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### Spider-Man: The Character with Many Faces

Ciara Corbett-Browne  
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**Spider-Man: The Character with Many Faces**  
How One Character and Their Iterations Are Changing Media as We Know It

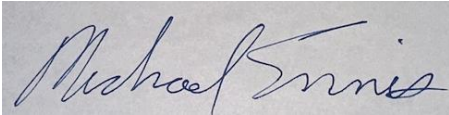
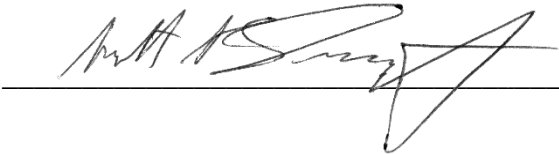
**A thesis submitted to**  
**Regis College**  
**The Honors Program**  
**in partial fulfillment of the requirements**  
**for Graduation with Honors**

**by**  
Ciara Corbett-Browne

**May 2024**

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Thesis Reader or Co-Advisor**Accepted by**\_\_\_\_\_  
Director, Regis College Honors Program

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Be friendly and remember to look out for the little guy.

## ABSTRACT

Name: Ciara Corbett-Browne

Major: Music Performance

### **Spider-Man: The Character with Many Faces**

How One Character and Their Iterations Are Changing Media as We Know It

Advisor's Name: Dr. Michael Ennis

Reader's Name: Dr. Scott Dimovitz

As the way we intake media has increased to span multiple genres and media types, the call for an increase in representation has skyrocketed. Looking at one of the biggest media money makers, superhero films come from a predominantly white, male, heterosexual origin that feels inadequate as the times and general audience have changed. Though there has been some improvement over the past few years, I argue that the Spider-Man universe continues to raise the bar for representation in the superhero genre, as well as media overall, as it has become a highly marketed enterprise that is continuously consumed by many. As people have continued to push for larger representation in media, the Spider-Verse has been a part of the snowball effect to grow the amount of diversity present in consumable media (such as a variety of races in leading roles, expanded gender expression on screen and age-based representation). Since the Spider-Verse creates this palatable universe in which many can see themselves, regardless of age, race, or gender, the audience that creators are able to pander to grows. When a larger audience starts to catch on to the need for more diversity and consumes media that caters to that need, the push on large creators to continue making similar content normalizes the diversified media. I argue that from its comic book origin to the latest animated film, the Spider-Man franchise has always remained a part of this progression, whether in regard to age, race, or gender, and has always been a reminder to other corporations and creators that adding diversity to their media is merely reflecting the times and is an incredibly necessary step in the continuation of media as a way of storytelling.





## Introduction

*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* became a cultural phenomenon when it was released in theaters in 2018. Receiving a high score from Rotten Tomatoes based on 402 reviews and generating over \$384 million between international and domestic box offices, there is no doubt that *Into the Spider-Verse* came in swinging. According to a review from the *New York Post*; “it’s the latest one, ‘Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,’ that unleashes the acrobatic arachnid’s full emotional and creative potential. The movie proves a New York teen superhero can do more than just excitedly swing around. He can move us, too” (Oleksinski). This movie expands upon the already beloved idea of a Spider-being and tugs at audiences’ heart strings as we get to explore the idea of the multiverse with not one, but six Spider-people, each with their own interesting origins and physical appearance to match their previously inhabited universes. *Into the Spider-Verse* as an exploration of postmodern storytelling in film positions itself as a reflection of the “gritty social reality [the heroes] live in; the challenges they face are a commentary on the world around—inequality of wealth, class struggle and utter chaos” (Patra). As the world changes, we want the media that we consume to change with it by showing something that more accurately reflects the current time. This film, and its sequels, are a symptom of the growing demand for the normalization of diversity on screen and in other media. As America prides itself on being the melting pot where all types of people can come together and live in one nation, under one flag, it would make sense that our media be as diverse as our population. Yet we have continued to produce the same, mainly white, stories over and over, only accurately portraying a percentage of Americans. *Into the Spider-Verse*, in all its postmodern glory, is taking that leap between the types of media audiences may be used to (those with a predominantly white, heterosexual, male cast), and what our world could look like on screen.

Before *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, there was Peter Parker. The original Spider story follows Peter Parker, a high schooler in Queens, New York, who visits a public exhibition of radiation manipulation and genetics and gets bitten by one of the mutated spiders there. Living with his Uncle Ben and Aunt May after the death of his parents, Parker comes to the realization that he now has spider related powers and becomes a crime fighting hero in an effort to avenge the death of his Uncle Ben who was killed by a criminal Parker let escape. Thus begins Parker's superhero adventures about which the public have been granted story upon story.

A character that was created for relatability is bound to expand and reshape as the times and the audiences change. Not only can this be seen in the many comic book series starring Peter Parker, along with some more team-based ones that feature him, but also his three different film series. Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man—who, despite his modest moniker, has starred in no fewer than eleven live-action movies in 22 years—has become one of the most overexposed superheroes of all (Dockterman). The power of Peter Parker to connect with his growing audiences is a testament to the goal that Stan Lee and Steve Ditko set out for themselves when creating this character. As opposed to other frequently depicted superheroes like Iron Man or Batman, who fit an adult, male demographic and who rely on their large personal finances, Spider-Man is an easier mold to see oneself in as he's just a clumsy, working class, funny kid who's allowed to get things wrong and try again. The efforts of Hollywood to get another strong spider-franchise off the ground speaks not only to the obvious money-making capabilities of the character, but to his ability to resonate with audiences over 60 years since his first appearance (VanderHelm). Sony (the studio that produces a large amount of Spider related films) recognizes that Spider-Man is something audiences want to see, and will therefore make them money, so it is in their best interest to capitalize off their beloved character's success. This becomes a crux of the universe's expansion: as the need to keep audiences interested grows, the need to be more

creative with what the character can do also needs to grow. In turn, we get projects and character variations like Miles Morales, Spider-Gwen and Miguel O'Hara who allow Marvel (the comic book company and later film franchise giant) to continue producing films within the realm of Spider-Man while also progressing and expanding the fictional world to engage with a wider audience.

If one wanted to compare the sticking ability of Spider-Man to some of his superhero competitors who have also appeared in many films, one only must go as far as the ratings. More Spider-Man movies stay at a 90% or above rating, according to Rotten Tomatoes, than their Batman alternatives, which stay more consistently in the 80% range. The numbers are just one instance where the constant film making works to some extent (as those numbers are professional critics and the fan scores of certain Spider-Man films were substantially lower). One can also turn to box office sales, where the Spider-Man franchise has made a combined \$8,957,427,627 in worldwide sales and \$3,693,313,140 in domestic box offices (The Numbers). Meanwhile, the Batman franchise has accumulated \$6,796,366,192 in worldwide sales and \$3,153,617,285 in domestic sales (The Numbers). People are willing to pay for this character in its many forms, demonstrating the sticking power of Spider-Man despite being over sixty years removed from the initial comic release and twenty-two years removed from the initial film release. Despite corporations' desires to churn out more for the sake of profit, Spider-Man is proving to be one of mass productions that works. There's a simple reason for that: Peter Parker is not a billionaire, a prince, or an alien. He's an ordinary guy whose greatest trials are often finding the balance between heroism and day-to-day struggles like jobs, friendships, and romance: "he's one of us" (VanderHelm). It is worth noting that the more the films progress (i.e. the more with the times they become via added representation or character growth), the fan scores on Rotten Tomatoes become higher. For example, *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi) scores a 90%

with critics but only a 67% with fans, while *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts) scores 92% and 87% in the same respective categories (Rotten Tomatoes). Most recently, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, Justin K. Thompson) scores a 95% with critics and a 94% with fans (Lord, Phil et al.). With as many reboots of the same character as there are, there are a few progressions within each version that more reflect the time of their release. This helps audiences latch on to him as he becomes more and more “just like us,” no matter what “us” looks like at the time.

This thesis will analyze the progression of the Spider-Man history in terms of growing representation, starting with the comic book origins, and going through *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). I will track the changes between each film series, looking at how they come to reflect the times of their release more accurately, and at the overarching evolution of Spider-Man as an example for storytelling going forward. This progression shows that Spider-Man can become a model for how other franchises or other storytellers in general can keep the essence of a story without relying so heavily on the “norms” of representation. Whether well-intentioned by the creators or merely responding to fan criticism, Stan Lee and Marvel’s decisions to diversify the comic book world, and, subsequently, the superhero film industry, through greater representation of age, gender, and race mirrors societal progress on those same issues. My analysis will proceed from the origin of Spider-Man in the comics to film representations of Spider-Man from *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi) to *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb) and the Marvel Cinematic Universe installments (Jon Watts) to finally *The Spider-Verse* (Rodney Rotham et al.). Ultimately, I argue that the growing diversity in Spider-Man stories mirrors America’s evolving acceptance of mainstream representation of its cultural pluralism, suggesting that Spider-Man has the possibility to be all races, genders, and ages at once (as multiple versions of Spider-people come to coexist in the later films) and that rather than having to create

a slate of entirely different characters, the Spider-Man franchise relies heavily on casting a wider net for representation and relatability.

## Chapter 1: COMIC BOOK ORIGIN

When did something as simple as a boxed-in drawing become so socially important? Comic book movies, the mainstream home of Spider-Man (our superhero in question) though incredibly popular now, began as humble Saturday matinees meant for children (Dixon 1). To go even further back, comic strips in newspapers may appear as a lesser form of media, especially in recent years with news becoming digitalized, but their origins as a way of storytelling should not be brushed aside. In *Of Comics and Men: A Cultural History of American Comic Books*, Jean-Paul Gabilliet discusses how the Gilded Age saw an increase in “the growing urban class’s taste for images and news, preferably of the sensational variety” (5). Sensational news is that which is more biased and emotionally loaded than factual, which provides more entertainment than reliable information. This means that not only were people open to receiving important information in this printed format, but also their entertainment, which gave room for the papers as a medium to grow.

As people began to enjoy the many stories that were appearing in their newspapers, it became clear that this was to become an important medium. Pierre Couperie, in *A History of the Comic Strip*, notes: “The comic strip, child of commercialism and technology, inadvertently conceived and born by accident, was to grow and proliferate in all directions before anyone even thought of giving it a name” (Couperie 21). Comic strip creators were writing and drawing these bits in newspapers as a way of communication, even if they appeared as simple little stories. Acting as a sort of picture book for adults, though they could be enjoyed by all ages, the comic strip became a medium for accessible storytelling.

After the 1937 success of the first comic to be completely devoted to a single hero, Detective Comics (or D.C.), other writers and publishers began to wonder if they could reach the same success via comic books and superheroes as well. Timely Comics was born, and its first

title, released a day before the outbreak of World War II, became the very first issue of *Marvel Comics* (Mackinder 23). Stan Lee, a Manhattan native born to Romanian parents, was hired at Timely Comics as an intern of sorts, doing menial tasks while bigger names, like Jack Kirby and Joe Simon, penned titles like *Captain America* (Mackinder 26). Twenty-three years into his time at Timely Comics, and a year after it rebranded to Marvel Comics, Stan Lee released the first Spider-Man comic (with art by Steve Ditko) titled *Amazing Fantasy #15*. With well over 1,000 comic issues featuring the arachnid-based character, the Spider-Man universe is vast and seemingly never ending, resulting in films, comic strips, TV shows, video games, a Broadway musical, and a rollercoaster.

Before delving deeper into the world of superhero comics specifically, it is important to comment that superheroes were not always the focus of the comic book medium. The 1930s, or the golden age of comic books, heavily featured superheroes, which initiated Superman and Batman's popularity (Genter 953). However, when writing about superheroes became a tedious effort, comic book writers turned to more realistic characters and storylines that involved crime and gangsters. The trend of more gritty characters continued into the late 1950s, until comic book publishers were faced with a litany of accusations from politicians and angry parents that comic books were to blame for corrupting young people. Popular comics such as *Black Mask*, *Detective Story*, and *G-Men* fed on the public's fascination with crime and, much like the more violent video games of today, were blamed for corrupting the young minds (Halsband). To counter this, publishers turned their writers to their less controversial characters and genres in the hopes of boosting their declining sales (Genter 953). In a time that wasn't proving to be the easiest for comic book writers or publishers, the more crime-focused and gritty stories had replaced the "golden-age" characters of superheroes past, and it looked like someone new and fresh faced was needed. Around this time was also when people realized that the teenager label

was not going to disappear, as this already occurring age group finally got a name, and thus comic book makers started to market toward them (Genter 970). Stan Lee, seeing the success of D.C. Comics with the creation of the Justice League, decided to make a new team of superheroes, and he decided to make his characters as normal as possible, and just expose them to radiation (Genter 956). In other words, these ordinary people were gaining powers, turning them extraordinary.

Although the ever-growing Spider-Man content leaves me with plenty to discuss, for the purposes of this thesis, I will be focusing on the three main film series featuring Peter Parker as Spider-Man as well as characters in the *Spider-Verse* films. The first trio of the Peter Parker iterations is *Spider-Man* (2002-2007), where Spider-Man is played by Tobey Maguire and the girlfriend is Mary Jane Watson played by Kirsten Dunst. The second film iteration is *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012-2014), and has Peter Parker played by Andrew Garfield and Gwen Stacy (the girlfriend) played by Emma Stone. Finally, there is the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) series (2017-2021), which all have “home” in the title, and star Tom Holland and Zendaya as Peter Parker and MJ respectively.

Throughout each iteration, there are certain aspects of the storyline that remain consistent, which are considered “canon events” in the Spider-verse. The Spider-verse, first coined in the events of *The Amazing Spider-Man (2014) #9* (a rebooted comic book), is the multidimensional universe in which all the different spider people live and appears for the first time on the big screen in the animated *Spider-Verse* films. The canon events are as follows: the spider-being getting bitten by a radioactive spider to receive powers, a loved of theirs dying to teach them a lesson of responsibility, a police officer close to Spider-Man dying in a battle with the arch nemesis, and the temporary separation between individual and Spider persona. These events are part of the reason the Spider-Verse franchise is so expansive because they are the



thread that keeps things familiar enough that audiences do not feel too far removed but the creators can still venture out to explore new ideas.

While Spider-Man's initial purpose was heavily based in the time that he was created, Stan Lee was not the only one doing this type of character building. D.C. Comics had taken a similar route in 1938 with the release of the first Superman comic, *Action Comics #1*. Superman punishes the evil and protects those who cannot fight for themselves and was a direct response to the fears that came about because of the Great Depression (Johnson 8). Although the catalyst for Superman's creation remains the same as Spider-Man's, the main difference lies in their portrayal. Superman continues to be a muscular, white, strong male figure who leaves his identity exposed to the world as his suit does not cover his face (Figure 1). There is hardly any room for improvement or flexibility within this character as the imagination for what he could possibly become under the suit is suppressed due to his exposed presentation. With Spider-Man there is much more room for this sort of imagining, and hardly any iteration so far presents as much of a physical threat to their opponents as Superman does. Spider-Man is not a large, impenetrable looking force; he's just a teenager.



Fig. 1, Superman. “Image Gallery – ‘Action Comics #1000’ Variant Covers - Superman Homepage.” *Superman Homepage - Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about the Man of Steel... and More!*, 20 Feb. 2018, [www.supermanhomepage.com/image-gallery-action-comics-1000-variant-covers/](http://www.supermanhomepage.com/image-gallery-action-comics-1000-variant-covers/).

Fig. 2, Spider-Man waving. Immonen, Stuart. “Spider-Man by Stuart Immonen: Marvel Spiderman Art, Spiderman Drawing, Spiderman Sketches.” *Pinterest*, 5 July 2017, [www.pinterest.com/pin/857372847781892908/](http://www.pinterest.com/pin/857372847781892908/).

Furthermore, Superman wasn't a teenager, and thus potentially had less appeal than Spider-Man to this profitable demographic. In fact, the idea of the teenager itself was new, as it wasn't until after World War II that they “appeared” for the first time. This new term for the age range that became the main demographic for Spider-Man became known as “a distinct social group and a distinct stage of adolescent development, caused by changing educational structures, familial shifts, and economic prosperity” (Genter 970). In other words, the changing nature of the world due to the end of the war meant that teens had more disposable income, thus creating a new market for advertisers and media corporations. Along with this, the new teenagers that came after World War II got to experience a bit more time in their young adult years as the GI bill had rapidly expanded the university system, meaning they could enter the work force later and could spend whatever money they might have been making on more enjoyable things. The GI bill allowed veterans returning from war to go to university, so they did not have to enter the workforce immediately, providing more leisure time while in school. As stated in “WWII GI Bill and its Effect on Low Education Levels: Did the World War II GI Bill Have an Effect on High School Completion, Poverty, and Employment?” by Megan D. Thomas, the GI bill was meant to help soldiers returning from war reintegrate themselves into daily life, “primarily by providing generous financial support to attend educational institutions” (Thomas 493). This included full tuition and expenses related to their education and a monthly stipend, which depended on family size, with married veterans receiving more than their single counterparts (Thomas 494). Setting up veterans for academic success helped situate them better for the job market, meaning their

families, or the new teenagers that are being focused on in this discussion, had a greater chance of a more comfortable life moving forward. With fewer things to worry about financially, the teenagers could involve themselves more in the media or entertainment they were consuming, such as the new Marvel Comics. The war effort changed plenty about not only America but about the world in general, and this new demographic provided plenty of reasons for mass media to target teenagers.

Stan Lee's Peter Parker, who was made to market to this new demographic, started as a regular high school student who was exposed to a mutated spider and developed spider-like abilities. When Spider-Man was first introduced in 1962, he was dealing with everything a normal high schooler living in Queens deals with: "crushes, homework, subway delays and being bitten by a radioactive spider" (Nichinson, Fields). The story was originally only a one-issue comic, but when Marvel owner Martin Goodman noticed the sales of *Amazing Fantasy #15*, he instructed Lee to reintroduce the character in a new series. The result was *The Amazing Spider-Man*, first appearing in 1963 and soon becoming the best-selling comic book in the Marvel library (Genter 970).

He became that relatable character for the teens who were craving representation at a time when Batman and Superman weren't really written to fail. They were these strong, adult male characters who, while they had their Achilles heel, represented a niche demographic, and were meant to reflect the need for men to be these strong leaders as opposed to everyday individuals. Stan Lee saw a hole that needed to be filled and created a character to fill it. Peter Parker was just a nerdy high school kid who couldn't work up the courage to ask out the girl next door. Gabriel Gianola and Janine Coleman summarized this concept perfectly in their work "The Gwenaissance: Gwen Stacy and the Progression of Women in Comics": "Superman is the superhero you looked up to, Spider-Man is the hero you probably are" (252). In other words, the

likelihood is that even though one might admire Superman, they were probably more accurately reflected in Spider-Man's stories. He was young—like his audience—funny, flawed, and relatable (Dockterman). He's been in remake after remake, series across different media, and even did a brief stint on Broadway. So, what has made this character connect so well?

While there may be many reasons for the superhero's long-lasting success, one of the possibilities presented in *Spider-Man and Philosophy: The Web of Inquiry* by Jonathan J. Sanford is society's continuously growing love for coming-of-age stories and underdogs. Like plenty of us, Parker learns to overcome life's evils with powers he didn't know he had (even if those powers involve web-slinging) (Sanford 2). Even deeper than this, however, lies the fact that Peter has a strong moral compass, but sometimes goes against it, and he is just trying to figure out his place in the world. He has the same basic struggles as we all do (trying to balance all the things we go through while the world throws us some curveballs), just in more fantastic circumstances (Sanford 2). Take away his extraordinary circumstances and he acts as anyone reading his comic might act in their day to day lives. Everyone loves to root for the underdog because they know that they have most likely been in a similar position and want to see the chance of success unfold in front of them. Peter Parker is just figuring life out as he goes along, as most normal people do as well.

This is partially what drew me to Spider-Man and Marvel in the first place. My friend had invited me to go watch *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) with her and I said yes with no expectations. Immediately I loved the world the film was presenting, as it featured a kid who was allowed to mess up despite the insane pressure placed on him by both him and the people around him. Peter Parker wasn't perfect, but he was still able to do incredible things. This put me instantly at ease that I was not going to get preached at by a guy in a million-dollar suit who could do no wrong.

Although the general morals of superhero films can remain quite universally applicable to any time or place, their contexts often remain true to the comic book origins. Comic books are only limited to the imagination of their creators, so just because the character is relatable doesn't mean the circumstances have to be. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko wanted Parker to be relatable to teenagers who read the comics, but this did not limit their imagination in his storyline. Lee wanted Parker to remain vulnerable and be a different kind of hero (Nicholson, Fields): just your average guy from New York put in not-so-normal situations, demonstrating that the average person can indeed see themselves in these more escapist realities, and it isn't just reserved for those who are predestined for greatness. He's a multifaceted individual who isn't known for having this tough exterior or a ton of money, but instead for his ability to fight for what he believes in no matter how many times he might have to face evil.

The fact that Parker is from New York in the first place is also worth noting because Lee and Ditko could have made him from a world of their own creation in the way that Batman is from Gotham or Superman is from Planet Krypton. Lee placed all his characters, good and bad, in the same city as a base to have them interact with one another (Pearl 562). This common placement was unusual for the time, as entire universes were being created for new characters. The proximity allowed for frequent cameos and guest appearances between comics (Pearl 562). Batman and Superman are very much connected to their environments, whereas Parker is from somewhere where his audience could also live (or at least some place like it). Instead of creating an entirely different environment which could have separated Parker from his audience more, another point of connection between the super-teenager and those on the other side of page or screen is the fact that he is from somewhere recognizable.

With the many relatable aspects of the comic book origins, both in terms of character and the world built, the printed version of the Spider-Man franchise remains the basis for the coming

adaptations, laying the groundwork for the films. Between the characteristics of Peter Parker himself and the fact that the entire fictional universe is based in a real city, the application for the future films becomes clearer as the groundwork is laid out, making it a slightly easier transition from page to screen than other films that may rely on constructing an entirely new fictional world. The future of Spider-Man resides on the big screen, all because of what was set before it.

## Chapter 2: SPIDER-MAN IN FILM

### Section 1: *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi)

The superhero genre, since its comic book origin, skyrocketed in popularity due to the growing love of film as it became a more successful medium. Beginning in 1888 with Thomas Edison focusing on motion picture technology, which gave way to the Kinetoscope, or a peephole, so that people could watch the films, film then became a “popular mass-market entertainment medium” (Pramaggoire and Wallis 5). Soon, in American cities, “neighborhood theaters called nickelodeons charged 5 cents for admission and presented diverse programs of short films of 15-20 minutes in length” (Pramaggoire, Wallis 5). Going to these theaters became a pastime, something people could go do to escape their everyday lives.

Being able to record and digitalize the stories in a medium that was quickly gaining speed as a favorite pastime and art form meant that an even wider audience could have access to it, which continues today due to our plethora of ways to digest visual media (either in theaters or on our personal devices). Films act as that step beyond comic books in our current age, as the visual and audio elements combined contribute to a more immersive experience. This has become especially prevalent because as the younger generations are growing up constantly surrounded by technology, as opposed to being exposed to it later in life, how they come to interpret the world is heavily influenced by said technology. This means that they are constantly bombarded with mixed messages and certain narratives, part of which comes from the media they choose to ingest. This is not to entirely diminish the comic book medium, as it is still prevalent in the fan world, but merely to say that film makes things that much more accessible. For instance, the peak year for Spider-Man comics, according to Comichron, was 1993 with a total number of distributed comics equaling 592,567. This means that at \$1.25 a comic, there was the chance for Spider-Man comics to make \$740,708.75 (or \$1.56 million with inflation), not including returns

or unsold quantities. Comparing this to the films, the highest grossing Spider-verse movie in the worldwide box office is *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which grossed \$1.89 billion. As films are something that most people are more familiar with today, for genres such as superhero and fantasy, the movie adaptations of previous comic book stories can act as a gateway into the fictional world. The superhero and fantasy genres, widely used as a form of escapism, help children to visualize a world outside of themselves as well as taking concepts and morals from those stories and applying them to their real life. For these reasons, I will be focusing on the films as opposed to the expansive comic book world, though it will not be left out entirely.

*Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi 2002) is the barest-bones page-to-screen adaptation, though the others do take from the comics as well. Peter Parker is a teenage boy who has lived with his Aunt May (Rosemary Harris) and Uncle Ben (Cliff Robertson) since he was a young child after the loss of his parents. On a school trip to Columbia University's genetics lab, with his best friend Harry Osborn (James Franco) and love interest Mary Jane Watson, Peter Parker gets bitten by a genetically altered spider, giving him his powers. He finds he no longer needs his glasses and has superhuman strength, reflexes, and speed on top of the fact that he can now shoot webs out of his wrist. However, as a typical teenager, he wants to impress Mary Jane by buying her a car and enters a wrestling contest to do so. This is the initial inspiration behind the suit design, as the mask resembles the luchador (Mexican wrestlers) style. He wins the match, but a thief he encounters on the way home steals all his money and runs off, but Peter lets him escape.

Following this is one of the canon events that connects this rendition to other spider people, as his Uncle Ben is carjacked by the thief he let escape, which results in Uncle Ben's death. Peter begins hunting the culprit with an unquenchable need for revenge, and upon high school graduation, begins his battle against injustice, donning his new suit and the title of Spider-Man. Meanwhile, Norman Osborn (Willem Dafoe), head of Oscorp (a multi-million corporation



that typically deals with military research and experimental sciences), finds out that his board plans to overthrow him so the company can be sold to a rival company. Feeling the pressure from his higher-ups to begin human experimentation, Norman began to perform experiments on himself, which created his Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde dual personality situation. He inadvertently created another ego for himself, which would become known as the Green Goblin. Parker is offered a place to work alongside the Green Goblin, given that Norman Osborn is his best friend's father, but he refuses, and is wounded in their subsequent fight.

This comes back to haunt Parker later, as his aunt invites Mary Jane, Norman, and Harry to Thanksgiving dinner and Norman recognizes a wound on Peter's arm, revealing his spider identity. Though he does not publicly out Parker, this does make Parker his enemy, as Norman doesn't want anyone in the way who could foil his plans. He then turns to harming the ones that Parker loves to stop him, starting with Aunt May (whom he hospitalizes) and forcing Parker to choose between a tram full of innocent pedestrians and Mary Jane, both of which he can save. The two eventually have their big battle, in which Norman, as the Green Goblin, attempts to impale Parker with his glider. However, Parker is warned via his Spider-sense (the sixth sense that alerts him to any incoming danger) and the glider ends up impaling Norman instead, killing him. At Norman's funeral, Harry promises revenge on Spider-Man for the death of his father, setting up the next movies in the trilogy perfectly.

As noted earlier, the Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* is very much a story copied and pasted from the comic book origins. However, it's not set in the 1960s like the comics. This makes it classifiable as a "nostalgia film," or "a composite image based on the recognition by the viewer of pre-existing historical stereotypes, including the various styles of the period, it is thereby reduced to the mere narrative confirmation of those same stereotypes" (Jameson 130). *Spider-Man* is then a nostalgia film in the sense that it subtly hints at a period for when it takes place but

lacks some of the bigger advancements that should have been present, given its time of release, in favor of aesthetics. Rather than anything indicating the early 2000s, specifically, audiences are presented with a medley of quaintly retro signifiers. Aunt May's grey-painted, knob-riddled TV is a Jet Age curio, and 1980s World Wrestling Federation mainstay ‘Macho Man’ Randy Savage reprises his glory days as an invincible strongman. The school bully's new car resembles a late 1960s Corvette, and Peter Parker's hairstyle has much in common with Ringo Starr's (Koh) (Figures 3-5).



Fig. 3. Ringo Starr (to be compared with Fig. 6.) Pinterest, 16 Feb. 2013, [pin.it/64bYK2uzg](https://pin.it/64bYK2uzg).

Fig 4. A late 1960s Corvette, “Corvette Chronology 1960s - Feature - Car and Driver.” *Caranddriver.Com*, 1 Oct. 2003, [www.caranddriver.com/features/a15133848/corvette-chronology-1960s-feature/](http://www.caranddriver.com/features/a15133848/corvette-chronology-1960s-feature/).

Fig 5. Flash Thompson's car from *Spider-Man*. *Car and Driver*, 2002, [www.caranddriver.com/features/a15133848/corvette-chronology-1960s-feature/](http://www.caranddriver.com/features/a15133848/corvette-chronology-1960s-feature/).

Along with the images presented, something else that highlights this pushback on the time is the general use of color throughout the film. The vibrant colors call back to the time of comic books, which relied heavily on brighter block colors. Except when Spider-Man and the Green Goblin are battling, when the lighting is at its darkest and most undersaturated, the film is very reminiscent of an older comic book style (Figure 6). In reference to a point made previously, one of the reasons the spider characters have stuck around for so long is because their time is not really relevant to how effectively their story is told. They are not so stuck in their environments like Gotham constricts Batman or Atlantis for Aquaman, as the fantastical nature of their stories does not come from their time frame or location. In the recent additions, *Into* and *Across the Spider-Verse*, the time of characters does play a slightly bigger role, but overall, you can tell this story from any date, and it still stands.



Fig. 6. Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker catching the lunch of Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane Watson in a school cafeteria; Bhatia, Hinakshi. "Tobey Maguire Nailed the Iconic Lunch Tray Scene in 'Spider-Man' without Any CGI & We're Stunned." *MensXP*, MensXP.com, 31 Jan. 2020, [www.mensxp.com/entertainment/hollywood/72473-tobey-maguire-nailed-the-iconic-lunch-tray-scene-in-spider-man-without-any-cgi-were-stunned.html](http://www.mensxp.com/entertainment/hollywood/72473-tobey-maguire-nailed-the-iconic-lunch-tray-scene-in-spider-man-without-any-cgi-were-stunned.html).

The easiest place to spot how focused this film is on the whiter and more male aspects is how the love interest, Mary Jane is treated. The movie begins with Parker narrating over a panoramic shot of New York, during which he says "but let me assure you. This, like any story

worth telling, is all about a girl” (*Spider-Man*). The audience is immediately introduced to the object of Parker’s affection, and borderline obsession in some moments. While this might sound like Mary Jane will play a crucial part in the storyline, it’s not as feminists would hope it to be. Throughout the film, Mary Jane is the typical damsel, constantly needing Spider-Man to protect her, and is the girlfriend of not one, but two (almost three) different boys in the 2-hour run time. It’s worth noting that she is the one to stand up for Peter in his early stages of being bullied, but this might be her only redeeming quality on screen, as she spends the rest of her time either worried about what the men in her life think or needing to be saved by them. Parker lured the audience in with a false sense of confidence that Mary Jane Watson wouldn’t be merely a steppingstone in his life, when it turns out that’s exactly what she is.

There is no better example of this than at the end of the film, when Mary Jane is finally single, though she can’t be single for long apparently, as she admits to Parker that she’s in love with him. After Norman Osborn’s funeral, Mary Jane and Parker stand surrounded by dark, dead leaves and grey tombstones. They are level with each other and with the camera, suggesting they might be on an equal playing field, but little does Mary Jane know that Parker will soon be pulling the strings in this situation. She tells him that during his final battle with the Green Goblin, where she was used as a pawn to torture Peter, that all she could think about was him and how much she wanted to see his face again. She reaches to grab his face, as if she might have some dominating force in this moment, but the whole thing feels entirely out of place. She also kisses him after announcing her revelation, showing once again that maybe this is the moment where Mary Jane will have some autonomy, but it doesn’t last long. Parker, having realized that he cannot love anyone without them getting hurt, rejects Mary Jane, leaving her crying on the hill. This was everything Parker wanted, and the fact that it was finally there at the end made it feel forced. While some coming-of-age films will have the protagonist eventually

get the girl at the end and everything will seem perfect, this version felt unnatural, as Mary Jane had shown virtually no romantic interest in Parker the whole film and was suddenly professing love at a funeral of all places.

However, the subordinate nature of the main female character does feel somewhat fitting with the retro appearance of the film. While the 1960s may have been a time of liberation movements for people of color, women, and the queer community, the media was following the 1950s sitcom era where wives were pulling fancy dishes out of the oven for the husbands who had just returned from a hard day at work. In her work *Sexism in American: Alive, Well, and Ruining Our Future*, Barbara J. Berg writes: “The typical day for millions of American women was consumed by housekeeping and childcare. Authorities urged making housework more creative and personal and, as a result, more time-consuming” (11). This meant that women had nothing better to do than rely on the work provided to them by their families and their homes and were expected to spend their time doing nothing more. Therefore, it makes sense that anything trying to replicate a nostalgic feeling for something close to that time would have women acting in the way Mary Jane does, but it does not make it any less awful. Contemporary feminist viewers might have hoped that the films could capture a retro style without having to resort to retrograde depictions of women, but this was unfortunately not the case.

*Spider-Man*, in its submissive representation of women, lack of diversity and focus on white, male dominance, is the comic book pages come to life. Its lack of definitive time allows the nostalgia for the original comic books released in the 1960s to seep through.

## **Section 2: GWEN STACY PROGRESSION IN *THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN***

Following the success of the original *Spider-Man* trilogy, Sony rebooted the franchise with *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012). Around its release in 2012, six years after the beginning of the #MeToo movement (which started in 2006 but gained popularity in 2017) and during the

year where Google searches about “rape culture” were increasing steadily (Rentschler 650), a rise in feminism appeared to be reaching its peak. However, being labelled a “feminist” had fallen out of favor between the 1970s and early 2000s, with 69% of the women in the U.S. reporting that they were satisfied with the treatment of women in a yearly conducted survey where they were asked their satisfaction level from 2001 to 2009 and 2018-2019. (Frisinger 195). Though this satisfaction remained for most of the early 2000s and part of the 2010s, when the survey was reconducted in 2018, the percentage had dropped to 46%. With *The Amazing Spider-Man* being released in the middle of this time, the film responded to the changing societal values by upgrading the “damsel in distress,” otherwise known as Gwen Stacy. Director Marc Webb, whose only other directorial credit was *500 Days of Summer*, stated “Spider-Man is an open storyline and there's so much to explore cinematically that hasn't been done before” (Hiscock). As the Sam Raimi films were intended to bounce the comic book pages onto the big screen, Webb saw this as his opportunity to take a turn at the vast written universe. Webb seemed keen on renovating some aspects of the film series, as in an interview with *The Guardian*, he mentions, “We're coming out of the baroque era, ‘vision’ and ‘spectacle’ are no longer enough: we need some heart, otherwise it's just a bunch of exploding cars and talking lizards.” (Pulver). Yet, most parts of the first film, apart from the love interest and Parker’s new interest in skateboarding, feel incredibly familiar. The love interest is the crucial part of how this movie sets itself apart from the Raimi films, as Emma Stone (Gwen Stacy’s actress) said in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter* at the film’s premiere: “modernizing was a major thing because she was made, you know, around maybe 50 years ago” (Ford). The character of Gwen Stacy isn’t exclusive to Webb’s duology, as she had made an appearance in *Spider-Man 3*, but as a side character who was placed as a point of contention in Peter and Mary Jane’s life in college. The need for something to feel different came to play in not only Webb’s desire to explore the comic

book world that hadn't been given the screen time in the original films, but also the time of ebb and flow in feminism, both culminating in Gwen Stacy.

In this reboot, it remains true that Peter and eventually Dr. Connors are the only ones with powers. However, does one need to have superpowers to be a hero? Gwen Stacy, for example, who started off as a fellow student of Peter Parker, first appeared in *Amazing Spider-Man* #31 (1965), and soon became Peter Parker's perfect girlfriend—attractive, kind, smart, and completely devoted to him (Gianola and Coleman 251). As opposed to Mary Jane Watson, who ran with the popular crowd and was an aspiring actress, Gwen Stacy is depicted mostly on her own. Stacy finds comfort in her mind, rather than being the one kind individual in her friend group and does not rely as heavily on her looks to get her advantages in life. Despite her academic standing, she was still presented in terms of her relationship to Peter. Gwen was completely head over heels for Peter and most of her early dialogue bubbles in the comics centered around her attraction to him (Gianola and Coleman 252). Though there were attempts at presenting a possibly progressive character (in the way that she was an academic and therefore could have some standing without Parker), Stacy's character was simplified to a boy-centered, superficial girlfriend, which reflected the patriarchal valuations of women at the time.

She eventually got more of a backstory when it was revealed that her father was Captain George Stacy, the chief of police, in 1968. However, this didn't elevate her story much because in 1970, Captain Stacy was killed after stepping in to help in a fight between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus, a famous Spider-Man opponent who had his body fused to four mechanical arms in an atomic experiment mishap. June 1973 saw the death of this “idealized 1960's ingenue” in an especially tragic and controversial manner-by a “snap heard ‘round the comic book world” (Sanderson and Daniels 82; Blumberg 198). Although she was presented as an academic match for Peter, appreciating his intellect as a science major herself, it felt as though

they had just introduced this character to kill her off. Her death came at the hands of Green Goblin, as having figured out Spider-Man is Peter Parker's super alter ego, Goblin kidnaps Gwen to lure Parker into his clutches. Goblin knocks Gwen off a bridge, and although Peter attempts to grab her with his webs, she is unresponsive when he pulls her back toward him, having met her unfortunate demise.

Gwen Stacy's character in the comics only acted as a steppingstone to Peter's story, and to further progress his character and plot, was killed off. Having her as a plot point reflects the hyper-male-focused fantasy that media was during the 1950s and 1960s. By the 1960s, technological advancements post World War II had skyrocketed consumerism in American culture, and several new products were aimed at housewives to help them run a cleaner and better home (De Dauw 51). The focus was not on intelligent women who could hold their own, so to introduce a character like Gwen Stacy and have the comic book do relatively well, it felt as though they had to have something tragic happen to her to solidify the thinking of the day. She was entirely superficial, and any attempt that was made to push her past that always had some underlying motive that still lent itself more to Parker's story than hers.

However, decades after her comic death, she started to get a new look and was reintroduced to the Marvel Universe in a few ways. Specifically in the *Amazing Spider-Man* film series, Stacy is just the daughter of the chief of police and a student at Midtown High School before she becomes encompassed in Parker's superhero lifestyle. However, instead of her being *just* his girlfriend, as is the tendency with Mary Jane Watson in the previous films and her own character in her comic origin, Stacy is given strong intelligence and sense of self. Indeed, Stacy's intelligence is a central feature of the character—she is the top of her class at Midtown Science High School and head intern for esteemed genetic biologist Dr. Connors—and provides her with the ability to play a large role in helping defeat the Lizard without superpowers or, indeed, supervision (Kent 49-50).



In this version, Parker (played by Andrew Garfield) has been not-so-subtly hinting at his love for fellow Midtown Tech student Gwen Stacy. They get together, and when having dinner with her family, Parker realizes that her father is Captain Stacy, who is vocal about his dislike for the masked hero. Parker reveals his identity to Gwen after dinner, and the two officially begin their relationship, keeping the spider identity a secret from Captain Stacy. With growing pressure from his superiors, Dr. Connors (an Oscorp scientist) is pushed to start human trials for his use of lizard DNA, though he is fired when he refuses to start the trials too early. In desperation, he tries the formula on himself, and it ends up successful. Connors then seeks to turn the entire world into lizards, as he feels it would better the human race in terms of evolutionary progress. Gwen, who works in Dr. Connors' previous lab, finds out about his plan to disperse the formula over all of New York via chemical cloud, and helps Peter intercept Dr. Connors (or the Lizard), releasing an antidote instead and saving New York from lizard mutation. Unfortunately, during this battle Captain Stacy dies, marking another canon event off the list.

When fighting the Lizard, Gwen plays a crucial role, especially in the moments when it appears as though Parker has rendered himself helpless. Gwen makes use of the trophy case around them, grabbing a large trophy off the shelves and launching it at the Lizard's head, successfully rendering him susceptible to Parker, as Spider-Man, who swoops in to save it all by capturing him in a web. Rather than constantly being stuck as the helpless damsel, dangling off the edge of a building or in the fist of the giant monster, Gwen can fight alongside her superhero boyfriend, providing aid in bringing the villain down. This scene also has one of those "wink wink" moments, as Parker informs Gwen that he's going to toss her out the window after their battle is won. In what is supposed to be a protective action, he tosses her out, and shoots a web that connects her to the wall, leaving her swinging just outside of the battle. His action is a direct reference to the ghost of Gwen's past, echoing her death in a moment more worthy of celebration as a nod to the fans.

Stacy's death is also referenced towards the end of the film, when the Lizard has run rampant across the city and is trying desperately to release his chemical formula over every citizen to try and get them all to become lizards. Parker tries to order Gwen not to interfere, but she doesn't listen to him, solidifying her independence. Despite her fear, Gwen knows her way around Dr. Connors's lab and knows that she can reverse his plan while Parker goes to fight him off. As she works in the laboratory, the Lizard reappears, having broken out of his temporary barriers, and it looks like it could be the end for Gwen. However, as luck would have it, the next shot shows her with a can of flammable liquid and a lighter, creating a makeshift blowtorch (Kent 62). The film once again teases her demise and refuses to grant the audience that which they can sense is coming (which comes soon enough in the *Amazing Spider-Man 2*), signifying her growth as a character and her gaining that individualism she did not have in previous renditions.

When one compares Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man* films to other superhero girlfriends, it is important to note that she comes to this sense of power on her own. She does not work for Peter, like Pepper Potts does for Tony Stark, and she is allowed to shine brightly, not despite but regardless of her relationship status. Stacy also does not become the focus of the film, as the previous installment had made Mary Jane, but more a backbone on which Peter can carry the weight of being Spider-Man (Kent 59). Rather than completely ignoring Stacy's comic origin as this dismissible character, director Marc Webb plays with moments that reference her seemingly inevitable death instead: "thus, the film is ironically deceptive in showing Stacy telling herself 'I'm in trouble' after having discovered Parker is Spider-Man" (Kent 61). This is to say that the film is winking at the fans that will know Stacy's unfortunate end in the comics and will be on the lookout for it as she becomes a more important figure in this reboot.

*The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) brings Gwen's death to the big screen. At the beginning of the film, Gwen is chosen as valedictorian for their high school graduation, and her speech is

about how precious life is because it ends. At 0:12:51, she says “I know we all think that we’re immortal. We’re supposed to feel that way” (*The Amazing Spider-Man 2*). The only on-screen death that is shown in the movie is the character who talks the most about how life is to be valued because it is short, and Gwen’s is shorter than most. The moment that had been hinted at in the previous film is foreshadowed throughout the sequel, and finally presented to viewers at the end. In the climactic scene, the Green Goblin holds Gwen captive above a clock tower. Parker stands in the center of the glass domed roof, looking miniscule and helpless as the Goblin and Gwen float above him, being shot from above in a God’s eye view. After Parker begs for Goblin to let Gwen go, he obliges, dropping Gwen from their floating height, leaving Parker to catch her as the two roll through the glass. Gwen lands on top of Peter as the camera switches to shoot from the side. This keeps the couple at even levels and brings a false sense of security that Gwen will survive the attack as Peter is keeping her from the rest of the clock tower.

However, this is short lived as the walkway breaks and Gwen continues her downward descent. The camera keeps her in the center, switching between her and Parker who shoots a web down to try and save her. He succeeds until Goblin captures his attention once again and Parker shoots another web to connect Goblin to a close cog. This causes a problem as the cogs turn and the web connected to Gwen snaps, leaving her to continue falling. The camera cuts to a tilted shot of the clock outside, as the hands spin out of control, signaling the time has come for the bits and pieces of a relationship that Parker and Gwen had tried to salvage throughout the film to come crashing down around them. This is evident at 2:00:51 when a close-up shot of Parker’s masked face shows a smaller reflection of Gwen in his spider eye, where she is surrounded by multiple broken clock parts, highlighting the fragments of the life Parker and Gwen had tried to continue together (Figures 7-8). The camera zooms away from Parker as he shoots a web to try and catch Gwen, following the web line as it forms finger-like attachments, and just as it attaches to Gwen’s

front, she snaps as she misses the ground. Parker is too late, and the camera holds the two of them together as blood starts to trickle out of her nose and Parker realizes she is dead.



Fig. 7. Gwen Stacy falling to her death reflected in Peter Parker's mask. Patronic 27 Productions. "The Amazing Spider-Man 2 - Gwen Stacy's Death Scene [Re-Score]." *YouTube*, 18 Dec. 2016, [youtu.be/wxbgfuF400I?si=ZPZihKf090b-FnZB](https://youtu.be/wxbgfuF400I?si=ZPZihKf090b-FnZB).

Fig. 8. Comparison between Gwen Stacy's film and comic book death. Marqueal, Aguilar. "The Night Gwen Stacy Died: Cosas de Dibujo, Cómics." *Pinterest*, 5 Oct. 2022, [pin.it/6ziAkLDCn](https://pin.it/6ziAkLDCn).

Miriam Kent brings up an interesting point in her review of Gwen's character progression, claiming that the emotional tenderness within *The Amazing Spider-Man* indicates that the film pandered more towards women (63). Now, for a genre that has been stereotyped by the hypermasculine fanboys that typically dominate it, the idea of a superhero film catering more towards women is a semi-novel one. Even Sony Picture's Chairman of Marketing and Distribution weighed in on this, stating that the film's promotion was targeted to men and boys, but also "younger women and moms" (63). This specification of audience is interesting because, while it is a step up from just boys, it's also limiting in its age. Since age was one of the main reasons Stan Lee created Spider-Man in the first place, I question why they would section off a specific age group (in this case it's seemingly teenage girls and those who may be older and not mothers) from participating in the fan culture. Regardless, the newer additions to Gwen Stacy's character, no matter how short lived they were, are a tribute to both the wave of feminism around 2012-2014

and Webb's desire to expand the Spider-Verse, giving more screen time to certain aspects or characters not previously explored.

### **Section 3: DIVERSIFYING OF SIDE CHARACTERS IN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE (MCU)**

The most recent film reboot (including *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021)), starring Tom Holland, is the only one so far to focus on life after the infamous spider bite. Holland's series does not start with the bite itself, and instead shows him already adjusted to spider life. It starts out with Peter Parker going through school, trying to date the girl of his dreams, and balancing his crime fighting side hustle. He is like a kid taking one too many extra curriculars on top of his classes, except that one too many happens to be fighting bad guys who try to rob banks. However, the first movie in the second reboot, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, focuses mostly on him being a teenager at school, and while the action in the film is obviously impressive, it does not make itself the focus.

This version of Peter Parker does not rehash his origin story like the previous ones do. When you do not have to reiterate what's happened previously to this character, it gives so much more room for more interesting storylines and character developments. Parker has already lost his Uncle Ben, has been fighting crime for a bit, but this time he gets recruited to join the Avengers. The previous installments of live action Spider-Men did not have the Avengers as part of their universes- a comedic point of confusion that shows up in a later "home" film. A perk to this is that while he did get his superhuman strength and agility from the spider bite, he gets his webs and some extra abilities from the suit that Tony Stark creates for him when he becomes Parker's mentor.

The addition of Tony Stark and his technological advancements does slightly detract from the prolonged relatability of Peter Parker, as it puts an even bigger responsibility on the teenager's shoulders. This is not to say that the crime fighting adventures of the two previous Spider-Men were not strenuous and abnormal tasks for teenagers, but that adding someone that helps Parker on the outside expands the realm of possibility. More responsibility brought about by the technological advancements is even further outside of what a normal person can hope to experience in their day-to-day life, therefore creating a division between MCU's Peter Parker and the "normal" teenager. However, the awkward humor and somewhat more typical teenage aspects still shine through in this rendition as Parker navigates his crush and a homecoming dance. Though the blending of human and spider DNA is not as permanent for this Peter Parker, the need to balance fighting all sorts of crime and still being a 15-year-old is even more prominent.

The most significant thing that separates the MCU's Spider-Man films from the solely Sony created ones is the more diverse cast. Like the two versions that came before, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* centered on a young, awkward white guy. But for the first time, Peter's diverse group of friends realistically reflected the population of Queens (Dockterman) (Figure 9). New York City is known as one of the truest melting pots in America, and it seems only fitting that an average kid going to a public school within the city would have a more inclusive group of friends. This growth in representation was at the heart of the film, as director Jon Watts told the *Los Angeles Times*: "Peter Parker is from Queens, one of the most diverse places in the world" (Yamato). Watts was set on this depiction from the script making process and claimed that Marvel and Sony were receptive from the beginning. He created a "lookbook," according to the *Los Angeles Times* interview, for which he pulled from real high school students in Queens, and used this as part of his pitch for what the general cast should look like: "These are what the nerdy

kids would be like, these are the cool kids, and because I was pulling from real life it was this very diverse group. And that was my pitch from the very beginning,” (Yamato) (Figure 9).

Aside from the director, other crew members were attuned to this idea as well, as Amy Pascal (the producer of *Spider-Man Homecoming*), has said: “I would say the inspiration for it was reality” (Luu). One cannot claim that reality in the US. does not vary in color, and the fact that this can be reflected in the superhero genre speaks to the steps being taken to advance not only the genre but representation in general media.



Fig. 9. *Spider-Man: Homecoming*’s main cast “Get to Know Spidey’s Classmates in Spider-Man: Homecoming.” *CBR*, 7 July 2017, [www.cbr.com/spider-man-homecoming-classmates/](http://www.cbr.com/spider-man-homecoming-classmates/).

The diversified cast reflects the United States becoming more and more diverse as well: “the Hispanic/Latinx population reached a record high 61 million in 2019, making it the second largest racial or ethnic group (behind white, non-Hispanic/Latinx individuals) at 18% of the U.S. population” (Scharrer et al. 723). Secondly, the Pew Research Center predicts that “Muslims will become the second largest religious group in the United States (following Christians) by 2040” (Scharrer et al. 723). This diversification seems natural given the timing of the MCU’s Spider-Man films, and it wasn’t just the crew that had something to say about it. In an interview with *The Vulture*, actor Tony Revolori, who plays a Latino version of the previously white Flash

Thompson, stated that “it’s wonderful” to represent the Latino community in a major franchise, and that “when you see the film, there’s not a single line of exposition as to explain why I look the way I look, and I think that’s wonderful. That I just am in the movie; it’s not about a certain race, it’s not about doing anything. I think that’s the diversity we need in Hollywood now” (Riesman). To have a character of a certain background just be as they are in a story where their main point of interest is not how they appear is a wonderful step in the right direction as media continues to grow more reflective of the times, adding more depth and interest to the stories we consume.

The MCU iterations are also where the idea of the Spider-Verse comes to the live action screen for the first time. *No Way Home* brings all three Peter Parkers together as Tom Holland’s Parker begs Dr. Strange, a neurosurgeon who learned to control time, to make it so everyone forgets that he is Spider-Man. Though Dr. Strange goes to grant what he wished for, Parker keeps changing the spell, asking for specific people to remember that he is Spider-Man so that he does not have to go through coming out again. This causes the spell to become unstable, and creates cracks in the multiversal thread, allowing villains and Spider beings from different dimensions to join the MCU. Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield reprise their roles as Peter Parker, who are summoned by Ned and MJ (MCU Parker’s best friend and girlfriend) as they try and find their Peter Parker using Dr. Strange’s magic.

*No Way Home* combines both villains and heroes from Peter Parker’s history, including Dr. Connors, Dr. Otto Octavius, and the Green Goblin (among others). With nods to the audience as acts of fan service, *No Way Home* sets the stage for the animated *Spider-Verse*, blurring the lines between the semi extraordinary from the previous installments and the breaking of barriers in the animated films.

#### **Section 4: *THE SPIDER-VERSE***



The Spider-Verse films are the first to diversify not just side characters, but Spider-Man himself. One of the interesting things about Spider-Men, in the most basic sense of the character, is that they can be put into a multitude of different worlds. As long as a few events take place, Spider-Man can be anywhere. He is going to be able to meld with the times. The times more recently have been calling for more diversity than the superhero genre is typically ready to give but “the depiction of nonwhite, non-American, and nonmale analogues within the larger Spider-Man mythology represents a potentially progressive, and inclusionary, step for a genre traditionally overpopulated by heroic Aryan supermen” (Brown 17). This is to say that despite the traditions of the superhero genre, the *Spider-Verse* comes at a logical peak where the genre starts to reflect the world in a slightly more accurate way. This larger world of spider people was first introduced in 2014, in *The Amazing Spider-Man #9*, a comic written by Dan Slott. In a Twitter post, Slott shared the origin behind the comic series, revealing that Beenox Studios were creating a video game surrounding a collection of Spider-Man characters and wanted him to write a storyline around it (Slott). The goal was then to turn it into a comic and “one up them, make it BIGGER and do something they couldn’t do, have all Spideys interact, and use EVERY SPIDER-MAN EVER!” (Slott). Whether to intentionally add representation at such an extreme level or simply to best a video game creating company, Slott started the ripple effect of diversifying the Spider world. This would eventually lead to one of the most praised animated film series that would dare to change media representation as it is currently known. Media representation has always been a call to decode the norms of our society, as it “is a complex idea because understanding it means challenging established ideas and assumptions” (Dakers 7). Media representation is a complex idea, according to this definition, because it involves multiple steps. In other words, calling for anything new, such as more representation of race, gender, or sexuality, requires challenging what has previously been established, or the “status quo.” This

requires a pushback and acceptance of the fact that change will most likely not be widely accepted, but that if pushed enough, diversity can grow. The status quo had to be established somehow, who's to say we cannot create a new one?

Another way to look at this is that it is not just Stan Lee and Steve Ditko working on this universe anymore. With three directors, Peter Ramsey, Bob Persichetti, and Rodney Rothman, and two writers, Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, the universe expanded past the capabilities of one director per adaptation. The Spider-Verse is something that people are supposed to be able to see themselves in, so the expansion in the creative department is fitting. Besides the writers and directors, the actual drawings involved also have several people behind them. There are plenty of artists on hand who have their own ideas and styles that culminates in what we see in the Spider-Verse: "The coexistence of different versions of a figure as popular as Spider-Man is a logical result of thousands of different writers and artists in different time periods and across different media formats, all telling stories featuring a specific character" (Brown 18). While these new variations do not replace the original, they can and do exist logically at the same time in the multiverse. In other words, "a central and standard idea of Spider-Man is crucial for the sake of continuity, but variations of Spider-Man seamlessly coexist under the logic of multiplicity" (Brown 19), which is that multiple things (or in this case, people) can be true at the same time. Put differently, the basic concept of Spider-Man, as presented by the canon events, provides a common basis of understanding, but the idea that multiple versions of the same character type can exist is not as absurd as some might think. The common basis of understanding provides a train of connecting ideas to carry through the different characters and their respective universes, therefore making it less jarring than possibly anticipated. It allows for patterns that the brain can recognize, making it clear that the characters are connected somehow while also leaving room for their individuality.

According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, Spider-Man “is one of the most famous fictional characters in the world and is indisputably the most profitable superhero, bringing in over \$1.3 billion in licensing revenues in 2014 alone” (Brown 19). What better character to multiply and diversify than an already popular one that ensures a fanbase? The list of existing variations is longer than a thesis allows space for, but some are as follows: Miguel O’Hara (who will be explored later), Pavirt Prabhakar (the Spider-Man of Mumbai), May “Mayday” Parker (Peter and Mary Jane’s daughter who later becomes the first Spider-Girl), Anya Corazon (who is of Puerto Rican and Mexican descent), Cindy Moon, Spider-Gwen and, perhaps most famously, Miles Morales (Brown 20).

In an analysis of stories set in other worlds, though his focus is the multiplicity within the Captain America comics, Jason Dittmer argues that they “offer both reinforcement of primary themes found throughout these heroes’ continuities and also opportunities to narrate political alternatives that may or may not be more politically progressive” (143). What Dittmer is saying is that common themes connect the different renditions of the same or similar characters, which gives room to expand upon them as well. Like the common basis of understanding, having multiple worlds in which a thread of the same character can exist provides opportunities to not only drive the moral compass and messaging of the original home, but also to explore other variations that might not follow the same path. Morals, when presented efficiently, have a universal application. It was hard to conceptualize this with the previously restricted representation, but now that we have variation, it becomes slightly easier. The themes that are being highlighted through a specific character, in this case Spider-Man, are only reinforced when there are multiple perspectives from which to demonstrate the point. While Dittmer’s focus is around the variations of characters that rely solely on location, such as Captain America and Captain Britain, Jeffrey Brown offers that Spider heroes function similarly. A physical location

is not the only thing that varies within a character, as seen in the list presented above, but changes in general can both remind and solidify the morals and themes presented in the “blueprint”.

To further explore some of these variations, I will focus on Miles Morales. In a 2016 interview in *Vulture*, African American crime and science fiction novelist Walter Mosley insisted, “The first Black superhero is Spider-Man.” According to Mosley, Spider-Man’s class position, nontraditional family, and the media’s unfavorable portrayal of his heroics resonate more closely with urban Black experiences than the experiences of a white boy from Queens (Mills 41). This was actually a few years after Marvel’s first release of their Black and Latino Spider-Man, Miles Morales. In an interview with *Inverse*, Morales’ creator Brian Michael Bendis talks about how terrifying it was to create and release Miles Morales out into the world. Bendis is quoted in the interview as saying:

It’s genuinely scary to put out something in the world that’s brand new. The extra added fear with Miles was that we were trying to be additive to Spider-Man. No one was asking for that. No one was going, ‘I wish Spider-Man was just a little bit something else.’ So, changing something so drastic in the franchise is daunting. But we really believed in what we were doing. Anyone could wear the mask (Francisco).

The concept of anyone being able to wear the mask is what separates Spider-Man as a blueprint character. Superman and Batman are typically big, buff men, sometimes without any sort of identity concealer in Superman’s case, but with Spider-Man, that costume is head to toe. It allows for the idea that it could truly be anyone under the latex as, on the surface, you could never know. The use of full body and face concealment allows for a projection of sorts; anyone can put themselves metaphorically within the suit without the need to be an exact copy of the predecessor. While characters such as Batman or Captain America do wear masks, they make up for their faces not being on display with their larger physique. Their costumes are incredibly tailored to visually fit their buff and athletic appearance, which then stand out in a crowd of

regular civilians. The Spider-Man characters are rather regular in appearance, meaning their suits are more versatile.

This push for a change is exactly what makes the idea of multiple universes so intriguing. It was also entirely worth the effort, as Miles is still selling strong. In their monthly release of top sellers for September of 2021, Diamond Comic Distributors, a partner with Marvel for distribution and marketing purposes, demonstrated that a reprint of Miles' original comic charted at number 8 in their top 10 comic sales list (Diamond Comics). This is ten years after *Ultimate Comics Fallout #4* (Morales' initial comic appearance) was initially released, demonstrating the lasting power of not only another Spider-Man character but also the effect that adding to and expanding upon an already successful brand as Bendis did has the chances to be both successful and produce positive change.

Miles isn't a cookie cutter version of Peter Parker either, as he has a separate storyline and origin story. For example, Miles has two parents, though their class position varies (Mills 41). This distinguishes him even more from the orphaned Peter Parker and allows him to fill in his own role and identity. This also means that Marvel opened the doors for new audiences to have a new story and character to relate to. If they only changed one thing about him, then they wouldn't necessarily be doing much, but here is an entirely new character with a new history and future plot to explore.

To take the expansion even further than just one new character, Marvel introduced a whole team of Spider-beings to fight alongside Morales in the newer animated films *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). There is the newest on-screen version of Gwen as Spider-Woman, who is not the preppy, academically focused popular girl from some of her previous installments. She has an eyebrow piercing, has shaved half of her head, and dyed the ends pink. She's a rebellious teen who plays the drums and

wants to join a band. Most notably, instead of being the one that dies because she cannot be saved by Peter Parker, he dies because she cannot save him. Peter Parker wasn't a superhero in this universe, but the curse of survivor's guilt that haunts all our spider friends must continue. Introduced in these animations as well are Spider-Man Noir, who remains black and white for the duration of *Into the Spider-Verse*; Peter Porker, a literal pig; and Peni Parker, an anime inspired character with a robotic suit piloted by the spider who bit her. The variation between these five characters is a clear indication that the possibilities truly are endless. Not only can one see a host of characters to relate to on screen, but it also opens the imagination to what other possibilities could be present thanks to this new multiverse.

Though there have been previous variations of Spider-Man in the past—as the comic book realm is a vast and sometimes confusing place—none seem to have stuck as well as the newer characters who made their way on the screen. There are a few reasons for this, one of which is the difference between representation in the past and present. In “Portrayal of Race and Ethnicity in Popular Media: Overview” Steve Miller provides a brief synopsis of the history of representation in media, studying the growth between the 1950s and the 1980s. Where the former had shows like *Leave it to Beaver* with its idealized, white suburbs, the latter tried to focus on “social realism” and included more inclusivity in its depictions of minority characters (Miller 2). One of the bigger shifts that Miller discusses is during the 1970s, when television was highlighting topics such as poverty and racial inequalities in shows like *Sanford and Son* and *Good Times*. Though these changes were occurring, most of the representation and real-world power focused on white males. This made trying to implement any type of change incredibly difficult across all mediums, as much of the population were seeking out what they were used to seeing. Along with this, because comics were so focused on the white male fantasy, it was hard for anyone of any other description to become fans. Companies were catering to what would sell

which, until fairly recently, was not comics appealing to women or people of color. The large stigma that comes with being a non-white and non-male superhero fan is something that turns plenty of potential fans away, as the more “hardcore” consumers gatekeep what they think is only for them. However, with mass media being able to market on a much wider scale, more people are being introduced to superhero and fantasy realms that appeal to them. This means that it is now more important than ever for characters that do not necessarily fit that previous fantasy description to be in said media. These factors, among others, have allowed the newer Spider-beings to swing across the screen in a much more appealing way. This is not to say that there hasn’t been pushback or criticism regarding their arrival, but it simply makes more sense to bring these characters to life now than it did in the past.

*Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), the second in the series of animated spider films, gives its audience even more to think about in terms of the boundaries that are placed around the idea of a superhero. It becomes obvious as the movie progresses that there are countless renditions of Spider-beings throughout the film. Even the antagonist of the film, a black and white lack of being who used to be a scientist, points this out as he says, "I love how many variations of you there are" (*Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* 2023). To take advantage of the animated medium, the artists behind *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* use background animation and different animation styles in general to portray each named character's universe. Comparing Gwen Stacy's world to Miles Morales's, Miles's world was much more lifelike, or as lifelike as animation could get. However, the things just reaching the outside of the frame or close to being out of sight were animated as if trying to watch a 3D movie without 3D glasses- they were outlined with red and blue lines (Figure 10).

There was also a myriad of colors used in Miles's world, which made it seem a lot brighter and closer to our world than Gwen's. Her world used a collection of primary colors

such as yellows, pinks, and blues (though pink is not a primary color, it's the "girlified" version of the red used in Peter Parker's and Miles's suit that distinguishes Gwen from "the boys"). The contrast is furthered by the lack of detail in Gwen's background animation, as the characters that are at the focus at any given moment are the ones portrayed in higher detail, and the background becomes like melting wallpaper off a wall. This might be illustrating the fact that for her, like most of the spider-beings in the film, their home world isn't as important as the spider headquarters they spend most of the film in. This is most evident in the conversation Gwen has with her dad and the fight at the art museum, during which her dad is trying to arrest her as he does not know her true identity and Gwen is trying to get him to listen to reason (Figure 11). This art museum scene does result in the exposure of Gwen's identity as the masked spider hero, much to her dad's disappointment. In both instances, the spider-people are the ones who are kept in focus, and the world around them fades into a hazy background, bringing our attention towards the characters in a way that live action can't do. When the world is hazier than the heroes, this visual difference reinstates the importance of the heroes, letting them be the main character despite their circumstances or surroundings. This animation trick plays with perception to highlight how this character could be anywhere or at any point in time, much like the factors of the Tobey Maquire films make the setting appear timeless.

The use of blue also plays a key role when analyzing the characters' relationships with their worlds. This is seen typically to highlight moments of tension and as a connection between the many different universes the film presents. During the battle at the art museum, the heroes are painted in red and pink, but the police helicopter is painted in blue, putting these two in opposition with each other. Gwen's spider-sense is also a blue/green color, which is her main indicator for things to watch out for around her. Later in the film, during the



confrontation between Miles and Miguel about canon events, Miles is the most stand out character because he is highlighted in "normal" lighting, and everyone around him is painted blue to some degree, once again pointing out a spot of contention. Lastly, when Gwen and her dad have their conversation as Gwen returns to her world for the first time, they start with an argument where half of the screen is blue and half is pink, putting the father and daughter at odds with each other, until Gwen runs to hug her dad, and they burst into one color (Figure 12).

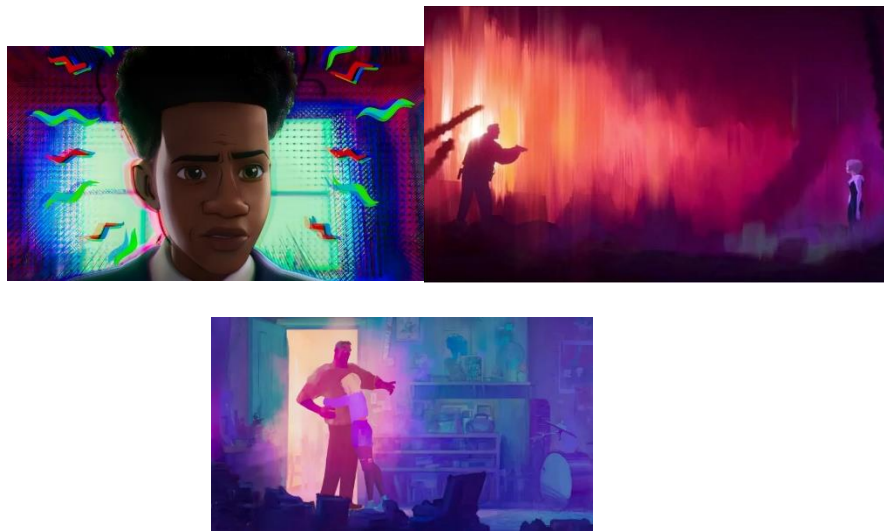


Fig. 10, Miles Morales's spider sense highlighted in 3D effects. Mike Bedard. "How Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse Creates a Huge Marvel First." *Looper*, Looper, 2 June 2023, [www.looper.com/1302405/spider-man-across-the-spider-verse-creates-huge-marvel-first/](http://www.looper.com/1302405/spider-man-across-the-spider-verse-creates-huge-marvel-first/).

Fig. 11, Spider-Gwen and her dad in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). Miaval. "🕸 Gwen & Her Dad ❤️ (across the Spider-Verse): Spiderman, Spider Verse, Spiderman Art." *Pinterest*, 7 Nov. 2023, [pin.it/2Sy5VZvci](https://pin.it/2Sy5VZvci).

Fig. 12. Gwen hugs her dad and the colors change. WordPress "Is Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse Better than into the Spider-Verse?" *Make Big Change - Finding The Best Online Marketing Firms*, 6 June 2023, [makebigchange.org/2023/06/06/is-spider-man-across-the-spider-verse-better-than-into-the-spider-verse/](https://makebigchange.org/2023/06/06/is-spider-man-across-the-spider-verse-better-than-into-the-spider-verse/).

The use of background animation to differentiate the characters and their worlds and the use of blue within *Across the Spider-Verse* really plays into the advantages of animated versus live action. There are more visual elements that lend themselves to storytelling than a

live action movie could, and the animators chose to not only highlight the characters and their backstories but also their relationships to each other by using such techniques.

Between rebellious Spider-Gwen and anarchist, anti-fascist Hobie in *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) there is certainly room for bending of the overall character in the new, expansive universe. Not only do we get different origin locations, but we also get different origin universes. This then encompasses a lot of different things aesthetically and thematically, including fitting into the cyberpunk genre. Cyberpunk is a trend most noted as a subgenre of science fiction that rose to popularity after the release of William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (Martin 466). It focuses heavily on the growing popularity of new technologies and the effects of said developments on human identity. Now, while the heavy burden of what may come after the destruction of humanity via the new technological advances of the 1980's and 1990's might not sound like the type of place that Spider-Man could thrive, it's not too far off from the original purpose of the character. As the creators wanted someone who could be relatable both at the time and for future generations to come (whether for marketing or other reasons), it makes sense that the character is molded to fit the given circumstances. In this period, Spider-Man as audiences knew him was far too comfortable; he was married and diving well into homelife, so a little sprucing up was in order. To do so, Miguel O'Hara was introduced.

As opposed to the typical heroes with good moral compasses and strong passions to do what is right despite what it might cost them, the cyberpunk era was ushering in more corrupt, deeply flawed, and selfish characters (Martin 469). The slogan for the *Spider-Man 2099* series (2099 being the year that it was taking place) does a fairly good job at summarizing these differences: "In 2099, your Spider-Man is a little less friendly, and so is the neighborhood." Now compare that to the "I'm just your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man" and the mental image is

already spinning with how flipped this version might be. With a ‘Public Eye’ as a police force and readily available technology, the world has shifted, and thus O’Hara must as well.

Instead of a class trip where Peter Parker gets bitten by a scientifically modified spider, O’Hara works for Alchemax- a company with less than stellar ethics and morals whose focus lies with gene-splicing and modulation- and is poisoned upon trying to quit. To try and remedy this, he attempts to use this gene-splicing to cure himself, and he is mixed with the genes of a radioactive spider, thus giving him the usual Spider-Man abilities with a little less humanity (Martin 470). What this comic series does, even in the mirroring of the origin story, is illustrate the twisted fate that cyberpunk envisioned with the rise in technological availability. People didn’t necessarily know how to use all that was coming at them or the effects that they would have on both future generations and future advancements, as seen in Miguel’s mixing of DNAs with a less than desirable result. To keep the relatability afloat and kick some of the dust off the well-loved character, Miguel O’Hara offers a darker version of the blueprint to match the darker tone of the time.

While *Spider-Man 2099* might shift around the general atmosphere that a Spider-Man related production might present, one thing that doesn’t change is the unfortunate depiction of its female characters. Besides the damsel-in-distress archetype that is threaded throughout, one of the notable female characters is O’Hara’s holographic assistant, Lyla. She acts more as a domestic servant and can typically be seen in provocative poses and revealing dresses (Martin 473). Her holographic body leaves her practically useless and only made to serve. However, this isn’t unlike the cyberpunk genre, as ‘the often-male cyberpunk hero’s interactions with his environment are gendered and sexualized’ and that the female characters function as ‘ornaments that decorate the exotic backdrop of the hero’s journey to self-enlightenment’ (Park 61-62). While I stated previously that the general world in which Miguel O’Hara resides is a drastic

change to the New York we're used to seeing in typical Spider-Man works, perhaps the focus on sexualizing Lyla brings it right back. I mentioned how the Sam Raimi movies and the comic book origins catered heavily to the male fantasy of the 1950s and 1960s that is still perpetuated today, though admittedly not to the same extreme, through the superhero genre. Connecting this to both Mary Jane Watson and Gwen Stacy in reference to Peter Parker's stories, the female characters only seem to serve as steppingstones for the male protagonist, leaving much to be desired for the feminist agenda. While Gwen Stacy did make some progress in her second attempt at an on-screen adaptation, there was still much room for improvement, although we are now a decade removed from *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) initial release. Lyla's first emotional revelation being a jealous tantrum and her admittance that if she were human, she would be in love with Miguel don't bode well for the progression of feminine representation, but where one Spider person may fall, there is another one to pick up the pieces.

The key component to why this range of characters is quickening the trajectory of increased representation is *Spider-Verse* films highlighting them all living in one universe. While they began as individuals in their respective universes, having different Spider-beings all come together demonstrates that being super does not have to be such an isolating or lonely experience. There can be more than one super being and that fact does not diminish the power of any given Spider-being. They are not so stuck in their own worlds that their experience solely relies on them or is the only one that matters. Rather, each character is unique in their own way and is not meant to mold or lose a part of their personality because they are a spider superhero. The Spider-verse acts as a celebration of multiple people of varying ages, ethnicities, and genders being able to work together, which may reflect the hope that the real world will be able to do the same.

### Chapter 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY

#### Why Does Representation Matter?

If even for a short time, film and other mediums act as a way for people to take a step back and submerge themselves into somebody else's story. People can go and see films to let themselves go from their current reality and plant themselves into another one, subsequently forgetting their stresses and struggles. If this is the case, why does it matter what the people on screen look like? If the whole point, for some people, is to avoid your life, why does the way a film may reflect the current period matter? Some may say that it doesn't, at least not to the extent that I'm arguing.

In *Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of Self*, Michael Slater, Benjamin Johnson, Jonathan Cohen, Maria Leonora Comello, and David Ewoldsen argue that "in the course of such experience, the accustomed boundaries of personal and social self are expanded to accommodate the realities, characters, and assumptions in the narrative. Identification with story characters and transportation into a story world provides, imaginatively and transiently, expanded agency" (443). In this case, it doesn't matter necessarily what the character looks like for an audience to connect with them. In the past decades where representation in more major productions was lacking, who is to say that people didn't connect with the white characters on screen, regardless of what they themselves looked like?

They also go on to say that when we engage with characters in such a way, "we are no longer confined to the roles, unrealized potentials, or limitations of that identity. We have temporarily expanded the boundaries of the personal and social self" (444). This is to say that creating such a deep connection with a fictional character pushes us so beyond the limits of identity and what we choose to include in that for ourselves, that it seems irrelevant to worry about what the character looked like in the first place.

However, a lot of the time, the reason that people relate to a story of a certain fictional character is because they are written around their own race, or gender, or some sort of identifiable expression. Often, stories that people of color relate to are centered around something that has to do with their specific race, and the same goes for queer stories as well. I'm sure the expanding of self-theory reigns true for some Spider-Man fans as well but, my main point against this is that the Spider-Verse takes it a step farther and connects the ambiguity of the mask with the deep characteristics of the individual. While it is true that it could be anyone behind the mask, therefore making it an applicable aspiration to just about any fictional being, the Spider-Verse does not ignore the person behind it either. Their stories intertwine with their personal identities and while they might not shove their cultural heritage in the audience's face, they relate certain aspects of the way that they act and respond to their environments to their cultural upbringing.

I also argue that providing that little bit of connection, such as with race or gender, beyond main personality traits, just validates the audience's connection a little bit more. While it might be easy to connect with a character that doesn't resemble you at first, it always hits a little closer to home when they do (meaning you are provided more with which you can more deeply connect), and you know that their struggles and life story is somewhat rooted in that as well.

For example, Alice E. Hall reports that "Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) asked a sample of young adults to indicate how much they desired to be like their favorite male and female TV character. They found that participants of both genders reported greater wishful identification for same-gender characters" (415). This is interesting, because as young adults and teenagers were the target audience for Spider-Man in the first place, and arguably still are, the fact that they were the ones surveyed remains relevant here. An integral part of Spider-Man's character to begin with was his age, which made him so easy for early audiences to latch onto because they

could finally see themselves as a character in the media they were consuming. The Spider-Verse has only expanded on that, creating more reasons for people to see themselves in their favorite character and relate even more heavily to them than before.

From a white Peter Parker in a very white New York, to an African American and Puerto Rican Spider-Man, the mask, though as great a start as it was, is something that Marvel is beginning to move past. As the movies continue to be made, Peter Parker's suit changes minutely to visually separate each protagonist, but they stay generally the same (especially the masks) to connect them as one character. Once we reach the *Spider-Verse* films however, the suits change drastically, introducing an array of different colors and patterns to distinctly identify the growing diversity within the universe. Each new suit matches their character in some way (with Miles' suit explicitly being black and Gwen's being white with lighter shades of the typical red and blue), therefore providing many visual clues as to what might separate this version from Peter Parker (Figures 13-15). This has lent itself nicely to character building not only in the Marvel canon, but with fans as well. Creating a spider version of oneself is a popular trend among fans, and the suits vary wildly depending on who is creating it (Figure 16). This is truly the epitome of what it means to have a relatable character, as dozens of people are creating versions of themselves within that universe. Enough people can see themselves within the Spider-Verse, but with enough comfortability to make changes that accurately reflect them, that they are creating spider versions of themselves. Along with this, I would argue that while it is great to be able to imagine yourself as a spider superhero and be able to place yourself in that world solely based on shared characteristics, Marvel has taken it a step further with their new developments as of late and made the character inside the suit that much more relatable too. By expanding the gender, race, and age of the people behind the mask, they have expanded their

storytelling opportunities beyond the crime fighting action scenes and can vary them enough that they reach a wider audience as well.

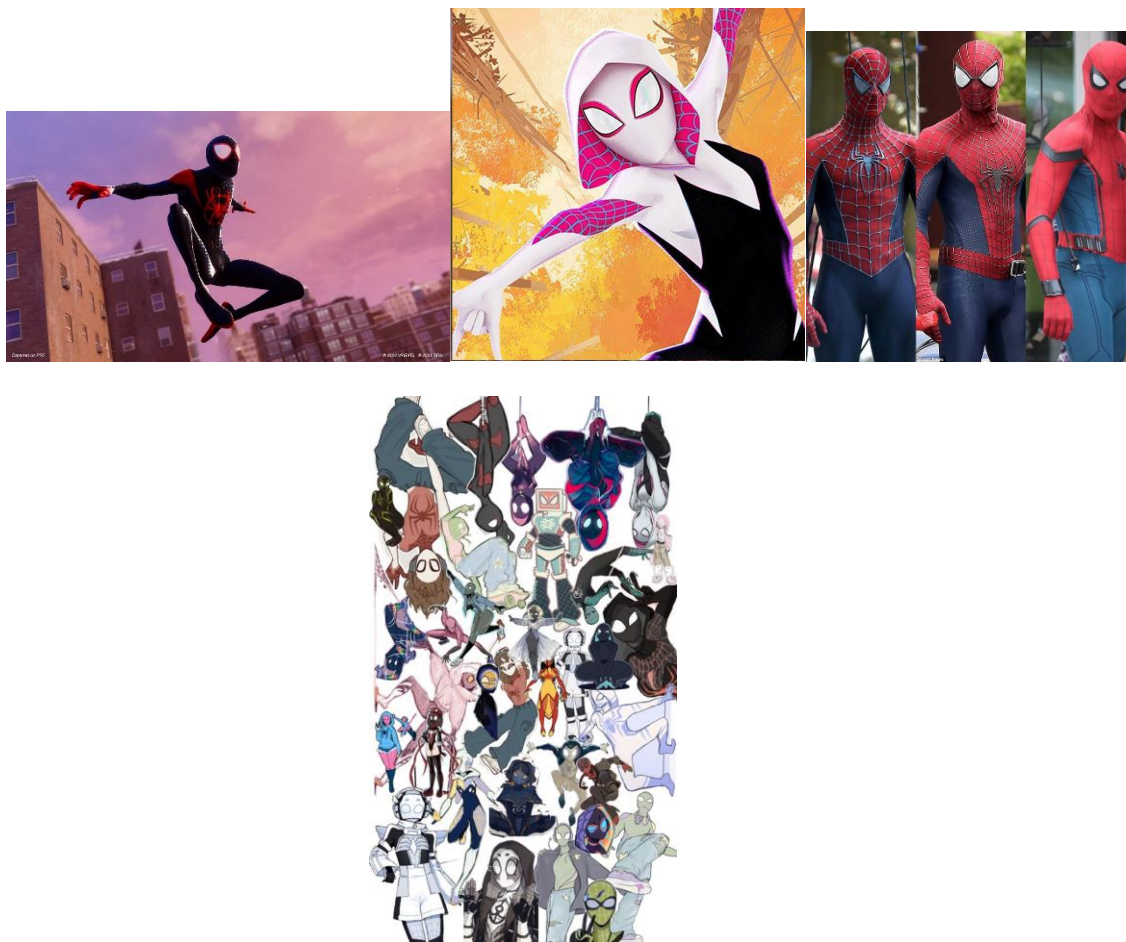


Fig. 13, Miles Morales's suit. Cito, Arne. "Miles Morales Shows Awesome 'into the Spider-Verse' Suit." *GameZone*, 30 Oct. 2020, [www.gamezone.com/news/miles-morales-shows-awesome-into-the-spider-verse-suit/](http://www.gamezone.com/news/miles-morales-shows-awesome-into-the-spider-verse-suit/).

Fig. 14, Spider-Gwen's suit.

Fig. 15, The evolution of the three Peter Parker suits. Eberly, Lily. "Comparing Each Spider-Man's First Movie." *The Rangeview Raider Review*, 19 Feb. 2020, [rangeviewnews.org/22028/ame/comparing-each-spider-mans-first-movie/](http://rangeviewnews.org/22028/ame/comparing-each-spider-mans-first-movie/).

Fig. 16. A collection of fan designed spider suits. Keam, Coco. "Spidies 🤍❤️🖤: Spiderman Drawing, Spiderman Artwork, Spiderman Art." *Pinterest*, 30 Dec. 2023, [pin.it/6l7AFuWGd](https://pin.it/6l7AFuWGd).

Let us not also diminish the societal messaging that comes along with seeing only white, typically males, playing lead roles (especially in superhero or fantasy media). Alice E. Hall later discusses the importance for young audiences to see themselves represented on screen:



Jenny Han, a Korean American author who wrote a series of young-adult novels featuring an Asian lead character that were eventually adapted into movies, has written about growing up without seeing female Asian characters in mainstream media: “What would it have meant for me back then to see a girl who looked like me star in a movie? Not as the sidekick or romantic interest, but as the lead?... Everything.” (416).

Being able to see oneself in the media one consumes, especially at a young age, does wonders for opening the imagination and feeling more comfortable with oneself. Instead of questioning why your story is not important enough to have someone that looks like you as the protagonist, the growing diversity for all ages allows one to counteract this idea and resonate with their importance from early on. This is not to say that the connections formed between characters and audiences of different backgrounds are invalid, but to have that be reasoning enough for why representation in media does not necessarily matter, Spider-Man or not, does not consider the importance of imagining a wider potential for oneself through characters that resemble the people connecting to them.

The problem with big corporations is the fear that they are only making changes to make money because of diversity becoming a trend, and once it no longer makes them a large sum, the representation will cease. However, I argue that once audiences who have been demanding representation finally get it, they are not going to let that go. Added diversity is making companies more money because they can now target a wider audience, meaning more people to put money in their pockets. This is a case of them extending past their means but in a good way. Once people start seeing themselves on screen, as white, male, heteronormative people have for decades, the request for more will grow. Similarly to how those who fit the norm seem to fear that casting people of color in traditionally white roles is somehow depriving them of a job, if the growing representation were to come to an end, there would be an uproar. That is how we got to the minimum of representation we are at in the first place.

The big corporations are also the ones who dictate how we see the world in our media, and their choices can either confirm or deny our implicit biases when we digest different mediums. As Diane Dakers elaborates, “the people (and corporations) who produce media decide how they will represent the world and people in it, to audiences” (Dakers 9). This is to say that the people in charge of these projects hold all the power, as to be expected, and are pandering for success. They choose what messages and narratives to push, and more recently they have been pushing narratives with a more diverse world view. Though the steps have been small, the choice to be more diverse in representation means that somewhere along the line corporations decided this would be beneficial for them and subsequently the ones who ingest their media. Creators have a myriad of ways in which they could go about presenting a story to their desired audiences, or “in other words, they have a whole suite of techniques to present information or craft a story that will appeal to an audience” (Dakers 9). What this means is that creators will only put in what they think is going to be successful, if not in the immediate moment, then at least in the long run (in Michael Bendis’s case) and have a collection of tips and tricks that will help them do it. Clearly, with *Into the Spider-Verse* and *Across the Spider-Verse* having a 97% and 96% rating respectively on Rotten Tomatoes, the appeal to an audience is working in Marvel’s favor.

To provide more evidence in favor of diversity in storytelling, I turn to a study conducted by Francisco Luis Torres and published through the National Council of Teachers of English. Torres analyzes the way children come to understand the world through the superhero genre. He notes in his layout of the study that his questioning paired with a well-written or well-produced piece of media pushes the children to ask, “who gets to be a hero—can they be heroes?—because of the diverse cast present in the text: a Muslim Ms. Marvel, a Black Captain America, a Mexican Nova, and a Black, Puerto Rican Miles Morales, to name a few” (Torres). While he does also implore the reader to consider the fact that the origin of this genre is heavily white,

male, and heterosexual, the upward spike in diverse characters in the last 10 years is something that can inspire children, or really anyone, to see them outside of themselves.

In the preamble to this study, however, Torres lays out the definitions upon which he will identify what makes a superhero as such. Following the work of Peter Coogan, one of the components of this definition is “The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless, which means that his fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda” (77). That is to say that the superhero usually fits in or reflects the time they are set for the sake of their mission, but what’s worth picking apart here is the “must not be intended to further his own agenda.” This appears as a one-sided view of superheroes, as though they do not have complex emotions and are merely plot devices for the betterment of their given story.

In more recent years, this seems to have shifted. Take some of the previously mentioned superheroes: for example, Black Panther or Captain Marvel. These characters have some sort of deep-rooted agenda, and while this is not groundbreaking, it does play a significant role in terms of motivation for these characters. Black Panther is trying to stop his cousin Killmonger from stealing his throne after Killmonger argues that Wakanda (the fictional African nation in which the story is set) could help millions of people and shift the power dynamic of the oppressed versus the oppressors. Captain Marvel has her life stolen from her when she is abducted by an alien race who brainwash her into believing that an innocent other alien race is an enemy. If one is to believe Killmonger, and he does come across convincingly enough to persuade the Black Panther to open up Wakanda’s resources, then surely his wish to free the oppressed would be more fitting with the “fight against evil” mentioned previously. Or, in Captain Marvel’s sake, her assistance in the annihilation of the opposing alien race would mean that she was helping said evil instead of fighting against it. These aren’t unlike the motivation that pushes Spider-Man. He

is fueled partly by rage and the need to avenge his uncle whose death he feels came from his actions, and partly by the desire to impress a girl who had previously never noticed him. If Spider-Man doesn't necessarily fit a component of the superhero definition, and isn't that far off from other superheroes in his major franchise, then why does anyone care?

Part of it has to do with the fact that Spider-Man's story doesn't start with his extraordinary experience. Yes, he does get bitten by a radioactive spider, which isn't something that happens to the average person, but he isn't part of an alien race or living in a secret society; he's just a kid. His motivation could happen anywhere, in any universe, and that is what makes the idea of a spider character so malleable. As Torres later describes, the conceptualization of a genre, and the things that make up that genre, is so important because it has the possibility of being limiting. If a child only sees white superheroes who only speak English, then that becomes an assumption for that genre, making it impossible for the child to see themselves in it or anything out of that realm of ideas as a possibility. It is in the creative space of discovering the possibilities of a genre that children really start to perceive and imagine what they are capable of, according to Torres (363).

Through Torres' study, he raises the question about whether one needs extraordinary circumstances to be a superhero at all. He asked the children in the classroom he was working with to analyze some superhero stories through "the lens of representation and what made them ordinary" (366). This then highlighted that becoming a superhero is more about the fight against injustice rather than what makes them "super." This is particularly relevant with Spider-Man because he starts out so ordinary. Spider-Man, starting out as Peter Parker, began as a way for the emerging teenagers of the time to see themselves in media. To be able to continue this via the growing representation that the Spider-Man iterations have represented is in some way carrying out the original intention of the character.

After introducing the children to this view of the superhero world, Torres invited them to make their own comics, and through this lens of ordinariness instead of the “superness,” the children were creating characters that reflected them and their voices. The students of color in the class made characters that represented their whole selves (their stories, their languages etc.) and they weren’t restricted to what had previously been thought of as the norm for the genre (369). In his conclusion, Torres remarks: “In the work of these students, their articulation of the superhero genre allowed the voices of children to be centered and matter; they created a space in which their truths could be taken up in dynamic ways, and left their readers open to the possibility that issues like racism, monolingual ideologies, and the like could be faced and overcome by children” (381). This is to say that the superhero genre is in theory a place where the possibilities are limitless, so why not have a character that speaks multiple languages or has darker skin? Spider-Man’s ability to stick around for so long as a character comes from the fact that the creators have accepted this reality of change and have made characters that reflect more people in the world than previously depicted. While, yes, other films in the same franchise might have done that, the ordinariness of Spider-Man cannot be undervalued, as it opens the door of possibility to more people who can relate to the sheer normalness.

## Conclusion

From the comic book origins of 1963 to the latest release of *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* in 2023, the legacy of Spider-Man is a flame that is still incredibly well lit. Though the origins were small in terms of the demographics represented, the Spider-Man franchise has always been one of change. Where creators could have made entirely new characters that were not related to the Spider-Man franchise to tell new stories, creators molded the character itself to fit the changing times, making it a model for current and future storytelling techniques. With an environment that has become welcoming to all, the Spider-Man films have become some of the highest grossing films to hit the box office, offering a taste of what the future of media could hold as it comes to understand growing representation and added diversity to pander to a wider audience. The Spider-Verse's strength lies in the fact that the character's identity lies more in their nonphysical descriptors, while still being able to blend important parts of their origins to make them infinitely relatable. Other diverse characters within the Marvel Universe are still a much-needed step in the right direction, but they are limited in their universal relatability in the way that Spider-Verse characters are not.

As someone who was introduced to the world of Spider beings on a whim, I felt my expectations of the superhero world shifted instantly and felt much more welcomed to the fictional universe than I had with previous comic book retellings. I could see how the Spider-Man franchise has survived this long as Peter Parker was so easily understandable even 61 years down the line. He morphed so well into the current time as he is just a normal teenager at heart who was exposed to abnormal circumstances. Since the expansion with the animated films, I have only found more to love about the Spider-Verse and even more characters to stand behind because I can see myself in their shoes somehow.

With the *Spider-Verse* films being the biggest step in terms of diversity in recent superhero films (with literally endless possibilities for Spider beings), I am excited to see what the future of media holds as this has provided a clear visual for what can happen when large corporations start varying their character types. From the ever-changing world of the Spider-Man comics, to the now expansive animated series, the next step seems to be carrying this newly diversified realm into live action films. The cheaper mediums (comic books are easier to create than animated movies, which are cheaper than live action movies) are gaining traction for their new relatability, so it only feels like a matter of time until the live action superhero world will follow suit. The natural progression that has taken place already provides a solid foundation for the trend of added representation to continue, especially considering the growing box office numbers and ratings of the newer films.

Identification with a fictional character is not a need built into how we function as individuals or as a society, but in the growing age of media it provides some reassurance that we are not alone in our adventures. Being able to see a character on a screen or on a page that can experience the same emotional and mental turmoil as a real-life individual provides some grace to know that we are not the first nor will we be the last to go through our situation. Creators pull their stories out of a myriad of places, but most often from their own experiences or those of people they know, so it makes sense that character relatability is such a strong component of what makes a successful story. The *Spider-Verse* has laid the groundwork for a universal relatability due to its wide range of characters, meaning that just about anyone can find a Spider being that speaks to their struggles and joys. It has allowed space for people to recognize that they are not alone, even in a fictional world, and provided an exciting look into the future of storytelling. The Spider-Man franchise might not be the only one making these changes, but it

certainly is a prominent one, and I have faith that its contribution to the carving of this new era will continue to be a large mark of its success.

With great power there must also come great responsibility and the Spider-Verse has been and will hopefully continue to use its powers for good, allowing more and more people to step up as the friendly neighborhood Spider being.



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