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Into the Spider-Verse: Cultural Identity in Spider-Man Media

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ABSTRACT

Superheroes have become a popular genre that is becoming more successful at creating box office records. As the superhero genre becomes more popular, more superheroes have been created as symbols that reflect the increase of cultural identity representation in contemporary media. Spider-Man is a superhero that also reflects these cultural identities by offering more diverse and relatable variants of the Spider-Man character that allow him to normalize and address their presence in media. This paper aims to analyze the different cultural identities that Spider-Man media can connect to and how this connection can lead to a greater understanding of cultural identity throughout media. This analysis considers four films of Spider-Man media including *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). Looking at the Spider-Man films through Marxist theory will aim to analyze how Spider-Man is a representative of the working class struggling against an exploitative capitalist system. Another approach this paper will consider is cultural theory which will analyze how Miles Morales is a culturally significant Spider-Man figure due to his ability to prove that minorities can also hold the Spider-Man title without being bound to the original story but extending further on what the Spider-Man identity represents. When studied through the lens of feminist theory, Spider-Man media reveals the evolution of women in the universe of Spider-Man media, where women have grown from damsels in distress into characters with more agency and ambition. Through a queer theory analysis, it is revealed Spider-Man takes on a role as a symbol of queer community's struggle to become accepted in a heteronormative society. Overall, Spider-Man has grown into a diverse character that can connect to many cultural identities in order to normalize diverse voices in the media. Through

this analysis, a new perspective on Spider-Man is revealed as an adaptable symbol for various

cultural identities to be represented and creates opportunities for more to come.

     Spider-Man is a superhero that has become well known throughout the world. Through his ordinary alter ego Peter Parker, he is able to connect to audiences in a more personal way. As the world evolves to become more culturally diverse, so does representation in media. Spider-Man has reflected these changes by becoming a more diverse character to the evolving cultural changes in the world. Spider-Man media demonstrates how Spider-Man can become an adaptable symbol to different cultural identities due to how relatable and socially conscious the character is. By utilizing Marxist, Cultural, Feminist and Queer theories, Spider-Man can be analyzed to determine his role in normalizing and addressing cultural identity in media through his connections with various cultural communities that provide insight and understanding into the attributes and struggles faced in each community. This analysis considers four films of Spider-Man media including *Spider-Man* (2002), *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). First by looking at Peter Parker through a Marxist theory framework, he can be seen as a representation of the working class who are taken advantage of by capitalism. The cultural theory framework reveals how Miles Morales' identity as a bi-racial Spider-Man provides a gateway into how Spider-Man's identity can be used to enrich the character, proving that racial identity does not define expectations but can be utilized to expand on the values and meaning of Spider-Man. Through a feminist theory framework the comparison between Gwen Stacy and MJ throughout the films reveal how the role of superhero girlfriends has evolved from damsels in distress to characters of more agency. Through a queer studies framework, the Spider-Man mask can be used to symbolize the struggles of the queer community of being accepted into a heteronormative society. This research hopes to gain more perspective in understanding the importance of how

Spider-Man represents these cultural identities in order to connect to and normalize their presence in the media.

Superheroes have become an integral part of American media throughout the decades. They provide a sense of escapism from the modern world through superheroes that are able to save us from any evil force we can think of. Superheroes have become a symbol of hope and justice in a distressing world. One of the most prominent companies that has created heroes for audiences to enjoy is Marvel. The Marvel Comics company was started in 1939 by Martin Goodman as a response to the rising comic books industry. Goodman's editor, art director and chief writer was Stan Lee. Along with artists Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, Lee created some of the most popular superheroes for the Marvel company including the Fantastic Four and the Hulk. One of the most well-known superheroes made by Marvel is Spider-Man, a superhero who provided a new perspective by focusing on the person behind the mask rather than their superhuman exterior.

Created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko in 1962, Spider-Man's story begins with a teenager named Peter Parker who is bitten by a radioactive spider. This radioactive spider gives him abilities such as strength, wall crawling, heightened senses and the ability to shoot webs. The Spider-Man comics became a success for teenagers due to the fact that they could relate to Peter and helped to connect to audiences in an empathetic and personal way. In their book, *Enter the Superheroes: American Values, Culture, and the Canon of Superhero Literature,* Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagnucci describe the audience reaction to Spider-Man, stating "While teens could not possibly relate to fighting Doctor Octopus, they could relate to Peter Parker needing to get home in time so he wouldn't upset his Aunt May. Teenage boys could also relate to Peter Parker struggling with talking to girls on a daily basis at school. More so than other

superheroes before him, Spider-Man/Peter Parker lived an actual life that reflected a 'real' reality" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 13). Teenagers were mainly seen as sidekicks in typical comic book stories but the birth of Spider-Man revealed that teenagers can become their own heroes as well which made the character become successful. Although the comics were a success, the rise of video games and other forms of entertainment led to a decrease in comic book sales over the years. In order to generate income, Marvel created a licensing deal with Sony in 1999 which allowed Marvel kept the rights to use the character in comic books and merchandise while Sony was able to use the character in films such as *Spider-Man* (2002)*, The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). These different iterations of the same character allowed them to explore the character through different social contexts and introduce the character to new generations. Throughout the years, the franchise has grown more diverse and has expanded its story further in order to represent the cultural diversity of its expanding audience. The wide variety of films today have grown to become a huge success for the franchise, leading the Marvel company to box office records and becoming a household name for fans and non-fans alike.

One of the reasons that people can relate to Spider-Man is through his alter ego Peter Parker. Peter Parker starts off as an average high school teenager who comes from a low-income family. He strives to rise in class for his family, but struggles to do so. Economic justice has been a common struggle among Americans, especially due to the rise of corporations who exploit the working class. In the book, *Critical Media Studies: An Introduction* by Brian L. Ott and Robert L. Mack, the concept of Marxism is described, stating, "Marxism is both a social theory and a political movement rooted in the idea that 'society is the history of class struggles'"(Ott and Mack). This trend is prominent in the Spider-Man franchise, most notably in *Spider-Man* (2002).

Sony Pictures' film *Spider-Man* was created in 2002 after Sony had acquired the rights to Spider-Man in 1999. Although class conflict issues were always prevalent in the Spider-Man franchise, the context of the film relies on corporate power and economic justice. This includes capitalist corporations who are known for taking advantage of the working class. Spider-man becomes a symbol of hope and perseverance for all Americans, especially the working class people. The message of corporate social responsibility is prevalent in the film, as it aims to condemn the role of corporations in a capitalist society through the greed and exploitation displayed by Peter Parker's adversaries.

In the film Peter Parker lives in a working class neighborhood with his aunt and uncle. His family faces economic and social problems and have struggled financially throughout their lives. During a class trip, Peter gets bit by a radioactive spider and develops superpowers which he subsequently uses to win money. Using his powers for financial gain backfires on him and his uncle dies as a result of his selfishness. Afterwards, Peter vows to use his powers for good and takes on the persona Spider-Man to help the people of his neighborhood with his abilities. Meanwhile Norman Osborn is a man who created his own successful company and has developed a serum that will enhance his strength and intelligence and even tests it on himself which develops his evil alter ego, the Green Goblin. The company turns against him and fires him in favor of a larger corporation. His alter ego uses his powers for evil and attempts to take his company back. Spider-Man and Green Goblin fight until Green Goblin accidentally kills himself with his own glider. The death of the Green Goblin by his own glider symbolizes how immorally acquiring capital can backfire on a person, causing them to face the consequences of their morally corrupt actions.

The film presents corporate America as a greedy capitalist entity capable of hurting and corrupting people such as Peter's uncle Ben and Norman Osborn through the corporations that they worked for. In the book, *The Cinematic Superhero as Social Practice*, Joseph Zornado and Sara Reilly explain the cultural impact of the superhero genre in film which reveals "The symbolic conflict in *Spider-Man* is between two ideations of America, a world inhabited by blue-collar workers vulnerable exploited by capital and a corporate billionaire class driven to homicidal madness in its desperate bid to stay on top" (Zornado and Reilly 61). At the beginning of the film, it is revealed that after 35 years of service, Peter's uncle Ben was laid off as a senior electrician at the power plant. Although he is disappointed, he continues to find another job in order to support his family. Uncle Ben is a victim of corporations who practice downsizing in order to upsize their profits. He represents the working class proletariat who are treated as labor rather than individuals and can be replaced or laid off at any time. They have little power in the company and cannot do anything to fight back after they are let go. However, those with more authority are able to have more control over their fate and are not willing to let go of their success that easily.

Norman Osborn is a representative of a higher class bourgeoisie individual who owns his own corporation called Oscorp. Oscorp is a company that is contracted by the United States military to create a new super soldier serum. Osborn is given a quick deadline to prove it works or the military will contract with Oscorp's rival company instead. Despite warnings from Osborn's colleague, Dr. Mendel Stromm, Osborn plans to take the serum himself to prove its worth. In this scene, Osborn is in the lab with Dr. Stromm. Osborn is viewed from a low angle to demonstrate his role as a powerful bourgeoisie figure. It also signifies the power that he possesses as he takes over the lab and tries the serum himself. Osborne is overcome with a sense

of urgency in that he is willing to take risks to keep the military's funding in order to maintain

his company's high status. Dr. Stromm is viewed through a high angle shot which demonstrates

his role as a powerless member of the proletariat. After Osborn transforms into Green Goblin, he

kills Dr. Stromm for doubting him (*Spider-Man* 0:14:57-0:17:47). Since Green Goblin represents

Osborn's inner beliefs, it demonstrates how Osborn's materialism causes him to value the serum

over the lives of his workers. He is corrupted not only by the super soldier serum but also his

greed and materialism to keep his business powerful. This is representative of how corporations

run their company. The lab that Osborn and Dr. Stromm use also symbolizes the risk taking

involved in making a business profitable. Much like scientists who take risks and experiment

new ideas, powerful figures take risks in their business, but mostly at the expense of their

employees. Companies are profit-motivated and determine the best way to capitalize their

workers and their labor in order to keep their high status. They are willing to exploit their

workers for the sake of business and maintain profit.

     Despite Osborn's efforts, Osborn's company was sold to Osborn's competitor instead, so

Osborn was voted out of the company to prevent a power struggle. This power struggle

demonstrates the idea that high class individuals are negatively affected by the greed that got

them to that position in the first place and will do practically anything to maintain it. Control

over a corporation is essential in ensuring its success, so by kicking Osborn out in order to

maintain control, Osborn's competitor is taking action to remain on top as a powerful

corporation in military research and development. In Osborn's case he is not only losing control

of his company but also losing control of himself through the Green Goblin. Unlike uncle Ben,

he uses his resources to fight back and becomes the Green Goblin, a masked figure whose goal is

to take out the members of the Oscorp board who fired him and take back his power over the

company. Much like the Green Goblin, many companies' boards ensure that they will remain in power even after their company loses its power. In the case of the Enron scandals, company executives had the ability to take advantage of their corporate power through fraudulent accounting practices to increase profits. DiPaolo reveals the result of the Enron scandals, stating "When the Enron Corporation went bankrupt in 2001, its employees' retirement plans, based heavily on the value of the energy company's stock, were devastated. Naturally, several executives with foreknowledge of the company's precarious position granted themselves 'golden parachute' retirements before the company imploded, so they did not suffer the same fate (DiPaolo 93). At a board meeting for Oscorp, a member tells Osborn that the company has accepted a buyout offer from Quest, Oscorp's competitor. The board is unanimous in this decision and is forced to fire Osborn in the process. Corporations are known to be able to take advantage of their working class, putting their workers' livelihoods at stake in order to remain solvent. The Osborn corporation furthers this by demonstrating that they are even willing to risk the career of a fellow bourgeoisie member in order to ensure that profits remain at an all-time high.

Although Spider-Man uses his abilities to help those around him, he did not start off that way. After Peter realizes he has powers, he immediately uses his power for personal gain by attempting to win money wrestling so he could buy a car to impress Mary Jane. After winning his round, he goes to collect the reward money but the owner refuses to give him the full amount. This is the first instance in which Peter is taken advantage of by a corporation and discovers that there is little he could do to receive his fair share of money. Peter is naive to the greed and power a corporate entity can possess over him. In their analysis of Spider-Man as an American class warrior in the George Bush Jr. era, DiPaolo reveals how the films and comics present Peter

Parker as a proletariat, stating, "One of the central themes of Spider-Man stories produced during the Bush era is that corporations have so stacked the deck against financial upward mobility, and so decimated the American middle class, that Peter will never rise to a position of wealth and power unless he sacrifices all his ideals in the process, and becomes a de facto member of the Bush Administration" (DiPaolo 92). In the George Bush era the economic performance index was the lowest it had been since the Depression. Peter in the Spider-Man films reflected this in the films by becoming an advocate for ordinary people who were affected by this and supported justice for all Americans despite having been greatly affected by the economic downturn himself.

One of the reasons that Spider-Man connects to audiences is that he describes himself as a "friendly neighborhood Spider-Man" which demonstrates his dedication to protect all neighborhoods despite their social status. Coming from a lower class, Peter understands the struggles faced by proletariat communities which motivates him to help them without any cost. If he were to rise in class he would no longer be a part of the proletariat community and lose the values that caused him to become a symbol for justice. This predicament also demonstrates the struggles faced by the working class due to rise in power. The proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie which leaves them in a position where they are not only exploited but are deprived of opportunities to rise in class. In order to rise in class they would have to become as ruthless and immoral as the bourgeoisie which becomes conflicting with their personal values.

In the scene where Peter goes to collect money from the wrestling owner, the wrestling owner is shown surrounded by money in order to display his materialism. Peter displays happiness as he sees the owner counting money, but it quickly turns into a frown after the owner reveals that Peter will only get a small portion of the earnings. After being cheated from his earnings, Peter lets a robber steal the wrestling owner's profits. This then transitions to Peter

walking up towards a large group of people. As Peter slides through the crowd the music builds, creating tension. Peter kneels over his uncle Ben who lays there dying (*Spider-Man* 0:41:42-0:44:22). By risking his values to get back at the wrestling promoter, Ben's death reveals that Peter cannot rise in class without personal cost. Uncle Ben is a figure in Peter's life that has taught him his values and the responsibility he has to take care of the people around him. His uncle's death is the embodiment of how Peter has betrayed those values, and therefore, must suffer a great loss in order to restore his place as a blue-collar member of society. Peter's disregard for his values is reflected in American history since large corporations have taken risks and sacrificed much of their values to become powerful, even if it means deceiving those less fortunate than themselves. Members of the lower class can relate to Peter's loss since it represents their own struggles with corporate greed and manipulation which has left them stuck in a lower social class with little resources or opportunities to rise above.

While Spider-Man becomes a more popular local hero, The Daily Bugle newspaper uses his image as a spectacle to attract more people to buy their newspapers. Peter realizes that he can use the need for Spider-Man pictures to his advantage, so he sets up shots as Spider-Man to sell to The Daily Bugle. Publisher Jonah Jameson of The Daily Bugle uses his images against him, transforming Spider-Man into a symbol of destruction and negligence. The commodification of the Spider-Man image demonstrates the corruption that large media corporations are capable of due to the power that they hold within a community. Despite knowing that Spider-Man has saved countless lives, The Daily Bugle exaggerates the negative aspects of this character in order to corrupt his celebrity image as a protector of the city and sell more newspapers. This corruption is a result of the actions of Jameson being profit driven and utilizing capital to keep The Daily Bugle a profitable corporation. This is also due to Jameson's conflicting political views with

Spider-Man. Spider-Man represents an egalitarian view due to his belief that all people are equal and should be given equal access to opportunities. However, Jameson represents more conservative values where tradition is more valued and change is discouraged. The conflicts between Jameson's and Spider-Man's beliefs further Jameson's personal hatred for Spider-Man and what he represents to society.

Since Peter Parker also works for The Daily Bugle, Jameson also takes advantage of Peter Parker due to Jameson's representation as a bourgeois figure while Peter represents a proletariat. When attempting to sell his photos to Jameson for The Daily Bugle, Jameson first degrades Peter by offering him a low price for the photos. Although they are all sitting down, Peter and Jameson's employee are viewed with a lower angle in order to demonstrate Jameson's dominance over them. When Peter attempts to go to sell them somewhere else for a higher price, Jameson demands that he sit back down and offers him the standard freelance fee before giving the photos to his employee to put on the cover of the Daily Bugle. When Peter asks Jameson for a job, Jameson quickly turns him down and continues to offer freelance (*Spider-Man* 1:01:17-1:02:42). This demonstrates Jameson's ability to take advantage of vulnerable people in order to make a profit. Jameson refuses to give Peter Parker a job and relies on freelance work as a way to take advantage of Peter Parker's labor by reducing the risk of having him as an employee while still profiting off his work. This represents corporations who take advantage of their workers despite how hard they work to make their wage. Jameson's conflicts with both Spider-Man and Peter Parker reveal that he is another bourgeois corrupted by greed and social order that blinds them from seeing the truth about the consequences of their actions. The use of Spider-Man in The Daily Bugle demonstrates how large corporations are able to control the media for profit. People can also relate to Peter Parker since despite working hard for a company, he is treated

poorly and not given enough credit for his contributions. This reflects the struggle of the lower class proletariat members of large corporations that are reduced to their labor due to the growth of capitalism.

Many people relate to Peter's struggles with economic and social issues. In all iterations of Spider-Man, Peter remains a lower class hero who stands up for those who are not able to stand up for themselves. People like Peter Parker can look up to Spider-Man because despite not being able to rise in social and economic class, he is still able to make a difference in his community by helping out those in his neighborhood. His egalitarian views make him a representative of equality and fairness for everyone despite their background. Despite being taken advantage of by large capitalist corporations, he still manages to maintain hope as a representative of the proletariat. At the end of the film, Peter accepts the responsibility as the city's protector and sacrifices his relationship with Mary Jane in order to keep her safe. Peter's devotion to his role as a protector represents the superhero story's ability to create hope as long as superheroes will be there to protect us no matter who we are.

Through the introduction of the multiverse in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), different Spider-people are introduced that connect to a wider range of audiences in order to appeal and make connections with minorities that don't typically see themselves on screen through Peter Parker. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, this area is explored further as the multiverse saga has allowed for different iterations of the same character to coexist, allowing for further opportunities to diversify and expand characters under the umbrella of Marvel's original characters. Marxism reveals how large corporate entities are given more power over social issues including controlling representation in media. In typical superhero comic narratives, the dominating hegemony, or dominating cultural belief system, comes from white men which

makes it difficult for diverse voices to be heard. In their book, Romagnoli and Pagnucci reveal the dominating hegemony in the superhero genre, writing "To a great extent, comic writers, artists, inkers, editors, and other members of the many creative teams are predominantly white males. This traditional homogeneity among the genre's creators affects both racial diversity and gender equality with the comics' stories themselves" (Romagnoli and Pagnucci 133). Since 1962, Spider-Man was seen as a predominately white character due to the fact that the creators were white themselves and therefore were biased in the creation of their characters to represent themselves. The comic book industry relied on white American male comic book writers to set the narrative for comic book superheroes which allowed them to exclude diverse characters in bias of their own race. It also allowed them to set the values and expectations of the superhero genre which is translated into the superhero films made today. By excluding diverse superheroes from narratives it was difficult for ethnic kids to see themselves as the hero. Spider-Man, however, changed this since his suit hid the color of his skin and therefore implied that anyone can be under the mask. As diversity becomes more prominent in America, the media also evolves to replicate this diversity outside of the mask. *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) is a multiversal film which proves that anyone can become a hero despite any ethnic, gender or class concerns that people can have. It proves that Spider-Man is for anyone and can be changed to reflect different cultural values in order to further diverse voices and connect with a greater audience.

In *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), Miles Morales is an Afro-Puerto Rican teenager from Brooklyn who was bitten by a radioactive spider on the subway. Suddenly, Miles discovers a collider made by Wilson Fisk to access parallel universes to bring back his wife and son. However his plans are interrupted by Peter Parker, who sacrifices his life to save Miles and

the city. Miles takes on the Spider-Man role by using his powers to help those around him. Miles suddenly meets Peter Parker from another dimension who helps him train to become the new Spider-Man in exchange for help to steal data from Wilson's research facility to create a flash drive to disable the collider. However, they get caught at the research facility and are saved by multiple Spider-people from other dimensions, including Spider-Woman, Peni Parker, Spider-Ham and Spider-Man Noir. Together, they defeat Kingpin and Miles remains as his universe's own Spider-Man.

In the beginning of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), Miles Morales struggles to find his identity. This is prominent in the first scene as it shows Miles going to school. On his way to school he passes by his old school where he greets his old friends and classmates. However, at his new school, The Brooklyn Visions Academy, he does not fit in. His parents made him join the school in order to not waste his intelligence on a regular education, but one where he can be challenged. However, Miles feels more connected to his uncle, who fosters Miles' artistic talents and allows him to represent himself through his spray paint art. In the book *Panthers, Hulks and Ironhearts. Marvel, Diversity and the 21st Century Superhero,* Jeffery A. Brown reveals the importance of Miles' struggle, emphasizing that "...critics were almost unanimous in their praise of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, often emphasizing the balance the film strikes between the importance of Miles' ethnicity in a genre where most heroes are still white men and the message that Miles cannot be reduced to just his ethnicity" (Brown 29). Typically, ethnic struggles with identity usually rely on ethnic identity struggles. However, Miles' struggles rely on the expectations of his father versus what he really wants to be. Miles' wants to form his own identity and is able to do so with his Spider-Man title. Through Spider-Man he is able to not only find the balance between the expectations of his father and his uncle,

but also form a new identity for himself that he can be proud of. Audiences can likely connect

with this since identity is a common struggle that many people face. However, Spider-Man is a

character that explores identity through masking and unmasking the truth about a person.

Through the symbolism of being truly unmasked, audiences can find that their identity can also

be formed on their own account.

The inclusion of the different Spider-people helped to diversify the character of Spider-

Man. The different Spider-people that are represented in the film introduce themselves as Spider-

Woman, Peni Parker, Spider-Ham and Spider-Man Noir. These Spider-Man variants represent

different variations of diversity, period, species and gender. Brown reveals in his book the

importance of these Spider-Man variants, stating "...the implicit message of all these different

Spider characters is that anyone can be a hero, can be a 'Spider-Man,' regardless of their

ethnicity, gender, nationality or even species. Spider-Verse depicts the inclusionary logic that has

become associated with modern comic book multiplicities that true superheroism comes from

within and is not dependent on a specific ethnicity or gender." (Brown 21-22). What made Miles

Morales interesting as a character was that he was a Spider-Man who was not Peter Parker, but

instead had his own story. Through the inclusion of a culturally different Spider-Man and

multiple other iterations, this indicates to audiences that anyone has the capability to become

Spider-Man. These characters also do not just replace Spider-Man, but extend on the original

brand of the superhero. In the final fight sequence, Miles partners up with Peter B. Parker and the

rest of the Spider-people in order to take down Kingpin and the Super-Collider. In this scene, all

the Spider-People display different abilities, such as Peni Parker's robot, Peter Porker's cartoon-

like abilities and even Miles' ability to turn invisible. Eventually Miles saves Gwen and sends

the Spider-people back to their own universe before standing up to Kingpin himself (*Spider-*

Man: Into the Spider-Verse 1:28:00-1:36:09). In this scene Miles displays courage and a responsibility to save other people much like the original values of the Spider-Man character. Although Gwen was not able to save her own Peter Parker, Miles was able to save Gwen and even stood up to Kingpin to save his mentor Peter B. Parker when the previous Peter Parker could not defeat Kingpin himself. Miles' ability to do what his mentor couldn't, proves that Miles has grown to become his own version of the Spider-Man character, capable of doing what other Spider-people can do and making his own decisions on what the Spider-Man identity means to him. Audiences can relate to these different Spider-people since they represent the fact that Spider-Man is an adaptable character to various cultural identities. This character can be molded in different ways to appeal to different audiences while maintaining the values that Spider-Man is known for.

Although Miles Morales serves as a good example of how diversity can be applied to the character of Spider-Man, translating the race of a character from comic to film is not always fairly portrayed. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), Peter Parker starts off as Spider-Man, skipping the origin story unlike the previous Spider-Man films. Peter Parker is back to school after helping Tony Stark fight in Germany, but he longs to have the Avenger title. MJ is introduced again as Michelle "MJ" Watson, but this time she is no longer a damsel in distress or a romantic interest until the second film. Instead, Liz Allan is Peter's high school crush. He struggles to balance his academics with his superhero life, constantly looking for ways to prove to Tony Stark that he should have a role as an official Avenger. This causes him to get in trouble with the Vulture, a villain who is trying to steal advanced technology from Tony Stark. Coincidentally, the Vulture's daughter happens to be Liz Allan which complicates his mission.

With the help of his best friend, Ned Leeds, Spider-Man defeats Vulture while also sacrificing his chance with Liz in the process.

Although diversity in superheroes has proven to defeat exclusion in the superhero genre, diversity in romantic interests for superheroes has suffered in the Spider-Man franchise due to racebending. In Chamara Moore's journal, "Swapping Heels for Capes: The Superheroine Alternative to Racebent Love-Interests", she reveals how the trend of "racebending" in Hollywood has reduced the role of black women in Hollywood. Moore explains this term in her article, explaining, *"Racebending* is when a media content creator (like a movie studio or publisher) changes the race or ethnicity of a character. It is a longstanding Hollywood practice with a complex and abhorrent history utilized to discriminate against people of color. The primary issue with racebending is that it de-emphasizes the importance of race and ethnicity to a character's identity" (Moore 190). As love interests of Peter Parker, Liz Allan and MJ are representations of this phenomenon. Liz Allan is played by Laura Harrier and MJ is played by Zendaya Coleman who are both actresses that have African American roots. Although they are portrayed as African American in the films, the characters of Liz Allan and MJ were both originally white in the comics. By changing their ethnicities in the films, this indicates that the characters' racial identity does not have meaning in the context of the story and could be easily stripped in order to make the franchise become more diverse. It reduces the importance of these women when an independently diverse character can be introduced instead. The inclusion of black women as only romantic interest also minimizes the role of black women as merely objects of desire when they have the opportunity to gain agency or even have superpowers of their own. The inclusion of Miles Morales combats this, by proving that people of any ethnic background can become their own version of Spider-Man where they can expand upon the values of the

Spider-Man characters without becoming a direct imitation of Peter Parker. The Spider-Man franchise can combat this by introducing new racially diverse characters that are not only romantic interests but characters with agency as well.

As the Spider-Man universe evolves, many more people can relate to the character through the variations of the Spider-Man character. The struggle with identity is crucial to the character since Spider-Man must balance his human identity with his superpowered one. Miles takes this aspect and uses it to form his own identity based on the original character. Differences in gender, race, species and more can be used to connect to a vast variety of people through a single character. Much like Miles, audiences can form their own identity through Spider-Man and use it to discover more about themselves and how they can be represented in the media. In addition, many different perspectives can be seen through this diversity which allows for more understanding of different perspectives other than their own. Through these different perspectives audiences can learn not only about others but also themselves through a single character. However, diversity must be done carefully in order to ensure that everyone gets a fair and original representation otherwise it will undermine characters' racial identity in the context of the franchise. Another aspect of Spider-Man media that offers a new perspective on cultural identity is the overall role of women in the superhero genre.

Diverse representation also includes how women are portrayed in the context of the Spider-Man franchise. In typical superhero narratives, women are rarely seen as active in the story, and are usually seen as victims used to motivate the hero. In Miriam Kent's book, *Women in Marvel Films*, she describes the role of women in superhero narratives and how it has evolved throughout the Marvel comics and Spider-Man films. She reveals that "The superhero girlfriend has a consistent presence in Marvel comic books and their filmic counterparts. Often, she

provides the motivation for the hero's actions through her victimization by a villain. Occasionally, she fights back, though usually unsuccessfully, and frequently appears unexpectedly when the hero is overwhelmed by the villain, providing a momentary distraction during which the hero can recover" (Kent 29). In superhero narratives, women are seen as passive, emotional and a product of the male gaze. In *Spider-Man* (2002), Mary Jane was seen as the damsel in distress, a woman used solely for the purpose of motivating the hero. In the opening of *Spider-Man* (2002), Peter Parker starts off by saying that the story is all about a girl and the camera pans over to Mary Jane's face. This places Mary Jane as an object of desire in the film for Peter. This is furthered when Mary Jane poses for Peter's camera for the school paper. This scene is presented through Peter's point of view as we see Mary Jane through the eyes of the lens as she poses for Peter (*Spider-Man* 0:9:25-0:10:21). The lens represents Peter's desire for Mary Jane and his dedication to have her. She is embodied as the sexual object of the male gaze as Peter enjoys looking at her through this lens. This patriarchal representation is typical in the superhero genre in order to idolize the men who are typically superpowered while women remain defenseless sexual objects. This undermines women in society by displaying them as helpless figures that are dependent on men.

The idolization of men in the superhero genre is also represented when Peter transforms into Spider-Man and uses his abilities to save Mary Jane. In the book, *Superhero Comics*, Chris Gavaler reveals his study of gender in the superhero genre, stating "Inverting the attractive-because-effective logic of the male body, an appearance of female physical ineffectiveness is attractive specifically because that ineffectiveness invites male intervention. She is attractive because she is weak" (Gavaler 183). During the course of the film, Mary Jane is too weak to stand up to anyone and becomes the sexual object for multiple people. This presents her as a

weak individual, one fit enough for Spider-Man to become her savior. In one scene where Green Goblin takes over the World Unity Festival, the camera zooms in on Mary Jane's reaction to Green Goblin's glider right before one of his pumpkin bombs hits the balcony she is standing on, causing her to scream in terror as she slides off the balcony. Despite the explosion, Peter is seen with a serious look while everyone else runs away (*Spider-Man* 1:06:27-1:10:21).

The juxtaposition of Mary Jane sliding off the balcony in helplessness is met with the image of Peter running towards the action while taking off his shirt and revealing the Spider-Man suit underneath. This demonstrates the gendered stereotype that women are more emotional and men are more logical. Green Goblin rises above Mary Jane in a menacing manner before Spider-Man swings by, knocking Green Goblin off his hovercraft. Before Mary Jane falls, Spider-Man catches her and carries her in his arms as he swings throughout the city. The way Mary Jane looks up to Spider-Man reveals the relationship between them. She is in a position of weakness while he is displayed as more powerful and dominant over her. This representation of women is similar to how women were presented in comic book stories. They had little power in the story besides being the romantic motivation and could not take care of themselves. They had to be rescued and taken care of by active male figures. This female representation due to the dominating white male hegemony was created in the comics and translated to film which also demonstrates how the media has not changed how women are represented in media. This is furthered by Mary Jane's role as a test of Peter's values.

When Mary Jane becomes kidnapped by the Green Goblin, her life and the lives of New York people are risked as Green Goblin makes Spider-Man choose between saving Mary Jane or innocent bystanders. By putting Mary Jane in danger as well, Peter is forced to choose whether to stick to his values or risk them to save the woman he loves. In this instance Mary Jane can be

seen as a "woman in refrigerator" due to the fact that she has been taken by Green Goblin as a way to get to Spider-Man. Brown explains this term in his book, stating "The term *fridging*, coined by comic book writer Gail Simone when she amassed the list of 'women in refrigerators' who had been unceremoniously killed, depowered, and/or sexually assaulted, has become a common reference point for the unequal violence to which the women are subjected. Obviously, male superheroes also suffer violent assaults and even death, but the men often rise again or suffer in a heroic manner not afforded the women (Brown 33). Mary Jane represents this stereotype since her life is at risk as a result of her connection to Spider-Man. Her placement in Spider-Man's narrative places her in the role of a passive woman waiting to be rescued by the active Peter Parker. Spider-Man must use his logic to decide how to save both Mary Jane and the bystanders, while Mary Jane displays a more emotional experience by fearing for her life and waiting for Spider-Man to save her. This representation is harmful to women as it presents them as powerless and dependent. It relies on stereotypes that are not representative of the evolved feminist values that are present today.

Although in *Spider-Man* (2002) Mary Jane represented the typical damsel in distress, the character Gwen Stacy had a more active role in Spider-Man's journey in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) which proves that women can become more than a damsel in distress to the male superhero. In this 2012 reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man,* Peter Parker continues to face the same economic, social and romantic challenges. However, this iteration introduces Peter's parents in a vital role in Peter's life. Peter was abandoned by his parents, but finds a mysterious briefcase that was his father's. He discovers that his father used to work with Dr. Curt Connors, a scientist at Oscorp who is experimenting with cross-species genetics and turns himself into his alter ego, the Lizard. Peter gets bit by a genetically modified spider at Oscorp, which gives him

his spider abilities. After letting a robber escape in order to get back at a cashier, Peter discovers his uncle Ben has been shot by the same robber. He decides to use his abilities instead to help others as the vigilante hero Spider-Man. Peter's crush, Gwen Stacy, also interns at Oscorp as a research assistant. With the help of Gwen, they create an antidote to restore Dr. Connors to normal. This new version of Peter's love interest provided Sony with an opportunity to reinvent the character for changing times. Gwen Stacy was still a love interest for Peter, but displayed more beneficial qualities such as intellect and bravery which contributed to Peter's story in a more active way. In one of the first scenes in which we are introduced to Peter Parker, Peter and Flash get into a fight. In the scene, Gwen Stacy is introduced as she takes an active role in stopping the fight and even stands up to Flash herself. Meanwhile in *Spider-Man* (2002), Mary Jane took a passive role and watched in fear as Peter and Flash fought. The differences between Mary Jane and Gwen Stacy reveal the evolution of the role of women in superhero stories. Gwen reveals that women can take a more active role in superhero stories and can even become heroes themselves. She quickly learns about Peter's secret identity and is able to play an active role in the Lizard's defeat. This film accomplishes the goal of being an effective feminist piece of media due to Gwen's ability to speak for herself and stand up for other people. This aspect of her personality shows the shift toward giving women agency that can inspire women to take an active stance in their own lives by having the confidence to stand up to what is not right. It demonstrates the evolved role of women in superhero narratives and how active they can become in their stories.

The character of Spider-Man's love interest evolves further to becoming a hero herself. In *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), Gwen Stacy reveals to Miles Morales that she is a superhero herself called Spider-Woman. In Gabriel Gianola and Janine Coleman's journal, "The

Gwenaissance: Gwen Stacy and the Progression of Women in Comics", they describe Gwen

Stacy's evolution from a "woman in refrigerator" to a Spider-Woman herself. They describe her

costume as a Spider-Woman, explaining "Comic book characters have had costumes featuring

hoods before, most notably Green Arrow and the Spectre, but the way the artist has drawn the

hood on Spider-Gwen manages to signal 'woman' with the hood in place of her hair. It says

"woman" in a new way for comics, and it says it from the neck up" (Gianola and Coleman 271).

The way that Gwen Stacy is represented in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) is different

from other female superheroes in that she is not seen sexualized by her body, but instead is fully

covered by her suit. The hoodie displays a way to display Spider-Woman's gender in a non-

sexual way that makes her an equal to her male counterparts. She presents a more logical

character which goes against the assumed stereotypes of women being more emotional in the

media. The reveal of Gwen Stacy's origin story reveals that she was the one bitten by a

radioactive spider. Unlike Peter Parker in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), she reveals that she

was able to save her father from dying. This difference reveals that the patriarchal roles are

switched in her story, as she aims to become the active person in her society rather than previous

iterations where she took a passive role in Spider-Man's story. This demonstrates that she has the

capability to become just as skilled and powerful as Spider-Man by not only having more agency

but by becoming a Spider-person herself. This reveals that in the media women can become just

as active as men in their stories and even become heroes themselves when the artificial limits

placed on them by audience and publisher expectations are lifted.

  Mary Jane's role in Spider-Man can be rewritten in order to become a more effective

piece of feminist media by making her more active such as having the ability to stand up to those

that take advantage of her. By making her a more confident and outspoken individual, she can

become a feminist role model to women that feel discouraged to become an active part of their

community. Gwen Stacy is a better example of a feminist role model due to the fact that she has

more qualities to help Spider-Man than just being a romantic interest. She has intelligence and

bravery which contribute to Spider-Man's story in many ways. In her encounters with the Lizard,

she shows bravery and fights back. It is also her intelligence that eventually defeats the Lizard

and saves the city from the Lizard's plan. Spider-Man's feminist narratives have evolved and

become more reflective of current society as the women portrayed are not just "women in

refrigerators" but also an active member of the superhero's story. In Gwen Stacy's role as

Spider-Woman she is able to become a superhero herself who is just as powerful as Spider-Man

which demonstrates the fact that women can be powerful heroes as well. This presents women in

a powerful light that can inspire women to become more active and see themselves as being

more than a romantic interest.

In addition to feminism, our culture has developed representation in film to include

additional genders and sexual identities, but this is rarely expressed in superhero films. In Ellen

Kirkpatrick's academic journal, "Transformers: "Identity" Compromised", Kirkpatrick reveals

the role of shapeshifters in the superhero genre to connect to transgender communities and

represent the struggles they face in a heteronormative society. Kirkpatrick exposes the Marvel

Cinematic Universe for its lack of queer representation, stating "The superhero genre, both

historically and currently, is exclusively heteronormative; in the first twenty-one MCU films

there was not a single example of a non-heterosexual character" (Kirkpatrick). As mentioned

before, superhero narratives focus primarily on heterosexual relationships, focusing on the

relationship between the powerful active male and the weak passive female. However, this focus

has excluded other sexual identities from being represented due to sexual othering and therefore

fails to connect to queer identities. Mary Jane and Gwen Stacy have always been female romantic interests for the male Spider-man character. Although Spider-Woman exists to empower women as more than romantic interests, there has not been a Spider-person who is not heterosexual. This lack of representation has not only excluded those who are not heterosexual, but also excludes those who have a different gender identity.

Gender identity is an aspect of Peter Parker that does not change after his transformation to Spider-Man. Quoting Edward Avery-Natale on embodiment in DC superheroes,   Ellen Kirkpatrick writes, "Throughout all their transformations, such characters remain neatly gendered; even mimics, those characters performing full material, often cross-gender transformations (e.g., Mystique, Martian Manhunter), return to an original gender point: 'even the shape-shifter ultimately shifts back to a perfected and sexed human form'" (Kirkpatrick 126). Despite the transformations that superheroes go through, they are still restrained by their original gender identity. In fact, their gender becomes a more exaggerated representation of the male or female gender during their superhero transformation. In *Spider-Man* (2002), after Peter Parker gets bit by the spider, he receives toned abs, larger muscles and better eyesight which enhances his role as the male protector. He even gets the name Spider-Man, confirming his identity as a superpowered male hero. His powers make him an outcast to the rest of the world, yet his gender identity remains consistent with heteronormative values. This demonstrates despite the large transformation into a superpowered being, he will consistently be male due to preexisting cultural norms about gender identity. Changes in gender identity are difficult to find in the Spider-Man franchise. However, queer fans have utilized subtext in order to connect their favorite characters to themselves.

Those who want more representation of queer characters have looked for signs of queer culture through subtext in order to create them on their own. The fourth persona, or hidden messages, reveal a lot about the Spider-Man character, including his connections to queer culture. Kirkpatrick mentions how "tanks" such as the Hulk transform from a regular human male into monstrous creatures which the queer community has used to parallel how they feel in a society where they are not accepted. Kirkpatrick dives deeper into this phenomenon, stating "Permanently altered tanks manage and control every aspect of their subjectivity from their appearance (e.g., Thing's hat and trench coat) to their inner drives and desires. They seem to be in a continual battle to remedy a mismatch, to demonstrate they are not the uncontrolled 'monsters' their 'freak' bodies make them out to be" (Kirkpatrick). One of the reasons that Peter Parker wears a mask is to protect his identity and separate his normal life from his superpowered one. Much like the Hulk, Peter Parker goes through a transformation by putting on the Spider-Man suit which can be seen as a way to conceal his unnatural self. The mask is similar in the way that queer identities sometimes have to be hidden from society due to cultural preconceptions about gender and sexual identity deviating from the norm.

Although queer representation is not explicitly displayed in the Spider-Man films, there are other ways that the queer community have found to connect with the character. The role of sexual and gender identity is prevalent within the Spider-Man franchise though a fourth persona which allows queer identities to connect to the character based on their own experiences being an outcast and having to conceal their identity. With the growth of the Spider-Man multiverse, there may be new iterations of the Spider-Man character that can relate to queer identities in a more explicit way by having Spider-people that have different gender identities and sexualities that do not conform to heteronormative values.

Spider-Man has evolved from a comic book hero to a diverse representation of cultural identities. Through different iterations of the character, Spider-Man connects to people of different social classes, ethnicity, gender and sexualities. Peter Parker connects to the working class due to his role as a proletariat in a society that favors the capitalist bourgeoisie which represents the real world issue of capitalism in America where the working class is reduced to a commodity towards materialistic corporate figures. The character Miles Morales connects to the Afro-Latino community as their own iteration of the Spider-Man character that does not seek to just change the ethnicity of the character but create their own Spider-Man story. Miles and the inclusion of more variations of the Spider-Man character allow for various minorities to feel seen by the character and allows them to connect with it in their own unique way. The role of Spider-Man's girlfriend is prevalent throughout the franchise. Starting off with Mary Jane, she presents a passive role that has to be saved by the dominant Spider-Man. However, Peter's next girlfriend Gwen Stacy presents a character that has more agency over her situation and even contributes to Spider-Man's journey. Eventually Gwen evolves to become a Spider-person herself with the name Spider-Woman. This demonstrates the fact that women are now given a role equal to men in the superhero genre that allows them the same powers and capabilities to become active heroes themselves. In addition, queer representation is also prevalent in the Spider-Man character, as the queer community can relate to Spider-Man's struggle to conceal his real identity in a heteronormative society.

Overall Spider-Man is an adaptable symbol for multiple cultural identities with the goal of normalizing and addressing cultural identity in media. As the Spider-Verse expands, more diversity will be represented which will allow more minorities to feel seen through the Spider-man character. As an avid superhero fan, Spider-Man is a superhero that is vastly different from

other superheroes I have seen. Through the many different critical schools of Spider-man, I was

able to see for myself how a character as unique as Peter Parker can make a lasting impression

on different audiences. The critical theory I connected most with is the cultural theory. Viewing

Spider-Man from a cultural perspective revealed to me how diverse the character has become.

There are many Spider-people that are introduced in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018)

and even more coming in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). The multiverse is

constantly growing so I am eager to see if there will be a film featuring a Latina version of

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