SUPERHEROES & STEREOTYPES: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF RACE, GENDER, AND SOCIAL ISSUES WITHIN COMIC BOOK MATERIAL

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The popularity of modern comic books has fluctuated since their creation and mass production in the early 20th century, experiencing periods of growth as well as decline. While commercial success is not always consistent from one decade to the next it is clear that the medium has been and will continue to be a cultural staple in the society of the United States. I have selected this type of popular culture for analysis precisely because of the longevity of the medium and the recent commercial success of film and television adaptations of comic book material. In this project I apply a Critical lens to selected comic book materials and apply Critical theories related to race, class, and gender in order to understand how the materials function as vehicles for ideological messages. For the project I selected five Marvel comic book characters and examined materials featuring those characters in the form of comic books, film, and television adaptations. The selected characters are Steve Rogers/Captain America, Luke Cage, Miles Morales/Spider-Man, Jean Grey, and Raven Darkholme/Mystique. Methodologically I interrogated the selected texts through the application of visual and narrative rhetorical criticism. By using this approach, I was able to answer my guiding research questions centered around how these texts operate to reinforce, subvert, and modify socio-cultural understandings related to the race, gender, and economic class in the United States.
This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Baltazar and Bonnie Cruz. My father taught me that the path to El Norte is long, arduous, and that many do not make it. I owe a great debt to him for showing me how to be the kind of man that can endure the journey. I am grateful for three particular pieces of wisdom that my mother has imparted to me and that I will always carry with me. The first is that it is not enough to know something, you must understand it as well. The second is that dragons come in many forms, and they can be defeated if you are brave enough to try. The third is to care for others because there is a lot of ugliness in the world and everyone needs a little help.

Thank you, Mom and Dad. I can only reach so high because I am standing on your shoulders.
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CHAPTER 1: THE CRITICAL GAUNTLET

Introduction

In 1934 DC (then called National Allied Publications) first began printing newspaper comics as books, and in 1938 DC published the flagship of all flagship comic book characters: Superman (Hirsch, 2014). This comic book hero, often seen wearing a blue spandex suit, red cape, and a large red "S" on the chest of his suit, possessed such incredible powers as flight, super-strength, x-ray vision, and unbreakable skin. Born on the alien planet of Krypton and raised on Earth from infancy by American parents, Superman (with the alias, Clark Kent) became a champion of the people and a protector of Earth. This character, like many others, came to represent not just the comic book industry, but also the dominant culture. The comic book medium became a platform for engagement with social issues and cultural phenomena. Time and time again Superman fought different villains, from gangsters and criminal masterminds to the Ku Klux Klan, corrupt politicians, and of course other beings with near-godly power. With his enormous popularity, it seems only natural that the hero was used to reflect American values and patriotism (Hirsch, 2014). While he may be the most easily recognizable comic book hero to those who follow this genre and U.S. popular culture he is hardly the only iconic comic book crime fighter. In 1939 Marvel Comics (then Timely Comics) hired comic creator Stan Lee and began to change the face of comics by having heroes that were grounded in relatable experiences; this new direction brought the business significant success (Genter, 2007). Just as DC had produced an entire cast of iconic and wildly popular superheroes such as Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and the Flash, so too would Marvel. From the pages of Marvel Comics came characters that have endured for generations and captivated millions, such as Spider-Man, the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and so on. Since then many other comic book
publishers have come and gone such as Eerie Publications, Dark Horse, Image, and POW! Entertainment.

Comics have been a part of American society since before the comic books of the 1930s. If we define comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, p.20, 1993) then it is clear that comics have been a part of Western society since at least the 19th century, when Rodolphe Topffer began to create socially satirical comics (McCloud, 1993). Topffer’s art style of combining sequential illustrated images and words in the form of captions has been regarded as the genesis for modern comics (McCloud, 1993), and it is clear that this art style has been utilized by American comic strip creators since the 1850s (Beringer, 2015).

The 1930s witnessed the creation of Superheroes and in the decades that followed they became bigger, bolder, more fantastic, and increasingly popular. On the surface comic books appeared to cater to the tastes of adolescents, featuring outrageous fights between ridiculously unrealistic characters. They were flashy, dynamic, and on a superficial level appeared to be geared towards the immature. To be sure, this is often the case. Comic books are often vehicles for indulging in crude humor, lascivious imagery, and violent illustrations, all held together and propelled forward by a superficial plot. However, comics also have a long history of engaging with and discussing social issues, providing commentary on political events, and addressing cultural tensions. For example, in *Superman versus the Ku Klux Klan: The True Story of How the Iconic Superhero Battled the Men of Hate*, Rick Bowers (2012) discusses how the Superman radio program of the 1940s utilized information gathered about the KKK by an investigative journalist. The ultimate goal of using the information was to demystify and de-romanticize the KKK. By exposing their secrets and depicting their leadership as corrupt and self-serving the
radio program contributed to the decline of the Klan, as the program helped to ruin its cultural standing. By having Superman confront the Klan the radio broadcasters were able to help build public sentiment against the hate group, particularly in the minds of children. Superman is far from being the only superhero to deal with important social issues. Whether by intention or accident, Marvel’s X-Men have served as an example of marginalized identities, such as the LGBTQIA community and racial minority communities, and the struggle between marginalized groups and repressive governments that seek to control them through legislation (Fawaz, 2011). It is easy to see how Professor Xavier’s and Magneto’s differences of opinion in regard to the solution for mutant political and social disenfranchisement mirrored two famous leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Like Malcolm, Magneto favored a militant approach to asserting the rights of the marginalized, whereas Professor Xavier preferred to emulate the message of Dr. King, specifically harmonious integration (Baron, 2003). Similarly, Luke Cage, a character who fights crime after having gained superhuman abilities as a result of being experimented on in prison, can be considered to be a reflection of the changing notions of Black American identity over time. Even a casual comparison of Cage’s original comic series run with his most recent iteration as a live-action TV show on Netflix ostensibly indicates two different, if somewhat overlapping, perspectives on what it means to be an African-American man in the United States. The Invisible Girl, from Marvel’s Fantastic Four, has functioned as a mirror for the gradual development of Second-Wave Feminism. Specifically, she has illustrated the transition from being a somewhat useless character primarily defined by her relationships with the men in the team, a pseudo housewife role, to becoming a powerful force in her own right who can function independently of male counterparts (D’Amore, 2008). Ultimately my assertion is that while comics are often regarded as overtly childish and
superficial, they have often served as a reflecting pool for society, showing us who we are and
where we have been on a national level.

The comic book art style also has been adapted by writers and artists from outside of the
superhero genre in order to address specific cultural events or social phenomenon. A particularly
prominent example is the cartoonist Art Spiegelman who wrote and illustrated the graphic novel
Maus (1991). Maus is a narrative retelling of his father’s experiences as a Polish Jew who
survived the Holocaust. In this comic the Jews were depicted as mice and the Germans and Poles
were illustrated as cats and pigs. The story serves as a biographical and historical account of the
Holocaust and was so well received by critics that it earned the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 (Pulitzer,
2017). Another well-known work of Spiegelman is, In the Shadow of No Towers (2004). This
comic was originally serialized by a German newspaper and ran from 2002 to 2004. After its
completion, it was collected and reprinted in one volume as an over-sized board book in 2004.
The book addresses not just the events of September 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2001, it also includes Spiegelman’s
perspective on the national reaction and the political aftermath over the course of the next year.
The book offers a critique of American politics and insight into the American psyche from a self-
proclaimed outsider. Ultimately my assertion is that comic books both directly and indirectly
provide interpretations of significant social issues and cultural phenomenon.

It is with this understanding of the potential of comics to rhetorically address matters of
social and cultural importance that I advance the critical question: How have comics operated as
a vehicle for the illustration and exploration of racial issues over time within the American socio-
cultural context? In the service of answering this question I proffer the following three sub-
questions:
1. How do gender, race, and class intersect and factor into the visual and narrative representation of comic book characters?

2. How have the racial identities of characters changed over time and what does their current state invite the audience to understand about social norms regarding their respective races?

3. How have comic book characters been used to rhetorically engage with specific social issues and cultural phenomena?

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain the importance of this study and examine the relevant scholarly literature that has been produced related to the analysis of comic book material. I will also discuss the methodology that I will apply in order to interpret comic book discourses, as well as provide a chapter-by-chapter overview of what this project will entail.

**Rationale**

There are several justifications for this study, which include the need to investigate the frequent stereotypically racialized depictions of characters as well as the need to critique the widespread invisibility of whiteness that serves to ostracize non-white bodies. Furthermore, there is the issue of social phenomena being discussed within comics by individuals who are almost exclusively members of a privileged social status within society. The problem is that this limits the possible perspectives offered on the social issues raised in comics and heavily influences the outcome of the discussion. I will begin explaining the rationale for this project by addressing the issue of stereotypical racial representation, the role that whiteness has played, why positionality matters regarding the creators of the content, and I will touch on the implications for why the creation of fiction matters.
Stereotypical Representation and Authorship

Like other forms of mass media, comic books have a long and problematic history with racial and gendered representations. Early comics often utilized racial tropes as narrative devices for comics, using exotic racial elements that reinforced dehumanized notions of the “other” such as Orientalist conceptions of mysticism and martial arts (Gruber, 2015). One such example is the Marvel character called the Ancient One. The character is ethnically of Asian origin, specifically originating from the Himalayas, and first appeared in 1963 and displayed several Asian stereotypes such as a mastery of martial arts, mystic powers and abilities, and a proclivity for deception. These stereotypes create an Orientalist vision of the East; and Orientalism, as described by Edward Said, is an exotic, fantastic, and generally false image of Eastern cultures and nations created by Western perspectives and scholarship that is meant to excite and fascinate those from outside of Asia (Buchanan, 2010). In short, Orientalism is an illusion created by the Western world that is not based in reality but is also rooted in “a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony” (Said, p.5, 1979). Furthermore, the character functions as a component of a larger “White savior” story that positions the White American, Dr. Stephen Strange, as the protagonist who becomes the apprentice of and then successor to the Ancient One as Earth’s Sorcerer Supreme, Earth’s defender against supernatural threats. The Ancient One is one character in a long history of characters of color who have been largely defined by Western racial stereotypes. Often the stereotypes involved reductive representations that involved tropes associated with non-white bodies such as a propensity for extreme violence (Kelley, 2003) and hypersexuality (Lendrum, 2005). One such example is Marvel’s Luke Cage, who was based on those tropes that characterized the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s (Englehart, 2015).
In order to better understand the problem with this type of representation it is important to include critical examinations of film and television media, in large part because of the status of comic studies as a still-developing field of scholarship, particularly within the realm of Communication Studies. While the comic art style predates motion pictures there has been considerably more scholastic focus within Communication Studies on the latter. One notable exception in the field is the book *The Comic Art of War: A Critical Study of Military Cartoons, 1805-2014, With a Guide to Artists* (2015), written by Christina Knopf. In this book Knopf (2015) critically engages with comic material created by and for military personnel; in particular Knopf (2015) critiques the substance of the comics and their various themes. However, due to the otherwise general deficit of Communication Studies scholarship related to comics, I have found it useful to draw from other popular media studies scholarship, because while the format is different, the issues with race are largely similar.

One powerful critique of film, particularly in the early days of the medium, has been the fact that white directors and white producers have been responsible for the creation of the vast majority of mainstream media and have used Brown actors to illustrate their versions of what it means to be a person of color in the United States. In his book on the history of Black Americans in film, Donald Bogle (2016) asserts that in the past when the black actor has been directed by whites using scripts written by whites then

“the Negro actor, like the slaves he portrayed, aimed always to please the master figure. To do so, he gives not a performance of his own, not one in which he interprets black life, but one in which he presents for mass consumption black life as seen through the eyes of white artists. The actor becomes a black man in blackface” (p.22).
The relevance of this critique when considering comic book characters is that just as black actors were subject to the vision of white writers and directors, so too are characters of color subject to the visions of their creators. White Americans in position of power and influence have been in charge of creating representations of non-white people that have often been reliant on racist stereotypes to various degrees in order to make them appealing to mainstream audiences. Sometimes these creations originate from a lack of actual understanding of the experiences of persons of color and other times they are rooted in an overt desire to portray non-whites negatively. One such example of the latter is the film *Free and Equal* (1925) which illustrated the reasons interracial marriage could not work due to the inherent flaws and monstrous nature of Black Americans (Bogle, 2016). Whether intentionally demonizing or not, the gap between white creators and black culture within the film industry can be found in comic books as well. In the introduction to *Marvel Masterworks: Luke Cage: Hero for Hire, Nos. 1-16* (2015), a collection of reprints of the first sixteen issues of the original Luke Cage series, writer Steve Englehart, who authored issues 5-15 in the collection, discussed how Luke Cage was created by a team of white men who pulled inspiration from the Blaxploitation films popular at the time (early 1970s). Englehart (2015) mentions that Marvel

“would have liked to have a black writer, but he’d have to be able to write a saleable Marvel comic, and there was no one who fit that bill (because there were almost no black comic writers at all, which is an easily discernable story—but there it is)” (Englehart, p. 5, 2015).

The lack of viable black writers in the comic book industry (an assertion by Englehart that provokes questions about equitable hiring practices) led chief writer and Luke Cage co-creator Archie Goodwin, a prominent White American comic creator, to visit the theaters where
Blaxploitation films were shown. As a result, Cage took on the appearance and characteristics of the Blaxploitation heroes who were essentially reiterations of the Buck stereotype that had been created in the early days of cinema; the primary difference being that characters like John Shaft and other Bucks were “dressed in new garb to look modern, hip, provocative, and politically ‘relevant’” (Bogle, p.210, 2016). This heavy-handed use of stereotypes by White American authors is not exclusive to black characters. Native American (King, 2009), Japanese (Hirsch, 2014), and Latinx (McGrath, 2007) characters, among others, have been traditionally depicted with heavy reliance on racial stereotypes.

It is because of the long tradition of using stereotypes to create and continually define/redefine comic book characters of color that I will be applying a critical lens to the material. Under the perspective of critical rhetoric, I will be applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) and whiteness studies to this particular form of media to not only gain a better understanding of how certain comic book characters first appeared, but also to understand and critique how these tropes and stereotypes have changed, been subverted, discarded, and reinforced over the years and in their most recent iterations. This type of work is important because it uncovers the ways in which racism is maintained and changed. It is vital to the continual progress of society that scholars engage in critical analysis of popular media because in doing so the underlying ideological workings of society are laid bare and addressed. This is an important step in reducing (or at least rendering more visible) the prevalence of ideological messages that reinforce prejudice, racism, misogyny, and other discriminatory mindsets that overtly and subtly endorse social, political, and economic inequality.
Whiteness and Public Perception

In this project I will be engaging in a critical analysis of five comic book characters over the course of their publication history and across various mass media formats. Towards that end I will be applying Critical Race Theory as well as whiteness scholarship. The central contention of CRT is that racism is an invisible and mundane component of society that influences perceptions and is reified through official and unofficial cultural institutions and must therefore be exposed and interrogated (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009). The previously mentioned literature engages in an analysis of race within comic books, but the scholarship needs to be extended. By gathering comic book discourses from a scope that is both chronologically deep and textually varied I will be able to reach a nuanced understanding of how racialized identities have been created, manipulated, destroyed, and recreated in comics. CRT involves the examination of whiteness as a dominant norm within Western culture, and towards that end I will be examining whiteness and its role in the normalization of racial elements within this genre of fiction.

Whiteness is the idea that being white/appearing to be of Western Euro-American descent is the standard, it is the norm against which all other identities are compared and found lacking (Buchanan, 2016). One assertion of this project is the idea that the presence of whiteness within comic books, and within American media in general, serves to perpetuate racism, if not by intent then certainly by consequence. Within this context, racism by consequence means the continued use of

“social practices that are essentially depersonalized through institutionalization. As a result, racial prejudices may decline overtime, yet more subtle patterns of discrimination persist, supported by the inertia of custom…At the institutional level, racism by
consequence tends typically not to be recognized by ‘white’ Americans, and may not necessarily be triggered by intent” (Guess, pp.651-652, 2006).

I contend that the use of racist stereotypes, whether intentional or as a subconscious consequence of the normativity of racism, within comic books and the related media contribute to the perpetuation of racism by consequence, by endorsing normative ideas of whiteness juxtaposed with problematic representations of ethnic and racial minorities. While audience analysis is not within the scope of this project I feel it is important to at least briefly discuss the implications of this type of racism by consequence, as it helps to justify the need for an examination of this mediated form. Research into the correlation between watching television and perceptions about the world appears to indicate a positive relationship between rates of viewing and the beliefs of the audience. In his article on the relationship between Just-World Beliefs and the consumption of fiction and non-fiction Markus Appel (2008) found that fiction is somewhat effective in helping to cultivate a perception of Just-World Beliefs, the idea that everyone gets what they deserve and that there is justice in the world. Appel asserts that while fiction rarely uses overt arguments to make a point, “However, they usually follow a plotline with relatively schematic elements… Their endings typically include a resolution that brings together unconnected story lines, thus balance and, ultimately, justice” (pp.63-64, 2008). While this study is referring to the television viewing habits and there are obvious differences between the visual formats of comic books and television, the same narrative elements can easily be found within comics. In fact, for many years the Comics Code Authority, a non-government organization whose purpose was to self-regulate the comic book industry, up until the 1970s, required that the heroes within comics always defeat villain. Cultivation Theory suggests that heavy viewership of television allows for the content to influence the perceptions of the
audience, and studies examining this theory relative to race indicates that heavy television usage correlates to perceptions of ethnic and racial minorities. Researchers Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, and Ortiz (2007) found that,

“Across all three stereotypes examined, the more television White viewers consumed, the more their evaluations of Latinos reflected their TV characterization—markedly so when viewers’ real-world contact with Latinos was not close, resulting in a greater reliance on televised images in decision making” (p.362).

What this seems to indicate is that even fiction that is understood to be fiction appears to have some influence on the perceptions of racial minorities by White Americans, and perhaps the same could be said of Americans in general. It would be inappropriate to argue that this study involving television could easily be applied to comic books for obvious reasons, if for no other reason than because of the differences in format. However, this scholarship does assert that fiction plays some sort of role in influencing the perceptions of the public. Furthermore, this scholarship has implications for the recent widespread adaptation of comic book material to live action television/film/home-viewing entertainment, such as with the Marvel Cinematic Universe which includes live-action films and digital content. By this I mean that these forms of entertainment may contribute to the influencing of mainstream/White American audiences in their perceptions of what is normative whiteness and racial representations. Unless these racial representations are engaged, challenged, and examined in an in-depth manner it is likely that their problematic nature will be accepted to further contribute to the dehumanization of people of color within American society. With that comes the accompanying social, political, and economic implications for what happens when one or more minority group is regarded as less-than the majority in terms of their humanity. Thus, there is a need for studies, such as this
project, that interrogate this type of media. The body of scholarship created by this project will contribute to the growing academic understanding of how messages manifest within popular culture and uncover the ways in which white normativity continues to ostracize non-white identities. In so doing this scholarship will play a part in challenging the effects of racism by consequence and aid in the progress of achieving racial social, political, and economic equity.

Selective Literature Review

In order to critically engage in a thoughtful analysis of comic book material it is important to first understand the scholarship that has produced knowledge of the subject matter. I have reviewed a significant amount of literature related to the study of comic books and graphic storytelling and have divided that literature into two categories. The first has to do with the issue of stereotypes related to race and gender present in comic books and the second has to do with comics providing a platform for self-determination in regard to ethnic and racial identity. In this section I will explore each of these areas and explain how they provide a foundation for this study.

Comics and Stereotypes

As mentioned above, the comic book industry and its related art form are rife with racist and racially stereotypical depictions of minorities. As articulated in the article “"Black Skins" and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race” by Marc Singer (2002),

“Many of Wertham's allegations remain relevant today: Comics still perpetuate stereotypes, either through token characters who exist purely to signify racial clichés or through a far more subtle system of absence and erasure that serves to obscure minority groups even as the writers pay lip service to diversity” (p. 118)
Singer substantiates his claim about racial clichés by pointing to what appears to be a pattern of referencing the characters’ race in their superhero moniker, i.e., Black Panther and Black Lightning, both of whom are black superheroes. At the heart of Singer’s assertion is the idea that comics have played a role in the preservation of the illusion of democracy that is in reality based on prejudice and disparity. By appearing to be dedicated to diversity but only using token minorities in a stereotypical manner, comics simultaneously oppress minorities and reaffirm the belief held by a racist majority, that non-whites are in some ways lesser-than and not as deserving of equal consideration when shaping society. In a sense, comics have used diversity in such a way as to say that even if they (non-whites) are included they are still little more than the simple stereotypes that the majority has historically believed them to be, and as such are of little value within a democratic society. This understanding of how comics reinforce the idea that diversity is nonnormative is consistent with my contention that comics have often used representation to reinforce the cultural centrality of whiteness. The second half of Singer’s article is concerned with the potential for the comic genre to be used to offer a more nuanced perspective on race and racial identity. In short, Singer contends that the use of alter egos/secret identities provides an opportunity to explore the idea of racial double-consciousness. I will touch more on this later, as it is the central assertion made by Lysa Rivera (2007) in her article “Appropriate(d) Cyborgs: Diasporic Identities in Dwayne McDuffie's Deathlok Comic Book Series” which I have categorized under the subsection “self-determination”.

To Singer’s point on the note of stereotypes, comic book scholarship suggests that race is often heavily connected to gender and sexuality. In the article, “The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970’s Mainstream Comic Books”, Rob Lendrum (2005) discusses the role that black masculinity has played in American comic books and
addresses the connection between comic depictions and the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Lendrum (2005) writes,

“The formation of 1970s superhero black masculinity has several parallels to the Black Power movement and the Blaxploitation film genre. There is an emphasis on the establishment of a patriarchal role model. Women are active, sassy and they often attempt to destabilize masculine attempts at authority. The dynamic between black men and women informs the schizophrenic binary between the hero and his alter ego. The alter ego, although not sexually and socially rejected like his white counterpart, is often badgered and lacks the power or authority to change his emasculated position. The black body of superheroes is borrowed from the Brutal Buck stereotype and the superpowers that they possess are often exaggerated attributes of the brutal buck or savage.” (p. 370)

Lendrum’s assertion that Black male bodies are modeled after the brutal Buck stereotypes found in Blaxploitation films is particularly plausible. In his work on black stereotypes in film Donald Bogle (2016) addresses how Blaxploitation heroes were based on the same Buck stereotype, and Steve Englehart (2015) stated clearly that the character of Luke Cage was directly inspired by Blaxploitation film; therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that other black superheroes, especially those that originated in the 1970s, were likely created with those stereotypes in mind. What is interesting about the significance of sexuality in the creation of black superheroes is not just the sexuality of the heroes or their alter egos. Lendrum (2005) points out that white superheroes often have powers that are beyond being exaggerations of normal human abilities, such as Superman’s x-ray vision or Spiderman’s almost-precognitive sixth-sense; but black superheroes generally have powers that emphasize and exaggerate their masculine bodies. Lendrum (2005) references Luke Cage’s impenetrable skin and super
strength, Black Panther’s natural ability to stalk his target in a savage and romanticized primitive manner, and Black Goliath’s power to grow to 15-feet-tall and gain the corresponding physical advantages. In a sense, these powers are stereotypical black masculinity amplified.

While gender is an important element to consider when evaluating the represented identities of these characters, there are certainly other dimensions that warrant examination. Such elements may include the character’s backstory, motivations, personality, and accompanying accoutrement. For example, in the article “The Dharma of Doctor Strange: The Shifting Representations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism within a Comic Book Serial”, Joel Gruber (2015) discusses several aspects of the Marvel comic book character Doctor Strange and his relationship to Buddhism, which was a significant component of the character’s origin story. Within that discussion Gruber addresses the stereotypical nature of Doctor Strange’s mentor, the Ancient One. Gruber (2015) writes,

“With the exception of naming the Ancient One the Oriental Monk, it is hard to imagine a title that better captures an early sixties’ stereotypical vision of a mysterious but wise man from the East. The Ancient One’s bald head, his sparse but lengthy facial hair, the robes he wore, the ancient texts in the backdrop, the exotic throne he sat upon, and the mysterious pot of smoke wafting through the air around him, provided the audience with the visuals they expected to signify the Orientalism of a sage named the Ancient One.” (p. 353)

In this analysis of the Ancient One, the author examines not just the appearance of the character but also the items that help to define him: ancient texts, an exotic throne, and a mysterious pot of smoke. Gruber (2015) also addresses other elements of Orientalism that are closely connected to the Ancient One that further add to his exotic mystic nature, specifically his
backstory and personality traits. Gruber (2015) argues that the character’s backstory of being from and residing in the Himalayan Mountains along with the character’s penchant for deception (displayed in a story arc about trying to trick Strange into bringing him back to life), are tropes that are in lockstep with the prominent stereotypes of the time, the 1960s. What I find particularly useful about this analysis is that it provides some suggestions for analyzing the texts; it is not enough to evaluate comics and comic book characters along the lines of visual rhetoric, there must also be consideration for plot, character motivations, personality traits, and visual elements outside of the character.

While it has been argued that the casual use of stereotypes within comics can be dehumanizing (Singer, 2002), there is another application of comic book stereotypes that warrant attention because of their intentional use in influencing public opinion. Specifically, I am referring to political comic books, both in the sense of having overt political messages and those created in response to political issues. One example of a comic book having overt political messages was the comic series featuring a hero of the same name, Captain Canuck. Captain Canuck was a superhero of Canadian origin and the protector of the land of his birth, fighting those who posed a threat to the Canadian way of life and the Canadian government. The character essentially served as a piece of heroic propaganda, supporting a rhetorical narrative in line with the wishes of the Canadian government. In the article “The Many Lives of Captain Canuck: Nationalism, Culture, and the Creation of a Canadian Comic Book Superhero”, Ryan Edwardson (2003) analyzes the use of Captain Canuck as a vehicle for the distribution of a Canadian nationalism. Edwardson (2003) writes,

“Consequently, in mass culture one can find mass national identity. Captain Canuck’s red and white costume adorned with maple leaves signified his Canadian-ness, while his
moralism, natural strength, and self-sacrificing persona reinforced conceptions of Canadians as polite, kind, moral, heroic peacekeepers. Distinctively national comic books, then, are vessels for transmitting national myths, symbols, ideologies, and value. They popularize and perpetuate key elements of the national identity and ingrain them into their readers—especially, given the primary readership, younger generations experiencing elements of that identity for the first time.” (p. 186)

That overtly political messages can be found in comic books is no surprise, but what is interesting about this use of Captain Canuck is the intentionality of the publishers to target youth with symbols and messages consistent with national myths and government approved ideologies. As Edwardson (2003) argues, the use of a comic book hero by the Canadian government may “validate the national identity and add cultural depth to an institutional hegemonic agent” (p.196). The use of a comic as a vehicle for these rhetorical messages could conceivably make the youth of Canada more receptive as the ostensible purpose of comics is to provide dynamic entertainment rather than political indoctrination, and since the indoctrinating messages are favorable to the State it would seem that the purpose of the comics was to create a more agreeable citizenry. Captain Canuck is not the only example of overt political ideology being present in comic books. From 1942 to 1945 many comic creators worked with the Writers’ War Board (WWB), a quasi-governmental organization that worked with the U.S. government to create comic books that would serve as pro-Allied Powers propaganda during World War II. Before long the comic industry proved to be a useful tool the WWB; in the article “This Is Our Enemy” The Writers’ War Board and Representations of Race in Comic Books, 1942-1945”, author Paul Hirsch (2014) writes:
“Beginning in April 1943, the WWB used comic books to shape popular perceptions of race and ethnicity, as well as build support for the American war effort.\textsuperscript{5} WWB members concluded that the core traits of the comic book form—its broad popularity, comprehensibility, emphasis on raw emotion, and distinct lack of subtlety—marked comic books as a potentially useful delivery system for propaganda and education. Additionally, because comics, unlike most other major forms of media, were not subject to external censorship, comic book writers and propagandists could freely utilize clear, unambiguous images and language; they did not need to obscure opinions beneath layers of allegory or abstraction.” (p. 449-451)

The creative freedom allowed by the comic book industry combined with the easy to understand format made the comic book medium an important tool for spreading war propaganda. What is perhaps the most interesting and important aspect, in regard to my research, is the overt willingness to use racial stereotypes to cultivate public perception against entire groups of people. The irony is that the messages of the comics produced by the WWB worked to simultaneously promote multicultural unity as a necessity in order for Americans to defeat the Axis nations as well as instill in the American public a race-based hatred for the nations that the Allies were fighting (Hirsch, 2014). This inconsistency would seem to speak to a perspective that racial stereotyping is acceptable under certain circumstances, which begs the following questions: 1.) What are those circumstances? and 2.) Who are the acceptable candidates for stereotyping? I believe that these questions will factor into my examination of comics.
When researching the representation of gender within comics, I discovered several readings that dealt with the depiction of female superheroes and others that addressed the issue of masculinity. I will begin with addressing the problematic representation of female superheroes, and that begins with the matter of appearance. In her article “Gender, Race, and Latina Identity: An Examination of Marvel Comics’ Amazing Fantasy and Araña”, author Karen McGrath (2007) address the trouble with popular depictions of the female form in comic books. She writes,

“So, although many of these women have superpowers and skills beyond those of the layperson, Araña included, their bodies are similarly idealized and objectified in the negative ways presented in the research on magazine advertising where women’s bodies are on display and women are ‘‘ready for sex’’” (p.272).

McGrath’s point regarding the appearance for women is well made and often noticed by fans and critics alike. At minimum female bodies in comic books are expected to be aesthetically pleasing, if not overtly eroticized. Scholar Laura D’Amore (2008) makes a similar observation in regard to later depictions of Invisible Girl, A.K.A. Sue Storm, in her article “Invisible Girl’s Quest for Visibility: Early Second Wave Feminism and the Comic Book Superheroine”. D’Amore (2008) notes that, “the Silver Age superheroine negotiates a complicated balance between femininity and power. Invisible Girl’s power is feminine and is balanced by her tendency to domesticate and her pre-occupation with her own beauty” (p.5). It seems that even though the character is in possession of extraordinary powers she is still regarded in terms of her aesthetic quality, an attribute that she is also aware of herself. This requirement for women to appear attractive and overtly sexualized lends credence to the notion
that comic books largely have been historically influenced by the heterosexual male gaze. However, the objectification of the female form is not the only issue with the representation of women in comic books, there is also a matter of personality and function. McGrath (2007) points out that

“Men are often depicted as emotionally strong, independent, rational, aggressive, and in superior roles (i.e., bosses) in the workplace, whereas women are often depicted as nurturing, caring, emotional, dependent, irrational, submissive, and in subordinate roles in the workplace” (p. 275).

D’Amore (2008) echoes this sentiment when she discusses how Invisible Girl generally functions as a support member for the Fantastic Four. D’Amore (2008) asserts that in the early days of Invisible Girl she was for the most part defined by her relationship to the three other men in the Fantastic Four, Reed Richards (her husband), Johnny Storm (her brother), and Ben Grimm (her long-time friend). But Sue Storm functioned as more than just the emotional support for the group, she also functioned as a liability as exhibited in a Fantastic Four story arc where she was kidnapped by Namor the Sub-Mariner, King of Atlantis because of his infatuation with her and the Fantastic Four were forced to rescue the damsel in distress. Sue Storm’s apparent frailty which is apparently rooted in her femininity serves to highlight the inherent superiority of her teammates’ masculinity. Their ability to perform in a capable manner due to their overt masculinity is a comic trope that has a long history. McGrath (2007) expounds on this in her own article, asserting that men are typically depicted as being emotionally strong, aggressive, rational, generally independent, and more often than not in superior roles. Anecdotally, it would be easy to say that the representation of women in comics has improved in both quality and quantity, but at this point without more research it would be difficult to verify that claim and
determine to what extent it could be true, as I have not encountered any research to speak to this area of study.

**Self-Determination**

While comic books historically have been rife with stereotypical depictions of race and gender, the medium has also provided a platform for artists to create more nuanced and true-to-life conceptions of racial identity and gender expressions. In her article “Appropriate(d) Cyborgs: Diasporic Identities in Dwayne McDuffie's Deathlok Comic Book Series”, Lysa Rivera (2007) examines the themes of dual identities, double consciousness, and borderland existence within Dwayne McDuffie’s Deathlok story arc “Souls of Cyberfolk”. This story arc involves two characters that are Black Americans and cyborgs, Deathlok and Misty Knight. Rivera’s (2007) primary contention is that the apparent struggle with identity experienced by the two characters, both feel that they are not sufficiently machine or African American, is analogous to the identity formation of the African Americans in the United States who are neither sufficiently African or American. It is worth noting that the author of this series of comics, Dwayne McDuffie, was an African American man who helped to co-found the comic book title Milestone Comics (now Milestone Media). The purpose of Milestone Comics was to produce comic books that were racially diverse and complex in order to fill the lack of diversity within mainstream comics. Towards this end, Milestone Comics signed with DC comics and became a branch of their organization. However, Milestone Comics stopped producing comic books during the late 1990s because of low sales and have since become Milestone Media, which deals primarily with licensing some of their successful intellectual property.

During its short time as a comic book publishing company (1993-1997) Milestone Comics succeeded in providing alternate and more nuanced depictions of Black American
masculinity. Jeffrey A. Brown (1999) examined Milestone Comics’ conceptualization of comic book masculinity in his article “Comic Book Masculinity and the New Black Superhero”. In the article Brown (1999) discusses how the Milestone writers seemed to blend together aspects of masculinity and femininity, such as making characters tough but not merciless, and making them strong while also being cerebral. This type of depiction of masculinity provides an alternative to the hyper-violent, ultra-sexual representations often found in comic books that are both gratuitous and dehumanizing. At the same time, Brown (1999) remarked that the writers were able to expand on the notion of what constitutes legitimate masculinity while still adhering to many of the conventional norms of comic book heroism.

Milestone Comics was anomalous within the comic book industry in that the creators of the organization were able to both sign on to a major distributor and maintain creative control of the content. Yet the idea that racial minorities should and could be represented in a more nuanced light is not entirely foreign to the industry, although one could argue that it is not the norm. In the article “Alter/native Heroes: Native Americans, Comic Books, and the Struggle for Self-Definition”, C. Richard King (2009) details the ways in which Native American comic book writers and artists have used the medium to address real-life issues within a fictional setting. King (2009) asserts that the creators are actively resisting anti-Native American tropes that are often found throughout popular media. One example that was used in the article is the Native American comic book *Tribal Force* which details the exploits of a group of four Native Americans who battle with agents of the U.S. federal government in order to protect their fellow Native Americans and their land. What is so important about this comic is that the series deals with true-to-life issues faced by Native Americans such as sexual abuse, alcohol addiction, and racism which are often omitted from stories about Native American characters (King, 2009).
As shown in the literature above, comics can often serve as vehicles for addressing racial and social issues in an overt manner. In those instances, it is relatively clear to see that the authors are addressing political and social issues in a heavy-handed manner. However, sometimes it is necessary to look for subtle indications that the creators are addressing certain cultural phenomena. Lawrence Baron (2003) explores the Jewish subtext in the comic book movie *X-Men* (2000) and the presence of that subtext within the original source material in his article “X-Men as J Men: The Jewish Subtext of a Comic Book Movie”. In the article, Baron (2003) addresses the overt imagery in the film, drawing parallels between the Holocaust of World War II and the film’s U.S. government legislation that would require mutants to be registered with a federal database. However, Baron goes further and discusses the likely influence of the X-Men’s original creators, writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. Baron (2003) asserts that the fact that Lee and Kirby were both Jewish likely played a role not just in the decision to make the prominent mutant character Magneto a Holocaust survivor, but also in their decision to have the fictional Professor Xavier follow a peaceful path towards human/mutant integration. Baron (2003) writes that, “Dr. X’s mission to acculturate the mutants and train them to defend their host society mirrors the integrationist strategies pursued by many of the first generation of Jews born in America” (p. 46). With this assertion, Baron argues that Jews in America conceptualize themselves as being different in some capacity from other American citizens, but as still being capable of integrating and fulfilling a useful function in society. This desire to belong combined with an imagination oriented around superheroes protecting others may have led comic book pioneers like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, both of whom are Jewish, to create a narrative where the marginalized fit into society because they can protect that society and are loved for their service (Baron, 2003). This analysis of the X-Men based film and source
material provides some insight into how the personal identities of authors can be used when conducting textual analysis. While there are limitations to trying to understand the intent of the author, information such as the personal ethnic identities of authors or other relevant information can be used in conjunction with overt messages found in comics, and from there larger messages can be constructed and understood.

After reviewing the pertinent literature there are three conclusions that are particularly clear. The first is that racial and gender stereotyping have a long history within the comic book industry and that the practice still persists into the modern era of comic books. The second conclusion is that comic books also offer a platform for redefinition. A precedent has been set for writers and artists who have a racial or ethnic minority background to challenge some of the long-held notions of representation and what it means to be a minority in comic books. The third conclusion is that comics can be used as a vehicle for creators to address social and political issues that are prevalent at the time, using the comic book characters and narratives as metaphors or analogous illustrations for real-world problems. After having reviewed the literature I feel confident that my project will add to this body of work in terms of both depth and scope.

**Methodology**

As stated above, the purpose of this project is to answer the following research question: How have comic books and the related material functioned as rhetorical vehicles for reflecting and exploring racial issues over time within the American culture and society? In service of answering that question I pose three sub-questions. The first asks the question of how race, gender, and class intersect and factor into the visual and narrative representation of comic book characters. The second inquiry asks how the racial identities of characters have changed over time as well as what their current state suggests about social norms regarding their respective
races; and the third asks how comic book creators have used characters to address specific social issues and cultural phenomena.

In order to answer these questions, I will be engaging in a rhetorical criticism of a selected body of material, in particular I will be applying the critical textual analysis methodology for deconstructing the data and interpreting overt and latent meaning within the texts.

**Rhetorical Criticism**

For this project, I will be utilizing multiple forms of textual analysis in the service of rhetorical criticism. Rather than treat rhetorical criticism as a method to be followed I will be using it as an orientation that will inform my analysis. McKerrow (1989) describes the nature of rhetorical analysis as a perspective that operates to serve two functions. The first function is “demystifying the conditions of domination” (McKerrow, p.91, 1989). This means that the goal of rhetorical criticism is to examine the ways in which the ruling class’ ideological power is created and maintained through social and cultural normative practices (McKerrow, 1989). The second function of this orientation is to place the rhetorical critic in a position of perpetual criticism, including engaging in self-reflexive rhetorical critique (McKerrow, 1989). The value of the second function is that by existing in a space of permanent critique the critic is kept from becoming dogmatically rigid in their criticism and thus protected from contributing to a new form of socially constructed power that is spared from due interrogation.

It is with this understanding regarding the aim of rhetorical criticism to uncover ideology enforcing normative social practices that I have chosen to scrutinize and examine comic books and related material. Critical media studies regard popular media, such as television and film, as
forms of communication as well as vehicles for ideological rhetoric that may influence media consumers (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009). I contend that like television and film, comic books are a form of discourse between the creators of the text and the reader who interprets the narrative. This supposition is predicated on the assumption that all popularly produced material is inherently rhetorical, whether or not the author(s) of a given text intended for it to be consumed in such a way. Clearly, some texts act explicitly as social commentary while others are intended to be consumed as pure entertainment. My contention is that these texts invite audiences to agree, if only for the moment, with the author’s perspectives regarding race, class, gender, and the internal narrative logics of the texts. In this way, the point of whether the texts were designed to be forms of social commentary is irrelevant as narrative fidelity can only be obtained if the audience believes that the details of the story world make sense. Once the audience accepts the invitation offered by the narrative logic of the world the audience then consumes the ideological forces that underpin the details of that narrative. Thus, all narratives are rhetorical in that the details communicate ideological messages to the audience that the audience chooses to temporarily entertain or accept in totality. As such, all of these texts offer intentional and accidental social commentary.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the problematic history of comics and race as well as gender representation, and it is clear that the already established body of scholarship points towards the presence of ideologies of dominant whiteness and Patriarchy. This ideological discourse works to normalize the marginalization via stereotypical representation of non-white, non-male groups. Therefore, my rhetorical critical orientation will focus primarily on uncovering the ways in which these ideologies are normalized and maintained while allowing for the possibility of their subversion and further engagement by the authors within the texts.
Procedure

In this project, I will examine five Marvel characters. The texts that will be examined include comic books and related material, specifically current adaptations of each character. For this project, I will be investigating five characters, I have selected them because of their racial and gender identities as well as their prominence within the current mainstream media. The characters I have selected along with their rationales are as follows:

- Captain America: White Masculinity: this character dates back to the 1930s when modern superheroes were first created and has a long and rich history of being used for social and political propaganda.

- Jean Grey: White Femininity: this character represents mid-20th century attempts at creating female superheroes, and her popularity has maintained her cultural presence to the modern day.

- Luke Cage: Black Masculinity: this character was originally a mashup of Blaxploitation characters and while his popularity has fluctuated, he has seen renewed popularity in recent time.

- Miles Morales: Afro-Latino Masculinity: This character represents industrial attempts at creating a more diverse cast of characters by giving high-profile superhero titles to demographic minorities; in this case Morales serves as an Afro-Latino Spider-Man.

- Mystique: Non-raced Fluid-gender: this character is in her “natural” form a blue female yet possesses the ability to change race and gender at will, most often she is in the form of a white female, she is symbolic of otherwise non-overtly raced/gendered characters.

For the analysis process, I have gathered material from the publication history of these characters. I have divided their respective timelines along decade delineations; within each
decade I have selected a portion of issues from their comic book series, either their own title or a series in which they feature prominently. Each selection for each decade is a collected volume, often referred to as trade paperbacks. These volumes are reprints of the original single-issue comics that have been collected into a set typically for the purpose of telling a coherent narrative arc. The justification for doing so is that the reprinting of certain comics into collected editions indicates their commercial success as not all issues are reprinted in this way. Furthermore, analyzing the material as complete arcs helps to contextualize information and provides a deeper understanding of the characters than would ordinarily be discernable from random single-issues.

In order to select which comic book volumes I have analyzed, I considered the prominence of the character and their centrality to the story line. If a distinct story arc can be distinguished which features the character prominently then each issue of the story arc was examined. The process of selecting adapted material will be based on perceived relevance including popularity (such as ticket sales for a film) and recency.

The process of interpreting the data involved the application of narrative criticism as well as visual criticism. Narrative criticism is rooted in the idea that humans construct society through the use of narratives that are told over and over again, eventually creating culturally accepted, ideology-laden assumptions regarding various subject matter (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009). McGee (1990) argues that narratives possess fragments of societal ideologies that shape how members of the given society understand their world. This project operates with the understanding that fragments of racial ideologies can be found within the narratives of comic books and thus warrant critique. Therefore, this study involves the narrative analysis of comic book story arcs both in terms of multi-issue series as well as the story-telling techniques, methods, and stylistic devices used within each respective issue. The ultimate goal of this
approach is to uncover narrative themes and patterns within the texts that indicate ideological rhetoric. This project also includes the use of visual rhetorical criticism. This type of criticism prioritizes imagery over text and is best applied as a theoretical perspective. Visual rhetoric goes beyond the aesthetic quality of an image and instead uses the image’s elements such as lines, coloring, and textures to “infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas” (Foss, p. 306, 2004). This type of rhetorical criticism helps to reveal underlying ideological messages regarding gender and race as both are expressed via distinct and intentional imagery. As with narrative criticism, the goal of this approach is to reveal patterns and themes that indicate an ideological underpinning. This process of analysis requires closely reading and re-reading the texts and meticulous note-taking. An important part of interpreting the discourse is acknowledging my own positionality in relation to the material. Specifically, I am a fan of the genre and have been a consumer of this material for several years; as such I must acknowledge my own biases towards the material and be aware of how my own personal taste in the material may inform my examination. For example, I must be aware of my emotional relationship with the texts and the role that may play in my willingness, or lack thereof, to critique the texts. By acknowledging my own positionality, I can engage in self-reflexive critique and come to new understandings of the material. In regard to the acquisition of the data, when possible, hard copies of the texts have been acquired. However, due to financial constraints, digital versions of the material have been utilized as needed. By analyzing the components of the individual pieces of material I have come to a greater understanding of the ideological rhetorical function of the comic books, both in terms of overt content and latent meaning. From there it has been possible to glean the relevant information and construct conclusions that answer my guiding research questions.
Overview of Chapters

The dissertation is divided into six chapters and is organized as follows. This chapter has provided the introduction, rationale, and methodological procedure for the study. I have also included a selective literature review of academic material that involves the critical examination of comic books.

Chapter two addresses each character that has been selected in detail. This chapter provides an overview of each character in terms of their fictional origins, super powers, and important qualities. In this chapter I also include an in-depth justification for the selection of each character for this project. The ultimate purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with sufficient familiarity with the characters and their respective corners of the Marvel universe so as to better consume the material addressed in the other chapters.

The third chapter answers the first sub-question by engaging in a rhetorical critique of the intersection of race, class, and gender within comic books. This chapter answers this sub-question by centering on an examination of two characters, Marvel’s Captain America and Mystique. The rationale behind using these two characters is that they are diametrically opposed in terms of their racial and gender identities. Captain America is a White American symbol of apex masculinity, whereas Mystique epitomizes the “other” as she is ordinarily a Blue female who has the option to become any race and gender. In a sense, Mystique has the potential to represent any and all marginalized demographics, so she is an excellent candidate for exploring the intersection of an “other’s” possible identities.

The fourth chapter answers research question 1C by addressing the changes comic book characters have endured over time until their most recent iterations, and what those changes indicated about modern conceptions of race and gender. This chapter focuses on the characters
Jean Grey and Luke Cage. The reason for including Jean Grey is that few other female characters have had the same longevity and popularity as evidenced by her adaptation into four major films so far. Her longevity of over fifty years means that the character has undergone a significant number of recreations/remodeling as her appearance and personality have changed with each decade's perspective on femininity. Luke Cage is included in this chapter because over the years his Black America identity has been heavily influenced by the time in which he has existed. While the character is enjoying a resurgence in popularity as evidenced by the recent Netflix series *Luke Cage* and a currently running comic series by the same title, the character’s commercial success has fluctuated over the decades prompting attempts at reinventing his identity and thus his blackness.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation answers the fourth sub-question discussing how comic book characters have been used as rhetorical vehicles for exploring and commenting on social issues within American society. This chapter involves an in-depth examination of Captain America and Miles Morales. Captain America has been selected for this chapter because of his long history of being used to address socio-political current events such as World War II, student protests, and fascism. Miles Morales has been selected for this chapter because of the character's story lines have often served as a means to explore themes of social inequality, criminality, and other systemic societal issues.

The sixth and final chapter of this dissertation answers my driving research question by synthesizing the points from each chapter. I then discuss what my analysis seems to indicate about the state of the comic book industry and its future. This chapter also includes a discussion on what can be done to remedy the apparent failings of the industry as well as bring attention to areas of the industry that are succeeding in offering more nuanced, humanized depictions of
ethnic and racial minorities. Finally, this chapter entails a brief discussion of the reasonable possibilities for the future of the comic book industry as well as research, based on the conclusions reached within the dissertation.
CHAPTER 2: THE (MOSTLY) HEROES GALLERY

For this project, I have elected to focus on five different characters from the Marvel universe. Those characters are Captain America/Steve Rogers, Luke Cage/Power Man, Jean Grey/Phoenix, Raven Darkholme/Mystique, and Spider-Man/Miles Morales. In this chapter, I will explain the rationale for choosing each of these characters and how they are positioned from a critical communication approach. I will also include expository information that provides a brief orientation to each character. That information will include their origin story, when and where each made their first appearance, notable qualities, and their current (as of 2018) iteration. The purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive history of the characters, but rather to describe the characters in sufficient detail in order to be properly oriented when they are critically examined in the following chapters. Before proceeding it is important to articulate that a component of selecting these characters for analysis is that they meet certain basic criteria.

The first criterion is that the character must have existed in publication for at least five years. The purpose for this standard is to help ensure that there is a sufficient amount of texts for analysis. Comic book characters rarely have a continuous publication history, as they occasionally fall out of favor with fans or are written out of stories for narrative purposes. Selecting characters that have existed for at least five years helps to guarantee that there will be enough comic data to analyze for this project, even if the character has not been published continuously since their creation. The second criterion is that the character must have been adapted to a medium other than print. The purpose for this standard is that adaptations allow for greater creative variety with the same character with each iteration embodying another interpretation and, in some cases, geared toward specific audiences; such as animated Disney adaptations that are marketed towards children and television adaptations that seem to be
designed for more mature audiences. The third criterion for selecting these characters is that they must have a current iteration. A part of the impetus for this research project is the current popularity of comic books and related material, which has been sustained for approximately 10 years as of this writing. Therefore, I believe that it is important to focus on characters that have been a part of this wave of popularity. All of the characters selected for this project have current iterations within the comic book format as well as other adaptations either at this time or scheduled for the future.

**Captain America**

The oldest character in this project in terms of publication history, Captain America, has endured since the 1940s and has become a staple for Marvel as evidenced by his presence in the recent Marvel Cinematic Universe and his recent comic book story arc, *Secret Empire*. It is important to note that several different characters have taken up the mantle of Captain America, including James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes and Samuel Wilson. For this project, I have decided to analyze Steve Rogers, the original and current Captain America. In chapter six, I will discuss the implications and significance of having other characters assume the title of Captain America and other such legacy superhero mantles.

I selected Captain America for analysis because of his cultural significance as well as the social forces he appears to represent, at least ostensibly. At first glance the character embodies the dominant cultural ideology. He is depicted as a white, capable, heterosexual male and adorned in an American flag themed costume which strongly implies that he is the ideal form of American identity (Dittmer, 2007). Captain America symbolizes the American ideal not only in terms of his appearance and his extraordinary physical capabilities, but also in the way in which
he was created. The origin story of Captain America details how Steve Rogers, a young White American man became the icon of American hope during the 1940s. In the story, Rogers enrolled in an experimental research program meant to create super soldiers after having been rejected by the military for service due to his apparently unacceptable physical condition (Simon & Kirby, 1941a). During the experiment Rogers takes the Super-Soldier serum and is transformed physically and mentally into a superior version of himself. While the specifics of his transformation are not clearly detailed in issue #1, it is clear that he is meant to represent humanity beyond its normal capacity. In essence, the U.S. government was successful in creating the ideal human both physically and mentally in the form of a heterosexual White American male. Placed within the context of critical communication, Captain America is a powerful symbol of pro-American ideology (Dittmer, 2005). However, just as Captain America has been used as a symbol of American empire and the associated ideologies he has also been used as a vehicle for the critique of the American government. The character has a long history dating back to the 1960s of recognizing the discrepancy between what America as a nation extols as its values and what practices and policies it adopts particularly on the international scale (Dittmer, 2005). The nuances and complexity of the character as a rhetorical vehicle for the support and critique of America as an institution will be examined further in chapter 3.

The circumstances surrounding the creation of Captain America, both within the comic narrative and reality, are apropos of real-world events and international politics. Captain America first appeared in Captain America #1 which was published in March of 1941, nine months before the attack on Pearl Harbor that would draw the United States into World War II. Captain America’s origin story reflects an image of American society that is concerned about the possibility of foreign involvement in domestic affairs, particularly through subterfuge and
infiltrating civilian society as well as the government. In the issue the experiment that transformed Steve Rogers into a super-soldier is immediately disrupted by an undercover German spy who is then killed during the process of his capture. Captain America’s first mission is to then hunt all foreign agents within the United States, and in the process he gains notoriety as America’s champion and defender.

The first issue of *Captain America* also introduces the villain Red Skull, a member of the Nazi leadership second only to Adolf Hitler. In this issue the version of the Red Skull that Captain America encounters is an imitation, an imposter posing as the actual Red Skull in order to hide his identity as an American industrialist intent on betraying the Allied Powers. After encountering multiple imposters, Captain America eventually confronts the actual Red Skull in *Tales of Suspense* #66 (Lee, 1965d) when he is captured and regaled with the story of the Red Skull’s origin as told by the villain himself. The Red Skull has served as the frequent nemesis of Captain America throughout his publication history and has come to embody the antithesis of Steve Rogers in nearly every way. Whereas Captain America believes in serving the greater good, Red Skull works to ensure his own goals are accomplished without regard of the cost. Captain America opposes tyranny even if that means opposing the U.S. government, and the Red Skull toils tirelessly to subjugate all life and control others according to his own will. The struggle between Captain America and the Red Skull continues to the modern day, such as in the 2015-2016 *Secret Wars* series when the Red Skull temporarily transformed the hero into a member of Hydra, the terrorist organization and last official remnant of the Third Reich.

While he possesses physical capabilities beyond peak human condition, within the realm of superhero of abilities Captain America is physically average. While the character is understood to have super-human strength and reflexes, he is overshadowed by many of his
colleagues such as the Hulk, Thor, Spider-Man/Peter Parker, and Iron Man. What makes Captain America an effective superhero is his intellect, his grasp of military strategy, and his talent for leadership, instead of his physical attributes. His capacity for military strategy and leadership qualities make him a natural-born commander, which is why he has often led the superhero team the Avengers and operated as a high-level agent within the governmental agency, Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.; as a point of clarity, the agency’s name has been changed over time) throughout his publication history. The most popular recent version of Captain America, depicted in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) exhibits many of the same qualities as the comic book iteration, including his talent for strategy and inclination towards leadership. The MCU version of Captain America is an amalgamation of Steve Rogers’ various personality traits illustrated over time in the comic books, distilled into one character. The MCU Rogers embodies the canonical Captain America’s sense of duty, self-awareness, leadership, morality, and willingness to critique the government (Dittmer, 2005). This last element of distrusting governing bodies is a theme explored in chapter three and is rooted in the critical consciousness that Steve Rogers developed as a person who had access to the inner workings of the U.S. government in wartime. What he witnessed and experienced engendered wariness in the character and a willingness to dissent from the government. This is evidenced in the comic book event *Civil War* and the MCU film it inspired *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016). While the respective narratives differ greatly in detail, the underlying element of Captain America’s distrust of governing bodies led the character to become an outlaw. This act of defiance, and others like it, are a significant part of what makes the symbolism of the character so important and worth examination from a critical communication approach.
Mystique

I selected the character Raven Darkholme/Mystique for this project primarily because she represents a large group of fictional characters found within comic books and other Science Fiction and Fantasy media that are unique in terms of their identity. Specifically, I mean characters whose race, gender, class, and other elements of identity are not easily codifiable or are generally fluid in this regard. Within the broad realm of fiction there exist characters that are not racialized or gendered in the traditional sense that mirrors our reality. As such their identities are open to interpretation as less obvious racial signifiers such as linguistic patterns, behavior, or other aspects of their aesthetics are used to construct the characters. Previous research has argued that non-human appearing characters, such as lycanthropes and other fantastic creatures, operate as analogous representations of co-cultural groups and those stigmatized by social difference (Hudson, 2013). Yet even within this group Mystique occupies a particularly special position as a character whose gender and racial identity is entirely fluid. This mutant from the X-Men series possesses the ability to change her physical composition into any form so long as she maintains a way to breath while altered. She is often depicted expressing various racial identities and gender expressions, which makes her a worthy artifact for examination for this project. Operating from the position of approaching these characters as symbols for various demographics of people, Mystique functions as a symbol for any and all marginalized groups due to her ability to assume any identity.

Mystique’s first appearance was in 1978 in the comic Ms. Marvel #16 (Claremont, 1978a) and continued to appear in the Ms. Marvel series as well as various X-Men comic book series. The character debuted as a spy who used her shape-shifting abilities to infiltrate the Pentagon for the purpose of foiling the government’s attempts to create anti-mutant weapons.
This initial story arc set the tone for the character for much of her publication history. Mystique’s narratives typically feature the character using duplicitous methods, particularly shape-shifting and lying, along with violence to complete an objective that is often related to either mutant liberation or personal gain. Mystique’s narrative arcs, such as Michael K. Vaughn’s Mystique, explore the ethics of militant tactics to achieve liberation for marginalized groups, the subject of exploitation within disenfranchised demographics and issues of prejudice from minority communities. Her narratives also touch on the concept of coalition building across various types of oppressed groups such as human racial minorities and mutants and the exploitation of female labor. Among her most prominent and enduring qualities are her penchant for manipulation, her fluid sexuality, her fluctuating moral compass, and her inclination towards violence. The character is consistently featured in narratives where each of these qualities factors into the arc of the story; and it is her sense of ethics, sexuality, and shifting gender expressions that are of particular relevance to this project.

Mystique’s origins are not confirmed within the material that has been examined for this project, and reference sources such as the official Marvel wiki encyclopedia indicate that her origin is thus far unconfirmed (Mystique, n.d.). The character’s ambiguous origin allows for the character to be read as an encapsulating symbol for any and all marginalized communities since there is no true gender and racial identity to attribute to the character. Even the name Raven Darkholme may or may not be her actual name. Mystique’s default appearance within the comics and adapted material is that of a tall, shapely, blue woman, but whether or not this appearance is her natural state or yet another disguise has not been canonically confirmed to the best of my knowledge, although some adapted material such as X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) suggests that it is not. Originally the character was intended to be bisexual and a part of a lesbian
relationship with the character Irene Adler/Destiny, but this was not actualized in the comics for many years due to the discretion of the editors of Marvel (Cocca, 2016). The character’s sexuality and gender expression were explored over the course of her publication history as she was often involved with either men and women yet often chose to appear as a woman when given the option. An interesting quality of the character in terms of her sexuality is that she is perpetually naked as her clothing is merely her altered skin (Vaughn, 2003c). Creative choices such as this reinforce the idea that this character is defined by her sexuality, especially her sexuality as a woman which suggests implications for the satisfaction of the presumed male audience.

Recently the character has been adapted to film in the live-action X-Men film, X-Men: Apocalypse (Singer, 2016) wherein Mystique is played by the actress Jennifer Lawrence. This iteration of the character is consistent with some aspects of the canonical qualities of Mystique while changing some elements of the character’s aesthetic. While this version of Mystique maintains her mutant abilities and pro-mutant sense of ethics, the character is also significantly altered in terms of her personality. This version of Mystique is not as overtly sexualized as the versions in the comic books, nor is she as deceptive and malicious as her comic book counterpart. Instead of bearing a grudge against humanity and expressing prejudiced perspectives as she does within the comic book material, this film version of the character is motivated by self-preservation primarily and eventually acts with an attitude of altruism. In chapter 3 of the dissertation, I address the implications of these different iterations particularly as they pertain to narrative discourses of race, class, and gender.
Luke Cage

Among the first black superheroes in comics, Luke Cage’s popularity has fluctuated over the years as he was reinterpreted many times since his initial creation. Like fellow early black superheroes Black Panther and Black Lightning, Cage was subjected to the creative limitations of authors and illustrators that were unfamiliar with Black American experiences (Englehart, 2015). Early films that featured black actors playing parts written by white writers and directed by white directors often relied on stereotypical conceptualizations of blackness (Bogle, 2016). The early Luke Cage comics mirrored this variation of black face as the character was created and written by White American men whose primary inspiration was the hyperbolically stereotypical blaxploitation films of the 1970s (Lendrum, 2005). The impetus for his creation was Marvel’s desire to capitalize on the prominence of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s-70s so as to sell more comics (Englehart, 2015). As such, Cage was immediately foisted into the position of being a symbol that, whether by accident or design, represented an imagining of blackness to White Americans and not a mere character in a piece of fiction. The circumstances of Luke Cage’s creation, the nature of his existence as a black character within an historically white space, and his longevity as a character make him a valuable cultural artifact with a rich publication history. Furthermore, positioning Luke Cage in a critical communication context allows for the interrogation of the character as a cultural artifact and rhetorical vehicle with consideration for his position within popular culture. Through contextualizing the character as he exists today as a composite of previous iterations constructed over more than four decades I am able to treat the character as a reflection of this era’s conceptualization of blackness relative to the conceptualizations of previous periods in American culture.
Luke Cage first debuted in his own series, Marvel’s *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* published on June 1, 1972. This issue introduced Cage and illustrated his origin story which resembled that of Captain America’s, but with differences that reflect an attempt to address the experiences of Black American men. In brief the issue depicted Luke Cage, then referred to by his original name Lucas, as an unjustly incarcerated inmate at Seagate Prison. Cage gained his powers after being leveraged with the promise of parole into volunteering for an experimental procedure that went wrong. The procedure gave him super-human strength, near impenetrable skin, and enhanced healing. The issue concludes with his escape from Seagate Prison by jumping into the sea that surrounded the island facility and adopting the name Luke Cage to hide his identity.

A major element of Cage’s narratives, particularly up until the early 2000s, was the acquisition of wealth. Immediately after escaping prison Cage began to market himself around New York City as the hero-for-hire indicated in the title of the series. Cage’s choice of work and preoccupation with monetary gain played heavily on the media stereotype that black masculinity is in part defined by the acquisition of wealth and the romanticized image of the black hustler who is perpetually looking for ways to make money (Lendrum, 2005). This motivation combined with the understanding that superheroes of color are often characterized by powers that are exaggerated versions of physical attributes (Lendrum, 2005) amount to a new iteration of the Buck stereotype popularized in early film history (Bogle, 2016). In essence, the ‘Buck’ is a black male motivated by base desire, exhibits extremely aggressive behavior, and uses physical force and coercion to satisfy his desires (Bogle, 2016). As discussed in chapter 4, these characteristics are exhibited throughout much of the character’s publication history and are a large component of the problematic nature of the character and the way blackness is represented within the comics.
Recently the character has been adapted into a popular live-action series for Netflix, titled *Luke Cage* which exists within the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe along with the other Netflix Marvel series such as *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*. The series details the origin story of Cage and places him within Harlem as he contends with the issues of organized crime and political corruption. At various points over the course of his publication history the character has been used to address socio-cultural and political issues that have affected the Black American community, and this series is consistent with that spirit. The show acts as a rhetorical vehicle for messages related to issues that have historically affected the Black American community such as drug-related crime, disproportionate incarceration, and the politics of identity and language. In chapter 4 of this project, I will examine the ways in which the series represents and engages with these issues in ways that are both beneficial and problematic from a critical perspective.

**Jean Grey**

I selected Jean Grey as a symbolic representation of white femininity within comic books due to her longevity, prominence, and relationship to the X-Men series which is among the most popular comic book properties that Marvel has created. This is evidenced by the long publication history of X-Men related material dating back to 1963 with their debut issue, *Uncanny X-Men* #1 (Lee, 1963a). The importance of the character within the narrative context of the X-Men can be seen in her consistent appearances in the comics, as she often features prominently or centrally within the arcs of the various titles in which she has appeared. Interestingly, the character has been killed off and brought back to life several times over the course of her publication history, which speaks to the success of the character as a commercially viable property. Perhaps the best-known example of Jean Grey and her value as an ideological symbol is *Dark Phoenix Saga* which details her relationship with the cosmic entity known as the Phoenix Force, the
embodiment of all life in the universe. This narrative exemplifies why I selected Jean Grey as a character for analysis because it features the character as central to the narrative and explores through the narrative different elements that have shaped her aesthetic. One such element is her romantic relationship with Scott Summers/Cyclops and the influence of heteronormativity as a defining aspect of the character. This arc also explores the concept of female empowerment within a patriarchal power structure, specifically the X-Men. Jean Grey’s empowerment in the form of wielding the power of the Phoenix Force represents a significant shift in how she had been conceptualized as a superhero up until that point. In chapter four of this project, I engage with the aesthetic construction of the character and the ways in which that aesthetic has shifted and developed over time.

Jean Grey first appeared in Uncanny X-Men #1 (Lee, 1963a) as a new recruit to the Xavier School and the X-Men team led by Charles Xavier. As a mutant, it was understood that she received her powers of telekinesis and telepathy through naturally occurring deviations in her genes just as it had happened with other mutants. Instead of being the result of an experiment, accident, or deliberately seeking powers, she, along with the other X-Men, were simply born to a life outside of the norm. For this reason, the X-Men and other mutants have been examined as being analogous for marginalized communities such as racial groups (Fawaz, 2011) that are oppressed because of their biology. My interest in Jean Grey as a symbol goes beyond positioning her as a mere metaphor for an oppressed demographic. My research explores other elements of her origin which appear continuously throughout her narrative arcs, particularly her background as a middle-class woman. This element of her origin factors into her character construction and often manifests visually, such as when she wore a dress created by her in-universe friend and real-world fashion designer Nicole Miller (Lobdell, 1994a). The initial
conceptualization of Jean Grey is consistent with prominent stereotypical media representations of females, particularly white women, as damsels-in-distress who are physically weak, emotionally maternal, and often in need of a masculine savior (Prividera & Howard, 2006). These character traits did not change until her transformation into the Phoenix, when she experienced a second origin story of sorts. As detailed in (Byrne, 1986) Jean Grey bargained with the cosmic entity known as the Phoenix Force when it answered her plea for help as she piloted a crashing spaceship while suffering from lethal amounts of radiation. The bargain, that the Phoenix help her land the spacecraft and save her friends in exchange for possessing the body of Jean Grey, formed a bond between the two characters that has continued to the current iteration of Jean Grey and her narrative in Jean Grey: Nightmare Fuel. Her rebirth as the Phoenix signified a dramatic shift in the aesthetic of Jean Grey, as she no longer served as a damsel-in-distress and became one of the most powerful entities in the Marvel Universe (Claremont & Byrne, 1980).

As with any character, Jean Grey has been recreated and re-imagined countless times as new authors and illustrators attempt to add to the mythos of the character. While some aspects of the character have changed and evolved over the years, there are certain character traits that have proven to be largely consistent across the iterations. Many of these are connected to tradition media representations of femininity and include traits such as compassion, maternal nurturing for youth, and emotional support for male characters (D’Amore, 2008). Her publication history has served as a long-running discourse on the negotiation of these traits in an attempt to combine them with traditional aspects of heroism, often without much success as this typically manifested in the form of the character waffling between the binary tropes of being a damsel-in-distress or a power-mad threat to masculinity. Recent iterations of the character within the last decade have
attempted to reinvent the character with an aesthetic that is empowering without being problematic. The most recent adaptation of the character at the time of this writing is featured in the film *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016), where Jean Grey is portrayed by actress Sophie Turner. This version of the character is an attempt at reconstructing the aesthetic of the character without the problematic elements that defined Jean Grey for much of her publication history. This iteration of Jean Grey also attempts to reinvent the nature of the Phoenix Force, which has been a salient aspect of the character since the *Dark Phoenix Saga* and has been adapted into live action film once before in *X-Men: The Last Stand*. In chapter 4 of this project, I examine the aesthetic construction of both characters and discuss their implications as rhetorical texts in relation to each other as well as the canonical Jean Grey comic book material.

**Miles Morales**

I opted to use Mile Morales for this project because he represents a combination of intersecting elements of the comic book industry that are relevant to the discussion of comic book material acting as a form of social commentary. The first of the intersecting elements is Miles Morales’ racial identity. Historically the comic book industry has had difficulty successfully representing characters of color or including them at all within popular narratives, particularly in the early years of the industry (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia, 2015). Within that context Morales represents a part of the ever-growing cast of superheroes of color that Marvel continues to create. Morales is a bi-racial character, with a Puerto Rican mother and a Black American father, so inherent to his character construction are the components of blackness and Latinidad. These elements of his identity add depth and complexity to the world in which he operates, the struggles he endures particularly as a civilian, and his identity as a superhero.
His identity as a non-white Spider-Man is the second intersecting industrial element that relates to this project. Miles Morales is not the first Latino Spider-Man, instead the first Spider-Man to have a Latino identity was Miguel O’Hara who starred in *Spider-Man 2099* (David, 1992) which was published in November of 1992. However, that character belonged to one of Marvel’s alternate universes, designated Earth-928 (set in 2099 A.D.). For clarity, Marvel has historically maintained multiple universes within a common multiverse cosmology. These universe designations include but are not limited to Earth-616 (the primary universe), Earth-199999 (the Marvel Cinematic Universe), and Earth-1610 (the Ultimate Universe). Miles Morales originated as a character in Marvel’s Ultimate Universe/Earth-1610 as that continuity’s Spider-Man after the death of that universe’s Spider-Man, Peter Parker. The decision to make a Latino youth from New York City, New York, the successor to the mantle of Spider-Man in the Ultimate continuity is a significant editorial decision that emphasizes the potential for superhero legacies. The concept of different individuals adopting the same superhero identity is not new. This has been done with for years with codenames such as Captain America, which has been used by multiple people, including Sam Wilson who is a Black American male. What is important about the concept of making superhero identities into mantles is that they add a layer of symbolic meaning to the rhetorical messages of the characters as everything they do exists relative to the original or most popular iteration of that character. This aspect of the character being referential of Pete Parker was emphasized when the Ultimate Universe merged with the primary Marvel universe Earth-616 during the *Secret Wars* event of 2015, not to be confused with the *Secret Wars* event of 1984. After the merge of the two universes Miles Morales became a protégé of the original Spider-Man, Peter Parker. The third intersecting element of the character is the social commentary incorporated into the narratives and even appearance of Miles
Morales. According to an interview with Marvel editor-in-Chief Axel Alonso, the character was visually based on President Barack Obama and actor/musician Donald Glover (Swift, 2015). The use of two prominent Black Americans for the creation of a character that will bear the mantle of Spider-Man emphasizes the symbolism of the character and his significance as a fictional entity. In this way the visage of Morales acts as an implicit signifier of Black American accomplishment. The narratives of Miles Morales also incorporate social commentary as the character’s arcs involve themes such as the militarization of law enforcement, criminality within the black community, and the negotiation of what constitutes acceptable violence for superheroes. These themes along with others are explored in chapter 5 of this project.

Miles Morales first appears in *Ultimate Fallout* #4 (Hickman, Spencer, & Bendis, 2013) which debuted in August of 2011. Similar to Peter Parker’s (Earth-616) origin, Miles Morales received his powers when he was bitten by a genetically modified spider. The spider bite gave Morales super powers such as being able to climb walls, a near-precognitive spider-sense, super strength, and the ability to sting others with an electromagnetic pulse administered through touch (Hickman, Spencer, & Bendis, 2013). Morales’ origin story depicts the Afro-Latino youth as a resident of New York City who has just won admittance to a charter school through a lottery program, which indicates that Morales comes from a disadvantaged background. This point is reinforced when his parents speak to him about the importance of his acceptance to the school and his potential for success (Bendis, 2011). Commentary on cycles of violence also factor into the origin story of Miles Morales. Miles Morales’ father, Jefferson Davis, led a life of crime prior to meeting Morales’ mother, Rio Morales. While Jefferson Davis worked to separate himself from his criminal past, his brother Aaron Davis continued to work as a high-profile thief under the codename, The Prowler. In *Ultimate Fallout* #4 (Hickman, Spencer, & Bendis, 2013)
Aaron Davis robbed the facilities of a prominent scientific research corporation named Oscorp. During the robbery an experimental genetically altered spider slipped into Davis’ bag and rode with the thief until he returned home. The next day the spider bit Morales while he was visiting his uncle, against the express instructions of his father who feared that Aaron Davis would be a bad influence on his son. This incident not only initiates Morales’ future as a superhero, it also begins a narrative arc which functions as a commentary on the negotiation of familial relationships, criminality, and personal agency, all of which are discussed in chapter five of this project.

While Miles Morales is the only character I have selected for analysis that has not been adapted for a live-action production, I contend that the character is a worthy artifact of analysis due to his popularity. The character is still featured prominently in Marvel’s comic book material and has served as the lead character for his own series titled Spider-Man while also crossing over into prominent Marvel titles such as Secret Empire and All-New All-Different Avengers. Additionally, there is the reasonable possibility of the character joining the ever-expanding Marvel Cinematic Universe. The character is currently scheduled to star in an animated film Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (Persichetti & Ramsey, 2018) which will be widely released by Sony on December 14th, 2018. While this film is not connected to the MCU, the character was referenced in the MCU film Spider-Man: Homecoming (Watts, 2017) when Aaron Davis mentioned to Peter Parker that he had a nephew that lived in New York City; the implication being that Miles Morales currently exists within the MCU continuity. Whether or not the character becomes a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is clear that he is an artifact worth examination within this dissertation.
CHAPTER 3: OF MUTANTS AND MEN

In this chapter, I discuss three key socio-cultural ideological forces that manifest within comic books: race, class, and gender. The question that guides my analysis of the texts is: how do gender, race, and class intersect in the visual and narrative representations of comic book characters? Within the context of this project, I use the word “race” to mean conventional physiological differences like skin color and physical features, as well as ethnic and cultural differences that are signified within narratives. Examples of ethnic differences include visual or verbal references to national origin, or linguistic signifiers such as accents or the use of different languages. I operationalize “class” by noting references to occupational, economic, intellectual, or educational success and achievement. Within this context “gender” refers to not only gender expressions that may be normative or contrary to dominant forms, but also to the relationship dynamics between individuals evidenced within the texts. In order to answer this question of ideological manifestation within the material, I consider elements such as the origin stories of characters, their superpowers, their antagonists, as well as prominent story arcs that involve them. For this question, I have selected two characters to function as rhetorical artifacts for analysis, Steve Rogers/Captain America and Raven Darkholme/Mystique.

I have selected these characters because of their longevity within the realm of comic books as well as their prominence within the current popular culture landscape of superhero and comic book related material. In addition to their respective statuses within popular culture, they are also ostensible diametrical opposites in terms of appearance and characteristics, and thus represent opposing ends of the spectrum in terms of race, class, and gender. Captain America is canonically within comic book material and in other adaptations a white heterosexual hyper-masculine male with middle class origins, whereas Mystique is a non-white Other whose gender
expressions and sexual orientation are fluid along with her apparent racialized appearance; and while her origins are unclear she is often associated with upper-tier organizations such as government agencies and aristocracy.

I will discuss each of these characters respectively in their own subsections before examining them relative to each other. In this chapter, I analyze how their origins and powers function as rhetorical vehicles for ideological messages, with special consideration for what the differences between iterations may signify. After addressing the origin stories and powers of each character I will engage with their narrative and visual elements in terms of race, class, and gender respectively. In service of this analysis I take an ideological fragmentation approach rather than treating the comic issues or arcs as necessarily encompassing. By doing so, I can construct and engage with a more fully realized articulation of how the comics serve as vehicles for each ideological message. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on how these different elements work together to convey messages regarding race, class, and gender and in what ways they support predominant problematic norms within this genre as well as subvert or modify these same norms.

**Captain America: The Green in the Blue Eyes**

**Origin & Powers**

Before interrogating the world in which Captain America exists it is important to first understand the circumstances of his creation. The most common origin story for Captain America is detailed in *Captain America Comics* #1 “Meet Captain America” (Simon & Kirby, 1941a), *Tales of Suspense* #63 (Lee, 1965c), and the Marvel Cinematic Universe film, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011). The origin story involves Steve Rogers, the
civilian identity of Captain America, volunteering for a secret government program to create super-soldiers. Rogers is described as weak and frail, physically unfit for military service. Therefore, he serves as an ideal test subject for a newly developed super-soldier serum, the purpose of which would be to transform even the weakest of candidates into warriors whose abilities would make them among the most formidable in the U.S. military. After Rogers is successfully transformed into Captain America by the scientists, an undercover Nazi assassin kills the lead scientist, and, in the process, the last remaining sample of the super-soldier serum is destroyed. The newly created super-soldier is then utilized by the government to defeat its domestic and international enemies.

While this plot is the most common version of the story, it is important to note that there are significant differences between the iterations. In the original 1941 story, retold in 1965, Captain America is created in order to combat the Fifth Columnists. This term applied to any threat, domestic or foreign, to the United States government within its sovereign boundaries. Hence, Captain America’s first job was to root out Fifth Columnists who actively worked to undermine government forces or subjugate American citizens towards the ultimate end of providing support to the Third Reich. The reason behind Captain America’s role as a spy-catcher had to do with America’s position towards World War II at the time. Published in March of 1941, the United States had not yet experienced the attack on Pearl Harbor, so rather than have Captain America fight overseas he was tasked with stopping saboteurs at home. The details of those missions will be discussed as applicable in the following subsections. In contrast to the original source material, the 2011 film Captain America: The First Avenger, a film set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Captain America was created post-Pearl Harbor and America’s involvement in the war. While initially serving as living propaganda on display during
World War II, Captain America eventually finds himself serving as an active-duty soldier while still wearing the star-spangled costume. While the details differ based on the iteration, the purpose of the character was made clear: to fight Nazis (Dittmer, 2007). An important note regarding the comic narrative is that at the time of the original publication the United States maintained pre-Pearl Harbor isolationism, yet the cover of the comic book boldly depicts Captain America punching Adolf Hitler squarely in the face in what appears to be a depiction of wish fulfillment for the creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, both of whom were Jewish-Americans (Dittmer, 2007). This understanding regarding the intention behind the creation of Captain America by two Jewish-Americans adds a layer of context and significance to the character. While the hero has come to embody the apex of White American identity, I contend that he was initially conceptualized as an ally of minority communities similar to American Jews who faced international and domestic discrimination. Contextualizing Captain America as an ally of oppressed communities helps to understand why he was created in such a way: he was to represent the dominant form of American identity while still being an advocate for the marginalized. As such he needed to be characterized by qualities that made him the idyllic American, hence the personality traits of courage, work ethic, leadership, and a sense of justice in addition to superhuman physical prowess. By creating the ideal American hero and ally, Simon and Kirby also inadvertently created a character that could be used to narrowly define legitimate American identity. I will elaborate more on this concept throughout this chapter.

In the 1979 film Captain America (Holcomb, 1979) the origin of Steve Rogers differs greatly. This version of the character’s story depicts Steve Rogers as an ex-Marine looking forward to life as a civilian. This Rogers only becomes Captain America after being given a super-soldier serum codenamed FLAG (Full Latent Ability Gain) to save his life after being
mortalily wounded in an assassination attempt by the film’s villain Mr. Brackett. While this film
does share some common themes with the other iterations of the character, the origin is different
in ways that suggest significant changes in perspective by the filmmakers. The most important
change is this version of Rogers’ relationship to heroism and the U.S. government. This version
of Steve Rogers initially rejected the mantle of costumed-hero even after receiving the FLAG
formula and expressed an overt desire to be separated from the government. Nonetheless, by the
end of the film the character accepts the role of hero but still maintains his distance from the
government, acting as a vigilante independent of government direction. This difference in origin
stories reflects differences in attitude towards the government and sentiments towards patriotism.
While comic/MCU Rogers volunteers because of his desire to serve and act as an agent of a
morally correct government, the 1979 Rogers clearly wishes to sever ties with the organization
and operate with his own version of patriotism that is not directly accountable to the U.S.
government. Another point of departure from the comic/MCU story and the version told in the
1979 film is the matter of choice for Rogers. Traditionally, Rogers opts into the experiment of
his own volition, yet in the 1979 version Rogers receives the experimental, and as mentioned in
the film potentially fatal, formula against his will. In fact, prior to his hospitalization Rogers
refuses the government scientists when they propose he take part in their attempts to perfect the
formula. Here, it is evident that the government is characterized as well-meaning yet still
coercive and willing to exploit others. The significance of Rogers’ shifting relationship with the
government will be further explored in the subsection on class analysis.

In each version of Captain America’s origin story covered here the result in the abilities
he gained is the same, with little variation. Those powers include enhanced physiology (strength,
speed, senses, durability), enhanced intelligence, and enhanced healing. In addition to these
benefits yielded from the super-soldier serum he also has skills developed from his time as a soldier in the U.S. military. Yet the most important abilities possessed by Captain America did not come from the super-soldier serum, rather they were inherent to Steve Rogers as an ordinary American citizen, specifically, his persistence, work ethic, and his courageous nature (Dittmer, 2005). In this way, Captain America was not a human with godly qualities as with characters like The Flash or Wonder Woman; instead he was a human exhibiting what it meant to be the best of humanity. While his powers alone did not set Captain America apart from his contemporaries within the genre such as Super Man who also possessed abilities beyond the norm, they did place him in a position to do what other super-powered beings at the time could not: address the issue of the war while still making sense in the narrative. Many costumed superheroes were too powerful to enter into World War II without potentially ending the conflict overnight, and so comic book creators avoided having them take part (Dittmer, 2007). Yet he was a character who was just powerful enough to be nearly invulnerable in battle while still not so powerful as to defeat the Nazis single-handedly provided an opportunity for the creators to engage with the events of the time while still maintaining narrative credibility (Dittmer, 2007).

In addition to benefitting from a government science program and possessing abilities beyond the boundaries of normal humans, another consistent element of Captain America’s origin story is the costume that he wears. In each iteration of the character he receives the costume from those who are responsible for his transformation. In each case the costume is thematically, and typically aesthetically, the same in that the suit incorporates the red, white, and blue of the American flag along with a white star on the chest, a capital letter “A” on the forehead of the mask, and small white Mercuryesque wings at the temples of the mask (Dittmer, 2007). This uniform clearly relies on the symbolism of the American flag, making Captain
America into much more than a mere costumed vigilante. He represents the ideal embodiment of the United States (Dittmer, 2007), a courageous and bold hero who is of course also white, heterosexual, and male, with a middle-to-lower class background. In the sections that follow I will interrogate each of these aspects of Captain America, not just as he enacts those identities but also in how those aspects of culture are made manifest in the world he inhabits.

Defending (White) America

In this section, I discuss the whiteness of Captain America as understood from the Critical Race perspective, in terms of how Captain America enacts not only whiteness in general but also in ways that endorse particular expressions of whiteness. I also address the use of non-white bodies within his narratives and what his relationship with those characters appears to imply. Before continuing it is important to note that there have been multiple Captain Americas over the years, including at least two black men who assumed that name: Sam Wilson and Isaiah Bradley. In order to remain consistent in my analysis I kept the focus of this research on Steve Rogers and included the other bearers of the title Captain America only when they became immediately relevant to my argument.

A critical component of interrogating the racial aspects of the character Captain America is the concept of whiteness. Whiteness studies describe the term as a cultural and psychological force that supports the idea that whiteness is equivalent to normalcy, thus alienating non-whites and bestowing some privileges to whites (Jensen, 2010). A key element of how whiteness functions within media, that is particularly relevant to this examination of Captain America, is that whiteness functions within the American context to allow white audiences to visually identify with the majority as well as systems of power (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). This means
that by implication those who are not white are not provided the opportunity to identify with those same systems of power. In keeping with previous research in whiteness studies, I will be engaging with whiteness in this chapter in order to render it visible and aid in its removal from a position of cultural authority and centrality (Sen, 2007).

Within the context of Captain America comics, it is clear that whiteness works to evoke this power visually. Captain America is depicted as being white with blonde hair and blue eyes, and remarkably handsome as mentioned by various female characters that interact with him. In this way Captain America’s whiteness is visually reinforced, serving as an ideal role model for whiteness in appearance. This visual representation of whiteness is then coupled with a primary American institution of dominant power: The United States military. Together, the Golden Age of Captain America functioned as a powerful tool of pro-American propaganda (Skidmore & Skidmore, 1983). While early Captain America overtly reinforced American values by combating its enemies both domestic and international, he also rhetorically functioned as a guardian for the boundaries of acceptable whiteness. As indicated in the early comics of Captain America, it was not enough to merely be white, an American had to be the correct form of white.

From the beginning, Captain America has served as a sort of regulator for what it means to be white in the ideal form. Early issues of Captain America depicted the title hero fighting various enemies, many of whom were white, and generally male. However stylistic choices were made within the comics to set apart the types of whiteness that were clashing on the pages of the comics. One such stylistic choice was the utilization of linguistic signifiers that reinforced the “Otherness” of the villains. Specifically, early issues of Captain America had the villainous Nazis speak with heavy German accents, as signified by switching “w” with “v” and “th” with “d”. This is illustrated in the following sentence from Captain America #1 wherein a Nazi spy
refers to assassinating a military commander, “I vill giff der cheneral a special treatment!” (“I will give their general a special treatment”) (Simon & Kirby, 1941c, p.24). This indication of German origin serves to solidify the proposed idea that while the Nazis were white they were also different in significant ways. This sort of partition within the created white space of the comics helped to create a sense of definite Otherness within the narrative and thus preserving American whiteness as distinct from its European counterpart. Later in Captain America’s publication history it appears that this linguistic signifier of ethnic Otherness collapsed into merely using words from different languages rather than having the characters use poor English. However, writers for Captain America found other ways of indicating the difference between American and international whiteness. One particular method of conveying this message was the behavior exhibited by other white characters of different nationalities. In the “Winter Soldier” story arc the brutality of Russians became a recurring theme exhibited when the Russian defector, General Lukin executed the captured USSR agent Red Guardian (Brubaker, 2004) as well as when Lukin’s mentor Vasily Karpov tortured and executed a Nazi soldier, against the wishes of Captain America (Brubaker, 2005b). Furthermore, Karpov appeared to have no concern for the casualties of war, unlike Captain America who expressed a strong desire to save civilians from being victimized during the battles he fought. This recurring theme of foreign white brutality committed by villains within the story-arc work to reinforce the nobility of American whiteness. By depicting Captain America as opposed to such a barbarous practice as executing a prisoner of war he demonstrates that mercy is an important character trait for the white American identity, along with the qualities of courage, moral correctness, and strength already established in the early Captain America Comics of the 1940s.
Another recurring theme evident in Captain America’s stories was that whiteness was the norm, such that in order to witness a significant number of persons of color he typically had to travel outside of his normal locales. For example, in the 1940s series Native Americans are nearly non-existent until Captain America travels to the Mojave Desert (as Steve Rogers), and Asians do not appear in early issues unless they are invading or visiting from overseas. These early representations of non-whites reinforce their Otherness by establishing their places of origin outside of where whiteness is the norm, whether domestically or internationally. Rhetorically this articulates that domestic non-whites have cultural and/or political connections outside of normal American society, reinforcing their outsider/Other status even if those persons/demographics have domestic roots. In the 1970s series Black Americans are rarely seen outside of Harlem. Research into pre- and post-war comics has found that after World War II Black Americans all but disappeared from comics; on one hand, this reduced the frequent use of negative stereotypes about Black Americans, on the other hand their removal from comics denied their equality (Lenthall, 1998). In the absence of persons of color, white faces have filled the pages of Captain America both as primary and background characters. Over time Marvel has attempted to address their lack of diversity by incorporating characters with non-white and non-male identities such as Black Panther (male, African), White Tiger (male, Puerto Rican), and Sooraya Qadir/Dust (female, Afghani) yet the ubiquity of whiteness is still pervasive as evidenced by the normalcy of Captain America interacting with other white characters and the abundance of white characters in leadership positions such as Maria Hill, Nick Fury, Sharon Carter, and most of the Avengers. Some characters that appear to be non-white such as Vision, Namor, and Hank McCoy/Beast still signify whiteness linguistically even if they do not otherwise appear to be white.
When non-white characters appeared in comics they were often treated poorly, particularly in the early days of the format. From the use of racial slurs to address minority characters (Skidmore & Skidmore, 1983) to underrepresenting them while using tokenistic stereotypes (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia, 2015) comics have an established history of being problematic when representing persons of color. Captain America’s comics over the years are no different, often relying on tropes, stereotypes, and sometimes the absence entirely, of minority characters. Early in the history of Captain America he combated threats of Asian origin including the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor (often referred to as “Japs”), creatures referred to as the “Oriental Giants” (Simon & Kirby, 1941d, p. 3), and the mystical League of the Unicorn (Lee & Avison, 1942). These characters were usually depicted as ugly or monstrous in appearance, such as giving Japanese officers and Chinese warriors fanged teeth, blood-shot eyes, claw-like hands, or excessive facial hair. In the instance of the giants, the characters were from Tibet where they were the source of legends about walking mountains that lived for centuries. Similarly, the League of the Unicorn appeared as an ancient order of master criminals that terrorized Asia until finally coming to the United States. These Orientalist representations that utilize the stereotypical exoticism (Gruber, 2015) associated with Asia simultaneously reduce Asia and those of Asian heritage to stereotypical tropes while positioning Captain America as the righteous defender of the United States, and whiteness by implication.

Later in Captain America’s publication history the star-spangled Avenger began work with allies of color with increasing frequency. Some of these interactions became recurring events for Captain America, such as the time he spent helping Sam Wilson/The Falcon save Harlem from its criminal element. Others appeared to be one-off adventures for Captain America, usually depicting him traveling somewhere he would not ordinarily visit and helping
the local residents. Throughout his adventures with persons of color a few narrative themes emerged. The first is that Captain America, and to some extent other whites, function as the saviors needed by persons of color. In *Captain America* #125 (Lee, 1970a) he embarks on a journey to Vietnam during the Vietnam War in order to save Dr. Hoskins, a White American doctor who is seen as an agent of peace during the conflict who has gone missing. The war is depicted as primarily taking place between the two factions of Vietnamese soldiers with very little to illustrate an American presence in the war. Captain America saves the doctor from a third faction within the Vietnam War, an organization led by The Mandarin, an Asian villain that utilizes mystical rings that grant him powers. The Mandarin’s ultimate goal was to further destabilize Vietnam by kidnapping the doctor and pitting the two sides of the war against each other in order to increase the hostilities. He is, of course, thwarted by Captain America. This story utilizes the tropes of Asian occultism (Gruber, 2015) and the white savior narrative wherein a white outsider enters into a space inhabited by non-whites and proceeds to solve their problems (Schultz, 2006). Furthermore, the purpose of Captain America’s mission was to rescue Dr. Hoskins who also functions as a white savior as he is a White American who is credited with saving the lives of many Vietnamese who are otherwise preoccupied with fighting one another. Within this narrative two prominent White American figures represent the concepts of hope and peace in the war-torn country ravaged and destroyed by people of color.

This theme of Captain America as a white savior emerges again in Harlem, where he helps the local superhero named The Falcon bring justice to the oppressed. In this series, a second narrative theme emerges, that of the dangers of black radicalism. Sam Wilson, the civilian alter ego of The Falcon, lives in Harlem, New York, and works as a social worker trying to better his community within the parameters of the system in which he lives. As Falcon,
Wilson combats the forces that threaten Harlem both internally and externally. These threats include the activities of black radical organizations such as The Diamondheads who appear in *Captain America* #126, “The Fate of…The Falcon” (Lee, 1970b). This organization is characterized as “a black version of the Klan” (Lee, 1970b, p. 8) that threaten to destroy race relations in the United States. Within the narrative of this issue The Diamondheads work to agitate and harass the community and facilitate hate towards whites. Captain America functions as a white savior in this narrative by helping The Falcon clear his name from false charges created by The Diamondheads, lending crucial aid that The Falcon desperately needed. This narrative along with others presented in the comics, place The Falcon as a hero who crusades against the dangers of black radical thought, a hero with moderate political inclinations who also realizes the need for social change. In this way The Falcon functions as a sort of apprentice white man, a non-white character who seeks to advance the rule of law and order supported by the dominant power structure established by white forces (FitzGerald, 2014). The writers of the comic even went so far as giving Sam Wilson a post-racial attitude. At the end of *Captain America* #126 (Lee, 1970b) Wilson comments, “your skin may be a different color…but there’s no man alive I’m prouder to call…brother!” This sentiment of inter-racial/inter-ethnic solidarity for Americans was a trend in early American comics as a way of addressing issues of equality (Lenthall, 1998). Coupled with his earlier expressed disdain for black radical attitudes and it becomes clear that Captain America’s sidekick functions as a vehicle for a moderate form of Black American identity that simultaneously denounces black radicalism that threatens the American government while advocating for social justice in a way that facilitates positive feelings for the White America that Captain America embodies.
**Class Warfare**

One element of Captain America that makes him remarkably different from many of his costumed-colleagues is his identification with the American working class. Unlike other heroes who are hybrids of economic success and vigilantism, such as Bruce Wayne/Batman (Gavaler, 2014), Captain America’s alter ego Steve Rogers was not well-born or economically advantaged. Rather he was born in Brooklyn with little to indicate his background besides attempting to enlist in the Army instead of applying for officer’s school as one might expect were he from a well-off family. Interestingly, even after being transformed with the super soldier serum, Steve Rogers serves as a Private in the U.S. Army until he is frozen in ice and revived some years later. As a Private, Rogers’ identity is known only to the leadership of the military, leaving everyone around him including his commanding officer Sergeant Duffy unaware of his true identity. Within the narrative of the early Captain America series this leads to Rogers being assigned grunt work such as peeling potatoes, often as punishment administered by Sergeant Duffy for having done something wrong. Captain America’s identification with those on the bottom of level of systems of power likely comes from co-creator’s Jack Kirby’s own working-class perspective (Dittmer, 2007). Positioning Steve Rogers as a member of the military, and at a grunt-level station, allows for the character to simultaneously include patriotism as a narrative motif while also identifying with lower-class Americans who may distrust the federal government. At such a level, the character can still be closely identified with protecting and serving ‘everyday Americans’ which would be a more difficult narrative logic to convince the audience of if the character were a high-ranking officer. a politician, or a bureaucrat, as those types of government employees are often characterized in popular media as dissociated from, and occasionally burdens on, the American public. Outside of being a member of the lowest rung of the military, several other narrative...
elements have appeared in Captain America’s stories that indicate his status as a hero of the working class. Those elements include the villains that he fights as well as his roles in the Civil War and Secret Empire story arcs, respectively. His status as a hero with a working-class background makes Captain America relatable to a broad audience and allows them to identify with him to a certain extent. By positioning the character as a product of an everyday environment the comics send the message that there is heroism to be found within the ordinary working and middle-classes of America. Captain America serves as an endorsement of the greatness found in the lower-to-middle socio-economic status and this ethos of the character makes him a hero of the people. This message also carries with it the implication that “the people” constitutes white males of that economic status, thus he serves as an everyman that the public can identify with so long as they fit within this narrowly defined identity.

Heroes are in part defined not only by their origins and powers, but also by whom they confront. A consistent theme that emerged within the narratives of Captain America’s comics is that he often fought members of upper-class society such as the wealthy, intellectuals, and scientists. Early comics depicted Captain America fighting Fifth Columnists, those who sought to undermine the United States and lend aid to the Nazis. These secret saboteurs included villains like Mr. Maxon, a wealthy industrialist who attempted to sabotage the U.S. military by selling them defective planes and assassinating military leaders (Simon & Kirby, 1941c) and Burton Hargraves, a railroad magnate who attempted to ruin the relationship between the United States and China (Lee, 1942a). Later stories of Captain America had him confronting scientists who were bent on global domination. Characters such as M.O.D.O.K. (Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing) and Dr. Garbo played on the anxieties related to science and the implication of the atomic bomb (Genter, 2007). These characters and others like them were intellectuals,
capable of wonders and horrors funded by either criminal activity, wealth from personal success, or government agencies. Within these narratives these mad scientists operated as they pleased with little concern for who was harmed. For example, in *Captain America* #135 (Lee, 1971b) and #136 (Lee, 1971d) a scientist working for the international peace-keeping organization S.H.I.E.L.D. (Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-enforcement Division) named Dr. Garbo experiments on himself to improve his physical features and accidentally transforms himself into a giant gorilla. In his new form Garbo terrorizes New York City until Captain America is able to defeat him. While Dr. Garbo was a short-lived villain, he represents a larger theme endemic within Captain America’s gallery of rogues which include other villains with advanced technological resources such as A.I.M. (Advanced Idea Mechanics) under the direction of M.O.D.O.K., and A.I.D. (Advanced Idea in Destruction) led by the Red Skull.

Interestingly, the Red Skull is the inverse of Captain America in terms of class dynamics. In *Tales of Suspense* #66 (Lee, 1965d) the Red Skull details his rise to power to a subdued Captain America, describing how he went from being an orphan in Germany to being trained by Adolf Hitler himself and ascending the ranks of the Nazi government. The origin of Captain America and the Red Skull exhibit some similarities in that both began as common people, unknown to most of the world until after they were transformed into symbols of their respective governments. However, the point of divergence in their respective journeys represents differing messages regarding socio-political class. Whereas Steve Rogers was placed as a private within the ranks of the Army, the Red Skull was directly positioned as Hitler’s right hand. From that position of power, the Red Skull earned a reputation as a brutal leader, as opposed to Rogers who donned the costume of Captain America and served as a source of inspiration among the foot soldiers of the military. This difference in positioning, along with the recurring themes of
villainy being associated with resources and institutional power, convey the message that those in positions of authority are likely to abuse their power and that the superior morality and courage of the lower-classes must keep them in check in order to prevent catastrophe.

Two recent story arcs for Captain America have centered on his relationship with power and speak to the recurring theme of Captain America’s identification with the working-class. The first was the 2006-2007 Marvel Comics event *Civil War* that also served as the inspiration for the 2016 MCU film *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016). At the core of both the film and the comic is the narrative that in light of events that have had a particularly high casualty rate, individuals with powers/abilities are required to register with an agreed upon government agency and function as an operative of that agency. As such they would be beholden to a clear command structure and face consequences for their actions. Failure to do so would make them outlaws and targets of international law-enforcement. In the comics Captain America has a conversation with acting SHIELD director Maria Hill where he asserts why he will resist the law requiring powered-individuals to join the government. The following is an excerpt from that conversation

**Captain America**: “You’re asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week.”

**Maria Hill**: “No, I’m asking you to obey the will of the American people, Captain.”

**Captain America**: “Don’t play politics with *me*, Hill. Super heroes need to stay *above* that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the *super-villains* are.”
Maria Hill: “I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law.”

*The sound of nearby soldiers readying their weapons*

(Millard, 2006, p.22)

In this conversation Captain America clearly states his concerns and motivation for actively resisting the law. In the film adaptation Captain America expresses the same concerns regarding the use of the Avengers and the potential for manipulation of their abilities by malevolent government forces. This distrust of governing organizations (S.H.I.E.L.D. within comics, the UN in the film) reveals Captain America’s distrust of systems of power. This is particularly interesting since he has worked with, if not necessarily for, the government throughout his career. In addition to this skepticism towards governing power, those opposed to registration include Captain America and many powered-individuals often referred to as street-level heroes. These are characters who typically work in neighborhoods and cities from criminal organizations and super-villains that operate on a more local level, rather than large scale threats such as alien invasions, interdimensional entities, and deities. Examples of anti-registration street-level heroes in the comic include Luke Cage, Daredevil, The Falcon, and eventually Spider-Man after he defects from the pro-registration side. It is also worth noting that many of the characters who are anti-registration in the comics also symbolically represent different marginalized demographics such as Luke Cage (ex-convicts, Black American), Daredevil (disability, blind), Hercules (immigrant), and Storm (black, female). On the note of Daredevil, while it is not expressly stated in this comic arc that Danny Rand is impersonating Daredevil instead of the actually blind vigilante Matthew Murdock, the impersonation (which is revealed elsewhere) still visually signifies the presence of an intersectional coalition built by heroes representing marginalized identities. Furthermore, Captain America predicts that Daredevil
would resist the registration (Millar, 2006a) without knowing that Danny Rand was impersonating the hero, indicating that Rand’s actions are consistent with what the actual Daredevil would choose.

The anti-registration coalition composed of various heroes, including those with various marginalized identities reinforces the notion of class difference between the anti- and pro-registration forces. This theme is reinforced when considering the leadership of the pro-registration team, Tony Stark/Iron Man, Hank Pym/Yellowjacket, and Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, all of whom are intellectual affluent heterosexual white males. In the film adaptation, several significant changes are made including team composition, but what does carry over is the conflict between Iron Man (pro-registration) and Captain America (anti-registration). The final fight between the two visually signifies the economic class distinctions between the two and was compounded with meaning by the narrative elements that have been established within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Tony Stark fought equipped in an Iron Man suit, a mechanized suit of armor equipped with weapons and artificial intelligence that was made possible because of Stark’s intellectual nature and his extreme wealth. In contrast, Steve Rogers fought in his Captain America uniform, a suit created and loaned to him by the U.S. government, which served as body armor, along with his shield (created by Stark) and the physiological benefits granted from the super-soldier serum. An underlying theme in this fight is that in order for the working-class to be on par, yet still not evenly matched with the economic upper-class, they must have government assistance. Another latent theme within the text is the triumph of the working-class trait given to Captain America by his creator (Dittmer, 2007): strength of will. Through much of the fight Captain America is outmatched, as he uses his own thinly covered hands to punch Stark’s dense metal suit while Stark uses a computer program to analyze Rogers’ moves and
fight pattern to gain the upper hand. And yet Rogers continues to fight without relenting until he eventually wins, which supports the earlier claim that among his most valuable powers is his persistence and willingness to work hard (Dittmer, 2005). This conflict with Iron Man further supports the assertion that not only does Captain America identify with the common citizen as established earlier, he is a product of that culture.

Most recently, the Secret Empire story arc featuring Captain America as an undercover agent of Hydra inverts Captain America’s relationship with systems of power. In this story arc Captain America has been transformed into a member of Hydra, an offshoot of the Nazis led by the Red Skull (Marvel, 2017), by the Red Skull with the use of a reality-altering device called a cosmic cube as described in Secret Empire #1 (Spencer, 2017a). At the time of this writing only the ten-part core issues have been released while tie-in series are still unfolding. What is clear is that the narrative of the story so far is consistent with the vilification of power within Captain America comic books. The difference of course is that Captain America serves as the villain who now leads the Nazi organization Hydra as well as S.H.I.E.L.D after having been appointed to position of commander-in-chief of earth’s defenses prior to the revelation of his true allegiance. Captain America has assumed an apex role in the governance of the world while still maintaining consistency with the narrative theme in his comic series that those in power are susceptible to corruption and the abuse of power.

Test-Tube Masculinity

In many ways Captain America embodies an ideal form of masculinity as defined by the five-criterion asserted by Nick Trujillo (1991). Those criteria include the use of physical force, occupational achievement, familial patriarchy, frontiersmanship, and heterosexuality (Trujillo,
In this section I explore how the comics engage with these aspects of masculinity visually and narratively.

While Captain America is not the most physically advanced among his colleagues, among whom are the likes of the Norse god Thor and the “incredible” Hulk, his physical prowess and capability are well established. From the beginning Captain America’s physical might has been a defining quality for the character, particularly since the primary motivation behind his creation was to prove that weak and frail men unfit for combat could be transformed into apex warriors, as detailed in his origin story in *Captain America Comic* #1 (Simon & Kirby, 1941a), *Tales of Suspense* #63 (Lee, 1965b), and the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston, 2011). However, it is not merely Captain America’s penchant for violence as a form of conflict resolution that is significant, but also the manner in which it is expressed. While Captain America often works with others such as the superhero team The Avengers as well as with partners like Bucky Barnes and Sam Wilson, he also often operates on his own. This is also the case when working for an organization such as S.H.I.E.L.D. Whether or not he is operating on behalf of an organization, his style of functioning on his own is reminiscent of the Western film trope of the masculine cowboy who solves problems with violence, except that in this case the cowboy has exchanged a hat for a colorful costume (Kvaran, 2017). This type of behavior has worked to reinforce the idea that being violence is a necessary part of being masculine. For example, in *Captain America* #128 (Lee, 1970c) he is ridiculed for being outdated, a relic of the past that is seemingly no longer relevant. However, later in the issue Captain America asserts his relevance when he saves a crowd of hippies at a music festival from a biker gang called Satan’s Angels. He does so by violently defending the hippies who are singing about the values of peace and love, and in doing so Captain America galvanizes the reluctant “flower children” into action.
Within this narrative Captain America asserts himself as a relevant and necessary form of masculinity whose value is largely measured in his ability to commit violence for seemingly noble reasons. By comparison the hippies, in particular the men, appear to express an inferior form of masculinity that would have been victimized by those willing to commit violence.

Captain America’s masculine aspects of occupational achievement and familial patriarchy complement each other and manifest in his frequent leadership role within both the comics and films. He consistently occupies a leadership position when he works with partners such as Bucky Barnes, Rick Jones, and Sam Wilson, as well as when he works in groups such as with the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. This is evident in the Marvel Cinematic Universe during instances when Captain America leads missions. One such example is the mission to capture the villain Brock Rumlow/Crossbones in Lagos, Nigeria in *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016). During that mission Captain America led the Avengers, consisting of Scarlet Witch, Black Widow, and The Falcon; the mission concluded with the capture of Crossbones but with significant casualties. Later in the film Captain America once again assumed the role of leader in the struggle against the Sokovia Accords, an international law that would have required the members of the Avengers to register with the United Nations and operate as agents of that organization. In the comic series his success in occupational achievement is best represented in the *Secret Empire* story arc where Captain America acted as the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. while also being charged with the responsibility of defending the earth from an invasion of aliens known as the Chitauri. This position indicates his level of professional achievement as among the most powerful individuals in the world as the head of an agency with international recognition that is beholden only to the United Nations. As the director of this organization Captain America represents the height of occupational achievement, particularly since the weight
of that position was compounded with the responsibility of defending earth. The task of coordinating every available resource, including powered-individuals, in order to defend earth represents the intersection between occupational achievement and familial patriarchy. He is given the responsibility of defending the earth, which is symbolically consistent with paternal authority figures defending the family (Prividera & Howard, 2006). Under his command are powered-individuals from a wide array of backgrounds, nationalities, and gender identities including prominent female heroes such as Captain Marvel, America Chavez, and Black Widow, reinforcing the idea that in times of war females are supposed to support and contribute to patriarchal militaristic systems of power (Prividera & Howard, 2006). The dangers of this intersection of masculinity manifest as Captain America then abuses his occupational success and paternal authority to explicitly subjugate the world in service of Hydra. This expression of toxic masculinity then becomes the focal point of the core series and provides the background for all of the tie-in series as earth’s inhabitants and defenders.

This examination of Captain America in terms of race, class, and gender has addressed the ways in which the character functions within his material and the rhetorical messages conveyed within those texts. I will now endeavor to do likewise with the character Mystique so as to situate the character within the same parameters. After discussing the ways in which she incorporates race, class, and gender into her narrative universe I will conclude by interrogating each character’s intersectional rhetorical messages and their significance.

**Mystique: The Jerks Running the World**

**Origin & Powers**
The character Raven Darkholme, whose alias is “Mystique”, was first introduced into the Marvel comic book universe in *Ms. Marvel* #16 (Claremont, 1978a). Since then she has been a prominent character across different media, appearing in the comic books with regularity, in animated television adaptations of the comic books, as well as in film. Suzanne Scott (2015) asserted that the code names for characters reveal biographical information, and this is certainly the case with Mystique, because while she has a long and well-established history there is actually little known about her beginnings. What is known about the early life of Mystique is that she originates from Austria and that she had a poor relationship with her father. Her age is unknown because her super power, a naturally occurring genetic mutation that classifies her as a “mutant”, is that she can transform her body entirely. Thus, her age is impossible to tell through traditional methods as she is frequently altering her appearance. To the best of my knowledge her canonical comic book age has not been revealed through narrative exposition, or in a credible Marvel reference source. In the film *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2011) Mystique’s is depicted as Charles Xavier’s adopted sister, however no information is provided regarding her life prior to living in the Xavier household at the ostensible age of nine years old. This version of Mystique differs greatly from the comics as it involves her living with Xavier until adulthood and adopting his idealistic view of harmony between mutants and humans. Her perspectives on the relationship between humans and mutants will be explored in a different section in this chapter.

There are two elements of Mystique’s mutation, and they are defining qualities for the character. The first is that her natural form is that of a human with blue, scaly skin and dark red hair. Each iteration of the character has depicted this form as her natural state. The second element of her mutation is her total control over her physical form, meaning that she can assume the form of almost any person, even some inanimate objects. However, there are limitations to
her ability to shapeshift; she cannot create matter, she can only alter it. This means that if she weighs 180lbs she only has that much matter to manipulate, and in some instances assuming a larger form has proven to be a strenuous activity that cannot be maintained for long. Additionally, she may manipulate her appearance, but she cannot manipulate the nature of her substance. For example, in X-Men (Singer, 2000) Mystique fought with Wolverine and assumed his form, going as far as imitating his iconic adamantium-coated claws that protrude from his fists. During the fight Wolverine slashed through her claws, injuring her because while they appeared to be made of the same metallic substance they were in fact significantly less dense as they were made of hardened flesh and bone. Accompanying this limitation of being unable to transform the herself into any other substance is the implication that she must also be able to perform the necessary biological functions. This means that if she transforms she must be able to breath and maintain a circulatory system.

These qualities about Mystique factor heavily into how she is portrayed and lend credence to her personality as someone who is typically opposed to the idea of human dominance and normativity. Towards that end the character is also a spy by profession as well as a terrorist/freedom fighter. The distinction between the two perspectives is dependent on who describes the character within the context of the material. In the following three sections, I explore how the elements of race, class, and gender function rhetorically in her narratives before discussing the intersection of these aspects in the conclusion of this chapter.

**Homo Superior**

Mystique’s first appearance in Ms. Marvel #16 set the tone thematically for many of her narratives for the next several years. In this issue she assumed the form of an adult white woman
with dark hair; a woman of mysterious origins and clearly nefarious intent. This identity was later revealed to be that of Raven Darkholme, a government official working at the Pentagon in Washington, DC. While the name Raven Darkholme is believed to be her actual name, the form she assumed was an image created to blend into the environment of the Pentagon, intended to draw little attention and allow her a reasonable amount of mobility within the organization both physically and socially. Throughout her publication history Mystique has utilized her ability to shapeshift into different people to her advantage. For an unspecified amount of time she posed as the wife of Baron Wagner of Austria, taking the form of a beautiful white female presumably so that she could benefit from his wealth (Lee, 2003). During this time, she not only posed as the Baron’s wife, Raven Wagner, she also assumed the form of various women who lived in the nearby town for the purpose of having affairs with men and causing turmoil among the personal lives of the townsfolk. All of which was ostensibly done for no other reason than her own amusement. During her career as an unwilling agent working for Professor Charles Xavier in the series *Mystique* she used her abilities to assume various forms in order to move about inconspicuously. Often this meant assuming the form of locals and natives such as a Cuban man in *Mystique* #4 (Vaugh, 2003c) or a Black South African woman in *Mystique* #9 (Vaughn, 2003f). Her ability to change her race and ethnicity as well as gender at will allowed her to operate as a particularly successful spy.

It is for this reason that I assert that Mystique symbolically poses as the ultimate racialized Other, a person stigmatized because of her appearance and obvious genetic deviance from the norm of *Homo Sapiens*. Her ability to alter her appearance, and thus her race and ostensible ethnicity, allows her to act as a symbol that transcends a single race thus making her into an icon of racialized Otherness particularly because of her status as a mutant. It should be
noted that canonically mutants are referred to by the scientific nomenclature of *Homo Superior* as opposed to *Homo Sapiens*. Her deviance from the norm carries with it implications for her position in society and highlight issues that reflect real-world issues with racial minorities.

While Mystique is able to manipulate her appearance at will, she is limited in its use by the world in which she lives. Whenever she assumes a form she does so conscious of the implications, such as when she uses her appearance as a white foreigner in South Africa to curry favor with a white taxi cab driver in *Mystique #8* (Vaughn, 2003e) or disguises herself as an elderly Asian woman to blend into the crowd of an Asian marketplace in *Uncanny X-Men #15* (Bunn & Land, 2016). These examples illustrate that while Mystique is capable of navigating various environments, she, like many racial minorities, must contend with established norms regarding the performance of race (Zingsheim, 2016). In the exchange with the White South African cab driver the rules for racial normativity are revealed in terms of being black as well as being a mutant. During that conversation, the cab driver flirts with her as well as refers to Black South Africans as “kaffirs” (a racial slur for Black South Africans) (Vaughn, 2003e, p. 3), mutants as “suppies” (p. 4), and laments the end of Apartheid and the danger posed by both Black South Africans and mutants. This conversation signifies the consequences that Mystique would have had to contend with had she taken another form. Had she appeared as a black individual she likely would have been snubbed by the cab driver and perhaps others. Had she appeared in her natural form she might have encountered violence, as the cab driver referenced that some officials see violence as an appropriate solution to issues related to mutants (Vaughn, 2003e). By assuming the form of a member that identifies with the dominant society of the country she enters she also removes the possibility of being verbally marked as an Other (Pandey, 2015), a consequence that is often unavoidable for minorities in reality.
Mystique’s relationship with her natural form has served as a narrative vehicle for exploring the idea of assimilation and the manipulation of the self in order to fit into pre-defined cultural norms. In *Mystique* #12 the character known as Forge referenced how Mystique avoids reflections of her natural form whenever possible and implies that she must not be comfortable with her own visage, to which Mystique has no response (Vaughn, 2004). Karen McGrath (2007) remarks that for whatever reason it is not unusual for superheroes to hide their ethnic identities, similarly the reader is led to believe that Mystique intentionally hides her appearance from herself. It is important to note that her character in *X2* (Singer, 2003) departs from this perspective by asserting that she desires a world where she does not have to assimilate her features to the normative standard of society. Whether in the films or in the comics there is an understanding regarding her natural form, specifically that her appearance marks her as a mutant and thus a deviant within society. Monstrous aesthetic qualities have been used rhetorically in the past to indicate Otherness, such as with Vampires (Frohreich, 2013) and other supernatural creatures (Hudson, 2013) whose appearances contribute to their narrative functions as dangers and threats. Mystique’s appearance fits within the parameters of possessing a monstrous aesthetic, not only in the mind of the reader but also within the narrative. One such example is the dream depicted in Uncanny X-Men #170 (Claremont, 1983). In this dream Mystique appears in her natural form as she is being hunted by English aristocrats on horseback, led by Jean Grey of the X-Men. As she is being pursued the hunters are speak to one another, referring to her as “the beast” (p. 11) until she is captured and executed, prompting her to wake up from her dream.

A theme that occurs several times throughout her narratives is the comparison of mutants to communities that have suffered from genocide and/or systematic oppression. These include comparisons to the Jews prior to and during World War II in *Uncanny X-Men* #199 (Claremont,
1985) and the film *X-Men* (Singer, 2000); the internment of the Japanese during World War II in *Mystique* #2 (Vaughn, 2003a); as well as the genocide committed against Native Americans by the U.S. government, in *Mystique* #12 (Vaughn, 2004). Additionally, during the *Messiah Complex* story-arc, in which Mystique played a role, a possible future is depicted where mutants are kept in concentration camps against their will and physically marked with a symbol indicating their Otherness. This is not unlike African slaves who were restrained on plantations and Native Americans that were forcibly relocated to reservations; both of whom were marked as different by their aesthetic qualities (Pandey, 2015). This theme, in all the ways in which it manifests, reinforces the idea of mutants as being naturally deviant from the norm on a biological level. Each comparison made between mutants and the groups mentioned involved widespread and overt institutional race-based discrimination that yielded fatal consequences. By establishing this theme as a motif, the message is created that mutants collectively represent marginalized communities that face systemic oppression, often with lethal consequences. Furthermore, I assert that the prominence of this theme within the *Mystique* series functions to rhetorically position Mystique as the ultimate representation of all racially marginalized groups, particularly since she embodies their external identities via her ability to shapeshift into any of the mentioned demographics.

As a result of the frequent persecution of mutants, Mystique developed a cynical perspective of humans. In the following conversation between her and Forge, a mutant who is also a Cheyenne Native America, she expresses her incredulity at his willingness to be kind to humanity.

*Mystique*: “I mean, I don’t understand how a *Native American* could have any love for humans. They systematically exterminated your ancestors.”
Forge: “My human ancestors, you mean? You spit out this tired old anti-human rhetoric, but deep down, I think you know that peaceful coexistence is the only answer.”

Mystique: “Yeah, after they’re done slaughtering us, maybe humans will give us some mutant casinos. Or at least name one of their mascots after-” (Vaughn, 2004, p. 7)

This exchange illustrates Mystique’s worldview on human-mutant relations in the world and her contempt for them as a species, despite having evolved from humanity. This conversation also explains her motivation for becoming a militant in favor of fighting humans; for her it is a matter of ensuring the survival of her species. This recurring theme within her narratives crosses into the territory of class struggle, an issue that I will explore in the next section.

Terrorist Vs. Freedom Fighter

Within the narrative of the Marvel comic universe, as well as in the other narrative universes created in other media, mutants are an established underclass. They are shunned by members of society, persecuted by institutions, subjected to cruel treatment and when a mutant is permitted to function in society they are still stigmatized (Bucciferro, 2016). The use of non-human others to characterize oppressed groups is not unusual (Hudson, 2013) and fits thematically and narratively with the nature of the fictional society within which the mutants function. Since their status as an ostracized community is tied to their biology, discrimination against them is analogous to racism (Pandey, 2015). This biology-based prejudice combined with the subjugation of mutants via threat of violence (i.e. Purifiers, Sentinels) and derogatory language (i.e., the slur “muties”) establishes them as members or a rigidly enforced subjugated class (Pandey, 2015). There are two general reactions to this type of oppression within the
mutant community of Marvel: assimilation and resistance. The X-Men, led by Professor Xavier, fall into the former; whereas mutants such as Magneto and Mystique argue for the necessity of the latter to the extent that they engage in activities that are often characterized as militant in order to achieve their goals. In this way, the two figureheads Xavier and Magneto function as rhetorical analogs to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Baron, 2003). While the members of the X-Men along with the students enrolled in the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning benefit from adequate resources and the environment of an all-mutant community located in the countryside of New York state, insulated from normal human society, mutants that have to function within the constraints of human-dominated society are not nearly as fortunate. For most of her publication history Mystique has made war on human society, working from within to sabotage humanities efforts at controlling the mutant population such as when she worked at the Pentagon as Raven Darkholme; or by leading groups of mutants such as the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants.

Early narratives involving Mystique depicted her as a malicious terrorist working against the U.S. government (Claremont, 1984), S.H.I.E.L.D., the Avengers (Claremont, 1981), as well as the X-Men (Claremont, 1985). Later in her publication history her narrative was revised, as she asserted to others that she was in fact a freedom fighter and that the name of the organization Brotherhood of Evil Mutants was meant to be ironic (Vaughn, 2003a). This version of her motivation for engaging in coordinated acts of violence has become the most prominent motivation attributed to the character in both the comics as well as in film. In *X-Men* (Singer, 2000), *X2* (Singer, 2003) and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner, 2006) Mystique operates as an agent of the Brotherhood of Mutants led by Magneto. The group’s primary goal was to ensure the survival of the mutant species by any means necessary including violence whenever possible.
Her character was significantly altered in the later-made prequel *X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2011), by depicting her as sympathetic to Xavier’s vision of humans and mutants coexisting. Later in the film her attitude changes as she realizes that humans will always fear mutants, prompting her to join Magneto in his newly formed group. Her allegiance and perspective shift yet again towards the end of the most recent film, *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016), with her joining Xavier’s team once again, indicating that she has recommitted herself to peaceful coexistence with humanity. Furthermore, in the film *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016) Mystique is depicted as remarkably less feared than in the comics, having acquired hero-status as a result of her actions in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Singer, 2014) wherein she saved President Nixon from assassination by Magneto and spared the life of the notorious anti-mutant public advocate Bolivar Trask. These actions endeared her to the mutant community earning her a reputation as someone who aids mutants who are victimized, as evident in *Apocalypse* when she saves two mutants from being forced into fighting for the amusement of humans.

Mystique’s perspective on the oppression of mutants is informed by an understanding of the history of humanity as well as the clear and present danger that looms over mutants all over the globe. In the *Messiah Complex* story-arc this danger appeared in the form of the Purifiers, a religious organization founded by the Reverend Stryker who created the order with the express purpose of hunting mutants and in particular the Messiah child, the first mutant born after a cataclysmic event eliminated almost all *Homo Superiors*. The Purifiers believe that the child is the Antichrist that will bring about the destruction of humanity. During this conflict Mystique aligned herself with Mr. Sinister, an evil mutant pursuing the child for his own diabolic ends. While Mystique’s motivation for joining Mr. Sinister involved saving her daughter, a matter to
be examined in the next section, she did lend material aid to his forces in the form of strategic planning.

Due to her militant mindset and insistence on the inability of humans and mutants to coexist as established in the source material for the character, I contend that she represents a revolutionary figure more in line with Malcolm X than Martin Luther King (Baron, 2003). While her methods are certainly more extreme and violent than X’s, she nonetheless embodies the spirit of a leader seeking to upend and disrupt societal norms that maintain the system of oppression that force mutants to the fringes of society, overall. Her critical consciousness regarding the future of human-mutant relations within the comics helps the reader to sympathize with the character, however that sympathy dissolves once she is depicted committing acts of villainy. These representations of a character that is a violent revolutionary causing destruction and taking lives in the name of change speaks to a broader issue of condemning political radicals that advocate for drastic reform of oppressive institutions. Combined with the film representations of the character where she is reformed and joins with the assimilationist X-Men, the argument posed by the creators is clear: radicalism is harmful and counterproductive to achieving political satisfaction, instead peaceful assimilation into the dominant norm is the acceptable mode of change.

**Tinker, Taylor, Pin-Up, Mother**

The concept of gender factors significantly into Mystique’s narratives, with two particular themes standing out: that of her sexuality and her motherhood. I will begin with the method in which her sexuality is expressed narratively and visually and then discuss her motherhood as a character defining quality.
Women within media, and comic books in particular, are often depicted in a manner that relies heavily on being objectified and hyper-sexualized (McGrath, 2007). Mystique fits well into this pattern of representation. My analysis found that Mystique was often depicted in a manner that emphasized her sexuality. In terms of her clothing one of her more common outfits consisted of a form-fitting white dress with exposed shoulders that also split at the hip so as to expose the leg up to the thigh. This dress also included a belt made of skulls and a small piece of jewelry in the shape of a skull, worn on her forehead. She also typically wore calf-high high-heeled boots and gloves that covered up to her bicep. While this outfit appears to be better suited as an evening gown it is typically worn into combat or on missions, indicating that her aesthetic appeal is more important than protective or otherwise pragmatic gear. Another example of Mystique’s sexuality being emphasized visually is the cover art on most of the issues of *Mystique*. These covers, drawn by various artists, consistently depict her in the same outfit: tight, dark pants with a tight, dark tank top that exposes her midriff. In almost all of the covers she is drawn and posed in a manner that emphasizes her cleavage and hips. These artistic choices serve the purpose of emphasizing her visual sexuality for the benefit of the reader (D’Amore, 2008). Even though her blue skin and yellow eyes disqualify her from real-world conventions of beauty, the art-style emphasizes the areas of anatomy that are generally associated with signifying sexuality: the hips, stomach, and chest. These illustrations also meet the primary stylistic qualities of pinup art as outlined by Scott (2015), which include one body illustrated in totality and without being engaged in a sexual act with another body and emphasis placed on the potential for sexual energy via direct eye-contact with the reader. Many of the covers for *Mystique* meet this requirement, and in doing so they prime the reader to view Mystique as a hyper-sexual being throughout the rest of the comic book issue. This reading of Mystique as overtly sexual is further reinforced by
many of the art-styles employed by the primary artists (covers and pages are often drawn by different artists).

The illustrators behind the page-to-page depictions of Mystique often rely on industry norms for depicting women in comic books, which involve large breasts, narrow waist, and prominent hips (McGrath, 2007). These routine depictions of Mystique, which are also prevalent in *Uncanny X-Men* and *All-New X-Men*, convey the message that in addition to her narrative function as a prominent character within Marvel, she is also a sexual object intended for the gratification of the viewer and a vehicle for the facilitation of exaggerated fantasies for the reader (Scott, 2015). In a sense, her visual aesthetic collapses the character into the common trope used to represent women and supports the idea that whatever the character does, win, lose, or draw within her narrative arcs, she perpetually and inescapably exists to please the eye of the reader. This is even true when she assumes different forms, such as when she transformed into a Cuban woman with the intent of seducing a Cuban military leader, in *Mystique* #4 (Vaughn, 2003c). While Mystique’s intent is to use her sexuality to get close enough to the military leader to incapacitate him, her hyper-sexuality is commented on by her field-contact, a mutant who goes by the codename Short Pack. Once he sees the form that she will be using to entice the target he notes that, “Isn’t that a little…excessive? I mean, you can be seductive without being, you know, practically *naked.*” (Vaughn, 2003c, p. 8). This exchange is not only a comment within the narrative on Mystique’s sexuality, but also a meta-commentary on how Mystique is often depicted. This remark on her appearance, along with the illustration, reinforce the idea that beauty is a form of currency that can be utilized, both within the narrative with other characters (D’Amore, 2008) as well as reader. Within this same scene Mystique references that the parts of her that appear to be her clothing are actually her skin. As such she is always naked. This in-
continuity reality of Mystique’s perpetual state of exposure seems to reinforce the idea that women’s costumes within comic books serve to conceal the identity but reveal the body (Scott, 2015). This revelation that Mystique is always naked places her as an object to be ogled (Cocca, 2016), in this issue as well as any other issue the reader consumes that involves the character. As such it reinforces within the mind of the reader what is already signified by the visual representation of the character, that their body is more important than their capability (McGrath, 2007); because no matter what Mystique accomplishes within the context of her narrative it will always be accompanied by the subtext that she did it while naked.

Within the narrative Mystique’s sexuality also serves as an extension of her ability to shapeshift, functioning as a weapon of sorts. There are many different examples of her using her sexuality in order to achieve a goal such as seducing a security guard that stands watch over Magneto in _X2_ (Singer, 2003) as part of a plan to free him from prison. Mystique weaponizes her sexuality to manifest agency and capability. It appears that more often than not, men are the targets of her weaponized sexuality, although there are instances of her using the same or similar tactics against women. Occasionally she deviates from the use of overt sexuality and manipulates patriarchal sensibilities by other means, such as when she pretended to be a girl of around 8 years old in order to deceive an adult male soldier in _Mystique #2_ (Vaughn, 2003a). In another instance, she posed as a much larger, aggressive looking Cuban man; the benefit of which was not an increase in strength (as her mutation is constrained in that capacity) but instead to be perceived as intimidating and deterring others from attacking her while she pursued her target in _Mystique #4_ (Vaughn, 2003c). Additionally, she is also dangerous in that she is proficient at enacting lethal violence. With rare exception, Mystique has little qualms with killing in the pursuit of a goal or the completion of a mission. Her penchant for violence combined with her
weaponized sexuality creates a complex rhetorical message in terms of the nature of women within comic books. She directly violates the established tropes of women as gentle caretakers, while at the same time she reinforces the negative stereotype of women as deceptive, manipulative, and hedonic agents of evil (Oh & Kutufam, 2014). The case for Mystique as an evil and manipulative woman given to hedonistic pleasures is best exemplified by her affair with the ancient demonesque mutant Azazel. This occurred while Mystique disguised herself as Raven Wagner, the wife of Baron Christian Wagner of Austria. The affair between Mystique and Azazel was first consummated within a church, thus emphasizing the profanity of their (particularly her) hedonistic behavior.

On the note of Mystique’s sexuality, her sexual orientation includes proclivities for both men and women and has engaged in long-term relationships with both. Most notably, her original love interest and long-time partner was Irene Adler also known as the mutant with precognitive gifts, codenamed Destiny. At the time of their narrative arc in the 1980s, it was not possible to overtly depict them as a same-sex couple due to constraints of the Comics Code Authority. However, their shared life was heavily implied, such as when it was revealed that the two lived together with Mystique’s adopted daughter Rogue in *Uncanny X-Men* #170 (Claremont, 1983) and forming a same-sex nuclear family. In other places within the comics her sexuality has been indicated by flirting with men and women, as well as a willingness to manipulate pre-existing romantic relationships by posing as the man and/or woman in a heterosexual relationship as depicted in *Mystique* #8 (Vaughn, 2003e). In fact, earlier in the issue this was discussed as a possible method of obtaining an important object, indicating that Mystique’s fluid sexual orientation is not merely an aspect of her personal life but also a tool to be exploited by her employer who in this instance was Professor Xavier. Interestingly, her queer
sexuality does not appear to be an aspect of the character in the films. At no point does she engage in sexual activity with a female whether to complete a mission or for personal satisfaction, yet on at least a few occasions she seduces men in order to accomplish a goal and is involved in a romantic relationship with Magneto (Knopf & Doran, 2016). This distinction implicitly states that Mystique’s sexuality must be constrained to a form that is appropriate for a heteronormative audience when depicted in a format with as broad an appeal and accessibility as mainstream film.

The last aspect of Mystique’s gender that I will discuss here is her role as a mother. Biologically, Mystique’s only child is Kurt Wagner/Nightcrawler, the offspring of her extra-marital affair with Azazel the ruler of an island inhabited by mutants that are demonesque in appearance. At birth, Nightcrawler’s appearance revealed the truth of his parentage, he inherited his mother’s blue skin and his father’s demonic visage complete with pointed-ears, three-digit hands, and a tail that ended in a spade-like point. As a result of his monstrous form and Mystique transforming into her natural state during child-birth, which was aided by non-mutant midwives, the two were hunted and forced to escape from their home. Mystique, having killed her husband Baron Christian Wagner, recently abandoned by her lover Azazel, and having no resources, decided to kill the child by throwing him over a waterfall. As Nightcrawler fell his mutant ability manifested as he teleported away to safety. This story was revealed in Uncanny X-Men #428 (Lee, 2003) and confirmed the suspicions of Nightcrawler’s origin; however earlier in Mystique’s publication history (and later in her character-narrative time-line) she served as a mother for her adopted daughter Anne Marie, codenamed Rogue. On an interpersonal level, the relationship between Rogue and Mystique has been tumultuous, characterized by Rogue’s desire to be reformed from the villain that Mystique raised her to be. On an abstract level, Mystique’s
role as a mother is to be her Achilles’ Heel, leading her to make poor decisions with terrible implications.

Rogue is first introduced in the Marvel universe in *Avengers Annual* #10 (Claremont, 1981). In this comic, she works with Mystique to defeat the Avengers pre-emptively so that they cannot interfere with Mystique’s rescue of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. Rogue proves well-suited for the task as her mutant power is to absorb the life energy and memories of anyone she touches with her skin, and in the case of super-humans she absorbs their powers temporarily which leaves them weakened and without their abilities for a short time. Rogue successfully defeats several of the Avengers and steals their powers, including Captain America and Thor. In the case of the former, she exhibits a trait consistent with Mystique: the use of sexuality as a weapon as she drains Captain America by kissing him on the lips until he is incapacitated. While it is clear in this issue that Mystique has little compunction about exploiting her daughter and placing her in harm’s way in order to complete a mission, it is also clear in later issues that their relationship is laden with emotion. In *Uncanny X-Men* #185 (Claremont, 1984) Mystique converses with Destiny about the danger Rogue faces as a fugitive. During this conversation Mystique muses that Rogue would be better off without her powers, since her inability to control her life-draining touch prohibits her from leading any semblance of a normal life even by mutant standards. Mystique considering this option is a significant departure from her usual worldview that mutants should not have to alter themselves in order to exist, and indicates that her maternal relationship with Rogue forces her to consider options that she would otherwise find detestable. Later, in the *Messiah Complex* story-arc Mystique makes a decision that also represents a significant departure from her typical ideological perspective and threatens the future of mutant-kind. In *New X-Men* #46: *Messiah Complex Ch. 12* (Kyle & Yost, 2008) Mystique risks the life
of the Messiah child, a baby who is believed to be the potential savior for mutant-kind, by pressing the baby against Rogue’s skin as she lay in a coma. Mystique does so knowing that this process could kill the baby and potentially doom what remains of the *Homo Superiors*, having suffered genocide recently. The child survives the process, but before Rogue awakens (revealed in the next issue), Mystique laments her apparent failure and remarks, “If I saved her, maybe she would love me again” (Kyle & Yost, 2008, p. 18). Rogue later awakens and castigates Mystique for risking the life of a child to save her, even going so far as to strike her adopted mother and drains her life-energy to the point of near death; Mystique does not retaliate but rather accepts the punishment. This interaction is odd considering the kind of character Mystique has revealed herself to be, someone who values the preservation of mutants above all else, is generally unwilling to take the life of young mutants, and possesses a penchant for violence. Her decision to risk the life of the Messiah to save her daughter, as well as her unwillingness to kill a little girl who was forced to power mutant hunting robots *Mystique* #6 (Vaughn & Lucas, 2003d), indicates that Mystique’s role as a mother is a potential character flaw. Narratively reconciling these events with her decision to abandon Nightcrawler at birth means understanding that her later emotional weakness for children, in particular Rogue, is likely a manifestation of guilt for her decision to let Nightcrawler die. As narrative rhetoric, this guilt functions as a weakness for the character and reinforces the idea that the feminine identity is fragile and emotional (Prividera & Howard, 2006).

**Critiques of Dominance**

In this chapter, I have examined how race, class, and gender manifest respectively in the narrative and visual elements of the materials related to the characters Steve Rogers/Captain America and Raven Darkholme/Mystique. To conclude, I will discuss how these different socio-
cultural manifestations intersect and function to critique socio-cultural systems of power as well as reinforce negative ideologies regarding the aspects of race, class, and gender intersectionally. In doing so I reassert the initial premise of this chapter, that comic book characters serve as rhetorical vehicles for the propagation of ideologies that value the centrality of masculine whiteness and middle-class socio-economic status, even in their attempt to subvert these cultural norms.

The story-arc involving Captain America, *Secret Empire*, best exemplifies his use as a rhetorical artifact that supports the normativity of white dominance, misogyny, and the villainy of the socio-political upper-class. Within this narrative Captain America heads the Nazi-based organization called Hydra and controls the United States, and by extension the world, while subjugating powered-individuals. In terms of race this narrative reinforces what has been prevalent within the Captain America comics, that whiteness is the dominant norm within the Marvel Universe just as it is within the United States (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). As the head of the organization that controls the world, Captain America embodies the endorsement of whiteness as the dominant mode of society. This is consistent with readings of his material that historically have place whiteness as the visual norm by underrepresenting other minority groups and using the few that do appear as stereotypical tokens (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia, 2015). Similarly, Hydra agent Captain America visually reasserts patriarchal forces as the dominant mode of governance. Narratively, this manifests as Captain America continuing to hunt down the powered-individuals that threaten his domination. In *Secret Empire*, his use of authority to engage in violence is consistent with stereotypes regarding masculinity as defined by aggression, strength, and power (Prividera & Howard, 2006). This narrative theme of men as saviors and the value of physical force has been reiterated consistently throughout his comics and film
adaptations as Captain America has utilized violence to solve his problems. His use of patriarchal authority is displayed in *Secret Empire* #1 by his decision to destroy the entirety of Las Vegas, NV because of rebels hiding there (Spencer, 2017a); this action illustrates the nature of Hydra under Captain America’s command: violent and aggressive, and thus masculine by implication. Regarding class, a recurring theme within Captain America’s narratives is that of upper-class villainy as discussed earlier in the chapter. The *Secret Empire* narrative changes Captain America from a hero of the middle- and lower-classes to a villain positioned within the uppermost class. His apparent switch in allegiance is consistent with the recurring theme found in Captain America comics that those in positions of authority are susceptible to abusing their power or may be outright evil. The difference in this story is that rather than being a corrupt banker or someone seeking to capitalize on tense race-relations the villain is an authoritarian dictator and violator of basic human rights in the form of Captain America.

Ultimately, I assert that Captain America has functioned rhetorically as a vehicle that serves to reinforce the centrality of whiteness, the superiority of the masculine identity, and the villainy and corruption inherent in higher classes of society. The end result of this intersection of ideologies is the exaltation of middle-class, heteronormative, masculine men who must struggle against those in places of authority who abuse those who are disadvantaged. This is evident in *Secret Empire* #10 (Spencer, 2017c) when Hydra Agent Captain America is defeated by the recreated version of the original Captain America via a reality-altering plot-device. The original Captain America even did so by wielding Thor’s hammer, Mjolnir, which only responds to characters that are deemed worthy by embodying the height of noble virtue. In doing so Captain America yet again prevails and reasserts the apex heroism and natural superiority of the hyper-masculine, middle-class, heteronormative man.
In the film *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016) Helmut Zemo remarks, upon seeing Captain America up close, that he appears to have some green in the blue of his eyes and that it is comforting to know that he is in some way flawed. In this case the green in the blue of Captain America’s eyes is his endorsement of white masculinity at the expense of persons of color and women. While ostensibly Captain America has fought for the liberation of the oppressed, it seems clear that this has come at the cost of providing equal representation and empowerment to people of color and women who are often either missing, helpless, or subordinate within his narratives. In doing so Captain America comic books have helped to reaffirm the normativity of whiteness, and thus contributing to the perpetuation of racism without malicious intent on the part of the creators who are merely following industrial norms. This constitutes a sort of casual continuation of implicit and often unseen racist practices, or what Teresa Guess (2006) refers to as racism by consequence.

While Captain America represents the white masculine savior, Mystique signifies the exploited feminine Other. As established earlier, Mystique acts as a symbolic representation of the ultimate racialized Other due to her ability to change shape, and thus race and ethnicity, at will and has illustrated a propensity to do so when necessary (Zinghsheim, 2016, p. 94). Thus, the nature of her mutancy rhetorically positions her as a metaphorical representation of any and all demographics, including those who benefit from dominant power structures as well as those who are subjugated by oppressive cultural norms. However, due to her positionality as a mutant within the context of the larger Marvel universe she identifies and empathizes with the traditionally marginalized and disadvantaged.

Although the issue of whiteness is not addressed specifically in the dialogue of the texts, it is addressed narratively. Mystique’s ability to assume the racial identities of anyone around her
means that in a sense the social benefits of whiteness can be counted among her super-powers. She adopts the intersectional positional benefits of whiteness and upper economic class privilege when she poses as Raven Wagner. Her cover as Raven Darkholme the pentagon agent involved assuming whiteness in her appearance which implicitly added to the normalcy of her presence in a top government facility since within the comic the people in the background are generally white. Whiteness has also played a role in Mystique’s story in that she rebels against whiteness literally in her struggles with white manipulators such as Charles Xavier in the Mystique series or Magneto (Ratner, 2006); as well as metaphorically from the perspective that her mutant/Homo Superior quality positions her as a racialized Other that is marginalized by whiteness metaphorically represented as the norm of humanity/Homo Sapiens.

In addition to her social position as a racialized Other, she also serves as a visual and narrative symbol of one that fights to resist oppression as indicated by her self-imposed title as a freedom fighter and her frequent references to the oppression of mutants at the hands of humans. Furthermore, she positions herself as firmly against patriarchal forces that she sees as endemic in systems of government and faults dominant masculinity for the condition of the world. This message is perhaps best encapsulated in a remark she makes in Mystique #3 regarding a female mutant whose power is to make her consciousness transfer between bodies but only females. She remarks, “Pretty lame power when you’re living in a patriarchal society. How can you spy on the world when you can’t even look like the jerks running it?” (Vaughn, 2003b, p. 16). In addition to these aspects of her personality she also exhibits stereotypical behavior often attributed to women, that of a hedonistic and sexualized object (Oh & Kutufam, 2014) as well as emotionally weak and fragile (Prividera & Howard, 2006) as exemplified by her role as a mother. Narratively and visually, Mystique conveys the message that women are useful as sexual
objects, and that through embracing a weaponized version of their sexuality that they may become formidable. Also, her sexuality reinforces the notion that the primary function of women within comic books is to function as a source of visual gratification for the reader, and that all other aspects of the character are secondary. Furthermore, Mystique rhetorically conveys the messages that women and minorities must struggle against forces of oppression, such as those represented by Hydra Agent Captain America: institutional whiteness, patriarchy, and class oppression. Interestingly, Mystique's struggle for liberation comes into conflict with her own femininity. While Mystique has dedicated her life to the militant advancement of mutants (or at least the undermining of human society) it becomes clear in the *Messiah Complex* story-arc that her maternal instinct threatens the future of mutant-kind. Within this narrative Mystique attempts to save the life of her own child, Rogue, in a manner that carries the probability of sacrificing the life of the Messiah child who is supposed to be the savior of mutant-kind. Thus, her maternal nature associated with her femininity is illustrated as a liability, an obstacle to true emancipation for mutants worldwide. The implication here is that had she possessed the masculine quality of emotional detachment she would have not risked endangering the survival of her species. In a previous comic she managed to exercise this sort of dispassionate judgement by callously abandoning her son Kurt Wagner so that she could survive. In short, the assertion made in the narrative is that feminine maternal inclinations are tantamount to weakness that is potentially disastrous when women are in positions of authority.

Mystique rhetorically functions as a critique of patriarchal, classist, and oppressive white forces. She comes to represent aspects of the indigenous exploited woman as discussed by Gloria Anazlda (1987) wherein she is physically marked as an Other and placed under the coercive power of patriarchal forces that exploit her body for specific labor, reducing her abilities to a
means to an end rather than as a source of agency. However, the character also embodies many of the problematic norms that she attempts to defy. Visually this is the aspect of her physical appearance as she is often drawn to suit the male gaze by emphasizing her hips and bust while usually wearing revealing clothing (McGrath, 2007). Additionally, the canonical reality that she is perpetually naked adds a pin-up girl quality to the character in that her implied constant nudity signifies her ever-present potential sexual energy (Scott, 2015) which plays into the heteronormative male fantasy of hyper-feminine sexuality (McGrath, 2007). In this way Mystique reinforces patriarchal norms of representations even as she seemingly, and unsuccessfully, fights them within the narrative.

The character is also problematic in terms of how she engages with issues of racial marginalization and classist oppression. As discussed earlier her status as a mutant and her profession as an exploited mercenary rhetorically positions her as a symbol of both a racialized Other and an oppressed laborer, serving as a critique of dominant racial and class structures. However, her solidarity with *Homo Superiors* is combined with a strong prejudice for *Homo Sapiens*. Her bigotry reinforces her narrative status as a villain and lends credence to the perspective that she is a terrorist motivated by racial hatred rather than emancipation. Her intersectional identity as a second-class, female, racialized Other, could plausibly allow the character to become compassionate and motivated to facilitate coalition building among other marginalized groups. Instead she becomes an agent of destruction who inadvertently serves the goals of a *Homo Sapien* (read: white) patriarchal system by facilitating the discord between the pro- and anti-integration mutant factions while also engaging in dangerous terroristic activities that contribute to the denigration of mutants in the public consciousness.
A research question that is vital to this project is that of how racial and gender identities of characters have changed over time? Additionally, what does their development and current state invite audiences to understand about social norms regarding their respective races and genders? In order to answer these questions, I examined the two Marvel characters Luke Cage and Jean Grey, respectively. Due to the in-depth and extensive nature of my findings I have divided my analysis into two chapters. This chapter will deal with Luke Cage while chapter five will address Jean Grey.

In this chapter I examine and critique the different iterations of the popular comic book character Luke Cage, in order to deconstruct how they reflect the fluctuating socio-cultural perspectives of black masculinity over time. I position the character as a mirror that reflects prominent social understandings regarding the nature of black masculinity, and as artifacts of the eras in which he was created and recreated. As I critiqued each iteration throughout the last several decades, I endeavored to answer the guiding questions: how has the expression of Cage’s racial and gender identities changed over time? And what does his current state invite the audience to understand about social norms regarding black masculinity?

In order to answer these questions, I developed a set of criteria for elements to focus on and guide my critique. In the edited book *Black Comics*, author Angela Nelson (2014) describes what she refers to as a “black aesthetic” (Nelson, 2014, p.100) within popular media, based on Stuart Hall’s assertion that blackness within media is based on a collection of cultural elements used in concert. She expands the initial understanding of the term as proposed by Stuart Hall to include a more extensive and encompassing list including cultural elements such as
Inspired by this notion of an articulated black aesthetic within comics, I developed my own set of standards for what constitutes the black masculine aesthetic of Luke Cage. These elements are composed of the narrative and visually rhetorical components of the characters and their comic books and collectively establish guidelines for analysis which are applicable to every iteration of the characters across their multi-decade publication histories and media adaptations. The guidelines for the character aesthetics are: 1.) narrative arc; the stories and plot lines that characters are placed within operate as vehicles for ideologies related to the characters, not just in terms of the premise but also the resolutions of story arcs. 2.) Physicality; the visual and narrative expressions of the body, the feats performed, and prowess displayed, emphasize the presence or absence of agency and the prominence of tropes such as stereotypes about the primitive and physically impressive nature of black bodies (Brown, 1999). 3.) Sexuality; the visual and narrative exploration of each character’s sexuality factors prominently into the texture of their respective aesthetics, whether expressed as visual pin-up art for the gratification of the viewer (Scott, 2015) or within narratives that utilize dehumanizing stereotypes concerning hyper-sexuality and bodies of color (Brown, 2014). 4.) Personal qualities/characteristics; throughout each series the personalities of each character are modified. Occasionally the changes are minor, but often they are significant departures from previous incarnations as different writers express their own creative insights into what it means to be a black man or a white woman in the given era. These elements such as linguistic habits, personal philosophies, and internal thought processes may either add depth to the character or reduce their dimensionality depending on the creative manifestation. 5.) Villains; a defining component of comic book hero identity is not just the abilities possessed by the characters, but those they
combat and struggle against. Villains rhetorically function as embodiments of negative elements of society, and in this capacity comic book heroes operate as the solution to those social ills. This dynamic adds depth and texture to the characters as they rhetorically champion ideologies that are ostensibly part of the character’s persona.

My goal in this chapter is to engage with the different iterations of Luke Cage, beginning with his original incarnation and concluding with his most recent iterations. I use the aforementioned aesthetic criteria to interpret and critique how the character has been depicted and changed over time, retaining some of the previous incarnations attributes and new qualities in attempts to keep the character relevant and topical. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the character’s modern incarnation, situating the live action adaptation as a distilled version of Cage wherein it embodies characteristics that are not only informed by the modern era’s perceptions of their respective demographics, but draw from the years of material that has kept Cage relevant enough to warrant a mainstream television adaptation. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications for Luke Cage moving forward, and how he may be of use as a positive rhetorical symbol that address socio-cultural ills while maintaining narrative consistency.

Luke Cage: “I Am, Therefore I’m Bad”

The Reformed Buck

Luke Cage first appeared in the Marvel comic book *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* in June of 1972. The debut issue details the superhero origin of the character and positions Cage socio-culturally with intention. In this issue the reader learns that Cage, originally named Carl Lucas, was serving a prison sentence in Seagate Prison, an island facility off the coast of Georgia, for a
crime that he did not commit. Cage details how he was framed by a former friend named Willis Stryker over a dispute regarding a woman, and that the two worked together as street criminals in their youth until Cage decided to reform himself and lead a legitimate life. It is worth noting that the woman, named Reva, was murdered by accident during an attempt on Stryker’s life. This element of Cage’s backstory becomes an important part of how Cage relates to others in future narratives. The wrongful incarceration of a tall, broad, powerfully built and strong-willed Black American man speaks to social consciousness of the time and the fears of Civil Rights activists that the State was responsible for the systematic oppression of American minorities (Nama, 2011). However, while Cage’s status as an unjustly imprisoned African-American speaks to the conditions of the time that prompted the Civil Rights Movement, his social positioning constructed within the narrative is that of an outsider ostracized for not joining black activists within the prison. Cage’s position within the social environment of the prison as someone who will not join a demonstration being staged by black inmates leads his peers to label him as a “Tom” (Goodwin, 1972a, p. 3). Interestingly, Cage’s decision to refrain from joining the demonstration seems counter-intuitive as he has experienced a significant amount of abuse from Officer Rackham, an overtly racist white male corrections officer who unsuccessfully attempted to coerce Cage into betraying the activists. Rhetorically, Cage’s attitude conveys a message of respectability politics in the face of adversity as he resists oppression and abuse by authorities but refuses to engage in militant black activist behavior that would be displeasing to a mainstream white audience. Narratively this behavior establishes a component of Cage’s world-perspective that is consistently a part of the character across many, although not all, of his iterations: self-preservation. Cage’s lack of initial engagement and solidarity with other oppressed and abused Black Americans indicates an unwillingness to sacrifice for the sake of a
common good ostensibly because of his desire to avoid trouble so as to not jeopardize his chances of being released early from prison.

Additionally, in the first issue of the series is the explanation for how Cage received his powers. Desperate for an early parole, Cage volunteers for an experimental study performed by Dr. Noah Burstein after the doctor suggests that participation in the study could lead to an early release for Cage. During the process an enraged Officer Rackham attempts to kill Cage by tampering with the experiment, inadvertently causing the experiment to imbue Cage with super-human strength, accelerated-healing, and super-human durability while also causing the testing chamber to explode. In the aftermath used his new powers to break through the walls of the prison, only to fall into the ocean after being shot (but not harmed) by prison guards. As a result of his apparent death, Carl Lucas was reported as dead allowing the character to adopt a new identity as Luke Cage.

Within the first issue of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* are all of the elements of the character that are found within the first series and establish many enduring traits that have been defining attributes for the character until today. These characteristics include being, strong-willed, hyper-muscular, heterosexual male, that is prone to bouts of aggression. These qualities position Cage firmly as a Black Buck stereotype. Donald Bogle (2016) describes the Black Bucks as characters defined by barbarism, repressed-and-then-unleashed hyper-sexuality, the physical prowess of a feral animal, and motivated by instinct and base desire. Luke Cage displays many of these characteristics to a significant degree, however I assert that throughout the course of the initial series Cage adds nuance to an ordinarily heavy-handed stereotype, such that I label him as a “Reformed Buck”. Within the context of this chapter the term means that while Cage is in many ways steeped in the trappings of stereotypical representational norms of his demographic, he also
displays qualities that rhetorically function to subvert those same problematic traits and add some degree of depth even if only marginal at first. Moving forward, I will elaborate on the ways in which Cage adheres to the Black Buck stereotype and expand on the nature of his reformation and its rhetorical significance.

In the forward to the Marvel Masterwork special edition of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* writer Steve Englehart, who co-authored several issues of the original series, addresses how the initial inspiration for Cage came from characters depicted in the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s such as *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972) (Lendrum, 2005). True to form, the original iteration of Luke Cage spoke in a manner consistent with the jive-talking heroes of those films and adopted a similar style (Lendrum, 2005) with his exceedingly flashy costume: a canary-yellow shirt, silver chain belt with matching bracelets, and a silver tiara. Visually, this outfit added to the hyper-masculine aesthetic of the character as the tight clothes and perpetually unbuttoned shirt revealed super-human musculature far beyond that of the other non-powered humans in the comic. The belt and bracelets, which are visually almost identical to manacles, reinforce the Buck-aesthetic of Cage as they evoke notions of the slave trade that first brought Africans to the United States. The depiction of a hyper-muscular black man adorned in a chain with manacles that appears to be perpetually angry clearly conjures to mind racist fears of escaped male slaves avenging themselves by killing whites (Bogle, 2016).

However, to dismiss the character as a mere negative trope of black masculinity would be erroneous. During the narrative course of the first sixteen issues the character experiences a reformation of sorts that, while not entirely transformative, does develop the character beyond being a strong-arm mercenary fueled by self-preservation at the expense of others. Initially Cage is depicted as being motivated by financial gain and survival. As an escaped convict Cage found
himself in need of work and as the hero for hire, worked for many different people by using his talents to complete objectives for cash. In one instance Cage unwittingly worked for Dr. Doom, and when it was time for Cage’s compensation Dr. Doom identified himself and left Cage without having paid him (Englehart, 1973a). This prompted Cage to track down the supervillain and beat Dr. Doom savagely until he agreed to pay the “paltry $200” owed (Englehart, 1973b, p.11). What is perhaps most interesting about this story line is that not only does Cage track down Dr. Doom to the nation that he rules, Latveria, but during his pursuit of the money Cage discovers that Dr. Doom’s royal sentient robotic subjects are staging a revolt against the tyrant. The leader of the revolution attempts to enlist the aid of Cage by appealing to Cage’s sense of empathy by comparing the circumstance of the robot population to that of the African slaves of America. Cage is unmoved and feels no need to aid in the revolution, which speaks to his own emotional hardness, callous nature, and sense of self-interest. While this iteration of Cage never abandons his mercenary roots, he does open himself up to taking jobs out of concern for others resulting in ostensible charity. In issue #3 of *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* Cage encounters Dr. Burstein for the first time outside of prison. It is revealed that Dr. Burstein moved on from Seagate prison after the destruction of his lab and began working at a free community clinic in New York city. During a conversation with Cage, Dr. Burstein urges the former inmate to help people for free rather than charging them (Goodwin, 1972b, p.4). Cage dismisses the suggestion out of hand, preferring to use his new powers as a means of making a living. This narrative choice reinforces the character’s aesthetic by emphasizing Cage’s concerns with material survival rather than embracing altruism. While Cage does continue to work as a mercenary, he exhibits more noble characteristics that are indicative of reform in his narrative arc with the widow Mrs. Jenks.
In *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* issues #5, 10, 11, 14-16 the character Mrs. Jenks serves as a variation of the damsel in distress trope whom Cage aids. In terms of narrative opportunities for displaying Cage’s shift towards reformation, the arcs with Mrs. Jenks allow Cage to showcase investment in his community and the possibility for compassion that deviates from the Black Buck stereotype. In the first story arc with Mrs. Jenks she is widowed when her husband is murdered for an unknown reason by a group of criminals. This occurs in front of Cage who then offers to avenge Mr. Jenks’ death without charge, although he eventually and reluctantly agrees to accepting payment. Cage’s willingness to, and eventual success in, defeating the villain responsible for the death of Mr. Jenks while insisting that he not be compensated in any way for the endeavor illustrates the capacity for altruism within the character. This character trait, while not frequently exhibited in the early series, suggests that Cage differs from other larger-than-life heroes. Those types of characters often save communities from external threats while also operating from the position of an outsider; whereas in this case Cage is saving a member of a community that he belongs to as established by his backstory of having grown up in New York City. This positionality, often referred to as being a street-level hero similar to Daredevil who protects the New York City neighborhood of Hell’s Kitchen, imbues Cage with the rhetorical significance of being a symbol for the emergence of heroism from within an oppressed community rather than relying on external saviors.

In addition to avenging the death of Mr. Jenks, Cage helps Mrs. Jenks by protecting the widow from the aggressive sexual advances of Big Ben Donovan. Donovan, a large, powerfully, black adult male who also serves as Mrs. Jenks’ legal counsel, romantically pursues Mrs. Jenks and grows belligerent once the widow makes it known that she is not interested in a sexual relationship. This culminates in a fight between Cage and Donovan when the lawyer tracks down
Mrs. Jenks and finds her in Cage’s office (Englehart & Graham, 1973). Enraged at the notion of his date having not paid for any of the evening’s entertainment and not reciprocating his advances, Donovan assaults Cage believing that he is the widow’s romantic partner. The raucous conflict between the two operates as a commentary on the villainy of the Black Buck stereotype and its replacement by a nobler, if still problematic, version. Donovan embodies the Black Buck stereotype in terms of physical stature, hostility, and sexual aggression (Bogle, 2016). And while Cage is also characterized by his advanced physical stature visually and his inclination towards hostility and enacting violence, he deviates from the traditional stereotype in an important way: in this instance he is the protector of feminine sexuality as opposed to the Black Buck’s typical role as its defiler. By depicting Cage as triumphant over Donovan as a matter of virtue instead of being motivated by romantic or monetary compensation Cage illustrates a departure from the typical role of black masculinity within comic books. Specifically, he represents a heroic application of the Black Buck stereotype whose physical prowess and base motivations are geared towards goals that are nobler than personal gratification at the expense of the innocent. However, it must be noted that while Cage’s deviance from the mal intent that typically characterizes the trope works to distance the hero from traditional villainous black masculinity he also serves to aid in the evolution of the trope making it more palatable to a wider audience. Essentially, this iteration of Cage does not shed or break the stereotypes that have dehumanized black bodies for generations but instead modifies and repurposes the attributes towards benevolent ends. This makes the disparaging qualities that define the mono-dimensional character an ostensible cause for celebration as the hyper-muscular and brutish hero attempts to save the life of Mrs. Jenks (unsuccessfully) and defeat the resurfaced villain, former-officer Rackham from Seagate prison. The death of Mrs. Jenks at the hands of Rackham further
reinforces the character-defining pain experienced by Cage and pushes him further into the established Black Buck qualities as a man defined by suffering and anger. In short while this early iteration of Cage positions the hero as a new take on an established negative stereotype, the ultimate result is a character that merely repurposes those same problematic qualities. While this does represent a step away from villainous black masculinity, it also makes the trope more palatable to audiences that want to cheer for the character and does nothing to add depth, dimension, or correct misconceptions about black identity within popular culture.

**Only the Baddest Survive**

Over the course of Luke Cage’s publication history, the character has been reinvented multiple times across several different series. Each reinvention symbolizes a perspective on black masculinity that has been influenced by cultural perceptions of what constitutes blackness in relation to heroic masculinity. In this section I will address the development of Cage’s aesthetic as depicted across the 1980s, 90s, and early 2000s.

In the series *Power Man & Iron Fist*, which ran from 1978 until 1986, Luke Cage joined with Danny Rand/Iron Fist as heroes for hire based in New York City. The two made their living working for wealthy clients that visited their office located on 5th avenue, a significant change from Luke Cage’s 42nd street office in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*. Narratively and visually the juxtaposition of Rand and Cage worked to reinforce the Black Buck elements of Cage as his qualities are contrasted with those of Rand. To begin, Danny Rand is an adult White male, born to power, wealth, and prestige as the son of millionaire entrepreneur Wendell Rand. As the sole surviving member of his family and heir of his father’s business, Rand Corporation, Rand was entitled to wealth and privilege that starkly contrasted the poverty and struggle that characterized
Cage’s youth. The influence of their respective upbringings also factored into their superhero identities. Orphaned at a young age while in Tibet, Rand was adopted by monks from the ancient and mystic city of K’un-Lun where he studied their style of martial arts (Duffy, 1981). Rand learned mental and physical discipline, and eventually earned the right to the mantle of the Immortal Iron Fist the defender of K’un-Lun along with the mystical powers associated with the title. Cage however, developed his combat capabilities as a street brawler fighting in gangs with his bare fists. Rand’s abilities were rooted in the pursuit of enlightenment and an elevated existence, whereas Cage’s came from a lifetime of violence, crime, the pursuit of base desires and abuse by authority figures in the form of Seagate Prison and the experiment conducted by Dr. Burstein. Narratively these differences are manifested in the differences in their behavior wherein Rand is represented as calm, logical, and stable consistent with enlightenment values and white nobility represented elsewhere in media (Oh & Kutufam, 2014), and Cage is depicted as brutish, emotional, and prone to violence. For example, in Daredevil #178 (Miller, 1978) the duo utilizes a “good cop/bad cop” routine to intimidate a suspect, which features Cage acting as an intimidating figure that is barely restrained by the calm and rational Rand who uses the opportunity to glean information from the frightened suspect. While this act is staged for the sake of scaring the suspect into speaking, it is important to note that this behavior plays on the established perception of Cage being the “mean half” (Oneil, 1982) of the heroes for hire. Consistent with his behavior as a rough and abrasive character, Cage continued to be depicted as a hyper-muscular, violent behemoth whose clothes were often ripped and torn during combat. By using a narrative justification for removing Cage’s clothing the artists were afforded the opportunity to reveal his advanced musculature during and post combat. The trope of constantly depicting Cage in a revealing manner also served to objectify the character by emphasizing the
potential for sexuality consistent with techniques used in pin-up photography (Scott, 2015). His frequent state of undress combined with his established heterosexuality as evidenced by his romantic relationship with Harmony Young, the fashion model that Cage is romantically involved with during *Power Man & Iron Fist*.

Cage’s hulking figure combined with his reputation for being aggressive, his narratively and visually emphasized sexuality, and inclination towards emotion-based decisions only serve to reinforce his status as a black buck. The clear and present contrast between Cage’s primitive attributes Rand’s enlightened qualities not only serve to denigrate the nature of black masculinity as constructed within the comics, they also highlight the value and aspirational standard of white rationality. While Rand is a flawed character and occasionally exhibits personality flaws, he is clearly depicted as the intellectual leader of the duo. Ultimately, even without the presence of Rand’s calm, white rationality, Cage development as a character is marginal during his time in *Power Man & Iron Fist* as he consistently displays the same base motivations exhibited in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire*. This continuation of the black aesthetic within this particular Marvel Character speaks to the perceptions of the commercial viability of this genre of blackness. In essence, the years between the creation of Luke Cage and the finale of *Power Man & Iron Fist* witnessed the solidification of the black heroic aesthetic into a form that served white audiences at the expense of dimensional representation. Next, I will address how Cage’s various incarnations affected the composition of his black aesthetic and how those changes reflect shifting perspectives on what constitutes black masculinity.

After the conclusion of *Power Man & Iron Fist* in 1986, Cage did not headline his own series until his reintroduction in 1992 in the series titled *Cage*. From that series until his most recent comic book iteration in the 2017 series *Luke Cage*, the black aesthetic of the character has
shifted and evolved in dramatic ways. While the different iterations draw from the aesthetic aspects established in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* as well as *Power Man & Iron Fist*, the manifestations vary in terms of complexity and ideological-bearing. In some cases, this came in the form of progress and character growth that indicated a more complex perspective on the racialized identity of the hero, and in some cases the shifts in aesthetic were backwards as the authors and artists relied on heavy-handed and reductive tropes that facilitated demeaning perceptions of blackness. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss the different iterations, the development of Cage’s black aesthetic, and the rhetorical implications of these different incarnations of the character.

The 1992 series *Cage* depicted the character as a hero retained by the newspaper the *Chicago Spectator*, based in Chicago, Illinois where Cage worked as a security agent for hire. The arrangement between Cage and the *Chicago Retainer* involves the newspaper paying Cage to allow a journalist to follow him as he responds to various crises that require the intervention of a powered individual. Cage’s penchant for violent work was explicated in the first issue where the narrator detailed his childhood as a street fighter who went to prison. The narrator emphasizes that, “the boy went to prison, and became a man” (McLaurin, 1992a, p.1). The visual aesthetic of Cage in this series is different from his previous incarnation and emphasizes a 1990s urban style (McLaurin, 1992a). In keeping with the previous series, the character is depicted as tall and possessing advanced musculature that, while not as exaggerated as in *Power Man & Iron Fist*, still sets him apart as larger and ostensibly stronger than those around him. His costume was also modified as he dressed in a red shirt, black jacket, blue jeans, boots, and a steel waistband that matched the steel manacles around his calves. This difference in appearance visually distinguishes the character from his career as Power Man, a name that he rejects whenever he is
addressed in that way. Similar to how the authors and artists attempt to distinguish this version of Cage from previous series, this iteration of Cage frequently attempts to set himself apart from his criminal history. Often within the narratives of the series Cage is described as a criminal, particularly by journalists who take opportunities to slander Cage as a villain (McLaurin, 1992c), or as an outlaw hero (McLaurin, 1992d). While this character attempted to vindicate himself as a legitimate businessman, his black aesthetic, though modified, still relied heavily on previously established themes established in earlier comics and do little to advance the character beyond the Black Buck stereotype.

There are two examples in particular that emphasize how Cage is depicted as a Black Buck, and both involve villains. The first was the juxtaposition of Cage and the villain codenamed: Hardcore, a lithe and lethal henchman who served as Cage’s antithesis: he did not possess superpowers, he was slight of build, and was exceedingly intelligent. Hardcore was characterized as an intellectual strategist while Cage functioned as a “creature of pure instinct” (McLaurin, 1992a, p. 18). The few similarities between the two were that they were both adult black males with inclinations towards violence, although even in that aspect they differed as Cage refrained from killing while Hardcore found no issue with taking lives. The starkest contrast between the characters being their differences in intellect, with Cage perpetually depicted as prone to anger and violence in keeping with the Black Buck stereotype (Bogle, 2016) rather than thinking problems through. The narrative elements of the comics reinforced this point by having Cage fall into Hardcore’s traps on several occasions such as when Cage was lured into Colorado and ensnared in a laboratory where Dr. Burstein was being forced to replicate the experiment that produced Cage (McLaurin, 1992b). The second example of Cage being illustrated as a Black Buck is the visual aspect of the narrative arcs. Particularly during combat
such as his encounter with the villain Power Master (McLaurin, 1993b). The villain is an adult black male who has powers similar to Cage’s, and their battle in *Cage* #12 (McLaurin, 1993b) exemplifies a recurring visual theme in Cage’s comics up to this point: hyper-muscular black bodies that are often revealed; in this instance Cage did not have a shirt and Power Master wore only his underwear.

The narrative element of Cage being noticeably less intelligent than his adversaries and the visual element of his hyper-muscular, and by implication threatening, black body combined with his penchant for aggressive behavior and constant state of anger depicted throughout the series create a black aesthetic completely consistent with that of the Black Buck. However, there is a point of departure from this stereotype that recurs throughout some of his future iterations that positions the character narratively as a community hero and adds depth to the character in a way that deviates from this problematic stereotype: Cage as a caretaker of black youth. A narrative arc that appears periodically in the series is the plight of a young black boy nicknamed Troop who is without a support system. Cage’s concern for the boy is motivated by his desire to keep Troop from turning into a violent youth living on the street the way that Cage did in his childhood (McLaurin, 1993a). At this point in the character’s development this aspect is still in its germinal stage. While the contribution is minor the introduction of this quality signifies the beginning of a shift for Cage from being a superficially reformed buck to a community hero, a theme that will be explored later in this section. Even though the development within the context of this narrative is minor, it is a significant piece of information that informs how I ultimately answer the question of how Cage’s identity invites the audience to understand black masculinity.

The *Cage* series ran from April of 1992 until November of 1993, and it wouldn’t be until November of 2002 that the hero for hire would headline his own series again. Until then he only
appeared in titles that were headlined by other characters, most notably the series *Alias* (2001). Cage’s aesthetic in the series heavily relies on themes related to blackness that have been established thus far in his publication history. Cage continues to be monetarily inclined. He owns a bar and continues to work as a security agent, this time protecting Matthew Murdock (the public alias of Daredevil) (Bendis, 2002). While the artistic style of the *Alias* series is much more rooted in realistic depictions of the human form than other comic book art-styles, this version of Cage still exhibits advanced musculature and definition compared to the illustrations of other characters within the series. *Alias* is a part of the MAX imprint of Marvel comics which serves as a sub-brand of Marvel where authors and illustrators are permitted to utilized more mature themes than are typically allowed in mainstream Marvel comic books. As such, Cage’s sexuality is expressed in his one-night stand with the protagonist of *Alias*, superpowered private investigator Jessica Jones, as well as frequent references to his other sexual partners which include but are not limited to other superpowered individuals such as She-Hulk (Bendis, 2001b; Bendis, 2002).

While this iteration maintains much of the Black Buck physical and psychological characteristics, going so far as to style himself “the scariest ni**a ever was” (Bendis, 2001a), there exists within this narrative a departure from traditional emotional callousness and self-serving inclinations established within previous series. Specifically, in *Alias* #25 and #26 Cage provides emotional support for the hardened and traumatized Jessica Jones. Over the course of these two issues Jones relates her harrowing history with the mind-controlling villain Killgrave/The Purple Man who dominated her psychologically for eight months. In this scene that stretched two issues Cage listened thoughtfully and attempted to console Jones and the guilt she felt for the actions he forced her to commit including an attempt on the life of the Avenger,
Scarlet Witch. In this scene Cage is depicted as visibly moved by her story and offered to attack Killgrave on her behalf. This response, while a nod to his Black Buckesque behavior, indicates that the character as depicted in *Alias* is capable of real emotional connection in a manner that until this point had been reserved for his friendship with Daniel Rand. This interaction facilitated an emotional bond between the two which prompted another interaction in *Alias* #28 when Cage confronted the private investigator with his feelings for her. Of particular note in this interaction is another departure from the established aesthetic of Cage, his demeanor. A component of the black aesthetic in fiction is the coolness or hipness of black characters (Howard, 2014) and Cage is no different, although the manifestations of his coolness especially in regard to his use of colloquialisms and slang terminology could be characterized as at least curious and at most a clear misrepresentation of an urban dialect. Cage’s proclamation of his love for Jones is neither cool nor in keeping with the established qualities associated with the Black Buck. Rather he is verbally clumsy and emotionally vulnerable. During this conversation Jones reveals that she is pregnant with his child and the two agree to make a life together. Relative to the research question at hand, this shift towards a more emotionally authentic and paternal Cage invites the audience to perceive black masculinity beyond the stereotypes of absentee fatherhood and selfish sexual gratification. As such, this point in the narrative helps to create a more dimensional representation of the black masculine aesthetic.

These moments of sincerity and emotional vulnerability exist in stark contrast to the iteration of the character when he headlines his own series in 2002, the MAX imprint *Cage* authored by Brian Azzarello and Richard Corben. This limited series ran for five issues and depicted a Cage that relied heavily on the Black Buck aesthetic by being hyper-muscular, aggressive, motivated by sex and money, and dressed in a manner consistent with pop-culture
representations of the hip-hop gangster aesthetic (Nama, 2011). In essence, this character represented a version of blackness conceptualized through a lens of whiteness wherein the character is little more than muscle for hire that seeks to profit from engaging in violence and taking advantage of the chaos generated by warring criminal factions. This iteration of the character is particularly problematic as the conceptualization of the black aesthetic reduces Cage from being a character with a moral compass that is capable of empathy to being little more than an opportunistic creature that takes advantage of unfortunate conditions. This depiction is consistent with real-world news media representations of black criminality where members of black communities are portrayed as opportunistic and self-serving during moments of crisis (Lacy & Haspel, 2011).

After the conclusion of Cage (2002), the character appeared as a recurring prominent character in author Brian Michael Bendis’ series New Avengers (2004-2010) and The New Avengers (2010-2012). Cage features in both series as a prominent, if not primary, character. By this I mean that while he often appears as a part of, or in some cases leading, the superhero team codenamed The Avengers, he is not always depicted in the forefront narratively or graphically in the same capacity as Iron Man or Captain America. The iteration of Cage created by Bendis does rely on previously established themes while modifying the black aesthetic of the character particularly in terms of his sexuality and how he relates to women. Consistent with the series Alias, Cage is initially seen working for Matthew Murdock as a bodyguard as Murdock and his business partner Franklin Nelson visit a prison for supervillains at the request of Reed Richards. During their visit the prison is sabotaged, and the prisoners escape which led to one of the earliest examples of how Cage’s black aesthetic from previous iterations was reinforced. During a battle between several heroes and the newly freed prisoners Cage came into conflict with
Killgrave and proceeded to beat the man viscously for what the villain had done to Jessica Jones and for threatening their child Danielle. It is strongly implied that were it not for the intervention of Captain America, Cage would have killed The Purple Man (Bendis, 2005a). Yet again the external interjection of white rationality was needed to temper the brutal nature of the Black Buck, similar to when Iron Man kept Cage from killing an opponent in *Cage* (1992) (McLaurin, 1992c).

Through a series of events that were precipitated by the prison break Cage finds himself recruited by Captain America to join the newly reformed Avengers team. Interestingly, the interaction with Captain America illustrates a departure from previous iterations. When Captain America asks Cage to join the Avengers he makes it clear that it is a volunteer position without pay. Cage agrees, which indicates a shift in the character’s development as generally he is motivated by profit and not charity. It is important to note that Cage agrees to join the team with one condition, that his voice be heard and respected (Bendis, 2005a). This demand, which Captain America agrees to, is symbolic for reasons related to race and social class. Rhetorically the two heroes represent very different social positions. Historically Captain America has served as a champion for the working-middle class of America and has often occupied a position of formal power within the United States government. His superpowers are not merely his physical capabilities but also his whiteness in terms of the privileges of power and social capital associated with his skin and formalized through his affiliation with the highest levels of society. Luke Cage rhetorically symbolizes a very different group of people within American social strata. Cage represents not the working-middle class but the working-poor of the United States, the Black Americans relegated to the type of poor neighborhoods that were subjected to the sort of crime that sustained Cage as a young man when he fought in a gang. As heroes the two are
also distinctly separate in terms of their social strata. From the beginning of his publication history Captain America has been tasked with matters of national security, fighting against enemies of the United States before later saving the planet from internal and external threats. Cage, however, is typically positioned as a street-level hero along with characters such as Iron Fist, Daredevil, and Jessica Jones. Captain America may save the United States from international or intergalactic threats, but Luke Cage aids the citizens often forgotten about by such grand-scale heroes. When considering these aspects of the characters it then becomes significant for a man that is Captain America’s social and heroic inferior to make a demand of him, especially one that asserts dignity, respect, and authority. As such, this interaction symbolizes an assertion of the value of blackness in the face of a white superstructure.

Cage’s rhetorical visual aesthetic has shifted over the course of Bendis’ tenure with the character, often changing based on the illustrators that were teamed with Bendis. As with previous iterations, these aesthetic shifts in how Luke Cage is depicted invite the audience to make certain assumptions about the character relative to his intersectional identity as a black man. The clothing has at times involved different combinations of caps, do-rags, suits, jeans, boots, sneakers, earrings, gold necklace, yellow or black shirts, and various forms of facial hair, yet the aesthetic was always essentially the same: normal human clothing that stood in stark comparison to the outlandish outfits of his colleagues. Cage’s refusal to use some sort of vibrant or flashy costume and a codename like his peers symbolizes a grounded-ness that is perhaps not shared by his teammates. This narratively reinforces the perception that while Cage is equal to the task of working alongside global-scale superheroes, his roots are within the community that produced him. In particular, his refusal to use a codename implies that the character is comfortable being approached by ordinary civilians in a way that his peers often are not; this
makes Cage accessible to the public and reaffirms his identity as a member of his society that is capable of championing them rather than acting as an outside agent or savior in the way that a character such as Iron Man might. The implication being that the heroic personality traits Cage displays are inherently tied to the community that he comes from and openly identifies: poor Black American neighborhoods. The rhetorical value of connecting a public superhero who dresses in an ordinary manner to the black masculine identity and larger black community is that it offers a narrative logic for the audience to accept: that blackness can be synonymous with heroism and that heroism can be found within minority communities. Therefore, towards answering the initial research question for this chapter, we see that these iterations of cage continue to advance a more dimensional approach to representing black masculinity that while not perfect certain deviates from stereotypes of criminality and base motivations.

While the art styles used to depict Cage illustrate an advanced (beyond normal human) musculature rather than a hyper (exceedingly beyond normal human) physicality, his size is nonetheless emphasized visually. In comparison, Cage is larger than all of his New Avenger teammates with the exception of Captain America. During a mission to the Savage Land when the New Avengers were captured there were several depictions of the team, Spider-Woman, Spider-Man, Iron-Man, Wolverine, Captain America, and Luke Cage, bound and stripped naked (Bendis, 2005b). In these scenes it is clear that Captain America and Luke Cage are of relatively equal size and overshadow the rest of their teammates, most of whom possess advanced musculature and physiology. The visual equivalence of the two characters elevates Cage’s black physical aesthetic to being comparable to Captain America who rhetorically functions as a prominent symbol of white masculinity (Dittmer, 2013). Therefore, the art style, while still referential of the Black Buck, subverts the stereotype by normalizing Cage’s size relative to
Captain America who often serves as a standard of heroism. While I generally consider the
equivocation of Luke Cage and Captain America as a positive rhetorical element of the narrative,
there is also an implication in this comparison of the differences between whiteness and
blackness in terms of aesthetic and power. When Captain America is stripped of his costume he
becomes Steve Rogers, and while Rogers is a capable man in his own right he is not as imposing
and threatening as Captain America. However, because he does not wear a costume Luke Cage is
always threatening, imposing, and potentially dangerous. Luke Cage does not possess an alter
ego that is less dangerous that his superhero persona, as is the case with Steve Rogers and
Captain America. Rather, he is perpetually dangerous and so in moments such as this when the
other white heroes are illustrated as vulnerable as signified by being naked the same cannot be
said of Cage. It is because his superhero identity is so closely tied to his black aesthetic that he
still visually communicates a message of dangerous potential that supports existing stereotypes
regarding blackness and violence.

One prominent shift in Cage’s black aesthetic is that of his sexuality. Consistent with his
publication history up to this point Cage remains heterosexual. Throughout his publication
history the character has dated almost exclusively women of color such as Dr. Claire Temple,
Harmony Young, and Reva Connors. However, there are two notable exceptions, Jennifer
Walter/She-Hulk whom he dated briefly, and Jessica Jones whom he married in *New Avengers
Annual* #1 (Bendis, 2006). Cage’s relationship with Jones was referential of the Black Buck
stereotype as a component of the trope is the Buck’s sexual desire for white female bodies,
however the similarities end there. The relationship between Jones and Cage subverts
problematic ideologies regarding black paternity such as irresponsible fatherhood (Tyree, Byerly,
& Hamilton, 2011) and misogynist gender dynamics. This is exhibited within the comics on
multiple occasions. In terms of absentee fatherhood, Cage elects to begin a relationship with Jones once she reveals that she is pregnant with her child. Regarding the gender dynamics within their relationship, traditional gender roles are sometimes exhibited such as when Yelen Belova attacked the Avengers and Jones and their infant daughter Danielle hid indoors along with Spider-Man’s aunt May and his wife Mary Jane. However, elsewhere the couple have been depicted fighting side-by-side, such as in *New Avengers* #3 when the Avengers fought against demonic entities invading New York City. It is important to note that Jones left NYC to take their daughter to safety and then returned to aid in the battle, doing so in time to rescue her husband as he was being crushed beneath the weight of interdimensional enemies. From that point forward the two operated in a collaborative manner for the duration of the battle. Moments such as this illustrate that while the two represent a superhero parallel to the nuclear family, Cage operates from a perspective of sharing power within the relationship not often associated with popular culture representations of black masculinity that feature misogyny (Oware, 2010).

In 2016 writer and animator Genndy Tartakovsky, whose creations include the popular cartoons *Dexter’s Laboratory* and *Samurai Jack*, co-wrote and illustrated the comic book series *Cage!* featuring the heroic ex-convict. The limited-series lasted four issues, and similar to *Cage* (2002) the comic relied heavily on elements of the Black Buck stereotype. Set in 1977, the series creates a black aesthetic for Cage wherein he is depicted as excessively aggressive and hyper-muscular (Tartakovsky, 2016a). Cage’s capabilities are characterized as animalesque which reinforces the savagery associated with the Black Buck and works to reinforce the escape-slave motif as the descriptors are used as Cage is hunted through a jungle and ultimately captured (Tartakovsky, 2016b). Additionally, Cage’s sexuality is exaggerated in a manner that is entirely superfluous in the form of the cover for *Cage!* #3 (Tartakovsky, 2016c) where he is illustrated as
standing and smirking while three scantily clad women, who have nothing to do with the story as indicated by the captioning on the cover, cling to Cage or pose next to him. The visual is referential of blaxploitation films wherein the hyper-sexuality of the protagonist is emphasized while simultaneously characterizing the hero as motivated by base desires consistent with the Black Buck. In essence, this series is socio-culturally regressive in terms of developing Luke Cage’s black aesthetic and does little to speak to the roots of the character as a hero of the community beyond referencing Cage’s street-identity as credit for his ability to win in hand-to-hand combat (Tartakovsky, 2016d).

The most current iteration of the character in the comic book format is *Luke Cage*, written by David Walker. As this is an ongoing series the aesthetic of the character will undoubtedly shift and develop over time. For the purposes of this research I have examined the first collected edition of the series, *Luke Cage Vol. 1: Sins of the Father*, which collects issues #1-5. In this series Cage’s character and black aesthetic are conceptualized in a manner that recognizes blackness beyond the visual element of the narrative and develops his dimensionality as a community hero. Visually, Cage’s aesthetic has shifted minorly from his iterations within *New Avengers* (2004) and *The New Avengers* (2010). The character wears plainclothes attire, reinforcing his identity as a grounded hero with a public identity. While he still possesses an advanced musculature, he is still within the boundaries of normal human stature if on the larger end of the spectrum. In terms of Cage’s personality, the character’s aesthetic is developed through two primary narrative elements: his relationship with his creator Dr. Burstein, and his relationship with black youth.

While the relationship between Cage & Dr. Burstein has been a recurring element within the comics, its nature has shifted and fit the whims of each author’s intent. For example, in the
original series *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* the relationship between the two was represented as a reluctant friendship born of circumstance as Dr. Burstein attempted, often unsuccessfully, to advise Cage regarding the application of his abilities. Yet in *Cage* (2002) the protagonist depicts Dr. Burstein in a negative light, characterizing the man as a racist mad scientist who possessed no moral qualms with experimenting on black people (Azzarello & Corben, 2002). This series represents the relationship as that of a father-son dynamic with Dr. Burstein positioned as the father that is responsible for the creation of Luke Cage at the expense of Carl Lucas. This plot point serves as a narrative device to facilitate the development of Cage’s critical consciousness relative to his creation and subsequent purpose in life. It is worth noting that this also illustrates a significant departure from the original iteration of Cage, his considerable intelligence. Previous iterations of Cage have treated his intellect as manifesting in being instinctual (McLaurin, 1992a), deductive and street-smart, or generally lacking (Englehart, 1973c). However, this series conceptualizes Cage’s intellect as capable of existential examination. The series involves Cage travelling to New Orleans, LA for the funeral of Dr. Burstein, to pay respect to the man whom he considers a father-figure. Over the course of the narrative Cage learns that Dr. Burstein is in fact alive and has been experimenting on young black boys from the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. During an interaction with Dr. Burstein, Cage watches him treat the wounds of the villainous Warhawk, Dr. Burstein’s first super-human creation. During the procedure Cage is shocked by Dr. Burstein’s references to Warhawk as a specimen rather than a human being. This, combined with the revelation that Dr. Burstein is alive even though Cage was led to believe that he had died, along with the new information that Dr. Burstein had continued his experiments on young black youth, prompts Cage to reflect on his relationship with the scientist and reconsider what he knows about the man as well as himself.
“Noah Burstein is alive. He didn’t commit suicide. He wasn’t murdered. He’s alive, performing surgery on the first person he experimented on. I watch him. I listen to him. I realize I’ve never seen the big picture when it comes to Noah Burstein. And that’s when it hits me—harder than anything has ever hit me before—not like the Hulk punching you in the face, but like the Hulk smashing your soul…I don’t really know Noah Burstein—I don’t know the truth of him, just bits and pieces of a truth. Those bits and pieces of who I thought Noah Burstein was are tied to the core of who I am. But if I don’t know the truth of who Burstein really is…how can I know who I really am? Warhawk is one of the craziest people I’ve ever met…but he’s still a person. To hear Burstein talk about him…makes me wonder what Burstein really thinks of me. I thought I knew…I thought I knew Burstein. What he thought of me. I believed him. I believed him when he said I was like a son to him. I believed it when he said I was special. Now I don’t know what to believe—about Noah Burstein…or about myself.” (Walker, 2017c, p.4-6)

This encounter between Cage and Dr. Burstein culminates in an argument between the two when the scientist asserts that he is responsible for making Cage the man he is, and the hero argues that ultimately it was his own decisions that made Cage into the person he is currently:

Burstein: “Where would you be without me, Luke? You would be nothing more than what you were—wasted potential living out his life as a thug, either still in prison or dead. You’d be nothing without me—I made you the man you are!

Cage: “You made me?! Let me break it down for you…you experimented on me. You gave me some really inspiring pep talks from time to time. But make me? You. Did. Not. Make. Me. I made myself. Right or wrong—everything I did was because I chose to do it.
I’ll give you credit for the experiment and what that did to me…but what I did with myself, what I did with my life…that was me. I never asked for these super-powers, but I’ve done the best I could with ‘em.” (Walker, 2017c, p. 11-12)

The conflict between the two characters expresses Cage’s black aesthetic in a manner that includes the desire and ability to self-actualize despite the circumstances of his origin. Rhetorically this argument between Cage and Dr. Burstein resists the ideology of the white man’s burden, which argues that it is the moral responsibility of white civilized societies to seize control of bodies of color and that without that form of intervention non-white societies would squander their potential (Brantlinger, 2007). Cage’s assertion that he is responsible for his own successes and failures, while acknowledging Dr. Burstein’s role in the creation of his superhero persona, incorporates black emancipation and self-actualization into the character’s aesthetic. Dr. Burstein’s refusal to acknowledge Cage’s role in the development of his identity represents the perspective that without the guidance of a superior (read: white) Cage would have wasted his potential. Cage’s refutation of this ideology also represents a departure from the father-son relationship between the two and the implicit power dynamic that characterizes such a dyad. Cage’s re-conceptualization of their relationship also removes the power imbalance, as he shifts from a character who has succeeded because of his powers to a character that has succeeded due to his own decision making, effectively minimizing the role Dr. Burstein played in his narrative.

Cage’s connection to the Black American community is revisited and expounded upon within this series, as he works to overthrow an institution reliant on white dominance and the subjugation of black bodies. This theme of white dominance is established visually in the beginning of the series. In issue #1 (Walker, 2017a) Cage attempted to protect a woman from assailants and believed himself equal to the task of repelling the three attackers. However, during
the conflict one individual, a white adult male, produced a weapon that functioned both as a sword and a bladed whip. The man proceeded to whip Cage, lacerating the hero’s nearly unbreakable skin until he is left bleeding in the street as the three villains escape. The visual of a black man being whipped by a white man to the point of collapse, particularly in a Southern state such as Louisiana, evokes the imagery of slavery and sets the tone of the narrative as pertaining to the exploitation and abuse of black bodies.

As previously mentioned Dr. Burstein used young black men from New Orleans’ Ninth Ward for his experiments. The reason for doing so was to perfect the Burstein Process which creates a dangerous side effect within the patients, and uncontrollable rage. The only exception to this side effect was Luke Cage. The youths, who possess enhanced abilities similar to Cage, were then used by Mr. Morgan, Dr. Burstein’s employer and captor, for his own criminal enterprises. The self-styled Ninth Ward Mafia, led by Kevin Larson/KevLar, consists of these young black men that have been experimented on and abandoned by society. KevLar displays an acute awareness of the power dynamic between the Ninth Ward Mafia and their employer, Mr. Morgan, as well as Dr. Burstein. KevLar characterizes Dr. Burstein as a mad scientist that used them as “guinea pigs” (Walker, 2017b) for his own reasons. KevLar is also particularly suspicious of the business arrangement between his gang and Mr. Morgan, asserting that “He ain’t lookin’ to do bidness wit’ us…he lookin’ to own some negroes to do his dirty work” (Walker, 2017c, p.7). When questioned by one of his subordinates he elaborates that,

“Mr. Filthy-Rich-Moneybags give us mad paper to clean up his mess for him—to kill for him—but he ain’t give us no cure for the craziness. That makes us slaves two times over—and I ain’t lookin’ to be a slave.” (Walker, 2017c, p.7)
This recurring narrative theme of slavery and the exploitation of black bodies helps to create an ethical division between the oppressors, Dr. Burstein and Mr. Morgan, and the oppressed, the Ninth Ward Mafia. Cage firmly places himself on the side of the oppressed, not only by breaking away from the father-son dyadic relationship between himself and Dr. Burstein as referenced earlier, but also when he chooses to empathize with KevLar and act as a comforter for the traumatized youth. In issue #4 (Walker, 2017c) the Ninth Ward Mafia are ambushed and slaughtered by Mr. Morgan’s mercenaries, until KevLar eventually kills them. At that point Cage and KevLar confront each other, and Cage is struck by the realization that he is “face to face with what I might’ve been” (Walker, 2017c, p. 21). In this moment KevLar serves as an inverted looking-glass image of Cages’ youth, and what he might have become had he returned to his habits as a young street-fighter. This moment appears to set up for a clash between Black Bucks, pitting Cage against KevLar. However, what follows in issue #5 deviates significantly from that expectation and creates a moment that dramatically shifts Cage’s black aesthetic. As the bloodlust triggered by the Burstein Process wears away from KevLar, Cage decided to wait and see how the youth behaves. The gang leader was then overwhelmed with emotion as he realized that all of his friends were dead, prompting him to kneel beside the remains of one of his friends. Rather than apprehending the young man as previous iterations of Cage might have, he takes the opportunity to kneel beside KevLar and console him. Cage attempts to ease his suffering, saying “It’s gonna be all right.” KevLar responds, “No, it ain’t. They’re dead—all my boys. Ain’t a thing gonna be all right.” (Walker, 2017d, p. 5). This arc of empathizing, consoling, and later mentoring KevLar firmly reinforces Cage’s role as a community hero that actively aids exploited, troubled youth of color. While his role as a mentor only lasts for the duration of issue #5 as the two defeat Mr. Morgan, Cage’s attempt to guide KevLar instead of turning him in to
the authorities speaks to a level of personal and emotional investment in the young man that would not have been characteristic of earlier iterations of the character.

Relative to the research question for this chapter, this newest iteration of Cage speaks to the development, growth, and shift in the character’s black masculine aesthetic that rhetorically functions to invite the audience to recognize a more dimensional representation of black masculinity. Over the course of this subsection I have traced the developing aesthetic of the character, from a reformed Black Buck that was motivated by base desires such as money, selfish interest, and sexual attraction, to a character that has become a more actualized version that is faithful to the original intent of the character: a community hero. In the following section I will examine his live-action adaptation in the Netflix series *Luke Cage* and how that depiction of the character functions as a distilled version of the hero that speaks to modern perceptions of the black masculine aesthetic.

**The Holey Hoodie**

The narrative continuity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is entirely its own, meaning that the characters and their arcs may or may not conform to previously established canonical storylines, behaviors, or even superpowers. I assert that because the characters of the MCU, which includes the Netflix series titles such as *Daredevil, Luke Cage, and Jessica Jones*, are not directly beholden to the continuity of the comic books, they represent distilled versions of the characters composed of previously established elements of the characters combined with current ideological perspectives of their races, socio-economic classes, and genders. Operating with this assertion in mind, I posit that the black aesthetic found within Marvel’s Netflix series *Luke Cage* represents a distilled version of the character, a composite made of ostensibly
desirable qualities taken from previous iterations and legitimized as being consistent with current
perspectives of the black masculine aesthetic. As with the previous subsection, I will examine
and critique the following elements of Cage’s black aesthetic: the narrative arc of the series;
Cage’s physicality and sexuality expressed visually and narratively; and the qualities/
characteristics that make up the superhero. I address these elements of Cage’s aesthetic within
three different manifestation: Cage’s origin story, Cage as a sexual entity, and Cage as a
community hero.

Luke Cage’s origin story in many ways aligns with the canonical comic book iteration.
Consistent with the comic book, Cage finds himself incarcerated in Seagate prison, an island
facility located off of the coast of Georgia. Also, consistent with the comic, Cage finds himself
the target of abuse by Officer Rackham motivated by personal-interest and racial animus.
However, the means in which this manifested indicates a departure from the canonical story in
favor of an arc that illustrates Cage’s capacity to fulfill the Black Buck stereotype. Within the
Netflix series Cage is coerced by Rackham to become a combatant in an illegally operated
fighting club that is streamed online for profit. Cage is leveraged into fighting in order to protect
his fellow inmate Squabbles and later Reva, a group therapist that working at Seagate for whom
Cage develops romantic feelings (Murray & Natali, 2016). During Cage’s time in the
underground fight club he develops a reputation for being nearly undefeatable and exhibits
significant character changes. Cage stops showering, cutting his hair, and becomes vicious
during the fights such that his coach Squabbles suggests that Cage may be losing perspective of
his identity (Murray & Natali, 2016a). While Cage’s descent into barbarism is temporary it
illustrates the character’s capacity for violence and disregard for the suffering of his victims
which is a trait consistent with the Black Buck stereotype and hyper-masculinity within the comic book genre.

Within both versions of the origin story Cage is targeted for participation in Dr. Burstein’s experimental process because of his physiology. In issue #1 of Luke Cage, Hero for Hire Dr. Burstein indicates that he is looking for a “unique breed of man” (Goodwin, 1972a, p.8) and that Cage is “ideally suited” (Goodwin, 1972a, p. 14) for the experiment. This theme of Cage being physically exceptional, with the addition of psychological strength, is repeated in the series (Taylor & Shankland, 2016) as the justification for his selection for the process. However, a key departure between the two narratives is the matter of Cage’s willingness. Within the comic book Cage agrees to volunteer for the process, although the decision is made under the duress of incarceration along with the possible reward of parole (Goodwin, 1972a). In the Netflix series Cage does not volunteer for the program, rather Reva demands that he be subjected to the process as an attempt to save his life after a beating from Rackham’s henchmen, inmates Hernan “Shades” Alvarez and “Comanche”, leave Cage mortally wounded. Both narratives exhibit a fetishization of the black body and its physical capabilities, a trope rooted in the dehumanization of black identity.

The experimentation on Cage’s body without his consent in the Netflix series is reminiscent of the historical exploitation of black communities in the United States by the scientific community. Instances of this type of treatment include the Tuskegee Study where African-American men with syphilis were studied without their consent and intentionally denied the appropriate treatment for the purpose of advancing medical science (The Tuskegee timeline, n.d.). This aspect of Cage’s origin story in the Netflix series expounds upon the previously addressed theme within the comic of the relationship between the creator (Dr. Burstein) and the
created (Luke Cage), highlighting the rhetorical message of Cage defining himself as being a refutation of whiteness and the notion of black success owing credit to white influence. That Cage did not consent to the project, nor was ever made aware of his role as a potential participant until afterwards, means that Cage’s actions moving forward from the traumatic event represent progress despite exploitation. Cage did not volunteer for the experiment in the way that Steve Rogers did out of a sense of altruism and exceptional valor that existed prior to the process that produced Captain America. This iteration of Cage had and extraordinary circumstance foisted upon him that could have resulted in his demise, and once proven successful could have become the impetus for a return to a life of criminality. Cage indicates having led a life of crime prior to being sentenced to Seagate, saying “I’m guilty of a lot of things that people will never know about” (Murray & Natali, 2016).

The qualitative similarities between the comic book and Netflix series along with the narrative differences that were incorporated into the show emphasize a theme addressed earlier in this chapter: the notion of the reformed Black Buck. This theme of redemption for black masculinity is reliant on narrative tropes and stereotypical themes that characterize this identity as criminal with a deep capacity for brutality. However, in the proceeding pages of this section I will discuss the ways in which this problematic aesthetic is subverted and repurposed relative to Cage’s identity as a heterosexual entity and as a community hero where his redemption is actualized.

Luke Cage has appeared within the MCU’s Netflix television ventures across three different shows, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and The Defenders. In these different series the MCU has depicted Cage as romantically involved with Jessica Jones, Reva Connors, Claire Temple, and Misty Knight, all of whom have been romantically involved with Cage in the comic book
continuity. Often within popular media black masculine sexuality is problematically stereotyped as sexually aggressive, whether in terms of mild behavior such as flirting and pursuing a potential partner, or overtly demanding the submission of women; these characteristics are all referential of the Black Buck stereotype (Lendrum, 2005). Within the context of the Netflix series all of Cage’s romantic partnerships exist relative to his relationship with Reva Connors, the therapist he meets while in Seagate Prison and the woman who aids in the establishment of his new life after he gains superpowers. Connors is established as a primary meaningful connection for Cage during his time in, and after, Seagate Prison. His relationship with Connors allows for the expression of deep emotional investment in another person, facilitated by the group therapy sessions as well as their conversations outside of the sessions. Through his relationship with Connors, Cage exhibits introspection and emotional vulnerability, both of which deviate from the typical display of black masculinity which is often characterized by emotional distance and callousness (Oware, 2010). In terms of answering the research question that guides my analysis, this emotional investment humanizes blackness by resisting tropes that characterize black masculinity as being driven by base desires for sexual gratification without regard for the emotional well-being of the recipients of the affection.

Examples of Cage’s willingness to become emotionally invested in his romantic partnerships include his relationships with Connors and Jones, respectively and are illustrated in the revelation of personal betrayal. In Season 1 Episode 10 “Take It Personal” (Horwitch & Surjik, 2016) Cage and Temple learn that Connors was instrumental in selecting Cage for experimentation and had not revealed that information to Cage before her death. Cage’s feelings of betrayal manifested as extreme anger resulting in the demolition of Dr. Burstein’s home laboratory as well as hurt feelings experienced afterward. Similarly, after learning that Jones
killed his wife Reva, admittedly she was under the mind-control of the villain Killgrave, he experiences intense anger at the betrayal of Jones having known that she killed Connors and still opting to pursue a romantic relationship with Cage. In both instances, Cage enacted normative forms of masculine emotional release: outrage and anger. While this pattern of behavior does conform to traditional norms within popular culture, as well as being consistent with characteristics displayed in Cage’s comic book narratives, he also deviates significantly. In both instances Cage exhibits emotional reconciliation. While still upset, he recognizes that Jones was not under her own control when she killed Connors and still wants to save her from the police after having snapped the neck of Killgrave (Reynolds & Rymer, 2015), indicating that he still felt investment in their relationship. In *Luke Cage*, after the destruction of Dr. Burstein’s laboratory, Cage and Temple discuss his feelings for his deceased wife. In this conversation Cage engages in deep emotional reflexivity and introspection, concluding that Connors served as an emotional support system in and out of prison but that, as he expresses,

Cage: “That woman? The idea of her…her smell…that was the only thing that kept me sane at Seagate. That’s what’s eating me up inside. I don’t think I really knew her at all. Temple: “You still love her.”

Cage: “I love…the idea of Reva. But not her specifically. Not anymore.”

This psychological development within Cage represents a significant shift in the aesthetic of his black masculinity as such a revelation and emotional reconciliation would not be probable if he adhered to common toxic gender expressions for black masculinity that prioritize emotional invulnerability (Oware, 2010) and the subjugation of women (Lendrum, 2005). In some regards this iteration of Cage is a refutation of previous iterations in terms of his conceptualization as a sexual entity. This version is willing to engage in romantic relationships that require emotional
attachment, unlike the versions found in *Cage* (1992) and *Cage* (2002). While other versions such as those found in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* (1972) and *Power Man & Iron Fist* (1978) engaged in romantic relationships, they did not display the willingness to become emotionally vulnerable indicated in the Netflix iteration. This version of the character reflects a more dimensional black masculine aesthetic consistent with *New Avengers* (2004), *The New Avengers* (2010), and *Luke Cage* (2017) wherein Cage is depicted as being in a committed relationship to Jessica Jones and express concern for her wellbeing consistent with emotional investment.

Regarding Jessica Jones, while the Netflix continuity uses aspects of the series *Alias* (2001) to create the relationship between Jones and Cage, the narrative departs from the comic as the two do not conceive a child together and do not pursue a relationship beyond their initial sexual engagement. Ultimately Cage’s relationships with Jones, Temple, Connors, and Knight (who primarily serves as a narrative foil for him in *Luke Cage* following a one-night stand) aid in the creation of a black male aesthetic that is simultaneously entrenched in normative heterosexuality while deviating from traditional gender norms for the processing of emotional pain and enactment of emotional intelligence. The execution of these narrative arcs invites the audience to sympathize for Cage and recognize the emotional dimensionality and fragility of a character this is often associated with bulletproof skin and an intersectional identity that is stereotyped as dismissing the value of women and relationships.

The narrative arc of the series engages with multiple socio-cultural themes that affect Cage’s developing aesthetic as a community hero throughout the first season of the show. As the narrative progresses, Cage is placed in multiple situations that showcase the qualities of the character as he negotiates a fictional world textured by real life issues such as crime, politics, and the penal system. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the ways in which Cage’s aesthetic
as hero of the black community is reinforced visually, narratively through his interaction with the public, and narratively through the ideological villainy that he confronts. The series begins by depicting Cage in Harlem, New York City doing menial labor such as sweeping hair and doing laundry for Henry “Pop” Hunter, a reformed criminal turned barber; and washing dishes in a nightclub named Harlem’s Paradise which is owned and operated by the local gang leader Cornell “Cottonmouth” Stokes. This introduction to the character establishes a visual aesthetic for the character that becomes a recurring theme throughout the series: his roots as a working-class individual that lives among the citizenry that he protects, as opposed to characters such as Tony Stark or Thor that live above and apart from the rest of their respective societies. The symbolic significance of Cage being depicted in a janitor’s uniform is addressed in Season 1 Episode 5 “Just to Get a Rep”, where Cage delivers a eulogy at Pop’s funeral. Cage says,

“I asked Pop once why he didn’t want people to curse in his shop, and why we had to wear these ugly smocks. He said, ‘these kids need to see a man go to work every day, and to be in the presence of men in uniform putting in work’.” (Horwitch & Jobst, 2016)

This quote from Pop acknowledges an implicit understanding within the narrative that is meant to reflect a cultural understanding within our own reality, the need for positive male role models of color to combat the rampant denigration of the Black American identity within mainstream media. However, while this manner of representing Cage as a positive role model in a civilian capacity rhetorically functions to assert the potential of mundane heroism and the cultural need for heroes outside of those that have superpowers, the narrative of the series is also problematic in that it does not explicate the reasons for why there is such a shortage of employed black men within Harlem, and by implication other Black American communities. The decision to not elucidate on the phenomenon regarding the absence of gainfully employed black men in
the community is perhaps best illustrated in Season 1 Episode 7 “Manifest”, when Cage attempts to leave Harlem and is stopped by Claire Temple. Cage’s desire to leave is motivated by Stokes’ attempt to blackmail Cage into working for him and effectively eliminate Cage as a threat to his criminal enterprise within Harlem. As Cage packs his belonging so he can leave Temple persuades him to stay by indicating that many of the people in Harlem have either been incarcerated or know someone that has been imprisoned and are therefore likely to view Cage as a member of the community (Cooper & Goddard, 2016). This exchange references the prevalence of incarceration with American communities of color, often attributed to the United States Government’s War on Drugs (Moore & Elkavich, 2008). Yet the narrative never includes an explanation of the crime for which Cage was framed and sent to Seagate, the private prison located in Georgia. Canonically within the comic books Cage is framed for possession of illegal narcotics by Willis Stryker. However, within the Netflix series the reason for Cage’s unjust incarceration is never provided within Season 1, even during flashback scenes that detail his experiences in prison up until his escape after he receives superpowers. The consequences of not including this information in the narrative canon of the MCU diminishes the rhetorical function of Cage as a socially relevant hero rooted in the oppression of the black community in the United States and its exploitation at the hands of government policies.

After the death of Pop at the hand of one of Cottonmouth’s employees, Cage begins to actively work against Cottonmouth by undermining his organization. To do so he enters sensitive locations where Cottonmouth stores his money, often accompanied by contraband such as illegal firearms and narcotics, subdues the guards, takes a portion of the money, and calls the police allowing them to seize the remaining money and contraband as evidence of illegal activity. When engaging in vigilante activity, which is illegal in itself, Cage wears jeans, a t-shirt, and a
hooded sweater or jacket colloquially referred to as a “hoodie”, with the hood pulled up over his head to obscure his identity from cameras and passersby. In Season 1 Episode 3 “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” (Ownes & Navarro, 2016) Cage raids the Crispus Attucks Complex, a memorial community center named for the first American, and African-American, killed in the American Revolution. Cage raids the complex because it serves as the central storage location for Cottonmouth’s remaining money, which is a part of a larger scheme involving Cottonmouth’s cousin, the corrupt Harlem politician Councilwoman Mariah Dillard. Cage’s attire chosen for raiding the complex consists of jeans and a black hoodie with a yellow interior. By the end of the raid, after having been shot multiple times by armed guards, Cage is triumphant as he leaves the complex with a portion of the stolen money while wearing a hoodie that is riddled with bullet holes.

The rhetorical symbolism of the hoodie is twofold in terms of what it refutes and that of which it referential. Cage’s outfit, particularly the dark hoodie with bullet holes, is a symbolic refutation of his earlier attire from the original comic book. The Netflix series even takes the opportunity to mock the original costume in Season 1 Episode 4 “Step in the Arena” (Murray & Natali, 2016). In that episode Cage is depicted escaping the prison and in need of a change of clothes, and therefore resorts to stealing clothes from a clothesline in someone’s yard. The clothing includes the yellow V-neck shirt and pants with a chain belt, which combined with Cage’s afro-style hair and steel-tiara leftover from the headgear needed for the experiment, create the image of Cage as he appeared in the original comic book. Upon seeing his own reflection Cage remarks, “you look like a damn fool” (Murray & Natali, 2016). Cage’s comment indicates a shift in not just the visual aesthetic of the character, but also of a shift in the nature of the character. The *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* version of Cage sought to market himself as a
superhero for rent as a money-making venture; this version of Cage attempts to remain anonymous as he engages in heroic activities. The Netflix iteration of the character shuns the spotlight initially, and even when he does become a public figure he does not advertise himself nor seek notoriety in order to build a capitalist enterprise.

The second symbolic function of the hoodie is to serve as a reference to the black urban identity which is associated with the hoodie and in particular the killing of Trayvon Martin, who was wearing a dark colored hoodie when he was killed by George Zimmerman (Weeks, 2012). After the killing of Trayvon Martin, the hoodie became a symbol of protest as celebrities and public figures wore hoodies in remembrance of the teen that was unjustly killed (Weeks, 2012). Cage’s adoption of the hoodie as the preferred costume worn while committing unauthorized acts of justice repurposes the hoodie from being an indicator of criminality (Weeks, 2012) to the outfit of a champion of the community that confronts oppressive forces. By wearing a hoodie and being shot repeatedly yet still surviving largely unharmed, Cage becomes a rhetorical message for the resilience of communities of color that are disproportionately affected by crime. This rhetorical assertion created within the show is given an additional layer of meaning when Cage is confronted by law enforcement who profile Cage as a black male and use this vague description as justification to apprehend him and insist on identification (Taylor & Shankland, 2016). As the officers attempts to arrest Cage he defends himself by incapacitating the arresting officer, then shielding that officer with his own body as the other officer fires on Cage. The bullets strike Cage leaving holes in the grey hoodie, and Cage proceeds to knock the remaining officer unconscious. This incident visually and narratively references the unjust killings of minorities by law enforcement officials and alters the typical narrative by having the individual stopped survive an encounter that would have ordinarily resulted in their death. This interaction
illustrates an important component of the narrative that constitutes Cage’s aesthetic as a member of the community, that while his powers are extraordinary he is still subjected to the same oppressive treatment due to his identity as a black male that other civilians in Harlem that do not possess superpowers. The narrative and visual combination of having Cage wear a hoodie and interacting with police in a manner that would have been fatal for a Black American who lacked superpowers, simultaneously reinforces the previously made point that Cage does not have a mild-mannered alter ego as in the case of many white superheroes while also incorporating the elements of real-world stories about the killing of unarmed Black Americans by police officers. Doing so brings new focus to the issue of assessing blackness as more savage than whiteness within the realms of comic book fiction and reality. Thus, Cage’s interaction with the police invites the audience to recognize the problematic nature of that assumption as a mistake that, under different circumstances, would have resulted in the death of an innocent Black American man.

The way in which Cage interacts with the public helps to solidify his identity as a hero of the community. In the beginning of the show Cage works to maintain an appearance of normalcy by working unskilled labor for undocumented wages. However, after his superpowers were publicly revealed in Season 1 Episode 4 “Step in the Arena”, Cage became a public figure and soon earned a reputation for being a person that could help solve problems. This is somewhat consistent with the comic book continuity as Cage developed a similar reputation for being able to solve problems for common Americans. It should be noted that there is a significant difference between the two continuities. In the comic book Cage’s aesthetic includes monetary gain as motivation for assisting others as he charges for most of the jobs that he takes. But in the MCU continuity, Cage works for free during the first season. Once Cottonmouth learns that Cage is
responsible for the seizure of most of his assets due to raiding his strongholds he orders his men
to coerce additional money from those that already pay him as a means to recoup his losses and
attempt to turn public sentiment against Cage. This pressure prompts members of the community
to request assistance from Cage, urging him to recover the money coerced from them by
Cottonmouth’s henchmen. Cage’s willingness to acquiesce to their requests for free indicates
that monetary gain was not a part of his motivation, rather he was compelled by a sense of justice
for his community.

As Cage works to improve the lives of the residents of Harlem, Cage also metaphorically
combats socio-cultural ailments that are associated with the oppression of communities of color:
organized crime and political corruption. Both of these issues are represented in *Luke Cage* as
different ideological perspectives with the same goal: the cultivation, expression, and
maintenance of power relative to the community within which one operates. Cottonmouth and
Willis Stryker/Diamondback represent the pursuit of monetary and social capital as they use their
criminal organizations to generate income while instilling fear in the citizenry which translates
into being respected. Councilwoman Mariah Dillard perceived power as residing within
institutions, which motivated her political career on the Harlem City Council. Both Dillard and
Cottonmouth, and later Diamondback after the death of Cottonmouth at the hands of Dillard, use
their respective sources of power to exploit the residents of Harlem. Dillard did so by investing
government funding in Harlem’s Paradise for the benefit of her cousin Cottonmouth and at the
expense of social programs that would have benefitted her constituency. Later in the first season,
once her political career has ended due to scandal, she used her political connections to broker a
deal involving arming local officers with weaponry that can kill Luke Cage and other
superpowered individuals. The arms provided were supplied by Diamondback and fueled his
Cottonmouth exploited the residents of Harlem by recruiting from among their ranks to fill his organization as well as selling guns and drugs to members of the community.

Cage’s efforts to combat Dillard and eventual defeat of Diamondback, the boss to whom Cottonmouth answered, positioned Cage as a refutation of these ideological perspectives with the implication that power rests within the people of Harlem and not its institutions. During Pop’s funeral in Season 1 Episode 5 “Just to Get a Rep” Cage extoled the values professed by Pop. Specifically, Cage addressed Pop’s belief in the potential of ordinary people and need for solidarity. Within this eulogy Cage articulated that, “I don’t believe in Harlem. I believe in the people that make Harlem, what it is” (Horwitch & Jobts). Cage couches this sentiment of solidarity within a message of fighting oppressors that represent themselves as allies, which served as a veiled attack at Cottonmouth who represents community institutions (such as Harlem’s Paradise) that are ostensibly for the people but rely on their exploitation. Ultimately Cage’s struggle against Cottonmouth, Dillard, and Diamondback represents an ideological clash between perspectives on the nature of power, who has access to that power, and how it should be utilized. Interestingly, the divide between those three and Cage is also represented linguistically. A recurring theme throughout the series is Cage’s refusal to use the N-Word, while all three of the series villains use the term frequently. The implication being that the use of this slur represents a perceived disconnect between themselves and the rest of the black community as they conceptualize their own identities as being superior to that of the common citizenry of Harlem. It is worth noting that initially Dillard refuses to use the word until after she slayed Cottonmouth in a fit of rage. This moment in the narrative represents a shift in her personal arc as she transitions from respected Councilwoman towards becoming a leader of organized crime.
Cage’s refusal to use the term reflects an aspirational quality of the character and indicates his distaste for terminology that denigrates those that he considers to be his people. In short, I contend that Cage does not use the slur because he sees it as way to demean and oppress the potential of black people and the larger black identity.

Similar to Captain America’s early narratives regarding the tension between corrupt upper-class captains of industry and the working class who are subjugated by them, addressed in chapter 3 of this dissertation, Cage’s actions rhetorically argued against the consolidation of power and within formal and informal institutions that are vulnerable to corruption. In this regard, the nickname of “Harlem’s Captain America” (Cooper & Goddard, 2016) appears justified. This narrative of a black man and ex-convict challenging corruption in an attempt to enact change for the benefit of his community not only reinforced Cage’s identity as a community hero, it also rhetorically asserted the potential for the black community to address issues of oppression and change them in a manner that is self-determinist. In essence I assert that this iteration of Cage serves as the narrative embodiment of the concept that the black community possesses the necessary capabilities to produce their own heroes to combat oppression, similar to how the Jim Crow South produced its own Civil Rights heroes such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Medgar Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Rosa Parks.

To conclude this section, I assert that the Netflix series utilizes elements of Cage’s publication history to construct a black masculine identity that is consistent with the developing nature of the character while reflecting modern sensibilities of an aspirational black aesthetic. Cage’s aesthetic composition affirms stereotypical elements of the character from the comics that are rooted in the Black Buck trope, such as the hyper-physical nature of his powers and his proclivity for bursts of anger, while simultaneously refuting other problematic elements of that
stereotype by being emotionally intelligent, reflexive, and in some capacity altruistic. This iteration of Cage incorporates themes established in post-2000 versions of the character, such as Cage joining the Avengers as a volunteer instead of as a paid hero in *New Avengers* (2004). In essence, this Cage serves as a repurposing of an originally problematic hero that previously conformed to negative stereotypes of black identity. This series does so by using narrative and visual cues to create a hero that is rooted in the black community, as he is subjected to negative aspects of the black experience thus making him relatable. The character then works to bring about change by confronting oppressors by metaphorically endorsing an ideology of power that prioritizes people over corrupt institutions.

**The Hero of Harlem**

So far in this chapter I have provided a detailed deconstruction of Luke Cage in terms of his character aesthetics over time, beginning with his first iteration and up until his most recent version at the time of this writing. As stated at the beginning of this chapter I will discuss in this section the implications for the character moving forward and the ways in which he may be used to rhetorically engage with socio-cultural issues. I will begin with a brief distillation of the aesthetic shifts for each character before proceeding to address his respective potential rhetorical applications.

Luke Cage was initially conceptualized as a mono-dimensional character consistent with pre-existing stereotypes. Luke Cage’s early iterations were firmly rooted in the stereotype of the Black Buck, a representation of black men that is characterized by brute strength, aggression, and base motivations (Bogle, 2016). Throughout most of his publication history Cage’s aesthetic was that of what I refer to as the “Reformed Buck”. The reformed Buck exhibits most, if not all,
of the characteristics of the original Black Buck, such as strength, aggression, and base motivations such as greed or lust, while working in service of others. This stereotype essentially maintains these attributes but applies them in a benevolent or heroic manner. A clear example of this was Cage’s career as a self-styled hero for hire that worked to help people in exchange for monetary compensation. At worst, Cage’s aesthetic was that of mercenary that was motivated by self-interest, such as in Cage (2002) or Cage (1992). These versions of the character reinforced stereotypes about urban black masculinity and fed into the tropes of personal gain, hyper-physicality, and hyper-sexuality (Lendrum, 2005). At best the character becomes a rhetorical device for addressing social ills within the narrative and offers a critique of dominant society while advocating for the black community. Over the course of Luke Cage’s publication history, the comic narratives featured attempts at social commentary such as the arc with Troop in Cage (2002) which contained a brief arc where Cage attempted to help this particular at-risk youth.

I contend that the character’s most successful attempts at social commentary occurred when his aesthetic was that of a street-level vigilante that helped minority communities, as opposed to his time in the Avengers when he was a global-level hero. The Netflix series Luke Cage and the recent comic book series of the same name (though mutually exclusive in terms of continuity) construct the character’s aesthetic in this way. They characterize Cage as a person motivated by a desire to carry out justice and aid the oppressed in their struggle against external forces and superstructures such as organized crime and social inequality. The value of this type of representation is that it challenges common real-world media narratives that conflate blackness with criminality in news (Lacy & Haspel, 2011) and entertainment (Oware, 2010). By confronting these oppressive norms within media Luke Cage offers an alternative set of narratives that can function to deliver positive rhetorical messages about the nature of blackness.
within an American context. Just as there has been an historical articulated connection between whiteness and positive attributes, the recent iterations of Luke Cage, including his time as an Avenger, offer positive examples that articulate a connection between blackness and heroism.

The popular fictional media of a given era serves as a reflection of the norms, beliefs, and fears of dominant culture that birthed that particular piece of fiction. With that understanding it is clear that the dominant American culture, which has historically been defined by white male interests, has shifted over time in terms of how it has conceived black masculinity. As such, characters within popular media that are depicted as rooted in socio-politically marginalized communities bear the burden of acting as rhetorical vehicles for those groups. As articulated by the Black American comic book creator Dwayne McDuffy, “My problem...and I'll speak as a writer now...with writing a black character in either the Marvel or DC universe is that he is not a man. He is a symbol” (Nama, 2011, p. 1). The burden that is placed upon the creation of such symbols is also an opportunity for the rhetorical refutation of oppressive norms. As discussed earlier, readers were often invited to consume black masculinity in a way that was reductive particularly in the early years of these characters. Yet as the aesthetics shifted so did the rhetorical messages and moving forward it is important that we as readers and critics recognize the value of these symbols in recreating simulations of reality within fiction by incorporating real-world issues and addressing them in a manner that is socially just.

Comic books occupy a peculiar place within popular media. The nature of their production allows them to address socio-cultural issues much sooner than television or film, which allows them to incorporate current events into the material quickly. The combination of visual dependence for narrative and the need to eliminate excessive text by virtue of the format, makes the medium particularly accessible to those that have low levels of literacy. Therefore,
comics are well-positioned for the use of disseminating messages that challenge established problematic understandings of race and gender through the use of creative narratives and character aesthetics. I contend that as a historical proliferator of problematic knowledge about marginalized identities and as a socio-cultural actor that is positioned to continue the generation of cultural knowledge embedded in fiction that the comic book industry has an ethical responsibility to continue the thoughtful development of character aesthetics as indicated within this chapter. To do otherwise would be to facilitate the mindsets of the 1960s and 70s that originally produced the garish representations of black masculinity found in the early days of Luke Cage.
CHAPTER 5: PHOENIX, FEAR, AND FEMINISM

As with the previous chapter, this chapter is concerned with the deconstruction of an enduring and popular character. However, instead of critiquing the shifting aesthetics of black masculinity, I focus on the white femininity embodied in Jean Grey. I situate the character as a reflection of salient social understandings of white femininity and contextualize the character as an artifact created and recreated during different eras of American society. As with Luke Cage, the questions that guided my critiques were: how has the racial and gender identity of this character developed over time? And what does her most recent iteration invite consumers of that media to understand about the norms for society regarding whiteness and femininity?

To answer these questions, I utilized the same set of criteria for Jean Grey as I did for Luke Cage. As a point of clarity, these guidelines for analyzing Jean Grey’s aesthetic are: 1.) narrative arc; particularly the plot lines centered around the character and how they operate as methods for conveying ideological messages, especially in terms of their narrative resolutions. 2.) Physicality; in this context this refers to visual illustrations of the body as well as how the character’s body factors into the narrative, such as allusions to the physical helplessness of the female form (D’Amore, 2008). 3.) Sexuality; in this context this means the ways in which the character’s sexuality is represented visually, such as pin-up style art for viewer gratification (Scott, 2015), as well as within the narrative. 4.) Personal qualities/characteristics; as the character has been recreated/ reinterpreted over the years, so too has her personality changed in ways that are often significant and offer insight into perspectives of what it meant to be white and female at the given time. Elements such as dialect, worldview, and internal thoughts may add depth to the character or reduce their complexity and dimensionality depending on the intent and perspectives of the creators. 5.) Villains; the forces against which the superhero fights are as
much an integral component of the character’s identity as their powers. Villains may symbolically represent detrimental aspects of society, allowing the superhero to act as the embodiment of the solution to the given social ill.

The purpose of this chapter is to engage with the various iterations of Jean Grey that have been created since her initial conceptualization. As with Luke Cage, I use the previously described aesthetic criteria for interpreting and critiquing the different versions of the character, how each iteration diverges from the prior version, and how they retain certain elements from past conceptualizations while incorporating new characteristics. The majority of this chapter is an exploration of the character’s aesthetic as represented within each decade of her publication history, with special focus on significant events in the character’s narrative such as her wedding to Scott Summers and the Phoenix narrative arc. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of Jean Grey’s most modern incarnation, positioning the live-action representation as reflection of modern perceptions of white femininity that is informed by the publication history of the character. The conclusion also involves a discussion of the implications for the character moving forward, and the rhetorical possibilities for the symbol of white femininity as a vehicle for addressing socio-cultural issues through narrative assertions.

Jean Grey: Malefic Destiny

The Arm Candy in Distress

Jean Grey, originally codenamed Marvel Girl, first appeared in the pages of Marvel comics in *Uncanny X-Men* #1, published in September of 1963. From the beginning the character functioned less as a capable hero in her own right and more of a narrative device whose purpose was to explore the masculine identities of her teammates and mentor. The aesthetic of the
character as developed through the narrative arcs, expression of physical abilities, personal characteristics, and depiction as a sexual entity, indicate that the character was conceptualized as the least among equals, almost categorically. The character is first introduced as a new addition to the all-male team, which at the time of origin consisted of teammates Scott Summers/Cyclops, Warren Worthington III/Angel, Bobby Drake/Ice Man, and Hank McCoy/The Beast. All of these mutants, humans born with extraordinary powers, were led by Professor Charles Xavier who acted as their mentor and pseudo-paternal figure. The visual aesthetic of Jean Grey was consistent with that of the other X-Men in that she was created as a young, white, middle-class woman that joined a team of young, white, middle-class men. The notable exceptions being Angel who is later revealed to be upper-class due to his family’s fortune, and Xavier who is a mature adult as well as particularly wealthy.

From the beginning, Jean Grey was treated as a sexual object. A recurring theme throughout the series is the use of pet names for Grey by her teammates, that reference her attractive appearance such as “little lady” (Lee, 1963a, p.9), “gorgeous” (Lee, 1963b, p.6), and “pretty partner” (Lee, 1963f, p.20). Additionally, other characters refer to her by her appearance such as Xavier when he introduced Grey as “a most attractive young lady” (Lee, 1963a, p.7), as well as the member of the Avengers, Janet Van Dyne who called her a “Titian-haired tigress” (Lee, 1963f, p. 13). Grey’s contribution to the narratives as a sexual object is compounded with her lack of ability and prowess in the X-Men’s early missions. During the team’s missions the character primarily functions in a support role such as when she trapped the evil mutant henchman Quick Silver, who was working for Xavier’s nemesis, Magneto (Lee, 1963f). Despite arguably having possessed the most powerful abilities on the team, telekinesis (the ability to manipulate objects with one’s mind), she typically took orders from the team leader and her
future romantic partner, Cyclops. On rare occasions Grey was depicted using her abilities to powerful effect such as toppling a Tyrannosaurus Rex during a mission in the Savage Land, yet even then she required further assistance and was ultimately rescued by Cyclops (Lee, 1963g). Furthermore, her ability to enact agency on missions is hindered by the resulting fatigue brought on by the use of her powers (Lee, 1963e). Rather than being depicted as a capable superhero and fighter, Grey is illustrated as enacting agency in the X-Men’s domestic environment. This original iteration of the character was often depicted as a maternal figure, a sort of super-powered housekeeper who cared for Xavier when he became overly-fatigued from exhausting his abilities (Lee, 1963d,) as well as Cyclops (Lee, 1963f). Grey also cared for the X-Men by cooking for them when the house maid was off duty (Lee, 1963e). This maternal aspect of Grey included rebuking the X-Men when they displayed poor manners such as when she scolded Ice Man for eating with his hands (Lee, 1963e).

Jean Grey’s lack of sufficient skill in combat, her innate maternal nature, and the narrative emphasis on her attractive appearance highlights the central concept at the core of her character: patriarchal notions of white femininity (D’Amore, 2008). Grey’s personal aesthetic as conceived in the initial series is consistent with historically patriarchal perspectives on white femininity in terms of wealth, sexual interest, domesticity, lack of agency, and whiteness (Prividera & Howard, 2006). The character was associated with resources through her middle-class background (Lee, 1963a; Lee, 1963d), and she was often fought over by other men who harbored romantic feelings for her including Cyclops, Angel, Beast, Xavier (Lee, 1963a; Lee, 1963c), and the villain The Blob (Lee, 1963c). This point becomes more salient over time as the as-yet unrealized romantic connection between Grey and Cyclops develops over the course of the character’s publication history. As addressed previously the character displayed a nurturing
personality as well as a clear inability to perform in combat on the same level as her partners. However, it is Grey’s whiteness that is of particular importance. Grey’s whiteness is established in her physical appearance and reinforced narratively. The character is depicted as a representation of exceptional attractiveness consistent with the ideology of whiteness as a standard of beauty (Bock, Chacon, Jung, Sturm, & Figueroa, 2018). This point is reinforced by the comments made by other characters within the comic as well as the various illustrators’ methods of depicting the character. For example, in issue #9, p.21 (Lee, 1963f)) Jean Grey is portrayed in a full-length, single-page, illustration reminiscent of the pin-up art style wherein she is portrayed in her original Marvel Girl costume while using her powers to levitate a vase of flowers among other objects. This illustration emphasized her hour-glass figure by accentuating her bust and hips in a manner that ostensibly represented the character as more physically mature than the norm for a girl that was at the time sixteen years old. A second and especially component of Jean Grey’s white aesthetic is her mutant powers. Grey is a mutant with psychic powers which prior to her union with the Phoenix first manifested as telekinesis, the ability to manipulate objects with her mind, and then additionally as telepathy, the ability to read the thoughts of others and communicate with her mind. These abilities set her apart from her original X-Men colleagues, and many of her future peers, in that she could activate her powers without attracting the attention of normal humans or mutants. Within the context of the X-Men series mutants have been identified as Others, often operating as metaphorical representations of racial or sexual minorities (Fawaz, 2011). In this sense, Grey functions rhetorically as a metaphor for minorities that externally pass as members of the dominant group because of her ability to use her powers without indicating that she is a mutant. Unlike her colleagues, her powers manifest in ways that are invisible except for their ultimate effects. Cyclops’ mutant ability is to project a
red, concussive laser beam from his eyes whenever they are open (which require him to wear protective lenses at all times). Similarly, in order for Ice Man to express his mutant identity he must visibly create ice from his body, and both Angel and Beast are physiologically altered due to their mutations. This appeared in the form of Angel’s large avianesque wings and Beast’s simian body-type which later includes blue fur and feline features.

Grey’s ability to pass as human even while using her mutant powers is not unique in the entirety of the mutant community, but it does place her in a certain position within society that carries with it significant implications that will be discussed at other points in this chapter. What is important to understand at this stage is that Jean Grey embodies white femininity from a patriarchal perspective as she represents: wealth, domesticity, heteronormative sexuality, inferior physicality, and societal whiteness. In the following sections I will address how her aesthetic has shifted and developed overtime as the character goes through different creative iterations up to the current time.

**Jean Grey Is Jean Grey Is Jean Grey**

In the 1970s the character of Jean Grey underwent a radical transformation, not just in her narrative arc but also in her overall aesthetic. This transformation began with *Uncanny X-Men* #101 where Jean Grey, presumed dead after a crash landing that left her spaceship submerged at the bottom of a lake, rose from the wreckage and declared “Hear me, X-Men! No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! I am life incarnate! Now and forever I am *Phoenix*!” (Claremont, 1976bp, .4) before immediately losing consciousness. This moment of transformation from Jean Grey into the Phoenix is a narrative element that has defined the character from the 1970s until today as Grey’s relationship with the Phoenix, a cosmic entity of near-unrivaled power,
continues to be a large component of Grey’s narratives and aesthetic. There are several notable changes between the pre- and post-Phoenix versions of Jean Grey, and I will deconstruct them in terms of each element of her aesthetic. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to Jean Grey and Phoenix by their respective names dependent on the salient identity at the time. For example, when she is with her family and friends the identity of Jean Grey is the most salient and is the identity that is being expressed, however during moments of turmoil or combat she transforms into the Phoenix, an entity that shares her body and consciousness but retains a will of its own.

The first important distinction between Jean Grey prior to the crash landing of the ship in *Uncanny X-Men* #101 (Claremont, 1976b) and Phoenix, who rose from the water and wreckage, is the visual aesthetic of her female form. In *Uncanny X-Men* #100 (Claremont, 1976a) Grey is depicted as a grown woman with red hair and wearing a black dress as she desperately fights to control the careening spacecraft. Her debut as the Phoenix on the fourth page of issue #101 depicted her with the same physical form but with some significant changes, particularly her costume and hair. The Phoenix’s costume was not that of Marvel Girl or the black dress, both of which she had worn in issue #100. Instead she appeared in a skintight green and gold body suit that visually highlighted her form and her musculature conveying a sense of power combined with sexuality. This visual distinction is reinforced in issue #109 (Claremont, 1978b) when Grey disclosed to her powers that she had become transformed. The scene illustrated on p.7 shows Jean Grey as a normative appearing woman wearing a pantsuit with normal length hair and average frame, and then as the Phoenix wherein she was shown to be wearing the skintight costume, emphasized hips and bust, and longer, wilder hair (Claremont, 1978b). The difference between Phoenix’s and Grey’s hair was that pre-crash Jean Grey possessed shoulder-length red hair that curled slightly. Phoenix’s hair, however, appeared as approximately twice the length of
Grey’s and much wilder with long flowing locks and curls. This is of importance because post-crash Grey’s hair becomes a signifier of her persona dependent on her identity. As Jean Grey her hair maintains its length and size but hangs in an ordinary manner, but when she becomes the Phoenix her hair floats and appears to be almost alive as it behaves as a sort of aura emanating from the character. In this way, Grey’s hair becomes a signifier of her relationship with the Phoenix as the entity is every present even while dormant during the mundane moments of Grey’s life. Furthermore, the color red becomes an important motif as it is associated with both the Phoenix’s fire and Grey’s hair color, serving to represent the intimate nature of the connection between the two entities as both are naturally associated with the color. This kindred color shared by the two acts as foreshadowing for the exposition in the narrative provided later that explains their connection, that they are connected because of their inherently similar natures. I will address this element of the character in a following section.

The second element of the character’s aesthetic shift is that of her prowess and abilities, her overall physicality. Whereas the previous iteration of Jean Grey often acted in a support role for the team and occasionally required rescuing (Lee, 1963g), as the Phoenix she is easily among, if not the, strongest of the X-Men. Cyclops remarks on this when notices that she has transformed from the weakest member of the team to someone that is capable of feats that border credulity (Claremont, 1977a). Her newly discovered powers also surprised herself as much as her teammates and adversaries. During combat with an alien entity known as Firelord, the invader comments that Phoenix was comparable in strength to Thor, the Avenger and ancient deity referred to as the God of Thunder (Claremont, 1977a). The narrative text of the comic compounds this description by characterizing the power as “primal fury” (Claremont, 1977a, p.11) As Phoenix gained the upper-hand during the confrontation with Firelord she began to
express concern about herself and the new abilities. As the Phoenix, Grey remarked to herself that the power was intoxicating “like a drug” (Claremont, 1977a, p.14) and began to worry “God in Heaven, what have I become?” (Claremont, 1977a, p.14) as she was struck by the fear that she was unaware of the extent of her transformation. The most overt display of her god-like powers occurred during a mission where the X-Men were recruited by an alien civilization called the Shi’ar to stop their Emperor D’Ken from activating a weapon that threatened the universe (Claremont & Mantlo, 1977). The weapon, referred to as “The End of All That Is” (Claremont, 1977c, p.2) is later revealed to be a “neutron galaxy” (Claremont, 1977c, p.12) constrained and frozen in a moment of explosion. Emperor D’Ken’s attempt to release the exploding galaxy would destroy the known universe, so Phoenix contained the explosion by resealing its original vessel. In doing so Phoenix effectively saved the universe, indicating that the transformation underwent by Grey could be positive.

This shift in Jean Grey’s aesthetic, from being a representation of vulnerable femininity to an entity of near deific power, still feeds into problematic notions of white femininity that support patriarchal social structures. Grey was still narratively positioned as a love interest for Cyclops and a new team member, Logan/Wolverine. By this point in the narrative her fellow teammates that had considered her a potential romantic partner, Angel, Beast, and Ice Man, had departed the X-Men, and Xavier no longer felt an attraction towards the woman Claremont, 1976b). While at this point in the narrative neither Logan nor Cyclops had made their feelings known to Grey, her comatose state in issue #101 (Claremont, 1976b) prompted both men to consider their feelings for her resulting in their respective resolutions to pursue her as a romantic partner once she recovered. This plays out in a particularly patriarchal fashion with Cyclops as he positions himself as her protector during the uncommon moments of vulnerability
experienced by Grey as she acclimates to Phoenix’s power. For example, in issue #107 of *Uncanny X-Men* (Claremont, 1977b) Cyclops protected Jean Grey during combat with the Shi’ar Imperial Guard because she was weakened and fatigued from having used her powers to activate and provide energy for an inter-stellar travelling device. The rhetorical assertion of this instance is that women, even empowered women, must still rely on the assistance of a white man, as opposed to being aided by her female teammate Storm, to protect them when faced with danger. Furthermore, Grey still opts to follow the orders of Professor Xavier even though she has the capability to disobey his orders with little chance of repercussion (Claremont, 1977a). This suggests that while Grey is newly empowered she still willingly submits to the direction of her leader who represents normative patriarchy as an educated, wealthy, white male who also possess uniquely powerful mutant powers. What this means in terms of answering the research questions that guide this chapter is that even after her radical transformation Jean Grey embodies a perspective of white femininity that is still physically fragile and intellectually subordinate to men, even after the character is imbued with cosmic powers. This invites the audience to understand that even when a woman has unrivaled potential she must still rely on men for survival and guidance.

Within this same vein of Grey’s newfound abilities is the idea that Grey is unable to control her own powers and distrusts them. Ostensibly the idea of a female character that is imbued with the powers of a cosmic entity that places her within the same league as a deity such as Thor could easily be read as feminist empowerment. In this narrative transformation several of the key flaws with the original iteration of the character, as understood from a feminist perspective, are corrected as she is generally capable of enacting agency in a manner bound only by her creativity. However, early in the narrative Grey begins to distrust her own abilities and
their source, the Phoenix Force. Initially Grey differentiates between herself and the Phoenix, such as in *Uncanny X-Men* #105 (Claremont, 1977a) when she asserts that the Phoenix, as opposed to herself, has enough power to use the Shi’ar transporter. Her willingness to dissociate herself from the entity that occupied her body is the first step to the eventual development of the Us/Them relationship that she has with the Phoenix Force. By doing so she rejects some degree of ownership over the power of the Phoenix and thus diminishes her own empowerment. This qualified acceptance of her new abilities is rooted in distrust and fear, specifically her fear of being corrupted by the power of the Phoenix Force. She articulates this in *Uncanny X-Men* #110:

“So much has happened so fast since I became Phoenix, I haven’t been able to sort things out. Lord knows, I’ve tried. But each time I try to talk to someone—Scott, the Professor, my folks—I freeze up inside. I—I’m scared! I never wanted Phoenix’s power—and yet, using it feels so…good—I’m not sure I can handle it. What’s that saying…? ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ I’m lost inside. And no one can help me find my way” (Claremont, 1978c, p. 6).

Jean Grey’s reticence to accept her power and reluctance to take ownership of the Phoenix Force as indicated by her desire to differentiate between the two is indicative that her aesthetic is consistent with the patriarchal perspective of women in regard to power: that they are too weak and emotionally unprepared to wield power and authority (Prividera & Howard, 2006). In this capacity Jean Grey is placed within the patriarchal and sexist narrative trope of being the Damsel in Distress wherein she is unable to save herself from harm. Within this context the harm is the potential of being corrupted by her own abilities. This element of her aesthetic is explored within the *Dark Phoenix Saga*, a particularly profound and well-known arc within the *Uncanny X-Men* series.
The Dark Phoenix Saga began in January of 1980 with *Uncanny X-Men* #129 (Claremont, 1980a) and concluded with issue #138 in October of the same year. This narrative arc depicts yet another radical shift in the narrative and aesthetic of Jean Grey as she transformed into the Dark Phoenix, a character development that was adapted in the film *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner, 2006) and ostensibly serves as the inspiration for the film *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* which at the time of this writing is set to be released in 2019.

Jean Grey’s transformation into the Dark Phoenix occurs gradually throughout the arc of the series, so I will begin by explaining the relevant elements of the narrative and then deconstruct the ways in which her aesthetic shift was expressed. Grey’s transition into the Dark Phoenix was initiated by the villain Jason Wyngarde/Mastermind, a powerful mutant whose ability was to create illusions that appear real. With the aid of a device given to Mastermind by the evil mutant Emma Frost, he was capable of creating a psychic connection with Grey that was powerful enough to convince her that her surroundings had changed entirely. Over the course of the first several issues Mastermind used the device to convince Grey that she was mentally slipping into the mind of a British ancestor in the 1700s (Claremont, 1980a). At several points throughout the first half of the narrative Mastermind triggered these events gradually as he worked to corrupt Grey by guiding her through the “memories” along a path that lead to marrying Mastermind in the colonial setting. In reality this was done to convince Grey to fall in love with Mastermind so that he could easily control her through the psychic connection; thus, allowing him to strengthen his position with the Hellfire Club’s inner circle and provide the Club with an advantage in their endeavor to defeat the X-Men (Claremont, 1980c). This process of placing Grey within the illusion of reliving an ancestor’s previous life included Mastermind cultivating a new identity for Jean Grey, that of the “Black Queen” (Claremont, 1980b, p.10).
The identity of the Black Queen served as an expression of Grey’s darker qualities. For example, after her initial time-illusion she begins to find herself attracted to the more perverse aspects of human nature, such as in *Uncanny X-Men* #130 when she scanned the minds of the people in a downtown discotheque. After reading the minds of the revelers she commented to herself that she found the thoughts she encountered repulsive and yet “Part of me almost finds those thoughts…attractive” (Claremont, 1980b, p.5). This remark indicates what is illustrated elsewhere in the narrative, that Mastermind’s plan to dominate Grey is not merely to recalibrate her sense of morality but to facilitate sexual corruption. Mastermind’s subjugation of Grey is not limited to mental oppression but includes sexual assault as well. During the scene in the discotheque Mastermind places her within the time-illusion again and kisses her as his counterpart in the illusion, her romantic love interest that uses Mastermind’s actual name, Jason Wyngarde (Claremont, 1980b). This sexual contact occurred without the consent of Grey as her free will was restrained by the control of Mastermind’s psychic domination. While this is the only instance of physical sexual assault in this narrative, I contend that his domination of her mind is tantamount to rape as it constitutes an intimate violation of her person.

Mastermind’s subjugation of Grey continued as she visually transformed into the Black Queen, first within the illusion and then in reality once Mastermind completed his control over her. The visual aesthetic of the Black Queen is consistent with the theme of sexual subjugation at the hands of Mastermind, as it functions as a means of visual gratification for the male gaze. Ordinarily Grey dressed conservatively such as wearing a knee-length dress and coat (Claremont, 1980b). The Black Queen appeared in a much more sexualized costume: a purple cloak, black leather gloves and figure-accentuating corset, black underwear-style bottoms and calf-high black boots (Claremont, 1980b). This costume revealed a significant portion of Grey’s
body, specifically her thighs, part of her abdomen, and the tops of her breasts. The Black Queen’s appearance rhetorically functioned as a confirmation that not only had she been corrupted morally but that she had been corrupted sexually as well, reinforcing the narrative theme that she served as Mastermind’s means to an end both in terms of enacting violence, as she later turns on the X-Men at the behest of Mastermind, as well as sexual gratification. The identity expression of the Black Queen also serves as a reinforcement of the socio-economic whiteness of Jean Grey. As discussed earlier, the original iteration of the character depicted the woman as a product of a middle-class upbringing. This iteration of the character takes the notion of femininity and wealth and takes the signification a step further by implying that Grey possess a regal status indicated in her title of Black Queen. As with the Phoenix, her new identity is also expressed through her hair as the Black Queen wears an ornate hairstyle wherein the hair is pulled back into a large crown-like shape with two layers (Claremont, 1980c). Once the Black Queen apprehended Cyclops, Storm, and Colossus per the request of the Hellfire Club the captives were chained, and moments in the narrative depicted the prisoners as Grey saw them. Of particular importance was Grey’s perception that Storm, a native of Africa with black skin, white hair, and the mutant ability to control the weather, appeared as one of the slaves owned by the Black Queen (Claremont, 1980d).

In terms of answering the questions that guide my analysis for this chapter, this iteration of the character invites the audience to perceive Jean Grey as a sex-object first, a villain second, and a victim third, if at all. Grey’s sexual attraction to Wyngarde and physical expression of that attraction, in conjunction with the pinup style appearance, emphasizes the point that this character has consistently functioned to serve the heteronormative male gaze. This aspect of the narrative also highlights the contrast between Jean Grey and the Black Queen, primarily that
Jean Grey represented an idealized notion of acceptable white femininity as defined by patriarchy and that the Black Queen represented the version of white femininity decried as unacceptable by patriarchy. Jean Grey was subservient to the male leadership of the X-Men, was sexualized but still conveyed sexual innocence through modesty, and carried with her the promise of moderate wealth and resources through access to her family. Conversely, the Black Queen represented hyper-sexuality and the implication of promiscuity through her clothing, the oppressive control of others associated with a formalized class system, and rebellion against masculine leadership and control. This last element is illustrated in what occurs next in the narrative: her defeat of Mastermind (Claremont, 1980e) and her attack on the X-Men (Claremont, 1980f). During Cyclops’ failed attempt at freeing Jean Grey through their shared mental link that was established earlier in their history, Grey witnessed Mastermind “kill” Cyclops’ mental projection (Claremont, 1980d). Watching the image of her romantic partner die shocked Grey enough for her to regain control of her own mind, freeing her from the domination of Mastermind and allowing her to fight back (Claremont, 1980e). Once subdued, Grey exacted revenge against Mastermind in a way that horrified even herself. The narrator describes the event,

“She stands motionless, a shadow among shadows, feeling dark fire consume her soul. Her face is supernally calm. Her face lies. Jean Grey is terrified—more afraid now than she’s ever been—because she knows what is happening to her. And she cannot stop it. She laughs to herself. The man is such a fool. She will enjoy what happens next. And, realizing that, she weeps.” (Claremont, 1980e, p.12)

This moment marks a point of self-awareness that reveals to Jean Grey that she is firmly becoming the Dark Phoenix as elements of the Black Queen become manifest in her real-world
behaviors. The punishment that Grey administered was to force Mastermind to perceive the entirety of existence through the power of the Phoenix which resulted in the destruction of his mind (Claremont, 1980e). The events that follow this act of revenge further entrench Grey into the persona of the Dark Phoenix. Immediately after defeating Mastermind, she attacked the X-Men who were powerless to stop her (Claremont, 1980f) before she left for outer space. There she wandered until she encountered a star and consumed its energy in order to feed her own, which resulted in an explosion that destroyed an alien civilization known as the D’Bari who inhabited a nearby planet (Claremont, 1980f). After Grey ravenously consumed the star she encountered a Shi’ar battleship that engaged with her and lost as she destroyed it absolutely (Claremont, 1980f). After destroying the ship, Grey returned to Earth to find her family. But much to her dismay they were shocked and afraid of her new form; sensing this fear Dark Phoenix reacted with hostility by storming out of her family’s house, at which point she was attacked by the X-Men (Claremont, 1980g). This encountered ended differently than the first because the X-Men were able to fix a technological crown on her head that dampened, but did not eliminate, her power. The power inhibitor ultimately proved ineffective, yet she was defeated nonetheless by Professor Xavier who managed to construct a psychic prison that captured and successfully suppressed the Phoenix (Claremont, 1980g).

This is not the end of the narrative arc of the Dark Phoenix Saga but before continuing I will address the significant aesthetic shifts in Grey’s character. Grey’s interactions with Mastermind, her family, and the X-Men represent dramatic changes in aesthetic that through the narrative rhetorically refute her established identity as a product of patriarchal white femininity while simultaneously legitimizing masculine dominance of the female body. In Uncanny X-Men #133 the character Moira McTaggert, a scientist that researches mutants, said that “As Phoenix,
Jean realized her ultimate potential as a Psi. She possessed the power of a god, but only the experience and awareness of a young woman.” (Claremont, 1980d, p.9). This sentiment underscored the aesthetic nature of Grey/Dark Phoenix, she was a woman lacking in wisdom, experience, and good judgment who was gifted the powers of a cosmic entity and so surely this could only lead to tragedy. The creators of the comic worked to impress upon the read the dire nature and power of Dark Phoenix by describing her through narrative text, “She strikes like the Angel of Death—terrible in her unhuman beauty—as elemental, as majestic as the stars in the heavens.” (Claremont, 1980f, p.3). Other characters commented on the Dark Phoenix’s powers; Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four remarked that Grey’s strength rivaled that of Galactus, the cosmic entity renowned for devouring worlds. The sheer might of Dark Phoenix represents the antithesis of the Grey’s character as initially conceived. Jean Grey originally functioned as an attractive damsel in distress stereotype that existed to be saved and to care for the X-Men. As the Phoenix she gained agency while still bound by heteronormative relationships of a sexual nature, such as with Cyclops and Mastermind, as well as professional in the case of Professor Xavier. This transformation into the Dark Phoenix entails disregarding the hegemonic control of patriarchal dominators in favor of the pursuit of power in and of itself. Freed from the bondage of control by men such as Mastermind, Cyclops, and Xavier, Dark Phoenix is free to pursue the enhancement of her own power as an end to be accomplished. The omniscient narrative voice of the comic explains the duality of identities at play,

“Jean Grey is a gentle, loving, woman who cared so much for those she loved that she defied death itself to save them. Phoenix is a destroyer of worlds who only cares for herself. Yet Jean Grey is Dark Phoenix.” (Claremont, 1980g, p.6)
This description from the narrative voice encapsulates the rhetorical assertion made by the narrative: that femininity is defined by love, compassion, and power that if unchecked leads to destruction. The rhetorical assertion made within the narrative is that in order to prevent further catastrophe femininity must be constrained by masculinity, and that femininity must agree to this form of subjugation. This is made clear during final confrontation with the X-Men and the conclusion of the *Dark Phoenix Saga* which involves the Shi’ar’s need for justice.

During the Dark Phoenix’s last conflict with the X-Men there are several moments that represent this asserted need for masculinity to subjugate femininity for the benefit of society. There is a brief instance where Jean Grey is able to wrest control of herself from the Dark Phoenix and begs for Logan to kill her, saying: “Strike! While the human part of me is still in control. Finish me with your claws, I beg you…I don’t want to—hurt you!” (Claremont, 1980g, p.11). Later during combat Cyclops manages to appeal to Grey’s sense of humanity by arguing that she is capable of love and compassion. As Grey was shown struggling with her feelings she was ambushed by Professor Xavier who stunned her with a blast of psychic force (Claremont, 1980g). In this way her sense of caring, love, and compassion operated as a weakness to be exploited by Xavier and ultimately led to the imprisonment of the Phoenix as Xavier used his temporary upper-hand to construct a psychic prison that bound and suppressed Dark Phoenix (Claremont, 1980g). This is accomplished with the necessary help of Grey as she aids Xavier from inside her own mind, which argues through metaphor that it is in the best interest of femininity to be complicit in their own subjugation. When Dark Phoenix was defeated, Jean Grey appeared naked and weak which prompted Cyclops to carry her. As Cyclops did so she read his thoughts and discovered his intention to marry her, and in that scene the two agreed to marry. The underlying thematic message in this narrative is that in order for Grey to actualize
happiness, which takes the form of heteronormative love, she must be stripped of her power as her own empowerment proved to be an obstacle to herself and an existential threat to the universe.

The conclusion of the *Dark Phoenix Saga* occurred immediately after the suppression of the Dark Phoenix, when the X-Men were transported to the Shi’ar empire for the execution of Jean Grey for her having destroyed a sun, the genocide of the D’Bari, and the murder of Shi’ar soldiers who were onboard the battleship she demolished. Upon hearing the death sentence Professor Xavier argued for the right to death by combat, allowing the X-Men to fight for Jean Grey’s life. The Shi’ar granted them the right to do so, but this ultimately still led to the death of Grey as she took her own life as a protective measure against the possible resurgence of the Dark Phoenix. Over the course of this section of the narrative arc several moments occurred that reinforce the underlying rhetorical assertion of the benefit of subjugating femininity. When the X-Men prepared for the duel with the Shi’ar Imperial Guard, Jean Grey elected to wear the Marvel Girl costume which was referential of the pre-Phoenix Jean Grey who was a product of patriarchal cultivation. During the battle She and Cyclops found themselves separated from the rest of the group, and Grey took the opportunity to express how their relationship was a source of comfort for her (Claremont, 1980h). Immediately afterward Cyclops was wounded, causing Grey to enter a state of duress that weakened the psychic bonds on the Phoenix and allowed it to escape. In a moment of desperation where she was able to control the Phoenix she executed the plan that she developed once the duel began, she used her powers to activate an alien weapon and turned it upon herself, vaporizing her body instantly as Cyclops watched in horror (Claremont, 1980h). In *Uncanny X-Men #137* a character referred to as The Watcher, an immortal entity who has the responsibility of observing the events of lesser civilizations, asserted
that the Phoenix was “…a primal force second only to that of the Creator” (Claremont, 1980h, p.1) which implied that Jean Grey, a middle-class, white, female, was for a time the most powerful entity in all of existence except for the deity that created the universe. The aesthetic shift from being a sexualized damsel in distress to such an entity ostensibly serves as a metaphor for the possibility of femininity and the empowerment of women. Read in such a way, the narrative assertion is that the empowerment of women is dangerous as it threatens the leadership of men and carries with it terrible implications for society on a broad scale as asserted through the metaphor of the Dark Phoenix carrying out genocide. In terms of answering the guiding questions of this chapter, this development in the aesthetic of the character urges the audience to understand that the continued disenfranchisement of women is beneficial for the public good because the empowerment of women poses an existential threat to society.

After the death of Jean Grey in September of 1980 in Uncanny X-Men #137 (Claremont, 1980h) the character did not reappear until January of 1986 in The Avengers #263 (Stern, 1986). Grey’s reemergence into comic narrative begins a new series of adventures for the character. In the following paragraphs I will describe and deconstruct the aesthetic qualities of Jean Grey and their rhetorical implications as expressed in the volume X-Factor Epic Collection: Genesis & Apocalypse which collects The Avengers #263, X-Factor #1-9, and multiple tie-in issues. Instead of involving grandiose plot points that dealt with existential threats as in the Dark Phoenix Saga, this volume focused on Jean Grey’s rebirth and integration into a social world that believed her to be dead, while offering some degree of exposition regarding her relationship with the Phoenix Force. To begin, The Avengers #263 (Stern, 1986) revealed that a version of Grey existed and had been kept in a cocoon-like structure deep in the bay where the spacecraft that Grey piloted had originally crashed. The narrative sequel to this event, Fantastic Four #286 (Byrne, 1986),
retroactively established that the iteration of Grey that became the Dark Phoenix and ultimately killed herself was not in fact the actual Jean Grey. In this issue it is indicated that Jean Grey bargained with the cosmic entity named the Phoenix Force as she was dying of radiation from piloting the crashing spacecraft. In exchange for protecting Grey and saving the X-Men the Phoenix was permitted to make a clone of Grey, body, mind, and personality, for the Phoenix to inhabit and live within. As a part of this bargain the now established actual Jean Grey was placed into a container that would help her to recover from the damage done by the radiation. After Grey’s resuscitation she reintegrated into the world by reuniting with her former colleagues, the original X-Men Angel, Beast, Cyclops, and Ice Man. Over the course of this narrative arc the group created and then operated an organization known as X-Factor whose public mission was to find and capture mutants for law enforcement as well as private individuals, not unlike being animal control specialists for mutants. In actuality this was a cover for the group that allowed them to rescue mutants from dangerous situations and then train them to use their powers responsibly.

The most notable developments in the aesthetic of Jean Grey in this series are displayed within the contexts of her relationships with others, particularly men as she often occupies spaces dominated by male characters. In terms of Grey’s sexual aesthetic there is similarity between Grey and the Dark Phoenix as both are depicted in form fitting attire and with big red hair. The first time that Grey met Cyclops she wore a tight black dress that appeared to be for the benefit of the presumed heterosexual male reading the comic as well as Cyclops (Layton, 1986a). Grey’s attractiveness and sexuality was reinforced throughout the series as she was often the target of men with amorous intent, such as Angel (Layton, 1986c), Ice Man (Layton, 1986b), a new recruit named Rusty Collins, and even the narrator (Layton, 1986e) describe the attractiveness of
Jean Grey. Within this vein was the contentious relationship between Grey and Cyclops which was characterized by struggle as the two harbored feelings for one another, yet Cyclops was bound within a marriage that he effectively abandoned by joining X-Factor (Layton, 1986d). This relationship provided a platform for the display of Grey’s personality as she struggles to cope with Cyclops’ emotional distance and the reality that he is inaccessible to her as a romantic partner. Within this collected edition she scolds and reprimands him but is ultimately incapable of disconnecting herself from Cyclops, indicating that her romantic interest in him is a vital component of her aesthetic. This is reinforced by her marriage to Cyclops which will be addressed later.

Jean Grey’s emotional aesthetic was also expressed multiple times in this series, particularly as related to children. At several points throughout the series Grey was depicted in a maternal capacity as she operated as a caregiver for children whether as a comforter, advocate, or trainer. Her role as a maternal figure is best exemplified in *Iron Man Annual* #8 (Harras, 1986) when she advocates for Willie Evans, a young Black American child whose mutant powers have escaped his control and resulted in the death of several people. In this comic Evans’ ability is to create monsters and animate objects that can cause destruction and kill. He does so at the urging of his imaginary friend/extension of his subconsciousness named Grunt, who appears as a small anthropomorphic frog that wears a suit and smokes a cigar. During a conversation about the danger that Evans poses as a threat, Grey advocates for the merciful treatment of Evans. She argues that the child is behaving in such a manner because of the way he was treated. She asserts to the Beast, “Hold on Hank! Willie was treated like a lab animal for months! He lashed out as any child would! He can’t be blamed if his powers are beyond his control!” (Harras, 1986, p.22).
Moments later Iron Man raises the point that it may not be possible to stop Evans without doing serious harm to him, and Grey rejects the idea outright. She argues,

“Who are you to judge? You’re just a man in a suit of armor. At the end of the day, you take it off and blend into the masses. But we can’t do that! We’re born with our powers. They’re a part of us! That’s why society fears and hates us! But we’re human beings just like Willie Evans and we have the same rights!” (Harras, 1986, p.24)

This moment is important to the aesthetic of Grey for several reasons. Grey’s assertion forces Iron Man to recognize the privilege he possesses as Tony Stark in that he can choose to appear and behave in a normative manner. Due to the mundane nature of his biology Stark can walk among the human population without stigmatization. One could argue that mutants like Jean Grey who appear human and can even use their powers without drawing attention to themselves also possess this privilege of metaphorical whiteness, but Grey’s assertion also implies that to do so would be to deny what it means to be a mutant. In this case, the rejection of one’s own powers for the sake of blending into the public is tantamount to living a closeted identity. Additionally, this assertion operates as a statement of intersectional solidarity as Grey, a white, female, mutant that can easily pass as human, advocates for the well-being of a young black child whose powers have made him the focus of experimentation and exploitation. As mentioned in her earlier quote, Evans was subjected to experiments conducted by a private corporation that sought to control his powers, which resulted in his lashing out. So, while she does understand the need to reign in Evans with the use of force, she rejects Iron Man’s assertion that serious harm may need to be used to subdue the child because ultimately, he is still a child. This moment of sympathy and solidarity reinforces Grey’s positionality as a member of a marginalized community that is able to act as an ally due to her contextual privilege.
The most notable element of Jean Grey’s developing aesthetic in X-Factor does not occur within the series proper but is depicted in *Classic X-Men* #8 (Claremont, 1987) and #43 (Claremont, 1990) which were added to *X-Factor Epic Collection: Genesis & Apocalypse* as expository selections that explain Grey’s connection to the Phoenix Force. Issue #8 (Claremont, 1987) revealed that the reason that the Phoenix Force came to Jean Grey as she piloted the crashing shuttle and tried to endure the lethal radiation, was because of her strength of will and need for help. Grey’s will and resolve attracted the attention of the Phoenix and so the cosmic force came to her aid. This explanation is expanded further in issue #43 (Claremont, 1990) when Grey met Death, who appeared as a tall adult white male construction worker with dark hair, after having died during the Shi’ar trial by combat in the *Uncanny X-Men* series. In the afterlife Grey appears as the White Phoenix, which is similar to her appearance as the Phoenix but with a white costume instead of the usual green. During her time in the afterlife Death explains that Jean Grey and the Phoenix are inextricably linked, and that because Jean Grey is connected to the cosmic force of Life (Phoenix) she is also tied fatally to Death as the two cannot exist without each other. Death tells Grey that,

“Since creation, Jean, I’ve *never* encountered a creature as fiercely, unconquerably devoted to life—you risked your own to ensure your best friend wouldn’t come to me alone. Faith, you cast aside your own mortality for the sake of those you loved. Small wonder the Phoenix heard your cry. You’re kindred spirits.” (Claremont, 1990, p.10)

This revelation regarding the nature of Jean Grey and her similarity to the Phoenix Force re-contextualizes the aesthetic of the character. This piece of narrative exposition places Grey as a singular entity among all of humanity, with the rhetorical implication being that middle-class white women bear an extraordinary responsibility that comes from the power that they hold.
Rhetorically, this comic narrative acts as an affirmation of the value of white feminism while critiquing it simultaneously. The narrative justification that the Phoenix Force, the cosmic entity that embodies all life within the universe, found its most appropriate vessel in a white woman from a middle-class family in the United States acts as a metaphorical representation of the empowerment of a particular kind of woman. The value of this empowerment is that it positions this genre of woman to reject patriarchal systems of control. Historically, the detrimental aspect of this kind of empowerment is that it came at the expense of other marginalized groups such as women of color and queer women who were ignored during sections of the 1970s Women’s Movement in American history (Fawaz, 2011). Metaphorically this is represented in the destruction of the D’Bari, the alien society that lived on the planet destroyed by the Dark Phoenix. The D’Bari metaphorically function as a catch-all group for marginalized others as they are positioned within the larger Marvel universe as non-human others within a narrative that values humanity as the standard against which other species are measured. The genocide of the D’Bari is a memory that Jean Grey grapples with during her time in the afterlife, and after her conversation with Death she realizes that she must resolve to do better moving forward just as Feminist scholarship has had to reckon with its own inequities in terms of silencing marginalized voices (Okolosie, 2014). This shift in the character’s aesthetic is important in understanding conceptualizations of white femininity up until this point. Up until this point the narratives have invited audiences to perceive white women as physically fragile, intellectually subordinate to men, easily corruptible by power, and compassionate to the point of poor-judgement. But this new development in the growth of Jean Grey and her assumption of the power of the Phoenix encourages those that consume the material to consider white femininity as capable of growth and the judicious exercise of power. This narrative addendum to the character also carries with it
implications for Jean Grey symbolizing intersectional feminist empowerment as she
contemplates the consequences of her actions that cost the lives of many outside of her
demographic. In short, this iteration of the character offers the logic that white femininity is
compatible with the responsible use of power.

The next significant narrative event in the publication history of Jean Grey that I will be
examining in terms of her aesthetic development, is her marriage to Scott Summers in the
collected volume *X-Men: The Wedding of Cyclops & Phoenix*. This collected edition of comics
from the early 1990s depicts the narrative arc of Jean Grey’s and Scott Summers’ relationship
from the days immediately before the wedding up until the day of the event. Aesthetically, this
volume visually and narratively overtly emphasizes Grey’s sexuality, her socio-economic
background, and the importance of heteronormative romance in her character development.
Grey’s socio-economic status is referenced at multiple points throughout the volume, such as
when her father is referenced as “Professor Grey” (Nicieza, F, p.10) which suggests that he holds
a doctoral degree. Such a title would be consistent with other aspects of Jean Grey’s life
mentioned earlier that indicate that she comes from a firmly middle-class background. The most
notable reinforcement of her socio-economic status within this narrative is that her dress was
designed by her fictional friend and real-world fashion designer Nicole Miller, which was
delivered by Miller in person (Lobdell, 1994a). These small elements of the narrative reinforce
Jean-Grey’s aesthetic of being a well-off and socially well-positioned woman who has benefitted
from various forms of privilege.

The most important aspects of Jean Grey’s aesthetic development during this narrative
event are her sexuality and her salvation through heteronormativity. Grey is visually represented
in a hypersexual manner, consistent with the hyperphysical art styles in the *X-Men* (1991) series
and the *Uncanny X-Men* (1981) series. The visual representations of the characters in these series involve bodies with disproportionate physiques that are display advanced musculature and clothing that obscures very little of the human form. This art style is not unusual within comics as it is consistent with the idea that women within comics serve as form of pinup art for the sexual gratification of a presumed heterosexual male viewer (Scott, 2015). This is particularly true in the case of Jean Grey when she is illustrated in her wedding dress which combines virginal white coloring with the implied sexuality of the form of the dress as it draws attention to her bust. The result being the rhetorical implication of unused sexual potential that will be utilized within the boundaries of her marriage to Scott Summers. This teleological perspective on her sexuality is reinforced by the heteronormative narrative of Jean Grey that positions Summers as a vital part to her self-actualization along with being necessary for the salvation of the universe.

The narrative arc of this volume emphasizes the role that Scott Summers played in the life of Jean Grey. As a child Jean Grey experienced a personal trauma that required professional medical treatment. As a young girl she formed a psychic bond with her childhood friend Annie who would soon die in her arms (Lobdell, 1994b). The resulting trauma of being psychically connected to a dying friend as a child sent Grey into a catatonic state for three years. This establishes within the narrative of Jean Grey that her psychic powers, particularly her ability to experience extreme empathy, become a liability for her own safety. In effect, this narrative uses a hyper-representation of empathy, a quality often associated with femininity (D’Amore, 2008), and turns it into a weakness. Acting as her childhood therapist, Professor Xavier constructed psychic barricades to allow her mind to heal and grow (Lobdell, 1994b). Grey’s empathic abilities began to return when, as a young woman, she developed a romantic interest in Summers
and her mind started to remove the barriers that Xavier had created (Lobdell, 1994b). This piece of narrative development indicates an important piece in the aesthetic construction of Jean Grey: heterosexual love as necessary for self-actualization. It is only through her sexual attraction to Summers that she can regain an aspect of herself that had been lost to her. With the understanding that the Phoenix is the peak expression of her powers (as addressed earlier), this moment in her narrative becomes contextualized as necessary for her to realize her highest potential as a mutant. Essentially, the narrative logic within the text asks the audience to accept the importance and necessity of heterosexual relationships for women to achieve their full potential.

In *Uncanny X-Men* #308 (Lobdell, 1994b) Jean Grey and Scott Summers revisit the event when Grey managed to overpower the Phoenix during the Shi’ar duel and killed herself, bringing the reign of the Phoenix to a temporary end. As they reminisce Grey points out that she was only able to do so because of her concern for Summers once he was harmed and nearly killed. In this way, their romantic connection ultimately saved the universe from the Phoenix because without that bond it is unlikely that Grey would have found the strength to terminate the physical form of the cosmic entity. Included in this volume is *What if...?* #60 (Busiek, 1994), which re-contextualizes the significance of the relationship between Grey and Summers by exploring the possible consequences of their relationship unfolding in three different ways. The first possible alternative to their canonical relationship involved the two getting married early, prompting them to leave the X-Men, weakening the team and resulting in their deaths during a conflict with Krakoa, the sentient landmass (Busiek, 1994). The second possible alternative depicted Jean Grey falling in love with Angel/Warren Worthington, III, leaving Scott Summers alone and introverted. Ultimately Summers’ isolation resulted in his transformation into a villain as he
became increasing emotionally hardened without a positive feminine influence to temper his unchecked masculinity. The third possible outcome depicted Phoenix falling in love with Wolverine/Logan. However, because their love was not sufficiently strong the Dark Phoenix ultimately destroyed the universe. While the first possible alternative provided a narrative justification for why it took so long for Grey and Summers to become married, the other two alternatives speak to the need for their relationship both on the local level (Cyclops becoming a villain) and on the existential level (Phoenix destroying the universe). These alternative endings represent the duality that characterizes Jean Grey’s aesthetic. In one respect Grey functions as a symbol of (white) feminist empowerment that, as revealed by the possibility of an evil Cyclops, is necessary to keep masculinity from developing into a toxic form that is oppressive and malicious. In another respect, feminine potential must be constrained by heteronormative love of a particular genre. The love between Grey and Logan, while heteronormative, is not sufficient. The Phoenix can only be kept in check by the mythologized version of love that is predicated on the notion of there being a singular entity that is meant for each person. In Uncanny X-Men #308, Jean Grey describes Scott Summers as her singular entity. She states,

“Every teenaged girl is assigned one guy with a capital ‘O’, Scott. The guy to pine away for. The guy to get weak-kneed and tongue-tied over. At least, that’s what my mother told me. I used to laugh at her, telling her times had changed. Then…I joined the X-Men…you ever wonder why mothers are always right?” (Lobdell, 1994b, p.2)

The idea that Scott Summers is the mythologized ‘one’ for Jean Grey, combined with the narrative affirmation that any deviation from their canonical romance would lead to catastrophe, rhetorically functions to assert that heteronormative romance is vital to the aesthetic of Grey as conceptualized up to this point. Essentially, this volume reaffirms the narrative motif that
unchecked feminine potential would be existentially devastating, and that a romanticized and unrealistic notion of heterosexual love is the only way to avert such a crisis.

The iteration of Jean Grey found in the *New X-Men* series created in 2001 is an interesting shift in terms of the aesthetic of the character. The series reinforces established elements of the character, such as her actual and metaphorical whiteness, while departing from the previously discussed iterations by placing her within a position of power and authority within the Xavier School. I’ll address each of these elements of her character construction and how they encourage the audience to accept certain narrative logics about the nature of white femininity in turn, but first I’ll begin with a deconstruction of her visual aesthetic. For this research I examined the first two collected volumes of *New X-Men*, and across those volumes Jean Grey’s aesthetic changed with the different artists that illustrated the character. However, each iteration was consistently subdued in terms of physicality and implied sexuality, as compared to many of her previous depictions. Author Grant Morrison even notes her new appearance within the third issue of the series when he has Grey comment as telekinetically lifts debris, “Trust me: I compensate for unnaturally thin wrists and ankles with an extremely—buff—mind” (Morrison, 2001a). This comment functions as an acknowledgement that this version of Grey is not the hyper-physical, and by implication overtly sexualized, character that readers have been accustomed to in previous work.

Grey’s subdued visual aesthetic, which is to say she no longer wears skintight outfits and is not drawn with an exaggerated hourglass figure, is juxtaposed with the perpetually scantily clad villain-turned-hero Emma Frost. Over the course of *New X-Men* volume one and volume two Emma Frost is often portrayed in a manner that is hyper-sexual. A representational example is the cover of *New X-Men* #116 (Morrison, 2001a), which is featured in volume one, where
Frost poses in an outfit that exposes most of her breasts, shoulders, midriff, and her upper thighs. This relates to another element of Jean Grey’s aesthetic: her sexuality. It is revealed over the course of the two volumes that Grey regarded Frost as an ally but also as something of a sexual competitor as Grey was concerned that Frost and her husband Scott Summers may have had a brief relationship while away on a mission together (Morrison, 2001c). Grey rationalizes that Summers’ aloofness may be caused by his supposed infidelity, which prompts her to make a sexual advance towards Logan (Morrison, 2001b). Ultimately the sentiment was not reciprocated, and the anomalous action becomes an isolated incident, although it does indicate that the character was unable to seduce a man who canonically has had romantic feelings for her which further emphasizes her intentionally diminished sexuality. Scott Summers assuages Grey’s fears by denying that they were physically intimate, but the articulation of the character’s fear reinforces this newly created sexually demure aesthetic and implicitly emphasizes the sexuality of Frost. By emphasizing the sexual nature of Frost, the creators invite the reader to shift their gaze towards her instead of Grey for visual sexual gratification. This in turn helps to diminish the pinupesque element of Grey that has existed for much of her publication history. Doing so encourages the reader to eschew previous conceptions about Jean Grey being an object of overt sexual desire and instead to consider her as an intellectual force. In terms of answering the guiding questions for this chapter, this reconceptualization of the icon of white femininity serves to push beyond the previously established binary of helpless arm-candy-in-distress and corrupted villainous vixen; and into the realm of a capable leader whose intellect takes priority over her function as a source of visual sexual gratification for the reader.

Over the course of volume one and two of *New X-Men* the heroic mutants are pitted against two villains; a psychic entity named Cassandra that was intent on overtaking the universe
and a mad scientist named John Sublime who saw it as his personal mission to forcefully create human/mutant hybrids by butchering mutants for their powers. Within these overlapping arcs elements of Jean Grey’s aesthetic are reinforced while others shift, especially while she acted in a leadership capacity. In issue *New X-Men* #117 (Morrison, 2001b) Professor Xavier, just recently psychically possessed by the villain Cassandra, places Jean Grey in charge of the Xavier Institute before departing for the Shi’ar Empire. This appointment reaffirms the already established socio-economic status of Grey both explicitly in terms of her position as well as implicitly in terms of her appearance. Grey’s position placed her in authority over all of the residents of the school, both students and faculty. This also meant that she was in charge of Scott Summers, her husband and field leader of the X-Men to whom she had been deferential in the past. This point in the narrative symbolically acts to represent the professional achievement of women, but that message is qualified by the implication that such a status is attainable by a woman of her middle-class background.

The value of Jean Grey’s actual and metaphorical whiteness is implied during her tenure as the headmistress of the school. A subplot within the overarching narrative is the plight of Barnell Bohusk/Beak whose mutation caused his appearance to transform such that he resembled a cross between a human and a large bird, complete with avian facial features and arms. At several points in volume one and two of *New X-Men* Beak was ostracized for his appearance, which reinforced the cultural understanding among the mutants that the ideal image was that of a human (Morrison, 2002e). As addressed earlier, the ability of a mutant to pass as human is a metaphor for whiteness because within the context of the Marvel universe mutants are frequently discriminated against just as racial minorities are discriminated against by members of the dominant white group within the context of the United States. This prejudice against mutants is
exhibited in *New X-Men* #119 (Morrison, 2001d) when Jean Grey asks for assistance from local law enforcement in defending the school from John Sublime’s soldiers as they attack the school, and the dispatch operator tells her that the mutants in the school can fend for themselves. Therefore, to be free of physical demarcations of “otherness”, i.e. visible mutations, places an individual closer to the dominant group which results in greater access to socio-cultural benefits. Jean Grey’s metaphorical biological privilege of passing as human factors into her role as the headmistress when she is responsible for meeting with news reporters who are suspicious of the activities at the Xavier Institute. During the meeting one of the reporters referred to Dr. Hank McCoy/Beast as a monster because of his appearance, which at this point in the series resembles a large, blue, anthropomorphic lion (Morrison, 2002c). In that scene Beast is one of three mutants present, but he is the only one that does not pass for human. The implication being that humans take particular issue with mutants that appear aberrant within a human-centric society. I contend that because this is the case Jean Grey would be less well-suited to be the headmistress if she could not pass for human. I also contend that her metaphorical whiteness rhetorically functions to reinforce the privileged aesthetic that characterizes Grey, which is consistent with the aforementioned elements of her privilege rooted in her socio-economic status, idealized beauty, and whiteness.

During Jean Grey’s meeting with the press, as well as in other important moments throughout both volumes, she asserts herself in a leadership capacity and performs feats with her powers that are impressive within the context of this universe. The following actions are the most notable in terms of her abilities and their implications for her aesthetic: When she took control of the minds of the reporters to direct them to safety when the Xavier Institute became under attack; When she single-handedly routed John Sublime’s private military force as they laid siege to the
school; and when she stored the consciousness of Xavier in her own mind and then used the machine Cerebra, a super computer operated by psychic energy, to disburse the consciousness of Professor Xavier thus keeping him from harm and allowing him to reconstitute himself. The first feat I listed represents an interesting personality shift in Grey, as she typically avoids intruding in the minds of others without their express permission. Her willingness to take control of the minds of the reporters while acknowledging that doing so at best stretches the boundaries of what is considered ethical (Morrison, 2002d) indicates that her priority is for the safety of her charges and reflects a variation of the idea that the ends justify the means. The second heroic feat involved her use of the Phoenix Force in earnest, as she protected the members of the school from John Sublime’s assault force. Specifically, she manifested the aura of the Phoenix as she telekinetically disassembled the weapons and equipment of the soldiers before creating an explosion that wounded the soldiers and forced them off the school grounds (Morrison, 2002a). The third heroic feat involved her, with virtually no help from Emma Frost, rescuing the consciousness of Xavier that Cassandra had imprisoned in a psychic cage and storing his consciousness in her own brain. The strain of such an act caused her head to bleed and weakened significantly (Morrison, 2002e). She then uploaded Xavier’s consciousness into Cerebra, the psychically operated super machine, and stored pieces of his mind in mutants all over the world. Doing so kept him from being a single, targetable entity and allowed him to reconstitute his consciousness into his own body when it was connected to Cerebra. This impressive feat not only demonstrates her power as a mutant, it also switches the traditional dynamic between Xavier and Grey as he has often served as a paternal figure. But in this storyline Grey treated him as though he were the damsel in distress and rescued him from certain danger.
That Jean Grey is accomplishing impressive feats and making bold decisions is not new, her previous iterations as the Phoenix and Dark Phoenix displayed similar aesthetic elements in this regard. The difference is that this iteration of Grey strives for the both/and possibility rather than the either/or in terms of her aesthetic. The character does not fall into a binary of being a caregiver or destroyer of worlds, as she did in the past. This iteration’s aesthetic includes boldness as well as compassion and empathy. This emotionally accessible aesthetic is displayed during a few moments when she expressed extreme anguish; the first time occurred when she read the mind of Beak who was mind-controlled by Cassandra into beating Beast nearly to death (Morrison, 2001d). Reading Beak’s mind and understanding how deeply he was traumatized by being forced to almost kill his closest friend at the school caused Grey to weep uncontrollably. Grey again expressed deep sadness as she held the consciousness of Xavier and experienced his own memories, doing so caused the omega-level psychic to lose composure as she experienced the memory of Xavier’s childhood dog dying (Morrison, 2002c).

Ultimately this version of Jean Grey is an attempt to strike a balance between the binary that has often plagued the character. Early iterations depicted her as an object of sexual desire that was effectively of minimal help, thus reinforcing traditional perceptions of the frailty and beauty of women. Later iterations turned her into a hyper-physical symbol of distorted radical feminism that had to be constrained by heteronormative relations and patriarchal figures, or else she became an existential threat. This version of Grey was an attempt at finding a middle ground between the two, and is best characterized by these excerpts from a lengthy conversation between herself and Scott Summers after the battle with John Sublime’s forces:

Scott: “Should we be worried about this?”
Jean: “About what? About me?”

Scott: “It’s not the telekinesis, Logan told me you manifested the Phoenix Raptor Display when the U-Men attacked the school. Jean, you know what happened last time you lost control of these enormous thoughts and emotions of yours.”

Jean: “Do I look like I’m losing control? These are different times, Scott. Everything is different. Charles is right, we can’t afford to be ashamed any more. We can’t strap down our wings or hide our strange eyes and our brilliant minds…” (Morrison, 2002b, p.10)

*Later in the Conversation*

Scott: “As far as we know, humanity is slowly dying out. The last thing they need is for us to act like the master race with our master plans…”

Jean: “It’s not going to be like that…Charles was imagining a whole new world for everyone. A new way of thinking and living. We have more important things to do than worry about whether our glowing eyes frighten the Republicans!” (Morrison, 2002b, p.11)

This exchange between Jean Grey and Scott Summers encapsulates the aesthetic of this character as a leader who was concerned for the well-being of her students, had an egalitarian vision for the future, and was not afraid of seizing power and making bold decisions. Rhetorically this version of Jean Grey functioned as an articulation of feminine dimensionality and empowerment that was not a threat to masculinity, as well as being an endorsement of feminist leadership towards a prosperous future. In terms of answering the guiding questions of this chapter, this iteration is another step towards a more dimensional representation of white
femininity. The aforementioned exchange is a distillation of a recurring theme within popular media about the leadership of women: will their emotions complicate their ability to lead? This narrative invites the reader to accept the logic that women are as capable of being efficient leaders as men and do not need to buy into the problematic binary of either/or when it comes to emotional intelligence and decision making. Whereas previous iterations of the character represented white femininity as incapable of judicious leadership because of emotional fragility, this version rhetorically contends that emotional intelligence can be a component of effective leadership.

The next version of Jean Grey that I will discuss is a significant departure from the previous versions of the character. The previously addressed version of Jean Grey died at the hands of Xorn, a mutant that was under the influence of John Sublime, in *New X-Men* #150 (Morrison, 2003). As a point of clarity, *New X-Men* #150 is outside of my selected literature for analysis. After the death of Jean Grey and the destruction of the Xavier Institute, the school was rebuilt and renamed as the Jean Grey School of Higher Learning (Bendis, 2012a). Additionally, during a brief moment where Cyclops possessed the Phoenix Force he killed Professor Xavier in a moment of madness; this occurred in a comic that is also outside of my selected literature. Jean Grey reappears in the 2012 series *All-New X-Men*, but as a previous version of herself. Within this story, Beast, who is dying from his own ever-developing mutation, time travels to the early days of the X-Men when the team was originally composed of Cyclops, Angel, Beast, Jean Grey, Ice Man, and Professor Xavier. His rationale for doing so was to bring the original X-Men to the current time so that they can persuade Cyclops, who has recently joined forces with the militant mutant Magneto, to abandon his campaign against humanity in the name of mutant rights.
(Bendis, 2012a). The Beast succeeded in bringing the young X-Men to the current time, prompting the dramatic recreation of the Jean Grey’s aesthetic beginning in *All-New X-Men*.

For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the youthful version of Jean Grey that was transported from the 1960s to the current decade as “Young Jean Grey/Young Grey”. This will become particularly important when I address her narrative where the original, deceased Jean Grey reappears.

I will begin with an analysis of her visual representation and the way that it is referenced within the narrative. The art style of *All-New X-Men* leans toward the hyper-physical, often depicting characters with advanced musculatures of rippling muscle and slightly exaggerated proportions. While this style is does not rise to the level of hyper-physicality displayed in earlier X-Men comics, particularly those during the 1990s, it is clear that the visuals rhetorically convey that these are extraordinary people. Within this context Young Jean Grey appears relatively normal. In *All-New X-Men* #1 (Bendis, 2012a) she is depicted with shoulder length hair and wearing a green, knee-length dress, and has a physique that visually places her between close to adult maturity yet still in adolescence. This is the case with all of the young X-Men, and it is made particularly clear in their first encounter with the current day Cyclops and Magneto (Bendis, 2012c) as the two groups are visually juxtaposed. Both Cyclops and Magneto appear much larger, imposing, and more physically capable than the youths which helps to reinforce the idea that these young mutants have not yet matured in terms of age, body, or mind. Furthermore, it is important to note that Young Jean Grey is not visually sexualized in the way that other female characters are, such as with the villains Emma Frost (She became a villain again somewhere along the way) and Magik. Both characters are depicted with exaggerated hourglass figures and clothing that is revealing either because it strategically exposes skin, as in the case of
Frost, or because the costume is skintight and emphasizes the curvature of the body, as in the case of Magik (Bendis, 2012b).

Even though Young Jean Grey was not visually represented in a manner that emphasizes her sexuality, her beauty was still narratively reinforced. In *All-New X-Men* #4 (Bendis, 2012c) the current day Cyclops was struck by the beauty of the Young Jean Grey and remarked that she looked “gorgeous” (Bendis, 2012c, p.4). The cover of *All-New X-Men* #5 (Bendis, 2013a) features Young Grey’s face set in a grim demeanor and positioned in the center of the cover, surrounded by the adult Jean Grey as Marvel Girl, the Black Queen, Phoenix, and the day she married Scott Summers, with each iteration in accurate attire. Each representation of the adult Jean Grey involves the illustration of her physique in a manner consistent with previous sexualized iterations. Rhetorically, this imagery asserts that Young Grey must contend with a future that she does not care for with the implication that she also rejects her future of sexual objectification. This is narratively explored in the same issue, which featured a conversation between the unconscious adult Beast and Young Grey when she used her telepathy to reach into his mind. While in his mind Young Grey pointed out that her attire changed, to which Beast responded that the Marvel Girl outfit she was wearing was his favorite costume of hers (Bendis, 2013a). Young Grey expresses distaste and incredulity with the outfit, and while the point is not expanded upon within the narrative I assert that her rejection of the outfit has to do with the fact that it featured a plunging V-neckline and the skirt portion ended just below her hips, exposing the skin of her mid-thigh down to the top of her boots just below her knees. The purpose of the outfit is clearly the gratification of the viewer and not for fighting super-powered villains. That Beast conceptualizes her in such a way within his own head speaks to her position within the group as a sexual object. Later while still in Beasts mind, he allows Young Jean Grey to perceive
her future through his memory. Once she perceived the entirety of her life, including her deaths, reincarnations, romantic relationships, traumas, general struggles, she immediately recoiled in fear and horror, rejecting what she had seen.

In the final pages of *All-New X-Men* #5 (Bendis, 2013a) Young Jean Grey argues for the group to stay in the current time to fix the issues of the present, so that the hardships that she and the X-Men will endure in their future will have been worthwhile. This moment in the character’s history indicates a profound shift in Young Jean Grey’s aesthetic. In this scene Young Grey asserts her decision to stay once Beast has resolved to send the time-displaced youths back to their original era. The boldness of her statement is antithetical to the original iteration of Jean Grey from the 1960s comic as that character would never have asserted herself so forcefully, and certainly not against an authority figure like a senior member of the X-Men. The original version of Jean Grey would have deferred to the wisdom of either Professor Xavier or the team leader, Scott Summers. Young Jean Grey ultimately puts the decision to a vote with the majority decision as the result. Her argument about the need to fix the current problem persuades each original member, except for Young Angel. Shortly after the decision to stay was made, Young Grey was appointed as the leader of the team instead of Young Cyclops due to her ability persuade most of the Young X-Men to stay in the current time (Bendis, 2013b). Another critical development in her aesthetic was made shortly after the vote to stay; Young Cyclops approached her and asked for a moment to speak alone. Young Grey’s response was to reject him, saying “Scott…leave me the Hell alone” (Bendis, 2013a, p.21).

These narrative events, her decision to stay against the wishes of Beast, her rejection of Young Cyclops, and her appointment to the position of team leader, are rhetorical refutations of the original iteration of Jean Grey. Whereas the previous Grey was typified by the damsel-in-
distress trope and effectively functioned as a secondary support character both in and out of combat, this new version of Jean Grey acts as a declaration of the character’s potential capabilities. The Young Grey represents occupational achievement and ability while also rejecting the character’s historic dependence on Cyclops for stability by initially shunning Young Cyclops. This action came as a result of reading adult Cyclops’ mind and being horrified at the truth that adult Cyclops did in fact kill Xavier. While the two eventually reconcile and resume being on amiable terms, this initial distancing from Young Cyclops suggests that Young Grey reconsidered her feelings for him and reevaluated their future together. This moment symbolizes the possibility of a future for Jean Grey that is independent of her cycle of life-death-rebirth that ostensibly revolves around her romantic relationship with Cyclops. While the long-term future of the character has yet to be determined, it seems that at least in this moment Jean Grey succeeded in breaking away from patriarchal control and influence. Pertinent to the initial questions I posed at the beginning of this chapter, this iteration of the character invites the reader to agree with the narrative’s critique-through-contrast of the original Jean Grey. The text then attempts to persuade the reader that the new behavior of this Jean Grey is both narratively faithful to the nature of the character and a positive shift in the character’s aesthetic. In doing so the text proposes the narrative logic that young white femininity is capable of democratic leadership and self-governance independent of male dominance.

The assertive and independent aesthetic of Young Jean Grey is further developed in the series Jean Grey, which began in 2017. I examined Jean Grey Vol. 1: Nightmare Fuel for this project and I will begin my analysis with a deconstruction of her visual aesthetic before continuing to discuss other elements of the character.
The first volume of Jean Grey serves as a discourse on two different versions of femininity. In the opening pages of Jean Grey #1 (Hopeless, 2017a) the Young Grey delivers a monologue about the differences between herself and the original Jean Grey that died. Her assertions will be incorporated later in this section, but first I would like to highlight the differences in visual aesthetic between the two characters. In the beginning of the comic the adult Grey is depicted as she typically was during her time as the Phoenix, full figured with a slightly exaggerated hourglass shape, big red hair, and clad in a skin-tight outfit that emphasized her advanced musculature. By comparison, Young Grey was depicted in a much more adolescent and ostensibly appropriate manner. Her aesthetic included short hair that framed her face, physical proportions that were within the realm of normativity while suggesting a somewhat advanced physiology rooted in her mutant biology, along with a form-fitting body suit and matching jacket that obscured her torso. Even with the form-fitting suit, this version of Young Jean Grey conveys a message of adolescence and youthful immaturity more so that her previous iteration in All-New X-Men. By juxtaposing the images of the adult Grey and the Young Grey, the visual rhetoric conveys the idea that the two are distinct individuals even if they are the same biological entity. This visual reinforcement of their individuality allows the narrative of the Jean Grey series to engage in a rhetorical discourse about the two characters as a way of redressing the original Grey’s flaws and problematic elements of her aesthetic. In the following paragraphs I will address that discourse and how it leads to further development of her rhetorical aesthetic.

The discourse that characterizes the narrative exists both as metaphor and as a literal component of the narrative. The former seeks to reconcile the modernized Young Grey with the historical Jean Grey that was caught in a cycle of life-death-rebirth that was characterized by white feminist subtext and patriarchal domination. The narrative rhetoric of Nightmare Fuel
engages with two key concepts pertinent to both original and Young Jean Grey: intersectionality and the oppression of privilege. I’ll begin by first establishing the premise of the narrative arc before addressing the two concepts that are central to the narrative.

The premise of *Nightmare Fuel* is that Young Jean Grey, after having left the X-Men to travel on her own, begins to have visions of the Phoenix Force pursuing her which she understands to be a warning that the cosmic entity is coming to Earth to possess her just as it did with the previous Jean Grey. In response, Young Grey sets out to learn how to combat the entity and save herself from the fate that the previous Jean Grey suffered. Her fear is not only that the Phoenix Force will commandeer her body, but that even if it doesn’t she will be forced to suffer various traumatic experiences just as the previous Grey did. Young Grey characterizes the other version of herself as a genocidal madwoman that destroyed a planet and attempted to kill her friends. As she articulates in *Jean Grey* #1, “That other Jean. Grown-up badass, seen-and-done-it-all Jean. She’s my nightmare. Her life—the life I should have led—wakes me up a couple nights a week. All cold sweat-y” (Hopeless, 2017a). Her desperation to avoid the fate of the adult Jean Grey motivates her to seek help from others that have been hosts for the Phoenix Force in an attempt to avert tragedy. As previously discussed, after adult Jean Grey killed herself during the Shi’ar duel she found herself alongside an incarnation of Death where she reflected on her mistakes and resolved to do better in the future. While not specifically mentioned in this text, this appeal for guidance acts as a sort of fulfillment of her post-death resolution to learn, grow, and improve moving forward.

This quest for wisdom from previous hosts of the Phoenix rhetorically functions as a metaphor for intersectionality and the value of differing perspectives regarding a particular problem. Unfortunately, the execution of this metaphor was problematic. The purpose of
intersectionality is to incorporate the voices of the marginalized in order to create a more just approach to resolving oppression (Okolosie, 2014). Ultimately Young Grey seeks out Quentin Quire, Colossus, Magik, Rachel Summers, Hope Summers, and Namor, all of whom were hosts for the Phoenix at some point. While each of these characters occupy marginalized places within society, they also benefit from significant privilege. Each of the aforementioned mutants is white and could pass for human, except for Namor who is an Atlantean mutant and possesses non-human physical features. These passing mutants possess actual and metaphorical whiteness, which positions them as privileged within the context of their marginalized community such that they could seamlessly assimilate into human-centric society. Namor also benefits from his own form of privilege, as the king of Atlantis he is also the ruler of the oceans and so possesses his own form of class privilege at the expense of his subjects. Essentially, this attempt at using an intersectional approach to handle the issue of the Phoenix Force is a significantly mitigated success. Colossus and Magik possess the national identity of being Russian which qualifies their actual whiteness. Magik, Rachel, and Hope Summers are marginalized as women within a patriarchal society both in terms of macro-level American society and the micro-level X-Men organization which is often under the command of men such as Professor Xavier, Logan, and Cyclops respectively, yet still possess the benefits of actual and metaphorical whiteness.

Furthermore, Rachel and Hope Summers are both related to Young Jean Grey; Rachel is adult Jean Grey’s daughter from an alternate timeline and Hope is the future adopted grandchild of adult Grey. In short, this attempt at intersectionality implicitly reinforces the centrality of Grey as she two of the five people she seeks council from are narratively and visually (they look like her) referential of this character. Namor symbolically acts as a representation of masculine non-whiteness as he has green skin which marks him as an ‘other’ when in human society, but even
within that context he has the social privileges of being regarded as a mighty entity along with Captain America and Thor. My contention is that while mutants have often served as symbols of marginalized identities (Fawaz, 2011), these mutants in particular occupy particularly privileged positions within that context and that genuine intersectionality would involve the narrative use of mutants that do not benefit from metaphorical whiteness, such as the Morlocks who are mutants that were forced to live underground due to their hideous appearance, or X-Men like Beak. Ultimately, Young Jean Grey’s choice to seek the help of others within her marginalized community displays an important development in her aesthetic, specifically that this version of the character values community and affirms the knowledge of others. Unfortunately, those others are similar to her in terms of her own privilege within that community.

While the narrative use of intersectionality was flawed Young Jean Grey’s interaction with the previous hosts does prompt the beginning of rhetorical engagement with the second key concept, the oppressive nature of privilege. Through the use of telepathic communication each previous host for the Phoenix Force visually represented the psychological trauma that they endured. The commonality across all of the representations was fire burning landscapes and buildings, such as the vision that Namor allowed Young Jean Grey to perceive which appeared as his throne room in Atlantis burning as the Phoenix Effect danced in the flames (Hopeless, 2017b). Earlier in this chapter I asserted that Jean Grey’s possession of the Phoenix Force symbolized feminist empowerment; this new understanding of the cost of wielding that power adds a deeper understanding of empowerment and its potential consequences. Within the narrative the Phoenix Force still operates as a metaphor for empowerment, but the permanent psychological damage done by the Phoenix to its previous hosts underscores an element of power that complicates understandings of privilege: that access to privilege is oppressive and it
comes at personal cost. This rhetorical assertion regarding the nature of power is consistent with previous research, particularly work that address male privilege within a patriarchal society. Previous research on hegemonic masculinity suggests that subordinate masculinity must also be a component of patriarchal systems, that lesser forms of masculinity are subjugated by dominant forms as a part of maintaining control (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, influential endorsers of masculinity, such as male family members, reinforce the value of dominant modes of expression and by implication stigmatize other expressions; this in turn prompts younger generations to self-censor and modify their behavior such that it may cause distress (Pompper, 2010). A consequence of having access to the cosmic power of the Phoenix Force is mental scarring and psychological trauma. Similarly, access to privilege such as in the case of hegemonic masculinity may come at the cost of anxiety, distress, and a lack of emotional health (Pompper, 2010). Young Jean Grey’s recognition of the horrors associated with the power of the Phoenix Force, and her ultimate decision to combat it in an attempt to preserve herself indicates a shift in her aesthetic. Specifically, her rejection of cosmic power and the decision to confront this entity rather than keep running from it creates an aesthetic of defiance, conviction, and empowerment that does not come at the expense of other groups as was the case with the D’Bari. It is a form of empowerment that came from the recognition of the suffering of others combined with a desire to keep from harming other people. Relative to the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter about representation and understandings about society and white femininity, this narrative arc connects to the first instance that these texts addressed the issue of the responsibility and burdens of empowerment in the X-Factor collected edition. This ideological sequel to that narrative invites audiences to understand the same point made about white women in society, that oppression and privilege can coexist in the same intersectional
identity and that there are burdens inherent within privilege and that an intersectional approach to wielding that responsibility is necessary to understand the consequences of wielding that power. The texts invite the audiences to engage with the narrative logic that introspection and intersectional perspective are necessary for those that occupy privileged positions within society.

I’ll conclude this section with a discussion on the narrative reconciliation of the two Jean Greys and the rhetorical implications as illustrated in the last issue of *Nightmare Fuel, Jean Grey* #6 (Hopeless, 2017c). In this comic the Young Jean Grey seeks the help of Dr. Strange, the chief magician and Sorcerer Supreme of Earth, in finding out the source of the voice that she has begun to hear. The two characters travel to the spirit dimension where they discover that the voice is that of adult Jean Grey, and that she has been communicating with Young Grey as a ghost. In this comic adult Grey takes Young Grey through a series of flashbacks through adult Grey’s history, some of which Young Grey has experienced and some of which she has not. During the first part of the flashback the adult Grey shows the Young Grey a common memory of her first birthday celebration as a part of the X-Men. The scene involves a conversation between the two Greys as the version in the flashback addresses Young Grey,

Dr. Strange: “Perhaps that’s why she brought you here. To remind you of a simpler time.”

Young Grey: “Maybe, but what’s the point? Oh look, life used to be so easy and great, but now—"

Adult Grey: “*Great?!* Are you *kidding* me?! I’m an Omega-Level telekinetic. Using my gifts to slice up and distribute cake. To a roomful of wildly insecure little boys. Who can’t decide if my role on the team should be—damsel in
distress, sex kitten, house keeper or mascot! If any one of them had any idea of how powerful I am—"

Young Grey: “Never gave them enough credit. I just assumed they couldn’t handle it and played girlie. And who even cares? The indignity of that crap doesn’t hold a candle to what came after. Knowing what I know now—"

Adult Grey: “You! Know! Nothing!” (Hopeless, 2017c, p.8)

This conversation is one example of multiple flashback experiences that the ghost of Jean Grey forced Young Grey to experience. At the conclusion of the flashbacks ghost Grey demands that the Young Grey speak an uncomfortable truth that she had thus far refused,

Adult Grey: “I want you to say it. I want to hear it out loud. The unspoken truth you refuse to accept.”

Young Grey: “Jean Grey…is Jean Grey…is Jean Grey.”

Adult Grey: “Yes…and who are you?”

Young Grey: “I’m…you. I’m just you.” (Hopeless, 2017c, p.16-17).

The narrative purpose of these sequences, the flashbacks and conversations, is to prepare the Young Grey for the eventuality that the Phoenix Force will come for her and that there is no escape. Rhetorically, this issue asserts the value of reflexivity and its role in negotiating hegemonic forces, power, and oppression. By confronting the version of herself that she regards as nightmarish, Young Jean Grey is forced to reflect on her own experiences and her own potential to become an existential threat. The underlying ideological message within this narrative is that reflexivity is necessary for anyone that would operate from a position of power
and privilege, whether obtained through choice or circumstance, because to ignore the possibility of unwillingly participating in a system of oppression allows it to continue. In her article on the issue of racism by consequence Guess (2006) articulates that whiteness as an oppressive force continues to operate as people who benefit from it do not confront the customs, traditions, and systems that reinforce racism in a subtle manner. Similarly, without reflecting on her own potential to become an oppressive force while possessed by the Phoenix Young Grey would become consumed by the entity and lose herself and thus her control. This sentiment coupled with Young Grey’s reconciliation that she is the adult Grey adds a new aesthetic to the character. One of maturity, reflexivity, and the recognition that privilege is problematic. This event combined with the realization that access to the power of the Phoenix comes at a cost, functions rhetorically convey a message that becomes a part of Young Grey’s aesthetic: a critical consciousness and understanding that power and privilege are oppressive to the self, to others, and that refusing to reconcile one’s born privilege is to become vulnerable to manipulation by hegemonic forces.

The Biggest Freak in the School

In the last eighteen years the character Jean Grey has been adapted twice into a live-action character in major films. While the two iterations are a part of the same continuity, they feature different aesthetic constructions of the character. I’ll begin this section by addressing the aesthetic of the first Jean Grey featured in the original X-Men films in the early 2000s played by Famke Janssen, and then most recent version of Jean Grey portrayed by Sophie Turner. As I deconstruct the two versions of the character, I will incorporate a discussion of their rhetorical values and the logics that they offer regarding the nature of white femininity within the context of the United States, pertinent to answering the questions posed at the beginning of this chapter.
For clarity I will indicate which version I am referring to by using the indicator (X3) for the iteration in X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) which was the third X-Men film; and I will use (AP) to refer to the iteration in X-Men: Apocalypse (Singer, 2016). A note on the continuity, while both films exist within the same universe they do take place in different timelines. The first three X-Men films took place in the original timeline and X-Men Apocalypse took place in an alternate timeline after time-travel related events in X-Men: Days of Future Past (Singer, 2014) reset the events of history, dramatically changing certain pieces of information that are relevant to this analysis. Specifically, events such as when the Phoenix first manifests in Jean Grey and when she meets the X-Men are different in X-Men: Apocalypse (Singer, 2016) than as established in X-Men: Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) due to the chronological alteration. I emphasize this point for the purpose of clarity because as I discuss different aspects of each character there will be information that is contradictory.

The aesthetic construction of Jean Grey within X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) centers around her connection to the Phoenix. This version of the Phoenix is a significant departure from the comic book version of the entity, as the comic book Phoenix is a cosmic entity that occupied the body of Jean Grey but possessed its own intellect and will. This version of the Phoenix is an extension of Jean Grey’s (X3) subconscious. Professor Xavier refers to it as Grey’s (Ratner, 2006) dormant subconscious that named itself and is “a purely instinctual creature, all desire and joy…and rage” (Ratner, 2006). Within this narrative Xavier placed psychic barriers in Jean Grey’s (X3) mind when she began to train with the X-Men in order to subdue the chaos associated with the Phoenix. The Phoenix within Grey (X3) breaks free of the psychic constraints off-camera at the end of X2 (Singer, 2003) when she is submerged underwater after a dam bursts. In X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) Xavier posits that Grey
(X3) must have created a psychic cocoon to protect herself until she could recover her strength and escape the lake. This appears to be a reference to the canonical events in the comics where Jean Grey was found in a cocoon at the bottom of a bay when she was presumed dead (Stern, 1986). The resuscitated Grey (X3) is both herself as well as the Phoenix, and this affected her aesthetic greatly. For example, this iteration of the character uses her sexuality as a weapon for killing other mutants. At two points in the film she attempted to kill other mutants through sexual contact. The first event was the successful murder of Cyclops when he returned to the lake and encountered Grey (X3) for the first time since her emergence from the lake. In this scene she kisses Cyclops and drains his life force until he dies (Ratner, 2006). The second incident occurred when she was taken back to the Xavier School after being discovered and while in the medical facility she attempted to have sex with Logan as a means to stealing his life force as well; Logan halted the encounter once he realized what she was attempting to do (Ratner, 2006).

Another element of her aesthetic in this film is her power and abilities. In a flashback scene in X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006) Xavier and Magneto, while they were working together, visited the young Jean Grey (X3) at her home with her parents to talk to her about joining their school for mutants. After the young Grey (X3) displays her abilities by elevating all of the cars in the neighborhood simultaneously, Xavier tells her that “‘You have more power than you can imagine, Jean. The question is, will you control that power…or let it control you?’” (Ratner, 2006). Jean Grey’s (X3) power is a central component of her aesthetic in the film as she is regarded as the most powerful mutant on the planet. When Grey (X3) manifests the powers of the Phoenix she adopts a visage that is terrible to behold. Ordinarily she appears as an ostensibly normative adult white woman with red hair, but when she becomes the Phoenix and uses her abilities her eyes turn black, her skin adopts a dark tinge, she is wreathed in an ambient glow,
and her hair becomes wild and wind-swept. The visual rhetoric of her appearance is that she is a dangerous entity, similar to a vengeful goddess and the ways in which she uses her powers within the film reflect this message. Most notably, she obliterates Charles Xavier when he confronts her and proposes restraining the Phoenix once more after it broke free. Later in the final conflict of the film she is seen disintegrating a battalion of soldiers along with mutants without consideration for whether or not they are her allies (Ratner, 2006). Pertinent to the principle question of societal understandings of white femininity, the message delivered in the narrative is that empowerment leads to corruption and villainy. Similar to the comics, the film offers to the audience the logic that women that become empowered are a liability, rather than a benefit to society.

Ultimately the aesthetic of Jean Grey (X3) is that of a villain motivated by base desires related to self-gratification and corrupted by power. The narrative of the film uses this aesthetic to rhetorically assert a similar message to that of the Dark Phoenix Saga within the comics: actualized feminine potential is destructive and must be tamed by patriarchal forces in order to avoid catastrophe. Within the film there are four attempts to control Jean Grey (X3) that act as metaphors for controlling realized feminine power for the benefit of society. The first attempt was Professor Xavier’s attempt to contain the Phoenix by placing psychic constraints on the entity. This act within the narrative is a metaphor for the cultivation of compliant young women by patriarchal superstructures. Ultimately this attempt failed when extreme physical trauma prompted the release of the Phoenix. The second attempt was also made by Professor Xavier when he attempted to convince Jean Grey (X3) to agree to re-imprisoning the Phoenix once it had escaped; this attempt at obtaining willful submission to a masculine figure resulted in Grey (X3) killing Xavier. This same scene led to the third attempt at controlling feminine
empowerment when Magneto succeeded in convincing her to join him in his fight for mutant liberation through militant means. Eventually this attempt at reining in the power of the Phoenix is unsuccessful as she begins to destroy his mutant army along with all other combatants during the final conflict. The final metaphor for the subjugation of feminine potential comes in the defeat of the Phoenix when Logan successfully kills Jean Grey (X3). This scene conflates violence with heteronormative romance as Logan professes his love for her just as he impales her with his claws, effectively ending the threat of the Phoenix. In this scene the narrative rhetorically asserts that the only way to conclusively end the threat of actualized feminine power, which is inherently malevolent, is to use masculine violence as a means of subjugation provided. In essence, the logic offered by the narrative is that violence against women is justifiable when the alternative the actualization of female empowerment.

The teenage iteration of Jean Grey represented in X-Men: Apocalypse (Singer, 2016) has a similar aesthetic to that of the original comic book Jean Grey. The character is depicted as a person that is unsure of her own abilities, who operates in a support function during combat, and provides emotional support for traumatized men. A central theme to the X-Men series, whether the comics or other adaptations, is the abilities of the characters. Jean Grey (AP) uses her powers largely in a support capacity, such as providing psychic camouflage for her teammates by altering the perceptions of enemies, or by monitoring the status of other characters. Until the conclusion of the film Grey’s (AP) most significant contribution during combat is monitor the mental state of Professor Xavier once he has been kidnapped by the film’s villain, En Sabah Nur/Apocalypse. Her role in the conflict within the film as a support character mirrors her function within the comics as a support character who, as discussed earlier, took orders from the team leader and worked to provide help to her allies instead actually defeating the villain. Within
the context of the narrative this places Jean Grey (AP) as subordinate to other characters that either give her direction, such as Mystique, and devalues her role as a hero since she is not exposed to danger in the same manner as her teammates.

Her abilities as a psychic also dovetail with Jean Grey’s (AP) ability to provide emotional support. In the film the Xavier Institute is destroyed in an explosion that also claimed the life of Alex Summers, the older brother of Scott Summers. In the immediate aftermath Grey attempts to console Summers and confides that she knows what he is feeling because her powers allow her to know what everyone is feeling. Another way that her powers facilitated her role as an emotional support provider was when she encountered Logan during their time in a military facility. At this point in the new chronology Jean Grey (AP) did not yet know Logan yet she still felt compassion for the mutant, particularly since he appeared to have been traumatized. This iteration of Logan had been experimented upon and suffered memory loss, with the implication that he did not know who or where he was. When Jean Grey (AP) and the other mutants discovered him in a near feral state and restrained within the facility they freed him, and she was able to restore a portion of his memory, “I found a piece of his past and gave it back to him. Just a few memories I could reach” (Singer, 2016). In terms of her aesthetic, these moments add to the construction of the character articulating her capacity for compassion, empathy, and emotional support often associated with traditional femininity (D’Amore, 2008).

While Jean Grey (AP) is characterized as a supportive and somewhat subordinate character during most of the film, her aesthetic changes with the realization of her abilities as the Phoenix at the end of the narrative. Early in the film Grey (AP) has a nightmare at the moment that Apocalypse awakens from his millennia-long hibernation; in the dream she sees fire and burning landscapes similar to those depicted in Jean Grey #3 (Hopeless, 2017b). The dream also
manifested externally as the walls of her room began to bubble and burn slightly as though they were exposed to an intense heat. Professor Xavier woke her from the dream and the two spoke of what she saw. During this conversation he commented that her mind was the most powerful that he had encountered and that she would soon learn to control her power (Singer, 2016). Grey’s (AP) concern was that she felt something she characterized as a dark force growing within her and that she was afraid. This remark foreshadowed the Phoenix which appeared during the climax of the battle with Apocalypse. While the word ‘phoenix’ is not used within the film it is clear that the Jean Grey (AP) accesses the power of the Phoenix because as she defeats Apocalypse she is wreathed in a fiery insignia that forms the image of a bird with outstretched wings similar to the Phoenix Effect illustrated in the comics (Singer, 2016). While the nature of the Phoenix within this film has not yet been confirmed, it is likely an inherent component of Jean Grey (AP) as conceptualized in X-Men: The Last Stand (Ratner, 2006). Whether or not the Phoenix poses an existential threat to humanity is a question to be answered in another film, but as articulated within this narrative it does not appear to be as corruptive as initially depicted in X-Men: The Last Stand as evidenced by Jean Grey’s (AP) ability to revert back to her normative state without complication.

In terms of answering this chapter’s guiding questions, this aesthetic construction of Jean Grey (AP) and the narrative rhetoric of the film work to convey the message feminine empowerment is a desirable goal that is beneficial for society. In this narrative the character is established as being similar to her original iteration within the comic books as a hero whose primary purpose was to support other male characters. But the realization of her powers elevates her to the position of narrative messiah by defeating the enemy when the patriarchal savior Xavier was unable to do so and faced certain death at the hands of Apocalypse. Furthermore, a
symbolic interpretation of Apocalypse positions him as a representation of old-world patriarchal systems. This is established within the narrative as he is illustrated as originally being an entity that was deified in ancient Egypt and ruled through the oppression of his subjects. In ancient Egypt Apocalypse killed and absorbed the powers of mutants, thus adding to his power by exploiting others. Furthermore, the viewer is led to believe that his rule was oppressive as indicated by the revolt staged by his subjects leading to his comatose state until his awakening in the 20th century. The defeat of an ancient malevolent masculine deity by a newly empowered female youth acts as a rhetorical metaphor for the liberation of society through feminist critique of patriarchal systems of power. In short, this iteration of Jean Grey acts as an endorsement of actualized female power as opposed to X-Men: The Last Stand which treated the concept as an existential threat to society.

The Feminist Firebird

Within this chapter I have deconstructed Jean Grey relative to her character aesthetics as they have developed over time. I began with her first iteration in 1963 and continued up until her most recent versions depicted in comic book and live action adaptation form, as of the time of this writing. As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, I will address in this section the future implications for the character and how she may be utilized rhetorically to engage with prominent societal and cultural issues. To begin, I’ll start with a brief distillation of the character’s aesthetic shifts and then continue to address her possible rhetorical applications.

Jean Grey was initially conceived of as a mono-dimensional character who conformed to existing stereotypes about the nature of women within media. In her initial iteration she functioned narratively as a damsel in distress, as well as a support character for her more heroic
male counterparts. Later iterations, particular those in the *Dark Phoenix Saga*, dramatically reconfigured certain aspects of the character by empowering her and expanding her agency while simultaneously demonizing that same power and maintaining the narrative centrality of heteronormativity. Throughout much of her publication history Jean Grey’s aesthetic has been problematic. She was often illustrated in a manner that served the patriarchal male gaze by imbuing her with pinupesque qualities (Scott, 2015). Her character frequently required rescuing and thus fed into the damsel in distress trope that involves the use of women to narratively support dominant masculinity (Prividera & Howard, 2006). Furthermore, her time as the Phoenix incorporated negative stereotypes regarding the empowerment of women and the supposed threat to men that such women pose (Oh & Kutufam, 2014) in the form of the Phoenix posing an existential threat to humanity.

However, the recent iterations of Jean Grey in the last decade illustrate a significant shift in the character’s aesthetic that is of rhetorical value in terms of being a vehicle for positive messages. The series *New X-Men*, *All-New X-Men*, and *Jean Grey* conceptualized the character in a manner that incorporated leadership, agency, and emotional intelligence. These particular versions of Jean Grey are not without flaws, such as the previously discussed issues with executing an intersectional approach to feminism. These aesthetic constructions provide conceptualizations of white femininity that are not entrenched in problematic themes such as patriarchal narratives that require salvation rooted in heteronormative relationships or the empowerment of white females at the expense of marginalized groups. At her finest the character operates as a vehicle for feminist critique of society, whether implicitly such as when she rejected patriarchal guidance in the form of Cyclops’ recommendation of self-censorship for the
sake of public acceptance in *New X-Men* #122 (Morrison, 2002b) or explicitly when Jean Grey confronted her own past in *Jean Grey* #6 (Hopeless, 2017c).

My contention is that just as the comic book industry has a responsibility to alter its patterns of representation for black masculinity, so too does it have a responsibility to do the same for other marginalized identities including white femininity. As an industry that has contributed to generations of problematic cultural knowledge, the realm of comic book publishing is uniquely equipped due to its ability to adapt and far-reaching content quickly, to influence cultural understandings about the role of women within American society, whether as civilians or superheroes, in a positive manner. The alternative is to continue to propagate misogynist content that reinforces negative messages from other media formats that are ultimately consumed by an audience that may be persuaded to adopt such perspectives.
CHAPTER 6: ICONS OF DIFFERENT ERAS

In this chapter, I pose the question of how comic book characters and their narratives have functioned rhetorically to engage with prominent social issues and cultural phenomena. This question is predicated on the perspective that fictional media often serves as a platform for discourse about important issues that are a part of the social consciousness in the United States. There exists a body of research to support this perspective as scholars have examined pieces of fiction as commentary on important cultural phenomena such as war (Dittmer, 2007), Mexican-American identity (Espinoza, 2016), and the developing attitudes of American society towards the empowerment of women (D’Amore, 2008). In essence, fictional media serves as a metaphorical barometer for the social climate of the time in which it was produced. That is why in this chapter, I examine comic books as they engage with social issues and cultural phenomena and provide commentary on those matters.

For this chapter, I have selected two characters to analyze, Steve Rogers/Captain America and Miles Morales/Spider-Man. I elected to use Captain America for a second time within this project because of his longevity, prominence, and conceptualization of American propaganda. From the very beginning of his publication history in March of 1941 to the current day the character has served as a symbolic representation of the United States, if in a particularly hegemonic way. In his own words the character has described himself as an icon of the U.S., particularly while serving internationally (Brubaker, 2005b). Captain America’s longevity and overt use as a representation of American ideals has resulted in a socio-cultural discourse that has spanned over seventy years. Over the course of that time the character has negotiated narratives that have included foreign conflict, issues of free speech, domestic fascism, racial inequality, and capitalist corruption. It is because of his use as a vehicle for American socio-
cultural discourse for so long and in such an overt and prominent way that I have opted to critically engage with the character’s texts and include my findings in this chapter of the project.

The second character that I have elected for this chapter is Miles Morales, the Spider-Man of the Ultimate Universe imprint. To clarify, the Ultimate Universe which is also referred to as Earth-1610, is an imprint of Marvel Comics which takes place in a reality that is separate from the primary Marvel Universe which possesses the designation Earth-616. Creatively the Ultimate Universe has served as a way for Marvel creators to explore new storylines and character conceptualizations without grossly contradicting the primary Marvel continuity. Within the Ultimate Universe, Miles Morales served as the replacement Spider-Man once the Peter Parker Spider-Man of Earth-1610 was ostensibly killed during combat. Similar to Captain America, Miles Morales’ creation was inherently political. The character’s appearance was based on two prominent Americans of color, the actor Donald Glover and President Barack Obama (Swift, 2015). Furthermore, the character was conceptualized as an “opportunity to redefine Spider-Man for the 21st century” according to then Marvel editor-in-chief Axel Alonso (Keyes & Alonso, 2011). It is clear that from his beginning the character was developed to be a comment on the era in which he was created; and as the character has continued to enjoy a degree of prominence his narratives have served as vehicles for addressing pertinent cultural issues such as race, policing, and social determinants.

Before continuing it is important to first address my method for critiquing the material. Consistent with previous chapters within this project, I selected texts for each character according to reprint-status and time of publication. Each comic book selected must exist as a part of a collected edition commonly referred to as a trade edition. These comics are collected and reprinted together often for narrative cohesion, and their status as a reprinted comic indicates
marketability and popularity as not all comics are reprinted into trades. In order to gain an in-depth understanding of each character and because of the unfeasibility of reading every comic or trade for each character, I selected trades based on when the comics were originally printed across each character’s publication history. In the case of Captain America this meant selecting one or two trades from each decade of his publications as they were accessible. In the case of Miles Morales, I deviated slightly and analyzed a trade for each year of his publication history up until 2017, since the character has only existed since 2011. For Captain America, I also examined recent iterations of the character in the current Marvel Cinematic Universe. This was not possible for Mile Morales as there has not been a film adaptation of the character as of yet, although he is scheduled to appear in the film Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse which will be released in December of 2018. The character has also been referenced, but not depicted, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Each text was examined through the lens of rhetorical criticism, specifically in terms of narrative criticism and visual criticism. I analyzed each text to discover the ways in which the narratives were depicted and how they were used to discuss relevant social issues and cultural phenomena. Through close readings and interpretations of the texts informed by previous research I learned how these two characters have functioned as rhetorical vehicles for social commentary. It is important to note that I position each text as an artifact that is generally independent of authorial intent. While authorial intent is sometimes discernable through interviews and external commentary, I suspend consideration of the authors perspectives because of the fragmented nature the characters. Joe Simon and Jack Kirby created Captain America, but the character has been recreated by many different authors over time with each iteration informing the next such that Captain America as an artifact is best positioned as a composite
created by many different authors, each with their own perspective. Due to his status as a relatively new character Miles Morales is still largely subject to the vision of his creator, Brian Michael Bendis. But for the purpose of this project and the need for methodological consistency I also suspend authorial intent as a consideration for my rhetorical analysis. Any exceptions to this rule are pieces of information that are ubiquitous and such that they are mainstream knowledge for readers.

**Captain America: “All They Care About Is Their Fear”**

From the beginning of his publication history Steve Rogers/Captain America has represented the United States ideal: a champion of Western values with an undertone of patriotism that crosses into nationalism (Dittmer, 2013). The inaugural issue of Captain America depicted the hero punching Adolf Hitler nine months before Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. This image of Captain America served as a window into the type of commentary that would take place within the pages of Captain America’s various books and media: A defender against the fears of American society. In chapter three of this project, I discussed the ways in which Captain America has come to represent an espoused American ideal, a white heterosexual male who identifies with the middle-class of America. In addition to this demographically hegemonic representation of what it means to be the American ideal, Captain America is narratively imbued with certain ideologies professed by Western society. Specifically, he possesses the attributes of patriotism and nobility associated with the ideology of American exceptionalism as it relates to the military. At multiple points throughout his publication history Captain America has distinguished himself from other warriors by condemning practices such as torture (Brubaker, 2005b) or self-sacrifice as illustrated when he surrendered to government forces during the Marvel Civil War event to keep from further
harming the public (Millar, 2006e). Captain America’s identity as an honorable soldier whose task is to keep American society safe from harm lends his stories to commentary on social issues ranging from foreign threats to domestic cultural phenomena. My analysis of Captain America texts found that a common theme within the material was that the villains that Captain America defeated were often symbolic representations of what the American people feared. In this chapter, I have categorized the social commentary found within the Captain America material into three sub-sections. The first pertains to fears related to institutions, specifically corruption within scientific institutions, government, and capitalist organizations. In the second sub-section I address the commentary within the narratives related to fears of racialized others, specifically foreign agents and domestic minorities. The third sub-section addresses the recurring theme within the material of Captain America navigating social and cultural change. This includes a discussion on Captain America as an icon of mid-century society that has had to endure significant cultural shifts, and in doing so has acted as a rhetorical device for addressing these social phenomena.

**Institutional Fear**

Captain America, like many superheroes, has fought a plethora of villains over the course of his publication history. The size and scale of these conflicts has ranged from dealing with street-level gangsters to cosmic entities intent on conquering the known universe. This sub-section will address the villains that are rooted in socio-political institutions within the United States. These domestic threats come in the form of corrupt capitalism, amoral science, and oppressive government.
A recurring theme within the early Captain America narratives is that of the corrupt businessman, one who is motivated by greed to betray the United States or threaten its citizens. Examples of these types of villains include George Maxon, Mr. Benson, and Hugh Bradley, all of whom were depicted as villains within the early Captain America Comics series of the 1940s. George Maxon worked as a wealthy industrialist who contracted with the U.S. military to build aircraft. Maxon betrayed the U.S. government after Adolf Hitler bribed Maxon to operate as a spy and saboteur, killing members of the military leadership (Simon & Kirby, 1941c). Mr. Benson, a character described as a corrupt businessman, brought monstrous giants from Asia to rob banks and use strongarm tactics to acquire wealth and power (Simon & Kirby, 1941d). Hugh Bradley, a trader employed by an agency that worked with Native American tribes, betrayed the U.S. and allied himself with Imperial Japan. He inflamed anti-American sentiment among the local Native Americans and engineered an attack against the local military force (Lee, 1942b). I assert that these characters represent a rhetorical commentary on the distrust felt towards entrepreneurs by the American public in the 1940s. At the time of their publication these comics were read by individuals that remembered the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the United States suffered an economic collapse that left many stranded without viable economic options. Within the context of these comics the characters represent the evil associated with the accumulation of obscene wealth, which within the narrative comes at the expense of American lives and society at large. This vilification of capitalists suggests that, while the economy had begun to recover during the early 1940s, the captains of industry were not beyond reproach and could still pose a serious threat to American society due to their lack of principles and greed-based motivation.
An intrinsic element of many comic book narratives is that of science, particularly science that is fantastic in its manifestation and is often carried out by scientists with little or no moral direction. Captain America narratives are no exception to this motif. Steve Rogers volunteered for the process that turned him into Captain America in an ostensibly noble effort to create a champion of democracy, however a prominent theme within the material is that of amoral scientists exploiting their knowledge for their own gain. One example of this is that of Dr. Erik Gorbo, a scientist that worked alongside Captain America in a multi-issue narrative from the 1970s (Lee, 1971c). The character worked with Captain America as an agent of the Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law-Enforcement Division, also referred to as S.H.I.E.L.D. As an aside, the organization is still known as S.H.I.E.L.D. although the words for the acronym have changed, which will be addressed later. Dr. Gorbo used his scientific knowledge and resources to augment his physiology and make himself more physically attractive in an attempt to gain the romantic interest of a female colleague (Lee, 1971c). The attempt transformed him into a monstrous gorilla and resulted in multiple conflicts with Captain America until his eventual defeat. Other scientific groups such as “Them” (Lee, 1966b) and Advanced Idea Mechanics/A.I.M. (Lee, 1971a) are essentially terrorist organizations that are run by evil scientists that are intent on conquering the world. These organizations represent an us/them division between academics and the public. The former group are those that are in control or have access to power in the form of advanced technology and the latter are dependent on them in terms of relying on technology and are also powerless to stop them should the scientists decide to abuse their power.

Within the narratives of Captain America this social commentary that science-based power could be prone to abuse is not limited to characterizing scientists as mad and amoral
entities, as some narratives depict scientists associated with institutions as well-meaning but still dangerous. A strong example of this type of science-based terror is found within the pages of Marvel’s Civil War Event. To be clear, I am referring to the comic book arc as opposed to the film adaptation of the comic, *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo & Russo, 2016). The premise of the narrative is that following a fatal catastrophe wherein super-powered heroes and villains caused the deaths of many civilians including school children, the United States government decides to impose a law on super-powered individuals. All individuals with powers must register with the government or be incarcerated, and the choice divided the superhero community in two. Each side was led by two notable characters, Tony Stark/Iron Man on the side of pro-registration and Steve Rogers/Captain America on the side of anti-registration. Later in this sub-section I’ll address Captain America’s rationale and its significance. In addition to Tony Stark, Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four and Hank Pym/Ant-Man joined the pro-registration group and allied themselves with the federal government. These three characters are generally understood to be among the most accomplished scientists within Marvel, and during the events of Civil War they engineered a weapon that proved to be unintentionally lethal. The scientists created a clone of Thor Odinson, the Nordic deity and member of the Avengers who was noticeably absent from the conflict. The clone, which was controlled through technological enhancements, was meant to serve as a stand-in for the actual Thor and act as a propaganda tool while also being strong enough to subdue, but not kill, members of the anti-registration group. During a conflict with anti-registration forces the cloned Thor killed Bill Foster/Giant-Man, a member of the anti-registration forces and close friend to several of the Avengers who’s publication history spans decades (Millar, 2006b). Many of the heroes on both sides of the conflict mourned the death of Foster. Unlike many superhero deaths, Bill Foster’s appears to have been permanent, at least thus
far according to the official Marvel online reference source (Goliath, n.d.). The rhetorical message in this text is that scientific power, even when wielded by those with noble intentions, is still dangerous and can result in catastrophe.

It is unsurprising that the theme of science as a source of fear and horror would be a long-lasting and prominent component of Captain America’s narratives. A comprehensive understanding of the rhetoric within Captain America’s comics regarding scientific progress and applications reveals that science in and of itself is not an issue. Captain America often uses science and technology to defeat villains and save the public. A prime example of this is his iconic shield which is made of a fictional material called vibranium (Russo & Russo, 2016), and its use by Captain America speaks to the benefits of the science within the Marvel Universe in addition to the nature of Captain America’s origin. The concern that is voiced within the narrative rhetoric of these comics is that science combined with institutional power and authority can become dangerous. Therefore, I argue that the rhetorical value of these narratives is as a form of commentary on the fears of American society about real-world technological advancements and their applications as weapons, i.e. the nuclear bomb. The trope of the mad scientist is a familiar element of fiction and is born from the notion that if such scientific marvels can be used for ostensibly noble reasons, they can also be abused by scientists as well (Haynes, 2016). Thus, Captain America acts as defender of the honorable application of science and protects American society from its misuse. Of course, within this context what defines the noble application of science is that which Captain America approves of, in this way the very concept of what it means to be honorable is rooted in the moral position of the character as opposed to an external reference point.
The last theme of social commentary related to an institutional fear is that of government oppression committed by the United States federal government. Captain America’s relationship with the government has at times been strained in moments when they betrayed the trust of the American public or acted in a way that Captain America found to be egregiously wrong or misguided. There are two prominent examples of Captain America narratives acting as commentary on the issue of government oppression, the previously addressed Civil War event and the series Secret Empire. The Civil War comic series as well as the film adaptation Captain America: Civil War operate based on a similar premise: that after a catastrophe involving powered individuals the U.S. federal government is prompted to regulate superhero activity. In both instances the characters are required to reveal their identities and surrender to the authorities. (Millar, 2006a) (Russo & Russo, 2016). In both the film and the comic Captain America decides to oppose registration. I refer back to the exchange between Captain America and Director Hill cited in chapter three wherein the American champion articulates his reasoning behind opposing registration. For clarity and convenience, I have included the exchange in this chapter as well,

Hill: “This proposal goes to a vote in two weeks’ time and could be law in as little as a month. But we can’t go in half-cocked. We’re already developing an anti-superhuman response unit here, but we need to make sure the Avengers are onside and that you’re out there leading the Avengers.

Captain America: “Forget about it. You’re asking me to arrest people who risk their lives for this country every day of the week.

Hill: “No, I’m asking you to obey the will of the American people, Captain.”
Captain America: “Don’t play politics with me, Hill. Super heroes need to stay above that stuff or Washington starts telling us who the super-villains are.”

Hill: “I thought super-villains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law.”

*Soldiers surrounding Captain America ready their weapons* (Millar, 2006, p. 23)

Captain America’s assertion that his opposition to registration is based on the concern that the government will begin to abuse the powers of superheroes speaks to the societal sentiment that governments are prone to violations of morality and abuse of authority. Indeed, American history is fraught with examples of the government using its power and authority to oppress various groups within the United States that it considered to be a threat. Events in history such as the internment of Japanese-Americans, and state-based eugenics programs that targeted minorities such as in the case of the North Carolina program (Brophy & Troutman, 2016), are examples of government determining who is and is not a threat to American society. While the merits and wisdom of Captain America’s decision to resist registration can be debated, what is clear in the text is the commentary that his concern is that the government is prone to the abuse of power to the detriment of the American people. His concern for the well-being of the American public is illustrated again in the series when he surrenders to the authorities because of the collateral damage done to civilians as they are caught between the conflicting forces (Millar, 2006e). Not only does this series reinforce the idea that Captain America is a champion of the American people, it also illustrates that he is willing to oppose the United States government when it oversteps its authority, as some would argue it has throughout American history.

The second example of a Captain America narrative functioning as a rhetorical vehicle for social commentary on the dangers of an oppressive government is found within the 2017
series *Secret Empire*. The premise of the series is that Red Skull, the leader of the Nazi organization called Hydra, used a reality-altering device that turned Steve Rogers into an undercover Hydra agent during the 1940s (Spencer, 2017a). Captain America maintained his cover as a champion of the United States until he was charged with being the leader of the Earth’s defenses against an alien invasion. Once the invasion began Captain America used his position to execute a plan that resulted in the containment or defeat of most superheroes, the overthrow of the United States government, and the brainwashing of nearly every American citizen into thinking that Hydra won WWII. The series concluded with the restoration of the original anti-fascist Steve Rogers to reality via the same reality-altering device. The two Captain Americas fought until the original defeated the Hydra version resulting in the defeat of the Hydra organization and the restoration of reality as it was prior to the transformation of Steve Rogers (Spencer, 2017c). Within the narrative of the text it is clear that there is a rhetorical message underpinning the premise of the comic related to patriotism and its manipulation. Captain America served as a valuable tool for Hydra because of his role in American society as an icon that stood for patriotism and American ideals. Therefore, when he publicly represented Hydra in addition to American ideals he conflated the two and made the public more willing to embrace the newly presented reality of Hydra as the government. In essence, the American public bought into fascism because it was presented to them in the form of the ultimate patriot. I contend that this narrative is a commentary on the dangers of accepting patriotism without critique as it could lead to the installment of authoritarian powers like Hydra. Narratives such *Secret Empire* and *Civil War* speak to growing concerns of authoritarian rule and the use of patriotism as a tool for engineering public approval of government actions. Such applications of leveraging patriotism could include manufacturing support for international conflict as in the case of the Iraq invasion.
or ending public protests that involve kneeling/sitting during the national anthem at sporting events.

**Fear of the Other**

Among Captain America’s most important responsibilities during his initial series was the protection of the United States from malicious foreign agents. Within the context of the time in which these comics were created this makes sense as World War II had erupted in Europe and the question of the United States’ participation had been raised. As addressed in chapter three of this dissertation, the foreign threats to the United States were illustrated in a manner that positioned them as articulated Others, racially and aesthetically. The external threats to the United States came in the form of Nazi spies posing as Americans with some degree of wealth or responsibility, such as an American financier (Simon & Kirby, 1941c), a town mayor (Simon & Kirby, 1941e), or a popular film actor (Simon & Kirby, 1941f). When the Nazis were not posing as powerful Americans they were working to undermine American society by subversively trying to persuade American citizens to become Nazi sympathizers. Within these comics are two common elements that act as social commentary for the time; the first is that the Nazi threat is ubiquitous, and that Americans should stay vigilant against Nazi subversives. The second element is that while the Nazis are white in appearance, they are different from normative American whiteness. As discussed in chapter three of this project, Nazis are typically characterized as speaking with poor English and are often ugly or disfigured. These qualities distinguish them from characters like Captain America or his sidekick Bucky who speak with appropriate, if colloquial American English and are normative appearing, or described as aesthetically attractive within the text as in the case of Captain America. By characterizing the Nazi as such the creators reinforce the ideas that they are separate and inherently different from
White Americans even though they share a common skin color. This subtext within the comic helps to reinforce the nationalist idea that White Americans should see foreign whites as intrinsically different with the implication that empathy for others should be limited to members of their own nationality.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor the comics began to depict Japanese soldiers and criminal organizations as enemies of the American people. The cover of Captain America Comics #13 depicts the character punching a visually monstrous appearing Japanese soldier as the patriotic hero declares, “You started it! Now- We’ll finish it!” (Lee, 1942c). Within the same issue Captain America combats a Japanese crime organization known as the League of the Unicorn, the “Master Criminals of Asia”, who have infiltrated the United States in order to sabotage the relationship between the United States and China by attacking a visiting Chinese prince (Lee, 1942a). While the leader of the League of the Unicorns was revealed to be an American entrepreneur attempting to destabilize China by killing members of their royalty, the imagery of foreign criminals infiltrating the United States certainly capitalized on the imagination of the readers who had recently learned to regard the Japanese as an enemy of American society. In this early era of Captain America narratives, the character comes to represent an American society that is at war with articulated others, often defined by a stigmatized racial identity, and is ultimately triumphant. These narratives always resolve with Captain America defeating the stereotypically racialized enemies and saving the American public from harm. At a time of international conflict Captain America reassured the readers that the United States could only ever be victorious in the face of adversity.

Captain America’s role as a defender against the fears of the American public carried into his revival in the 1960s when the character was thawed out after years of being frozen in ice
(Lee, 1964). During his publication history the character was used as a vehicle for rhetorical commentary on several issues that weighed on the American consciousness. Within the comics that I selected for this project there are two instances of Captain America engaging with the subject of the Vietnam War. The first occurs in *Tales of Suspense* #61 published in 1965 (Lee, 1965a) and features Captain America traveling to Vietnam in order to rescue Jim Baker, an African-American helicopter pilot for the U.S. military. Within the narrative Captain America parleys with the Viet Cong and is taken to Baker after proving his worth by defeating multiple soldiers at once. Once Captain America reached Baker the two fought their way free as the Viet Cong attempted to capture Captain America and have him executed along with the other prisoners of war (Lee, 1965a). The conflict in Vietnam was revisited in *Captain America* #125 published in 1970 (Lee, 1970a). Within this narrative Captain America returns to Vietnam in order to rescue Dr. Haskins, an American physician who heals soldiers from both sides of the conflict. The plot centered around the doctor having been kidnapped which resulted in both sides of the conflict blaming the other and consequently heightening the hostilities. Captain America entered the conflict for the purpose of finding Dr. Haskins and freeing him from capture so that the conflict could resume the tenuous ceasefire that had preceded his disappearance in the hopes that the ceasefire could lead to the negotiation of peace. Once there, Captain America discovers that the doctor has been kidnapped by the Mandarin, an Asian supervillain who draws power from ten magical rings that grant him abilities. Within the narrative it is revealed that the Mandarin operates a third military faction within Vietnam and uses it to enflame the hostilities, so he could benefit from the chaos and accumulate power (Lee, 1970a). The narrative concludes with Captain America defeating the Mandarin and his army, rescuing Dr. Haskins, and easing the
tensions between the two sides, which does not immediately lead to peace but does allow for negotiations.

Both of these narratives offer commentary relative to the American military, the Vietnam War in particular, and American involvement in international conflict in general. Fear factors prominently into the narratives and the commentary they offer. During the Vietnam War, media outlets covered the war in unprecedented detail, allowing the viewing public to consume information about the war in an intimate way. The consumption of that media sparked a variety of emotions within the American public including fear for those that were captured by communist Vietnamese forces. At the same time, public sentiment against the war rose as the public learned about the cost in terms of American life and the actions committed in the name of fighting that war. In these narratives Captain America does not side with either the pro- or anti-communist forces in terms of the fighting. While he does combat the Viet Cong during the rescue of Jim Baker, it should be noted that he does so only in response to being attacked by the communist forces when his attempt to negotiate failed. Rather than becoming concerned with winning the war, his primary focus is the rescue of the American prisoners of war and their return to safety. By refraining from involvement in the war beyond the rescue of the prisoners Captain America keeps from embroiling himself in the controversies that characterized the unpopular and often maligned international conflict. The character maintains his status as a noble and virtuous American by engaging in an activity that combines both humanitarianism and patriotism. Within both comics Captain America is the only person from the United States other than Jim Baker and Dr. Hoskins. This made him a symbol of American intervention as he was the only United States soldier to be depicted, other than Baker who is described as a pilot but without any mention of his reason for being in Vietnam. The symbolism of Captain America
within the context of Vietnam is a visual juxtaposition of romanticized heroism embodied in the U.S. government’s iconic soldier and the setting of an international conflict where the ugliness of war was made visually accessible to the American public in a profound way. In essence, the creators of the comics placed a mythic, morally “clean” American figure into a context that was decidedly, grotesquely real. By doing so the creators advanced the message that the United States’ involvement in the war could lead to a positive resolution by acting as a facilitator of peace as in the case of Captain America rescuing Dr. Hoskins. Rather than depicting 1960s U.S. forces combating communist soldiers in a way that might be redemptive or damning, the creators injected an icon of American virtue into the conflict as a representation of the ostensible good that America could do as an intervening power, while also conveying a narrative that addressed the fears of those concerned about prisoners of war. This commentary sidesteps the reality of the United States’ role as an international actor that directly intervened in the conflict by committing military forces to battle.

Captain America narratives not only addressed the issue of American intervention in foreign conflicts, they also engaged with domestic issues such as racism and public dissent. One of Captain America’s longtime crime-fighting partners has been Sam Wilson/Falcon, an African-American man who has been working with Captain America since he first appeared in Captain America #117 in 1969 (Lee, 1969). During the 1970s the characters appeared working side-by-side as they confronted the various dangers that threatened Harlem, Sam Wilson’s hometown. In the comics that I have selected for analysis, this generally involved the two heroes silencing voices of radicalism and fighting the criminal element depicted within the black community of Harlem. One particularly salient example of Captain America combating the fears of the American public in regard to racial tension is illustrated in Captain America #126, published in
1970 (Lee, 1970b). In this issue Captain America and Falcon fight against the Diamond Heads, a black radical group that are characterized as an African-American version of the Ku Klux Klan (Lee, 1970b). The Diamond Heads openly endorse hate against White Americans while also running a criminal enterprise that includes acts such as extorting local business under the guise of charging for protection services. In *Captain America* #135, published in 1971 (Lee, 1971a), the monstrous mad scientist codenamed M.O.D.O.K. (Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing) attempted to exploit the intersecting social issues of poverty and racism to encourage radicalism among poor black communities for the purpose of causing division within, and thus weakening, American society. The supervillain asserts that,

> “Wherever people suffer—wherever they are *down trodden*—they are ripe for *exploitation*! So long as *slums*—and *poverty*—and *racism* exist—I will have a *breeding ground* for my own form of evil! And those, like *Captain America*, who truly try to *help* thru reason and understanding—will be scorned and *discredited* by those who have been *betrayed* too often! Thus, I must *continue* to inflame them—I must blind them to the fact that *they* themselves will suffer most from *violence!*” (Lee, 1971a, p. 15).

The narrative rhetorical assertion within these comics is the simultaneous acknowledgement of race-based injustice that intersects with poverty, along with the perspective that justice is not possible through radical means and that embracing radical methods will only lead to immediate and long-term harm. Additionally, both comics feature white antagonists as the instigators behind the radicalism as both Diamond Head and M.O.D.O.K. are ethnically White Americans. I assert that the use of white antagonists behind the instigation of black radicalism functions as commentary that black radicalism is disingenuous to racial justice and that the narrative of the comics suggests that it is an illegitimate form of civic engagement. In
The issue of legitimacy among black perspectives is revisited as Sam Wilson enlists Captain America’s help in defeating the African-American criminal called Stoneface (Lee, 1971b). The narrative pits the two black men against each other, with Wilson representing moderate Black America that is interested in peaceful integration with the dominant culture, while Stoneface represents the stereotype of black criminality that is not interested in integrating into mainstream America and is focused on the exploitation of black youth (Lee, 1971b). Obviously, Captain America sides with Sam Wilson and thus symbolically represents the dominant culture’s ostensible support of a moderate approach to racial justice. By characterizing black radicalism as a front for criminal enterprise and opportunistically capitalizing on the injustice suffered by the Black American community, the narrative commentary dismissed the validity of civil rights groups that utilized radical separatist approaches such as the Black Panther Party and leaders like Fred Hampton and Malcolm X. By confronting fictional black radicals that were revealed to be opportunistic villains Captain America also quelled the fears of the American public that black radicals posed a threat to American society. Just as he had defended the United States against foreign threats such as undercover Nazis and Japanese Imperials, so too did defend the country against domestic threats in the form of black radicals who threatened to disrupt American society. In this way, Captain America redrew the lines around what it meant to be an American patriot. In this case, that meant that one could work towards a particular form of racial justice focused on integration into the dominant culture without having to give credence to the concerns or grievances voiced by black radical organizations.
America Endures

An underlying theme of Captain America narratives that has at times been mentioned overtly within the text of the comics and recent film adaptations is that by virtue of having been created in the 1940s, then frozen, and then revived decades later (a number that continues to shift to fit narratives), he is a living relic. He is a man divorced from modernity in a way that is romanticized; he is a youthful member of the oft-lauded Greatest Generation in the modern day. His identity as a living icon of American patriotism that was created in response to one of the greatest dangers the world has ever known factors prominently into the overarching commentary provided by the Captain America narratives. The primary rhetorical assertion made by the narratives when considered from a long-term perspective is that the ideals of the United States endure. Over the course of the character’s publication history Captain America has been depicted navigating the changing landscape of social issues in the United States. In the 1960s comics about Captain America, particularly within the series *Tales of Suspense* which often featured stories about Iron Man and Captain America respectively, old stories that were originally published in the 1940s *Captain America Comics* were sometimes re-created with a retroactive continuity (otherwise referred to as ‘retcon’). These issues often changed details to reflect a more modern sensibility. For example, in *Tales of Suspense* #64 (Lee, 1965c) the story of Sando and Omar the undercover Nazi spies posing as a performing magic act is updated from its original version published in *Captain America Comics* #1 (Simon & Kirby, 1941b). This updated version changes two important details from the original iteration. The first is that Agent 13, an agent of the Women’s Army Corp, fights with the Nazis, proclaiming “I’ll show you that a female doesn’t have to be helpless herself!” (Lee, 1965c, p. 19), before being captured. This detail deviates from the original story where she was taken by the Nazis without difficulty. The second change is that
Omar, an adult man who appears to have the condition of dwarfism, is not a Nazi conspirator but is instead being exploited by the Nazi Sando who bought him from a sideshow of differently abled people. These updates to the original 1941 story indicate a cultural shift towards accepting the physical agency of women, while still relying on the stereotypical damsel-in-distress trope and refraining from demonizing those who have disabilities.

The issue of the agency and abilities of women is revisited in *Tales of Suspense* #77 (Lee, 1966a) which features a flashback to Captain America’s service in World War II. The comic depicts Captain America rescuing a group of prisoners held by Nazi forces, one of whom was his girlfriend at the time (unnamed within the comic). The two discuss her involvement in the war, with Captain America wanting her to cease involvement in the conflict:

> Girlfriend: “You were wonderful! I’ll never forget these weeks…with Captain America fighting at our side!

> Captain America: “I won’t forget them either! But…you’ve got to leave the partisans! This isn’t woman’s work!”

> Girlfriend: “I can’t leave! This war is everybody’s war…I was needed…and I answered the call…just as you did, in your own way!”

> Captain America: “I know! And I know I haven’t the right to speak to you this way! It just that you…you’ve come to mean so much to me…!” (Lee, 1966a, p.18)

This exchange illustrates Captain America’s hesitant acceptance of at-the-time-progressive ideas regarding the role of women within society as capable and possessing agency even in situations like combat. The socio-cultural empowerment of women is one aspect of the ever-shifting social landscape that Captain America has had to navigate. Other elements of
cultural change include civil rights for people of color and the issue of public dissent in the form of student protests against institutions. As addressed in the previous section Captain America narratives have incorporated the issue of racial injustice and featured plots that centered around the defeat of radicalism in service of achieving racial justice. I maintain that this approach is simultaneously beneficial and problematic, as the narratives acknowledge the legitimacy of racial injustice while demonizing and effectively silencing radical voices that attempt to convey the severity and prominence of those injustices. This issue of appropriate methods of dissent is also addressed in *Captain America* #130 (Lee, 1970d) when the patriotic icon becomes involved in a student protest on a college campus. While the specific demands of the students are not overtly addressed it is clear that the students have grievances with the administration as they attempt to break their way into the dean’s office. Captain America attempts to quell the riot by getting the police to cease fighting but is unable to do so as he is immediately attacked by students that assumed he was working with the police force (Lee, 1970d). Later in the comic when the character is asked to appear on television to comment on student protests and the need for law and order the character delivers this speech while on camera,

“I’ve been asked to *speak* to you today—to *warn* America about those who try to *change* our institutions—but in a *pig’s eye* I’ll warn you! This nation was *founded* by dissidents—by people who wanted something *better*! There’s *nothing sacred* about the *status quo*—and there never *will* be! I don’t believe in using *force*—or *violence*—because they can be the weapons of those who would *enslave* us—but, *nor* do I believe in an *establishment* that remains so *aloof*—so *distant*—that the people are *driven* to desperate measures—as in the case of a *college dean* who *isolates* himself from his student body!” (Lee, 1970d, p. 14).
As with other Captain America narratives that deal with the issue of radial approaches to social change, the character simultaneously denounces what is represented as an illegitimate tactic while acknowledging the need for socio-cultural and institutional change. The commentary offered by these narratives is that moderate approaches to social ills is the best solution for injustice and that to resorting to physical violence is unacceptable. The irony of Captain America’s position is that he uses physical violence to defeat radicals, and that in the speech he delivered on television he ignores the reality that the United States was founded by dissidents that used violence to change the oppressive government. In these narratives Captain America not only defines what is an is not an acceptable form of dissent, he also implies that violence is acceptable when used against those that would harm American society, which then begs the question of who decides what is and is not detrimental to the American public within the context of social change.

That Captain America is a symbol of patriotism and the ideals of the United States is also a point of commentary within the comic narratives. At multiple points within the selection of material that I reviewed, Captain America as a public persona and cultural icon is addressed in terms of being a larger-than-life figure and what he represents to the nation. In *Avengers* #4 (Lee, 1964) Captain America’s disappearance from the world is retconned, as it is explained that during a mission he fell into the ocean near Newfoundland and froze, remaining in a state of suspended animation due to the super-soldier serum. In *Captain America* #4 (Brubaker, 2005a) it is revealed that after Captain America’s disappearance during World War II the identity of Captain America was assumed by two men on behalf of the federal government: William Naslund and after his death, Jeffrey Mace. The rationale for replacing Captain America after the presumed death of Steve Rogers was that morale during the war needed to be maintained in order
to win the war; Rogers also implies that Mace was important in helping shape the country during the 1960s as Captain America (Brubaker, 2005a). This piece of exposition highlights the importance of Captain America to the nation’s consciousness within the context of the Marvel universe and reinforces the significance of the social commentary offered in the next two narrative points that I will discuss.

The first instance is depicted within *Civil War* series and involves the vigilante Frank Castle/The Punisher and Captain America. In the series Castle joins the anti-registration cause because of his disgust with the pro-registration side’s willingness to recruit criminals into the federal program (Millar, 2006c). Captain America accepts Castle as a member of the team until he murders two villains that attempt to join the anti-registration side: Goldbug and Plunderer. After the death of the two villains Captain America savagely beats Castle; but when Castle refuses to fight Captain Americas asks him why he will not defend himself. In response Castle says, “Not against you” (Millar, 2006d, p. 13) which is a reference to Captain America embodying the best, idealized version of the United States. This response prompted Captain America to cease beating Castle, yet still demanding his removal from the team. Castle’s devotion to Captain America as a symbol of what is good and just is revisited in *Secret Empire* #7 (Spencer, 2017b). In the series *Secret Empire* Frank Castle reveals the reason for why he has joined with Hydra, even though they have always been a villainous organization; he says,

“You’re makin’ a mistake…you don’t understand—he told me his secret…all those people who died—he’s gonna use the cube. Fix everything. Make the world what it’s supposed to be—then he’s gonna bring them all back. Bring back everyone we lost” (Spencer, 2017b, p. 19).
This moment in the comic serves as a commentary on the manipulation of patriotism by asserting that even the ideologically rigid can be manipulated into betraying their ideals when those values are subservient to a larger, more esteemed ideology such as patriotism. Frank Castle is an example of such manipulation, as a character who was previously depicted as perceiving the world through a fixed binary of good and evil was successfully persuaded to support a fascist government because of the associated icon of patriotism and moral correctness. In this sense, the series operates as a commentary on the abuses of patriotic ideology in service to a governing institution. This same series offers a commentary affirming the perspective that American ideals endure through American hardships from threats both domestic and foreign, through the resolution of the narrative. In *Secret Empire* #10 (Spencer, 2017c) Bucky/Winter Soldier and Scott Lang/Ant-Man manage to restore the original Captain America (trapped inside the cosmic cube) to reality through the use of the cosmic cube. The two versions of Steve Rogers duel until the original Rogers defeats the Hydra version by wielding Thor’s hammer Mjolnir, which was only possible because of Rogers’ worthiness rooted in his sense of morality and justice. The defeat of the Hydra version of Captain America by the original version of Captain America through the use of Mjolnir rhetorically asserts that true patriotism, as represented by a white, male member of America’s Greatest Generation, is 1.) timeless and necessary to American exceptionalism and liberty, 2.) required for the liberation of the marginalized (a sub-plot of the series has been the extermination of mutants), and 3.) worthy of power that borders on the divine and is unparalleled terrestrially. Essentially, I contend that these narratives assert that America is worthy of prominence in the world and endures as an international superpower when it embraces the ideals of America at war which includes the rejection of fascism. However, I also maintain
that this perspective of what constitutes the American ideal is encased in problematic ideologies related to whiteness and dominant masculinity, which I addressed in chapter three of this project.

**Miles Morales: “I Want to Be Spider-Man”**

In August 2011, Marvel unveiled their newest character to assume the title of Spider-Man, Miles Morales. This new Spider-Man was set in the Marvel Ultimate universe, a universe that existed independently of the mainstream Marvel universe with its own continuity and different versions of established characters. For clarity, the Ultimate universe, which has a version of Earth designated Earth-1610, was created in 2000 and lasted until 2015 when it was merged with the primary universe, which has a version of the earth designated Earth-616. The Ultimate universe creatively functioned as a place for creators to develop different versions of well-known characters without contradicting continuity, as well as experimenting with new character ideas. Miles Morales is one such experimentation. The character is an Afro-Latino youth from Brooklyn, New York City, who was visually modeled after President Barack Obama and the actor Donald Glover (Swift, 2015), with the intention of creating a Spider-Man that could be relatable to youth of color. The significance of the character exists in the intersection of the character being a person of color and being Spider-Man in particular because of the superhero moniker’s importance within the world of comic books. The original Spider-Man is Peter Parker, a white male youth originally depicted in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 which was published in 1962 (Lee, 1962). Since then the character has become one of the most easily recognizable and commercially viable superheroes in American popular culture. That the creators of Miles Morales decided to make him into a new Spider-Man speaks volumes about their ambition for the success and relevance of the character. To be clear, this is not the first time that a Latino has carried the mantle of being Spider-Man. The first Latino Spider-Man was
Miguel O’Hara who headlined the series, *Spider-Man 2099* which began publication in 1992 (David, 1992). Miguel O’Hara exists in a continuity set in one possible future of the mainstream continuity in the year 2099 A.D. While that Latino Spider-Man was created to exist in a possible future, Miles Morales exists in the current day as a symbol of diversity and heroism. As such he operates as a vehicle for rhetorical commentary on modern day issues, particularly those relative to racial minorities within the United States. In this portion of the chapter, I will examine the ways in which the narratives of Miles Morales have been used as commentary on social issues. But before engaging in that critique, I will provide some pertinent background information on the character.

At the beginning of his narrative Miles Morales is a thirteen-year-old Afro-Latino from Brooklyn. He was born as a normal human being devoid of powers, abilities, or even special qualities such as Peter Parker’s advanced intelligence. Miles’ mother, Rio Morales (Latina), and father, Jefferson Davis (African-American) are married and at the beginning of the first narrative the two are seen walking Miles to an event where Miles would learn whether or not he would be admitted to a charter school called the Brooklyn Visions Academy (Bendis, 2011). After learning that he had succeeded in enrolling in the school through a lottery program Miles went to visit with his uncle Aaron Davis, Jefferson’s brother. While visiting with his uncle a genetically engineered spider bit Miles and gave him superpowers; these included the ability to walk on walls, enhanced agility and strength, a spider-sense that warns him of danger, full body camouflage, and the ability to use his body’s bioelectricity to stun targets (referred to as the venom blast). After the acquisition of these powers Miles began his journey to become a superhero worthy of the title of Spider-Man. Along the way Miles has fought supervillains,
worked with other superheroes, and even permanently crossed over into mainstream Marvel continuity when his Earth-1610 merged with Earth-616.

“Don’t Screw It Up”

In Spider-Man #8 (Bendis, 2016e) Miles Morales meets the iconic superhero Luke Cage and his wife Jessica Jones. In that interaction Cage remarks on the significance of a young man of color assuming the title of Spider-Man. Cage remarks, “Spider-Man is a kid of color now. That is cool. It’s important. Don’t screw it up” (Bendis, 2016e, p. 9). This quote encompasses three understandings about Miles Morales acting as Spider-Man. The first is a reference to Miles Morales’ assumption of the title and the acknowledgement that there was a Spider-Man prior to him. The second is that Miles’ role as the Spider-Man is culturally significant specifically because of his racial identity. The third understanding is that as a racialized character he bears a burden of representation to the larger public, and that his actions have larger social implications. Within the vein of Cage’s assertion, I will proceed to address the ways in which Miles’ identity as a hero of color and his narratives operate as social commentary.

After Miles Morales gained his powers he did not immediately begin fighting crime, as the youth initially struggled with the new reality of his abilities and the implications for his life. The catalyst for Miles was the death of Earth-1610’s Peter Parker, who died as Spider-Man while fighting Norman Osborne/Green Goblin (Bendis, Hickman, Spencer, 2011). Miles arrived at the scene of the battle as Peter Parker died and was immediately struck by the perception that if he had been acting as superhero during the months between the acquisition of his powers and Parker’s death then the tragedy might have been avoided. As a result, he takes it upon himself to act as Spider-Man for the Ultimate universe. This moment of transferal of the title of Spider-Man
is legitimized three times throughout Miles’ publication history. The first time, in terms of narrative chronology if not publication order, was in *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #14 (Bendis, 2012i) when the deceased Peter Parker’s Aunt May decides to give Miles Morales the web-shooter devices that belonged to Peter. This act of giving Miles the devices and encouraging him to do what he believes to be right is a form of Aunt May giving her blessing to Miles to be the new Spider-Man. The second time that Miles’ assumption of the mantle of Spider-Man was narratively legitimized was in *Spider-Men* #5 (Bendis, 2012e). This issue concludes the *Spider-Men* story arc which centers around Peter Parker from the primary Marvel universe/Earth-616 accidentally crossing through a portal that transports him to the Ultimate universe where he encounters Miles Morales. In *Spider-Men* #5 Peter Parker gives Miles his blessing to act as the Spider-Man of the Ultimate universe after the two heroes defeat Mysterio, the villain behind the interdimensional portal. The third time that Miles Morales was legitimized as Spider-Man within the narrative occurred in *Spider-Man* #2 (Bendis, 2016a) which takes place after the merge of Earth-1610 and Earth-616 into a new Earth-616/Prime Marvel universe. In that issue it is revealed through a brief flashback that the original Peter Parker gave Miles Morales his blessing to be Spider-Man within that universe, the implication here being that Peter trusted Miles to use the public moniker that has been an integral part of Peter’s identity for so long.

I reference these moments within Miles’ narratives to emphasize the point that Marvel has worked to legitimize Miles as the new Spider-Man and successor to the legacy of Peter Parker and all that such a mantle entails. In this way Miles is symbolically more than a mere race-bent iteration of Peter Parker that existed within an imprint of Marvel that was eventually canceled. As a point of clarity, race-bending within this context refers to the reconceptualization of character as being a member of a different race than the original iteration. It is because this
character is repeatedly endorsed as the new Spider-Man and because of his identity as a racialized character that he serves as an important commentary on the value of positive representation for people of color. In an exchange between Miles and his best friend Ganke Lee the two discuss the recent interest that a prominent YouTuber named Danika Hart has taken in Spider-Man.

Danika: “The new Spider-Man is brown. He’s a kid of color. This is huge!!! Is he African American? Is he Indian? Hispanic? I don’t know. But he is def color. So exciting!”

Miles: “Uh…and she shares why?”

Danika: “I love this! We have an African American Captain America, Thor is a lady, and now Spider-Man. This is nuts. In the bestest best way.”

Ganke: “She cares and she is cute. And would totally go out with you. With Spider-Man.”

Danika: “Guys! Just crazy! Go nuts. I am so excited!! I shall now dance. Dance with me. Spider-Man represent!”

Ganke: “Why is this bothering you?”

Miles: “I don’t know. Because who cares?”

Ganke: “I mean I get it.”

Danika: “Black Spider-Man!”

Miles: “I don’t want that.”
SUPERHEROES & STEREOTYPES

Ganke: “Want what?”

Miles: “The qualification.”

Ganke: “You’re losing me.”

Miles: “This—I don’t want to be the black Spider-Man. I want to be Spider-Man.”

(Bendis, 2016a, p. 18-19)

This conversation between the two friends as they watch the YouTube video highlights two perspectives regarding representation and within that conversation Marvel makes their institutional perspective clear on the matter. Miles’ insistence that he not be identified as the black Spider-Man, which he argues is factually incorrect because he identifies as partially Latino, is an argument for the desire to be a post-racial hero that is deserving of the title because of his merits rather than the novelty of his skin color. This insistence on a post-racial conceptualization of Spider-Man is not without merit, as the character wishes to prove himself worthy of the mantle and achieve a reputation of authentic heroism. But Danika’s, and Luke Cage’s, assertion that it is culturally significant that Spider-Man is now a person of color indicates the creators’ underlying commentary that representation matters because of the historic dominance of white, male heroes within the Marvel universe. The rhetorical subtext is clear, Miles Morales as Spider-Man indicates another step towards meaningful representation of societal minorities; not as ‘what if?’ conceptualizations confined to secondary imprints but as prominent characters within the primary universe of Marvel.

While Miles is positioned within the subtext of the narrative as a symbol of a more diverse prime Marvel universe the character’s racial identity is problematic in its manifestation, or rather what is not manifested. The issue is a matter of Mile’s Latino identity, or his Latinidad.
Miles identifies as half Latino within the series, he has a Latino surname, and his mother and grandmother manifest Latinidad visually through their appearances and use of Spanish vocabulary. However, Miles himself does not express Latinidad beyond the one instance of declaring himself to be “Hispanic”. One possible reading of the text could be that Miles represents a form of Chicano identity, those of mixed Latino and American heritage, except that within the selection of comics that I have examined there is no meaningful indication that Miles’s Latinidad is relevant to his racial identity. Instead there are clear references within the material that Miles is perceived to be black and is intended to be visually read as such. Visually the character resembles his father who is darker-skinned than his mother, and Miles is described as African-American by two other characters. The first time is by the original Peter Parker when he crosses over to the Ultimate universe in Spider-Men; in a conversation with that universe’s Nick Fury he describes Miles as African-American (Bendis, 2012d). The second instance is in Ultimate Comics Spider-Man #16.1 (Bendis, 2012k) when journalist Betty Brant identifies Miles as African-American based on filmed footage of Miles fighting a villain wherein she sees a section of his skin beneath his ripped suit. That Miles Morales appears as African-American yet has a Latina mother could have served as an opportunity to address the complex identity of Afro-Latinos who negotiate the duality of being ascribed the identity of being black while conceptualizing themselves as Latino, and any identity-related tensions that are born from the discrepancy between a persons’ self-concept and publicly ascribed identity. Instead, Marvel’s ostensible failure to create a sense of Latinidad beyond a single line in one issue rhetorically modifies their assertion about diversity and the future of Marvel comics. I assert that the commentary within the narrative is that Marvel intends to create a more diverse primary universe but that the execution of that goal is still flawed, as it has been historically.
“He Was Meant to Be Dangerous”

“Anthony was the oldest of seven,
Well respected, calm and collected.
Laughin' and joking made life easier,
Hard times, momma on crack
A four-year-old telling his nanny he needed her.
His family history pimpin' and bangin'
He was meant to be dangerous.”

(Lamar, 2017)

A recurring theme within the subtext of the narratives about Miles Morales is the issue of the social factors that shape and cultivate lives. Within these narratives the creators generate discourse that centers around the influence of social elements such as home and community environment, education, family influences, and the acquisition of power. Additionally, the creators incorporate commentary on the role of biological factors such as heritage and race within the larger context of society. I will begin my discussion of the commentary provided within the subtext of the narratives by addressing the first of these issues incorporated into a Miles Morales comic, education and poverty. In *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #1 (Bendis, 2011) Miles is shown with his parents as they attend a public lottery for students to gain admittance to the Brooklyn Visions Academy, a charter school located in Brooklyn that represents an opportunity for Miles Morales to have a better life than would ordinarily be probable if he remained in his local public-school system. As his uncle Aaron Davis remarks, Mile’s acceptance to the school is his “ticket out of this cesspool” (Bendis, 2011, p. 13) and elaborates that the opportunity would keep Miles from having to lead the kind of hard life that Aaron and
Jefferson had to endure. The Brooklyn Visions Academy factors significantly into Miles’ comics as the setting for many of his narratives. However, as of the most recent comic book analyzed for this project, *Spider-Men II* #5 (Bendis, 2017) Miles has yet to graduate from Brooklyn Visions Academy and so the impact of that education on his life has yet to be realized within his narrative.

The previous reference to the lives led by Aaron and Jefferson Davis made in *Ultimate Comics Spider-Man* #1 (Bendis, 2011) is the beginning of a recurring theme within Miles’ comics, and that is criminality and the idea of biology factoring into the composition of one’s identity. The creators incorporate the idea that one’s biological heritage, that is to say that a person is influenced by the choices of their parents on a genetic level, is an inescapable factor that plays a large part in manifestation of one’s identity. One example was when Miles’ mother calls her mother, Gloria Morales, for help in disciplining Miles when his grades begin to decline (Bendis, 2016b). Unbeknownst to Gloria and Rio Morales the reason for the decline in academic performance was due to his occupation as Spider-Man and his inability to balance his school and superhero responsibilities. In the absence of that information Gloria claims that Miles was involved in criminal activity, specifically dealing drugs. During a heated exchange between Gloria and Miles’ father Jefferson, who defended his son because he knew the truth of why Miles was doing poorly in school, Gloria asserted that “this is *your* half of him we’re dealing with” (Bendis, 2016b, p. 7). The assertion that Miles’ supposed criminality comes from his father’s side of the family is an argument for the idea that delinquent behavior is tied to blackness; this moment exhibits a racist stereotype often used to dehumanize racial minorities, particularly Black Americans depicted in the news (Lacy & Haspel, 2011). This narrative trope and media stereotype of black masculinity being inextricably tied to criminality is woven
throughout Miles’ overall narrative, and the rhetorical subtext on the issue functions as commentary on flawed logic that one’s biology fatalistically determines one’s future.

There are two prominent narrative arcs that deal with this issue in a direct manner. The first centers around Miles’ relationship with his uncle Aaron Davis, also known as the high-profile thief called ‘The Prowler’. In this arc Aaron discovers Miles’ secret and coerces Miles into working with Aaron in order to establish a criminal enterprise; Aaron did this by threatening to blackmail Miles and let his parent know about Miles’ secret (Bendis, 2012g). The danger of the threat was Miles’ father, Jefferson, was particularly prejudiced against powered-individuals and faults them for many of the world’s problems. In one instance Jefferson even implied that if Miles were a mutant/powered-person that Jefferson would be angry (Bendis, 2012f). Miles, perceiving no alternative, helped his uncle once before resolving to resist and face the consequences of the blackmail. When Miles resisted the two characters fought with each other in a battle that ultimately proved fatal for Aaron as his technological suit malfunctioned and exploded, ultimately killing the character (Bendis, 2012h). The revelation that Aaron died because of a technical malfunction would not occur until later, and in the moment both Miles and Aaron believed that Miles was responsible. Understanding this to be the case, Aaron remarked in his final moments that Miles was a criminal like him saying, “you are…just…like me” (Bendis, 2012h, p. 21). These words, combined with the perception that he killed his uncle and his understanding that his father was also a criminal in his youth, haunt Miles and prompt him to wonder about whether or not being a criminal is a part of his genetic being. Even learning that Aaron’s death was caused by his own reckless use of his technologically advanced suit did not remove Miles’ concern about himself.
The matter of Miles’ blackness predisposing him to violence and an inclination towards crime was revisited in the *Civil War II* event. This event centers around the issue of preventing crimes before they happen and involves the societal issue of profiling, which will be discussed in-depth within the next subsection of this chapter. The core premise of the series is that a character named Ulysses Cain develops the ability to predict possible futures and that the superhero community is split between those who want to use the power to prevent crimes before they occur, and those that want to avoid doing so because it could lead to an abuse of power. The former is led by Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, and the latter is led by Tony Stark/Iron Man; Miles joins those that are opposed to the use of the power. At one point in the course of the series Miles becomes the next hero to be targeted by those who wish to use Cain’s power to prevent crime, as Cain has a vision (which is experienced by those in proximity to him) depicting Miles killing Captain America (Bendis, 2016f). This revelation scared Miles, so he went to meet Captain America in Washington, D.C. to prove that he would not kill America’s champion; by doing so Miles hoped to prove to himself and everyone else that he was not the type of person to do such a thing. After meeting Captain America, declaring his intention to not kill him, and evading capture by Captain Marvel, Miles reflected on his identity and his abilities. In a conversation with friends that knew his identity Miles explained his perspective,

“Sometimes—Sometimes I have these thoughts. I get so mad. I get so frustrated at how this world works. I get sick of how many idiots we have to fight just to keep things relatively normal. Sometimes I want to punch a hole right through some of those idiots. Every day…*every* day I find myself holding back. Barely able to control myself. And every other day I think: *why* am I trying to help everyone? What difference does it make? There are still bad people in the world and nothing I do will *ever* stop that. No one else is
behaving, why should I? Why don’t I take what’s mine? And if I’m really being honest…my spider-powers are not making it any easier to keep this part of me buried. You have no idea, in mid-fight, how often I think about pulling someone’s head right off and I—it’s thoughts like that that make me worry that I am more like my dad and uncle than I want to admit. I worry that my dad isn’t the guy I want him to be…that he’s just pretending because I showed up in his life. I worry that it’s in my DNA. My family. That we’re just…not good. That eventually I’m going to just go the other way. And this vision, this experience the inhuman gave me, it didn’t feel as impossible as everyone thinks it is. At least not to me” (Bendis, 2016g, p. 17).

Miles’ introspection serves as an overt expression of the rhetorical subtext that has existed within Miles’ narratives since Aaron Davis’ assertion that he and Miles were similar. Interestingly, the confrontation with Captain America that is illustrated in Spider-Man #10 (Bendis, 2016g) is not the resolution to the narrative arc initiated by Ulysses Cain’s vision. Miles Morales and Steve Rogers meet again in Secret Empire #7 (Spencer, 2017b) when Miles attempts to kill the Hydra-version of Captain America. In the comic, both characters acknowledge Cain’s vision and proceed to fight until Miles defeats Captain America in a moment of rage sparked by the death of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. Confronted with the decision of whether to kill the evil Captain America or not, Miles decides to spare his life at the urging of his teammate Nadia van Dyne. Casting aside a defeated and severely injured Captain America, Miles remarked, “I’m not a killer” (Spencer, 2017b, p. 25) and thus resolved the narrative tension that has been a part of Miles’ narrative from the beginning.

Ultimately, I contend that Miles’ narratives typically involve rhetorical subtext regarding the influence of social and genetic factors in the determination of one’s future. The social
influences addressed include familial pressures and the emphasized need for education for the socially disadvantaged to succeed. The role of genetics is also addressed in the subtext discourse as the question of genetics in determining one’s personality type is asked and answered in a manner that refutes racially oppressive and stereotypical notions that genetics determine the qualities, personal attributes, and thus futures of people of color. This underlying theme of recognizing the agency of individuals, even when they are subject to socio-cultural forces beyond their control, is encapsulated in Miles’ last name. While not canonically affirmed in the literature that I examined, nor acknowledged anywhere else to the best of my knowledge, I assert that within the narrative Miles’ last name is Morales instead of Davis because his father wished to separate Miles from his own criminal past. It is my speculation that Jefferson Davis intentionally refrained from passing on his last name to his son so that Miles would not be burdened by any reputation associated with the last name Davis, particularly since Aaron was still an active criminal up until his death. By doing so, Miles would be free to self-actualize with as little hindrance from his father’s past. This action would serve as a subtext commentary on the part of the creators and convey the message that the right of marginalized individuals to determine their own future with as little interference from historical disadvantages is important and necessary.

“Arrested Twice”

Another element of social commentary that is woven throughout the narratives of Miles Morales is that of the relationship between co-cultures and socio-political superstructures, specifically the scientific academy and law enforcement, respectively. In this section, I will examine the ways in which the narratives for Miles act as commentary on the contentious and
often oppressive relationship between marginalized communities and established superstructures within American society.

The origin story of Miles Morales is predicated on the media trope of the mad scientist, the amoral researcher whose only sense of purpose is rooted in the advancement of science without regard for human cost. In the case of Miles Morales, the Ultimate universe version of the evil scientist Norman Osborn attempted to recreate the formula that accidentally imbued Peter Parker with superhuman abilities and made him into Spider-Man. While Miles’ acquisition of his spider-abilities was the result of happenstance as opposed to direct experimentation, his narratives have at times centered around conflict with mad scientists like Norman Osborn. One Ultimate universe story-arc in particular focuses on the Roxxon corporation, a multi-million-dollar science and technology company that contracted with that universe’s S.H.I.E.L.D. to provide weapons and equipment. Roxxon’s areas of research included genetic experimentation on human subjects which often involved unethical practices. These practices resulted in the creation of four powered-individuals: Jessica Drew/Spider-Woman, Lana Baumgartner/Bombshell, Tyrone Johnson/Cloak, and Tandy Bowen/Dagger. Each of these characters was subject to research practices that violated ethics norms for the purpose of exploitation. Jessica Drew was created as a modified clone of Peter Parker (Bendis, 2013e). Tyrone Johnson and Tandy Bowen were high school students who were in a car accident that left them comatose; Roxxon had their deaths faked so that they could be used for experiments (Bendis, 2013d). Lana Baumgartner received her powers while in her mother’s womb, a side effect of the experiments that her mother was subjected to while in prison (Bendis, 2013f). The purpose of these experiments was the desire to create super-soldiers, similar to Captain America, for monetary gain. In this way, the narrative adopts a subtext of exploitation and oppression. The
arc was resolved when this group of young superheroes led by the experienced, veteran agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. Jessica Drew, attacked Roxxon corporation. The conflict resulted in the defeat of Roxxon’s think tank called the Brain Trust, a group composed of evil geniuses, and the apprehension of the CEO Phillip Roxxon (Bendis, 2013g).

The matter of exploitation is revisited in a narrative arc that involves the Ultimate universe version of Hydra. In this narrative Miles and Jessica are captured for the purposes of lethal experimentation by Hydra agents so that they can learn to create their own versions of the superheroes (Bendis, 2015c). In this same narrative Miles encounters the long-thought-dead Norman Osborn/Green Goblin; and along with the also-revived Peter Parker the two Spider-Men defeat the mad scientist (Bendis, 2015b). What is of particular note that pertains to the narrative commentary of exploitation was Osborn’s attempt to recruit Miles by claiming to be his father, which in this context is a direct reference to Miles’ identity as Spider-Man being the direct result of Osborn’s scientific endeavors. Osborn’s attempt to recruit Miles would have resulted in his exploitation for nefarious purposes orchestrated by Osborn. As such this narrative reinforces the theme of scientists exploiting other humans for selfish reasons. While not directly analogous, I contend that this theme within the narratives serves as commentary on the historic oppressive relationship between vulnerable communities and scientific institutions. Two particular examples from American history that illustrate this relationship come to mind: the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Study of 1932 and the Human Radiation Experiments related to the Manhattan Project, which was conducted from 1945-1947. The Tuskegee experiment involved the examination of 600 African-American men in Tuskegee, Alabama, 399 who were diagnosed with syphilis and 201 who were not. The forty year-long study involved denying treatment to the men who had syphilis under the false premise of being treated for ‘bad blood’ and monitoring the slow decay
of the men as compared to the otherwise healthy men (The Tuskegee Timeline, n.d.). The Human Radiation Experiments involved injecting thirty American citizens with plutonium for the purpose of monitoring how their body processed radiation; none of the thirty participants were informed of the injection they were receiving and only one participant signed a consent form, which did not detail the specifics of the injection they received (Human radiation experiments, n.d.). The justification for selecting participants was that each had already been diagnosed with terminal illness and so the exposure to potentially lethal radiation would not alter their ultimate health, although in some cases the participants were not in fact terminally ill. The purpose of the experiment was to ascertain the possible health consequences that could be faced by the members of the Manhattan Project who worked with radioactive materials. These egregious moments in history highlight the often-exploitative relationship between scientific institutions and vulnerable communities. While not exactly analogous, these narratives involving Miles Morales and mad scientists act as commentary reminding the public of the dangers that can come from scientific advancement that is devoid of ethics.

The second recurring element in the narratives of Miles Morales that serves as social commentary is the relationship between law enforcement agencies and persons of color. While Miles does have a few positive interactions with officers of the law such as police chief Frank Quaid and even joins the Ultimates, serving under President Captain America (Ultimate universe continuity), Miles is also often at odds with law enforcement.

A consistent motif within Miles’ narratives is the tense relationship that he has with local police, as they often try to apprehend him after he has defeated the given villain. From Miles’ first encounter with police when he apprehended the Kangaroo during a robbery (Bendis, et al., 2011) to his visit to Washington, D.C. when he tried to prove to himself that he was not a killer
(Bendis, 2016g). As Miles recounted his excursion to the nation’s capital he described how he panicked and stood still when the police approached him with their weapons drawn. When asked why, he responded that “my head was filled with every viral video of every traffic stop I had ever seen and I just—I didn’t know what to do” (Bendis, 2015, p.10). This moment in the narrative re-contextualizes all of the instances when Miles Morales came face-to-face with police officers during his career as Spider-Man, as it adds an element of reality that is referential of real-world events. Specifically, events that involve the unjust killings of Black American citizens at the hands of law enforcement officers as in the cases of Philando Castile (Berman, 2017a) and Samuel Dubose (Berman, 2017b), both of whom were killed during traffic stops. Miles’ fear of being killed by the police is almost realized when he was grazed by an officer’s bullet while fleeing from the police after having fought the Green Goblin (Bendis, 2015a). These moments of fear experienced by the young superhero are not isolated incidents of the Morales-Davis family being victimized by law enforcement. During the Earth-1610 continuity both of Miles’ parents suffered at the hands of law enforcement. In the Ultimate universe Miles’ mother was killed when the New York Police Department SWAT unit opened fire on the creature called Venom. Once the Venom symbiote, a sentient lifeform that depends on a host for survival, was defeated by Miles only the host remained. The police discharged their weapons at the host, an adult black male, and a stray bullet from an officer struck and killed Rio Morales, leaving Miles and Jefferson devastated from the loss (Bendis, 2013c). Rio was later recreated when the primary Marvel universe was reconstructed, and her memory of her death was wiped from her mind. Miles still retained his memories from Earth-1610 which presumably included the death of his mother. In the Earth-1610 continuity Jefferson is shown clashing with federal law enforcement when he attempted to cross a barricade in order to reach his home and check on his family during
a disaster in New York City (Bendis, 2012j). Instead of an officer checking the home for occupants to ease Jefferson’s concerns the federal agents detained him, put him in a transport vehicle, and sent him to a detention area. On the way to the detention facility Jefferson was freed by a squad of Hydra terrorists. These instances act as commentary within the subtext of the narratives as assertions that the relationship between law enforcement and minorities is often hostile and oppressive. Even though Rio Morales’ death was not an intentionally malicious act, it was the result of recklessly using excessive force and could have been avoided had the officers elected to not shoot the defeated Venom host and instead apprehended the villain. The commentary within these instances is clear, for racial minorities interactions with the police can at the least be traumatizing or at the worst be lethal.

The final example of rhetorical commentary related to minorities and law enforcement embedded in the subtext of these narratives that I will address is the matter of profiling and the Civil War II event. As referenced earlier, the event centers around the debate within the superhuman community as to whether the powers of Ulysses Cain, an inhuman (alien and human hybrid) that can see possible future events, should be used to prevent crimes. Captain Marvel believed that the Avengers should the visions to prevent crimes, while Iron Man believed that doing so would be tantamount to profiling. He explains his perspective as such to Miles Morales during a conversation that the two have regarding the matter, which also served as an attempt to try and persuade Miles to join his side of the conflict (Bendis, 2016c). In that same conversation Miles alluded to the fact that his father had been profiled and falsely arrested several times and that this was a difficulty often endured by minority communities. Miles ultimately decided to oppose the use of Cain’s abilities after a mission involving keeping the Hulk from killing superheroes resulted in the death of Bruce Banner, as Miles realized that this method of profiling
could be used to justify killing people who may not eventually commit the crimes that were foretold (Bendis, 2016f). As mentioned earlier, Miles eventually became the target of this method of profiling when he is depicted killing Captain America in one of Cain’s visions (Bendis, 2016f). During the conversation with Captain America wherein he declared his intention to not kill the iconic hero he was approached by Captain Marvel. The leader of the Avengers attempted to persuade Miles to allow her to take him into custody, and when he refused she attempted to take him by force (Bendis, 2016g). Miles evaded capture thanks to the intervention of Iron Man, as he and Captain Marvel engaged in a battle that left Iron Man near death. I contend that the rhetorical commentary present within the subtext of this narrative is that even superhuman abilities do not exempt one from profiling by law enforcement. Furthermore, I contend that the narrative subtext also asserts that a key element in preventing harm that would result from abused authority is the intervention of allies from dominant society. This narrative is a clear example of the need for allies that can wield power and privilege in a manner that protects the agency and liberty of vulnerable communities such as racial co-cultures.

“*We Both Know How This Ends*”

For years comic books have been vehicles for social commentary on issues such as war (Dittmer, 2013), the Civil Rights Movement (Fawaz, 2011), the development of female empowerment over the years (D’Amore, 2008), and other elements of American society. As with many other characters, Steve Rogers/Captain America and Miles Morales/Spider-Man have served as powerful rhetorical vehicles for social commentary, especially due to the circumstances of their creation in the real-world. Both were created during times of extraordinary social change, World War II and the election of the first African-American president respectively; and they embody certain ideological perspectives of their respective eras: the need
for a champion against fascism, and a hero that reflects the changing landscape of American demographics. The value of selecting these characters for this project extends beyond their respective contexts of creation. I chose these two characters because the reflect diametrically opposed perspectives of American society. Captain America is an icon, a symbol of a mythologized American culture that is a form of distilled American exceptionalism. The narratives that I examined that feature Captain America are laden with the subtext that he unequivocally represents the American ideal and that his status as a hero, villain, or victim represents the state of American society. This sentiment is summarized in Captain America #25: The Death of the Dream Part 1 (Brubaker, 2007). In this issue Captain America has been arraigned and prepares to stand trial for the crime of resisting the Superhuman Regulation Act at the center of the Superhuman Civil War. As he was being escorted to the courthouse he was jeered by a crowd of people condemning him for his actions. Moments before his (temporary) death by assassination, his long-lost friend Bucky Barnes remarked that,

“They’re here. And they’re gonna parade Steve like he’s some cheap hood. Like they forgot everything he’s done for them…how could they ever forget? Even before I met him, before I became his partner, the guy was already a legend. But before I realized it, we were like brothers. He was like that sainted, can-do-no-wrong big brother. The guy you can’t help but look up to…because you just know you can never be that good…that graceful under pressure…or that strong in the face of horror. But they’ve all forgotten that…all they care about is their fear…” (Brubaker, 2007, p.10-13).

This perspective expressed by Barnes is a prime example of the way in which Captain America has been used rhetorically, as a larger-than-life symbol used to provide commentary on American society; which in this instance conveys the message that the American public is quick
to valorize and demonize its heroes in a way that is simplistic and self-serving rather than using a holistic and nuanced approach. The positive aspect to the commentary offered within the narratives of Captain America is that while the stories often facilitate a hegemonic perspective of what it means to be American within the identity politics of Steve Rogers, the character has been used to push the notion that it is acceptable, and in some sense necessary, to be skeptical of systems of power as an American. The recurring narratives of being wary of powerful institutions whether they are government, corporate, or academic is a profound message about the need to critique abuses of power. Unfortunately, that critique is curtailed when applied to the issues of racial injustice as Captain America and his African-American sidekick Falcon attempt to suppress radical voices and dissent while advocating for moderation within discourse regarding Civil Rights. In this way, Captain America silences the concerns of black radical movements and contributes to the dominance of whiteness within the narratives.

Essentially, Captain America has been used to offer commentary within the vein of protest and critique against societal institutions, even going as far as to take up arms against the federal government in *Civil War*, yet when confronted with the issue of racial injustice Captain America insists on moderation and integration without addressing the conditions that created the injustice. In short, an enduring quality of American identity is the willingness to take extreme measures against oppression except when race is concerned.

Whereas Captain America has been used as a discursive tool for addressing abstract ideologies like patriotism and American morality, Miles Morales has been used to discuss imminent, mundane, and complex matters such as the negative influences of one’s environment and the struggles of minorities relative to systems of power. The commentary within the narratives of Miles Morales act as critiques of American society and governance, although I
contend that these critiques are somewhat flawed. The editorial decision to create a Black American Spider-Man as an endorsement of diversity is valuable because of the implied refutation of the history of comics which has been entrenched in whiteness (Facciani, & Vendemia, 2015). Yet the manifestation of Miles’ ethnic identity, that of being an Afro-Latino, has been flawed thus far. His Latinidad is near absent and within the parameters of my analysis I found nothing to suggest that his hybrid identity factors into his negotiation of self-concept as it has for Chicanos and other varieties of Latinx-Americans (Calafell, 2004). The commentary within the narratives for Miles that address the issue of criminality and the social factors that influence one’s life is also an important step in the direction of critiquing American society, however as with the matter of representation this attempt at critique is also flawed. At multiple points throughout his narratives the creators reference the criminal histories of his father and his uncle, while also alluding to the lack of opportunity to be found in his community, which necessitates his admittance to the Brooklyn Visions Academy. Yet the narratives do not address the societal factors that created the environment of poverty that he is attempting to escape, nor do the narratives include rationales for why his father and his uncle felt compelled to engage in a life of crime. In the absence of a justification rooted in survival or need such as a lack of employment opportunities or disillusion with the ideology of the American dream, a plausible and problematic reading of the texts could be that the Davis brothers elected lives of crime out of greed or a natural inclination towards evil. This interpretation of the material lends itself to supporting established media stereotypes that characterize Black Americans as inherently violent and malicious (Lacy & Haspel, 2011). Similarly, the matter of profiling and the tense relationship between minority communities within the US and government institutions is not addressed in-depth. The matter of unjust profiling and harassment is raised, but the larger
cultural reasons for why profiling exists, such as scapegoating communities of color as inherently prone to criminality or white supremacist notions of fearing the empowerment of people of color, are not incorporated into the narratives. Thus, the struggles of minority communities are presented, but not explained and so an educational opportunity is missed.

Ultimately, the value of the social commentary within the comics I analyzed is a combination of positive and negative messages conveyed within the subtext. Positive elements include critiques of American institutions and raising consciousness regarding the plight of oppressed communities. Negative elements include silencing the legitimate concerns that are raised by radical voices, perpetuating racial stereotypes, and failing to seize opportunities for educating the audience on important matters of oppression. This tension between what comics have been historically and the new direction that comics are attempting to pursue is visually represented in *Secret Empire* #7 (Spencer, 2017b) when Miles Morales confronts Hydra-Captain America with the intent of killing the fascist imposter. This clash between the two characters represents a larger conflict within society, the struggle between the embracing new, diverse, and inclusive ideologies, and clinging to the old guard ideals of dominant whiteness and patriarchy that attempts to erase and suppress marginalized groups. The resolution of that fight is also emblematic of the current state of comics. Miles brutalizes Captain America but refrains from killing him (Spencer, 2017b), instead he walks away and is apprehended, allowing for Captain America to be rescued by Hydra forces. The narrative choice to have Miles abstain from killing Captain America acts as a symbolic acknowledgement of normative masculinity within comic books while illustrating a shift in the new generation of comics. In Hanke’s (1998) research on the subject of parodied masculinity, he asserts that through the use of parody a text may critique masculinity by referencing and acknowledging the normative modes of masculine expression.
and then revealing that mode of expression to be flawed by offering an alternative. Within the context of this research, it is reasonable to position comic book depictions of masculinity as forms of parody as it is typically characterized by exaggerated/hyper-masculine performances. I contend that by virtue of his hyper-physicality and previously established hyper-patriarchal behavior Captain America represents a symbol of parodied, or mock, masculinity. In contrast, Mile Morales represents the alternative form of masculinity against which the parody is compared and thus revealed as problematic and flawed. The traditionally masculine, within the context of comic books, method of resolving this fight would be to kill Captain America which would also be narratively plausible as we understand this version to be an imposter. However, Miles offers an alternative masculine solution: mercy. By not slaying the imposter Miles asserts an alternative to the parodied masculinity embodied in Hydra-Captain America. And yet, while this moment valorizes Miles as a hero that resists the urge to kill the iconic character, he does not play a role in the ultimate defeat of Captain America. Instead that is done by the original Steve Rogers when he is restored to reality, with the aid of Scott Lang/Ant-Man and Bucky Barnes (Spencer, 2017c). In this way, whiteness redeems itself as opposed to being saved by a character that was intended to be a hero for a new generation of readers of color. While this does represent progress in the media depiction of fictional characters of color it is an incomplete measure; and thus, it is a meta-commentary on the state of representation within comic books and related material.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this dissertation research is to understand and critique how comic books and related material have acted as rhetorical vehicles for ideologies related to race, class, and gender, as well as to explore critical methods for conveying perspectives regarding societal issues. Towards that end, I selected five characters for analysis: Steve Rogers/Captain America, Raven Darkholme/Mystique, Luke Cage, Jean Grey, and Miles Morales/Spider-Man. Each of these characters was selected because of their cultural prominence, market viability, and their racial and gender identities. For this project, I situated each character as a symbolic representation of their intersectional identities in terms of their races, class statuses, and genders, and by doing so I was able to critique each character as respective rhetorical vehicles that convey messages and commentary regarding American society. Methodologically, I critiqued the material using narrative and visual rhetorical criticism. Engaging with the material in this way allowed me to understand the interplay between the written text of each narrative and the accompanying illustrations, which led to more nuanced and complex understandings of the ideological underpinnings present within the materials. In total, I examined 341 comic book issues and six live-action adaptations, which included film and television. My examination of the material involved close readings of the texts and their overt messages found on the surface level as well as through the lens of metaphor and allegory, allowing me to understand the latent rhetorical messages within the materials. In order to guide my analysis of the materials, I developed three questions; the first question asks how racial, gender, and economic class identities factor into narrative and visual representations of comic book characters? The second question asks how the racial identities of characters have shifted and developed over time, and what does the current iteration of the characters suggest about social norms regarding their
respective identities? The third question inquires about the social commentary present within comic books and asks, how have comics been used to comment on social issues and which cultural phenomena have they addressed? In this chapter, I will answer each of these questions before concluding with a discussion on the implications of my research and the rhetorical use of comic book material moving forward.

**Intersectional Race, Class, & Gender**

In order to answer the question of how race, class, and gender intersect and rhetorically convey ideological messages, I examined the characters and narratives surrounding Steve Rogers/Captain America and Raven Darkholme/Mystique. I entered into the analysis of the material with two key understandings related to the nature of media. The first is that whiteness occupies a position with American society, and by extension American media, such that it is often rendered invisible as it is taken as a matter-of-course to be the norm (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Within this context whiteness not only refers to skin color, it also refers to wealth as whiteness is associated with middle-class and upper-class affluence and financial security. The second understanding is that media has historically endorsed patriarchal systems of power, and that this involved the depiction of women as either threats to masculinity (Oh & Kutufam, 2014) or as being dependent on men such as in the case of the damsel-in-distress trope (Prividera & Howard, 2006). With those understandings about the normative content within fictional media, I analyzed the material and was unsurprised to discover that the texts generally upheld ideologies that favored whiteness and masculinity.

Within the comics I examined, whiteness manifested in both explicit and implicit ways, both visually and narratively. Within the pages of Captain America comic books and film the
centrality of whiteness came through implication, as Steve Rogers, James Buchanan “Bucky” Barnes, and other important figures were often white. The very premise of Captain America’s origin story, turning a young white male into the ideal super-soldier, rhetorically functioned as a glowing endorsement of whiteness. The historical lack of people of color in comic books (Facciani, Warren, & Vendemia, 2015) further serves to erase co-cultures from the view of the audience. When minorities were depicted in the early Captain America comics they were often illustrated as stereotypes whose appearances were meant to be monstrous and reinforce their roles as villains (Vance, 2016). The use of aberrant and monstrous aesthetics to visually signify that a character is evil or at the least non-heroic is present within the image of Mystique. While the character possesses the ability to transform her physical form, a feat that she often performs in the course of her missions, her ostensibly natural state is that of a blue-skinned woman with yellow eyes without pupils. I contend that this aesthetic is a variation on a theme that was present within early Captain America comics wherein villains were often portrayed as ugly at best, and at worst they were monstrous. Mystique’s natural appearance immediately places her outside of the realm of normalcy and in so doing the comics reaffirm the visual acceptance of whiteness as natural. Even in the series Mystique where she is the primary character there are recurring narrative themes and visual motifs that reinforce her position as abnormal, such as her constant need to assume a form that does not draw attention. The character also frequently makes overt remarks about the plight of oppressed mutants which serves as a metaphor for the oppression of racial minority groups within the American white-dominant society. The ways in which Mystique is represented within both comic book and film adaptations reinforces the centrality and supposed superiority of whiteness, masculinity, and by extension the working-class ethos of characters like Captain America.
Overall, the character is conceptualized as having extreme prejudice towards human society to such an extent that she does not mind taking the lives of humans and justifies the violence with her perspective that *homo sapiens* pose an existential threat to *homo superior*. Her Otherness that is signified by her blue skin and yellow eyes is compounded with a critical consciousness that is predicated on the vilification of the human species; and while at times she is represented as a freedom fighter that uses terrorism as a means towards an emancipatory end, she is at other moments in her narratives depicted as being motivated by greed and self-serving ambition. While Captain America fights to defeat the ideological enemies of America such as opportunistic capitalists, fascists, and modern-day Nazis intent on world domination, Mystique works to fill her pockets by robbing banks, working as a mercenary, or acting as an agent of the government as a means of self-preservation. As a character defined by a militant view of human-mutant relations that is also motivated by personal acquisition of wealth, the character becomes a symbolic vilification of those who are critically conscious and would de-centralize the dominance of whiteness in society. Following this reading of the character, she also acts as a rhetorical device for casting doubt on the motivations of those who are aware of systems of power, the implication being that those who are critical of whiteness and patriarchal systems must also be intent on doing harm to those who identify as white and masculine. The notable exception to this pattern of representation is the iteration of Mystique portrayed by Jennifer Lawrence in the X-Men film series. The Lawrence-incarnation of Mystique, as opposed to the version played by Rebecca Romijn in the earlier X-Men films, ultimately decides to adopt the social integrationist approach advocated by Professor Charles Xavier (Singer, 2016). However, I contend that this version of the character also acts as a reinforcement of the superiority of whiteness. While an integrationist interpretation of a character that has historically been
characterized by militancy and prejudice could ostensibly act as a way of valorizing critical consciousness, the symbolic value of the character is immediately undercut by the visual whiteness of Jennifer Lawrence. Within the comics the character often adopts the skin color of a demographic that would be considered mundane in the national context of wherever she is located. But within the post-*X-Men: First Class* (Vaughn, 2016) films she generally appears as Jennifer Lawrence, as opposed to assuming the form of a woman of color as she often does in the comics when in the United States. This tacit endorsement of whiteness reinforces the notion that heroism is white, and to be non-white could be an indicator of ignobility.

Just as racial identities are antithetical to one another, so too are gender and class differences. The ways in which they are represented within the texts works to further valorize the culturally dominant identities of masculine heterosexuality and the middle-class. Captain America’s sexuality is represented through his occasional relationships with women throughout his publication history, as well as his visual representation as the ideal physical specimen that symbolizes the peak of human ability. Captain America’s heterosexuality is typically depicted with little controversy and is generally understood to be within the realm of normal sexual expression (Dittmer, 2013). This manifestation of Captain America’s sexuality is far from deviant and places him within the confines of what is considered acceptable within a heteronormative society. By comparison, Mystique’s gender and sexual fluidity reinforces her status as an Other within the context of American culture, as she is capable of shifting between masculinity and femininity, and is canonically bisexual (Cocca, 2016). While Captain America’s sexuality is generally confined to his personal life, Mystique’s sexuality is often weaponized as a part of her skill set for manipulating targets. If Captain America is depicted as being in love with a woman, it is almost certain that the feeling is born from genuine feelings of love and the desire
for a relationship. If Mystique romantically pursues a character, it is almost certainly for the purpose of manipulation and possibly murder. The visual rhetoric of Captain America’s physique is to convey his exceptional abilities and enhance his masculinity. Alternately, Mystique’s physical appearance, combined with the understanding that her clothing is actually her skin, is similar to that of a pin-up model, which suggests that her feminine figure is meant for the visual gratification of the reader (Scott, 2015). Whereas Captain America almost exclusively dates white women that are involved in some type of ostensibly honorable profession such as being a government agent, Mystique’s romantic interests are generally within the realm of sexual deviants. While she has had romantic relationships with men, she has often pursued relationships with women such as Irene Adler/Destiny, a female mutant with whom she lived and made a life. In fact, her relationship with Destiny was so culturally taboo that for many years the relationship could only be depicted through implication as Marvel, in accordance with the Comics Code Authority, would not permit Chris Claremont, who created Mystique, to portray the character in a lesbian relationship. Additionally, Mystique’s relationship with the demonic-looking mutant Azazel reinforced the idea that Mystique’s sexuality was deviant in nature; as the character’s willingness to consort with an apparent demon behind the back of her husband gushes of misogynist stereotypes about the lascivious and duplicitous nature of women.

Ultimately, I assert that the intersections of race, class, and gender as they exist within the material that I examined serve to perpetuate the historical dominance of white, middle-class masculinity within comic books. While there are instances within the material where more nuanced approaches that add complexity to the characters exist, they were largely ignored or misused in such a way that either overtly or implicitly reinforced these ideological underpinnings. For example, in the narrative resolution of the of the Secret Empire story-arc
Captain America ultimately defeats the evil, fascist, Hydra-version of himself by using Mjolnir, Thor’s legendary hammer that only responds to those that are morally righteous and worthy of the responsibility of wielding the weapon (Spencer, 2017c). In this moment the favored iteration of whiteness defeats the demonized version of toxic whiteness represented in the narrative. While the original Captain America represents a version of whiteness that is openly tolerant of diversity, the conclusion of the narrative is still laden with the ideology that only whiteness can save itself. Rather than have a person of color defeat the Hydra Captain America and restore the original to reality, or even have a team of heroes of color save Captain America so that he could defeat the fascist version, the creators opted to have two characters that represent white masculinity (Ant-Man and Bucky Barnes) restore the original Captain America so that he could save the day. In fact, the overtly foreshadowed and sensationalized moment where Miles Morales beat Hydra Captain America into submission (Spencer, 2017a) could have served as an opportunity for the newly established icon to save the world and the original Captain America by killing the Hydra clone and using the reality shaping device to restore the original. But rather than do so, or even have Miles find a non-lethal way to do that once he had the upper-hand, the creators wasted the opportunity by having Miles walk away from the defeated dictator only to be immediately captured and removed from the immediate narrative. Thus, the chance for the creators to convey a rhetorical message within the narrative about the decentralization of whiteness from the comic book industry in favor of complex and dimensional diversity was wasted.

Just as there were moments within the narratives of Captain America to decentralize the oppressive dominance of whiteness within Marvel comics, so too were there opportunities for Mystique to act as an endorsement of intentional, thoughtful, diverse representation that were
mishandled. At its best moments, particularly within the pages of the Mystique series, the character embodied a militant freedom fighter working to liberate the oppressed, except that she was also vilified in the eyes of the audience as often as possible. Rather than advocating for the poor and oppressed, she was preoccupied with personal wealth. She often used her anti-human prejudice to justify violence against that demographic, and her empathy for the suffering for others was often dependent on whether or not the victim in question was a mutant. The uncertainty regarding her origin, which has not been canonically confirmed to the best of my knowledge, and her ability to assume nearly any form makes Raven Darkholme a symbol of marginalized minorities across the world. She could be any member of the oppressed and in her natural state she is ostracized as abnormal, thus she becomes a symbol for any and all oppressed minorities. The creators of her narratives could have capitalized on this to use the character as a rhetorical vehicle for messages encouraging critical consciousness about social issues related to race, class, and gender; and indeed Brian K. Vaughn comes close in the Mystique series. However, the moments of dialogue that attempt to fulfill this function ultimately boil down to Mystique being prejudiced against humans, and so the opportunities are wasted. Essentially, the question I posed of how race, class, and gender are narratively and visually represented within these comics can be answered very simply: Often they endorse the ideology that to identify as white, masculine, and middle-class is to be morally superior and that the further one deviates from this trifecta of dominant identities, the more one is likely to be inherently villainous.

Shifting Aesthetics & Society

The second inquiry that I endeavored to answer in this project has two components; the first is asking how racial and gender identities have changed over time. The second component is
the question of what the current state of racial and gender identities suggests about social norms. The purpose behind asking these questions is to ascertain how manifestations of racial and gender identity have shifted over time and to evaluate the rhetorical messages conveyed visually and narratively. Towards that end, I examined two prominent characters that have long and established histories, whose race and gender identities have shifted over time, and who have survived to the modern day with current iterations as live-action adaptations. Those two characters are Luke Cage, whom I examined in chapter four, and Jean Grey, who was the focus of chapter five.

Before discussing my analysis of the characters, it is important to first address what has already been established within the scholarship of race and gender relative to comic book media. Historically, women and racial minorities have had a troubling relationship with the comic book industry particularly as it relates to representation. Characterizations of racial minorities have often relied on racist tropes and stereotypes that promulgate flawed and often harmful messages about those respective groups. Generally problematic tropes include the visual dehumanization of racial minorities through caricatured appearances, monstrous features, or general ugliness (Dittmer, 2013). Often racial identities are reduced to popular stereotypical qualities such as Black Americans being super-cool and hip (Howard, 2014) or particularly aggressive and malicious (Oware, 2010); or Native American characters being illustrated as savage (King, 2008). In his book *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammyes, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in Films*, Donald Bogle (2016) discusses how the film industry perpetuated the legacy of blackface even after hiring black actors by having films and television written by White Americans who were unfamiliar with the black experience in the United States. By doing so the actors merely echoed the words of writers who could only guess at what it meant to act and
sound black, often based on previously racist representations. In the forward written for *Marvel Masterworks: Luke Cage, Hero for Hire Volume 1*, Steve Englehart (2015) addresses how Luke Cage was victim to similar circumstances as the writers were White American men whose inspiration for the conceptualization of the character as well as his exploits were blaxploitation films which were filled with problematic tropes and stereotypical representation of Black Americans. The underlying problem made by these authors is that the quality of representation suffers, whether within the film or comic book industries, when creators cannot relate to the identities of the characters.

Similar to the issue of problematic representations of racial minorities, the history of female characters depicted within comic book material has been fraught with problematic messages. As with other media, comic books have often relied on tropes and stereotypes when representing female characters. Often women, and white women in particular, are portrayed as helpless victims whose narrative function is to highlight the abilities of their masculine saviors that rescue them from danger (D’Amore, 2008). This emphasis on the frailty of women reinforces real-world narratives that characterize women as incapable and dependent on men for help when endangered (Privadera & Howard, 2014) and thus reinforce societal inequality rooted in the perception that women are inherently inferior to their male peers. Even when presented as capable characters that manifest agency, women are often depicted as objects of sexual desire and illustrated in a manner that suggests hypersexuality in a way that visual conveys the message of sexual maturity (McGrath, 2007). This is true for modern representations of women, for while female characters have gained agency over the course of time they are still often used as pseudo-pin-up art used to appeal to the presumed heterosexual male audience (Scott, 2015).
I emphasize the established problematic history of comic books to underscore my rationale for examining the shifting representations of these two characters, and to differentiate my own examination from that of previous research. That the racial minorities and women have been portrayed in a detrimental manner is well documented; and while my own analysis covers the ways in which Luke Cage and Jean Grey have been depicted in a problematic manner, my focus is on the constitutions of their respective aesthetics and especially the ways in which they have morphed, developed, and evolved over time. Of particular interest is how the modern conceptualizations of the characters act as distilled versions of the characters informed by previous iterations that were often racist or sexist. Therefore, it is toward that goal of understanding what modern imaginings of these characters invite others to understand about black masculinity and white femininity that I endeavor, with the understanding that in the past that answer to that question has been that the audience should view these identities as non-normative, reductive, and by implication inferior to that of the mainstream dominant identity, white masculinity.

Luke Cage first appeared in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 in 1972 (Goodwin, 1972a) and from his inception certain near-permanent components of his aesthetic were established. The character’s initial conceptualization involved multiple elements associated with the “Black Buck” stereotype. Those elements included advanced physical prowess, constant aggressiveness, and base motivations (Bogle, 2016). The distinction then between Cage and the stereotypical Buck was a matter of attitude and morality; whereas the Buck was overtly malicious and amoral in service to his own needs, Cage generally abided by the laws of society and occasionally helped others out of a sense of care for their wellbeing. The original version of Luke Cage was more akin to a kind-hearted mercenary than a superhero in the traditional sense of a powered
individual that risks their lives for altruistic reasons. Over the decades Cage morphed and
developed both in terms of his appearance as well as the overall aesthetic of his character as
different creators experimented with the ratios that comprised his personality. Whereas the
character was depicted fairly consistently throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the character shifted
in terms of his tone and demeanor in the 1990s. While this version of the character maintained a
consistent attitude of angriness and general hostility, he also shifted towards moments of intense
altruism. A representative example of that shift was his arc with Troop, an at-risk young black
male that Cage tried to protect from negative influences. While Cage’s endeavor to keep Troop
from negative influences, such as a musician with prejudicial perspectives towards White
Americans, is not the first case of the character adopting a more benevolent tone it does represent
a continuation of the theme of being a genuine hero for the black community which began in
Cage’s original series. Interestingly, this potential for heroism was sidelined during the 2002
series *Cage* which reimagined the character as a hyper-sexual local mercenary motivated by
personal gain. Even though this five-part series was a mere blip in the overall context of
publication history that spanned more than fifty years it acted as a reminder that the character
was still very much entrenched in the Black Buck stereotype. This mini-series reminded
audiences that when creators imagine grit, gravity, and realism in connection to blackness that
the socially damning tropes of promiscuity, greed, criminality, and violence are often unjustly
associated (Nama, 2011).

The most recent conceptualizations depicted in the live-action Netflix series *Luke Cage*
as well as the comic book by the same name revisit the theme of Cage as a hero of the
community and underscore the noble aspects of the character’s aesthetic, effectively associating
black masculinity with heroism and agency. Both iterations of the character involve significant
story arcs involving Luke Cage attempting, with some success, to save communities of color from abuse by criminal enterprises. In the case of the comic book series the threat of exploitation manifests as a criminal organization that coerces Dr. Noah Burstein into experimenting on young black youth in New Orleans, Louisiana, so that they can be used as foot soldiers. The underlying rhetoric of the narrative is the need for intervention in situations where youth from underprivileged communities are at risk of abuse and exploitation. The narrative then depicts Luke Cage as an example of that intervention as a mentor who attempts to aid and facilitate the redemption of a young black male who attempts to escape the life of crime. The Netflix series portrays Cage in a different continuity, situating the character in Harlem and illustrates the character’s eventual rise to fame as a hero for the black community as he battles gangsters and a corrupt politician who are intent on profiting at the expense of the historic black community. The underlying theme within each narrative is that Luke Cage has the potential to help in the redemption of black masculinity which has historically been mischaracterized and maligned by popular media. Previous characterizations of black masculinity have emphasized violence, self-serving interests, and direct opposition to the law (Oware, 2010); but these most recent iterations of Luke Cage deviate from that norm. While the character still bears the signifiers of the buck in that his physical strength is superhuman, along with other enhanced physical qualities, these versions of the character incorporate kindness, compassion, heroism, and social justice into the aesthetic of the character. These qualities act as symbolic refutations of the previously established mono-dimensional portrayals of black masculinity and encourage the audience to view that identity through a lens of worth and value. This is not to say that these versions of the character are not problematic, as they occasionally fall victim to media stereotypes such as black
anger, hyper-sexuality, and respectability politics; rather my contention is that while not perfect these iterations serve as important steps toward counteracting the harm done by the media.

Jean Grey’s aesthetic shifts over time have reflected different perceptions of white femininity, and similar to the case of Luke Cage these characterizations have often been problematic although recent iterations offer some degree of hope. In her article on the development of the character Sue Storm over time, Laura D’Amore (2008) discusses how the character Susan Storm/Invisible Woman has served as a reflection of shifting cultural perceptions of women over time. In the article D’Amore (2008) addresses how the character was originally conceptualized as existing relative to the three males in her superhero team called the Fantastic Four, and that over time the character developed into a superhero with her own agency, ability, and narratives that did not require her to be subordinate to men. D’Amore (2008) further asserts that these changes in the character were reflections of American society’s changing landscape relative to the empowerment of women. Similarly, I contend that Jean Grey’s shifting aesthetic over time is reflective of different cultural perspectives of female empowerment and the role of women within society.

It would be outside of the scope of this project to tie specific moments within the comics and films analyzed to real-world events such as the Women’s Movement of the 1960s. However, it is clear that from my analysis of the material that the development of Jean Grey’s identity as a white female is intrinsically tied to large-scale social discourses of whiteness and perspectives of the consequences of female empowerment. The character was originally conceptualized as a hero with limited capabilities and often served to highlight the heterosexuality of her male colleagues as well as their heroism when they had to save her from harm. The character’s role in battle as a support figure whose purpose was primarily to aid others rather than engage directly in combat
herself, a task left to the men, mirrored her civilian role in the Xavier school as a caretaker and maternal figure that nursed her teammates and occasionally cooked for them. Read through the lens of metaphor it is apparent that Jean Grey’s empowerment through the Phoenix Force represents the empowerment of women in the United States. Whereas she was once the weakest member of the X-Men, she suddenly became a force that could threaten the entirety of existence. Within Jean’s narratives involving the Phoenix there are narrative and visual discourses regarding whiteness and femininity. As explained by Death in *Classic X-Men #43* (Claremont, 1990), the Phoenix selected Jean Grey because of all humanity she alone was most devoted to the preservation of life, specifically the lives of her friends. That the Phoenix selected a middle-class white woman from the United States instead of Ororo Munroe/Storm, an orphaned African woman and member of the X-Men who used her weather manipulation powers to bring rain and save the lives of several tribes who needed the rain to survive (Storm, n.d.), implies that within the narrative of the comic that privileged whiteness is more deserving of cosmic power than blackness that has triumphed over adversity and also saved lives. While the message within the narrative is that whiteness is worthy of empowerment, Jean Grey’s transformation into the Dark Phoenix acts as a cautionary tale for the empowerment of white women. The Dark Phoenix’s reign of terror and potential to be an existential threat to all life implies that the empowerment of women, particularly women from privileged positions in society, pose a threat to civilization. In this way Jean Grey as the Dark Phoenix embodied a demonized form of second-wave feminism whose aspirations of systemic societal change towards equality between the sexes has been characterized by detractors as indicative of the desire to subjugate men and supplant them as leaders, thus forcing them into being subordinates. Following this metaphor, the power of the
Dark Phoenix threatened the universe just as powerful white women threatened American civilization.

The development of Jean Grey’s aesthetic over the decades has largely centered around her acquisition and then application of extreme power. Within the films evaluated for this project the theme has generally been consistent, particularly within *X3: The Last Stand* (Ratner, 2006) which depicted the Dark Phoenix as a terror to be defeated through violence committed by a male romantic interest. The newest iteration of Jean Grey depicted in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Singer, 2016) continues the theme of whiteness as worthy of near-cosmic power, but whether female empowerment becomes an existential threat remains to be seen. However, in the comic book continuity of the prime Marvel Universe the relationship between Jean Grey and the Phoenix has shifted in a way that invites the audience to form a different understanding about the relationship between white femininity and power than in past narratives. The newest iteration of Jean Grey, a time-displaced version of the original character depicted in the 1960s, actively rejects the identity of the previously established, and deceased, Jean Grey and the power of the Phoenix. Rather than embracing the power as Jean has in previous narratives, this version seeks to confront the Phoenix and separate herself from the cosmic entity. In doing so the character actualizes power that makes her a formidable super hero that is vastly different from the original conceptualization of the character who was represented as weak and often helpless. In general, this version of the character represents a new take on white femininity and the concept of power. The previous Jean Grey was privileged, from a middle-class background with social connections and accomplished parents. This version doesn’t have parents in the current time and is raised by others from her own marginalized community of mutants. Whereas the original Jean Grey embraced the power of the Phoenix and became a symbol of second-wave feminist centered
around the advancement of white women, this version relies on community and coalition building with others to actualize her own potential and become a superhero without the acquisition of external power that eventually leads to corruption and the oppression of others. This iteration of the character incorporates aesthetic elements that were previously missing and re-imagines the character as an entrenched member of the mutant community as opposed to acting as an ambassador of sorts that is able to speak on behalf of mutant-kind due to her ability to pass as human (metaphorical whiteness). Yet this version of the character is still racially problematic as the character seeks help from most white colleagues who also possess the metaphorical whiteness of being able to pass as human or otherwise benefit from certain in-universe social advantages. Jean Grey’s allies in her fight against the Phoenix include Quentin Quire, Rachel Summers, Hope Summers, Colossus, Psylocke, and Thor, among others, all of whom are characterized by whiteness. In the Jean Grey series, the only non-white character that she seeks out in preparation for confronting the Phoenix is Namor, the Prince of Atlantis. Although while the character is green and possesses non-human physical features, I contend that he still has a variation of whiteness by virtue of his royalty and the privileges associated with membership to the height of his culture’s socio-political hierarchy. Therefore, while the character does represent a significant shift in the conceptualization of white feminine identity as one that is rooted in community and possesses inherent strength and capability, it is still problematic in its reliance on whiteness for mentorship rather than intersectional wisdom from others that are marginalized whether in terms of overt race or metaphorical race in the form of species.

**Long-Underwear Social Critics**

Comic books and related material have a long and established history of acting as vehicles for social commentary. From the early days of 1940s comics overtly addressing matters
such as international conflict (Vance, 2016) to modern comics that broach the issue the hybrid identities of Latinx-Americans (Espinoza, 2016), the texts have engaged with socio-political issues. This section of the project is geared towards understanding how the narratives of comics have been used by creators to address specific social issues and cultural phenomena. It is important to emphasize that during my analysis I did not account for the actual authorial intentions of the authors, rather I analyzed the texts for rhetorical messages found within the narratives that could be discerned independent of the context of authorial intent. My rationale for doing so was to identify clear themes within the commentary of the comics as they would be read by an audience that is not familiar with the perspectives of the authors, which I contend to be a reasonable approach to interpretation given the fragmented nature of comics as they are often sold independent of publications where authors may explicitly share their perspectives. In order to answer the question of how comic books and related material have been used as vehicles for social commentary I analyzed texts related to Steve Rogers/Captain America and Miles Morales/Spider-Man. For each character I sifted through the selections and identified where the narratives contained subtext commentary related to socio-political issues. My rationale for selecting Captain America as an artifact for answering this question has to do with the longevity of the character and the circumstances of his creation. The character was conceptualized at a time of intense international conflict and in response to that tensions of that era. as such his essence was imbued with political underpinnings and in the years that followed the element of political consciousness has been inextricably linked to the character and his narratives. I selected Miles Morales for this question for similar reasons, as the character was created within a context of political awareness as a non-white version of a historically white and very prominent Marvel character, Spider-Man. In this section I’ll address my findings and discuss the implications.
Within the comics I found that each character has been used to address different social issues and cultural phenomenon, with some degree of overlap. Captain America has often been utilized as a vehicle for commenting on the fears of American society, both domestic and foreign. Early Captain America narratives featured the character combating corrupt capitalists, mad scientists, undercover Nazis, and invading foreign powers such as the Japanese military. These stories acted as forms of pro-war propaganda that worked to convince the audience of the need for vigilance against threats to the United States. When these enemies are characterized by a non-White American racial identity they are often depicted as ugly or in some cases as possessing monstrous qualities such as fangs or claw-like appendages (Vance, 2016). As the times changed and World War II ended, Captain America gained renewed relevance when he was used to address other matters of cultural fear, particularly related to race. His adventures with the Sam Wilson/Falcon often feature subtext, which was occasionally made explicit, about race relations in the United States during the 1960s and 70s. Often the message within these narratives advocated for moderate approaches to social injustice between racial communities. In the process the narratives depicted Captain America and Falcon condemning radical voices who took ostensibly hardline and extreme approaches to social injustice, often characterizing them as villains in disguise that used racial tensions to inflame conflict between the Black and White American communities. In more recent narratives Captain America has been used to address the idea of government overreach and oppression, as evidenced in the Marvel comics events *Civil War* (2006-2007), *Civil War II* (2016), and *Secret Empire* (2017) all of which depict Captain America siding against actual and metaphorical representations of institutional oppression. The underlying recurring theme within the narratives is the commentary that American society is beset by existential threats in the forms of foreign governments, domestic corruption, civil
unrest, and government oppression. The commentary also contends that the solution to
triumphing over these threats is to adhere to certain values endorsed by Captain America; those
values include being critical of power whether in the form of private or public institutions, a
strong distrust towards foreign entities, and moderate approaches to domestic issues that still
reinforce dominant cultural norms such as the assimilation of Black Americans into White
American culture. Captain America’s engagement with abstract ideals of what it means to be
American has reinforced his role as a larger-than-life character; and his endorsement of these
ideals that often reinforce the mythology of a romanticized American middle-class with which
Captain America is associated, help to normalize and thus further entrench the white dominant
culture of the United States. In essence, Captain America’s narratives offer commentary that
both critiques issues such the problematic relationship between government and marginalized
communities, while also reifying the legitimacy of certain American ideals rooted in white
cultural dominance such as the silencing of radical voices that speak on social justice and the
assertion that only whiteness is able to keep whiteness in check, to say nothing of the efforts of
empowered minorities seeking to deconstruct white dominance in society.

While Captain America often addressed broad, abstract ideas such as the liberty of the
public and international relationships, the narratives of Miles Morales often employed a micro-
level approach to such large-scale social issues. Recurring commentary within the narratives of
Miles include the cultural significance of having a Black American Spider-Man, the socio-
cultural influences that shape the lives of minorities, and the abusive relationship between
marginalized communities and institutional power. The visual conceptualization of the character
as an ostensibly black youth wearing a recognizable variation of the well-known Spider-Man
costume is in and of itself a form of commentary. The rhetorical message of the visual is that this
is a Spider-Man that is meant for a new generation of comic book readers, a diverse hero meant to appeal to a diverse audience. The character’s racial identity is established as part-Latino and part-African-American, yet as discussed in chapter six of this project, there are multiple references within the narratives that the character appears to be read as black by other characters. This gap between his self-conceived identity and his ascribed identity could serve as an opportunity for the creators to explore the dichotomy of self-identification versus perceived identification, but the chance is largely ignored. Therefore, this commentary on the value of having a hero of color with such an iconic mantle is reinforced in a flawed way that could have been better utilized to examine issues of race and identity, as in the comic series *Deathlok: The Souls of Cyber-Folk* by Dwayne McDuffie (Rivera, 2007).

While Miles’ narratives are lacking in terms of nuanced engagement with the cultural issue of bi-racial identity, the narratives are more successful in their exploration of socio-cultural factors related to self-determination as well as the troubling relationship between marginalized communities and institutional power. The rhetorical subtext within the narratives acknowledges the influences of social determinants such as the location of one’s home, economic status, familial composition, accidental privilege and fortune, and the influence that family has in the negation of self-concept. Many of these elements are present in Miles’ conflict with his uncle, Aaron Davis/The Prowler, and in the events *Civil War II* and *Secret Empire*. A theme that was particularly prominent within the narratives was the commentary that it is possible to resist the trappings of family history and that a person is not defined by their biology or social circumstance. Throughout the narratives Miles revisits the idea that he could be predisposed to a life of criminality because of the influence of his father’s side of the family, specifically his father who had a criminal past prior to Miles’ birth, as well as his uncle who up until his
accidental death during a fight with Miles maintained a life of high-profile crime. This idea of Miles being inclined towards abusing his abilities for personal gain is interwoven with his confession that he has at times felt the urge to take the lives of villains he has fought and to use his powers for selfish reasons, which he attributes to the genetic influence of his father’s side (Bendis, 2016g). Yet, while the character struggles with his occasional impulses to act in a self-serving way that would violate the law he still refrains from doing so; an act that serves as commentary within the narrative that acknowledges the disadvantages of his circumstances while affirming the notion that it is possible to exercise free-will in a way that resists negative social influences, and that combined with the acquisition of socially advantageous qualities, represented in Miles’ powers and his enrollment in a high-performing charter school, it is possible, if difficult, to triumph over adversity.

This element of criminality dovetails with an area of overlap that examined in both the narratives of Captain America and Miles Morales, including where their narratives intersect. A recurring rhetorical message within Miles’ narratives is that he is often harassed by the police while acting as Spider-Man because of their assumption that he is a criminal. These interactions often feature the police pointing their firearms at police and for Miles this conjures to mind images of Black Americans killed by police during otherwise ordinary traffic stops (Bendis, 2016g). This narrative subtext asserts that the relationship between police and minority communities can be intense, oppressive, and potentially lethal; this sentiment is further explored during the Civil War II event where the issue of profiling is raised by Tony Stark during his conversation with Miles. In the conversation Stark framed the issue of using Ulysses Cain’s visions as a means to prevent crime as a form of profiling, which prompts Miles to reference his own family’s issues with racial profiling, specifically that his father was arrested twice for
crimes he did not commit (Bendis, 2016d). In *Civil War II* Captain America and Miles Morales side with Tony Stark as they refuse to use the visions as a means of profiling people to prevent crime, even to prevent the death of Captain America at the hands of Miles (Bendis, 2016). That the two decide to resist Captain Marvel’s attempt to arrest Miles in an attempt to prevent the crime from happening is a rhetorical assertion that 1.) profiling by law enforcement is wrong conceptually, 2.) the application of such practices disproportionately harms minority communities, and 3.) members of the dominant social group have a responsibility to advocate for minority communities in order to prevent oppression. In this way, the commentary within the narrative of the comics is an endorsement of social change that involves the restraint of institutional power.

The narratives of Miles Morales and Captain America exemplify the ways in which comic book material has been used as rhetorical vehicles for commentary that endorses or condemns various perspectives on a wide variety of social issues and cultural phenomena. The subject matter that has been addressed within the subtext of these stories include the dangers of unchecked institutional power, whether in the form of government oppression or the exploitation of the marginalized by scientific organizations, issues of race, social justice, what it means to be American, and other cultural issues related to society and politics. In the case of Captain America, there is a temptation to assert that the character has historically been a champion of progressive politics aimed at actualizing justice. However, my examination of his texts reveals that while the character has endorsed ideals such as free speech and the rejection of fascism, the narratives contain at least two significant blind spots: matters of race and gender. As previously addressed, Captain America’s early narratives overtly endorsed xenophobia as racialized villains were depicted with monstrous aesthetics meant to dehumanize the ethnic groups illustrated
More recent narratives escaped this unfortunate practice but continued to valorize whiteness by positioning Captain America as a perpetual leader with persons of color and women as his subordinates, as opposed to being equal partners, such as Luke Cage, Sam Wilson, and Jessica Drew. On the note of the state of women within Captain America comics, women depicted within these narratives generally exist to support him whether as an advisor, as in the case of Madam Hydra in *Secret Empire*, or as a romantic interest such as S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sharon Carter. While Captain America’s narratives often contain subtext rhetoric that rejects fascism, oppression, and injustice, they also reify the perspective that social salvation is to be found within white masculinity. As such, problematic social issues are often rejected as long as doing so does not require the decentralization of dominant norms related to whiteness and patriarchal control.

The commentary within the narratives of Miles Morales offers hope that comic book material can be used to address the blind-spots missed by the rhetoric of characters like Captain America. Ideally, new characters that are created within a context of political consciousness yet are not bound by needing to be consistent with previously established characteristics rooted in problematic ideologies (i.e., it is unlikely that Captain America would adopt socialist economic justice and champion wealth redistribution as he has a long history of fighting communists) can be used to convey messages that are more inclusive and socially just. In many ways Miles Morales has functioned as a vehicle for more complex, nuanced commentary by drawing on real-world, micro-level experiences that illustrate the realities of social issues such as racial profiling and other problems that plague minority communities. However, while the character does present new and exciting opportunities for social commentary the execution of conveying socially progressive messages has been flawed thus far. One area in which Marvel failed to make full use
of Miles as a rhetorical agent was in the manifestation of his bi-racial identity. While it is important to note that Miles’ self-identification as an Afro-Latino is a significant step towards increasing the visibility of otherwise rarely seen demographics, his Latinidad is not expressed in a way that affirms his self-concept. For example, the character Roberto Reyes who is the newest Ghost Rider is a Mexican-American high school student that lives in East Los Angeles and his comics are filled with expressions of Latinidad. In the comics Reyes speaks Spanish, eats Latin-American food, is involved in resolving issues that affect Latinx communities such as gang violence, and the community in which he lives are decorated with signifiers of Latinx identity such as murals and the businesses depicted. None of these elements are present within Miles’ aesthetic or that of his community, and while his mother symbolizes Latinidad through her appearance and her discourse it is clear that Miles more closely identifies with his father through his moments of self-reflection and his physical appearance. Additionally, while the comic addresses problems that often afflict communities of color such as tense relationships with law enforcement and the need for access to better public resources, the narratives lack any explicit or implicit commentary about the systemic reasons for why communities of color suffer from these problems. None of the comics that I analyzed for Miles speak to underlying causes of poverty such as the creation of segregated neighborhoods and the socioeconomic inequality that characterizes those neighborhoods (Andrews, Casey, Hardy, & Logan, 2017). Therefore, it is my contention that while characters such as Miles Morales offer new opportunities to provide social commentary regarding pressing cultural issues, current events, and societal concerns, the creators of those comics are still failing to utilize the full potential of the medium.
Implications and Moving Forward

The overarching purpose of this dissertation was to answer the broad question of how comic books and related material have served as vehicles for exploring issues of race. Pursuant to the answer of that question, I investigated how comics have manifested ideologies related to race, class, and gender; I have examined how the racial and gender identities of black masculinity and white femininity have been respectively conceptualized and shifted over time; and I have engaged with the commentary present within comic book narratives centered around two separate icons, one that has long been established and another that is emergent in the realm of Marvel comics. After thoroughly interrogating the selected texts by applying narrative and visual rhetorical criticism I have gained an in-depth understanding of how Marvel comic book material has explored issues related to race within the context of American society.

The comic book industry has a long and established history of mishandling race whether intentionally through nationalist propaganda (Dittmer, 2013), unintentionally through the use of writers unfamiliar with the experiences of persons of color (Englehart, 2015), or as a result of merely continuing to spread deeply entrenched racist messages generally understood to be common knowledge by dominant society (Bogle, 2016). In many cases my findings were consistent with this scholarship, particularly in material that was created prior to the year 2000, and while post-2000 comic book material often features content that reifies the dominance of whiteness at the expense of non-whiteness it is worth noting that within the texts selected the salience of those messages has diminished. Further investigation of the material has revealed that attempts at addressing matters of race have been a part of comic book narratives since at least the early publications of Captain America comic books in the 1941 when the champion of American
society defeated insurrectionist Native Americans with the help of Native Americans that were friendly to the United States (Lee, 1942b). From that point moving forward, Marvel comics use of race and the exploration of related social matters have generally been more exercises in failure rather than success for reasons previously discussed. However, I am optimistic that the future of comics will have more success in exploring and addressing issues of race than the previous generations of comic book narratives. Recent trends in storytelling within the realm of comic book material indicates that progress is being made in terms of accurate representations of racial minorities and women. Series such as Brian K. Vaughan’s *Mystique* (2011), David Walker’s *Luke Cage* (2017) and Brian Michael Bendis’ authorship of Miles Morales’ narratives indicate that attempts at creating more dimensional, meaningful representations of marginalized racial identities are being made. And that while these representations are sometimes flawed in their approach to dealing with sensitive subject matter related to race they still indicate that the industry is moving in a positive direction.

Walter Fisher’s narrative paradigm asserts that humans use stories to make sense of the world, and that if the stories make sense then they act as a form of logic for constructing the world (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009). For generations comic book narratives, while premised firmly in the realm of fiction, have incorporated elements of reality in terms of narrative settings, the use of familiar cultural reference points, and the incorporation of societal elements like social issues, current events, and cultural phenomena. These narratives have also approached race not just through the overt racialization of characters but also through metaphor as different variations of humanity have been used to represent the physiological differences that humans use to categorize one another within society (Fawaz, 2011). Within this context, narratives featuring the systemic abuse of human variations such as mutants act as metaphors for the oppression of
societal others such as racial minorities. The logics presented within these narratives are then processed by consumers of the media; and since it appears that comic book material will continue to enjoy mainstream success, as it has for ten years already as of this writing, these rhetorical messages within the texts will continue to reach international-scale audiences. As such it is imperative that comic books and related material continue to grow and develop in ways that actively combat established negative understandings of race that have historically dehumanized the already underrepresented racial minority groups.
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