seepages, as well as its changing boundaries at times of pregnancy and menopause, signifies association with the animal world, which reminds us of our mortality and fragility, and stands as the antithesis of the clean, contained, proper body (...).²¹

The female body, with its capacity for change and excretion, has come to signify debilitating decay and excess. The uncontrolled female body signifies contamination. The pregnant form “is infused with sexuality – swollen belly and breasts sign of her fecundity and embodied being” and threatens to bring forth something outside of male

¹⁹ Mary F. Rogers, *Barbie Culture* (London: SAGE, 1999), 137.

²⁰ Helen M. Malson, “Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess” in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*, ed. Jane M. Ussher (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 236-237.

²¹ Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 7.

influence. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss, a man “cannot verify his fatherhood by either sense or reason, after all; that his child is *his* is in a sense a tale he tells himself to explain the infants’ existence.”²² Considering Karen Horney’s concept of womb envy as male jealousy of women’s procreative power and the cause of motherhood’s increased denigration, as discussed in Chapter One, the female body’s symbolization of excess explains the need for elimination of the female in procreative and body-enhancing technology. The (Barbie) doll, in its plasticity, is a representation of the need for women to control their bodies via masculine technology or for men to control female bodies. The doll is seen as a body controlled and shaped by technology. It is made plastic: firm, beautiful and perpetually young. The inability to sustain such a body is considered a loss of femininity, a gender transgression. Early KleenTeen culture already hinted at the current obsession with body maintenance as it stressed grooming the body with beauty products to attain the romantic ideal. The evolution of American culture into consumer culture further encouraged the perception that spending money will guarantee a beautiful, plastic body. Supergirl is like Barbie, the physically impossible girl and like Barbie, Supergirl is a doll for play, sex and decoration. Rogers points out that Barbie “plies her influence on a cultural terrain where people [...] inhabiting contemporary post-industrial societies – know that to be female is to be seen significantly as a decorative object, an aesthetic contribution, or a sexy presence.”²³ Barbie might be an astronaut or a doctor, but she is known for her beauty and accessories. Barbie can be read to represent the belief that women are like dolls and that dolls exist to be looked at or moved by the desire of the (male) owner.

The Barbie doll – or any female doll that wears make up and caters to traditional modes of femininity such as Bratz or Disney’s princess range – is increasingly younger and there is something paedophilic in the way contemporary American culture has conflated signification of childhood with sex in hairlessness, which contributes to the ongoing sexualisation of women and girls at increasingly younger ages. Children are hairless and require adult supervision. In many ways, they are considered incapable of making their own choice. This reappears in the image of the doll, which is also hairless and can be moved and played with at the owner’s convenience. The doll becomes the porn star in the increasing pornification of Western culture, which normalizes hairless

²² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 5.

²³ Rogers, *Barbie Culture*, 33.

women to the extent that women in razor blade commercials are shaving their already hairless legs. The presence of body hair implies a lack of proper maintenance and femininity. As Featherstone notes, “the tendency within consumer culture is for ascribed bodily qualities to become regarded as plastic – with effort and ‘body work’ individuals are persuaded that they can achieve a certain desired appearance,” as long as they spend the money required.²⁴ Any lack of maintenance “becomes interpreted as signs of moral latitude.”²⁵ Everyone must maintain their body and make it plastic, permanently young, tight and beautiful. This plasticity must be maintained the way a car or computer or any advanced technological item requires maintenance, which safeguards the consumption of cosmetics, cosmetic surgery, dieting and exercise. For example, Barbie has multiple successful careers but is still most famous for being beautiful, young and fashionable. It is not the accoutrements of her professions or her success that have made her famous because Barbie is equally recognizable, or more so, when she is naked. It is her plastic body that signifies her identity. The porn star is the persona hidden behind the plastic façade of the doll. Supergirl is both the doll and the porn star because they have become extensions of each other. Across the years, Supergirl has remained identifiable through her youthful looks and the big S on her chest, but like Barbie, she has had numerous different costumes, careers and identities.

The new Supergirl first published in 2015 is the first new run that significantly redesigned the character. Although the 2004 version also had a costume that remains mostly the same in every issue, unlike her previous Bronze Age counterpart, she once again lacked a stable identity. She jumped from living in the 21st century to the 31st and back, briefly assumed the identity of Flamebird, a superhero from Kryptonian mythology, and eventually returned to Kryptonian society with the founding of New Krypton. The 2015 version offers a more stable identity and a new permanent costume. Similar to Superman’s costume update, hers is a blue body-suit with thin black lines to suggest the edges of interlocking panels and give a more armoured, military look. Her red cape is lined with gold and is tied over her throat, while her boots have been updated with a wedge heel to create the illusion of practicality. Now that Supergirl has moved on from a childish KleenTeen to a modern teenager, she has been given a staple of the accoutrements of femininity: a pair of high heels. However, wedge heels are also

²⁴ Mike Featherstone, “The Body in Consumer Culture” in *The Body: Social Progress and Cultural Theory*, ed. Mike Featherstone et al (London: SAGE Publications, 1991), 178.

²⁵ Ibid.

not ‘proper’ high heels and are increasingly common in pre-teen’s foot wear. The boots come up to her kneecaps but do not cover them, although the knee is one of the most fragile areas of the leg. The shape of the exposed leg is quite breast-like and giving it a frame draws attention to it, contributing to the fetishization of body parts and the objectification of female characters. The pointed ends of the boots point towards her crotch. The boots’ edge comes up high enough to qualify as the type of boot fetishized in pornography, but the wedge heel disarms the pornographic connotations and reconfigures Supergirl’s position as a girl. Once again, Supergirl straddles the divide between sexually available and sexless child.

Being both explicitly under age and sexualized, the modern Supergirl contributes to the sexualisation of young girls in contemporary American media. In *Supergirl Volume 2: Girl in the World*, a flashback shows the audience how Kara received her costume from her father and wears it for the first time. The graphic novel includes a storyline about Supergirl’s preparations for the final trials, an exam which grants adult status to any Kryptonian. The costume should denote that Kara has passed those trials and is seen as both an adult and a representative of her house. At this time, Kara has not yet attempted her trials and is sent off Krypton before she can do so. In other words, Kara will never be an adult according to her own cultural standards and her pose in this panel reinforces that idea. Her body language is hesitant and her hands are clenched in the fabric of the cape, scrunching it up and holding it away from her body. She is displaying herself for her father’s approval. The pose invites scrutiny. Her thighs are clenched together in uncertainty, her knees touching while her calves twist away from each other with one ankle turned out so her toes are touching. This is a very cliché image of innocent and naiveté, which is oddly flirtatious. The girlishness of the pose is undermined by her naked thighs, which signify sexuality. Instead of the knee-high skirt the KleeenTeen and 2005 Supergirl wore, the modern Supergirl wears a bodysuit that closely resembles a bathing suit. The red panels at the front and the back draw attention to her crotch and bottom. The suit’s panty lines are so high, some pubic hair should be showing, except that her vulva is seemingly completely bald (or clean shaven), like a doll, a porn star or a child. This panel uses imagery associated with children when the main female character is sexualised and posed to invite the reader’s scrutinizing gaze.²⁶

²⁶ Mike Johnson et al, *Supergirl Volume 2: Girl in the World* (New York: DC Comics, 2013).



Image 2.3: Girl in the World © 2013 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

In this iteration, Supergirl is still a *girl* even as she tries to invade adult spaces. At first, Supergirl is clearly uncomfortable and uncertain in the clothing of adulthood, complaining that the boots are too tight. Additionally, the narrative insists that Supergirl is not guaranteed to pass the final trials because she is not studying enough, implying that Supergirl lacks the responsibility necessary to become an adult. Supergirl approaches, but is ultimately rejected from, adulthood. Her youthful irresponsibility reappears when she refuses to let Superman guide her when she arrives on Earth. She has no memory of how she got there and is completely incapable of assimilating because she does not speak any Earth language. At a time when Supergirl is older than ever before, she has never been more helpless and infantilized, and yet she has never been more independent and rebellious. She continues to wear the dress of Kryptonian

adults, a subversive act by Kryptonian standards. She refuses Superman's help, finds housing and friends, building the foundations of her own support network outside of Superman's influence. She also attempts to discover how she ended up on Earth, beginning her own coming-of-age story. This narrative carries the anxieties that American society harbours towards young people: the potential for destruction, subverting the established order and resisting adult control.

Currently, Supergirl represents changes in American culture concerning young women – the ongoing sexualisation of young female bodies and the increased resistance fostered by online communities – and its anxieties about women and immigration. Post-9/11 American society, as discussed in Chapter One, has much in common with Cold War ideology and rhetoric, with a return to conservative gender roles and the persistent fear of America being invaded by sinister outside forces. While 9/11 was a direct hit to corporate America and most victims were men, Susan Faludi writes that the press framed the event in conservative gender terms and predominantly published photos with men saving female victims:

The articles seemed to gravitate toward the argument: “maleness” was making a comeback because New York City's firemen were heroes on 9/11, and they were heroes because they had saved untold numbers of civilians – especially *female* civilians. One would never think from studying the photos the press chose to publish that the survivors (the victims) of the twin towers attack were predominantly male.²⁷

In light of an attack on American soil, no matter the realities of that attack, protection and security were framed as masculine and femininity as weak and helpless in order to re-affirm traditional American values. This led to “the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search for and sanctification of girls” and the depiction of women in mass media as helpless and in need of a protector.²⁸ It heralded a return to traditional values in the interest of preserving American society as a whole. Supergirl's helplessness in America mirrors these traditional gender values, further reflected in her tenuous control over her powers

²⁷ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: What 9/11 Revealed about America* (London: Atlantic Books, , 2008), 79.

²⁸ Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, 14.

and her refusal to accept help when she obviously needs it, suggesting that competent and rebellious women who refuse masculine aid and protection are all delusional and a danger to themselves and others. However, her helplessness and stubborn resistance to male supervision further intersects with her status as an immigrant who is either incapable or unwilling to integrate into American culture. In the past, Superman and Supergirl were the embodiments of the American Dream, immigrants who assimilated completely without any visible effort and who were extremely loyal to their adopted country. Now, Supergirl is both unable and unwilling to assimilate. When she arrives on Earth, she is confused and unaware of her abilities, inadvertently causing extensive property damage and killing or heavily maiming at least two people. As a helpless young woman, she needs to be controlled by a male authority figure. As a foreigner on Earth/American soil, she is a threat. As a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl, cast in the image of the ideal American girl, Supergirl embodies the fear that the threat to American civilization has infiltrated American society and will eventually arise from within.

The fears surrounding immigration and infiltration are fully revealed in the *H'el on Earth* storyline (2012-2013), where Supergirl is persuaded to sacrifice Earth in an attempt to bring Krypton back by a third survivor of Krypton. At the start of this storyline, Supergirl is actively mourning the loss of her homeland, challenging the stereotype that all immigrants willingly come to America. Instead of celebrating her now adoptive country and giving it her undivided loyalty, Supergirl is willing to destroy it to bring back her old world. Unable to emotionally connect to Superman because of his distance from Kryptonian culture and his allegiance to America, Supergirl is eager to trust and believe in H'el, a fellow Kryptonian survivor. He presents himself as the only one who can understand her because they are the only two people who remember Krypton, which represents the existence of immigrant communities as dangerous and threatening. The seduction of Supergirl by H'el also raises the ghost of sex and reproduction, the fear that the immigrant community will grow too numerous and out of control, which explains why Supergirl and Superman's age dynamic is reversed. If Supergirl had arrived on Earth before Superman and taken guardianship of him on his arrival, she possibly would have raised him to respect his heritage and maintain Kryptonian values, which would have prevented Superman's complete loyalty to his adopted country and planet. By reversing their ages, the spectre of Supergirl as a monstrous Superwoman mother-figure who subverts Superman's potential for her own

purposes haunts the comic, while simultaneously safeguarding Superman's authority by presenting Supergirl as a teenager.

Supergirl is an ambiguous figure, both perpetuating and challenging dominant and conservative gender roles which frame women as subservient and decorative. She is young and pretty, conforming to the cult of the doll, but youth itself can be a site of anxiety and rebellion, which haunts the status quo. She is the embodiment of both the cultural fears and the desires that surround young women, who are continually cast as plastic bodies. The dominant gender script perpetuated by most mass media is that of women as plastic, controlling their biological, changing and unpredictable bodies through masculine technology. Biological procreation, with its excesses and swollen bodies signifying fecundity, must be banished through plasticity, maintained through masculine technology and eventually replaced by masculine procreation. Yet, women who do conceive children with technological aids often face a narrative where the technology is praised as miraculous and their female biological bodies are shamed as failures because difficult births and pregnancies shatter the illusion that female procreation is nothing but a biological accident. Instead, it reveals female procreation as powerful and requiring effort, determination and strength. Women and young girls are encouraged to transform their bodies, to chase plasticity, but they must do so in secret, to preserve the illusion of femininity as inherently young and beautiful. Supergirl represents this adherence to the cult of the doll, even while she exhibits rebellion and power. She is a superhero who refuses to allow male superheroes to interfere and use their paternal power over her. Inside her slim and plastic body, she contains all the elements that American culture fears it cannot control.

Wonder Woman: The Female Soldier/Combatant

Superhero comics have always been dominated by male superheroes and in the 1940s and 1950s, few child care professionals were worried about the lack of female role models in mass media influencing girls. While most critics and professionals were concerned with comics' violent content, William Moulton Marston, a psychiatrist and academic, was more concerned with the absence of female superheroes. A staunch supporter of the suffragette movement, Marston believed that women had a superior

moral and loving character that could tame men's war-like nature.²⁹ One day, women would rule the Earth by controlling men's destructive temperament through love bonds. Marston believed that neither boys nor girls appreciated femininity or even recognized female power and this needed to be corrected through "a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman."³⁰ Marston created the *Wonder Woman* comics to promote his theories on female power. For example, Wonder Woman came from Paradise Island, which was populated solely by women, which reflected his belief that if women were empowered, they could create utopia. Women should use love to make men submit to women's superior nature and Wonder Woman was equipped with a magic lasso that compelled everyone to tell the truth, even to themselves. All men really wanted was a strong and beautiful woman to submit to and in 1941, Diana of Paradise Island assumed the moniker Wonder Woman to embody both those things. To that end, Wonder Woman's looks received some serious consideration. The artist chosen to design her was Henry George Peter, whose work was inspired by the Gibson girl, a forerunner of many of the later pin-up girls popular during World War II. Marston wanted a woman "as powerful as Superman, as sexy as Miss Fury, as scantily clad as Sheena the Jungle Queen, and as patriotic as Captain America."³¹ The design that Peter came up with was remarkably similar to the patriotic pin-up girl.³²

²⁹ This theory is part of what is often referred to as benevolent sexism.

³⁰ Jill Lepore, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman* (Melbourne and London: Scribe, 2014), 187.

³¹ Lepore, *The Secret History*, 196.

³² William Moulton Marston and Harry G Peter, *Sensation Comics #8* (New York: DC Comics, 1942), cover.



Image 2.4: Sensation Comics #8 Cover © 1942 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the most popular illustration art in advertising calendars, pulp magazines and paperback novels was the pin-up girl as a celebration of American femininity. As Charles G. Martignette and Louis K. Meisel state, “artists chose to paint pin-ups because they wanted to capture and celebrate the femininity of American women.”³³ The American girl was bold, independent and enjoyed a freedom of movement unparalleled in more conservative European societies, at least from the American point of view. The American woman’s independence resulted in a more beautiful and refined femininity lacking in European women, as evidenced by the pin-up girl’s gaze often staring directly at the viewer. Wonder Woman, as a reflection of Marston’s ideas, had to be drawn as a celebration of powerful femininity. Like the pin-

³³ Charles G. Martignette and Louis K. Meisel, *The Great American Pin-Up* (London: Taschen, 1996), 23.

up girl, Wonder Woman's costume is form-revealing and resembles a bathing suit. The strapless, backless top was designed to showcase that, despite her strength, her arms and shoulder muscles remained slender and feminine. The belt hugs her figure and the booty shorts completed the look with a patriotic motif while the kinky boots created an air of sexual allure. Additionally, dressed in the American flag, Wonder Woman's identity as a non-American was effectively erased, as she clearly represents America itself. The style of the pin-up girl was combined with the conventions of suffragette art. Marston found the movements' art, with women blindfolded and breaking free of chains, appealing as a metaphor for his theory of love binding and most comics found Wonder Woman breaking free of the chains of patriarchal oppression while using her lasso to bind men instead. Additionally, the suffragette can also be found in Wonder Woman's bracelets. According to the origin story of the 1940s, the Amazons were once bound by men and when they broke free, Aphrodite led them to an island they could rule in peace. To remind them that they should never let men bind them, the Amazons had to wear the cuffs of the chains they had been bound with. Wonder Woman is "the suffragette as pin-up," a celebration of femininity and a symbol of female power.³⁴ Marston purposely aimed for an image of the feminine ideal that would be appealing to a mass audience, while incorporating his untraditional views.

The pin-up girl celebrated the 1940s' American ideal of feminine beauty, but underneath the glamour, she remained a traditional wife and mother. While the question of women and work occupied the cultural landscape in the 1920s and 1930s, most experts and popular authors urged women to remain in the home. Leila Rupp writes that "[motherhood] and housekeeping, women were told, were professions one could practice with pride."³⁵ However, in the 1930s, the working-class increased significantly due to the Depression and many women who had been professional housewives before took on work that has always been done by working-class women such as waitressing, laundering, cleaning and various kinds of factory work. In the 1940s, America entered World War II and the surplus of male labour created by the depression of the 1930s quickly dried up as men either gained employment in the growing war industry or joined the military. The shortage of workers had to be filled by women. Because of the professional housewife ideal, there was a cultural narrative that said most women were

³⁴ Lepore, *The Secret History*, 198.

³⁵ Leila J. Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War: German and American Propaganda, 1939-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 65.

unemployed and had to be convinced to join the work force when they had never done so before. The real cultural change that occurred was that, for the first time, middle-class and upper-middle-class women left the home to pursue life in the public sphere, which created anxiety about the future state of femininity in America. Supposedly, femininity was best preserved in the home and women participating in the rough public and professional spheres would become too masculine. Therefore, the government propaganda of the time presented the idea that war demanded extraordinary sacrifices of housewives, not only having to miss their husbands, but also having to leave their homes and children. Government campaigns emphasized that, if women took war jobs, men could return home, take those jobs themselves and allow women to return to their homes and children, reuniting the family. Women joining the workforce did change the way women were represented in popular media, but the widespread dissemination of the pin-up working girl “did not mean that the ideal American woman had changed beyond recognition. Beneath the begrimed exterior, she remained very much a traditional woman.”³⁶ Underneath it all, she was still a housewife.

Wonder Woman might not have technically been a housewife, but her story followed the cultural narrative more closely than Moulton might have intended considering his radical politics. Paradise Island, functioning as a metaphor for the domestic sphere populated exclusively by women, had been entirely cut off from the outside world, the public sphere, and only came out of seclusion because of the war, or because Steve Trevor crashed his plane on the shore of Paradise Island. Partly because of her growing feelings for Trevor, Wonder Woman volunteers to leave her home and fight for America in “man’s world,” the phrase Amazons use to describe the outside world. Through this narrative, Wonder Woman fits into the cultural idea of the woman who was comfortably and happily living at home, but does her bit in the war effort to save the life of her sweetheart. Throughout the *Wonder Woman* comics, the narrative implies that, after the war, Trevor and Wonder Woman would settle down together. The comics presented the idea that Wonder Woman’s participation in the public “man’s world” was temporary, just like women’s participation in war work. The image of working women became increasingly normalized even while the idea that women’s true place was in the home persisted because the working woman was usually unmarried and childless. Supposedly, these women only had the time to join the war effort because

³⁶ Rupp, *Mobilizing Women for War*, 151.

they did not have responsibilities in the home, even though plenty of married women with children did work. Wonder Woman was also unmarried and without children and did not challenge the idea that wives and mothers should be in the home. Despite Marston's radical policies, Wonder Woman followed the cultural narrative surrounding the working girl as a temporary phenomenon.

During World War II, Wonder Woman participated in what was considered traditionally woman's work in her secret identity as Diana, the Air Force Secretary. In 1942, the Woman's Army Auxiliary Corps was founded, which became the Women's Army Corp (WAC) in 1943. These women existed in the new cultural concept of the female soldier, which was created to preserve the hegemonic masculinity of the military. Male soldiers were defined as heroic combatants and female soldiers as non-combatants who did the increasingly feminized jobs of managing a professional army in an industrialized world. They were clerks, typists, telephone operators, technicians, secretaries and sometimes, translators. In this manner, the role of the protector and the heroic warrior ideal could be preserved as a masculine role. The female soldier was portrayed as honourable, self-sacrificing and chaste. Moreover, the work itself was promoted as essentially feminine, requiring specific skills women were naturally suited to. This substantial effort to reconfigure women's place in the home to women's place in the war on a temporary basis was further aided by recruitment strategies promoting the idea that women's natural and essential skills would be further developed and trained through military service, which would help women become better wives when their husbands returned from the war:

The flip side of this new recognition of women's place in the war was that the special skills that made Wacs so valuable were often precisely those nurturing and caring skills that were traditionally assigned to women. To accept Wacs as fellow soldiers now, to give them proper credit and support, would make them better wives when the war was over.³⁷

While the above statement by Michaela Hampf specifically discusses women in the WAC, this can be extrapolated to women in all branches of military service during the

³⁷ M. Michaela Hampf, *Release a Man For Combat: The Women's Army Corps During World War II* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 147.

1940s. The American media insisted that military service was reinvigorating and masculinizing for men because of the warrior ideal, as discussed in Chapter One. The creation of the female soldier as a separate concept allowed the media to simultaneously claim that women were feminized by military service.

The narrative of essential feminine qualities all women possessed being useful in the military was used to legitimise female soldiers and Wonder Woman, as a celebration of femininity and a secretary in the Air Force, further perpetuated that discourse. Wonder Woman rarely fought enemy Nazi soldiers directly, more likely to fight spies and infiltrators at the home front while working as a WAC. Even fighting, she remained explicitly feminine and her official, state-sanctioned profession was that of a secretary. And yet, while this can be read as a reduction of Wonder Woman's radical potential, it is important to understand that Wonder Woman embodied the American feminine ideal and insisted that her femininity was the source of her strength and power. Considering that femininity or behaviour associated with femininity is still often dismissed as frivolous and unimportant, this was a transgressive message for young children. Moreover, Wonder Woman's participation in the military, while fitting into wider cultural discourse of women in the military as temporary and improving their femininity, was promoted as positive and empowering. It promoted the normalization of working women in the military and the war industry. Wonder Woman admonished women to resist cruel husbands and abusive marriages, to submit to military discipline to become strong and make men submit to them instead. The Wonder Woman created during the Golden Age (1935-1956) was a complicated figure who straddled the divide between conventional and transgressive ideas about women in the home and in the war. These contradictory significations would vanish from the *Wonder Woman* comics after the death of William Moulton Marston in 1947, when Robert Kanigher took over the series.

In the 1950s, with the CCA and the increasingly conservative cultural landscape, *Wonder Woman* comics became less effusive in their message of empowerment for women and took on a more traditional gender narrative. A large part of the conservative turn taken by the comics can also be attributed to Kanigher, who "hated the character he called 'the grotesque inhuman original Wonder Woman.'"³⁸ Through the *Wonder Woman* comics, Kanigher attempted to perpetuate a more traditional depiction of gender

³⁸ Lepore, *The Secret History*, 271.

roles. At the end of World War II, Wonder Woman no longer fought Nazi spies or Japanese agents. Instead, like many women in the 1950s, she returned home. In the American cultural imagination, the home became the nexus of peace and relaxation, a hiding place from the outside world full of the burdens of corporate culture as well as the forces threatening to invade American society and the American nuclear family. Mitra C. Emad discusses how, after World War II, “sparked by American postwar [sic] propaganda directed at women, Wonder Woman’s identity moves further and further into the domestic, feminine realm and away from the masculine realm of politics and war.”³⁹ Most of Wonder Woman’s storylines during Kanigher’s tenure as editor revolved around her family on Paradise Island. Through the Amazons’ technological marvels, the adult Wonder Woman could interact and have adventures with her younger selves, Wonder Tot and Wonder Girl. Along with her mother, Queen Hippolyta, they protected Paradise Island and the planet from outside forces together, as a family. Wonder Woman no longer protected humanity from its own dangerous impulses, but from a hostile galaxy or the unknown world of the supernatural. These stories reflected the Cold War rhetoric of the domestic sphere as a bulwark against the threat of the world beyond America. Women, as the keepers of the domestic sphere, played a key role in the ideology of the domestic. They had to maintain the home as a pleasant and comfortable environment and raise good and able citizens. In these stories, Hippolyta functions as the mother who raised a good, feminine daughter, Wonder Woman. Together, they can protect Paradise Island, their home, and by extension, the world. Inadvertently, these comics did continue to promote Marston’s belief that strong women working together could save the world. The enemies they faced were often male or identified through masculine pronouns, implying that men’s greed and destructive tendencies needed to be contained by strong women in order to protect the paradise women could create together.⁴⁰

Kanigher remained dedicated to his conservative message of the domestic sphere as the ideal place for women and romance their only occupation. When he took charge of the *Wonder Woman* series in 1947, he immediately cut a traditional section in the comic called “Wonder Women of History” celebrating female scientists, artists and athletes. He replaced it with a “Marriage a la Mode” section dedicated to discussing

³⁹ Mitra C. Emad, “Reading Wonder Woman’s Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation” *Journal of Popular Culture* 39:6 (2006), 965.

⁴⁰ Lepore, *The Secret History*, 271.

different marriage customs around the globe. Romance, while always present in *Wonder Woman* comics, was now a far more central plot point. Wonder Girl often struggles with her feelings for Merboy and her duty to become Wonder Woman. Trevor and the grown up Mer-Man compete for Wonder Woman's affection. Trevor keeps asking when Wonder Woman will finally marry him while she struggles with the desire to be his perfect wife in light of her duties to the world. She continually reminds him that she cannot marry him as long as there is work for her to be done because she could not possibly combine her duties as Wonder Woman with the duties of a wife and mother, reflecting the idea that wives and mothers should remain in the home and that only unmarried women who did not have children to care for should remain in the work force. Wonder Woman also had to compete with herself for Trevor's love. In her secret identity as Diana Prince, the Air Force secretary, she often laments that Trevor never notices her and only cares about Wonder Woman. However, when he does show interest in Prince, she is often jealous and wonders how much he really loves Wonder Woman if he can be attracted to other women. It perpetuates the idea that women cannot be friends, even with themselves, because they are always competing with each other for men's affections. While the comics seem to imply that Trevor and Wonder Woman's marriage is inevitable, that Wonder Woman will one day be unable to refuse Trevor because she loves him, the reader also knew that Wonder Woman's work would never be done and, according to her own logic, she could not be both Wonder Woman and a wife. The tension between these two truths could not be explored indefinitely and the stories grew stale throughout the Silver Age (1956-1970). Wonder Woman's popularity and sales dropped.

It became clear that Wonder Woman needed a new direction and DC appointed a new editor, Mike Sekowsky. In 1968, Wonder Woman was summoned to Paradise Island and told that the Amazons had to retreat into an alternate dimension to recharge their fading powers and youth. Wonder Woman chooses to stay behind to save Trevor, who has been accused of murder. When the Amazons leave Earth, Wonder Woman becomes entirely human. She loses her Amazon strength, eternal youth and turns into Diana Prince permanently. She cuts her ties to her feminine support network and with the loss of her Amazon strength, also loses her feminine power. The loss of Paradise Island also erases her ties to her female gods. The consistent elimination of the female seems incongruous because these changes were, according to DC editorship, a move towards feminism, as Kelli E. Stanley documented:

The professed idea behind the transformation was to make the character more “human,” and therefore more “inspirational,” in keeping with the changing times; however, cover after cover reinforced not only her dramatically decreased physical strength and sense of helplessness, but even a 1950s’ style concentration on romantic plot entanglements.⁴¹

As Diana Prince, Wonder Woman would be more like an everyday modern woman. She owned a boutique, was an independent business woman, dressed in fashionable mod-style clothes and pursued an active dating life. These elements do not constitute a sexist narrative on their own, but other elements in the comics demonstrate a complete lack of understanding of the feminist movement by DC. Wonder Woman was unique because she had a whole network of supportive women; the Amazons of Paradise Island were her sisters, friends, teachers and fellow soldiers. Prince, however, became the martial arts student of a male Chinese teacher. With her Amazon strength completely depleted, she also seems to have forgotten her training on Paradise Island with her female instructors and now needs to learn an entirely new way of fighting from a male teacher. Instead of focusing on female friendships, Prince seems to have no female friends at all. Lillian Robinson notes that “[significantly], the covers from this period show her battling more female foes than ever.”⁴² The Diana Prince-era is an attempt to eliminate and destroy the female by placing Wonder Woman in male-controlled isolation. This new incarnation was intended to depict a Wonder Woman liberated from the responsibility of being a Wonder Woman. She could be her own person, answering only to her own wishes ... and the instructions of her male martial arts teacher. Infused with sexist stereotypes of what women really wanted: fashionable clothes, plenty of men to date and not having to compete with other women for men’s attention, the Diana Prince-era, through the patriarchal destruction of female ties, placed Prince firmly under the control of the masculine sphere and her feminine power was eliminated.

The Diana Prince era did not last long and in 1973, Wonder Woman returned, partly because of plummeting sales and pressures from feminist groups, in the cultural context of the feminist movement and its backlash, the anti-draft movement in response

⁴¹ Kelli E. Stanley, “‘Suffering Sappho!’ Wonder Woman and the (Re)Invention of the Feminine Ideal,” *Helios* 32:2 (2005), 152.

⁴² Lillian Robinson, *Wonder Women: Feminisms and Superheroes* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 81.

to the Vietnam War and debate about female soldiers in combat. At the start of the Bronze Age (1970-1984), several female superheroes who were explicitly physical fighters came onto the scene. Power Girl first appeared in *All Star Comics* #58 in 1976 and She-Hulk first appeared in *Savage She-Hulk* #1 in 1980. At a time when the cultural construct of the female soldier as non-combatant was called into question, Wonder Woman returned in her costume and resumed her original role as a female warrior in the fight against the forces of evil. In 1971, *Rowland vs Tarr* challenged the draft based on a number of reasons, including its gender discrimination against women. In 1979, the enlistment qualifications became the same for men and women, but women were barred from active combat zones, although this rule was not legalised until 1994. In 2005, this legislation was reversed and the ban on women in combat was lifted. This demonstrates that the debate of women's place in combat, in the military and in society has been ongoing for decades. Several key issues inform this debate, including the traditional view of women as mothers and homemakers in need of male protection as well as the cult of the body, which posits that women are physically unsuitable for combat. Helena Carreiras and Gerhard Kümmel challenge the cult of the body in their work, *Women in the Military and in Armed Conflict*:

The military traditionalists primarily stress what they see as the perennial and genuine physical and psychological qualities of men such as aggressiveness, physical strength, action orientation, boldness, stamina, willingness to endure exposure to extreme physical danger and readiness to taking lives and withstand the bloody requirements of war. These are mirrored in adherence to the myth of the genuinely peace-loving, passive, gentle and squeamish woman which denies these attributes to women and the female body and psyche.⁴³

The cult of the body, intersecting with patriarchal gender roles, perpetuates the argument that male and female bodies have different capabilities. Men can be muscled and physically powerful, but women are incapable of achieving such muscularity.⁴⁴ Men can be aggressive but women, who give birth and rear off-spring, are soft and

⁴³ Helen Carreiras and Gerhard Kümmel, "Off Limits: The Cults of the Body and Social Homogeneity as Discursive Weapons in Targeting Gender Integration in the Military" in *Women in the Military and in Armed Conflict*, ed. Helen Carreiras and Gerhard Kümmel (Berlin: Springer, 2008), 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

persuasive. The female body is burdened by the uterus, menstruation and pregnancy. It does not have the necessary stamina for combat training because of its biological destiny: motherhood. However, as Carreiras and Kümmel discuss, there are far larger differences between individual members of the same sex than there are categorical differences in fitness or strength between the sexes. Given similar amounts of training, men and women can attain similar levels of fitness. Female superheroes, despite their power and ability, have often supported the cult of the body through their ‘strike a pose and point’ powers that keep them from the battlefield and their lack of muscularity. Banning women from combat allows comics to present the female body as pristine and soft, perpetuating the cult of the body.

Despite her status as a physical combatant, Wonder Woman has often perpetuated this cult of the body in her comics. In the 1940s, Wonder Woman was never shown sweating, bleeding or injured when fighting enemies, which fit into the image of women in the war industry as removed from combat, preserving their femininity. Although Wonder Woman was physically very powerful, her unique Amazonian physique did not cause her to bulk up despite her training. Furthermore, as a female soldier, she was a non-combatant and never fought as an American soldier in a squadron or platoon. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wonder Woman remained slim and dainty and the loss of her uniform framed her as a civilian as opposed to a combatant. In the 1970s, when the debate on female soldiers gained media attention and second wave feminism made inroads on female stereotypes, Wonder Woman returned in full battle regalia. By the Dark Age (1984-1998), in 1987, the *Wonder Woman* comics were rebooted again by Greg Potter, Janice Race and George Perez, who is often credited with the success of this run. Wonder Woman returned to her roots, closely tied to the Greek gods and Greek mythology and focused on Diana’s own potential godhood as well as her physicality. Throughout many of these comics, Diana marvels at her own strength, taking delight in her bodily powers.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Joan Ormrod, “The Goddess, The Iron Maiden and The Sacrilization of Consumerism in the Post Crisis Wonder Woman, 1987-1992, (paper presented at Graphic Gothic: The 2016 International Graphic Novel and Comics Conference, Manchester Metropolitan University, July 11-13, 2016).



Image 2.5: Wonder Woman #329 Cover © 1986 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

The Wonder Woman of this era was more physically powerful, with more pronounced musculature.⁴⁶ Other female superheroes, such as She-Hulk, also increasingly had physiques which followed the bodybuilding tradition. As discussed in Chapter One, the popularity of bodybuilding in the 1980s had a massive impact on the looks and designs of male action heroes and superheroes. Female action and superheroes, while they did not bulk up in the same degree as their male colleagues, also gained noticeable muscle mass. Yvonne Tasker writes that “[the] soft curves presented as defining the ideal female form in the 1950s, has shifted to an emphasis on muscle tone in images of the 1980s and early 1990s.”⁴⁷ Bodybuilding constructed a narrative of building a better body while muscle tone was considered a sign of good

⁴⁶ Gerry Conway et al, *Wonder Woman #329* (New York: DC Comics, 1986), cover.

⁴⁷ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 141.

health, which was promoted in the original 1940s *Wonder Woman* comic books. This narrative returned in the 1987 run. Muscular female action heroes became increasingly present in popular culture, as evidenced by the popularity of heroes such as Ripley in *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) as well as Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2* (1991). The trend of drawing Wonder Woman as a more muscled superhero continued throughout the following two decades.

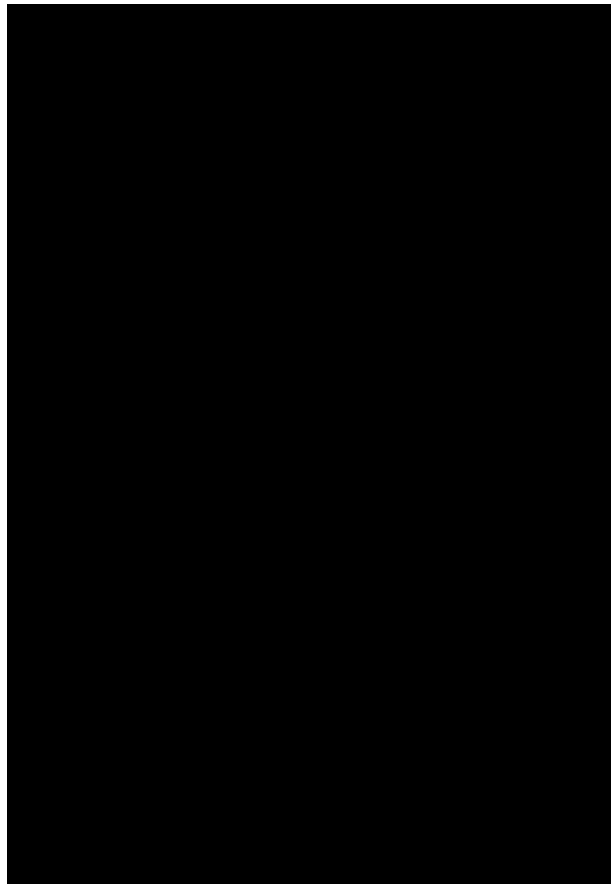


Image 2.6:

Simone's Wonder

Woman © 2010 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

This striking image of a muscled Wonder Woman from 2010 follows the tradition of the more muscular female heroes established in the 1980s and 1990s.⁴⁸ Wonder Woman is facing the reader, with an angry, determined expression and her legs stand firmly apart. With her arms side by side, but lifted in action, and her fists clenched, she adopts a very active pose, traditionally associated with male superheroes. Her abdominal muscles are defined with as much lavish detail as her male colleagues enjoy. Her shoulders are wide and the tendons and muscles in her arms and legs are clearly visible. These are all depictions of power, typically associated with masculinity. Yet, she is undeniably a woman and carries markers of femininity. Her long hair is loose and unbound. She is clearly wearing make-up and has large breasts. This depiction incorporates both feminine and masculine cultural signifiers to present a more complex and empowered image.⁴⁹ It is true, according to Jeffrey A. Brown, that tough muscular female superheroes “run the risk of reinscribing strict gender binaries and of being nothing more than sexist window-dressing for the predominantly male audience” because they can be read as “simply enacting masculinity rather than providing legitimate examples of female heroism” as long as they are not too muscular. When female superheroes enact masculinity and are read as empowered through that masculinity alone, the female superhero inadvertently dismisses and eliminates the feminine. This reading is in itself problematic. Are female superheroes read as tough and empowered because they enact masculinity? Or is the female superhero read as masculine because she is tough and empowered? Often, power is read as masculine because masculinity is predicated on the ability to overpower weakness, which is coded as femininity. The link between power, strength and masculinity is an established part of masculine discourse and it prohibits feminine discourse from being read as powerful because of the systematic denigration of femininity and non-masculinity in the American cultural landscape. It demonstrates “our inability to imagine femininity as anything but a condition of vulnerability,” as Stabile writes.⁵⁰ Reading a tough, empowered female superhero as a woman merely inhabiting a male space can be a form of sexism. Considering the research done by Carreiras and Kümmel, reading the possession of muscularity automatically as masculine can be a form of sexism. Instead,

⁴⁸ Gail Simone et al, *Wonder Woman: Contagion* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).

⁴⁹ It is worth pointing out that, like her male colleagues, Wonder Woman seemingly lacks core muscles and any real strength as a result.

⁵⁰ Carole A. Stabile “‘Sweetheart, This Ain’t Gender Studies’: Sexism and Superheroes,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 6:1 (2009), 87.

the elements in this image that add to Wonder Woman's embodiment of power, while they can and certainly are often read as signifiers of masculinity, also function as part of Wonder Woman's complex gender identity. In this iteration, Wonder Woman reconfigures the social mould of womanhood and challenges the culturally accepted gender binary by incorporating both feminine and masculine gender markers, which implicitly challenges existing relations between femininity, masculinity and power. The above image is a prime example of how Wonder Woman can function as a symbol of female empowerment through her status as a physical combatant.

While Wonder Woman's image has enjoyed an increase in muscularity and can be a very powerful image, this reading can be rendered harmless and non-threatening through her costume. One facet that is immediately noticeable about Wonder Woman's costume is the fact that it is basically a bathing suit. The practicality of such a costume, except as a tool to draw the male gaze, is questionable. Certainly, there is no way for her to prevent any nipple-slippage during battle or any friction whilst flying at super-speed, when according to the laws of aerodynamics, the air should slip between her breasts and pull at the fabric.⁵¹ It also provides the enemy combatant with an easy hold to pull Wonder Woman closer and leaves vulnerable parts of her body exposed. Wonder Woman, with her training in military combat, would, logically, chose something armour heavy to wear in combat, especially in light of the plate armour stereotypically associated with ancient Greek culture, which is associated with the Amazon. It would be more practical to at least cover the most fragile parts of the body, even if the protection of plate armour is discarded in favour of speed and manoeuvrability. While this kind of criticism might seem harsh for a fantasy genre, superhero comics consistently attempt to design realistic and supposedly functional armour for male superheroes. For example, Batman's utility belt helps him carry gadgets into battle, or the padding used in the Batman costumes for most of the Batman films protects him because he does not have any super powers. Superman's current costume is explicitly labelled as a battle uniform and has an armoured look, because Kryptonians would have needed protective gear in combat on their home planet. Authors routinely provide a rationale for superhero costume designs. Criticism aimed at Wonder Woman's bathing suit amongst fans has been consistent. Female fans tend to point out that the bathing suit helps objectify

⁵¹ Mara Wood, "Gender Issues: Wonder Woman's Costume," *Talking Comic Books*, August 23, 2013, accessed October 14, 2016, <http://talkingcomicbooks.com/2013/08/23/gender-issues-wonder-womans-costume/>.

Wonder Woman and exposes her in ways that male superhero costumes do not expose male bodies.⁵² A common counter argument is that a revealing costume is sexually empowering and that if a woman choses to dress in such clothing, she has a right to do so. It is important to remember that the empowerment argument is always flawed in regards to fictional characters, because even though the narrative provides the illusion that female characters have agency, they remain under the control of the author. It is never Wonder Woman choosing to dress in the bathing suit, but always the artist choosing to portray her in the bathing suit. Additionally, there is something suspect about a society where women are surrounded by images of naked women, encouraged to dress in certain ways whilst claiming that they feel empowered by being (almost) naked. However, the argument is not entirely without merit. While it dismisses objections against Wonder Woman's costume as old-fashioned concerns with propriety and as sexist and oppressive to women, it does combat criticism based in the slut-shaming of female superheroes for wearing revealing clothing. Yet, the general argument against tropes for female superheroes' revealing costumes concerns the double standard for men and women, specifically how ubiquitous such revealing costumes are in regards to female characters. The artist of the above image has managed to evade the objectification of female characters through revealing costumes by giving Wonder Woman a powerful physique and stance. But superheroes are often drawn by different artists who produce completely different images of the same superhero.

⁵² Ibid.



Image 2.7: Finch's Wonder Woman © 2011 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

This image is a variant cover for *Wonder Woman #36* (2011), published only a year after the 2010 image when Gail Simone handed over creative control to Meredith and David Finch.⁵³ In this image, Wonder Woman looks much younger, reduced to an uncertain-looking girl despite being *Wonder Woman*. She is posed in a way that simultaneously highlights her buttocks and breasts. While not a concrete example of the Brokeback pose, it is very reminiscent of the trope. She does not seem to possess any kind of muscle mass. While she is covered in blood and holding a sword and shield, it does not really convey the aftermath of an arduous battle. The blood stains are minimal and are placed to draw attention to the slim stretch of her arm and the wide curve of her thigh, which tapers off into an unlikely small knee and, by implication, thin calves. Her breasts are central to the image, framed by the shield and the sword. The curve of her ass is framed by the lasso. Her waist and ribcage are incredibly thin, as evidenced by the concave lines underneath her breasts, emphasized by her pose and the painful arch of her spine. Her facial expression is unsure, vulnerable and her mouth is drawn in a

⁵³ David Finch, *Wonder Woman #36* (New York: DC Comics, 2011), variant cover.

luscious pout. The sexualisation of her body leaves her open to both objectification and ridicule, undermining her power and authority as a superhero. To the presupposed male reader, she is harmless and non-threatening, providing him with the pleasure of watching her in voyeuristic close-up panels.

The pleasure experienced by the assumed male reader is scopophilia, which Norman K. Denzin defines as “pleasures which takes other people as objects of a controlling and curious gaze.”⁵⁴ As Denzin discusses, this controlling gaze in mass media is masculine, exercising control and objectifying female characters. Denzin goes on to say that “every gaze is regulated, structured by underlying systems of power and gender.”⁵⁵ The gaze is constructed by the viewer and their place in society: where social categories (such as race, sex, sexuality, class) intersect. For instance, in *Practices of Looking*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright argue that when men are depicted and subjected to the gaze of the audience, they are also empowered with “particular codes of resisting the power of the gaze upon them.”⁵⁶ Men depicted in action or with powerful physiques “negates attempts to objectify them because they are shown as powerfully within the frame.”⁵⁷ As in the 2010 image of Wonder Woman, this also works for women. It is the pose, the uncertainty and vulnerability, Wonder Woman’s youth, combined with the bearing of her body, which makes her vulnerable to the gaze. As a female, physical combatant, this image of Wonder Woman fits into the cultural impulse that ensures “[women] in media [are] frequently portrayed as in need of rescue, as sexual objects, or a seductress.”⁵⁸ To disarm Wonder Woman’s physical capabilities and strength, she is sexualized and framed as a sexual object reduced to the breasts on her chest and her ass. Yet, even the very same artist can produce different images. Consider the cover of *Wonder Woman #41* (2015), also drawn by David Finch. While this image does have thigh-high boots fetishized in porn and her concave ribs are still in evidence, she is also heavily armoured and has an active, powerful stance. The image of the powerful female combatant is arresting and transgressive, because it uses codes traditionally used by male characters to resist the gaze. As such, she can symbolize

⁵⁴ Norman K. Denzin, *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur’s Gaze* (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 43.

⁵⁵ Denzin, *The Cinematic Society*, 48.

⁵⁶ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 88.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Irene Jung Fiala, “Unsung Heroes: Women’s Contributions in the Military and Why Their Song Goes Unsung” in *Women in the Military and in Armed Conflict*, ed. Helen Carreiras and Gehard Kümmel (Berlin: Springer, 2008), 52.

rebellion and freedom, utilizing the potential of the powerful female body to the fullest.⁵⁹

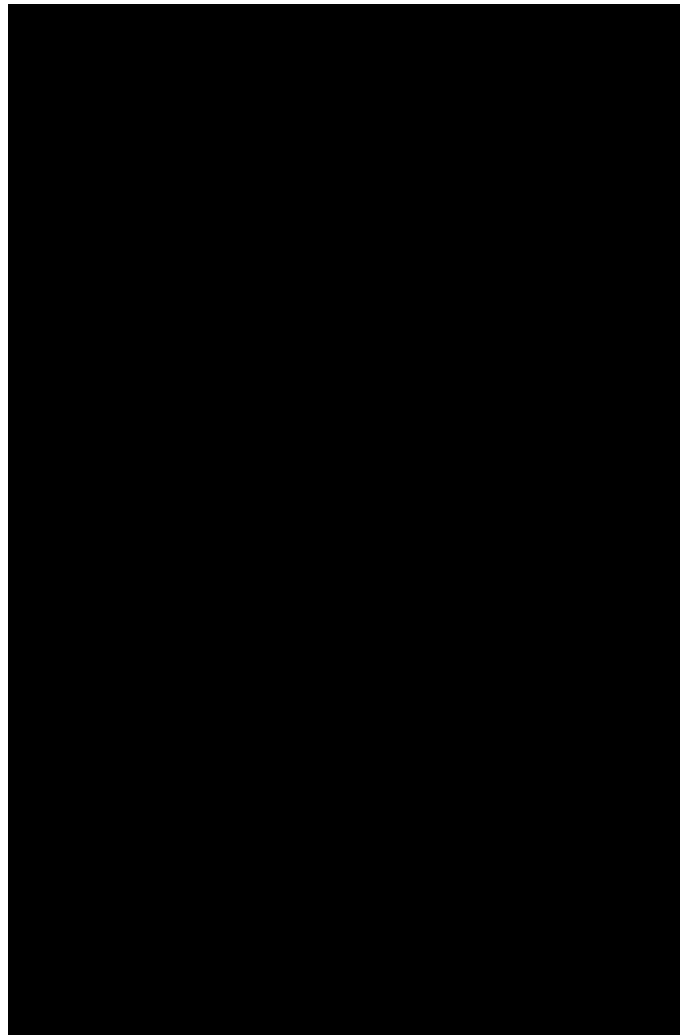


Image 2.8: Wonder Woman Full Armour © 2015 DC Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Wonder Woman's body can signify two things. It can indicate independence, strength and power and it can be objectified and sexualized. As we have seen in the previous Supergirl section, female superbodies often convey plasticity and malleability. They call to mind the image of the doll and the porn star, diminishing the power of the female superhero. The cover of *Wonder Woman* #36 leaves Wonder Woman sexualized. She becomes an object on display instead of a subject in action and perpetuates the idea

⁵⁹ Meredith Finch et al, *Wonder Woman* #41 (New York: DC Comics, 2015).

that female superheroes, and women everywhere, are nothing but window dressing. Yet, the other two images challenge that. These three images being produced so close together in time, published in 2010, 2011 and 2015, indicates how contemporary society is struggling to consolidate two conflicting narratives of female gender roles, especially in regards to superheroes. On the one hand, feminist movements and activists have encouraged artists and authors to move away from stereotypical images of women as helpless victims and to think of ways in which warrior womanhood can exist in the world. On the other hand, the increasingly powerful conservative forces present in the American cultural landscape since the events of 9/11 have made traditional gender roles once again appealing, because they are familiar and safe in a changing, dangerous world. These discussions also reveal the ways in which sexism and conservative gender roles evolve to incorporate and appropriate feminist dialogue, or at least to pander to it on the surface while perpetuating toxic messages concerning femininity, vulnerability and the objectification of women's sexuality.

It is clear that, throughout the years of publication, Wonder Woman has emerged as a complex figure in her signification of gender. Her origins as a celebration of femininity in a world where femininity is often dismissed and mocked can be read as transgressive, even while it perpetuates stereotypes about women being softer and gentler than men by the virtue of their sex, which robs women of a complex identity and subjectivity. Yet, even in the 1950s, when her stories presented the traditional gender roles of Cold War rhetoric, they inadvertently carried an important message about the power of female bonds against the aggression of the patriarchy. In later years, her more muscled physique and status as a physical combatant can be read as either perpetuating the idea that female characters need to be masculinized to be strong, but it can also be read as a female superhero straddling the gender binary and demonstrating how bodily strength and muscularity are not restricted to the male body. Yet, the bathing suit costume lends itself, like many female superheroes' costumes, to the sexualisation of her body and the diminishment of her abilities as a hero.

Conclusion

The Supergirl of today, with her immigrant identity highlighted and her rebellion against Superman's efforts to control her, is very different from the sweet kid-sister who first arrived on Earth in the 1950s. Supergirl's narrative seems to incorporate elements

of the classic coming-of-age story as she is continually seeking to discover her own identity, rebelling against the space of teenage-hood she is confined to. While she is infantilised and sexualised through the depictions of her body, the physical power of that body continually undermines those depictions. Supergirl is a superhero in flux: perpetuating and rejecting the formation of the body as a doll. The 1940s allowed for a more progressive and powerful female superhero, such as Wonder Woman, while the 1950s required a return to more conservative gender roles. This prompted the creation of the KleeenTeen Supergirl and turned Wonder Woman into a romance-obsessed girl. The 1960s created confusing storylines, where narratives supposedly influenced by Second Wave feminism created unstable female superheroes who rejected femininity. The 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of the muscled female superhero, which continued into the 1990s. The 2000s and 2010s, while catering to more progressive ideas about gender, still tap into conservative gender ideas that infantilize and denigrate capable women. Wonder Woman functions as a celebration of femininity and its many forms. As her most progressive self, she presents a complexity that goes beyond gender signification, challenging and combating prevailing norms.

Female superheroes inevitably challenge the status quo because they complicate the idea that women need to be protected, which is a fundamental rationalization for American culture's 'natural' gender roles. Much like the way forces in 1940s American media worked to deradicalise the female soldier to protect the status of the male soldier, female superheroes are deradicalised to protect the male superheroes' status. Through the cult of the body, the Barbie Doll and the porn star, female superheroes are presented as unstable and weak. Both Wonder Woman and Supergirl are subject to the increasing plasticisation of the body in the pornification of American culture, which supports cultural narratives positing the need for masculine technology to control the unruly, excessive female body. Yet, even in the most conservative narratives and exploitative images, the female superhero finds ways to relay powerful messages about womanhood and resisting the female-denigrating status quo.

Chapter Three:

Gay Characters and Social Progress

This chapter discusses Billy and Teddy (Wiccan and Hulkling) and Batwoman, who all openly identify as gay. Together, Billy and Teddy enact homonormativity as a route to social acceptance through Teddy's performance of the masculine partner and Billy as the feminized counterpart. The perpetuation of heteronormative gender roles in gay relationships in popular media is often used to legitimize gay characters and provide them with the protection of social acceptability. Yet, even heteronormative gay characters can still be Othered when they are taken out of the domestic setting of their relationship. This is especially true for Batwoman, whose struggles between the homonormative and the Other result in a monstrous transformation and death. The tension between heteronormative characterization and Othering of gay characters illustrates Suzanna Danuta Walter's point that visibility does not automatically indicate genuine social acceptance and that "media saturation of a previously invisible group can perpetuate a new set of pernicious fiction, subduing dissent by touting visibility as the equivalent of knowledge."¹ Visible queer characters can perpetuate stereotypes or embody traditional fears even while presenting humanizing and heroic portrayals.

Wiccan and Hulkling: The Rise of Homonormativity

Billy and Teddy are two members of the superhero team published in the *Young Avengers* series. The comic book first began publication in 2005, in the Modern Age (1998-now), and the team consisted of seven members: Wiccan (originally Asgardian, William 'Billy' Kaplan), Hulkling (Theodore 'Teddy' Altman), Patriot (Elijah 'Eli' Bradley), Stature (Cassandra 'Cassie' Lang), Hawkeye (Kate Bishop), Iron Lad (Nathaniel Richards) and Speed (Thomas 'Tommy' Shepherd).² The initial series remained in print until 2007, after which the Young Avengers, as a superhero team, appeared in several miniseries that tied into major comic crossover events such as *Civil War: Young Avengers* (2008), *Young Avengers Presents* (2008), *Secret Invasion: Young Avengers/Runaways* (2008), *Young Avengers: Dark Reign* (2009) and *Young Avengers:*

¹ Suzanne Danuta Walters, *All the Rage: The Story of Gay Visibility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 12.

² Hawkeye is a legacy superhero name, meaning that several characters have taken over or 'inherited' the name. The original Hawkeye was Clint Barton, who was dead when Kate Bishop first took on the name.

Siege (2010). The next series that focused on the characters outside of a crossover event was *Avengers: Children's Crusade* (2010), followed by a limited run of 15 issues published in 2013 and 2014, known as *Young Avengers Volume 2*. Billy and Teddy are currently part of a new Avengers team called Avengers Idea Mechanics in *New Avengers* (2015-ongoing).

The Young Avengers' initial appearance in 2005 occurred in the wake of several legislative changes in the US concerning homosexuality. The first would be *Lawrence-Garner v Texas* (hereafter referred to as *Lawrence*) in 2003, which decriminalized sodomy in Texas, setting a legal precedent considered to be a huge step forward in LGBTQA+ rights.³ In New York, where *Young Avengers* takes place, "anal sexual conduct" and "oral sexual conduct" were no longer legally classified as "deviant sexual intercourse" and do not result in "sodomy in the third degree charges" as of 2003.⁴ In the same year, the Massachusetts Supreme Court upheld same-sex marriage and was the first state to legalize it. These changes in legislature seem odd when considering how, post 9/11, American society became more conservative. In part, this can be explained through the increased perception of the gay community as a white, middle-class community capable of sustaining American heteronormativity by maintaining a private/public split. Lisa Duggan discusses how the concept of the public/private split first gained traction in the 1980s as a result of "antigay forces" redefining "privacy as a kind of confinement, a cordon sanitaire protecting 'public' sensibilities."⁵ In other words, it inscribed the private sphere as a separate entity, containing the personal from the public, which was defined as the political, effectively attempting to erase 'the personal is political' frames of thought introduced during Second Wave feminism in the 1960s. Duggan writes how "conservative forces worked to define the private sphere as an isolated, domestic site completely out of range of any public venue."⁶ Instead of a political issue influencing public rights, access to citizenship and modes of exclusion and discrimination, sexuality became a personal issue that should not have an impact on the public sphere, which is defined as heterosexual because of the heteronormative structure of American society. Additionally, the public sphere is also culturally framed

³ Katharine M. Franke, "The Domesticated Liberty of *Lawrence v. Texas*," *Columbia Law Review* 104 (2004), 1399.

⁴ New York State Legislature, accessed October 14, 2016, <http://public.leginfo.state.ny.us/lawssrch.cgi?NVLWO:>

⁵ Lisa Duggan, "The New Homosexuality: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" in *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, ed. Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 181.

⁶ *Ibid.*

as masculine, which is also defined as heterosexual. This private/public split became entrenched in the American cultural landscape of the 1990s, with the rise of neoliberalism, and was institutionalised through legislation, such as *Lawrence*. In 2003, it decriminalized sodomy on the basis of a right to privatized liberty, barring government intrusion into the private affairs of two consenting adults. As Katherine M. Franke points out, “*Lawrence* puts an end to the interpellation of gay male and lesbian couples as criminals based on their private sexual conduct.”⁷ However, the decriminalization of sodomy “merely signals tolerance of the behaviour, so long as it takes place in private and between two consenting adults in a relationship.”⁸ In effect, *Lawrence* creates a premise that heteronormalizes or domesticates homosexual couples and conduct. The private sphere is equated to the domestic sphere of the heterosexual nuclear family, of the couple, and domesticizes homosexuality. As Franke notes, *Lawrence* implicitly “renders different legal treatment to those who express their sexuality in domesticated ways and those who don’t.”⁹ *Lawrence* creates a framework where the acceptable homosexual is in a committed relationship, thereby implicitly creating the unacceptable homosexual who is not, whose sexual conduct is outside the private setting of the couple and could still be considered criminal.

While *Lawrence* created new political avenues for gay rights advocates, such as the right to marry and adopt, it foreclosed political action that resisted heteronormativity or domesticity (as used by Franke) to destabilise existing power imbalances and instead perpetuated both heteronormativity and homonationalism. By relegating homosexuality to the private sphere, neoliberalism depoliticizes the gay community and, by basing citizenship on powers of consumption, rewards the affluent gay community. When homosexuality intersects with other dominant social strata such as whiteness and the middle class, it creates a white middle-class gay community that is privileged or legitimized above other gay communities. The drive to legitimize a specific homosexual identity, not only through *Lawrence* but also through the legislation of gay marriage and gay adoption, which directly connects gay rights to the heteronormative hegemony, occurred after the 9/11 Twin Towers Attack in 2001. The attacks were followed by the rapid vilification of Islam in the Western press and the rise of Islamophobia at a time when the American government needed the middle-class to

⁷ Franke, “Domesticated Liberty,” 1411.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Franke, “Domesticated Liberty,” 1416.

stand united on issues such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Providing additional civil rights to the gay, white, middle-class community would ensure their support of American hegemony by creating a sense of homosexual nationalism, or as Jasbir K. Puar has dubbed it, homonationalism. Homonationalism allows the homonormative community to access forms of belonging in the hegemony by vilifying Islam or enabling others to do so. This legitimized the gay community by heterosexualizing queer culture. This transformation was reserved for the white American, middle-class community, made visible through TV-shows such as *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005), *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007), *The L Word* (2004-2009) and, more recently, *Modern Family* (2009-ongoing). Black, Asian, rural, working-class, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, asexual or other minority LGBTQA+ communities were conspicuously absent from this wave of gay acceptance in popular culture and it is in this context that Billy and Teddy's relationship was first published.

While Billy and Teddy were created as a gay couple from the beginning of the *Young Avengers* series' publication in 2005, in the first few issues, it is not clear that Billy and Teddy are in a romantic relationship. The text initially only inferred their relationship and caused audiences to speculate in online message boards and fanfiction. This subtext, however, was neither substantial nor overt.

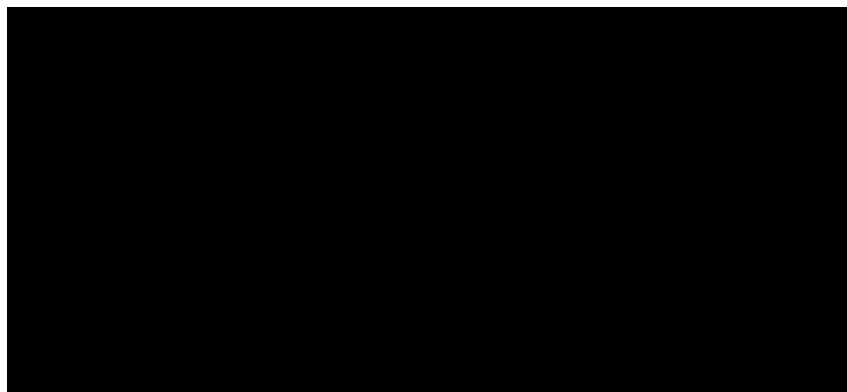


Image 3.1: Young Avengers #1 © 2005 Marvel Comics.

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In one of their very first close-ups, such as the previous panel taken from *Young Avengers #1* (2005), their interaction can be read as flirting.¹⁰ The phrase, “Thanks for watching my back,” can be interpreted as an innocent thank you from one teammate to another or it can be read as an invitation to flirt, especially when paired with the response “it’s a pleasure,” implying that Billy was literally deriving pleasure from watching Teddy’s behind.¹¹ Billy and Teddy are also consistently drawn pairing off together when the team disbands to return to their civilian identities and responding in a distressed manner when either of them is hurt. *Young Avengers #2* (2005), depicts Teddy with his arm casually draped around Billy’s shoulder.¹²

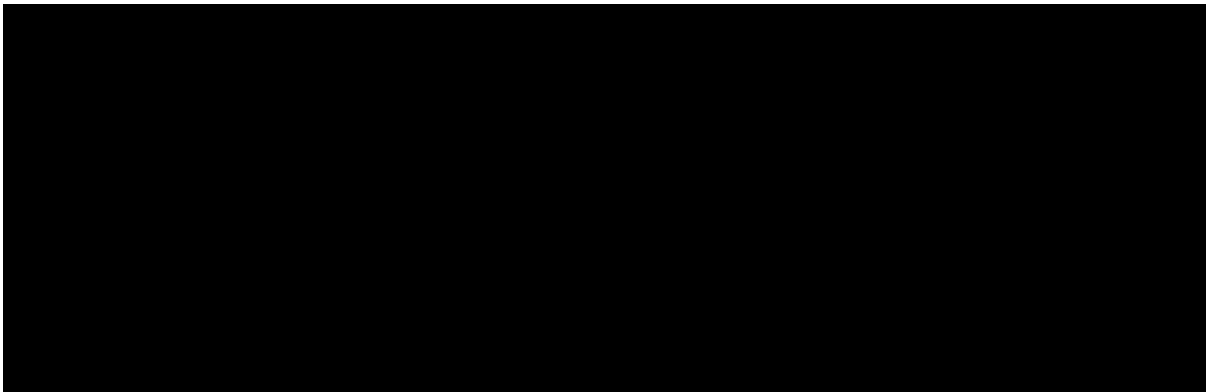


Image 3.2: Young Avengers #2 © 2005 Marvel Comics.

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However, it is only in the sixth issue that there is any explicit reference to Teddy and Billy’s relationship. When they are discussing their superhero codenames, Kate says that Billy will “need a name that won’t become a national **joke** when the press finds out about you and Teddy” (original emphasis).¹³ At this time, Billy is still going by the name ‘Asgardian’ and Kate is referring to the possibility of pronouncing ‘Asgardian’ as ‘Ass Guardian’ referencing anal sex in relation to Teddy, conflating anal sex with gay sex. Their relationship is only made vaguely explicit six months after their first appearance without using the words ‘gay,’ ‘relationship,’ ‘couple’ or ‘dating’ and they only touched platonically. Considering that the Young Avengers are teenagers,

¹⁰ Allan Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers #1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005).

¹¹ Heinberg, *Young Avengers #1*.

¹² Alan Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers #2* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005).

¹³ Alan Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers #6* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005).

Marvel might have wanted to avoid explicit romantic, and implied sexual, contact between young and possibly underage characters. Gareth Schott also writes that in mainstream comics ‘sexual intimacy is merely hinted at, occurring off-panel (...). When this occurs for gay characters, this is more readily understood as a political act, rather than a genre or medium driven shortcoming.’¹⁴ Kara Kvaran also points out that the author of the *Young Avengers*, Heinberg, who is gay, had complete control over the characters and that the decision to keep Billy and Teddy’s relationship mostly off-page was not an editorial decision but an attempt to keep the story moving forward because, as Heinberg said, “[when] you’re fighting Kang the Conqueror, it’s tough to find time to make out.”¹⁵ However, that does not explain why Stature and Iron Lad are shown kissing in close-up twice within hours of meeting each other, despite the fact that Stature is fourteen years old and the ages of the others, including Iron Land, are never specified and could be anywhere between fourteen and seventeen. While emotional intimacy and the development of long-term relationships, past the ‘will they/won’t they?’ stage, often occurs off-page, casual physical demonstrations of love or sexual interest between heterosexual partners does happen regularly and it definitely occurs in *The Young Avengers* comics. The double standard here is clear: homosexual couples do not have time to make out but heterosexual characters kissing is normalized to such an extent, it becomes invisible and is omitted from the rationalization barring homosexual romantic contact.

The *Young Avengers* comics refuse to directly engage with Billy and Teddy’s sexuality. This changes a little in *Young Avengers* #7 (2005) when Billy and Teddy attempt to tell Billy’s parents that they have assumed superhero identities, which Billy’s parents interpret as Billy and Teddy coming out, although the word ‘gay’ is never used. Billy’s mother says that “we’re just so happy you boys **found** each other” (original emphasis) and Billy’s father says “[welcome] to the family, Ted.”¹⁶ This frames Billy and Teddy’s coming out as part of a domestic narrative of family and togetherness. Combined with the lack of physical intimacy, such as hugs or hand-holding, between Billy and Teddy, the comic clearly follows the private/public split where sexual/romantic conduct between two consenting homosexuals in a committed

¹⁴ Gareth Schott, “From Fan Appropriation to Industry Re-Appropriation: The Sexual Identity of Comic Superheroes,” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, 1:1 (2012), 25.

¹⁵ Alan Heinberg qtd by Kara Kvaran, “Supergay: Depictions of Homosexuality in Mainstream Superhero Comics” in *Comics as History, Comics as Literature: Roles of the Comic Book in Scholarship, Society and Entertainment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 153.

¹⁶ Alan Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers* #7 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005).

relationship is socially acceptable as long as it cannot be seen. The private/public split is primarily normalized in white, middle-class communities, to which both Billy and Teddy belong. In *Young Avengers #9* (2005), Teddy mentions that his (adoptive) mother “sells **real-estate**. She does **pilates**” (original emphasis).¹⁷ Both the role of the real-estate agent and Pilates as a form of exercise are associated with the middle-class. In *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*, Billy mentions that his father is a cardiologist and his mother a psychologist, both upper-middle-class professions, and that he lives on the Upper West Side of New York. The Upper West Side is an upscale neighbourhood, with mostly residential areas, and is known as a cultural and intellectual hub close to Columbia University.¹⁸ New York itself is not only a metropolitan urban centre, it is *the* urban centre of America, known for its progressive, liberal politics, especially in opposition to the more conservative atmosphere of the American Mid-West and the Bible Belt.¹⁹ With the Young Avengers in New York, Billy and Teddy are framed as white American, middle-class and urban gay boys, fitting into widespread cultural ideas of white, middle-class gay culture, which performs heteronormativity not only through its framing of gay men or lesbian women as ordinary white, middle-class American people, but also as domestic and monogamous. Billy and Teddy are still young, either fourteen or fifteen when they meet. They are probably too young to have had any romantic relationships before they committed to each other. Aside from a single throwaway comment from Billy, previous crushes or boyfriends are never mentioned, implying that Billy and Teddy are each other’s first boyfriends. They are already an established item at the very start of the comic. This means that their coming out to each other, the development of their feelings for each other and their dating progress all happens off-page. The absence of their romantic development in light of their committed relationship allows Billy and Teddy to exist in a non-sexualized or non-romanticized gay space. They are safely contained in their relationship, implying that their homosexual desire is never focused outward. Their gay experience is only just visible enough to signal it to the reader, but it remains largely in the private, off-page sphere and maintains the private/public split as set out by Duggan. Their relationship remains framed in this manner until 2010, when it becomes a significant part of the

¹⁷ Alan Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers #9* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005).

¹⁸ Kenneth T. Jackson, “Upper West Side” in *Encyclopaedia of New York City*, ed. Kenneth T. Jackson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 1217-1218.

¹⁹ Greg Jacobs, “New York Neighbourhoods Defined By the Residents Who Call Them Home (Pt. 2),” *Huffington*, December 20, 2013, accessed November 4, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/greg-jacobs/new-york-neighborhoods-de_1_b_4475577.html.

Avengers: Children's Crusade storyline. In this series, Billy and Teddy are more physically demonstrative. They are depicted embracing, holding hands, and, most importantly, sharing a bed.

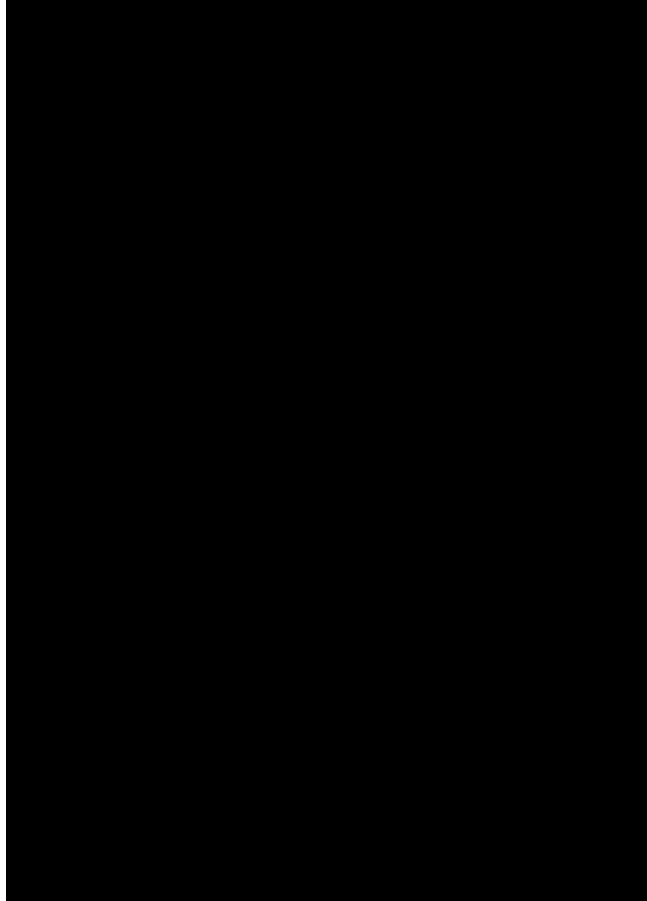


Image 3.3: Children's Crusade © 2010 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

In this page, taken from *Avengers: Children's Crusade* (2010), Billy and Teddy are spending the night at Avengers Mansion.²⁰ They are provided with a room and Billy uses his magical powers to transform the two single beds into one double bed. Giving the boys two beds instead of one to share can be read as the Avengers being responsible adults when housing a young teenage couple, although separate rooms would have been more efficient. However, Captain America's previous reference to Billy as Teddy's 'friend' instead of 'boyfriend' can be read as the Avengers refusing to acknowledge

²⁰ Allen Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers: Children's Crusade* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2012).

Billy and Teddy's relationship. Billy's transformation of the two beds into one is an act of defiance that physically manifests their relationship. Combined with their intimate embrace taking up more than half of the page, this image demonstrates that Billy and Teddy are comfortable with physical intimacy. The spectre of homosexual sex threatens the private/public barrier and emphasises Billy and Teddy's homosexual desire. Additionally, at this point in time, Billy and Teddy are both sixteen years old, under the legal age of consent in New York, which is seventeen.²¹ Any sexual conduct between them would be illegal. This framework creates ambiguity and suspicion around Billy and Teddy's possible sexual relationship. The threat of possible physical intimacy is dissolved when Speed interrupts them. A later panel depicts Billy and Teddy sharing a bed in another hide-out, but they are fully clothed and only sleeping. The potentially sexual relationship between Billy and Teddy is safely domesticated and rendered non-sexual. In the last issue, *Avengers: Children's Crusade* #9 (2012), Teddy asks Billy to marry him and when Billy accepts, the couple kiss. The issue where they kiss was published in 2012. In other words, Billy and Teddy had been a confirmed, out gay couple since their first publication in 2005, but it took seven years for them to kiss on-page. The context of the marriage proposal is crucial here as it frames the kiss as an affirmation of their commitment to emulating heteronormativity and maintaining the public/private split. It is only in the service of homonormativity that Billy and Teddy can display their homosexual desire, safely contained in their monogamous relationship. While the gay community is still under-represented in all media and the mere depiction of a gay couple can be read as progressive, Billy and Teddy typify the representation of homosexuality that equates gay culture with the white middle-class and normalizes them at the cost of other gay communities.

When Billy and Teddy are represented as a unit, in their relationship, they perpetuate homonormativity and its conservative, heteronormative gender roles. Billy is framed as the performer of the feminine role and Teddy as the masculine one. For instance, it is clear in the panel where Billy and Teddy are kissing that Billy is smaller and less broadly built than Teddy. In comics, where masculinity is often signified through dramatically built bodies, smaller bodies can be read as feminized because they 'lack' the exaggerated musculature associated with masculinity. Teddy, tall, buff, blonde and All-American, is framed as the masculine partner in the Billy/Teddy

²¹ New York State Legislature, <http://public.leginfo.state.ny.us/lawssrch.cgi?NVLWO:>.

relationship, but appears to lack masculinity when isolated. In his superhero identity named 'Hulkling,' he uses his shape-shifting abilities to assume a hypermasculine form. Green and large, he assumes a form that resembles the Hulk, to which his name also refers. The Hulk, known for his nearly uncontrollable rage and violence, green and hugely muscular, is a form of exaggerated masculinity emblematic of the hypermasculine, considering that "[to] a large extent, not only is aggressiveness and aggression expected to be a significant part of man's make-up, but also it is increasingly viewed as normal."²² Teddy's body, when transformed, is extremely powerful, with the kind of padded shoulders and musculature typically associated with masculinity in comics. The Hulk projects a hypermasculinity Teddy consciously and explicitly performs. Only his name 'Hulkling' seems to somewhat undercut this image of powerful masculinity. The diminutive 'ling' implies that Teddy's hypermasculinity is only a derivative of the Hulk's. As a gay character, Teddy can approximate masculinity, especially when compared to Billy, but his masculinity is questioned when isolated from a feminized counterpart.²³

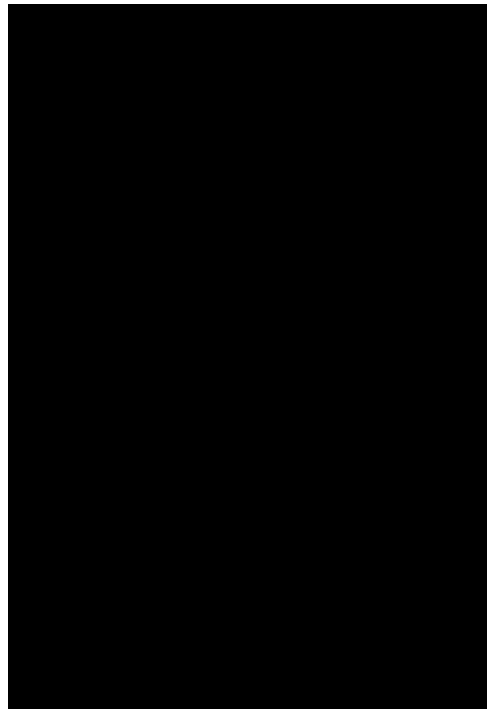


Image 3.4: Teddy as Hulkling © 2008 Marvel Comics.

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²² Moss, *Models of Masculinity*, 9.

²³ Allen Heinberg et al, *Young Avengers Presents* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2008).

Teddy's failed masculinity is further underlined through his origin story. Teddy is a Kree/Skrull hybrid, two alien races with a long and complex history in the Marvel universe. Most Skrulls are shape-shifters and so is Teddy. Therefore, his powers are rooted in his DNA and contained in his body. He can change his shape, colour and size. It cannot be said that Teddy's body is singularly male because it can produce multitudes of identity. The Hulk can only transform into the Hulk (or back into Bruce Banner, his civilian identity) while Teddy can transform into many forms, which renders him suspect. The gender binary creates only two modes of gendered bodily identity and erases multiplicity, which Teddy's body, through its abilities, automatically implies. While Teddy appears and seems to identify as a white male in his civilian identity, his body cannot be classified as either male or female according to cultural representations of biological discourse. This means that Teddy is both non-masculine and non-feminine and such a confusing, changing and unstable identification is often culturally understood to signify femininity. Jane M. Ussher writes about how the female body is seen as constantly caught up in its own biological cycles of production and is considered unstable and perpetually changing.²⁴ While Teddy can control the shift, the fact that his body *can* change signifies a bodily instability that can be read as threatening because it is feminizing. Teddy's body is a site of unease, as his changing body mimics women's procreative power, even as he continually attempts to create and embody traditional signifiers of masculinity.

When viewed in isolation from each other, Teddy represents the cultural stereotype of the homosexual who lacks masculinity but aspires to it while Billy is almost completely feminized and cast as the Other through his relationship with Wanda Maximoff (the Scarlet Witch) and his twin, Tommy Shepherd (Speed). In the *Children's Crusade* storyline, it is confirmed that Billy and Tommy are the Scarlet Witch's spiritual children. During her time with the Avengers, the Scarlet Witch married the synthezoid Vision, but because he is a robot they could not have children together. Instead, the Scarlet Witch used her magic powers to find two lost souls and give them physical bodies, creating twin boys named William and Thomas. Later events revealed that the two lost souls were actually part of the demon Mephesto, whose soul had been split in five parts during a previous storyline. Mephesto reabsorbed the two souls, but the power used by the Scarlet Witch to bind them to physical bodies

²⁴ Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 7.

destroyed him. It also resulted in the death of William and Thomas. Grief-stricken, the Scarlet Witch lost control of her powers, killed several Avengers and subsequently vanished. *Children's Crusade* reveals that Billy and Tommy are William and Thomas reincarnated. At this time, Billy is confronted with the fact that he is far more powerful than he initially supposed and that his powers resemble Wanda's abilities. A dominant theme in this story is the fear that history will repeat itself or that time, by its very nature, is cyclical and that Billy will end up destroying his friends the same way Wanda did.

The cyclical nature of time is indicated by the repetition of two sets of mutant twins in different generations. Ivor Morrish discusses how twins are often written as opposites of each other, representing binary forces: male and female, good and evil, light and dark, with the dark twin as the Other embodying all the evil impulses of the light twin.²⁵ Billy's mother, Wanda, is Pietro Maximoff's twin sister and had twins herself, William (Billy) and Thomas (Tommy). The original mutant twins are analogous with the second generation mutant twins. Both Billy and Wanda have magical abilities while Tommy and Pietro are speedsters with inexplicable white/silver hair. Pietro and Tommy function as the good/light twin compared to the black-haired Wanda and Billy who embody the dark/evil twin, the Other. While Wanda and Pietro both have Romani heritage, Wanda is the one who resembles their Romani mother while Pietro resembles their German father, Max Eisenhardt (Magneto). Billy is reincarnated into a Jewish family while Tommy's new family is never mentioned at all and he presents as white. Ritchie Robertson discusses how in the late 19th and 20th century there was a consistent trend in ethnography where anti-Semitism was expressed through quasi-scientific terms framing the male Jew as a feminized figure. For example, Robertson writes, Jacques Le Rider was one of the first to express how "[the] male Jew could be imagined as unmanly, as located between the masculine and the feminine."²⁶ When Billy's Jewish heritage can be read as another stereotypical signification of his intellectual and wealthy background, it can also be read as a stereotypical signification of a feminine nature which plays into the widespread paradigm that "gay sexuality negates masculinity."²⁷ Historically speaking, gay men have often been associated with a lack of masculinity

²⁵ Ivor Morrish, *The Dark Twin: A Study of Evil – And Good* (Wappingers Falls: Beekamn Books, 1999), 52-62.

²⁶ Ritchie Robertson, "Historicizing Weiniger: The Nineteenth-Century German Image of the Feminized Jew" in *Modernity, Culture and 'The Jew,'* ed. Bryan Cheyette and Laura Marcus (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 1998), 24.

²⁷ Tim Edwards, *Cultures of Masculinity* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 79.

and an affinity with the feminine, much like Jewish men. In the few instances where gay sexuality has been associated with an overabundance of masculinity, this has often incorporated the idea that men have sexual needs that the (real) woman does not. This creates the spectre of the predatory gay man who sexualizes straight men and can somehow spread his homosexuality like a contagion because they bear sexual signification:

Men want sex, but don't allow themselves to be the object of sexual desire. Women, and not men, should be the bearers of the sexual. They should be the ones to be desired. They should contain within their 'being', their social relations, their sense of fashion, all the promises of sex. Gay men blow that careful distinction.

To re-affirm this distinction, gay men in representation are often desexualized and relegated to the sphere of the domestic where they can safely perform heteronormativity.

Even when Billy and Teddy perform heteronormativity together, both Wanda and Billy's romantic partners can be read as indicative of perverted sexual appetites as neither the Vision, a robot, nor Teddy, an alien, are human men. While Wanda is heterosexual (as opposed to Billy's homosexuality) and the Vision clearly presents and identifies as male, she did marry and supposedly had sexual relations with a robot or cyborg. According to Donna Haraway, the cyborg itself is queer and functions as a myth "about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities" because they complicate a body's relationship to gender and humanity itself.²⁸ Wanda's attraction to the Vision signifies Wanda's status as the Other. This sexual perversion is hinted at through her superhero name: Scarlet Witch. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English discuss how "witches are accused of every conceivable sex crime against men. Quite simply, they are 'accused' of female sexuality."²⁹ Witches represent women who are in control of their own sexuality and therefore, women who are too powerful, threaten the established order and must be destroyed. Her relationship with the Vision is a crossing of the boundaries of gender, sex and humanity and so is Billy's relationship

²⁸ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 154.

²⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), 10.

with Teddy. By making Billy and Tommy analogous with Wanda and Pietro, the narrative implies that they are extensions of each other and so does the artwork in *Avengers: Children's Crusade* #3 (2010), depicted below.³⁰

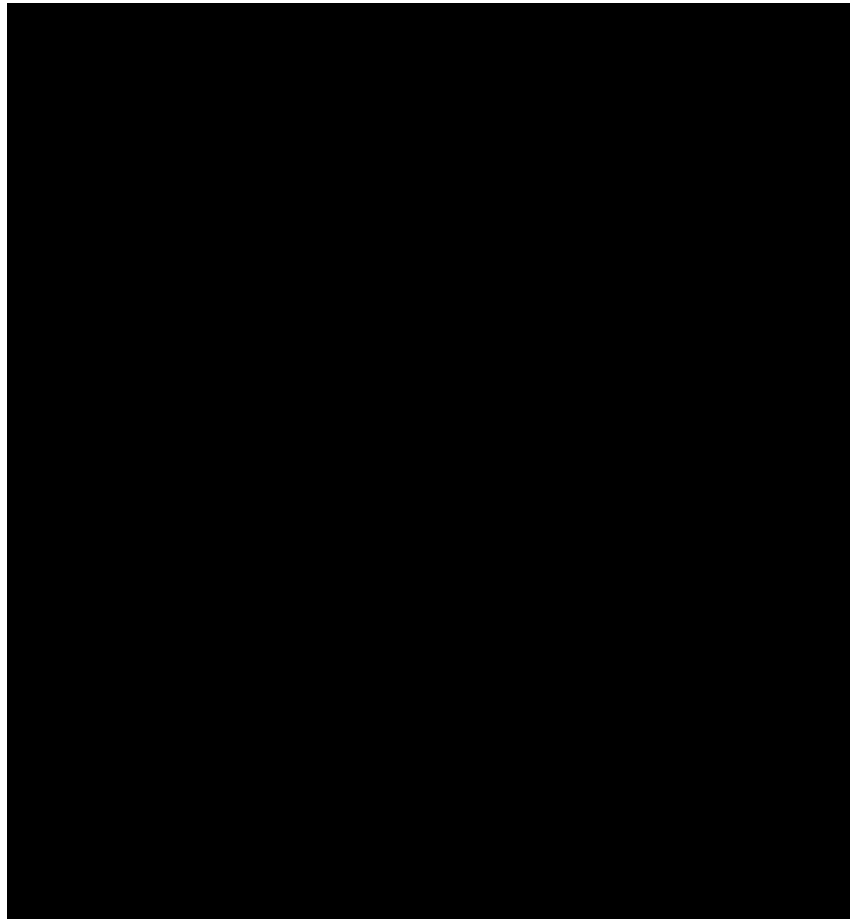


Image 3.5: Billy and Wanda © 2010 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

This image frames Billy as an extension of Wanda. Her cape flows into his, with no way to distinguish between the two. Their bodies seem to melt into one and both have expressions of fear and uncertainty. It almost looks as if Wanda's cape is strangling Billy, implying that Wanda's destiny will destroy him. For Billy, as a feminized character, the text implies an affinity or overlap between the homosexual and the female body, which needs to be destroyed when it becomes excessive and out of control. The danger of femininity, especially excessive femininity, becomes evident when considering how, in many narratives, excessive female power is destroyed to

³⁰ Heinberg, *Children's Crusade*.

maintain the status quo; white patriarchal hegemony.³¹ *Children's Crusade* implies that Billy and Tommy are destined to replay the lives of Wanda and Pietro with Billy (as Wanda) losing control and killing his friends. In *Avengers: Children's Crusade* #3, the mutant Wolverine, who serves as both an Avenger and a member of the X-Men says:

The Scarlet Witch murdered our friends – she stole their lives – and then she took out about a million mutants. And not **one** of you can tell me she won't do something like that – or worse – again. So the only permanent solution is to **kill** her. And if we were smart, we'd get rid of **Wiccan** too (original emphasis).³²

Billy and Wanda are considered too dangerous to be left alive because of their feminine powers and their bodily existence.

The power that Billy and Wanda, as the dark, feminine and Other twin, possess is excessive and originates in their bodies through their mutant bodily identity frames them as feminine. In the Marvel universe, mutants are the next evolution of mankind. Mutant powers, therefore, are centred in the body and the female body in particular “is constructed as bodily uncontrollable and excessive.”³³ Therefore, when female mutant superheroes lose control and need to be destroyed, it implies that female bodily excess, when it cannot be contained, must be eliminated. Placing Billy into the ranks of women who are too powerful frames him as a feminized character, implying that both women and gay men cannot handle responsibility and power. Additionally, magic has often been linked to women, especially women's procreative ability. Barbara Creed writes that “[during] her periods of pregnancy, woman was seen as the source of a particularly powerful form of magic.”³⁴ Billy's narrative plays into stereotypes where women are overwhelmed by their uterus and suffer from hysteria, further linking magic and pregnancy. Magic powers also fit into what Mike Madrid calls the ‘strike a pose and point’ powers mostly associated with female superheroes as it allows them to be

³¹ Another example of an out-of-control female mutant superhero is Jean Grey as the Phoenix in the Dark Phoenix Saga. Her periodical return from the dead causes characters to continuously debate whether she should be killed before she can become the phoenix and threaten to destroy the universe again.

³² Heinberg, *Children's Crusade*.

³³ Helen M. Malson, “Anorexic Bodies and the Discursive Production of Feminine Excess” in *Body Talk: The Material and Discursive Regulation of Sexuality, Madness and Reproduction*, ed. Jane M. Ussher (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 238.

³⁴ Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 45.

powerful without needing to be in the physical battle.³⁵ Like Wanda, Billy has magical, reality-bending powers and he takes on her role in the cyclical nature of history.

Not only is Billy Wanda's double, he is also her demonized offspring. Creed discusses how, in horror films, the fear of female procreative powers is represented through mothers who "create monstrosities through the power of their imagination."³⁶ Women create life without any physical evidence of the involvement of a biological father. Every pregnant woman contains the anxiety that whatever she is bringing forth is foreign, alien and cannot be controlled by men. Wanda harvested Billy's soul and gave him a flesh body by imagining it without any input from the father-figure, the Vision. Billy might be reincarnated as the son of a heterosexual couple now, but his origin story as the son of the Scarlet Witch frames him as a child produced solely by a woman without any male input. Such an origin story plays into stereotypical views of homosexuality caused by the domineering mother, who overtly feminizes her son and does not allow for any stabilizing, masculine influence. The stereotype of the effeminate and flamboyant gay man has a long history in American culture through its obsession with Momism: the paranoia that men became soft and were easily converted to communism and homosexuality because of domineering mothers, as discussed in Chapter One. Supposedly, Momistic mothers created overly dependent male children who identified with women and became attracted to men, which became a popular 'explanation' for homosexuality.³⁷ Billy's fatherless conception plays into those fears of the all-powerful woman whose procreative powers cannot be controlled or subverted by men. Billy's powers, rooted in the body, are also essentially reproductive. Billy can create almost anything with his magic and other characters, especially the Avengers, fear this ability. They fear that Billy's creation will be destructive and monstrous, mirroring the fear of women's reproductive power. Billy perpetuates the biblical image of the daughter who inherits original sin. Creed writes that, in horror stories, original sin is often used to portray the monstrous feminine as something that is inherited, a disease "passed from mother to daughter, from one generation of women to the next," or in Billy's case, from mother to gay son.³⁸ Billy's inheritance of Wanda's powers, the ability to create or recreate reality itself and taking her place in the cycle of history,

³⁵ Mike Madrid, *The Supergirls: Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic Book Heroines* (Minneapolis: Exterminating Angel Press, 2009), 292.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Hans Seibald, *Momism: The Silent Disease of America* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1976), 183.

³⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 45.

implies that he will also produce and reproduce an excessive, monstrous femininity. Billy's status as the feminized character manifests in his relationship with Teddy, Wanda, Tommy and his powerset.

His signification of femininity remains complex as, like most male superheroes, Billy's costume covers him completely, consisting of a full bodysuit and a cape.³⁹ In the ten years since Billy's creation, his costume has gone through three changes. The first one, from 2005, when he still went by the name 'Asgardian' had a few round chest panels and his headband had wings, as a tribute to Thor's costume, as seen in the panel below.⁴⁰ At this time, Billy was unsure what his powers actually were and he seemed to mostly produce something similar to Thor's lightning. While Billy's initial codename Asgardian has a connection to the traditionally masculine Thor, who comes from Asgard, his subsequent name, Wiccan, is affiliated with witches and women.



Image 3.6: Asgardian © 2005
Marvel Comics.
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restrictions]

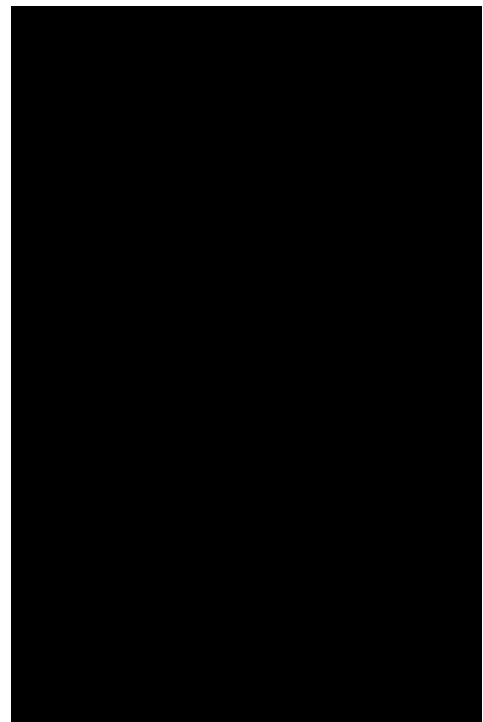


Image 3.7: Thor © 2015 Marvel
Comics.
[Image removed due to copyright
restrictions]

³⁹ Heinberg, *Young Avengers Presents*.

⁴⁰ Jason Aaron et al, *Thor: God of Thunder* #25 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014), Nashville Con variant cover.

Billy's second costume, updated in 2010, was similar to the first, only without the round panels and wings.⁴¹ The third and most recent change, from the 2013 run, also remained very similar to the original two.⁴² It consists of a black body-suit, a red cape, a belt and a galaxy pattern on the sides and the sleeves. They are a reference to Billy's destiny as the Demiurg: a god-like being with cosmic powers who will rewrite the rules of magic and create a paradise dimension.⁴³ The full-body suit completely covers Billy's body and erases all trace of it. In the panels depicting the first two costumes, both drawn by Jim Cheung, Billy does have some musculature, lightly toned abs and forearms. In the Modern Wiccan panel, drawn by Kate Brown and Jamie McKelvie, there is none of the usual muscular structure visible through the suit. This is partly due to the different art styles used by Brown/McKelvie compared to Cheung. The Brown/McKelvie team shy away from the typical body types of ideal masculinity used in comics, such as the lavishly detailed musculature. They do adhere to the inverted triangle body type, but in a much smaller degree than most comics. However, Billy lacks this shape entirely and yet, is not sexualized in the manner of many female superheroes.⁴⁴ While the degree to which the inverted triangle shape is exaggerated changes from artist to artist, Billy's lack is noticeable. He does not exist as either a fantasy subject or an object.

⁴¹ Heinberg, *Children's Crusade*.

⁴² Kieron Gillen et al, *Young Avengers Volume 2: Alternative Cultures* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

⁴³ This destiny is revealed in the 2013/2014 run.

⁴⁴ To be fair, none of the Young Avengers are as highly sexualized as other superheroes, probably because they are underage in most of the comics. The only character who has a more conventional female superhero costume is Kate Bishop/Hawkeye, who had an exposed midriff until the Brown/McKelvie run redesigned her costume.

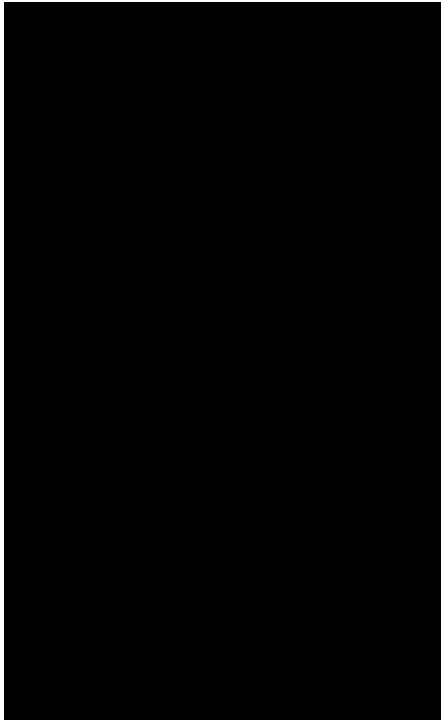


Image 3.8: Original Wiccan © 2010
Marvel Comics.
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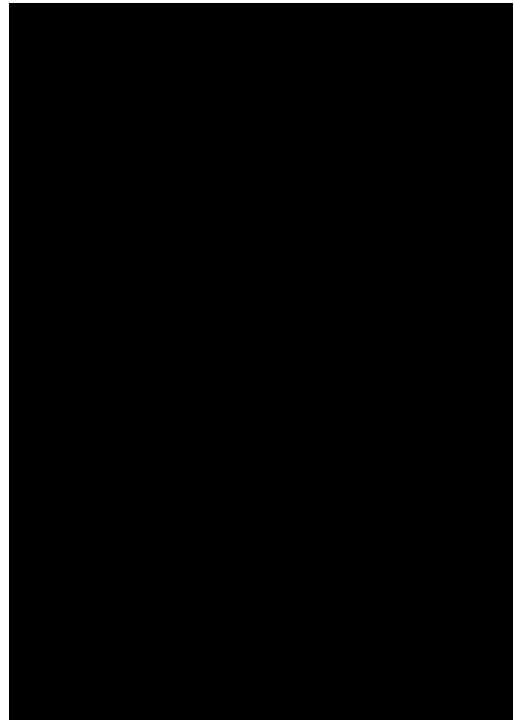


Image 3.9: Modern Wiccan © 2014
Marvel Comics.
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restrictions]

In *The Young Avengers Volume 2* miniseries (2013-2014), the plot is haunted by both the spectre of the predatory gay and the uncontrollable creations of monstrous femininity. In this storyline, Billy accidentally pulls an interdimensional, mind-controlling parasite into his own dimension. This parasite is referred to as Mother, once again referring to the monstrous feminine and the fear of female reproduction. To fight this Mother, the Young Avengers team up with four new characters; Noh-Varr, Loki, America Chavez and Prodigy (David Alleyne), and begin traveling through dimensions to find a way to destroy her.⁴⁵ During their time hopping from one dimension to the other, Loki addresses the possible consequences of Billy's power by claiming that Billy imagined Teddy into reality, as demonstrated by the following panels taken from *Young Avengers* #12.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Cassie Lang/Stature died in a previous storyline, Tommy/Speed is kidnapped at the start of this run and not present for most of it while Eli/Patriot left the team at the end of *Children's Crusade* and moved to the Midwest.

⁴⁶ Gillen, *Young Avengers*.



Image 3.10: Loki and Teddy 1 © 2014 Marvel Comics.

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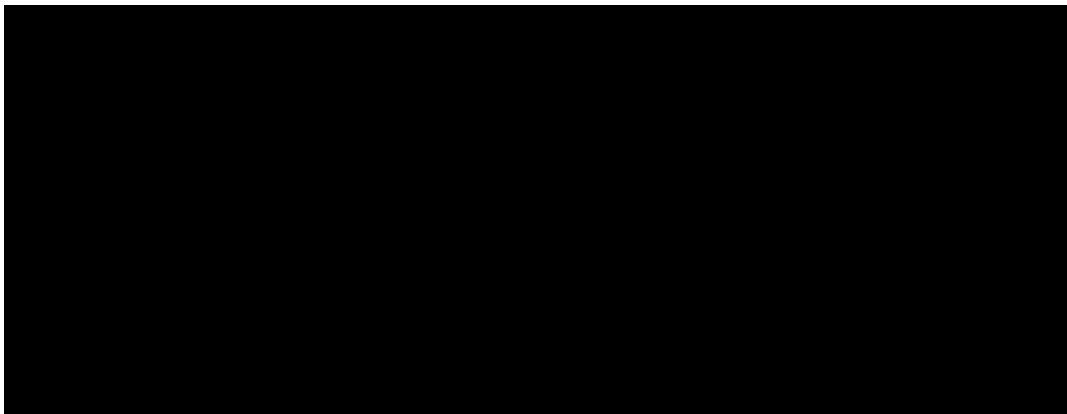


Image 3.11: Loki and Teddy 2 © 2014 Marvel Comics.

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Loki claims that the odds of Teddy existing and being in love with Billy are so low they might as well be impossible and that, while Billy might not have consciously chosen to bring Teddy into existence, all it takes are “whims and daydreams.”⁴⁷ He implies that Billy cannot control his powers and the strength of his (homosexual) desire uses those

⁴⁷ Gillen, *Young Avengers*.

powers to change reality itself. Of course, neither the audience nor Teddy can ever know for sure if this is true. Loki is an untrustworthy character and is known to either lie or twist the truth to serve his own purposes. Teddy does become concerned that everything he is feeling or thinking, or even his existence, might be created by Billy, which implies that Billy made Teddy gay, spreading his homosexuality like a contagion and raising the spectre of the predatory gay man. Furthermore, if Teddy was created by Billy, there would be an additional incestuous dimension to their relationship, further raising the spectre of Billy as the monstrous mother. In the end, they decide that all that matters is that they love each other. While this is a touching romantic narrative, it does not resolve whether Teddy's feelings are genuine or artificially created by Billy. At the end of *Volume 2*, the Young Avengers defeat Mother and Billy accesses his powers fully, becoming the all-powerful Demiurg. Billy decides that he lacks the experience and the knowledge to handle this power responsibly and turns away from it, deciding that he will come back to it in the future. The question of whether Billy will be able to control the destructive potential of his procreative powers remains unanswered and lies constantly in wait.

Externalizing the Queer: Batwoman's Monstrous Doubles

In the 1950s, superhero comics were recovering from a considerable decrease in sales after World War II. While superheroes rarely fought on the European front or in the Pacific War, many protected America by fighting Nazi or Japanese spies, upholding home front morale or helping the war industry. These storylines were no longer appropriate in the 1950s and superhero narratives became more whimsical with fantasy or sci-fi storylines, such as travelling to other planets and meeting aliens or mystical creatures. This change in the superhero genre proved successful and existing comics added characters based on the main hero to boost sales. Superman, for example, gained several pets and a cousin, as discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Two. The success of expanding the Superman family led to DC doing the same for other popular superheroes and in 1956, Batman met a new love interest called Batwoman. While Batman and Robin were, supposedly, written as partners with a father/son relationship, allegations that they were the perfect example of a homosexual relationship and promoted a homosexual lifestyle to young children had been cropping up since the early 1950s and had been expounded on by Frederic Wertham in his book *Seduction of the Innocent*

(1954).⁴⁸ Following the increased conservatism of the Silver Age (1956-1970) by the CCA, these accusations had to be refuted. Additionally, Batwoman would hopefully increase the sales of *Batman* (1940-2011) and *Detective Comics* (1937-2011), which featured Batman and Robin, by bringing in a female audience.

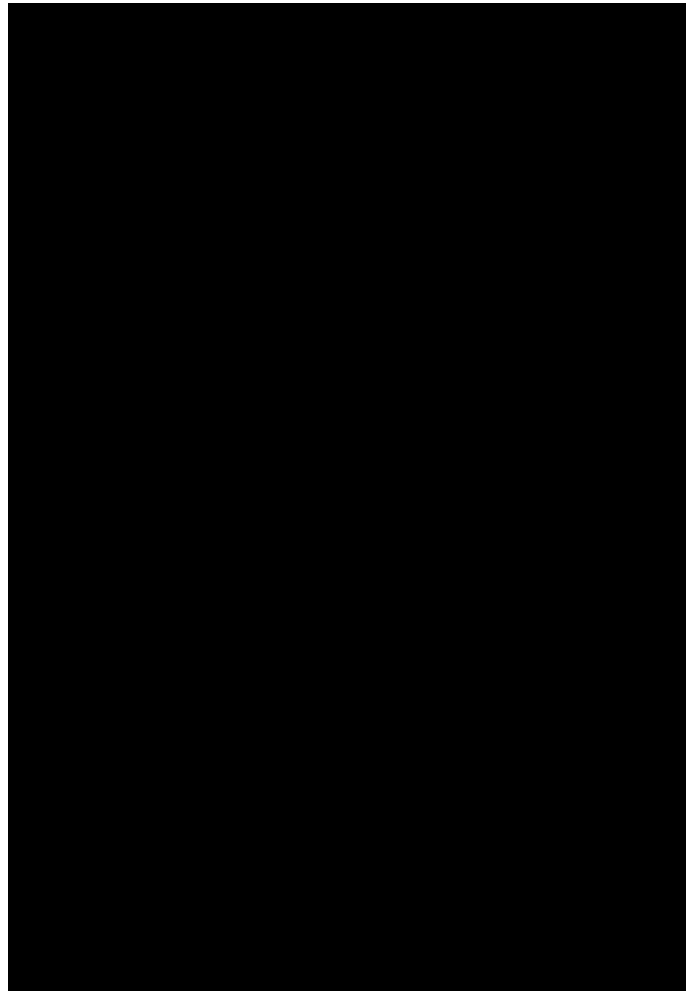


Image 3.12: Detective Comics #233 Cover © 1956 DC Comics.

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Batwoman's civilian identity was Katherine Kane, a wealthy socialite from Gotham who was inspired by Batman to use her wealth for good.⁴⁹ She had a utility purse, which carried weapons disguised as stereotypically feminine items such as lipsticks, hairnets and compact mirrors. Batwoman appeared regularly in the comics in the 1950s and 1960s and was relatively well-received by fans. But by 1964, Batwoman

⁴⁸ Frederick Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart, 1954), 190.

⁴⁹ Edmond Hamilton et al, *Detective Comics #233* (New York: DC Comics, 1956), cover.

and other characters created in the 1950s were cut in the series' overhaul when Julius Schwartz took over, because he considered these characters inappropriate for the new, darker direction, in which he was taking the series.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, characters continued to refer to Katherine Kane and she appeared briefly in a few issues in 1979, having come out of retirement to assist Batgirl (Barbara Gordon) with a case. Later that year, Batwoman was killed by the League of Assassins. The new Batwoman is a product of the Modern Age (1998-now) and first appeared in *Countdown to Final Crisis* (2007-2008) and *Final Crisis* (2008-2009), after which she briefly took over as the lead character in *Detective Comics*. In 2009, Batwoman appeared in a miniseries *Batwoman: Elegy* (2009-2010), after which she was given a regular titular series, *Batwoman* (2010-2014). The *Batwoman: Elegy* series was collected into a graphic novel and published in 2010. At the time of writing, Batwoman is appearing regularly in the new *Detective Comics* (2011-ongoing). This new Batwoman is Kate Kane, a wealthy Jewish heiress and, in an ironic twist, a lesbian. She is the cousin of the original Katherine Kane, who is Batman's aunt through marriage in DC's current continuity. This subsection will focus primarily on the Kate Kane Batwoman, specifically the *Batwoman: Elegy* graphic novel and the *Batwoman* series, both of which engage almost exclusively with the more fantastical and gothic elements of the DC universe.

In comic scholarship, *Batwoman: Elegy* has received positive criticism and while it is true that *Elegy* is the first Batwoman story that fully engages with Kate's sexuality in a transgressive and progressive manner, to consider it as only containing positive representation of heroic lesbianism is a simplification of the graphic novel's complexity. Paul Petrovic states that "through its intricate layout and thematic design," *Elegy*'s artwork visualizes how Kate's lesbianism is used to "challenge the heteronormativity of comics."⁵¹ Instead of using traditional linear panel lay-outs, the graphic novel is structured by panels in spider-web formation or like shards cracking the page. It disregards traditional use of borders and the gutter space in comics, symbolizing how Kate, as the Batwoman, transgresses the limitations of society and its interpretation of her identity. This style is also used in the serialised *Batwoman* comics, especially in the *Hydrology* storyline where panels are drawn in fluid streams flowing into one another, jumping back and forwards in time, forcing the reader to investigate and

⁵⁰ Paul Levitz, *The Silver Age of DC Comics: 1956 – 1970* (New York: Taschen, 2013).

⁵¹ Paul Petrovic, "Queer resistance, Gender Performance, and 'Coming Out' of the Panel Borders in Greg Rucka and J.H. Williams III's *Batwoman: Elegy*," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 2:1 (2011), 68-69.

construct the narrative.⁵² While Petrovic's argument that the art informs the narrative and underlines its themes of familial fragmentation as well as the multiplicity of Kate's identity is eloquent and significant, the interpretation of *Elegy* as fully transgressive or consistently invested in the politicization of Kate's lesbian identity lacks nuance. Both *Elegy* and the subsequent *Batwoman* comics are complex narratives that attempt to challenge the status quo and promote diversity but fail to interrogate heteronormativity.

The graphic novel, *Elegy*, contains damaging stereotypes about lesbians and gender performance through Kate's relationship with her sister and her father, as well as the codification of the domestic and public sphere. In *Elegy*, flashbacks reveal how Kate was kidnapped at twelve years old, along with her sister, Elizabeth 'Beth' Kane and her mother, Gabrielle 'Gabi' Kane. Both her mother and sister die, and Kate is rescued by her father, Jacob 'Jake' Kane. While this origin story fits a traditional narrative where the hero gains motivation from the death of a parental figure, the fact that Kate is part of a set of twins is unusual. Most superheroes do not have brothers or sisters, much less a twin sibling, or even extended family, which allows for a team of superheroes to function as a surrogate family without displacing the traditional, biological, family.⁵³ Morrish considers how twins exist in opposition to each other and are used to symbolize humanity's double nature:

Twins, however, have always been regarded as something special and, if not related directly to divinity, yet as possessing some unusual power or *mana* which works in opposition, rather like the positive and negative forces of electricity or the north and south poles of a magnet. There is, thus, in the concept of the twin a certain balance or equilibrium implied, a closeness and similarity without a complete identity; and ultimately, at least in mythology, a certain opposition which may lead through increasing hostility to an attempt by one twin to destroy the other.⁵⁴

Twins represent opposing dichotomies: light and dark, male and female, good and evil. Throughout *Elegy* and *Batwoman*, Kate is framed as the masculine twin and Beth as the feminine twin. In the flashbacks to Kate's childhood, she is often shown as having more

⁵² Greg Rucka et al, *Batwoman: Elegy* (New York: DC Comics, 2010).

⁵³ When superheroes do have biological families, there is often tension between the superhero's responsibilities and his/her family's needs, or the hero is estranged from their biological family.

⁵⁴ Morrish, *The Dark Twin*, 37.

affinity with her father while Beth is closer to her mother. During their childhood, Kate was often Beth's protector and exhibited behaviour traditionally interpreted as masculine or tomboy-ish while Beth was considered the more feminine of the two. The alignment of Beth as feminine and Kate as masculine is reinforced by the colour motif used in the flashbacks to Kate's childhood. When they are not drawn wearing the same thing, Beth is often depicted wearing white and pink colours, which are considered soft and feminine. Kate is drawn in black and red, which are often read as masculine colours, while foreshadowing her identity as Batwoman and allowing the reader to identify her.⁵⁵



Image 3.13: Kate and Beth as Children Cover © 2010 DC Comics.

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The twin's signification of gender is reinforced through their relationship with their parents and the family's relationship to the military. In *Batwoman* #7 (2012), Kate's father explicitly states that Kate resembled him the most while Beth was more like her mother, reaffirming Kate's symbolic position as the masculine twin. When both Beth and Gabi die, the feminine is completely annihilated in the Kane nuclear family.

⁵⁵ Rucka, *Elegy*.

Only the masculine survives in the form of both Kate and her father, reaffirming her parallelization with him in the family unit. While both of Kate's parents were in the military, her scenes with her mother are obviously parental, set in the domestic sphere. The family is seen moving from base to base to accommodate Jacob's career, framing him as the career military in the family while Beth's mother is consistently depicted making the girls' dinner, helping them with homework or driving them to and from school. Even though Gabi is also a military woman, we only see her performing traditionally motherly duties. Chapter One discusses how a masculine soldier identity depends on the destruction of the female, which occurred almost completely in the Kane nuclear family as the only two surviving members signify masculinity. Following the destruction of the feminine, Kate's family takes on the structure of the military unit, in which Kate assumes the identity of the male soldier following her superior/father's orders. After the death of the female signifiers in the family unit, Jacob used the tenets of the military as the moral code by which to raise his daughter. This culminates in Kate joining the military academy at West Point, where she attempts to consolidate her identity as a male soldier.

Kate joining the military is an attempt to cement her citizenship and access to its rights in American society. As discussed in Chapter One, through Aaron Belkin and Jason Dittmer's work, the military is considered quintessentially American, a place where citizens can affirm their American nationality. Joining the military is not only an attempt by Kate to find a masculine role as protector but also as a way to solidify her place in heteronormative society by affirming her American nationality. As we have seen in Chapter Two, the identity of the female soldier has existed in the cultural landscape since World War II, but this role has been encumbered by the need to preserve traditional notions of femininity and the masculine warrior ideal. The female soldier could exist as long as she did not threaten the superiority of the male soldier as protector and physical combatant, which meant that she was barred from combat. Kate's desire to be a soldier and protect people implicitly originates from a desire to assume the male protector role to protect signifiers of the feminine. While Kate is a woman, she is consistently framed as masculine in opposition to other feminine characters. Her identity as a soldier is framed in masculine terms. At West Point, she excels not only in her academic classes but also in the physical requirements. While this can, and should, be read as challenging stereotypes surrounding the cult of the body, which frames the female body as inherently weaker than the male body, as discussed in Chapter Two, her

lesbian identity can complicate this straightforward reading. Depicting the lesbian as too masculine or depicting masculinity as the source of lesbianism is a familiar, damaging stereotype. If Kate's desire to protect is read as a desire to inhabit a protective role that is explicitly masculine because of her childhood trauma, compounded by the fact that her father raised her without any feminine influence, Batwoman could be read as perpetuating the idea that lesbianism stems from an over-abundance of masculine influence, an inability to process childhood trauma or the result of childhood trauma interfering with the 'correct' construction of gender identity, which is a homophobic and Freudian construction of female homosexuality.

The graphic novel, *Elegy*, also undermines Kate's transgressive political potential through its portrayal of the military and the DADT policy. During her time at West Point, Kate begins a romantic and sexual relationship with her roommate Sophie Moore and is reported for homosexual conduct to her superior officer, Colonel Reyes. While it is impossible to simply ignore the charges, Reyes will look the other way if Kate publically denounces her sexuality. Kate refuses. This scene demonstrates Kate's refusal to compromise her individual identity for the sake of discriminatory military policies, but it also cements Kate's loyalty to the military and its code of ethics. While she never explicitly states that she is gay, she says she cannot tell Reyes what he needs to hear because "a cadet shall not lie, cheat or steal, nor suffer others to do so."⁵⁶ Kate is depicted as putting the morals and values of the military community above her own rights as an American citizen and does not object to the discriminatory policy that causes her to be expelled from West Point. When she tells her father, he says that he cannot fault her for anything because she maintained her honour. This maintains neoliberalism's public/private split, incorporating how *Lawrence* forecloses political action that challenges institutionalised heteronormativity. The graphic novel clearly presents gay women's capacity to serve in the military without compromising the military's code of honour or the effectiveness of its fighting force through Kate's exemplary behaviour and record, but never discusses how the military forces gay women to compromise their own identity. Kate never explicitly verbalises how the practice is discriminatory. Her exclusion is framed as a personal loss, not an institutionalized injustice. The narrative frames her silence as a positive strength and reaffirms that homosexuality should be kept private and separate from privileged spaces

⁵⁶ Rucka, *Elegy*.

to ensure survival of the institution, tying into the argument that DADT should not be repealed on the grounds that it would disrupt combat units and diminish combat effectiveness. Kate's sexuality is divorced from its radical political power, which erodes Kate's transgressive potential.

While the graphic novel never dips into the institutional and community-wide repercussions of such policies, it does demonstrate how such discriminatory policies are destructive on a personal level. After Kate is discharged from West Point Military Academy, she descends into a self-destructive downward spiral. Left without a purpose, she drinks too much, drops out of college and lives on her stepmother's wealth. Similar to the *Iron Man* comics and films, this slide into frivolous consumption is presented as part of the corrupting gluttony of the upper class, which is often framed as feminine, as discussed in Chapter One. Rejected from the ultimate masculine sphere, the military, Kate sinks into a completely feminine space of wealth and luxury characterised as excessive, toxic and destructive. After an encounter with Batman, Kate is inspired to become a vigilante and stops partying. Batman, as a signification of the masculine, guides her out of toxic femininity. After fighting as an unnamed vigilante for a time, Kate is caught by her father who threatens to use his position in the military to prevent her from fighting crime unless he can provide her with sufficient training and back up. With a masculine authority figure to give her structure, guidance and validation, Kate can escape the feminine space of excessive consumption. It is her father who suggests she uses Batman's chevron as her own, which identifies her as "one of the good guys," causing Kate to assume the Batwoman moniker.⁵⁷ Traditionally, Batman is the male warrior protector of the city of Gotham, which is often identified through female pronouns and when personalised, depicted as a woman.⁵⁸ Aligning herself explicitly with Batman means that Kate assumes a male warrior identity, protecting the female domestic sphere (Gotham), through male mentorship (her father) and male signification (the bat symbol).

In the traditionally male gender role of the superhero, Batwoman combines signifiers of masculinity and femininity, a monstrous gender transgression, partly evidenced through her uniform and character design. *Elegy* has three design sheets in the back, one for Batwoman and two for Kate Kane. The design sheet for Batwoman reveals a preoccupation with practicality typically reserved for male superhero

⁵⁷ Rucka, *Elegy*.

⁵⁸ Paul Cornell et al, *Stormwatch #3* (New York: DC Comics, 2011).

costumes. As the top lines says, the look used in *Countdown to Final Crisis* and *Final Crisis* is preserved but altered with “more sensibility and functionality.”⁵⁹ Batwoman’s hair, originally worn long, is cut and now hidden under a wig that detaches when gripped. The cape is fastened in the front to preserve mobility and has been refitted to function as a paraglider. Her costume has added armoured panels in the gauntlets and gloves, and the boots, instead of fashionable high-heels, are sturdy and resemble combat boots. While form-fitting, this look is the complete opposite of most female superheroes’ costumes, which resemble bathing suits or bikinis. It is more reminiscent of male superhero costumes: form-fitting enough to reveal their glorious muscles but simultaneously completely covering up the body.

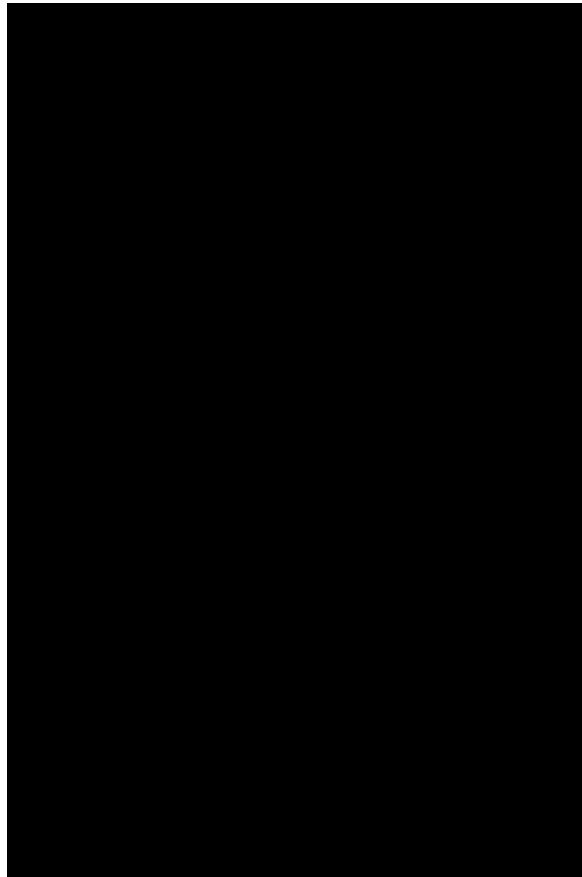


Image 3.14: Batwoman Design © 2010 DC Comics.

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⁵⁹ Rucka, *Elegy*.

This look is reminiscent of the way comics typically represent masculinity. Her suit has both the belt, as a replacement for the ‘Underwear of Power,’ and the chest icon, but without the inverted triangle body shape. Batwoman is still clearly recognizably a woman and her body conforms to some tropes typically associated with femininity in comic books. For instance, the tight-fitting body suit does not cling to a set of powerful abs. It clings to the concave curve of her rib cage, implying that Batwoman is starving and underweight instead of powerfully muscled, and her breasts sit high on her chest. In most panels throughout the graphic novel, they are slightly pointy, as if she is wearing a push-up bra instead of a sports bra, although they are a modest size compared to other female superheroes. As the Batwoman, she has long red hair (vs the short cut she wears as a civilian) and she wears blood red lipstick. Through the role of the physical combatant, *Elegy* steps away from the ‘strike a pose and point’ powers. Petrovic argues that “*Elegy* offers a deconstruction of the hyper-feminine,” not only by “showing Kate working out with weights, with sweat rolling down her grimacing face and grimy workout clothes, desexualizing the aura of the superheroine,” but also by adding typically male tropes to her costume.⁶⁰ It is a mingling of gender signifiers that challenges the idea of femininity as a complete contrast to masculinity. Through a blended performance of both femininity and masculinity while enacting a typically masculine role, Batwoman performs a blurring of gender roles, which eventually leads to a monstrous transformation. In *Elegy* and *Batwoman*, masculinity and femininity are each other’s double and doubles inevitably seek to break boundaries and seep into each other.

Superheroes exist in a constant state of doubling: there is the superhero and their secret, civilian identity. Especially in the Batman universe, the superhero is a consciously created monstrous double in order to strike fear in the hearts of criminals. In the case of Batwoman, she is both Batwoman and Kate Kane, the civilian. Batwoman is Kate’s monstrous other: embodying all those parts of herself that belong outside heteronormativity, such as her lesbian identity, her performance of enhanced and monstrous femininity in a masculine identity framework and the constant fight against the monsters and horrors plaguing Gotham City. As a civilian, Kate seeks to exist in the homonormative, but her dark Other contaminates and spills over into Kate’s private life. The villains that superheroes must defeat are also doubles of the superhero, often

⁶⁰ Petrovic, “Queer Resistance,” 69.

created to match and mirror the superhero. If, as Friedrich Weltzien claims, the superhero is automatically connected to masculinity, as discussed in the introduction, its double, the villain must reflect femininity back on him, as is the case with Batwoman.⁶¹ Her villains are all doubles of herself, monstrous and sexually destructive, invoking images of blood, monstrosity and femininity. One of these doubles is the villain of *Elegy*, the High Madame of the Religion of Crime, named Alice, who plans to release a toxic nerve agent over Gotham. The Religion of Crime is a cult worshipping crime, with its own bible and prophecies. According to the acolytes of the religion, “the Apostle of the First would come to Gotham and there he would murder ‘the twice-named daughter of Cain,’” which would bring about either apocalypse or elevate the Religion of Crime to the rulers of Gotham, both of which are acceptable outcomes to the cult. The organisation assumes that ‘Twice-Named Daughter of Cain’ refers to Batwoman, also named Kate Kane (pronounced as Cain). The cult sends their High Madame, Alice, to murder Batwoman and destroy Gotham. Alice is obsessed with *Alice in Wonderland* and only speaks in quotes from Lewis Carroll’s work. For example, when she meets Batwoman for the first time, she says, “I can’t explain myself, I’m afraid, because I’m **not** myself, you see” (original emphasis).⁶² In both *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice exists as a double, either as a dream or a mirror image, which exists as a distorted copy of Alice in the ‘real world.’ In *Elegy*, Alice is the distorted double of Batwoman, who is her direct opposite, the hero to her villain, and they are often depicted as two parts of the same whole.⁶³

⁶¹ Friedrich Weltzien, “Masque-*ulinities*: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero Genre,” *Fashion Theory* 9:2 (2005), 231.

⁶² Rucka, *Elegy*.

⁶³ Ibid.

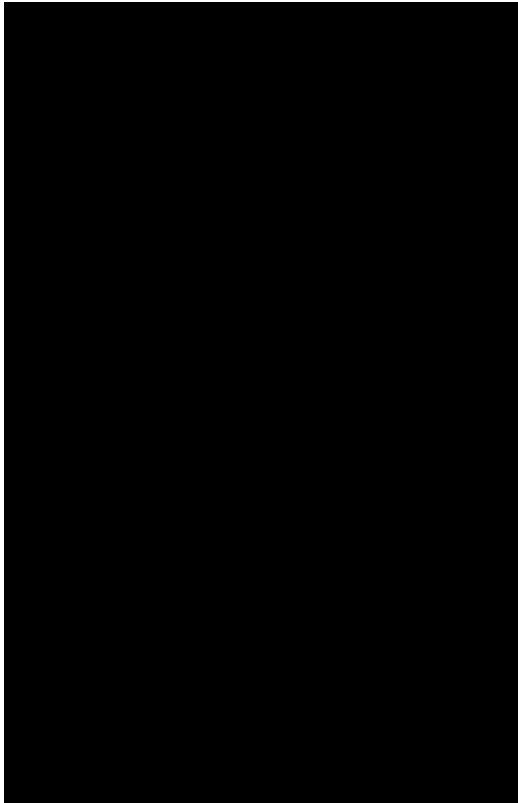


Image 3.15: Batwoman/Alice 1 ©
2010 DC Comics.

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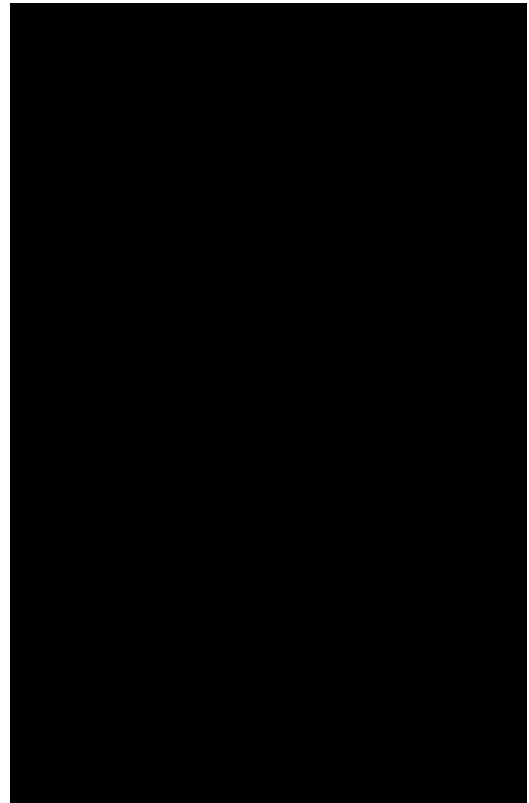


Image 3.16: Batwoman/Alice 2 ©
2010 DC Comics.

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In these panels, Batwoman and Alice form a single body and a single face, representing the conflicting impulses inherent in the subconscious and hinting at the plot twist near the end of *Elegy*, which is that Alice is actually Beth.⁶⁴ Some members of the Religion of Crime believed that Twice-Named referred to a set of identical twins and that one needed to kill the other. They kidnapped Beth as a child and brainwashed her into becoming Alice, to become her double's double and a double of herself: Alice is Beth's double, who is Kate's double, who is doubled by Batwoman, doubled by Alice; like a fractured mirror reflecting its distorted image back at itself again and again. This brings the thematic use of twins full-circle as the dark twin (Beth-as-Alice) attempts to destroy the light twin (Kate-as-Batwoman), while the light twin is victorious and the hero inevitably defeats the villain. Yet, the use of colours complicates this

⁶⁴ The colour scheme used throughout *Elegy* was also foreshadowing. Just like a young Kate wearing black and red so the audience can identify her as Batwoman, Beth always wears pink and white as does Alice.

reading. The use of white seems to point to Beth as the light twin and Kate's black costume frames her as the dark twin. Both Beth and Kate are complicated versions of each other and exhibit the blurring of boundaries and unstable identities seeping into each other.

Other villains, or doubles, in the *Batwoman* series are the Mother of Monsters, Nocturna and Morgan La Fey. During Batwoman's investigation into the disappearance of several children in Gotham. Batwoman discovers that they have been kidnapped to be sacrificed in an attempt to make monsters from urban myth real. For example, the legend of the Weeping Woman, a mother who drowned her own children, and Bloody Mary are brought to life. These villains link maternity and monstrosity as well as blood and femininity.⁶⁵

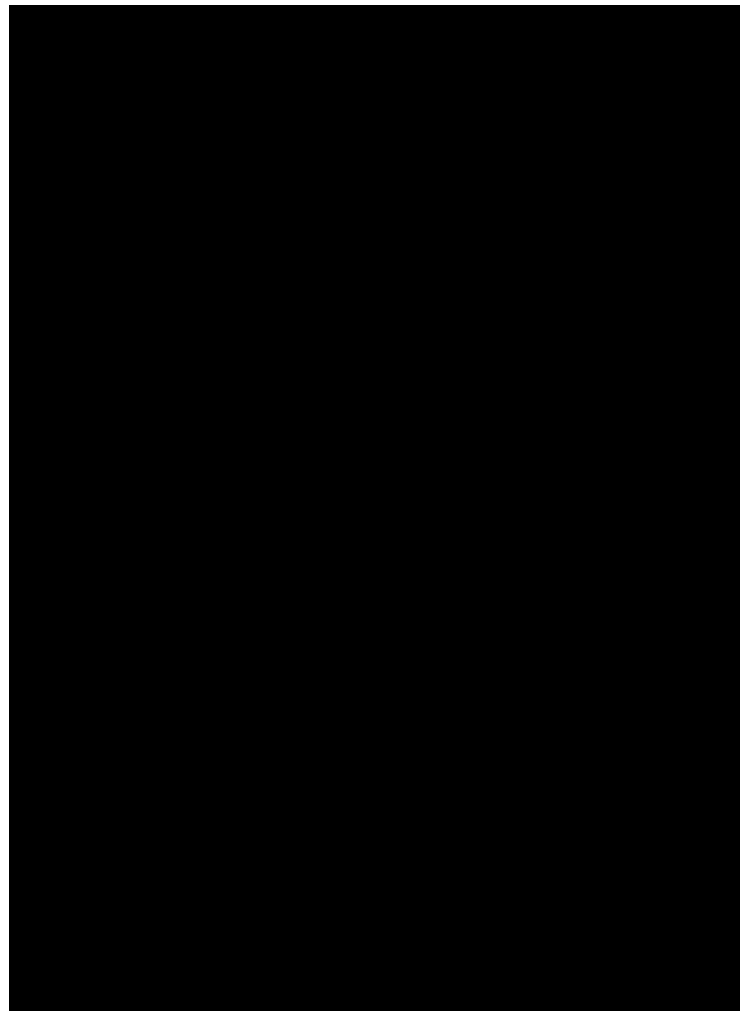


Image 3.17: Bloody Mary © 2012 DC Comics.
[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

⁶⁵ W. Haden Blackman et al, *Batwoman* #7 (New York: DC Comics, 2012).

These monsters are summoned and sacrificed to bring about the return of someone called the Mother. This is the Mother of Monsters, who gave birth to Medusa, the snake-haired woman from Greek Myth. By teaming up with Wonder Woman, Batwoman finds out that, in the ancient past of the DC universe, the Mother populated the Earth with monsters. Eventually, Zeus, the ultimate patriarchal God, decreed that the Earth belonged to mortal men and he ordered the Mother locked away, her monstrous children hunted down and destroyed. This villain's origin story reflects historic and contemporary anxieties surrounding motherhood and woman's procreative power. Not only does Mother give birth to monsters that exist outside of man's control, she also needs to feed on those monsters to re-enter the human world, playing into the stereotype of the devouring mother who feeds on her own children. The Mother's return to Gotham can then be read as a crossing of gender boundaries: a refusal to accept heteropatriarchal limitations on motherhood and femininity, which needs to be stopped at all costs to save the world, or preserve the heteronormative status quo. It frames gender transgression as monstrous and the Mother does look monstrous beyond anything that can be described.⁶⁶

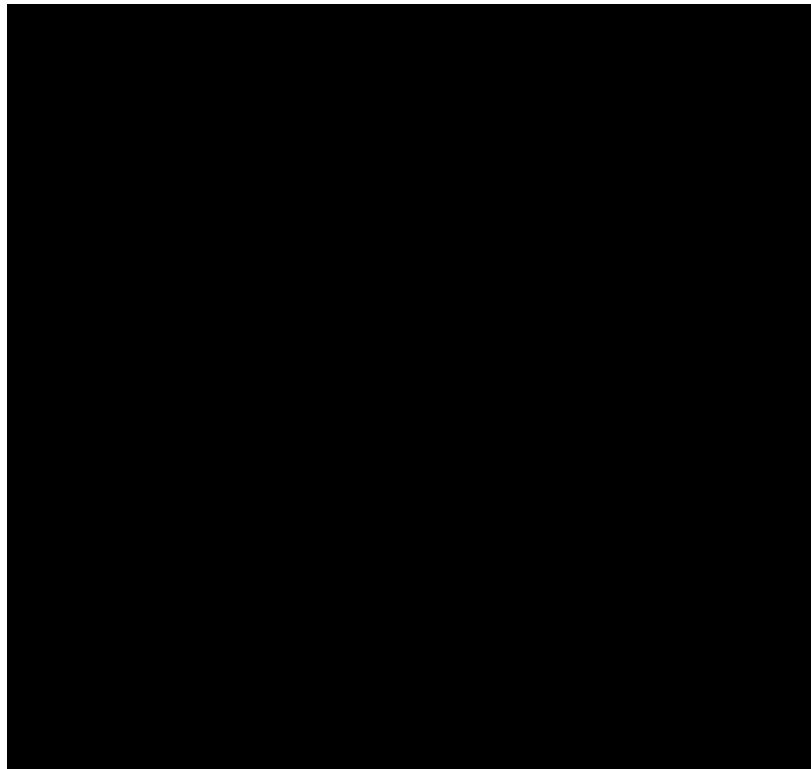


Image 3.18: Mother of Monsters © 2013 DC Comics.
[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

⁶⁶ W. Haden Blackman et al, *Batwoman #16* (New York: DC Comics, 2013).

The Mother does not seem to possess a body. Her lack of bodily identity hints at the breaking of boundaries, the blurring of categories, as another dimension opens into our own and she spills out. In the flashback depicting the Mother's story, she is drawn as a beautiful human woman, but time spent banished from the patriarchal heteronormative world has transformed her into something that cannot be contained. She can only be identified through motherhood, patriarchy's ultimate female biological destiny, and its twisted forms. Of course, in the end, she is vanquished. The Mother's defeat at the hands of Batwoman is the defeat of a woman made monstrous by escaping the bounds of the homo/heteronormative and transgressing traditionally subservient feminine gender roles. As Batwoman's double, the Mother also represents the struggle in Kate herself to prevent the dark and twisted Other from spilling into her homonormative civilian life.

Kate, in her civilian life, is invested in constructing homonormativity, which, as discussed previously, frames white, middle-class homosexual and lesbian couples in long-term relationships as an acceptable version of homosexuality at the cost of other LGBTQA+ communities. Kate attempted to perform heteronormativity by joining the military, which traditionally provides spaces of belonging and legitimization to minorities. Rejected by these spaces, Kate looks for belonging through a homonormative relationship. She has several female partners, most notably: Renee Montoya, Maggie Sawyer and Natalia Mitternacht. When Kate leaves the military, she also breaks up with her girlfriend and roommate, Sophie Moore, who maintained the public/private split and denied her sexuality to retain her position in the military. While in her self-destructive phase after leaving West Point, Kate meets Renee Montoya when Montoya, a beat cop in the Gotham City Police Department (GCPD), pulls her over for speeding. While Renee and Kate enter into a monogamous relationship, they are not able to fulfil the tenets of the homonormative. Renee, who also features as a regular character in *Gotham Central* (2002-2006), is Hispanic and at the time of meeting Kate, in the closet. Neither her parents nor the people she works with are aware that she is gay. While this maintains a public/private split, it also prevents her from fully committing to the construction of a family with Kate, a requirement of homonormativity. In fact, homonormativity requires people to come out as gay when they are in a relationship to ward off the spectre of the single, predatory lesbian. Remaining in the closet also goes against Kate's own morals which prohibits lying even

at the cost of professional and personal desires. As a beat cop with its implied low income, Renee signifies the working class, which falls outside of the heteronormative community. Additionally, neither Kate nor Montoya can be framed as the masculine or feminine partner in relation to each other, causing the relationship to transgress the heteronormative gender roles required in homonormativity.

The closest Kate comes to inhabiting the homonormative is through her relationship with Maggie Sawyer. They meet at a fundraiser event for the GCPD, where Maggie approaches Kate because they are both wearing tuxedos, breaking conventional gendered dress codes and signalling queerness to the outside world. In doing so, it breaks the public/private split as it makes both Kate and Maggie's lesbianism readily apparent. Maggie claims that wearing a tuxedo is always lucky because "you don't feel bad when other people show up wearing the same thing," implying that a woman in a tuxedo or a suit instead of an elaborate dress at a formal event automatically signals lesbianism and the potential for romance.⁶⁷ However, the image of a woman in a stylish suit is no longer as radical as it once was and cannot automatically be taken as an expression of lesbianism or lesbian desire.⁶⁸ Women in suits and tuxedos are increasingly normalized and co-opted by the fashion industry, an example of how heteronormative culture appropriates and de-radicalizes lesbian signification. Again, Kate's lesbianism assumes non-radical and increasingly heteronormalised forms. During this initial meeting, Maggie reveals that she broke up with a lesbian partner in Metropolis when she moved to Gotham and is currently single. Kate and Maggie start dating and quickly progress to a committed relationship, settling into the homonormative. Maggie is the ideal partner for Kate. She is openly gay in the CGPD, citing Commissioner Gordon's strict anti-discriminatory policy as part of her success, in contrast to Renee Montoya's insistence that being out would jeopardize her career. This frames Montoya's worry as paranoia in the face of a progressive, liberal society. Maggie's career as a detective frames her as middle-class compared to the beat cop, with its higher social status and wage. Furthermore, Maggie is a mother. Before she came out as gay, she was married to a man and had a child with him. Her daughter resides in Metropolis and only occasionally visits Maggie in Gotham. The link to

⁶⁷ Rucka, *Elegy*.

⁶⁸ As evidenced by online articles such as "11 Celebrities Wearing Tuxedos, Because The Red Carpet Needs a Good Shakeup Every Once In A While" on Bustle.com and "Women in Suits: Ladies Who Got It Right, Because gowns aren't the only look at the Grammys" on Elle.com and the increasing number of fashion houses and high-end stores that offer women suits, such as Harvey Nichols, Ted Baker and Harrods.

motherhood frames Maggie as the feminine partner in their relationship. Although Maggie is a detective and often works the same cases as Batwoman, during the Mother of Monsters storyline, Batwoman consistently expresses concern and fear for Maggie's position as a defender of Gotham's citizens. Even when Maggie is a physical combatant herself, Kate assumes that, as the Batwoman, she has more resources and training to withstand the rigours of combat against Gotham's villains. She effectively casts Maggie as the (female) civilian who needs to be protected and herself as the (male) soldier who will protect her. At the end of the Mother of Monsters storyline, Kate asks Maggie to marry her, reaffirming her position as the 'active' male partner in cultural discourse on gender roles. Throughout the next few issues, Kate and Maggie move in together and Maggie even encourages Kate to see a psychiatrist so Kate can resolve her childhood trauma and the PTSD she is suffering from as a result of her vigilantism.

Batwoman's original creative team, Aden Blackman, J.H. Williams III and Amy Reider, planned for Kate and Maggie to marry and completely settle into the homonormative, but DC editors intervened. They rationalized that superheroes could not have happy personal lives and therefore, Kate and Maggie could not get married. While editorial interference is normally not so widely published, DC had no choice but to openly justify their positions as Williams and Blackman both publically threatened to leave the title if DC interfered with their artistic vision. Considering that Williams and Blackman had won a GLAAD Media Award for their work on Batwoman, having them quit over an editorial dispute concerning the marriage of gay characters would have been a public embarrassment for DC. Instead, DC removed them from the title before they could leave in protest and released a statement saying that the editorial differences with the writers over the wedding were not because of Batwoman's sexuality. However, considering that plenty of DC superheroes have been or are currently married, the decision not to allow Kate and Maggie to marry seems to stem from a fear of public backlash against depicting a happily married lesbian couple. While Marvel's Northstar wedding in 2013 received plenty of positive publicity, which hints at the acceptability of homonormativity when performed by two men, DC's fear of a backlash over two gay female characters marrying hints at the way lesbian homonormativity prevents lesbianism's fetishization by straight men. Instead, in *Batwoman* #34 (2014), Kate breaks up with Maggie. Her ex-husband sued for full custody of his and Maggie's child, citing Kate as a bad influence on their daughter. Kate contacts Maggie's ex-husband and promises to leave Maggie if he drops the lawsuit. Kate never informs Maggie of

this deal, but stresses in her goodbye letter that “a daughter needs her mother.”⁶⁹ Kate is clearly referring to her own motherless childhood and inadvertently plays into the stereotype that only male/female couples are suited to raise children. The comic portrays the break-up with Maggie as a personal sacrifice on Kate’s part, sending the message that using people’s sexuality against them in custody battles over children is morally reprehensible, implying that sexuality should have no bearing on someone’s ability to raise a child. Yet, because the comic never depicts Kate and Maggie parenting together successfully or Kate having a positive relationship with Maggie’s daughter, this progressive message once again falls short. In the same issue, a villain named Nocturna, who has discovered that Batwoman and Kate are the same person, breaks into Kate’s apartment and seduces her.

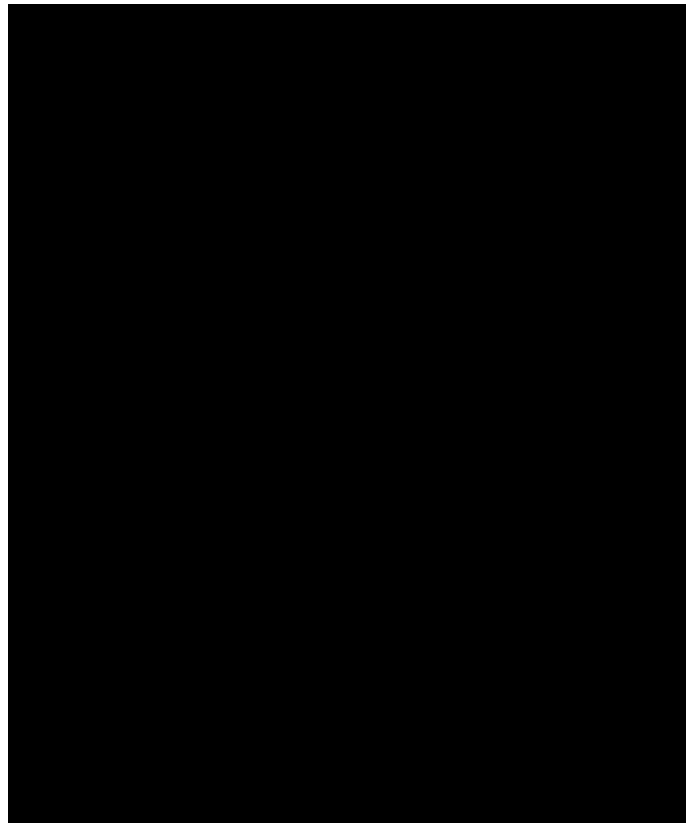


Image 3.19: Natalia Bites Kate © 2014 DC Comics.
[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

From this point on, the narrative descends into stereotypical portrayals of the predatory, vampiric lesbian. Having been bitten by Mitternacht, Kate is plagued by

⁶⁹ Marc Andreyko et al, *Batwoman #34* (New York: DC Comics, 2014).

dreams/nightmares and regularly transforms into a vampire. The transformation is marked by Batwoman having sharp canines, attacking people and speaking in a strange, purple speech bubble with a gothic font. Kate switches between this vampiric form of herself and Batwoman regularly, but never seems to remember her episodes as a vampire. Mitternacht also becomes romantically involved with Kate, whose emotional turmoil over breaking up with Maggie seems to have evaporated. As a lesbian vampire, Mitternacht represents the fallen/evil woman who refuses to perform the traditionally female roles of wife/mother which constitutes a threat to the survival of the heteronormative nuclear family. While such signification could be radical and progressive, its portrayal of perverting the destiny of the hero destroys its transgressive political potential. According to Barbara Almond, in her discussion of Dracula as a monstrous mother, the vampire has often been a stand-in for deeply rooted psychological fears about “perverse maternity.”⁷⁰ The vampire represents monstrous procreation as it can reproduce on its own, using its blood, linking images of procreation, menstrual blood, femininity and monstrosity. Perverse maternity is connected to sexual taboos, represented through Mitternacht’s relationship with her stepson, Anton. She seduced him into killing his father, who was also her husband, so she could inherit the family fortune. Not only does this relationship invoke the threat of incest but also the image of the controlling, vengeful mother who dominates her son, destroys his masculinity, steals his inheritance and turns him into a weapon against other men. Through the controlling mother, Mitternacht raises the spectre of the woman who saps men of their virility and masculinity. As discussed in Chapter Two, the large woman symbolizes the fear of being sexually consumed. The vampire functions in a similar way, representing the fear that women’s sexual appetites are disproportionate and cannot be satisfied by men. Instead, they are drained by her desire. The female vampire, with its sharp canines and heavily applied lipstick, raises the spectre of the vagina dentata that will literally, not just symbolically, devour the man and swallow his virility. The overwhelming sexual desire is a gender transgression as ‘normal’ women are portrayed as not having sexual desire, which is the prerogative of men. Mitternacht embodies the fear of female sexual hunger as she serially seduces, marries and then murders rich men. Her greed and gluttony continually destroy men who are too weak to

⁷⁰ Barbara Almond, “Monstrous infants and vampyric mothers in Bram Stokers’ Dracula,” *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 88:1 (2007), 220.

resist her, themselves already corrupted by an excess of money and luxury, which weakens masculinity.

Through its signification of monstrous procreation, the vampire also presents as a figure of contagion. The lesbian vampire in particular becomes a figure who spreads her homosexuality like a virus, seducing women away from socially acceptable partners. Mitternacht seduces Kate away from the desire to perform the homonormative and makes Kate monstrous. Mitternacht becomes Kate's mother by transforming her into a vampire and is also her lover. By infecting both Kate and Batwoman's life, Mitternacht further blurs the boundaries between Batwoman and Kate, pulling Kate away from the homonormative and allowing the dark Other to invade her civilian life. At this time, Beth redeemed returns to Gotham and reveals that Kate has been under hypnosis the whole time. Mitternacht only made Kate believe she was a vampire, but Mitternacht insists that hypnosis cannot force people to do things they do not really want to do, implying she only set Kate's hidden desires free. While Kate is obviously drawn in by Mitternacht's hypnotic and sexual powers, it is also clear that Mitternacht raped Kate, because Kate was not capable of informed consent. The insistence that, deep down, Kate must have wanted it, parrots the kind of accusations women are confronted with when they (attempt to) report their (sexual) assault. However, the comic does not explicitly engage with any of this, skimming over Kate's potential sexual trauma and her response to it. Instead, the comic immediately skips ahead to the conflict with Morgana Le Fey.

Morgana Le Fey is the last villain and double in the *Batwoman* series and, as a witch, symbolizes the sexually powerful woman. Morgana Le Fey's quest for world domination through the use of magic, which is code for sexual power, represents the woman who uses her sexual power to control men. In other DC canon, Morgana is often cast as the destroyer of Camelot, the ancient city of King Arthur. For example, in the DC Animated Universe (DCAU), containing the animated cartoon series *Justice League* (2001-2004) and *Justice League Unlimited* (2004-2006), Morgana seduced a knight of Arthur's court into letting her army into Camelot, leading to the city's destruction and the end of King Arthur's reign. She also represents the monstrous, controlling mother who subverts the power of her son. In the DCAU, she casts a spell over her son, Mordred, keeping him young throughout the centuries they spend trying to take over the world. He is a perpetual ten-year-old, not only playing into the Momistic idea that mothers baby their sons in order to control them, but also hints at women using their

sons to wield power in the public sphere as the power behind the throne. In *Batwoman*, she is once again attempting to take over the world by mixing feminine magic and masculine technology, a gender transgression. Batwoman's entire gallery of villains are women and monstrous mothers who represent the struggle between the queer and the homonormative in Kate herself. In the end, Kate loses this struggle. After the *Batwoman* series ends in 2014, the single *Batwoman: Future's End* issue (2014), reveals that Kate has become a vampire (for real this time) and Beth, as the new superhero, Red Alice, has to kill her.

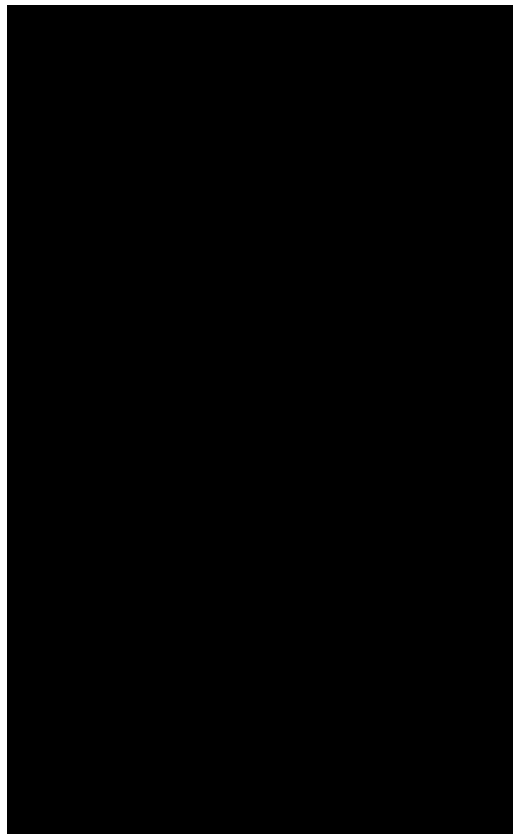


Image 3.20: Batwoman's Death © 2014 DC Comics.
[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

This issue demonstrates that Kate, as the Batwoman, the lesbian, the dark twin cannot resist being swallowed up by the horrors the lesbian invokes through her gender transgression.⁷¹ She must be destroyed by her opposite, her double, her twin. Her gender transgression first made her Nocturna's target, seduced by what appeared to be an evil vampire, and eventually turned her into one. The *Batwoman* comics narrate the struggle

⁷¹ Marc Andreyko et al, *Batwoman: Future's End #1* (New York: DC Comics, 2014).

between Batwoman's quest for order and justice, as well as Kate's attempts to construct a homonormative life in the heteropatriarchy while the Batwoman's existence in the realm of terror and monsters keeps invading Kate's life. Being Batwoman, Kate becomes literally haunted and controlled by her enemies, possessed by the dark Other, eventually becoming a monster and needing to be destroyed. While *Elegy* and the *Batwoman* comics attempt to engage with Kate's sexuality in a transgressive manner, before DC editorship interfered, Kate signified the homonormative. When DC editorship intervened, she was turned into a toxic lesbian stereotype. It seems that the gay superhero either performs homonormativity or is destroyed, perpetuating the cultural narrative where the homonormative, white, middle-class gay community is the only acceptable gay community. While Batwoman is clearly an attempt at positive representation, the comics fail to question and challenge the patriarchal hegemony.

Conclusion

Billy and Teddy's representation of homosexuality is relatively complex. While they can (and should) be read as a positive step forward to include more homosexual characters performing feats of heroism successfully, it is important to understand that they represent a specific kind of gay community. This white, middle-class gay community is gaining social support at the cost of other gay communities. Billy and Teddy perpetuate the homonormative and when they are represented in isolation from each other, they signify troubling and problematic stereotypes. The comics consistently conflate feminine with homosexual signification and perpetuate fears of the gay man as destructive, predatory and contaminating. The early comics imply that homonormativity is the only acceptable way to be gay. The new 2013-2014 run seems the most progressive so far, despite the implication of Billy making Teddy gay. They are often seen kissing and embracing, and casually refer to each other as 'boyfriends.' The new run has better representation of the full spectrum of human sexuality than earlier runs, including gay, bisexual and omnisexual characters. Recent comics present gay characters more directly, suggesting a more liberal attitude to gender and sexuality present in American culture. However, the manner in which they are represented, homonormativity and persistent stereotyping, contradicts this, revealing the persistence of conservative attitudes to gender and sexuality. It demonstrates Walter's point that it takes more than increased visibility to positively represent a minority. Batwoman's

performance of gender is transgressive, but the narrative problematizes it. The destruction of the monstrous, the search for the homonormative and the eventual death of Batwoman all represent the destruction of the queer as punishment for her gender role transgression. In this way, the narrative plays into the popular 'Bury Your Gay Tropes.' In this trope, usually one partner, or sometimes both, in a gay couple are killed. The decision to kill the one gay character in an ensemble cast is often justified as simply being part of the story even while it is clearly gratuitous. The trope has historically been present in American mass media, for example the death of lesbian character Tara McClay in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) in 2002. More recently, in the spring finales of several American shows, for example, *The 100* (2014-ongoing) in 2016, most lesbian and bisexual characters were killed. The trope mostly affects women, revealing how female lesbian relationships are less acceptable when lesbianism is not constructed for male consumption.

Billy, Teddy and Batwoman's representation of the homonormative ideal and the construction of the gay character as the Other makes clear that comics still have a long way to go in terms of positive representation of gay characters. The comic itself maintains the public/private split on which homonormativity rests. The reader knows that these characters are gay but the general public in the DC or Marvel universe do not. While their colleagues, family and friends might know that they are gay, do the citizens of Gotham and New York know that their heroes are gay? Doubtful. Kate Kane is an out lesbian, but is Batwoman in the closet? Billy and Teddy are openly committed to each other, but their allies, the adult Avengers, refer to them as friends. By divorcing the superheroes from a LGBTQA+ community and having them remain in the closet, the comics isolate their superheroes. It presents the gay superhero as an anomaly who needs to keep their sexuality in the closet when superhero-ing. While the incorporation of gay superheroes into the narrative promotes a more diverse and progressive attitude to gay people, they fail to construct a narrative that challenges heteronormativity as the foundation of hegemonic homophobia.

Chapter Four:

The Intersection of Gender and Race

This chapter analyses Black Panther, Falcon, Storm and Ms Marvel to examine how gender and race intersect in superhero comic books, utilizing the concept of the culture bound superhero as the only true non-white superhero. This chapter discusses how Black Panther, Falcon, Storm and Ms Marvel represent a racial community by either unhooking from whiteness or symbolically performing it. The first subsection investigates Black Panther and Falcon's signification of masculinity in light of the ideal masculinity scripted by white male superhero characters. In the second subsection, the analysis of Storm and Ms Marvel discusses the construction of their femininity in light of intersectional racial stereotypes.

Seeking the Black Superhero: Black Panther, Falcon and the Black Community

The first Black superhero to have a titular comic was Marvel's Black Panther, who first appeared in *Fantastic Four* #52 in July 1966, near the end of the Silver Age (1956-1970). He featured as a guest character in other series, often in panther-centric storylines. Black Panther, also known as T'Challa, king of Wakanda (a fictional nation in Africa), was briefly renamed Black Leopard in 1972 to avoid any association with the Black Panther movement. However, when the superhero was given a self-titled series in 1977, which ran until 1979, Marvel reverted back to his original name. After the series' cancellation, T'Challa often continued to appear as a guest character in other titles. He starred in a few self-titled miniseries in 1988, 1990-1991, 1998 and 2005-2008.

Throughout the years, T'Challa made regular appearances in other superhero titles and appeared in side titles for major crossover events, such as *Civil War: Black Panther* (2007). The series was revived in 2009 when T'Challa's sister Shuri became Black Panther. In 2011, T'Challa took back the title and became the main character for the *Daredevil* series (2011-2014), which was renamed *Black Panther: The Man Without Fear* (2011-2012). A new *Black Panther* series is set for launch in 2016. While the character has had a less-than-steady publication run, his origin story has remained as stable as Superman's or Captain America's. According to *Origins of Marvel Comics*, Black Panther is "the heir to a long tradition in his African kingdom of Wakanda. Each king of Wakanda undergoes rituals that enhance his physical abilities to superhuman

levels.”¹ As the king of Wakanda, a fictional African nation that has systematically resisted colonial efforts and remained independent because of its technological advancements, several storylines focus on the theft of Wakanda’s renewable national resource, vibranium, and Black Panther’s defence of his nation. Having resisted white colonialist expansion, Wakanda has been a prosperous sovereign nation on par with the developed Western world, with superior technological advancements.

As Wakanda’s representative and king, Black Panther is meant to signify the potential of Black identity outside of white European/American control. In the 1950s, there was a growing resistance to European colonialist expansion and many African nations sought independence from European government. According to Adilifu Nama, Black Panther represented “African leaders [who] embodied the hopes of their people and captured the imagination of the anticolonialist movement with their charisma and promise to free Africa from European imperialism.”² Certainly, Black Panther’s resistance to colonial forces taking over Wakanda allows him to function as such a symbol, existing as “an idealized composite of third-world Black revolutionaries and the anticolonialist movement of the 1950s that they represented.”³ However, this representation was not free from racism. As Martin Lund points out, Wakanda is steeped in white stereotypes about Africa, including a belief that African nations did not know what independence and sovereignty meant, implying that the leaders of these nations did not have enough education or intelligence to self-govern. The white American narrative about Africa considered its countries in need of a white hand to guide them to independence and protect them from the insidious communist forces waiting to take advantage of them. Lund discusses how, in their initial meeting with Black Panther and their first visit to Wakanda in 1966, even the Fantastic Four realize that Wakanda seems to consist almost entirely out of colonial narratives and Hollywood imagery, referencing Tarzan when describing it, a narrative “which was originally deeply rooted in white supremacist ideals.”⁴ Wakanda has natural resources coveted by European nations and is surrounded by a ‘primitive’ and ‘undeveloped’ jungle which “recalls notions about the African continent as nature-rich but underdeveloped ‘terra

¹ Alex Starbuck et al, *Origins of Marvel Comics* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2011).

² Adilifu Nama, *Superblack: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 43.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martin Lund, “‘Introducing the Sensational Black Panther!’ *Fantastic Four* #52-53, the Cold War, and Marvel’s Imagined Africa,” *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 6:1 (2016), 8.

nullius, that is, vacant land,' ripe for white interference.'"⁵ The insistence on Wakanda's technological developments, implying a Western view of progress as automatically taking similar routes as Western nations, does not negate the representation of Wakanda as backwards and uncivilized.

The issues of *The Fantastic Four* comics in which Black Panther appears, and most comics after, represent Wakanda as a stereotypical Western idea of Africa, made possible by Wakanda's lack of connection to any authentic, real-life nations or cultures present on the African continent. Presenting Wakanda as a stereotypical image of a united and homogenous 'Africa,' perpetuates the idea that all Black people have "a shared heritage that extends back to the time before the transatlantic slave trade" with "general manifestations of an African 'way of life' as it is expressed in clothes, food and, for that matter, African values."⁶ The idea of a homogenous Africa further generated the idea of Black commonality and Afro-centrism which gained traction at the time of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. It erases the many varied cultures, religions, languages and nations that make up the African continent and reduces all visibility to a common 'African' cultural way of life. In a sense, this can be read to mirror how most Americans experience their ancestry or heritage as somewhere outside of America, as discussed in Chapter One, which strengthens the ideal of the American melting pot. However, this generally only applies to white people and differing white cultures, which are subsumed into the hegemony and become the norm. African cultural unity is a stereotype that allows white hegemony to identify a marked minority with its origins elsewhere as a way to rationalize the group's exclusion and expulsion from the American mainstream. In more recent years, there have been attempts to create specific Wakandan cultural norms and traits, but these mostly focus on Wakanda's insular foreign policy and hostility to outsiders, including people from non-Wakandan African heritage. The insistence on the insularity of Wakandan culture shrouds the country in secrecy and plays into stereotypes of Africa as a mystical and savage place that cannot be understood by outsiders, especially the civilised West. Wakanda's fictionality alone perpetuates this idea. The comics have no problem with placing the Fantastic Four in New York, England or Canada, allowing real white nations and cultures to exist in the comic book universe, but the African nation they engage

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Katharina Schramm and Beverley Butler, *African Homecoming: Pan-African Ideology and Contested Heritage* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2010), 20.

with is entirely fictional. Creating a fictional country releases the creators from the responsibility of having to engage with a real country and its real culture, language and political infrastructure, which reflects the idea that all African nations are, essentially the same. A fictional African country will represent 'Africa' just as well as a real country because 'Africa' does not exist outside of the stereotypical Western image of it. As discussed in the Introduction, failing to represent and engage with real-life minorities only supports the construction of the white hegemony and the refusal to engage with or represent real African countries maintains and supports white stereotypes about Africa and its people.⁷

Despite Wakanda's signification of African stereotypes, its construction is an attempt to provide Black Panther with a Black community. Ghee writes that "before we can determine if an **individual** Black fictional hero (created by Whites) is truly a Black hero at all," it must be determined if this hero is culture bound.⁸ Ghee understands the culture bound superhero as a hero who "is working to save *his own* people *first*, in the context of saving humanity."⁹ For a Black superhero, or any racial minority superhero, to be a true Black or Asian or other racial minority superhero, he or she must not only protect the world but also advocate and represent their community to avoid perpetuating white hegemony. In this manner, Ghee's culture bound superhero also engages with Critical Race Theory and its notion of white performance. It is essential to recognize that whiteness is "normative: it sets the standard in dozens of situations" and is invested in privileging white hegemony. Karla Martin considers whiteness as the norm by which all racial minorities are judged, which bars non-white people from white social, cultural and economic spaces. Whiteness as the behavioural norm creates the illusion that acting white will provide access to institutionalized white privilege, in similar ways to how the performance of heteronormativity supposedly provides access to straight spaces for LGBTQA+ peoples. It allows white society to depoliticize and de-radicalize racial minority communities because it presents acting white as the road to equality instead of political organisation, which is characterized as disruptive, pointless and damaging to both the country and the racial minority community. In order for the racial minority

⁷ Other fictional countries in the Marvel universe are usually located in the South American continent or Eastern Europe, areas of the world which are not considered as white as Western Europe or North America in the American cultural narrative.

⁸ Kenneth Ghee, "'Will the 'Real' Black Superheroes Please Stand Up?!': A Critical Analysis of the Mythological and Cultural Significance of Black Superheroes" in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 230-231.

⁹ Ibid.

superhero to carry significance beyond being a non-white person performing feats of heroism, they need to challenge racist stereotypes about their community, represent the nuance of racial experience and unhook from whiteness.

Black Panther both exemplifies and negates the concept of the culture bound racial minority superhero. His relationship with his Black community in the face of global white hegemony is complex and contradictory. Wakanda is a Black community, but, as a white construct of a Black community, perpetuates white American ideals. While Black Panther is the representative of Wakandan interests abroad, and often explicitly states that he must consider Wakandan needs before American ones, American and Wakandan interests often align and Black Panther works with his white superhero colleagues to fight a common enemy. American mass media usually presents America as a defender of freedom and justice and therefore, any force that threatens Wakanda and its natural resources are never American. If they are, they are greedy corporate flunkies with ties to corrupt politicians who abuse the American way for their own profit. America rarely has an imperial agenda in its relationship with Wakanda. However, the few times that America and Wakanda have differing needs, Black Panther struggles to prioritize Wakanda over his white colleagues and allegiance to America. His advisors routinely have to remind him that his duties lie with Wakanda as his close emotional ties to America (and his white superhero friends) often take him there. When this occurs, his Black community is portrayed as suspicious, paranoid and unreasonable, or, their need to preserve Wakanda's international diplomatic ties, sovereignty and neutrality are depicted as selfish while Black Panther's desire to protect and help his friends is noble and courageous. The comic does not identify American interests and its white morality as a subjective position. Instead, they are framed as the greater good. Black Wakanda is portrayed as an insular and selfish community while whiteness is equated with universal moral superiority. Black Panther usually chooses to fight for the greater good, which is framed as white, and therefore, enacts whiteness.

Despite his non-American nationality, Black Panther has been constructed as a symbolically white American because of the Cold War context of his first appearance. During the Cold War, the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union reframed the 'them/us' mentality in American culture to suit Cold War politics. The cultural narrative established that something was either pro-American/Anti-Soviet Union or pro-Soviet Union/Anti-American. It was every American's duty to support a hard, conservative stance towards American foreign policy because hardness was

necessary to protect America from communist forces. By aligning Black Panther with the Fantastic Four in his first appearance, he becomes aligned with American interests. The Fantastic Four symbolizes the potential of the American nuclear family, and its prescribed gender roles, as well as the American spirit, conquering outer space as the new frontier and defending truth, justice and American democracy.¹⁰ According to Lund, the comic “implicitly asks the question of where Black Panther leans in the Cold war, and the comics then keep affirming that he is more capitalist than communist.”¹¹ Reaffirming Wakanda’s status as ‘more capitalist’ was important to ward off suspicions of communist sympathies, as several African countries became communist after gaining independence, such as Angola, Ethiopia and others in the 1970s and 1980s. Lund goes on to discuss how Black Panther, through his status as a wealthy king of a wealthy nation, his education at European universities and scientific prowess is all “prototypical of US conceptions of modernization.”¹² Black Panther enacts whiteness through the American construction of the modernized African who is educated in Western universities, expresses Western morals and values, and has ideological ties to America instead of representing radical ideas of independence and a united African block without ideological and political ties or debts to either America or the Soviet Union.

In *Civil War: Black Panther* (2007), Black Panther reveals that he initially joined the Avengers to spy on them in case they were an American imperial force. The narrative complicates the alignment of the Avengers with the (white) greater good by placing white America in opposition to the white global community. In this graphic novel, Black Panther insists that the best possible future for Wakanda is to join the global community instead of the traditionally isolationist stance enacted by his advisors. Yet, that global community is made up out of white countries and white-as-racial-other communities, such as the Atlanteans or the Inhumans. This marks Wakanda as the only representative of Africa, again reducing the entire continent to one homogenous mass. There do not seem to be any other African countries Wakanda could make alliances with, which again absolves the writers of having to research actual, real-life African nations. Compared to the white, civilized world with its many different nations, cultures and languages, Black Wakanda stands isolated and, with most of its people advocating segregation from the white global community, is framed as backwards and old-

¹⁰ Robert Genter, “‘With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility:’ Cold War Comics and the Birth of Marvel Comics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40:6 (2007), 968.

¹¹ Lund, “Introducing the Sensational Black Panther,” 14.

¹² Ibid.

fashioned. In contrast, Black Panther, educated at Western universities, understands the importance of international diplomatic ties. His alignment with the white global community complicates his status as a Black superhero. While he is taking a stance against white America, he is also disregarding the wishes of his Black community, which he is meant to represent. It implies that the only way for Black people or Black communities to participate on an international scale is to compromise with white hegemony and abandon the needs of the Black community. Black Panther's origin story can be read as a Black community empowering a hero that is equal to white superheroes so that he can advocate the needs of that Black community. However, that narrative is complicated by his alignment with white identity. This constructs Black Panther as a white-acting racial minority superhero because he perpetuates the status quo, which supports white hegemony.

In addition to his loyalty to white hegemony, Black Panther's identity is steeped in white stereotypes about Black people. His status as a king fits into the notion of the Noble Savage, an idealized representative of the racial Other. The term was first made popular in the late 1800s and is used to identify an idealized racial Other meant to symbolize the inherent goodness of mankind in its simplest and most natural state, freed from civilization and its corruption. Noble Savage characters often appeared in both pro-slavery and anti-slavery narratives and embodies racist stereotypes surrounding the supposed inferiority of Black people. It implied that the Black savage needed the patriarchal white man to guide him through the pitfalls of civilization, to domesticate him without allowing him to fall to the vagaries and corruption of modern civilization. The Noble Savage often appeared as royalty or African nobility, representing the pinnacle of the Black man's possible racial development. He existed in a racist racial hierarchy, placed above the regular Black man, whose natural state was closer to that of animals, but lower than the lowest class of white men. Black Panther's status as royalty plays into the idea of the exceptional Black who, unlike other Black people, has enough inherited nobility to be capable of education by the white man. Lund also considers that "[Black Panther's] genealogy refers to colonial tropes," as his powers are both inherited and constructed through stereotypes of African magic, which frames Black Panther as a hero "born out of atavistic practices."¹³ These practices consist of the Wakandans' worship of the Panther God and the use of herbs, medicine men and voodoo to gift the

¹³ Lund, "Introducing the Sensational Black Panther," 13.

Black Panther with his abilities. Yet, these atavistic practices combine with extreme technological prowess on par with and even beyond American technological abilities. *Origins of Marvel Comics* claims that Black Panther is a Wakandan version of Captain America, the super soldier “only [Black Panther] gains his powers form supernatural rather than scientific means.”¹⁴ This plays into ‘equal but different’ ways of thought, which were used to justify segregation in the 1950s and 1960s.

As discussed in the first chapter, it is at the point where the hard masculine scientific and technological means conquer feminine nature and intersect with military might and American identity that superhero masculinity is created. Black Panther, aligned with American interests and white American identity, along with powerful physical prowess, is characterized through his use of the supernatural and its mystical forces as opposed to the scientific. As discussed in Chapter Three, magic is connected to the feminine, meaning that Black Panther uses feminine power to imbue his body with masculine strength, hinting at the lack of a strong innate masculinity fundamental to the construction of the ideal masculinity set out in superhero comics. Additionally, Black Panther’s not even the wielder of the powerful magic that transforms him. He becomes infused with power that he never gains true mastery of because it is provided only at the irrational, non-quantifiable whims of a savage Panther God and thus remains shrouded in mystery. Compared to Captain America, whose transformation is fixed and has become an innate part of his body, maintained through training and masculine determination, Black Panther’s powers originate outside the masculine body and cannot be read as innate.

Black Panther is burdened with racist white stereotypes and his masculinity, while presented as honourable and positive, cannot measure up to the white superhero masculinity presented as the norm for all superheroes. Despite Black Panther’s performance of whiteness, he cannot access white spaces, privilege or status, as Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales write.

[Readers] felt pride seeing an African king like Black Panther portrayed as a superhero. But when the sovereign Black monarch of a high-tech civilization is

¹⁴ Starbuck, *Origins of Marvel Comics*.

rarely allowed to exercise that power and authority over his White counterparts, the pride is undercut.¹⁵

While this quote discusses reactions to Black Panther's storylines in the 1960s and 1970s, it is still relevant as Black Panther has not yet reached parity with his white colleagues.

Black Panther had the high-tech gadgetry and financial resources of Tony Stark, the regal imminence of Doctor Doom and the international cache of James Bond (...) his 'power' was fake and over time felt more like a token appointment to appease the times, not a real addition to the comic book landscape.¹⁶

Black Panther combined several narrative elements of well-established white superheroes and was still not afforded the same respect or mainstream exposure as his white peers. This remains true. In *Civil War* (2007), Black Panther, as a powerful monarch of a sovereign country, has his diplomatic immunity and the sovereignty of his embassy in New York City violated while American forces are engaging in 'war games' in waters close to his borders, when Wakanda and America maintain friendly diplomatic ties, simply because Black Panther has met with other international leaders. While Black Panther is often incorporated in major Marvel events or storylines, he does not impact the Marvel Universe the same way mainstream white superheroes like Captain America or Iron Man do. For instance, Black Panther does not appear in the main book of the *Civil War* crossover event and his interaction with it was limited, published in an additional, separate *Civil War: Black Panther* graphic novel that serves as an addendum to the story but does not need to be read to understand *Civil War*.

The struggle of the Black superhero to gain full parity with his white peers is an important part of Falcon's character development and origin story. According to *Origins of Marvel Comics*, Falcon, known as Sam Wilson in his civilian life, used to be a criminal called 'Snap' who "has succeeded in putting his past behind him and become a true hero."¹⁷ Falcon first appeared in *Captain America #117* in 1969, when Captain

¹⁵ Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales "Black Comics and Social Media Economics: New Media, New Production Models" in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation*, ed. Sheena C. Howard (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 67-68.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Starbuck, *Origins of Marvel Comics*.

America fought the Exiles on Exile Island. In that issue, Cap teaches Sam how to fight and, on their return to America, they create Sam's superhero persona together. Because of Sam's telepathic connection to Redwing, his pet falcon, they decide Sam should call himself 'Falcon.' Living together in Harlem, Captain America and Falcon team-up to protect the innocent people of their neighbourhood. While the comic focuses on both characters equally, Falcon consistently struggles with feelings of inadequacy. Compared to a (white) supersoldier, Sam Wilson is an ordinary human being and all the training in the world cannot give him Captain America's enhanced strength or speed. Eventually, in 1974, these inadequacies pushed Sam to investigate the possibility of compensating for this lack with technological means.

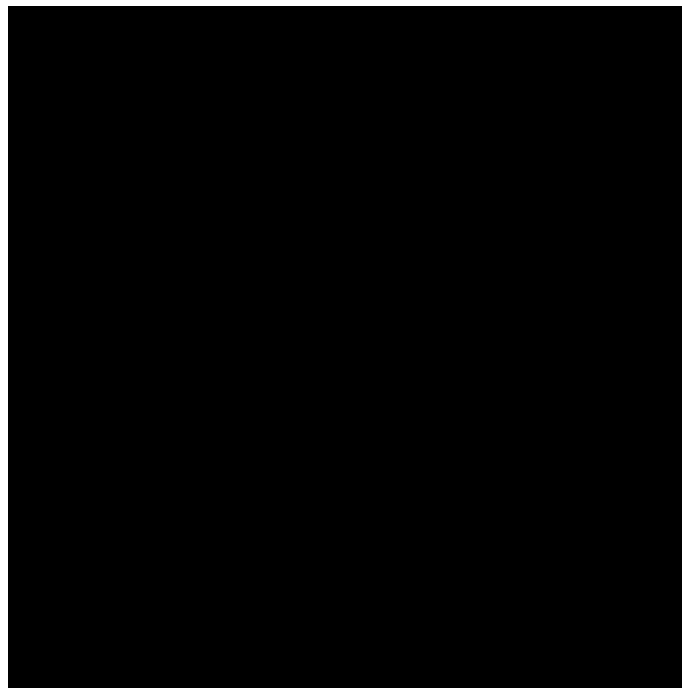


Image 4.1: Captain America and Falcon © 2014 Marvel Comics.

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As demonstrated by the previous panel, because of their unequal abilities, Falcon does not consider himself an equal in their professional partnership.¹⁸ Using technological compensation would even the playing field. Considering that Captain America's body is a technological or scientific product, they would then both rely on scientific means to construct their superhero masculinity. Falcon insists that he would

¹⁸ Steve Englehart, et al, "Captain America and the Falcon: Secret Empire" in *The Ultimate Graphic Novels Collection* (London: Hachette Partworks Ltd, 2014).

prefer to ask T'Challa, the Black Panther for help, instead of the Avengers because, like Sam, T'Challa is Black. The comic insists that Falcon does not want to rely on white assistance, seemingly placing Falcon closer to Ghee's culture bound superhero while simultaneously drawing on the idea of Black commonality that reduces individual Black cultures to a homogenous mass. Falcon claims that he and T'Challa have more in common than Falcon and the Avengers do because they are both Black, disregarding the fact that they have completely different cultural backgrounds and would have completely different racial experiences. The comic implies that the bonds of race supersede the bonds of nationality and cultural commonality and that Black experience is experienced in the same way by all Black peoples everywhere. Despite his partnership with Captain America, Falcon considers himself as set apart from white superheroes. While Falcon joins the white superhero team when a larger threat demands their cooperation, setting aside racial differences for the greater good, which is actually the white hegemony, he does not think of himself as an Avenger. Black Panther agrees to help Falcon and they travel to Wakanda, where Black Panther designs "super-strong, **glider-wings** – Jet-powered from their **tips** by those wafer-thin **integrated circuits** feeding off a **sunlight-charged** power-pack – and all controlled by a direct link to my **brain**" (original emphasis).¹⁹ The wings fit into the Falcon's superhero theme, allowing him to fully inhabit his superhero persona. They are a modification on his body and, wired directly into his brain, he has full control over them, as if they were a naturally occurring part of him. In this sense, Falcon fulfils the requirements of superhero masculinity: a naturally-appearing, scientifically-enhanced super-powered phallic body. The addition of wings is especially significant because, as Nama says, "[of] all the superhero powers, the ability to fly literally and symbolically established Falcon's agency and independence, in a contrast to landbound Captain America."²⁰ Not only do the wings serve as a signification of technologically-infused masculinity provided by a Black man to another Black man, they also elevate his status in the superhero hierarchy.

While Falcon's wings hint at a positive representation of Falcon as a Black superhero, there are elements of his powers that seem rooted in racist stereotypes. Aside from needing Captain America, a white superhero, to provide him with the physical training to become a superhero, Falcon's other superpower is his telepathic link to Redwing, his pet falcon and his telepathic connection and command of all birds. This

¹⁹ Englehart, "Captain America and the Falcon."

²⁰ Nama, *Superblack*, 73.

ability was forced on him by the Red Skull, a Nazi supervillain from Captain America's past. Sam developed the ability further, on his own, implying there is a natural innate ability that allows him to control his artificial power. There is something uneasy about a Black character having a telepathic connection exclusively with animals while other, white telepaths can communicate (exclusively) with other humans. For example, Charles Xavier and Emma Frost are powerful telepaths whose powers are naturally occurring and can use their powers to manipulate and control other human beings, which Falcon can only do to birds.²¹ Additionally, Falcon's ability was given to him by a Nazi without his consent. Historically, as Kobena Mercer writes, "racism has involved a logic of dehumanization, in which African peoples were defined as having bodies but not minds."²² For Black men, this meant their bodies were considered to be empty vessels: muscles and sex machines who do the physical better than whites, rationalizing Black oppression: their bodies must be controlled by the white mind for the protection of others, especially white women. Falcon's exclusive connection to animals suggests that the Black body is incapable of connecting to other humans on a mental, cerebral level. The Red Skull plays into these racist stereotypes linking Black manhood to animalism, but so do the comics as Falcon is capable of extending the ability without any artificial means even though the ability is not naturally occurring and, supposedly, his brain has no natural structures for him to train or control it. Despite his powers being connected to racist stereotypes about Black men, Falcon, more than any other Black superhero, is closest to the masculine ideal that comics are infused with. For instance, Falcon's abilities are provided through technological innovation, which is key to comics' masculinity. His close connection to Captain America connects him to the American military machine, especially when he takes on an official role in SHIELD, the militaristic American organisation charged with world security. The MCU further expands their shared connection by making Sam Wilson a former United States Paratrooper. Falcon is also American, another important element of the construction of American hegemonic masculinity and Falcon's body follows the inverted triangle shape necessary for the construction of the hypermasculine body, as demonstrated in the following panel.²³

²¹ While Jean Grey could read all minds, both animal and human, this was only when she was overcome by her powers and lost control over them.

²² Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 138.

²³ Christopher Priest et al, *Captain America and the Falcon #007* (New York: Marvel, 2014).

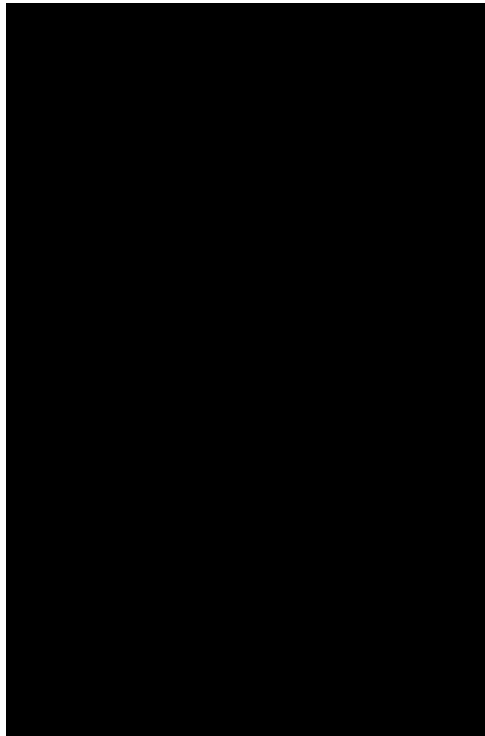


Image 4.2: Captain America and Falcon © 2014 Marvel Comics.

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While the exact colour pattern of the suit tends to change across artists and comics, the red and white have always been a staple of Falcon's costume.²⁴ In this iteration, the white band around his hips functions as an Underwear of Power equivalent and while it is not always present, most forms of the costume have some kind of detailing in the crotch area that functions in much the same way. With the wings spread out, they add bulk to the shoulder, accentuating the inverted triangle shape of his torso. Compare this image to Black Panther's costume, which is completely black. He does have a belt, which can function in a similar way to the Underwear of Power, but considering the lack of colour contrast and visibility, T'Challa's belt does not work in the same way.²⁵

²⁴ Aside from the initial green and orange costume, which was only in production for a brief time.

²⁵ Reginald Hudlin et al, *Civil War: Black Panther, A Marvel Comics Event* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2007).

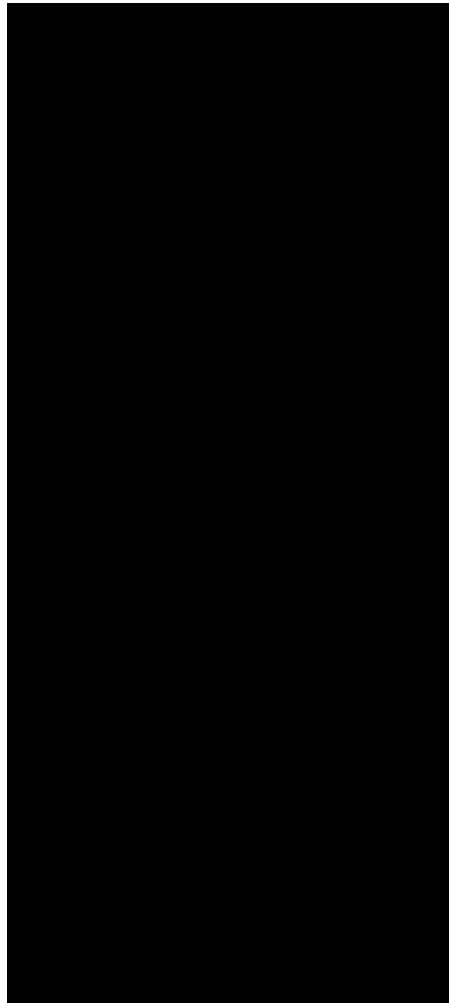


Image 4.3: Black Panther © 2007 Marvel Comics.

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Black superheroes, even when they have the same inverted triangle body shape as white superheroes, do not have access to the phallic body or a phallic status symbol in the same way. Neither Black Panther nor Falcon possess a chevron or a symbol for their superhero identity and masculinity. The absence of a chevron means that Black Panther does not have access to mainstream popularity or public recognition of their abilities, the same way that Captain America, Iron man or Superman have.²⁶ Both the Underwear of Power and the chevron work together to emphasise the inverted triangle body shape necessary for the construction of the hypermasculine. Black Panther lacks both those things while Falcon misses the chevron, indicating Falcon's ability to

²⁶ It is important to acknowledge here that there are many superheroes who do not have a chest chevron, but at the moment of writing, there is no chest chevron that exclusively belongs to a Black superhero.

approximate ideal masculinity more closely despite Black Panther's enactment of whiteness. Partly, this is because of Falcon's American nationality, which also allows him to assume the identity of Captain America himself. In 2014, Steve Rogers lost his youth and became an old man. Steve picks Falcon to become the next Captain America and Falcon takes on the name and a modified version of the costume, as well as the shield, which has long been used to symbolize Captain America. However, he also keeps his wings and is still recognized as the Falcon by others. His inheritance of the role is an odd reversal of a traditional narrative where the white main character inherits powers and artefacts from a non-white culture, thereby legitimizing that culture.

Comic books and other popular media often use non-white cultures to infuse the white hero with a potent masculinity as the hero's whiteness provides legitimacy and power to the artefacts and abilities from that non-white culture. In 'When Captain America was an Indian: Heroic Masculinity, National Identity, and Appropriation,' Chad Barbour discusses how popular culture and comic books often establish and "perpetuate an authentic white American identity" through the performance of race, specifically Native American identity or 'Indianness'.²⁷ By inheriting the powers from Native Americans and gaining their approval, the white hero has a rightful claim to ownership of American lands and thus, the American identity. In the same article, Barbour also discusses *Captain America: Truth* (2003), which explains how the supersoldier serum was initially tested on African American soldiers, including the Black Captain America, Isaiah Bradley, before it was given to Steve Rogers. Such a narrative, where the Black supersoldier was used to legitimize the authority and unique singularity of the white supersoldier reflects "the rhetoric of national inheritance by whites from 'primitive' predecessors, the transmission of authentic American identity (...), of the passing down of the continent to the perceived rightful heirs," as Barbour notes.²⁸ These narratives perpetuate the construction of the white American identity through the white man's racial superiority. The minority's connection to the land and nature becomes the hero's destiny. In essence, the non-white, racial Other "is frail of body but strong of spirit [and] when injected with the superserum of white civilization is transformed into a stronger, more admirable figure."²⁹ It is the addition of white culture or the white body that gives authenticity to Black or Native American spiritual

²⁷ Chad Barbour, "When Captain America Was an Indian: Heroic Masculinity, National Identity, and Appropriation," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48:2 (2015), 269.

²⁸ Barbour, "When Captain America was an Indian," 280.

²⁹ Barbour, "When Captain America was an Indian," 281.

power. When Steve Rogers passes on the shield and the identity of Captain America, this narrative becomes simultaneously inverted and full-circle: from the African American Isaiah Bradley to the white American Steve Rogers to the African American Sam Wilson, which can be read in two very contrasting ways. The first would be that Black superheroes are fully equal to white superheroes and they can take on the mantle of an established white superhero, symbolizing the increasing parity between white and Black people in America, not only in social and economic terms, but also in the performance of American masculinity. However, it can also be read as a Black man gaining legitimacy by inhabiting a white space. Has Falcon, trained by a white man, fighting alongside a white man, performed whiteness to such a successful degree that he has been given access to the highest status of American superheroes: Captain America? Or, is Falcon a culture bound superhero, a true Black superhero and has that elevated him above other white-acting Black superheroes, achieving true parity with white superheroes? The answer lies in whether Falcon can successfully own the Captain America identity.

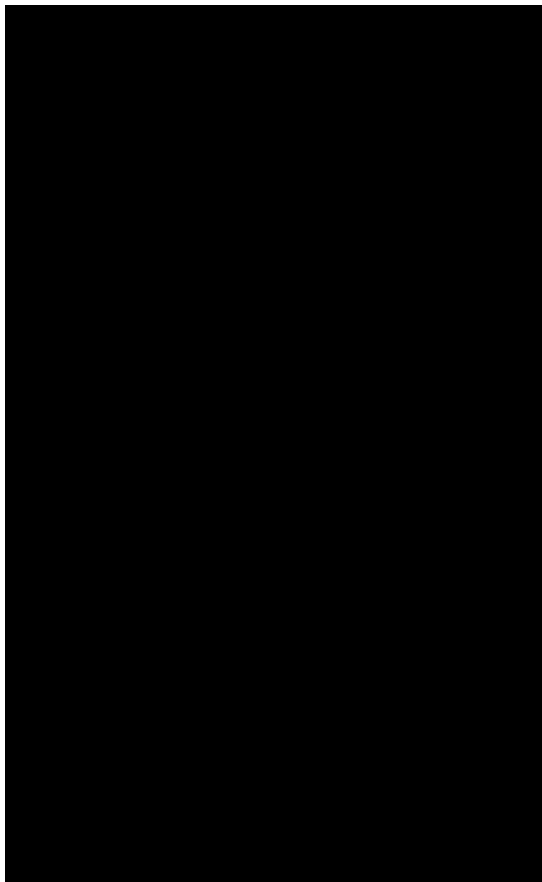


Image 4.4: Not My Captain America © 2015 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

In *Captain America: Sam Wilson* (2015-ongoing), Sam attempts to embody a new Captain America. His costume is similar to Steve's and contains both the star as the chest chevron and the red and white panelling on the waist highlighting the inverted triangle body shape.³⁰ However, the tagline of the graphic novel, "not my Captain America," casts some doubt on Sam's status, implying an inability to appeal to all Americans. During Sam's tenure as Captain America, Steve Rogers works as a consultant for SHIELD and while he refuses to publically condemn some of Sam's actions, the reader is privy to Steve and Sam's private disagreements, which reveals the racial tensions between the two of them. Sam insists that it is necessary for American society that he, as Captain America, speaks out in favour of immigration and social reform, while Steve has faith that America will do the right thing and that superheroes taking public stances on political issues will diminish superheroes' abilities to serve all of the American people. As a privileged white man, Steve can believe that, in the end, America will always represent truth and justice, democracy and freedom. As a Black man, Sam is aware of America's historical and contemporary racial injustices, epitomized in the Black Lives Matter movement beginning in 2012, and the difficulties of effecting legislative and social change for minorities, including the need for powerful cultural figures to speak out in support of minorities. Because Sam takes on a pro-immigrant political stance, publicly, as Captain America, we can see how he adheres to Ghee's concept of the culture bound Black superhero, which is used to undermine Sam's ownership of the Captain America role through Steve's judgement of Sam's decision. Through the tagline "not my Captain America," the reader is reminded that Sam is *a* Captain America, like Isaiah Bradley, William Burnside and others, while Steve Rogers is *the* Captain America, the *real* one. When Steve, who is the white ideal Sam is measured by, disagrees with Sam, it weakens support for Sam. Not only does he reaffirm that superheroes should stay 'above' politics, it reinforces the notion that the white man functions as the rational and objective norm while the Black man is emotional and selfishly divisive at a time when America needs to stand united against her enemies, fitting into racist rhetoric about how the enfranchisement of minority groups must wait until the national crisis of the time has passed.

The narrative never explicitly condemns any of the racist attitudes present in the graphic novel, but heavily implies that Captain America's attitude is old-fashioned, a

³⁰ Nick Spencer et al, *Captain America: Sam Wilson Vol 1: Not My Captain America* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2015).

result of his upbringing in the 1940s and his lack of engagement with social issues in the contemporary modern world. Of course, the way a comic speaks to the audience depends not only on the cultural forces that surround its production and reception, but also the social strata of the audience. It is worth noting that not all readers would receive the message positively, or at all, considering the response of some conservative fan groups to boycott the graphic novel. A more conservative group might read this as Sam's failure to live up to the title. In 2016, Steve's powers were restored and he appeared in *Captain America: Steve Rogers #1*. This title underlines that there are two Captain Americas now and does not explicitly identify Steve Rogers as *the* Captain America the way previous comics have done. While established readers might always remember Steve Rogers as *the* Captain America, future readers might only ever know two, one white and one Black.

Intersectional Identity: Storm and Ms Marvel

As discussed in the Introduction, the X-Men have often been credited as an analogy for racial discrimination and oppression, even when most of the X-Men were white men. In 1975, ten years after the first X-men were published in 1965, the X-Men gained their first Black member, Storm, also known as Ororo Munroe. Storm appeared in many X-Men focused comics such as *Uncanny X-Men* (1963-ongoing), *X-Treme X-Men* (2001-2004 and 2012-2013) and *Astonishing X-Men* (2004-2013). There have also been several miniseries focusing primarily on Storm, such as *Ororo: Before the Storm* (2015) and, most recently, *Storm* (2014-2015). While Storm is not the first Black woman to ever appear in comic books, or the first Black woman to wear a superhero costume, she did gain "recognition for being the first Black woman to be relevant in a comic book from a renowned publishing house," as Lucas do Carmo Dalbeto and Ana Paula Oliveira note.³¹ Storm was published by Marvel, which had a large readership, and she was an important main character who contributed to the story as much as her white colleagues did. In several instances, Storm served as the leader of the team, which mostly consisted of white men. Dalbeto and Oliveira discuss how, even though Storm's characterization is often burdened with stereotypical sexist imagery associated with

³¹ Lucas do Carmo Dalbeto and Ana Paula Oliveira, "Oh My Goddess: Anthropological Thoughts On the Representation of Marvel's Storm and the Legacy of Black Women in Comics," *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* 5:7 (2015), 2.

Black women such as “[strength], mysticism, sexuality, and exotic and mysterious beauty,” in the end, “it is important to stress that she carries traits that correspond to feminist ideals, such as equality between the sexes, women’s independence and a multidimensional approach to female characters.”³² While it is true that Storm often acts independently and is presented as a complicated character, the “traits that correspond to feminist ideals” correspond to white feminist ideals and the comic never explicitly engages with the discrimination she would face as a Black, mutant woman.³³ The intersectionality of Storm’s identity is often overlooked. She is primarily a mutant and, in the Marvel universe, the mutant community is principally a white minority.

Like Black Panther, Storm fits into the ideal of the Noble Savage through her heritage as a Kenyan princess. Even though her father was an African American journalist, her mother’s Kenyan ancestry frames her as the exceptional African and reframes her mutant powers as part of a specific African, racial heritage, compared to white, American mutants who are the next stage in human evolution. According to the comics, Storm is the last in a long line of Kenyan priestesses who all had white hair, blue eyes and were capable of weather magic. By reframing Storm’s powers as an inherited ability shared among her ancestors, originating in her racial past, the narrative engages with stereotypes about Black people being closer to nature, animals and spirituality compared to more cerebral white people. As discussed in Chapter Three, mutant powers are centred in the body and when the mutant identity of bodily powers intersects with the female body, these powers often signify excess. For extremely powerful mutant women or mutant signifiers of femininity, excessive powers turn them into a threat that needs to be destroyed. For example, in her youth, Storm ended a village draught by making it rain for days, disrupting natural weather patterns and causing draughts in other places, resulting in a high death count. The only way to avoid such destruction is to learn control over her powers from Professor Xavier, the powerful white patriarch of the X-Men, which fits into racist narratives claiming that powerful Black (and female) bodies must be controlled by white men.

Despite the focus on her Kenyan ancestry, Storm was born in America and is an American citizen. After her birth, her parents relocate to Cairo, Egypt. When their house is hit by a fighter jet during the Suez crisis (1956), her parents are crushed under the rubble. Storm survives and becomes an orphan living on the streets. In an attempt to

³² Dalbeto and Oliveira, “Oh My Goddess,” 5.

³³ Ibid.

reach a better life, Storm decides to cross the Serengeti where she eventually stumbles across the Kenyan tribe her mother was a part of. They recognize her because of her white hair and blue eyes and for a short time, she becomes a goddess to the tribe and the surrounding villages. The narrative plays into racist stereotypes about Black peoples in Africa as tribal and superstitious, yet seems to incorporate the idea of the Black community as supportive and empowering. However, when she is found by Xavier, she leaves the tribe and joins the white community Xavier is a part of, accepting the identity of 'mutant' as her own. Initially, Storm struggles to fit in with the X-Men, until she becomes friends with Jean, who, as Dalbeto and Oliveira point out, is a way for Storm to become civilized. Jean helps Storm adjust to Western society, for example, explaining why Storm cannot swim naked in the public pool.³⁴ This 'adjusting' is often written from a Western perspective with Storm enacting white stereotypes about behaviour and customs in Black Africa and being gently corrected by the white woman in the group, supporting a narrative where the savage can be civilized via white Western culture.

While Storm can be read as a representation of the equality of the sexes, as argued by Dalbeto and Oliveira, she does not explicitly engage with a discourse of equality. Consider her relationship with her (now ex-)husband Black Panther, as depicted in *Civil War: Black Panther* (2007). The depiction of Storm's marriage throughout the graphic novel fits into the cultural view of marriage as consuming the identity of the woman. Historically, in Western society, a wife became her husband's legal property upon marriage. Legally, a married couple was considered to be one body: that of the husband, and a woman would lose all legal standing as an individual. Storm struggles to reconcile her own identity with the one required of her as Black Panther's wife and queen. When Black Panther is told, on several occasions, to control his wife, neither Storm nor Black Panther explicitly address this sexist presumption that the wife represents her husband and needs to be controlled by him. When Storm intervenes in a fight between Black Panther and Dr Doom, Black Panther is outraged that she did not let him handle the fight alone. In the ensuing panels, instead of engaging with Black Panther's anger at her overstepping her bounds, his damaged pride at needing to be rescued by his wife or his sexist attempt to cut her out of the battle between them and Dr Doom, Storm kisses him and all is forgiven. Together, Black Panther and Storm

³⁴ Dalbeto and Oliveira, "Oh My Goddess," 3.

represent an old-fashioned, patriarchal view of marriage, where the wife has become representative of the husband's identity and power. They represent a new dynasty of the Noble Savage, as well as dispelling the fears of miscegenation present in some of Storm's other relationships with white superheroes such as Wolverine, and frames them as representative of the white ideas surrounding Africa: Black, homogenous and tribal.

The *Civil War: Black Panther* graphic novel perpetuates the idea that it is impossible to exist in multiple communities, to have multiple identities and to challenge social binaries. In *Civil War*, the Superhero Registration Act (SRA) is introduced at the federal level and requires all superheroes to register their superpowers and civilian identities with the government. This legislation leads to a break in the superhero community when some superheroes decide to comply, seeing legislation as the only way to assure accountability, and others refuse, believing that registration only leads to government control. Other countries follow America's example, with debates on civil liberties entering the global stage. When Storm, as the queen of Wakanda, attempts to reach out to the mutant community and asks them to speak out against the SRA, Emma Frost, as the white, female representative of the mutant community, refuses. Storm claims that if she was still their leader, they would challenge the SRA together and arrange protests. Emma's refusal to publically condemn the SRA is poignant as in the Marvel Universe, mutants have often come together as a community to protest mutant registration acts. In the mutant community, registration is interpreted as the first step in the direction of eventual segregation, followed by genocide, mimicking the origins of the Jewish Holocaust. Emma's refusal to speak out against a nationwide registration act for all superheroes perpetuates the idea that minority communities cannot set aside their own 'selfish' agendas in favour of solidarity, which also implies that intersectionality is impossible. It presents minority communities as divided and made up of completely singular identities, making it impossible for people to belong to several communities or for communities to overlap. Storm's marriage to Black Panther and, subsequently, her stepping down as leader from the X-Men to become his queen, expelled her from the (white) mutant community. Her opinion on important legal issues concerning the community no longer matters, even though she is still a mutant.

Storm's intersectional identity is always reduced to a single identity, the construction of which depends on the context of the situation. When she and Black Panther visit the White House, Iron Man attempts to force Storm into registering as a mutant because she is an American citizen and still subject to American law. Black

Panther claims that Storm is now the queen of Wakanda and has diplomatic immunity. He considers the request for registration as an affront to Wakandan sovereignty, playing into the view of Storm as belonging solely to his community. Simultaneously, Wakandan officials consider Storm an American interloper in Wakandan society. Both the white mutant community and the Black Wakandan community resist Storm's multiplicity and attempt to frame her as part of one single community. This reduction of complex identity causes Storm to, eventually, be rejected by the Black community in a similar vein to the way she was rejected by her white mutant community. During the events of *AvX* (2012), the Phoenix Force comes to Earth and possesses several mutants, who attack non-mutant communities, including Wakanda. The capital is almost completely destroyed and, as a result, Black Panther divorces Storm. When Wakanda is at war with representatives of the mutant community, Black Panther prioritizes Storm's mutant identity and expels her from the Black community. In Black Wakanda, she is considered a mutant. In the white mutant community, she is thought of as Wakandan.

Considering Ghee's concept of the true Black superhero functioning as a representative of the Black community, prioritizing its needs over the conservation of the status quo, Storm cannot be read as a Black superhero because she does not represent a Black community. By failing to engage with the intersectionality of the discrimination she would face as a Black, mutant woman, the comic presents Storm usually as performing whiteness. The collapse of her intersectionality into the singular mutant identity with its loyalty and ties to the white mutant community, compromises her representation of the Black superhero, not only because of Ghee's culture bound superhero, but also because it erases the lived experience of Black women. *X-Men* comics tend to only depict fictional forms of discrimination instead of engaging with actual, real-life examples and situations, which becomes especially clear in the *Storm* comic (2014-2015). The narrative takes her back to Kenya, touches on her past as a thief, the failed mutant community Utopia and a struggle against a corrupt American politician. In none of these storylines does the narrative explicitly touch on Storm's identity as a Black woman. Even when she is illegally arrested and detained, relevant at a time when incarceration of Black men and women is still disproportionality high, the narrative does not reflect that these situations convey specific racist attitudes towards Black people and not just mutants. In this manner, the comic limits itself to depicting fictional discrimination even as it attempts to serve as an analogy for real-life discrimination. For example, in issue #007 (2014), Storm is illegally detained and thinks

of her (Black, female) interrogator, “[she] seems nice enough. But so **typical** ... thinking **mutants** are just the sum of their **powers**.”³⁵ In this quote, Storm clearly points out that a common form of discrimination faced by mutants is to be reduced to their abilities, which the comics themselves do by giving all the X-Men names based on their superpowers. This echoes forms of discrimination faced by other minorities, including Black people, but because it only touches on fictional forms of discrimination, the specificity of Black discrimination is lost. The comics fail to identify the white hegemony as the source of discrimination and oppression because the person enacting (fictional) racism against Storm is also Black, which seems especially tone deaf considering the current social climate concerning Black communities’ interaction with the police and other forms of institutionalized authority. Since 2012, in response to the shooting of Black, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown in 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement has protested the increased incarceration rate of Black people and the consistent acts of physical violence against Black people by white police officers, who are often exempt from legal repercussions. Hence, Storm’s illegal arrest and detainment is specifically poignant because she is Black. The comic’s refusal to explicitly engage with Storm’s lived experience being uniquely connected to her Black identity, instead of her mutant one, seems incongruous when looking at other storylines in the comics where Storm attempts to help draught-ridden communities in Kenya and helps a young Mexican student reunite with her family. Additionally, the comic depicts the crowds supporting Storm during her illegal arrest as more Black than white, echoing the Black Lives Matters protests regularly occurring across America since 2012.³⁶

³⁵ Greg Pak et al, *Storm #007* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

³⁶ Greg Pak et al, *Storm #008* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).



Image 4.5: Storm Released © 2014 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

The X-Men comics fail to identify white hegemony as the source of institutionalized racism and the destruction of non-white communities *because* they are an analogy and only offer depictions of explicit racism aimed at a fictional minority. The comic also falls into the trap of framing minority groups as inherently violent and self-destructive, which is a stereotype perpetuated by white hegemony in order to normalize its violence against these communities and render it invisible. When surveying the ruins of Utopia, an artificial island constructed to lie in the San Francisco Bay to house all mutants, Storm thinks “[we] called it **Utopia** and then we **killed** it. Fighting amongst ourselves. I shouldn’t have been surprised. It’s what I’ve seen all my life, wherever I go ... oppressed people destroying each other instead of their overlords.”³⁷ While Storm’s words do imply that there *is* an oppressor, it again fails to identify the oppressor as white hegemony and instead insists that minority communities are consistently self-destructive in the face of oppression. In this way, *Storm* follows the ideological narrative of most *X-Men* comics, which shy away from recognizing the

³⁷ Pak, *Storm* #007.

white hegemony as a destructive force victim-blaming minority communities and framing its violence against those communities as necessary.

Like the *Storm* mini-series, narratives focusing on Storm as a main character often return to her African heritage. In some part this seems logical because it is part of her origin story, but to insist that Storm continually returns to Africa hints at Black commonality or the Pan-African movement, which, inadvertently, places Black people as belonging in Africa and, thus, outside of America. It can imply that Black people have no place in America. At the same time, the comic has shied away from using signification of Egyptian, Kenyan or even stereotypical, general African identity in her superhero costume. While Storm has had many different costumes over the years, she usually only wears black and white (or a very dark blue) and an 'X' somewhere on her costume to signify her belonging with the X-men. This demonstrates how Storm's superhero identity is completely subsumed by the (white) mutant community, to the extent that her refusal to incorporate any signification of her origin story in Egypt or Kenya could be read as a rejection of her heritage. Additionally, her hair is very sleek and long and ignores the realities of Black hair. The refusal to engage with Black hair falls into racist stereotypes that frame natural Black hair as unkempt and uncared for, while white hair is considered the 'norm.' Depicting Storm, whose identity is continually defined through her African heritage, as divorced from that African heritage and signifying whiteness, through, for example, sleek and white (light-coloured) hair, frames her as part of a white community.

Comics perpetuate the idea that intersectionality is divisive and destructive to a movement. Storm's reduction to her mutant identity showcases how Black women "have been expected to place a commitment to the race, as defined by men focused solely on their own enfranchisement, over attention to gender, which is often viewed by those men as a divisive, private matter."³⁸ Furthermore, in the (white) women's movement, Black women have historically been pressured to set aside race to achieve gender parity. Storm is consistently identified as a mutant only, fighting the oppressors of mutants, striving for mutant rights and working to improve the mutant community. At no point do the comics address discrimination in the community, implying that the mutant identity is enough to unify them. Even as Storm laments how mutants are reduced to their abilities alone, the comics do exactly the same thing by refusing to

³⁸ Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance* (Temple University Press, 2009), 35.

engage with the intersectionality present in the community and the comics. By failing to engage with Storm's intersectional identity, the comic erases her Black identity. In this manner, it commits the same discrimination against her that Black women typically face: being forced to either profile themselves as Black or as part of a female collective where their Black identity is considered divisive.

Not all comics systematically refuse the construction of intersectionality in communities or even the construction of a community as explicitly non-white, such as the new *Ms. Marvel*. In 2014, Marvel launched a new *Ms. Marvel* comic where Kamala Khan, a sixteen-year-old Pakistani American girl became Ms Marvel. When the audience first meets Kamala, she is at a small corner store with her friends. The comic immediately engages with the ethnic and cultural diversity of their community, as her friend insists that she should be called Nakia instead of Kiki. Kamala jokingly claims that “[proud] Turkish Nakia doesn’t ‘Amreeki’ nickname.”³⁹ According to S. Ajami, ‘Amreeki’ is a colloquial Arabic term for ‘American’ and, in this instance, refers to the American-style nicknames immigrants tend to (or are forced to) adopt in order to assimilate more easily into Western culture.⁴⁰ Addressing both Nakia’s pride in her Turkish heritage and the habit of ‘Amreeki’ nicknames, the comic immediately addresses the realities of the way second generation immigrants have to navigate the American cultural landscape as well as their own heritage. Another example of this navigation occurs a few panels later, when a white female character named Zoe asks Nakia about her headscarf.

Zoe: I mean ... nobody **pressured** you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody’s going to, like, **honor kill** you? I’m just **concerned**.

Nakia: Actually, my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it’s a **phase** (original emphasis).⁴¹

Through this conversation, which occurs on the first few pages of the very first issue, *Ms. Marvel* points out the stereotypes surrounding Muslims in post-9/11 American

³⁹ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #001* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

⁴⁰ J. Ajami et al, “Marriage and Family: Traditions and Practices Throughout the Family Life Cycle” in *Handbook of Arab American Psychology*, ed. Mona M. Amer and Germaine H. Awad (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 112.

⁴¹ Wilson, *Ms Marvel #001*.

culture, characterized by the rise of Islamophobia and the spread of misinformation on Islam. Assuming that Nakia is being forced to wear her headscarf by her father incorporates stereotypes about Islam as inherently hostile to women and male Muslims as violent and totalitarian. These stereotypes support the widespread cultural narrative that America needs to liberate Muslim women from Islamic oppression used to justify the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Zoe's concerned attitude is less an expression of actual concern and more a patronizing projection of American perceptions of Islam onto real-life Muslim experience. Nakia's response negates those stereotypes by pointing out that wearing the headscarf is her choice, against her father's wishes. Her father hopes it is a phase, which incorporates American notions of teenage rebellion and rejects the headscarf's stereotypical signification of oppression. Instead, wearing it becomes an expression of (religious) freedom. At the same time, wearing the traditional dress can be read as a way to resist American cultural imperialism.

The main character, Kamala, does not wear a headscarf but does follow other tenets of Islam, which causes her to clash with other, white students in her class or white culture in general. When she is invited to a party, her father refuses to let her attend and she sneaks out, during which her inner monologue laments how she often has to deviate from established American norms.

Why am I the only one who gets **signed out of health class**? Why do I have to bring pakoras to school for lunch? Why am I stuck with the **weird holidays**? Everybody else gets to be **normal**. Why can't I? (original emphasis).⁴²

While the earlier discussion between Zoe and Nakia reveals how adherence to non-American heritage can be a choice, this train of thought points out how growing up in a minority culture in a largely homogenous society can lead to experiencing non-white heritage as abnormal and a burden. Kamala is signed out of health class because of her parent's conservative views on sexual education. Pakoras are traditional foods in Pakistani culture and her Muslim holidays are not incorporated into American Judeo-Christian society and its official holidays. All of this causes Kamala to feel marked and singled out compared to her white class mates whose identity and culture is privileged

⁴² Wilson, *Ms Marvel* #001.

via the white hegemony. Despite the fact that Kamala grows up in Muslim and Pakistani communities, she still experiences her family's culture as existing outside the established norm, which is so ubiquitous Kamala has internalized it. At the party, Kamala is tricked into drinking alcohol, demonstrating a clear disrespect for Muslim culture and forcing mainstream American behavioural norms onto Kamala without her consent. Zoe also remarks that Kamala smells like curry, which is obviously racist.⁴³ After a confrontation with Kamala's friend Bruno, who points out that her parents cannot possibly have given her permission to attend the party, Kamala leaves. While walking home, she is enveloped in the Terrigen Mist and experiences a vision in which she speaks to the Avengers, including Captain America and the original Ms Marvel:

Captain America: You thought that if you disobeyed your parents – your culture, your religion – your classmates would **accept** you. What happened instead?

Kamala: They – they **laughed** at me. Zoe thought that because I snuck out, it was **okay** for her to make fun of my family. Like, Kamala's finally seen the light and kicked the dumb inferior **brown people** and their rules to the **curb** (original emphasis).⁴⁴

In this conversation, Kamala becomes aware that rejecting her culture and assimilating more fully into the American mainstream, acting white, will not automatically lead to a wider acceptance of her in the white American mainstream. Instead, it is necessary for her to display solidarity with her community, family, culture and religion to resist the discrimination and racist attitudes she will be faced with. However, as Kamala points out, she does not feel entirely at home in Pakistani culture because she also feels like an American.⁴⁵ Kamala is struggling with the intersectionality of her Pakistani American identity as it involves a crossing of boundaries and categories, which is not tolerated in the binary systems used to construct white America, evidenced by the erasure of intersectionality. Kamala expresses the desire to become less complicated and more singular: she wants to be the white and blonde-haired, original Ms Marvel. The dream-

⁴³ This exchange reveals how concerns over headscarves as expressed by Zoe earlier are rooted in islamophobia and racism instead of genuine concern as Zoe is exhibiting clear racist attitudes.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

vision of the Avengers fades and Kamala wakes up in a cocoon. When she climbs out, she realizes she now looks exactly like the original Ms Marvel.⁴⁶

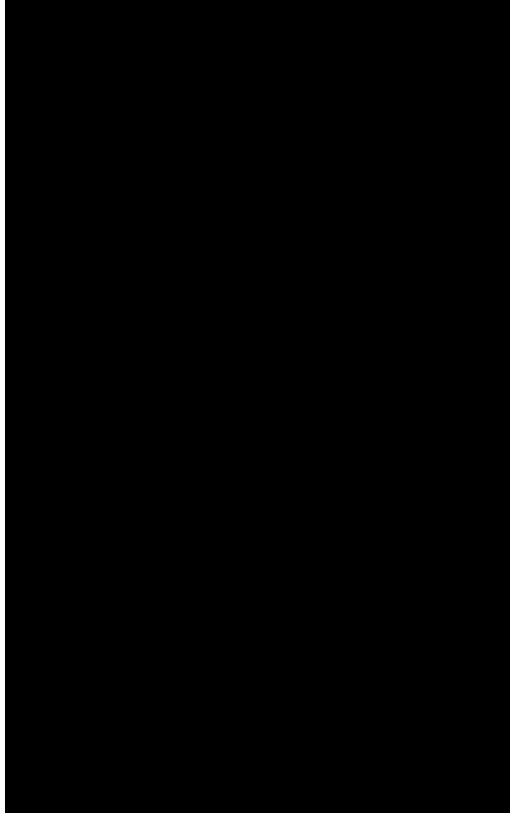


Image 4.6: Kamala as Carol © 2014 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

While Kamala has internalized American white hegemony to such a degree that she identifies the tall, white and blonde-haired Captain Marvel as the ultimate beauty ideal, transforming into that ideal helps her realize her own worth. Kamala eventually transforms back into her own body when she realizes that being someone else is not what she wants either. As Kamala says in a later issue, “[it] took me a while to figure out that Ms Marvel could be **me**. That I didn’t have to be someone else in order to wear the **lightning bolt**.”⁴⁷ Kamala realizes that heroism is not confined to the white and blonde-haired. Instead, anyone capable can wear the lightning bolt, which symbolizes the Ms Marvel and Captain Marvel identities the same way the Superman chevron does

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #007* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

for Superman. Through this narrative, the comic taps into the American Dream of hard work transforming into success, but recasts it in a diverse framework. Through Kamala, who makes the Ms Marvel role her own, the Ms Marvel identity comes to represent a diverse and intersectional superhero identity, which is further exemplified by the way Kamala constructs her Ms Marvel costume.⁴⁸ Unlike many female superhero costumes, Kamala as Ms Marvel is completely covered with close-fitted fabric.⁴⁹ Kamala made her first costume using a burkini, which are made specifically for Muslim women to exercise and swim in without compromising the modesty they choose to maintain for religious reasons. It is made of a lightweight fabric that allows freedom of movement but covers the entire body except for the hands, feet and face. While most burkinis typically have a hood to cover the hair, Kamala chooses to wear hers without.⁵⁰ She also wears a scarf around her neck, a domino mask to cover her face and a pair of blue boots with formal military-style buttons as a nod to Captain Marvel who has similar red boots and gloves. Considering that the superhero is considered a mostly American phenomenon, Kamala's use of the burkini, signifying her Muslim and Pakistani heritage, symbolizes the American Dream: the immigrant using their cultural history and customs to strengthen and contribute to American society. The costume's colour scheme: blue, red and yellow, is reminiscent of the American flag while the lightning bolt on her chest is a reference to the original Ms Marvel and current Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers.

⁴⁸ Kamala is also not the first woman of colour to tie into the 'Marvel' names and legacy. Previously, Monica Rambeau, an African American superhero, who later became known as Photon, Pulsar and Spectrum, initially assumed the Captain Marvel name from 1982 to 1996.

⁴⁹ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #011* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

⁵⁰ Ahiida, Burqini Swimsuit, accessed October 21, 201, <https://ahiida.com/>

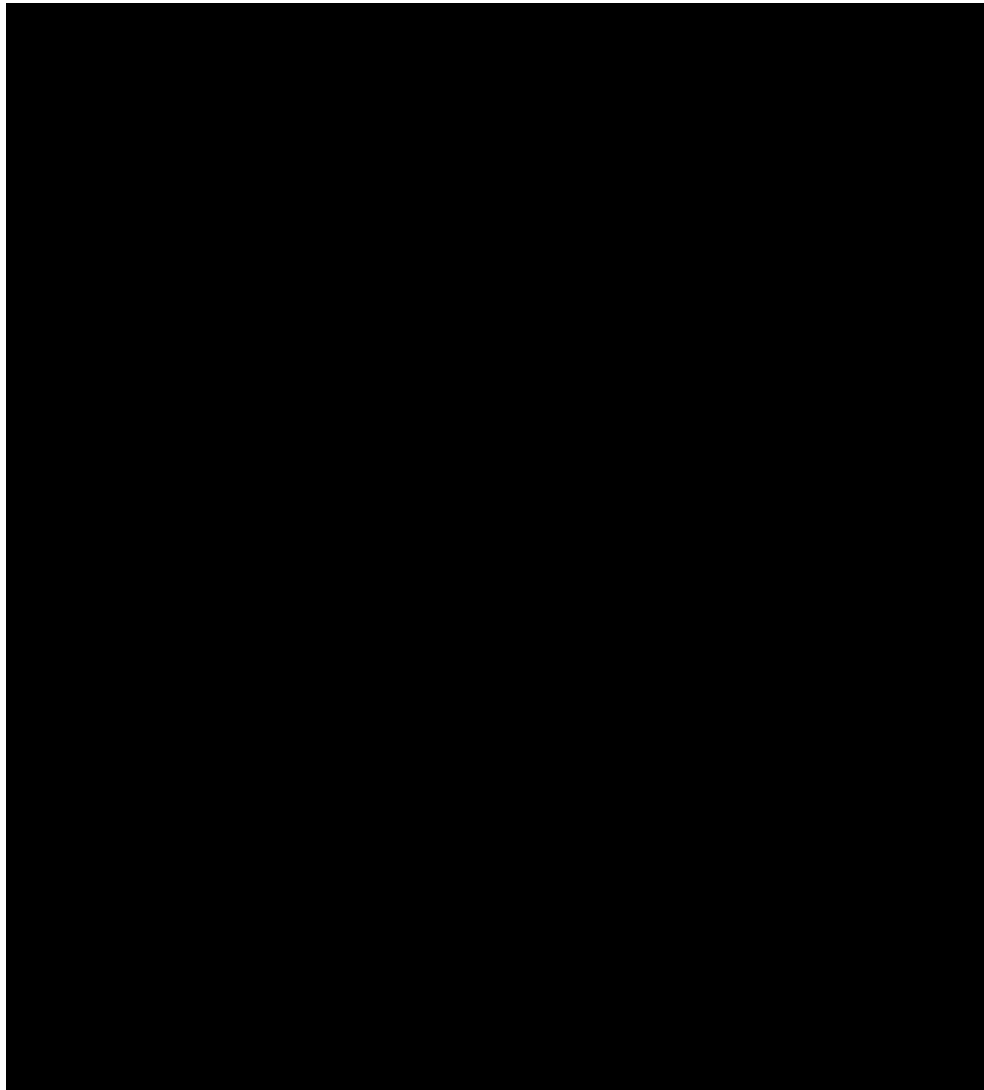


Image 4.7: The Burkini Costume © 2014 Marvel Comics.

[Image removed due to copyright restrictions]

Kamala, both in her civilian identity as Kamala Khan and as Ms Marvel faces challenges unique to her experience as a young, female Muslim Pakistani American. In issue #010 (2014), Kamala faces the Inventor, who has convinced others of Kamala's generation that the only way they can contribute to society is to allow the Inventor to turn them into living batteries to solve the world's energy crisis. Here, *Ms Marvel* engages with the growing public perception that millennials are lazy and ruining the economy, evidenced by the growing number of articles and opinion pieces claiming that millennials are ruining the world, ignoring the fact that millennials are not part of any

established authority and are often excluded from institutionalized power structures.⁵¹ The comic explicitly engages with this discourse as a form of discrimination:

The Inventor: The young are seen as a political burden, a public **nuisance**. They are not worth educating or protecting. They are called parasites, leeches, brats, spawn – If you used those words to describe any minority but children, it would quite understandably be considered hate speech. We are simply taking this loathing to its **logical** conclusion (original emphasis).⁵²

Throughout this plot, the comic showcases the growing discrimination young people face, especially children of non-white communities or children living in poor neighbourhoods who are increasingly seen as a drain on society.

The comic is also not afraid to engage with the discrimination Kamala would face as a girl in American society. As discussed previously, Zoe's implication that Muslim women are oppressed by their male family members confuses religious and cultural practices. It touches on the unique stereotypes about young Muslim women as oppressed in their community and needing to be saved by the white Western world. Essentially, this view denies Muslim women the agency to make their own choices regarding religious practices and implies that the only way to rescue these oppressed women is by imposing Western cultural values onto them. Kamala also experiences sexist attitudes from people in her community. For example, in issue #014, Kamala is introduced to the son of old family friends, Kamran. Initially, they have many hobbies and experiences in common and Kamala develops romantic feelings for Kamran. He offers her a ride to school and she accepts, but asks him to stop the car and let her out when she realizes he is going in the wrong direction. When he pulls over near the docks, Kamala is zapped by a third person named Kaboom and passes out. She wakes up somewhere else and confronts Kamran about the fact that he kidnapped her, but Kamran blames her for the situation:

⁵¹ Google's predictive search function, based on most searched for terms, will finish "millennials are" with: "the worst," "boring," and "self-entitled narcissist." Additionally, the search term 'millennials' will pull up articles such as "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation" published by TIME, "The Cheapest Generation" published by The Atlantic and "The 'Millennials' Are Coming" by CBS.

⁵² Wilson, *Ms. Marvel* #007.

Kamran: I had a feeling you'd change your mind once you saw what we're going to offer you. You just needed a little ... persuasion.

Kamala: That is incredibly **gross**. **You** are incredibly gross.

Kamran: That's not how you seemed to feel when you snuck out with me the other night.

Kamala: I never thought anything like this would happen! I thought – I thought it meant something else when we were together – something good –

Kamran: Who's gonna believe that? You got in my car of your own free will. As far as anybody knows, you chose to be here. **You** put yourself in this situation (original emphasis).⁵³

Kamran insists all Kamala needed was a little “persuasion,” which echoes the ways boys are encouraged to force or coerce girls into allowing sexual contact.⁵⁴ It highlights how persuasion is considered an acceptable technique to achieve sexual contact instead of the gateway to rape that it actually is. Furthermore, it closely mirrors conversations typically held about rape, consent and victim-blaming. It is often the victim's actions that are subjected to scrutiny by the media and the wider community instead of the attacker's assault. What did she do to encourage him? What was she wearing? What had she consented to previously? Having internalized such attitudes, Kamala initially questions whether she was complicit in her own abduction, but then realizes that she does not have to accept Kamran's characterization of her behaviour simply because he is a handsome boy. By echoing discussions of sexual assault in the above dialogue, the comic engages with the sexist attitudes young women routinely face and through Kamala's refusal to accept Kamran's victim-blaming, the comic encourages critical examination of victim-blaming and woman-blaming attitudes.

The comic further challenges victim-blaming narratives through the confrontation between Kamran and Aamir, Kamala's brother. Aamir is consistently portrayed as the most devout Muslim in the comics, even more so than his parents. He dresses in traditional Pakistani garb and the only time the audience sees him in American or Western style clothing is when he is dressed to attend a job interview. He is often shown praying, attending Mosque and quoting from the Quran. When Kamala

⁵³ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #014* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

⁵⁴ Ibid.

refuses to work with Kamran to take over the world, Kamran targets Aamir because of Aamir's religion and, presumably, conservative beliefs.

Kamran: You think some little part of Aamir isn't angry? Looking like he does, **believing** what he does ... you think he doesn't wish he could live in a world where **he** gets to make the rules? (original emphasis).⁵⁵

Kamran engages with stereotypes surrounding Islam, such as the widespread Islamophobic belief that Muslims are angry totalitarians and that Islam, as a religion, supports the destruction of other religions and communities. Coming from Kamran, such racist attitudes are especially poignant, because Kamran is Pakistani American. Additionally, he participates in the ideal of white America: he has a nice car, comes from a middle-class family, dresses in American designer clothes and has been accepted into early admission for college. On the surface, Kamran appears to be the ultimate American success story: a completely integrated and assimilated son of first generation immigrants. He has been Americanized to such a degree that he has internalized the Islamophobic discourse in American media and its cultural landscape. But it is this American success story that, when gaining superpowers, believes he is part of a new, superior race who will rule the lesser beings on Earth. By identifying someone like Kamran as a villain who believes in his own racial superiority and is committed to the creation of a totalitarian dictatorship, the comic rejects Islamophobia and identifies the performance of whiteness as destructive and complicit in the imperialist attitudes of the white hegemony. Kamran kidnaps Aamir and attempts to use the Terrigen Mists to give Aamir powers. Reading Kamran as the signifier of the fully assimilated immigrant and Aamir as the symbol of diverse intersectionality, this struggle is a reflection of American society's attempts to force whiteness onto racial minority communities. By convincing people of colour to act white, the racial minority community can be depoliticized. Aamir, the devout Muslim, completely rejects this imperial whitewashing, rebuffing the idea that Islam is fundamentally incompatible with the quintessentially American values of freedom and equality.

⁵⁵ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #016* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2014).

Aamir: But I don't **want** super-powers

Kamran: What are you talking about? Everybody wants super-powers!

Aamir: Not **me**. I was happy the way I was.

Kamran: How could you possibly have been happy the way you were?!

You're a – you're --

Aamir: I'm a what? A religious freak? An MSA nerd? A salafi? Yeah.

I'm all those things. And I'm not ashamed of any of them. And if you think that means you can take advantage of my sister – that I'll blame **her** for whatever happened to you, while **you** sashay off into the sunset 'cause you're a guy and nothing is ever your fault – well, my brother, you are **incorrect** (original emphasis).⁵⁶

In this conversation, Aamir refutes the idea that devout Muslims cannot be happy and are hateful, angry people who want to force their religion and culture on the world. Instead, those attitudes are identified as white American traits, identifying the white hegemony. Furthermore, Aamir refuses to engage in victim-blaming and explicitly rejects the discourse surrounding female victims of (sexual) assault. He also refutes the stereotype of a male-dominating and female-oppressing Islam by renouncing Kamran's earlier assertion that what happened between him and Kamala is Kamala's fault because of her gender. While Kamran advocates the use of superpowers to maintain the status quo or establish a new oppressive hegemony, both Kamala and Aamir reject this hierarchy in favour of a more equal discourse while Kamala demonstrates the need to use superpowers to do good with 'good' defined as 'defence of equality, especially how it pertains to the needs of the diverse racial minority,' exemplifying Ghee's concept of the culture bound superhero.

Whitewashing and the destruction of the racial minority community by the white hegemony becomes a regular theme in the *Ms. Marvel* comics. In 2015, a second *Ms. Marvel* run began publication and focused on Kamala's attempts to balance her civilian and superhero commitments. The run begins with Kamala's increasingly escalating confrontation with Hope Yards Development, a business initiative aimed at 'cleaning up' Jersey City. This story addresses gentrification and its racist discourse. Hope Yards Development pretends to encourage local residents to help clean up the neighbourhood,

⁵⁶ Ibid.

but actually brainwashes them into selling their property. Hope Yards turns these properties into upper-middle-class apartments and boutiques that local residents cannot afford. In the second issue, we see Hope Yards security agents stopping Tyesha, a Black woman in a burqa, for walking on the street, asking her why she is in the neighbourhood. This demonstrates the racism Black and, or Muslim people have to face on a daily basis as their movements are increasingly policed in attempts to keep them out of middle-class neighbourhoods. During a rally to motivate and brainwash more local residents, a spokesperson for Hope Yards explicitly states that “[soon] enough, **all** of Jersey City will be renewed, revived and free of **undesirables**.”⁵⁷ The comic links gentrification and its exploitation of the working class by the middle class with dominant white hegemony and its racist discourse promoting whiteness as a behavioural and cultural norm. The use of the word ‘undesirables’ purposefully connects this kind of whitewashing and segregation as fascist by invoking the language used by Nazi propaganda. Through this storyline, it is clear that Kamala’s loyalties lie with her multicultural community even when that loyalty threatens the status quo or the interest of the white hegemony. This allows *Ms. Marvel*, unlike the X-Men, to truly represent racial minority superheroes and discrimination by identifying the white hegemony as the oppressor of non-white communities.

The *Ms. Marvel* comics depict Kamala’s intersectional identity in relation to dominant cultural narratives that support white hegemony and to her own community by addressing the sexism and racism in it. In the very first issue of the 2014 run, when Kamala asks permission to attend the party she will sneak out to, her father refuses on the grounds that “it’s not safe for a young girl to be out late at night, with strange boys,” to which Kamala points out that if she “was a boy, you’d let me go to the party.”⁵⁸ Her father sends her to her room and Kamala sneaks out. While Kamala later regrets sneaking out because it causes others at the party to make fun of her heritage, this is not the only time Kamala engages with some of the cultural rules she suspects are rooted in sexism. For example, when Kamala and Nakia attend Mosque, Nakia points out that it is discriminatory for women to have to sit in a separate section in the back where it is more difficult to hear the sermon. The Qur’an does not require the separation of men and women in Mosques and the prophet Mohammed did not have separated areas for men and women in his Mosque. The comics reject the idea of Islam as inherently sexist,

⁵⁷ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #003* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016).

⁵⁸ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #001* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016).

locating possible sexist attitudes as separate cultural practices. It points out that sexist practices in Muslim communities need to be addressed by women in the community as white feminism fails to understand the real issues and nuances, evidenced by Zoe expressing ‘concern’ over Nakia’s headscarf while Nakia is more concerned with the fact that she is being excluded from religious spaces because of her gender.

The comic also addresses the possible racism present in the community, via the community’s resistance to interracial couples. Bruno, a long-term friend of Kamala, who is Italian and was raised Catholic, has been in love with Kamala for many years. While Kamala remains oblivious and jokes about the doctor from Karachi her parents will eventually set her up with, Aamir knows how Bruno feels and, in the 2014 run, tells him that he and Kamala will never be together because Kamala’s parents would never approve.

Aamir: I’m not saying you’re not a good guy. But my parents expect Kamala to marry someone like us. Because they don’t want our heritage to die out. They want their grandkids to feel connected to their religion, their language. They want their daughter to be proud of who she is, and to pass that pride down to the next generation. If you care about Kamala, you’d want those things for her too.⁵⁹

This dialogue presents a rejection of mixed-race relationships in an attempt to preserve religious and cultural practices throughout generations. It reflects anxieties about the preservation of cultural minorities in the face of white hegemony erasing diverse cultural practices. However, in issue #004 of the 2015 run, Aamir becomes engaged to Tyesha, the Black woman who was stopped by the Hope Yards security team. When Aamir and Kamala’s parents are informed, they are dismayed and, initially, hesitant to give their blessing. Aamir points out that he and Tyesha have had serious discussions about marriage, share the same religious values and would make a good match, which his parents would be foolish to reject “because of some outdated idea that a good bride looks like a circa-1989 Bollywood commercial for **Fair and Lovely**” (original emphasis).⁶⁰ At which point, the narration steps in to explain that ‘Fair and Lovely’ is a

⁵⁹ Wilson, *Ms. Marvel #014*.

⁶⁰ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel #004* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016).

“skin lightening-cream popular in Asia”.⁶¹ Aamir explicitly highlights the racism present in his parent’s rejection of Tyesha and the prevalence of colourism in the community. Colourism is the systematic discrimination against darker skinned people, especially girls, in the racial minority community and a preference for light skinned people to procreate with light skinned people to “advance the race.”⁶² Colourism is a sign of internalized racism by Black people, promoted by the white hegemony and its white beauty ideals. Aamir’s mother claims that they are not prejudiced but that they were simply hoping for a more “familiar” bridal match as they are so far away from their extended family and culture in Pakistan.⁶³ When Tyesha explains that she is willing to adhere to Pakistani cultural practices, Kamala’s parents react enthusiastically.

Throughout the development of this romantic subplot, both Aamir and Tyesha’s families openly discuss the difficulties of differing cultural and religious practices in families as Tyesha’s parents and extended family is Catholic, she is Muslim and her brother is an atheist. They consistently work out compromises that respect everyone’s religious practices. At the wedding, Tyesha wears a shalwar kameez, traditional Pakistani dress, while Aamir wears a boubou, which the narrative explains is “traditional West African formal attire for men” to respect Tyesha’s heritage.⁶⁴ Not only does this highlight the differences between religious and cultural practices, because Tyesha is both Muslim and in touch with her West African heritage, but the comic also engages with non-American cultures in detail, using terms, languages and customs specific to individual regions instead of treating the entire Middle-East or African continent as one homogenous Other, unlike, for example, the *Black Panther* comics. In this way, the comic rejects the discourse that claims dealing with racist or sexist issues within the community is divisive, as Tyesha and Aamir’s confrontation of such issues allows them to be married and brings families and communities together. The *Ms Marvel* series highlights the importance of intersectionality by portraying the different forms of racism, sexism and religious discrimination that Kamala and her Muslim and Pakistani American communities face. Actively engaging with real-life examples of discrimination and drawing attention to the hegemony as white Judeo-Christian allows *Ms Marvel* to present an anti-racist and anti-sexist narrative.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² *Dark Girls: Real Women. Real Stories*, directed by Bill Duke, written by D. Channsin Berry, DVD, September 24, 2013.

⁶³ Wilson, *Ms. Marvel* #004.

⁶⁴ Willow G. Wilson et al, *Ms. Marvel* #006 (New York: Marvel Comics, 2016).

Conclusion

The construction of Black masculinity in American society has depended on the idea of the Black man as inherently violent, destructive and mindless. The Black man's violence is also considered to constitute a violent Black sexuality, aimed predominantly at white women. The construction of America as white and masculine casts the Black man as the Other. Comics have attempted to avoid interacting with these stereotypes by presenting the idea of the 'acceptable' Black person who performs whiteness, upholding cultural behavioural patterns associated with white or 'normal' America. Black Panther certainly follows that pattern. While the comics continually portray Wakanda according to stereotypes associated with non-American countries, especially non-white countries, Black Panther himself is often exempt from such portrayal through his performance of whiteness, evidenced through his loyalty to America. Whenever he acts against American interests, this is framed as evidence of his country's backwards, tribal, isolationist tendencies. While he was created as an attempt to provide an image of Black masculinity outside of white hegemony, the comics fail to identify the white hegemony as a destructive force and therefore, it is impossible to conceptualize what Black masculinity, when removed from institutionalized oppression, might look like within American superhero comic books. The Falcon is a more sophisticated attempt at presenting an ideal Black masculinity. He explicitly engages with Black American communities, which allows him to function as a culture bound Black superhero, as defined by Ghee, without being fully Othered, the way Black Panther is. Black femininity in comic books depends not only on the performance of whiteness, as evidenced through the analysis of Storm, but also through loyalty to the white community and erasure of intersectionality. It is clear that, historically, comics have attempted to be inclusive for Black and other non-white characters by avoiding stereotypes through the performance of whiteness. These narratives maintain and perpetuate the white hegemony and therefore, fail to construct a clear anti-racist narrative. In comparison, Kamala Khan's femininity is a clear attempt to break away from stereotypes concerning Muslim women and women of colour without resorting to white performance.

Conclusion

In 2016, the first issue of the brand new *Captain America: Steve Rogers* comic series came out. Written by Nick Spencer, the issue revealed that Captain America had actually been a Nazi spy all along. During the publication of the story Nick Spencer maintained in interviews that it was not fake and that Captain America really was a Nazi.¹ Considering that the creators of Captain America, Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, were two Jewish men who specifically invented the character as a champion of the oppressed during WWII in the face of growing antisemitism in America and in Germany, many in the industry and the community felt this change was especially offensive. While the storyline later revealed that Captain America had been the victim of fake, implanted memories, many comic fans believed that the complete betrayal of the character's history was real and would result in a stand-off between Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson for the title of Captain America, which they both already possess. At a time when Captain America can be both a Nazi and a Black man, it is clear that superhero narratives are emblematic of American society's increased polarization, catering to both increasingly conservative and progressive audiences. American superhero comic books superficially advocate tolerance and equality, but fail to construct a narrative that actively interrogates institutionalized structures of inequality. Because of this failure, they reinforce existing stereotypes surrounding minorities while upholding the white male American hegemony. The concrete results of such attitudes is that not only do comics reinforce existing toxic structures surrounding gender in American culture, they also perpetuate and construct such frameworks in the comic book community, what is commonly referred to as 'nerd culture.' Considering Karen Barad's concept of intra-action, comics and the comic book community consistently influence and shape each other. This creates unsafe environments for everyone who does not embody the norm, meaning white American masculinity.

Comic books simultaneously contribute to and are influenced by general trends in American culture and hegemonic mass media, where gender is understood through contrast and hypermasculinity is increasingly culturally exalted. What is masculine can be more accurately defined as that which is not feminine and the feminine is everything

¹ Christian Holub, "Captain America a Hydra Plant: Marvel's Nick Spencer, Tom Brevoort Talk new comic," *Entertainment Weekly Online*, May 25, 2016, accessed on January 6, 2017, http://ew.com/article/2016/05/25/captain-america-villain-hydra-nick-spencer-tom-brevoort/?xid=entertainment-weekly_socialflow_twitter.

that is excessive and soft, un-masculine. The construction of the hegemonic masculinity all men should aspire to, as described by R.W. Connell, is perpetuated in comics and depends on the destruction or denigration of the female. The conceptualization of the audience as masculine, referred to as 'male-as-norm' syndrome, occurs in all mass media, where films aimed at women are 'chick flicks' and films aimed at men are simply films. Constructing masculinity by othering femininity is further carried out in language used in technological and scientific discourse. Especially when connected to military endeavours, progress is coded as male conquest of the female and as masculine procreation of the masculine. Technology is culturally understood as males producing males producing masculinity, which is symbolized by the cultural myth of the phallus as a vehicle of virility and reproduction. The male superhero embodies this cultural signification of masculinity through his phallic body. Considering comics' prolific use of voyeuristic close-ups intimately depicting male bodies, the body of the superhero is fundamental to the construction of the male superhero as a script for masculinity. This body is hard, powerful and capable of dominating any environment. This is the ideal masculinity promoted in American superhero comic books as evidenced through the analysis of Superman, Captain America and Iron Man.

Female superheroes tend to tap into dominant cultural narratives surrounding women as weak, helpless, irrational and excessive to neutralize the way they complicate the relationship between weak femininity and the masculine warrior ideal. Female superheroes contain the potential to challenge conservative gender ideology, as evidenced through the analysis of Supergirl and Wonder Woman. Their eternal youth signifies troubling stereotypes about adult and older women, which contributes to the construction of the female superhero as a doll. It reduces the female body to plastic perfection that cannot be achieved while the biological body, in its excess and fecundity, is obliterated. The cult of the doll leads to objectification and sexualisation, which is where the figure of the doll meets the porn star. Ultimately, the porn star and the doll share a similar function in the cultural landscape: they exist to be used or moved by an external (male) force. The image of the woman as a doll or porn star inevitably implies the presence of the subject who can act upon (or masturbate to) the object-doll. As discussed in Chapter Two, the female combatant is capable of resisting the masculine gaze by accessing codes typically used by male characters but these codes are rarely used for female characters.

What is clear is that superheroes and their bodies, no matter what gender, are increasingly rendered plastic. Both male and female superheroes are confronted with impossible bodily standards symbolized through the doll and the action figure. As discussed through the analysis of Iron Man and Supergirl, it becomes clear that men and women must purchase technology, coded as masculine, to rule over their natural and biological bodies, coded as feminine, to construct appropriate gender identities. While these plastic bodies pressure women into assuming extremely feminine appearances, it puts incredible pressure on men to deny the feminine in themselves. The elimination of the feminine is necessary to construct the hard, action figure body required for masculinity. In reality, this means that men must control and deny aspects of their identity that have been classified as feminine, which promotes hypermasculinity as a behavioural pattern and ideology. For example, the common saying ‘boys don’t cry’ highlights how men are not allowed to display emotions that are considered weak and feminine such as fear, sadness and pain. The only emotions men are allowed to fully experience or express are anger, impatience and other violent emotions. For example, ‘pulling pigtails,’ when young boys bully young girls and it is dismissed as them showing affection, or when ‘boys will be boys’ is used to excuse violent and aggressive behaviour in young boys. This teaches young boys that violence is normal, that the only acceptable way to express affection, as men, is through violent behaviour and teaches young girls to romanticize violence.² It normalizes men’s violent and controlling behaviour in abusive relationships.

In psychology, the way men are pushed to suppress emotion as a way to create masculine identity is called ‘normative male alexithymia.’ It refers to the way “traditional masculine role socialization” causes men to believe that “their masculine identity conflicts with many emotions they feel and what they feel they are ‘allowed’ to express.”³ This contributes to men’s inability to verbalize and cater to their own emotional needs and the way they require women to do much of the emotional labour of any interpersonal relationship. The masculinity constructed via the action/superhero reduces masculinity to violence and power. While the plasticisation of the body, the cult

² As evidenced by the popularity of Stephanie Meyers’ *Twilight* series, first published in 2005, where the relationship between the main protagonists, Bella and Edward, has eight of the ten warnings signs for abusive relationships as defined by the Women’s Aid organisation.

Women’s Aid, accessed January 6th, 2017, <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/the-survivors-handbook/am-i-in-an-abusive-relationship/>.

³ Greg Henriques, “Why Is it So Hard for Some Men to Share Their Feelings?,” *Psychology Today*, November 13, 2014, accessed January 16, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/theory-knowledge/201411/why-is-it-so-hard-some-men-share-their-feelings>

of the doll or the action hero, is increasingly toxic to men as it encourages the development of hypermasculine behavioural patterns, it still places men in a dominant and privileged position in society. The doll can only be acted upon, not act herself. The action figure can go on rescue missions and fight the villain. Additionally, men's adherence to the cult of the action figure is seen as an accomplishment worthy of praise, as evidenced by the admiration that male actors receive when they transform their bodies into superbodies, such as Hugh Jackman as Wolverine and Christian Bale as Batman, while women's adherence is taken as a given, standardized to the extent that deviation from the ideal is punished.

In superhero comic books, as in most American mass media, heteronormativity renders heterosexuality invisible, which means that homosexuality, as marked and visible, needs to be desexualised and heteronormalised. Homosexual characters are often cast as the strange Other who either participates in homonormativity or must be destroyed. Furthermore, considering Kenneth Ghee's concept of the culture bound superhero in light of queer representation, many queer superheroes fail to be a superhero for queer audiences. Recognizing that the only true queer superhero is a superhero who can resist the status quo, resist heteronormativity, and champion the needs of the community, I must conclude that queer representation in superhero comics is lacking as neither Billy nor Teddy nor Batwoman seem to be part of any queer community, even while living in large cities. The queer community is completely erased and exists only as a subgroup of the white middle-class, which queer superheroes perpetuate. Yet, even homonormativity does not always render a couple safe. Billy, Teddy and Batwoman are consistently Othered and marginalized. Gay men are often desexualised into the homonormative or domestic normative to reduce their radical potential and present them as non-threatening. Lesbian characters struggle to belong in the heteronormative, hinting at how lesbianism is less acceptable to straight white audiences than male homosexuality because of how lesbianism, much like straight women's sexuality, is assumed to serve the white male. Lesbian homonormativity would undo the fetishization of lesbianism and is therefore less acceptable. When not belonging to heteronormativity, the male and female homosexual are both completely Othered and this Otherness is often conflated with other marginalised, non-hegemonic identities to further reinforce stereotypes used to bar LGBTQA+ people from straight white spaces. Being Othered can also lead the narrative to participate in the Bury Your Gays trope. Comics have not used this trope as much as other forms of media, perhaps

because of comics' lack of gay characters and established romantic couples. The Bury Your Gays trope is similar to the way some narratives kill off characters of colour in order for the other white characters to experience emotions or learn valuable lessons about racism, as discussed in the Introduction.

While comics have come a long way in terms of including superheroes of colour, it is clear that the simple presence and visibility of those heroes is not enough to construct an anti-racist narrative. The Black superhero is often constructed as white-performing because he is always aspiring to the white superhero's ideal masculinity. The Black female superhero falls into the same trap of performing whiteness, which also negates intersectional identity as Black superheroes exist divorced from a Black community. Comics continually fail to engage with intersectionality and real-life representations of racism while sustaining racial stereotypes. In order to be anti-racist, comic books must unhook from whiteness and a part of that is identifying the oppressing hegemony as white and patriarchal. In order to do that, the superhero must be culture bound, prioritizing the needs of the community against the status quo, which sustains white hegemony. By that reasoning, it is impossible for the X-Men, as an analogy for race, to ever truly be an anti-racist narrative.

The common thread throughout all the numerous *X-Men* comics is that the mutant community is divided into two ideologies: violent resistance to and destruction of institutionalized power advocated by Magneto and a defence of the status quo with peaceful negotiations as the only way to progress advocated by Professor Xavier and his X-Men. Xavier, a wealthy, well-educated, privileged white man, consistently tells his students that they must be patient and wait for mankind to accept them while preventing Magneto's people from enacting disruptive resistance because it will make humans think badly of mutants. In this way, the comics reiterate the idea that the only form of protest minority groups should engage in is the quiet, patient and non-disruptive kind that causes no real discomfort to the dominant group. This illusion, that there is a specific form of protest available to the oppressed that is also acceptable to the oppressor, is reiterated numerous times in the debates surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM) in the white media. Conservative media outlets, for example Fox News, insist that the ongoing Black Lives Matter's protests are going against the spirit of Martin Luther King, whose peaceful protests are often framed as the ideal way to affect social change in America, and that if BLM only followed the examples of earlier protests, they would be less controversial. This proves how modern white

American culture has deradicalised the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and, as such, systematically misunderstands its historical significance. Conservative media outlets continually stress the need for silent and non-disruptive protest. However, when Colin Kaepernick, the San Francisco 49ers quarterback, refused to stand during the national anthem before the NFL game on Sunday October 16th, 2016 as a form of non-disruptive protest, he was lambasted by the same news outlets that had previously advocated this kind of protest. The oppressor does not get to dictate the forms of protest against its oppression and as long as comics cannot commit to a dismantling of white privilege by challenging the status quo, they are complicit with the reproduction of existing oppressive power structures in society.

The way that comics perpetuate traditional American gender roles, culturally exalted as the ideal means that they contribute to the violence in society attributed to those gender roles. For example, female characters are often drawn in skimpy costumes that helps to sexualise and objectify their bodies. Even taking the inevitable erotic aspect of voyeuristic close up panels into account, male superheroes are often protected from this objectification through their possession of the phallus, the position of power, and visual codes used to protect them from the gaze, such as active stances and powerful angles. Even when the male body is framed as actively sexual, this is often seen as the sexual conquest of women and is part of the hypermasculine discourse where sex and violence are conflated. It is clear that increasingly younger girls are sexualized in American mass media, including comics. Combined with the conflation of sex and violence, this normalizes the sexual assault of young girls not only by older men but also by their peers. The sexualisation of young girls normalizes sexual contact between minors, leading to sexual abuse amongst young people, where “[overall], 27 percent of girls and 25 percent of boys reported they had experienced verbal or physical sexual harassment or violence.”⁴ While comic books are not directly responsible for sexual assault amongst minors, they contribute to an overall culture that normalizes sexual abuse. Another example in which the revealing costumes female superheroes wear can place real people in danger are stunt women who portray female superhero characters in films or TV. In most cases, these stunt women cannot wear enough padding to properly protect themselves because their costume is too revealing for any

⁴ Allie Bidwell, “Study: Sexual Harassment Frequent Among Middle School Students,” *US News*, April 6, 2014, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2014/04/06/study-sexual-harassment-frequent-among-middle-school-students>.

additional protective gear. Women are rendered plastic, reduced to sex objects to be used by the male reader, which contributes to cultural narratives that consistently denigrates women. The construction of women as plastic dolls and men as violent action heroes contributes to the disproportionate amount of violence women face on the street, in professional situations and in intimate, interpersonal relationships.⁵ For comic books, specifically, this has given rise to toxic nerd culture.

Most male participants of nerd culture consider it a space reserved solely for men. Most of nerd culture, including the merchandising and the primary content such as comics, TV shows and films, are geared towards men.⁶ Women who participate in nerd culture are often seen as interlopers spoiling male spaces. Male nerds pride themselves on the idea that the masculinity constructed through nerd culture is divorced from hegemonic masculinity, specifically its conquest of women.⁷ Nerd culture's narrative on masculinity claims that nerds are unappealing to women because they consume specific kinds of content, such as comics, sci-fi TV shows and films. The very existence of nerd girls reveals that it is not the consumption of 'nerdy' material that makes nerd culture or nerd masculinity unattractive, but the toxic masculinity hiding in it. This is epitomized by the attitude that online communities have towards women, gay people and Black people. When comics focus on gay, female or Black characters, male nerds often perceive this as companies either pandering to progressives or as shoe-horning them in, reaffirming the attitude that straight white masculinity is the norm because unless it is vital to the storyline, incorporating non-straight, non-white, non-masculine identities is unnecessary. Women in nerd spaces are often labelled as 'fake geek girls,' meaning women who are only interested in nerd content because they want to impress nerd boys. The term delegitimizes their interest and presence in online communities, while implying that women's primary focus in life is to impress men. Alternatively, some

⁵ "According to the 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), 35.6% of women in the United States reported experiencing rape, physical violence, or stalking by a current or [sic] former partner or spouse ("intimate partner") in their lifetime (...). According to the NISVS, approximately one in four women in the United States has experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime, and approximately one in seven were injured as a result of such violence that included rape, physical violence and/or stalking." Taken from [genderindex.org](http://www.genderindex.org), accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.genderindex.org/country/united-states>

⁶ Carly Lane, "The Mary Sue Interview: Her Universe Founder Ashley Eckstein," *TheMarySue*, December 3, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.themarysue.com/the-mary-sue-interviews-ashley-eckstein/>.

⁷ Tessa Fisher, "Toxic Masculinity and Nerd Culture: Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire," *Somenerdgirl.com*, September 8, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, <https://somenerdgirl.com/2015/09/08/toxic-masculinity-and-nerd-culture-out-of-the-frying-pan-and-into-the-fire/>.

female participants in nerd culture are fetishized as an unattainable ideal. These nerd girls are placed on a pedestal and denied a complex identity because they are reduced to a vagina that likes specific nerd content. Their pleasure in consuming the nerd content is often co-opted by the male nerd's enjoyment of the content.

Currently, there is a perception in nerd culture and wider popular culture that increasing numbers of women are interested and participating in nerd culture. This ignores the historical presence of women in creating nerd culture. For example, the *Star Trek* series, a show stereotyped as enjoyed mainly by male nerds, was predominantly popular with women when it first aired and the first fanzines, which are considered the foundation of modern fandom or nerd culture, were written by and for women.⁸ The currently perceived rise of nerd girls has resulted in an increasingly toxic online environment where male nerds use hostile tactics such as general cyber bullying, but also specifically, doxxing and SWATing to bar women from online nerd communities. Doxxing is the act of finding and releasing private information, such as the victim's personal address, phone number and email address, often with the malicious intent of increasingly personalized rape and death threats. SWATing, which is more prominent in the gamer community, refers to the deception of emergency services such the police, where a fake ongoing crime is reported at the other person's location with the sole purpose of having that person (temporarily) arrested.⁹ Additionally, real-life comic spaces are also often unsafe for nerd girls, such as comic conventions. For example, a fundamental comic-con tradition is cosplay, the act of dressing up as a character using a home-made costume. Cosplayers pride themselves on the skill with which they make the costume and how accurate the costume is, meaning the degree with which it resembles the character's costume. Many female cosplayers experience sexual harassment and comic-con organisational bodies struggle to police male nerds or even establish protocols for dealing with sexual harassment, as evidenced by the torrent of witness or victim testimonies on [geeksforconsent.com](http://www.geeksforconsent.com).¹⁰ The skimpy costumes female characters and their cosplayers wear are often used as an excuse for the harassment, echoing debates surrounding slut-shaming and rape in American mass media.

⁸ Victoria McNally, "Women who love 'Star Trek' are the reason that modern fandom exists," *Revelist.com*, September 8, 2016, accessed January 16, 2007, <http://www.revelist.com/tv/star-trek-fandom-50th/4643>.

⁹ SWATing is not necessarily restrained by gender and appears to be used predominantly against a player who is outperforming the caller during an online gaming session, but there is not yet any research published on how frequently and in what conditions SWATing is most often used as a harassment tactic.

¹⁰ [Geeksforconsent.com](http://www.geeksforconsent.com), accessed January 16, 2007, <http://www.geeksforconsent.org/tag/cosplayer-harassment/>.

Furthermore, people of colour often face harassment when cosplaying a white character even while white cosplayers dress up as characters of colour.

Comics are simultaneously both progressive and conservative. If we consider representation itself, the increased visibility and presence of minority superheroes, to be progressive, then comics are progressive. I do not, in any way, want to undermine the importance or the positive impact of narratives that present minority superheroes in a positive light and make genuine, mostly successful, attempts to shy away from existing stereotypes. Increasing representation is necessary to undo the burden of representation. When only a small number of minority characters are visible in mass media, these characters are the single image of an entire minority and, therefore, must resist all negative stereotyping because negative representations of a minority are far more likely to be criticised than negative portrayals of privileged people. The minority characters are analysed in terms of their contribution to positive representation and then blamed for failing to fulfil the need of representation, which should be filled by hundreds and thousands of characters, as they have done for straight white males. If there were more diverse characters, singular characters would not have to represent the multitude of people present in their community. However, I also believe that representation alone is incapable of challenging the status quo. It is important that comics continue to construct not just representative, pro-diversity, but also anti-heteronormative, anti-racist narratives. These narratives can only be written by increasing the diversity of comic creators and for the companies to support diverse narratives during production. By including more people with varied lived experiences of racism, sexism and homophobia, they can represent instances of real-life discrimination which can be rendered invisible from a white perspective. The reason why *Ms. Marvel* stands out so consistently in its anti-racist rhetoric is the diversity of its creative team. The writer is Willow G. Wilson, who is an American Muslim woman and the editor is the Pakistani-American Sana Amanat. The collaboration between diverse people who can distance themselves from the hegemony creates diverse narratives. It is by engaging in dialogue and broadening perspectives that anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-homophobic stories can be written.

Some progress is being made. For example, Sana Amanat and Willow G. Wilson are currently writing the *Ms Marvel* comics. In 2015, Margueritte Bennet began writing DC's *Bombshells* title, which features an all-women cast and, as of August 2016, Ta-Nehisi Coates is producing *Black Panther* and *World of Wakanda* in collaboration with

Yona Harvey. Increasingly, queer, Black and other minority superheroes exist, have their own titular comics or are an important part of an established superhero team, for example, Miles Morales as the Black Hispanic Spiderman and David Zavimbe as Batwing, a Black member of Batman Incorporated. There are more female, Black, Hispanic, LGBTQA+ creators employed by Marvel and DC every year. Alongside the addition of several new gay characters to the DC universe after the New 52 reboot, as discussed in Chapter Three, DC's *Supergirl* TV series (2015-ongoing) has a lesbian main character. Yet, diversity is not enough. These diverse creators themselves also need to unhook from the hegemony. For instance, the initial *Young Avengers* run (2005-2010) written by Alan Heinberg was hailed as very progressive, presenting Billy and Teddy outside of stereotypical configurations of gay couples, which was partly credited to Heinberg himself being openly gay. However, as I have demonstrated, Heinberg himself fell into the trap of heteronormativity and its conservative, misogynistic representations of gender as well as supporting its invisibility.

What can the industry do to improve comics and minimize their contribution to toxic nerd culture and American culture's conservative gender roles? As discussed, they need to include more diverse creators. In order to employ such creators and profit from diverse narratives, the industry must also step away from assuming its audience is male and resist the stratification of the merchandising market along gender lines. Especially for young children, the market is divided along strict gender roles where TV shows and cartoons are either for girls or boys and the merchandising is tailored to what is traditionally considered appropriate for each gender. For example, dolls are for girls, but not for boys and toy cars, for instance, are marketed at boys instead of girls. Superhero themed merchandise is often aimed exclusively at boys, to the extent that female characters are withheld from the merchandising. For example, when marketing the *Avengers* films of the MCU, *Black Widow* is often left out of the numerous action figures, lunch boxes, hoodies and toys. The stratification of the market also impacts superhero content. For example, DC's popular cartoon *Young Justice* (2010-2013) was cancelled because it was too popular with female fans, as writer and producer Paul Dini admitted in an interview with Kevin Smith, the owner of the *Fatman on Batman* podcast.¹¹ Dini states that the show was cancelled because DC does not want girls

¹¹ Jill Pantozzi, "Warner Bros. Animation Takes Issue With Girls Watching Their Programs," *TheMarySue*, December 20, 2013, accessed on January, 16, 2017, <http://www.themarysue.com/warner-bros-animation-girl-market/>.

watching superhero shows because it means losing the boy market. DC believed girls would not purchase the already produced merchandise and that, in general, girls do not buy toys.¹² For Marvel, which is now owned by Disney, the stratification of the market along gender lines needs to be maintained to avoid Marvel/Disney from competing with itself. Because of the princess-range, Disney can be considered to have a large share in the girl merchandising market and if Marvel were to produce content that infringes on the girl market, they would lose part of their Disney clientele to Marvel and, subsequently, lose out on boys purchasing their toys because the Disney princess-range could not possibly appeal to boys.¹³ Therefore, the gender imbalance is maintained through the stratification of the merchandising market, which influences content, which also influences the market. Furthermore, because of the lack of Black superheroes, there is a lack of merchandise marketed towards specifically Black audiences and children, except for the MCU Falcon and Black Panther toys. Supposedly, Black children would buy toys with exclusively white superheroes anyway because of ‘white-as-norm’ syndrome. However, by excluding non-white children from their marketing strategies, both Marvel and DC are missing out on a large and viable demographic. By stepping away from artificially maintaining the superhero merchandising market as a white boys’ market and subsequently diversifying their narratives, DC and Marvel could improve their content and combat heteronormative gender roles.

Another important step DC and Marvel should take is to listen more closely to what their audiences want. Large parts of the comic community are open and even eager for increased diversity. For instance, after the success of MCU’s *Avengers Assemble* (2012), many fans called for a Black Widow film, which culminated into several online campaigns.¹⁴ Despite Marvel’s claims that a Black Widow movie will happen, as of 2016, the Black Widow movie has still not been incorporated into the MCU’s future line-up, which has been planned up until 2019. Marvel is also increasingly being held accountable for its lack of diversity by the community, which often points out how the MCU has more white actors named Chris than female or Black actors. Marvel’s TV series, produced by Netflix, tie into the MCU and have also faced some heavy criticism

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Monika Bartyzel, “Disney Spent \$15 Billion To Limit Their Audience,” *Forbes*, May 13, 2015, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/monikabartyzel/2015/05/13/disney-spent-15-billion-to-limit-their-audience/#425d39bdea37>.

¹⁴ Susana Polo, “Tumblr Fans Launch Campaign for *Black Widow* Movie, but Will Social Media Be Enough?,” *TheMarySue*, October 28, 2014, accessed January 16, 2017, <http://www.themarysue.com/black-widow-tumblr-campaign/>.

in regards to sexism and racism, especially the *Daredevil* series (2015-ongoing) in its portrayal of Asian American women. In comparison, the Netflix produced Marvel series *Luke Cage* (2016-ongoing) has been applauded as portraying insightful and meaningful instances of Black experiences. When Marvel released a statement that they were providing Netflix with the rights to the Iron Fist character, the community called for the main character in the comic, Danny Rand, to be played by an Asian American actor instead of a white man to avoid White Savoir Complex stereotypes.¹⁵ Marvel decided to ignore this, similar to the way it ignored calls for an actor of colour to play Stephen Strange in the *Dr Strange* film (2016). These examples demonstrate that, despite the existence of toxic masculinity in nerd culture, there are many diverse people present in the community and industry who are eager to see increased diversity in comics.

Nerd culture, for example through its support of Kamala Khan and its simultaneous glorification of Hydra, is a microcosmic example of the larger polarization in American society. By presenting a nuanced and complex analysis, this thesis fills some of the gaps in comic criticism and contributes to the increased use of academic theory and critical attitudes in the field identified by Hannah Miodrag.¹⁶ It presents a historical overview of the intersection of gender, sexuality and race and clearly sets out how this impacts comics' (in)ability to act as progressive narratives in American culture, which is increasingly split alongside a conservative-liberal ideological dimension. American mass media caters to this divide, which is expanding at increasing rates, and comic books are no different. By analysing several superheroes, this thesis constructs a comprehensive interpretation of superheroes and their impact on American society while identifying dominant trends within the comic book industry and the superhero genre. It is clear that these trends continually fail to construct a progressive line-up of characters. Superficially, comics promote liberal values and ideals but fail to contribute significantly to such ideals and contain deep-seated conservative attitudes.

¹⁵ Andrew Wheeler, "Why Iron Fist Needs To Be An Asian American Hero, Not Another White Savior Cliché," *Comics Alliance*, December 15, 2015, accessed on January 6, 2017, <http://comicsalliance.com/iron-fist-asian-american-or-white-savior/>

¹⁶ Hannah Miodrag, *Comics and Language: Reimagining Critical Discourse on the Form* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 4-5

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