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Matthew James Fleming  
*Wilfrid Laurier University*

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**The Avengers Disassembled:  
Deconstructing Gender & Hegemonic Masculinity in Superhero Culture**

**By**

**Matthew James Fleming**

**August 25, 2015**

**Major Research Project**

**Submitted to the Social Justice and Community Engagement Program**

**in partial fulfillment of the requirements for**

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**Wilfrid Laurier University**

**Advisors: Drs. Kate Rossiter and Vanessa Oliver**

**Second Reader: Dr. Andrew Welsh**

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## Abstract

This study explores the construction of gender and manifestation of hegemonic masculinity in comic and superhero culture. It is an investigation into the marginalization and discrimination of “lesser” masculinities that do not conform to the ideals of hegemony as theorized by R.W. Connell. Employing a third-wave feminist and masculinity theorist approach to gender and sexuality theory, this study considers the massive expansion of comic culture from the early 1940s through the early twenty-first century, and the many ways in which gender and sexuality have been constructed in these narratives. The research illustrates the gross injustice of an idealized version of masculinity that rewards hierarchical structures and male superiority, embraces competition and aggression, and celebrates the domination of weaker individuals through power and violence. Evidence suggests that the continual exposure and consumption of popular culture has the potential to influence social and cultural thought. Through a qualitative film analysis of Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2012), this research project critiques the various ways in which certain masculinities are more socially privileged than others, and how those that do not fulfill expected gender norms are often relegated to villainy, or—like most women in comic culture—submissive or support roles. As such, this project demonstrates the possibilities of social justice interventions into pop culture masculinity by proposing alternative paths to healthy masculinities that are not marginalizing, discriminatory, or oppressive in nature, thereby disproving the myths of manhood that suggest there is only one way to be a “real” man.

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	7
<i>Superhero and Comic Culture</i> .....	8
<i>Hegemonic Masculinity</i> .....	15
<i>Gender and Masculinity in Superhero Culture</i> .....	19
<b>Methodology</b> .....	25
<i>Research Question</i> .....	25
<i>Theory/Methodological Framework – Feminism and Masculinity Studies</i> ..	27
<i>Analytic Approach and Data Source – The Avengers (2012)</i> .....	29
<i>Qualitative Media Analysis</i> .....	31
<i>Creative Component</i> .....	34
<i>Ethics – Reflexivity, Social Location, Non-Positivism</i> .....	36
<i>Conclusion</i> .....	37
<b>Plot Summary</b> .....	38
<b>Analysis/Discussion</b> .....	40
<i>Establishing Male Hierarchy and Superiority</i> .....	41
<i>Enabling/Embracing Violence</i> .....	48
<i>Non-Verbal Behaviour</i> .....	53
<i>Masculinity and The Villain</i> .....	57
<i>Final Thoughts</i> .....	61
<i>Limitations</i> .....	62
<b>Creative Component</b> .....	66
<i>Creative Component Reflection</i> .....	89
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	93
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	96

## **Introduction**

With great power comes great responsibility, and while the superheroes of today might fight crime and use their powers to seek justice, it cannot be said that they are without responsibility or fault in this pursuit. Marvel Comics has stood the test of time and emerged in the twenty-first century as a corporate giant, having captivated millions of people through television, film, clothing and more, grossing over \$7.1 billion in revenue (Savage, 2015).

While the comics group is known for a variety of superhero franchises, one of their most successful groups is the iconic Avengers team. Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, The Hulk, Hawkeye, Black Widow, and Nick Fury and his Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D have invaded the lives and homes of societies and cultures worldwide. And although “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes” are tasked with achieving peace and justice for the people of Earth, their methods and behaviours sometimes have a different effect.

Superheroes have always been of personal interest, and over time my interest became passion and developed into a desire to understand the significance and influence of superhero stories, as well as the relationships between the characters depicted. Within the context of my social justice work, gender has been a construction to which I am drawn. In fictional worlds dominated by men, I have to wonder, how is masculinity constructed in superhero narratives? How do the relationships and interplay between these characters construct, develop, and maintain traditional ideologies and beliefs about what makes a “real” man in society? How is masculinity or “maleness” defined, and which masculinities are

privileged? Oppressed? Does the manifestation of “hegemonic masculinity” in superhero narratives contribute to an oppressive ideology that is enabled and embraced by characters meant to inspire others? How might a social justice intervention into superhero culture look? These are the questions I seek to answer.

Social justice, as I define it, is the embrace of difference; the universal recognition and acceptance of diverse social, cultural and political backgrounds by all people. To me, social justice is equality between all living things—human and environmental alike—and a celebration of the unique qualities that make up both individuals and communities. Comparatively, researchers Brown and Strega (2005) theorize social justice as anti-oppressive, transformative approaches to de-marginalizing those that live on the margins; providing the underprivileged the same rights and freedoms as the privileged “in a way that the least equal among them is the least worse off” (40).

To achieve social justice, intersections of race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, and various other forms of difference and privilege must be carefully deconstructed. Constructions of gender—how and what it means to be male, female, or identify differently altogether—are host to a variety of pervasive forms of oppression, marginalization, and injustice. The fictional Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a predominantly male-inhabited world, is no stranger to this. Even on the Avengers team, only one female holds a significant position—the Black Widow. With no powers of her own to speak of, “saving the day” tends to fall on the shoulders of her male counterparts. But what attention has been paid to the complex gender roles constructed within this team?

Hegemonic Masculinity is a term coined by sociologist R.W. Connell (1982). The term defines an ideology of masculinity that differs from other forms of manhood or male identity, and is in many ways synonymous with the patriarchal values that support the submission, exploitation and objectification of both women and “lesser” masculinities that do not conform to the ideals of hegemony. That is to say, hegemonic masculinity is considered to be a dominant masculinity; one that is exclusive, privileged, strong, and rejecting of anything feminine or otherwise stereotypically “unmasculine” in contemporary North American and Western society.

The Avengers conform to and perpetuate many of these stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours without consideration or concern for how these ideologies can contribute to social inequality and the oppression of less dominant gender identities in the real world. Considering the commercial and critical success of Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2012) film, which earned \$1,518,594,910 at the box office (Savage, 2015), I believe it is important to address the problematic gender constructions within and strive for justice in future depictions of some of comic culture’s favourite heroes. As such, the research I have conducted is an investigation into how masculinity is assembled in Avengers narratives—specifically *The Avengers* (2012)—and explore the ways in which traditional, ideological depictions of hegemonic masculinity in superhero cultures have developed and maintained oppressive gender roles and expectations in contemporary illustrations of these pop culture icons.



By engaging with the literature of gender theorists and masculinity scholars, I will analyze and critique the problematic gender assumptions that extend from hegemonic masculinity and focus my efforts towards suggesting alternate, healthier narratives of what it means to be a man in superhero culture. The goal of this research is to demonstrate alternative, healthier paths to masculinity that superheroes can take, while using their powers responsibly and justly to achieve a level of social justice that does not directly influence or perpetuate the oppressive gender stereotypes through pop culture's heroes. In doing so, I will demonstrate how diverse gender identities can successfully coexist and even work together to accomplish greatness.

### **Literature Review**

This literature review draws on a number of peer-reviewed articles and scholarly sources that engage in the discussion of comic and superhero culture. The authors explore the development of comic books and the growth of the "superhero" as a social and cultural symbol. The review is broken into three sections. First, I will explore the history of superhero narratives as they have developed between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which will include a review of literature more specific to Marvel's iconic team The Avengers. Second, I will review the works and articles of authors who consider gender and masculinity; more explicitly, this review will examine the development of "hegemonic masculinity" as theorized by sociologist R.W. Connell, and how this form of masculinity has been perpetuated in society over time. Finally, this review will move towards an integration of the themes in superhero culture and gender studies, in an effort to illustrate how

gender, masculinity, and sexuality have been constructed and depicted in superhero narratives to create a world full of idealized bodies that conform to the social status-quo.

### ***Superhero and Comic Culture***

The superhero, as he is recognized today, was created from the imaginations of American youth, as a result of their need to escape from the hardships of the Great Depression. In less than a century, superheroes—depicted across television, film, video games, clothing, etc.—have “conquered the world” (Kantor, 2013). The success of superheroes in society today is, in part, due to the roles they have played throughout contemporary American history, having been frequently illustrated as rescuers of the downtrodden and oppressed, or for their actions in saving the nation or world from some notorious evil threat to the rights, freedoms, and liberties of its citizens. Moreover, the social need for heroic intervention in times of turmoil has been reflected in superhero narratives and their popularity, such as after the Depression, and post-9/11.

It was the combined imaginations of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster in the late 1930s that created a hero of such superb strength, speed, and style that modern day superheroes embody and celebrate. According to comic historian Danny Fingeroth, the character would become a “combination of Sampson and Hercules, and a dozen other characters from the Bible to the comic strips, to the serials and the movie theatre” (Kantor, 2013). The pair’s “man of steel,” Superman, is one of the oldest and most important heroes of comic book history; he is responsible for setting the standard image and definition of superheroism in comic culture: extraordinary

people with extraordinary abilities standing for “truth, justice, and the American way” (Kantor, 2013).

Superman’s original debut in *Action Comics* (which would eventually become Detective Comics) No.1 could be purchased from a comic stand in 1938 for 10 cents. Today, original editions have been sold for up to “two million, one hundred and sixty-one thousand dollars” (Kantor, 2013), which is a testament to the popularity and social and economic value of these fictional characters, as they represent a “shift in depiction...from defenders of the status quo to figures that are capable of challenging the dominant rules of society” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 21). While superheroes *have* challenged a variety of dominant cultural norms throughout their development (such as the expectation that women be relegated entirely to submissive or supporting roles), they have in other ways perpetuated and bolstered the same rules by subtly navigating stereotypical tropes and reinforcing them through conformity. For example, while women may be granted superpowers, they still act primarily as sidekicks, or catalysts for action that ultimately impacts the male narrative. Furthermore, while crimefighters may stand for justice and protect others, depictions of them are almost always of buff, heterosexual, white males protecting defenseless women. Thus, Phillips and Strobl’s suggestion is problematic as the heroes reinforce dominant ideologies as often as they undermine them.

Due to the popular appeal of Superman, writers and illustrators in the 1940s began to capitalize on the opportunity for success in the comic book and superhero industry and culture, creating heroes of their own that would eventually become a major form of entertainment for youth—especially young men. In fact, as Ian

Gordon (1998) argues, “in the hands of a corporation, Superman was more important as a business asset than as a fictional character... [he] sold more than ray guns; in the early 1940s, he sold the virtue of comic books themselves” (134). Comics sold tens of millions of copies, and according to Phillips and Strobl (2013) “permeated nearly every home in America” (23) during the forties, demonstrating the effectiveness of superheroes in reaching a large audience, and acting as reflectors of broad, realistic social scenarios requiring a certain form of American justice (Gordon, 1998).

This suggests a celebration of American exceptionalism, implying that “American justice” in comics was somehow meted out more appropriately, more effectively, and with better results than other nations’ versions of justice. While the original comic book superhero is inherently American, the belief that the United States are inherently different than other countries is a problematic attitude that fails to acknowledge a wide range of diverse and interesting cultures, and to celebrate the successes of other nations. Furthermore, constructing the majority of superheroes as ideological American crimefighters (white, heterosexual, buff male) ignored the potential for reaching wider audiences, such as those whom identify with racialized communities or different sexual orientations.

According to theorist Arthur Berger (1971), in reality, comics were “an important part of [North American] socialization, by virtue of the simple fact that millions of children—and adults—cannot continually be exposed to a form of communication without something happening” (164). Truly, superheroes have demonstrated their growth throughout their history as agents of a particular brand

of social and cultural change, responsible for protecting the innocent, punishing the guilty, and either reflecting or challenging societal values and norms (Berger, 1971; Gordon, 1998; Kantor, 2013; Phillips & Strobl, 2013). Their impact resulted in a rapid expansion of the industry. In the early 1940s, there were seven publishers releasing fifty superheroes titles and only a year later, there were more than two-dozen publishing firms releasing 150 comic books featuring original superheroes (Kantor, 2013).

Berger (1971) asserts that the forties were “desperate times: crime was everywhere, mad fiends threatened to take over the world, and things seemed to be coming apart—and would have, no doubt, were it not for the various comic strip and comic book characters” (164). Indeed, the early heroes of comic culture worked towards peace and justice, consistently acting as the saviors of state and society, and all that was required of them. Superheroes at that time stood for “a loosely defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals like democracy, liberty, and freedom from oppression” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 23), which played a vital role during the Second World War.

Writer/illustrator duo Joe Simon and Jack Kirby of Timely Publications—which would become Marvel Comics in 1961—created a hero that would fight for the American way of life (Kantor, 2013); a hero that symbolically embodied the pride of the country’s citizens and their values: Captain America. His original debut came in March of 1941, when Steve Rogers—Captain America’s alter ego—was born to comic culture. A genetically modified kid from the Bronx, Rogers underwent experimental testing to create the perfect super soldier for the American army in

hopes of defeating the Nazi threat overseas, and emerged a hero with superhuman strength, speed and tactical ability, “bursting with muscles and bursting with action” (Kantor, 2013).

During a time of war and terror, Captain America represented all the national strength and ‘good’ that Americans held dear. He was a “modern day Uncle Sam” (Kantor, 2013); a necessary creation to combat the evil that was occurring in Europe. Mila Bongco (1995) argues “the figure of the superhero” is widely perceived as espousing hegemonic truths: “a prime example of a State’s henchmen, repetitively restoring order in aid of policemen and politicians,” (185) which was an effective propaganda tactic used by Cap’s writers and illustrators during the war (Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Kantor, 2013).

Phillips and Strobl (2013) write that “during World War II, titles like *Captain America*...riveted readers at home and servicemen abroad, selling nearly a million copies a month” (21). Shortly after the war, however, comic book superheroes took a hit in the form of Fredric Wertham, a German-American psychiatrist and author of *Seduction of the Innocent* (1955). In *Seduction*, Wertham argued that comic book superheroes in tights contributed to juvenile delinquency, an increase in youth violence, and struggles with sexuality as they often (subtly) promoted homoerotic behaviour and extremely graphic violence.

The trials that accompanied Wertham’s attack on comics resulted in the creation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) in 1954, which was designed to censor publications with superheroes, and reduce depictions of violence, sexually explicit images, and otherwise “adult” content including alcohol and drug use. In turn, this

led to sympathizers of Wertham's assault hosting public burnings of comics and parents rejecting the violence and graphic depictions of adult content within the books being sold to their children. At the same time, veterans of the war were seeking something more sophisticated than brightly coloured tight-wearing superheroes and villains, and characters like Captain America had served their purpose in aiding the war effort; in some ways, the traditional "superhero" died. Thus ended what has been coined the "Golden Age of Comics" (Kantor, 2013).

Of course, superhero comics did not completely vanish. Although they experienced a lull in popularity, superheroes like Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman continued to be published and hold an audience as more "domestic" heroes of post-World War II America (Kantor, 2013). Scott McCloud wrote satirically many years later of Wertham and the CCA, that the colourful superheroes that fought criminals who sought to take over the world were truly the cause of America's corrupt youth (1993). The CCA remained relatively unchallenged—with the exception of some underground publishers—until 1971, when Stanley M. Lieber (more commonly known as Stan Lee) of Marvel Comics, ran an edition of *The Amazing Spider-Man* detailing the dangers of drug-use *without* approval from the CCA and subsequently suffered no repercussions (Kantor, 2013). The Code remained in effect, though it became more frequent for publishers to produce material without the Code's stamp. All major publishers ultimately abandoned the Code by early 2011.

From the 1960s to the 1970s and beyond, costumed vigilantes fought crime in a more adult manner, choosing to reject the CCA and explore their subject matter

with more real superheroes—those with families, with realistic lives that followed their education and careers; those that suffered and spoke of their pain, and those that spoke of their happiness. These ‘real superheroes’ had relationships, lovers, and often shared their experiences of life and death with the reader (Berger, 1971). They were not afraid to tackle serious life issues, such as addiction and loss.

Although the appeal of superhero comics faded for a time post-war, the decades following Marvel’s challenge of the CCA resulted in a re-expansion of superhero culture and popularity. The reemergence—as well as introduction—and success of a variety of comic superheroes during the late stages of what is referred to as the “Silver Age of Comics” (1956-1970) reestablished the genre as a popular and formidable industry. Between the 1980s and 1990s, however, Marvel and Detective Comics (DC) became the supergiants of the industry (Kantor, 2013). Although Canadian publishing companies suffered once again beneath the weight of the original, more popular American superheroes, the marketability of characters like Thor, Iron Man, The Hulk, and The Fantastic Four were so globally successful, that the superhero genre developed into what is now known as the Bronze Age of Comics (1970-1985), quickly followed by the Modern Age of Comics from the late 1980s to the present (Kantor, 2013).

Today, Marvel and DC stand as massive corporate organizations that release countless superhero-related products, from TV shows and film, to clothing and merchandise. Featuring a dynamic group of “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes,” the Avengers team, whether individually in their own respective movies, or together in both Joss



Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012) and 2015 sequel *The Avengers: Age of Ultron*, has clearly demonstrated their capacity to take mainstream pop culture by storm.

Together, the globally celebrated iconic Avengers team fights to defend their fictional Earth from evildoers and supervillains. By measure of financial success, they are the most popular characters in a Marvel superhero franchise, having earned nearly \$3 billion from their collective solo films, as well as the team-up film (Boxofficemojo.com). *The Avengers* (2012) film alone grossed well over \$623 million at the American box office. Evidently, the Avengers' success in the world of comics and popular culture cannot be disputed. They are a force to be reckoned with, both in the context of their fictional world as well as in the real world as corporate products marketed to youth and adults alike, worldwide. But they are not without flaw; despite every move towards justice superheroes have made throughout their history, the heroes of the Modern Age of Comics can always improve in their fight to defend the rights, freedoms and liberties of Earth's citizens.

### ***Hegemonic Masculinity***

The study of gender has shed light on a variety of interesting theoretical frameworks and lenses through which to analyze social, cultural, and political structures. In the late twentieth century and, with more frequency in the early twenty-first century, gender theorists and academic scholars have explored the field of masculinity studies and critiqued the various constructions of masculinity (masculinities) that have become more heavily scrutinized in society. As Johnathan Peabody (2012) points out,

Indeed, 'what it means to be a man' has become quite complicated in recent years due to the rise of gender and masculinity studies,

notwithstanding queer theory; yet – in the words of sociologist Michael Kimmel – masculinity still seems to symbolize power to most Americans, and often violence is ‘the single most evident marker’ of that power. (7)

Like many social structures, there is a gender hierarchy (Holter, 2005) that theorists have conceived of as responsible for the relations between men, especially with regards to violence and sexuality.

In terms of masculinity, it is widely agreed by scholars that “hegemonic masculinity,” a term coined by sociologist R.W. Connell in the 1980s, is the ideologically dominant notion of what it means to be a (true) man in society (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005; Higate & Hopton, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005; Plummer, 2005). Theorists also agree that hegemonic masculinity, while the dominant, idealized form of maleness, is not indicative of all men’s masculinity. Instead, hegemonic masculinity is referred to as a form of masculinity all men are encouraged to aspire to, (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005; Higate & Hopton, 2005) and that it is strongly linked to the distribution of power (Holter, 2005).

The study of hegemonic masculinity has grown since its creation as a term for understanding and deconstructing complex gender binaries, especially as it relates to and privileges/oppresses different kinds of masculinities and ways of ‘doing gender’ (Higate & Hopton, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is defined as “involving forms of masculinity and femininity that are hierarchical, emphasizing the dominance of men over women” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 148), and by Higate and Hopton (2005) as “characterized by the interrelationship of stoicism, phallogentricity, and the domination of weaker individuals” (433).

It is my personal belief as a result of these findings that gender exists on a continuum—it is more fluid than static and consequently requires that a critique of something gender-related must consider the impossibility of that thing being inherently “male” or “female.” There must be room for flexibility. Moreover, this means that hegemonic masculinities must be constructed and understood as the product of relationships between *all* people—not just the male/female binary.

Dominating weaker individuals, as Higate and Hopton (2005) point out, sometimes exists in the realm of sexuality. Plummer (2005) suggests non-conformity to the “*hegemonic male sexuality*” (180)—in other words, non-heteronormative sexualities—influences adolescent socialization into manhood, and demonstrates how male sexuality can sometimes also be “a sign of weakness and vulnerability” (179) as often as it can be an enforcer of dominance. In this way, as Messerschmidt (2005) asserts, “gender is situated, social and interactional accomplishment that grows out of social practices in specific settings and serves to inform such practices in reciprocal relation... we do gender differently depending on the social situation and the social circumstances we encounter” (197).

In Stuart Hall’s article “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’” (1997), he asks, “why is ‘otherness’ so compelling an object of representation... How is the representation of ‘difference’ linked with questions of power?” (234) A review of the literature suggests this question is still yet to be fully answered, however, the capacity for positive social change results from the study of those *in* power as they perpetuate inequality and oppress the diversity and “weakness” of non-dominant masculinities (Brown, 1999; Gardiner, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2005).

As Jeffrey Brown (1999) argues, “masculinity, always regarded as a natural, stable gender identity, is in the process of being deconstructed on a variety of levels” (25), which necessarily requires a *destabilizing* of the myths of idealized manhood and a challenge to the concept of violent maleness as the socially acceptable and embraced form of masculinity (Pollack, 1998). William Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, argues that society does not support boys or men who do not conform to the hegemony inherent in violent masculinities, as well as boys and men that “relate in ways that are considered traditionally ‘feminine’” (65). They become the “despised ‘Other’” (Brown, 1999; Hall, 1997) that represents the “socially inept failure” (Brown, 1999, 25) of what it means to “be a man” (Pollack, 1998).

The result is often interpersonal violence between men, and especially against those who identify with different masculinities (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005; Kimmel, 1994; Kimmel, 2013; Pollack, 1998) and proof positive that “modern society is still a partly patriarchal society” (Holter, 2005, 30). Patriarchy supposes men should dominate women (Gardiner, 2005; Kimmel, 2013) and this translates to a sexism which, in some ways, ignores the fact that “socially organized power relations among men are constructed historically” and that “in some specific contexts, some men enjoy greater power than other men” (Messerschmidt, 2005, 198). A theme that develops here is the idea that violence is sometimes the only means available to men to assert their masculinity and power (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005). This has the potential to result in warring among differing male identities, and a privileging (and consequently oppression) of certain forms of masculinity.

Furthermore, there is a link between violence and hegemonic masculinity in relation to militarism. According to Higate and Hopton (2005), militarist values have “a disproportionate influence on the ways in which hegemonic masculinity is both created and reproduced” (444). This may explain why the military is so male-centric, and give explanation for the politicians that have “utilized ideologies of idealized masculinity that valorize the notion of strong active males collectively risking their personal safety for the greater good of the wider community” (Higate & Hopton, 2005, 434). This is a clear example of enabling, embracing and perpetuating male violence.

Perhaps Kimmel (2013) has pinpointed the central issue in arguing “we have accepted an ideology of masculinity that leaves us feeling empty and alone when we do it right, and even worse when we feel we’re doing it wrong” (9). This would suggest hegemonic masculinities are destructive and oppressive, leading to the isolation, marginalization, and under-privileging of more diverse masculinities that do not conform to the dominant ideology. In following, a serious injustice exists in the construction of gender within social and cultural contexts.

### ***Gender and Masculinity in Superhero Culture***

Due to the overwhelmingly large male presence in the fictitious worlds that superheroes inhabit, gender and sexuality theorists, as well as industry professionals, have had much to say about the construction of gender identity—especially masculinity—in comic culture (Brown, 1999; Polson, 2014; Kantor, 2013; McCloud, 1993; Peabody, 2012; Phillips & Strobl, 2013).

Especially important is the recognition of Phillips and Strobl (2013) and Kantor (2013) that during the Silver Age—and into the Modern Age—of comics, the “consequences of absolute power” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 34) became a focal point of superheroes’ own conscience and sense of responsibility. As this pertains to the notion of hegemonic masculinity and dominant power relations in a patriarchal setting, the male hero must then necessarily wear—desired or not—the results of his gendered behaviour in the comic world.

These displays of power include depictions of heroes engaging in sexually explicit content, the suppression of diverse masculinities from developing, and especially in graphic violence. Superheroes are known especially for their violence. In many ways it makes them appealing as they fulfill the hegemonic expectations of their role as men; one example is Thor’s message “that as a superhero he must engage in violence to protect the public in crisis and that any superhero who denies this duty has clearly lost his or her way” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 110).

In fact, numerous examples illustrating the responsibility of men to engage in violence have been offered from the pages of comic books themselves. Gail Simone (1999) created an online index that categorizes the deaths of- and graphic violence directed towards women in superhero culture. The website (formally known as “Women In Refrigerators”) details the unhealthy reality of women in comics that have been “either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator” (1999)—literally. The particular narrative that sparked the creation of this page was a publication of the Green Lantern comic in which Hal Jordan—who has decided to retire from the life of superheroism—returns home to find his girlfriend

murdered and hacked into pieces and stuffed in the fridge, which inevitably sparks his return to the superhero career. Given the (incomplete) list of over one hundred and fifteen women, both hero and civilian alike, that have been “killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies befall her” (1999) prominently featured on the list, it is evident that womanhood and/or femininity is not regularly celebrated in comic culture. Moreover, the notion that these women are killed for no other reason than to advance the male narrative suggests their primary role is as plot devices; women in superhero narratives are catalysts for action that result in the attention of men, and ultimately lead to further action and/or violence between the hero and the villain.

The expectation of superheroes to engage in a predetermined manner of behaviour for them to remain relevant and attractive is egregious and unjust. It prevents diverse social and cultural expansion in the context of their social worlds, simultaneously privileging, as Peabody (2012) points out, only “one form of national identity” (2) and perpetuating a hegemonic mentality, while undermining the process of comics’ steady deconstruction of a carefully constructed performance” (Bongco, 1995; Brown, 1999). As Brown (1999) points out, male superheroes are formulaic in their transformation into blatant examples of hegemonic masculinity—ultimately celebrating dominant viewpoints:

Spoiled playboy becomes Batman. Shy scientist [Bruce] Banner transforms into the monstrous Hulk when he gets angry. Young Billy Batson becomes the world’s mightiest mortal, Captain Marvel, merely by uttering the acronym ‘SHAZAM.’ Scrawny Steve Rogers becomes the invincible Captain America after [being exposed to] an experimental growth serum. (31)

Evidently, there is also a growing theme of hegemonic masculinity as it relates to the body that has been theorized and critiqued by scholars.

Aaron Taylor's article is aptly titled: "He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life." According to Taylor (2007), superhero masculinity is directly linked to depictions of the body in their narratives, regardless of any physical ailment or hindrance that may have existed prior to their rise as a hero. As Polson (2014) interestingly and accurately suggests, "The comic book superhero's body is often a point of emphasis used to enhance the characteristics of strength that allows him/her the means to conquer a disability, by turning a physical flaw into great feats of physical abilities," (33) much the same way Tony Stark's Iron Man suit is powered by an arc reactor which prevents a piece of shrapnel from a grenade explosion entering his heart and killing him instantly (Favreau, 2008).

In this way, the "male superhero's disability, specifically, becomes a characteristic that emphasizes and engages their masculinity" (Polson, 2014, 33). In the case of Tony Stark, then, his disability is that he is mortal. This is an interesting commentary on the impossibility of hegemonic masculinity, for it illustrates how even mortality is seen as a weakness. Phillips and Strobl (2013) echo this argument, noting "male crime fighters in comic books sport a hyped-up version of masculinity... with such characteristics as a brawny stature and a macho orientation" (152). This physical appearance undermines the existence of the (potential) disability, and reinforces the hyper-masculine image the hero ultimately publicizes and embodies—"for these characters, hegemonic masculinity is often



represented through body image; hyper-masculine heroes that represent confidence, strength, and power” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 152).

And yet there is a clear binary between the masculinity of the superhero and his alter ego, as Brown (1999) points out, “while the superhero body represents in vividly graphic detail the muscularity, the confidence, the power that personifies the ideal of phallic masculinity, the alter ego—the identity that must be kept a secret—depicts the softness, the powerlessness, the insecurity associated with the feminized man” (31). Superheroes illustrate a mild distaste for alter egos that are often constructed to personify more feminine behaviours and appearances; their civilian alter-egos are often presented as being weak or fragile, such as Dr. Banner and the Hulk, or Peter Parker and Spider-Man. This is further evident in Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* (2008) in which Tony Stark declares to the press, “I am Iron Man,” which can be deconstructed as a means of valuing his heroic identity over his own as Anthony Stark.

Essentially, the superhero masculinity is one that embraces the dominant ideology and even celebrates the violence associated with it. Differing masculinities and methods of achieving justice are rejected, as are the characters that embody these differences. Phillips & Strobl (2013) offer the example of *The Life and Times of Saviour 28*, a comparatively unpopular superhero that avoids violence and seeks justice in alternative ways, which “implies that there is little room for a superhero who works toward peace” (108).

This may also explain the mediocre success of Canada’s *Captain Canuck* who “avoided violence when possible, prayed before missions, and dedicated himself to

protecting Canada and the world from evildoers” (Edwardson, 2003, 184). While popular in Canada during its short publication run in the late 1970s, Captain Canuck could not compete with the global success of more stereotypically masculine heroes from America. Phillips & Strobl (2013) concur, “comic books are replete with stories that devalue peacemaking approaches while privileging violent responses, necessitated by the crisis at hand and the problem of a corrupt and incompetent criminal justice system” (108).

Finally, the literature illustrates a privileging of violent, hegemonic masculinities that favour the dominance of men over the ‘Other,’ more effeminate forms of maleness. Peabody (2012) captures this notion with a succinct summary, stating

Power and violence remain synonymous traits in the superhero genre, as superheroes use their powers to cause violence to their enemies. It is probably no surprise, then, that superheroes who use power (and subsequently violence) to fight those enemies and ‘protect the innocent’ (presumably ‘weak’ women, children, and men) might be classified as ‘masculine.’ (7)

In conclusion, the presence of hegemonic masculinity in superheroes is abundant, and the perpetual cycle and reinforcement of dominant ideologies surrounding the construction of gender and masculinity in these narratives is blatantly skewed and condemning of any diversity with regards to superheroes and their gender identity. While I have offered some brief examples of the construction of masculinity in some members—Thor, Iron Man—of the popular Avengers team, these are a mere outline of the depth to which these oppressive and marginalizing hegemonic ideologies have been endorsed by Avengers narratives.

## **Methodology**

This section will explore the theoretical framework and methodology I will employ to analyze the *The Avengers* (2012) film. Here, I provide a synopsis of my research questions before venturing into a discussion of my theories on feminism and masculinity studies, and how I intend to use these theoretical schools of thought to collect, analyze and discuss my data. Next I will offer explanation as to my selected data source and my reasoning and justification for this selection. This will lead into a short rationale of my methodological approach, an outline of the qualitative media analysis I will employ, and an introduction of my creative component, before making note of the ethical considerations and responsibilities to this kind of qualitative research. To present and discuss this information clearly and concisely, first I must describe my research topic and offer some insight as to what is problematic about the topic, and what questions have arisen as a result of exploring it.

## ***Research Question***

I suggest hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity that defines what it means to “be a man” in superhero narratives. For the purposes of this research, I will use hegemonic masculinity mainly to examine relationships between men—choosing to bypass the (equally important) impact of hegemonic masculinity on women—and focus on them as a means of recognizing a singular, privileged ideal version of man in society: one who embodies strength, courage, athleticism and brawn, and mocks emotional awareness, fragility, weakness and submission—something more often associated with femininity. In short, hegemonic masculinity is

a form of masculinity that is oppressive and perpetuates patriarchal values that privilege men above women (and other men) and upholds “the dominant belief system[s], values, and life” as “the best and [most] exclusive reality” (Baines, 2011, 2).

Connell recently suggested in a study that, “even before the women’s liberation movement, a literature in social psychology and sociology about the ‘male sex role’ had recognized the social nature of masculinity and the possibilities of change in men’s conduct” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, 831). On the other hand, Baines (2011) suggests anti-oppressive practices do not insist on altering individuals, but rather on collaborating with them to “[meet] their needs, whenever possible, in participatory, and transformative ways, and simultaneously [focus] on challenging and transforming those forces within society that benefit from and perpetuate inequity and oppression” (6).

The superhero genre in particular is incredibly popular, and the community of people that follow it very broad. The fact that the genre has such a wide reach for audiences both young and mature demonstrates what a versatile and important platform it holds in relation to the study of gender. Within the context of my social justice work, anti-oppressive gender theory has been a valuable tool. After all, in fictional worlds dominated by men, I have to wonder, how is masculinity constructed in superhero narratives? Hegemonic masculinity, as explored in a previous section, plays a significant role in the development of relationships and the interplay between characters in superhero texts. As such I wonder, how is “manhood” or “maleness” defined, and which masculinities are privileged in these

narratives? Do hegemonic masculinities in superhero culture influence or reinforce dominant social ideologies and attitudes that oppress or discriminate against non-conforming masculinities? Inevitably, what the research requires is an approach that does anti-oppressive, social justice work through a feminist lens that considers masculinity theories and study as a framework with which to deconstruct ideological gender stereotypes in superhero narratives.

***Theory/Methodological Framework – Feminism and Masculinity Studies***

In doing gendered social justice work, I need to adopt an anti-oppressive research lens, which Baines describes as “constantly refining its theory and practice to address new tensions and social problems as well as underlying structural factors” (Baines, 2011, 4). Furthermore, I believe that when working with gender, feminism is an important and crucial theoretical framework with which to explore masculinity; whereas traditionally feminism has explored the oppression of women in society, various branches of feminism have expanded to include masculinity studies as part of their mission towards gender equality and social justice / anti-oppressive work.

Feminism is the most constructive and valuable theoretical framework that fits my topic. Beckman (2014) states,

Feminist research is distinguished by its methodology rather than its methods. What makes research feminist is the application of feminist principles rather than use of specific methods or its study of topics related to women and gender. Feminist research methodology provides a unique set of principles to overcome the limitations and biases of traditional positivist research (165).

The principles of feminism I apply to my research will be, as Beckman suggests, crucial to constructing non-positivist knowledge that reflexively acknowledges my position as the researcher (reflexivity is explored in greater detail later). The framework will also contribute to my developing knowledge of masculinity theory as it relates to feminism. Gardiner (2004) argues the “most important accomplishment” of twentieth century feminism “is the concept of gender as a social construction; that is, the idea that masculinity and femininity are loosely defined historically variable, and interrelated social ascriptions to persons with certain kinds of bodies” (35).

I agree with Gardiner’s assertion that gender is a social construct, and believe it must be researched as such, and understood to be more fluid than static; male/female binaries are oppressive as they discount different masculinities and femininities at the same time they ignore sexualities and those who do not identify as male or female. Potts and Brown (2005) suggest “feminism’s attempts to construct anti-oppressive theory have created important political openings for new ways of looking at research processes,” (8) which I believe Mason (2003) supports in her text *Qualitative Researching* by arguing that “feminism has indeed had an enormous impact in its challenge to conventional scientific discourse, and in establishing the agenda for a whole range of issues which are now seen as central to qualitative research” (3).

These “political openings” allow for masculinity studies to develop and offer masculinity theorists a wealth of knowledge about gender identity, agency and relations *through* feminism. According to Gardiner (2004), “feminist theorists are

citing masculinity scholars more frequently than previously, and vice versa. Feminist thinkers are benefiting from the theoretical insights and empirical findings of masculinity studies that concern... gender in a wide variety of specific settings” (47). She suggests that as a prelude to the women’s liberation movement, “misogyny created feminist theory, and feminist theory has helped create masculinity,” (36) however, not all feminisms account for the roles and experiences of men as they relate to the wider gender conversation in the search for equality.

A more contemporary branch of the feminist ideology, third-wave feminism concerns itself with eradicating gender violence and acknowledging masculinity studies as a valuable piece of a larger conversation with much to contribute and so, I believe, is a feminism I can identify with. Moreover, a facet of third-wave feminist theory is that it encourages people to create their own understandings of feminism and to identify with that. Consequently—and in summary—thanks to the principles of feminist methodology and the interests of masculinity study, as I approach my research topic, I will do so from an anti-oppressive, third-wave feminist lens focusing on the roles and experiences of men in superhero narratives as they relate to and construct perceptions of justice when it comes to gender.

***Analytic Approach and Data Source - The Avengers (2012)***

The focus of this project is more specific than simply “superhero narratives.” In narrowing my data collection and thus selecting my piece of the larger conversation, I have chosen Marvel’s Avengers team as my primary subjects of research. More specifically, I will be examining the Marvel Cinematic Universe

(MCU) and its depiction of the iconic Avengers team in director Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012) film.

My reasoning for this is twofold. First, the Avengers team is currently the face of the Marvel franchise; what this means is that the solo films for each individual Avenger are created with a shared Universe in mind—their distinct narratives each play a crucial role in the development of a larger story that Marvel is trying to share, which is ultimately furthered by the “team-up” Avengers films that bring together each Avenger. Marvel has capitalized most on the Avengers narratives (both on individual heroes' storylines, as well as the team-up film) and *The Avengers* (2012) film alone grossed \$623.4 million at the box office. To put this in perspective, the MCU, currently with nine films released, is the highest selling franchise in US history, having achieved nearly \$2.5 billion and counting, with tie-in and future films in pre-production planned until 2019. For comparison, this gross revenue surpasses even the *Harry Potter* franchise. As such, I think the MCU and Avengers team is worthy of attention and analysis for their potential role in capturing the attention of the public and influencing their perception of appropriate and just gender roles, behaviours, and expectations. By looking specifically at the film, I am ensuring my data source is one that has both proven to be popular socially and culturally, and offers moments where most, if not all of the Avengers are present.

The desire to analyze moments where the Avengers are together and interacting provides a second justification for my selection. Choosing to focus on a team, as opposed to one particular superhero is crucial, because gender is constructed based on the social interactions and interplay between the men (and



women) onscreen. I believe this follows what Mason (2002) suggests, which is that “the process of identifying a methodological strategy should [not] necessarily be about finding a philosophical label for your approach, so much as finding a coherent and consistent approach to answering your research questions” (32). Exploring this particular team, and the ways in which they, together, construct gender and ideologies about masculinity is both grounded in feminism, and the best way to answer my own research questions.

This understanding is informed by my own experiences and epistemological beliefs about the conduct of the Avengers and their ability to construct gender in a popular social context. My methodology and theoretical grounding serves as a response to my epistemological belief, by suggesting the popularity of *The Avengers* (2012) makes it worthy of analysis and critique, and a valid and credible source of (potential) anti-oppressive work in the realm of masculinity studies (Beckman, 2014).

### ***Qualitative Media Analysis***

My particular research strategy involves performing a qualitative media (film) analysis of Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2012). A qualitative media analysis involves viewing the film from a variety of angles, while approaching the subject matter and content of the film with a critical eye. This requires multiple viewings of the film with shifting goals to achieve the most rigorous and in-depth critical analysis possible; the interpretive data that I collect from these screenings can be justified as meaningful and valid due to the media analysis method.

Altheide and Schneider (2013) argue effective media analysis is dependent on the methodological approach to reading the data content, as much as the questions being asked about the data. For this reason, I believe it is appropriate to use a qualitative film analysis as it provides the best approach to closely read, interpret, and evaluate *The Avengers* (2012) in a thorough and meticulous manner. Altheide and Schneider (2013) note the 1930s-1960s as a growth period of film/media analysis in which “attention turned to... the unintended consequences of media messages” (3). Ultimately, history has proven that those unintended messages are still being delivered to mass culture in 2015, and the wide audiences that receive these messages give justification to the goals of this project investigating *The Avengers* (2012).

For this project, the film was viewed a total of six times over a six-week period. Each viewing was intended to reveal an additional thematic concern of the film, or to at least offer potential coding options for the data recorded throughout the viewing(s). Furthermore, I found focusing on a particular character (and his dialogue and behaviours) was useful to narrowing the scope of each screening. While viewing the film as a whole was important to my consideration of *The Avengers'* bigger picture, the more attention I gave to each character as an individual—and their contribution to the plot, or team dynamic—the more I was capable of deeply connecting with the source material.

The first viewing illustrated how frustrating it can be to critique those superheroes I grew up idolizing. It also proved to be challenging to see beyond my enjoyment of the film as a consumer of the genre. On the other hand, watching the

film as though it was my first time seeing it proved to be enlightening; I recognized that viewing the film as data meant I did not know what I would find, and this allowed me to be more critical in my future approaches.

Arthur Berger (2013) states that semiotics (semiology), or the “science of signs,” (3) is an effective method of deriving meaning from pop culture in media criticism. He suggests that while words are the most recognized sign, signs can take a variety of other forms as well. As such, I understood the importance of reading beyond the spoken dialogue of the film and viewing the action, interaction and character behaviours as a language worth consideration.

I took notes on the various themes that emerged from my viewings of the film. I coded my findings into four distinct categories: Establishing Male Hierarchy and Superiority; Enabling/Embracing Violence; Non-Verbal Behaviour; and Masculinity and The Villain.

Each viewing of the film demonstrated to me how complex the male identities of the film are, as well as how my comprehension of masculinity was developing. I no longer view the male identity as a singular form that fits a static binary deeming something either male or female, masculine or feminine, but rather a fluid sense of self that is always in flux.

My methodology requires I observe and report my own experiences in collecting and interpreting my findings, and this led to a great deal of reflection on my process of media analysis. The responsibility to be objective in my analysis of the content and themes was challenging and complicated. As I identify with various positions of privilege (white, heterosexual, male) in society, I feared I would be at a

disadvantage in the depth of my analysis; perhaps my privileged position would prevent me from recognizing or catching certain instances in the film that are worth consideration? Eventually I realized that my position was not a downfall, but a support: acknowledging my social location makes my interpretation of the data valuable, because it comes from a place of honesty and reflexivity.

A qualitative media analysis is an effective methodological approach, as the study of signs (semiotics) in the film lent itself well to developing my analysis and argument in a rigorous and meaningful way. Augie Fleras (2011) suggests that media communication is gendered and ongoing; in other words, the ways in which media are communicated to its audiences is inherently gendered—catered to either a male or female audience—and that due to the media norm of an unquestioned, privileged male gaze, the construction of gender in film is skewed. This is problematic and requires exploration, and my specific use of the media analysis method draws attention to some significant issues in the construction of masculinity and hegemony in film.

My approach to examining masculinity does not end with analysis of the film, though. In doing anti-oppressive work, part of my project will include an example of how a pop culture social justice intervention into superhero masculinity might look.

### ***Creative Component***

In his article, “Men’s Collective Struggles for Gender Justice,” Michael Flood (2003) asks, “what inspires men to question sexist cultural values and patriarchal power relations?” (461) My best answer is: acknowledging the existence of gendered violence and its relationship to hegemonic masculinity, and possessing an

understanding of the need for a relationship between feminist and masculinity studies theorists and supporters to work together in the pursuit of gender equality and justice. Gardiner (2004) expresses that “although masculinist men’s movements sometimes decry feminism, generally men’s studies treat feminism and feminist theory as scholarly big sisters, perhaps dull, dowdy, outmoded, or too restrictive, but nevertheless models to be followed and bettered” (47). This attitude, while still problematic in its assumed superiority over a women’s liberation movement, illustrates the desire of men to learn from women and their successes and challenges in working towards a higher understanding and knowledge of gender constructions.

My role in contributing to this knowledge—and in using feminism in tandem with masculinity studies theory—will be the creation of an original superhero who undermines and subverts stereotypical hegemonic masculinities and patriarchal ideologies, and intervenes as an inspiring and influential (and ideally, marketable) hero who works towards justice via alternative methods than the traditional hegemonic man. My intention is to construct alternative ways of knowing gender and justice that are equally privileged and celebrated as often as the current approaches.

Potts and Brown (2005) argue “knowledge does not exist in and of itself, isolated from people. Rather, it is produced through the interactions of people, and as all people are socially located ... with biases, privileges, and differing power relations, so too is the creation of knowledge socially located, socially constructed” (261). Consequently, in doing anti-oppressive social justice work, I must also

consider the ethical implications of my research and be reflexive in my work so as to construct valid and credible knowledge of gender and masculinity in the Avengers MCU, from my particular social location.

***Ethics – Reflexivity, Social Location, Non-Positivism***

As a non-positivist researcher, I recognize that objectivity is not only impossible, but also invalid and less credible than the reflexivity of a theorist who understands his or her social location in relation to the research. While my method is qualitative film analysis without human participants, I must still position myself in relation to the data so as to provide the most transparent, honest, and ethical contribution possible.

While the intersectional nature of feminism is important and privileged positions of race, gender, class, etc. must often be considered in research, the constraints of this paper—as well as my focus on gender— primarily requires I identify as a white, heterosexual male researcher while I explore masculinity. I include sexual orientation as I recognize sexuality often plays a role in gender theory, and because hegemonic masculinities do not privilege, but in fact *oppress* anything that differs from the heteronormative behaviours associated with strong men who acquire exploited, submissive women for their heroic acts, and as objects of their sexual desire.

On the other hand, oppression comes in many forms, some subtler than others. Potts & Brown (2005) suggest “the key in recognizing oppression is seeing the oppression that occurs through the various activities, social relations, and social practices we engage in with others” (258). Thus, it is ethically important that as I

endeavor to create a superhero who undermines hegemonic masculinity by offering alternative forms of masculinity, non-patriarchal values, or non-violent ways of achieving justice, I do not use my privileged position to oppress or marginalize any other group or person. I can ensure this by recognizing my own social location as a fan and consumer of comic culture—especially the Avengers canon—and take direction from those most impacted by marginalization, so that in being reflexive and open to guidance, I guarantee my work is valid, credible, honest, and socially just.

### ***Conclusion***

To summarize, this section was intended to inform the reader of my research approach to masculinity in superhero narratives—specifically, hegemonic masculinity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe through Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012)—and to speak to my use of third-wave feminism and masculinity studies as theoretical frameworks through which I shall ground my analysis and discussion. I offered justification for my data selection and method, and described the significance of exploring gender construction through a team's narrative, as opposed to a single, individual hero, as gender is constructed by and relies on social interactions to form ideologies and belief systems surrounding men and masculinity. Finally, I discussed the ethics of this research project with regards to my own social location and positionality as a researcher, as well as the need for reflexivity as it relates to my responsibilities in the construction of knowledge while working on this project.

## **Plot Summary**

*The Avengers* (2012) follows Director Nick Fury (Samuel Jackson) of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement & Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.) as he brings together a team of unlikely heroes to fight the battles humanity could never hope to face alone. Much of the film—and the heroes' interactions—take place onboard the S.H.I.E.L.D. floating airbase known as the “Helicarrier” (Whedon, 2012).

Below I include a brief summary of the major heroes that comprise The Avengers team initiative:

1. Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.); alter-ego Tony Stark, a genius billionaire-engineer that made his fortune in developing military weapons, and wears a suit of near impenetrable armor that can fly and shoot high-energy lasers and repulsor cannons to inflict incredible amounts of damage to personnel and property.
2. Dr. Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo), a gamma-physicist who was accidentally exposed to enormous amounts of gamma-radiation and gained the power to transform into the incredible, indestructible Hulk—a beast of unparalleled strength and rage.
3. Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), a patriotic kid from the Bronx in the 1940s that after rejection from the armed services, underwent experimental testing to create the perfect super soldier: Captain America. Having been frozen in ice for seventy years following an encounter with a Nazi enemy above the Arctic Ocean, Steve has since been thawed and serves S.H.I.E.L.D. as the embodiment of American ideals.



4. Thor (Chris Hemsworth), the Norse God of Thunder from mythology; he wields the hammer Mjolnir, a gift from the All-Father Odin in Asgard, his home in a realm separate from Earths, and feels it is his sacred duty to protect the people of Earth as heir to the throne of Asgard.
5. Clint Barton (codename Hawkeye) (Jeremy Renner) and Natasha Romanov (codename Black Widow) (Scarlett Johansson) are Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. under Director Nick Fury. Unmatched in speed and agility, espionage and martial combat, they are two effective assassins and valuable members of the Avengers Initiative.

The film follows the struggle of this diverse group of heroes as they attempt to form a collective and collaborative team that can combat the threat of an alien invasion led by Loki (Tom Hiddleston), the half-Brother to Thor and Norse demi-God of tricks and mischief. Loki uses manipulation and deceit to spread dissent amongst the Avengers and cause them to unravel, making his plans of global domination easier to achieve.

Throughout *The Avengers* (2012) there is distrust and competition on the team that leads to distraction, resulting in the death of S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg): the Agent that Fury sent to recruit each Avenger, and with whom each shared a liking. This ignites a fire within the team that inspires them to fight Loki and his Ch'Tauri alien army in New York City.

Finally able to see beyond their differences and work together effectively, the Avengers push back the extraterrestrial threat and capture Loki, sending him home

to Asgard with Thor to stand trial for his crimes. The object of Loki's power—the Tesseract—is retrieved and soon sent away to be guarded from further evil.

Ultimately, the Avengers' success in Manhattan broadcasts a message to all the realms that Earth should not be underestimated; with an efficient response team, an aptitude for war, and some serious firepower, they demonstrate they are a dangerous team—one that if they cannot save the Earth, promise to avenge it.

### **Analysis/Discussion**

In this section I will explore the thematic elements of the film that depict hegemonic masculinity in a variety of ways. More importantly, I will demonstrate how the film challenges the concept of a single hegemonic masculinity, and instead makes a case for multiple masculinities in competition, struggling to assert their strengths and overpower the differences between one another, which they consider to be weaknesses. This suggests a number of hegemonic forms are at play in the film. These variations of hegemonic masculinity are embodied by individual characters in the film whose identities are challenged by others in an effort to undermine leadership and develop male power structures. First I will address the establishment of male hierarchies and structures of leadership and power resulting from these competing masculine identities. Next I examine the ways in which characters not only enable aggression and violence, but embrace it; the film suggests that the most effective means of asserting one's dominance over others is through combat and competition, and the graphic nature of the film's violent scenes are intended to be entertaining.

Additionally, I will demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity is made manifest in the non-verbal behaviour and interaction between Avengers that perpetuate an ideal version of masculinity that is stereotypically aggressive at its core, and based entirely on displays of strength and power. Finally, I critique the differences between hero and villain, based on Loki's individual character traits as they differ from the Avengers', as well as his manipulation and intimidation of the team, which illustrates an additional, more complex male identity that still adheres to attributes of hegemony and hyper-masculinity while demonstrating qualities that are typically associated with femininity.

### ***Establishing Male Hierarchy and Superiority***

As with many team-ups throughout comic history, there is tension and stress amongst the Avengers as they attempt to create a cohesive group. Throughout the film, there are a number of instances when individual members assert their right to leadership, their dominance over the group, and challenge one another in an effort to establish a hierarchy within the team. These are characteristics of hegemony and hegemonic masculinity.

As discussed in a previous section, hegemonic masculinity is a version of the male identity based on the social position of a man; hegemony is about power and dominance (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), aggression and authority (DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005). It may be acquired through competition and violence, and is often recognized in those men that embody a variety of idealized attributes including (but not limited to) an outwardly tough, muscular appearance; cool and charismatic charm, wit, or humour; financial wealth and security; a

traditionally objective attractive appearance often characterized by positions of privilege such as being white, heterosexual, and male (Higate & Hopton, 2005); a recognized status or position in political, economic, or social matters (Holter, 2005); or overt (hyper) sexualization and sexual awareness (Plummer, 2005). A hegemonic masculinity may also be recognizable through acts of extreme physical strength and fortitude, and a collected demeanor in the face of adversity or challenge to their status or position.

The Avengers embody most, if not all of these traits and as such, the team's leadership is frequently in flux. The compulsive need that arises from various Avengers to assert their leadership is curious, as it suggests leadership plays a role in establishing one's masculinity and credibility as a man. This is evidenced during a scene onboard the Helicarrier—just after Loki's initial capture—when the Avengers engage in verbal conflict amongst themselves as they try to uncover each other's secrets and express disapproval of one another's positions and agendas on the team. The dishonesty and resulting distrust unfolds as Loki intended, causing the team to unravel and turn on itself from the inside.

The primary focus in this scene is on the men and their challenges to one another's authority and legitimacy within the group. Black Widow, while present, contributes minimally to the conversation and tends only to support various men based on the legitimacy of their argument. Of particular interest, however, is the exchange between Steve (Captain America) and Tony (Iron Man) after S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nick Fury warns Dr. Banner to calm down in case he becomes the Hulk:

Dr. Banner: It's his M.O., isn't it? I mean, what are we, a team? No, no, no. We're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're... We're a time-bomb.

Fury: You need to step away.  
 Tony: Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?  
 Steve: You know damn well why! Back off!  
 Tony: Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me.  
 Steve: Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?  
 Tony: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.  
 Steve: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. Yeah, I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.  
 Tony: I think I would just cut the wire.  
 Steve: Always a way out... You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.  
 Tony: A hero? Like you? You're a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle! (Whedon 2012)

Steve's comment that Tony is nothing without his Iron Man armor is a direct assault on Tony's masculinity; Steve is suggesting the armor makes the man, and without it—without his masculinity, or at least the version America treasures—Tony is nothing. Tony is being degraded to a lesser status—lower on the masculine hierarchy—without his suit. His response, however, is quick and telling. By defining himself as a “genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist” even without his Iron Man armor, Tony proves he can achieve hegemony through class and the accumulation of wealth, sexual conquest, and various other accolades without violence. Steve argues he “know[s] guys with none of that worth ten of [Tony].”

This exchange suggests that Steve defines heroism and true masculinity as based on character and motive. As Captain America, he stands for the values of American society that reflect chivalry, justice, sacrifice, and proud patriotism. He believes in an ideal man that makes the “sacrifice play,” and takes a hit for the team, as opposed to a man fighting for himself—which he accuses Tony of representing.

Tony, on the other hand, argues that Steve's heroism is a gift from his father—if Howard Stark had not injected the super soldier serum into Steve Rogers, Steve would only be the tiny, wimpy kid from the Bronx he was prior to the experiment. Tony is arguing that Steve's worth as a man is not inherent to Steve Rogers, but rather a scientific feat that created Captain America. Tony's response feels sharp, as though Steve's heroism slight hit a nerve in Tony, and Tony wants a challenge to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow team members; this echoes Tony's earlier challenge to Steve about "wanting [him] to make [Tony]" back off—a threat intended to intimidate and bully Steve into a physical and violent altercation.

This scene demonstrates hegemonic undertones as Tony and Steve seek to establish a hierarchy and superiority between one another on the team. Steve judges Tony by the values he held in 1940 as a war hero—someone willing to sacrifice himself for the other guy—while Tony decries Steve's legitimacy as a hero because his super abilities were given to him by Tony's father in a laboratory experiment, effectively suggesting there is nothing special about Steve Rogers beyond the super soldier serum in his veins. The two men clash while the other Avengers watch, waiting to see whose wit, snide remark, or challenge will outperform the other.

What is particularly interesting about this moment is the introduction of two competing masculinities, each fulfilling various aspects of the ideal man: Tony represents wealth and wit, while Steve embodies courage, bravery and fortitude. The two masculinities at odds demonstrate how difference is treated among men, and paints a clear picture of the film's developing power structures; the back and

forth between the men suggests the two masculinities cannot perform together and are bound to compete. This further implies that the victor holds the ultimate power, and non-conformity to *that* identity will be relegated to a lesser position on the team and take a lesser place in the male hierarchy, thus creating an oppressive, hegemonic masculinity.

The exchange is competitively charged, evidenced by the growing tension throughout the team as they attempt to undermine one another with personal attacks, poorly veiled threats, and direct physical challenges, as if a violent encounter might determine the leader and alpha-male of the group. This supports the assertion that leadership and masculinity are intertwined so long as the leader can maintain his position of power and authority in the face of any threat.

As more of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s hidden plans are revealed, the scope of Loki's manipulation encompasses the entirety of the Avengers, excluding Hawkeye; at this point in the film, Barton is absent from the scene and, due to Loki's mind-control scepter, Hawkeye plays the role of (temporary) antagonist. Shortly following a brief scene change, the other Avengers involve themselves in the feud. The following exchange is a quick-paced argument between the Avengers onboard the Helicarrier, which follows—and continues—the dispute between Tony and Steve just prior. It demonstrates how dysfunctional the team is as they each attempt to assert their leadership and position above the others.

Thor: I thought humans were more evolved than this.  
 Fury: Excuse me, did we come to your planet and blow stuff up?  
 Thor: Did you always give your champions such mistrust?  
 Black Widow: Are you all really that naïve? S.H.I.E.L.D. monitors potential threats."  
 Dr. Banner: Captain America is on a potential threat list?  
 Tony: I feel threatened!

Steve: Put on the suit, let's go a few rounds.  
 Thor: You people are so petty... and tiny.  
 [...]
 Tony: You gonna stop me?  
 Steve: Put on the suit, let's find out.  
 Tony: I'm not afraid to hit an old man.  
 Steve: Put on the suit. (Whedon, 2012)

Thor's remarks about humanity reveal his perceived sense of superiority over men as a God. His sarcastic comment that "[the Avengers] are so petty... and tiny" elevates him to a large and significant status, towering over the lowly humans and small men of Earth. Because his comment is not directed at Black Widow (who has yet to speak in this scene), his remark can be taken as a threat to the masculinity of the other men in the room; calling them "tiny" marginalizes the more diverse masculinities that might be embodied in, say, Dr. Banner—the shy, timid scientist—or in Nick Fury, the human secret agent with no super power or strength. Fury challenges this notion by suggesting it was Asgard who first brought war to Earth and "[blew] stuff up," implying a primitive lack of civilization in the Asgardians who claim to want peace, and further belittling Thor's intelligence.

Although Thor is known for brash (and clumsy) attacks without reason or strategy, this assault on his intelligence is an expression of superiority that suggests intelligence is a necessary trait of the ideal man. It is an attribute of hegemonic masculinity that Captain America embodies: as a war captain, he exercises extreme precision and tact in his battle strategies, demonstrating an intelligence that adds value to his claim of leadership in the group. Thus, Fury's degradation of Thor in this way illustrates how brawn and strength alone do not make the ideal man, further drawing attention to the competing masculinities in the room.



The argument continues with Tony and Steve in each other's faces, challenging one another to a violent showdown in which one man can stand as the better. While the pair's comments are delivered humorously, it is this moment between Tony and Steve that sows the seeds for future conflict between the men; their desire to prove themselves stronger than the other is fueled by a need to establish a hierarchy and recognize one as superior to the other. This is the stereotypical, idealized form of masculinity suggested by both DeKeseredy & Schwartz (2005): a survival-of-the-fittest attitude that expects one man take leadership—through violence if necessary—and face any challenge or threat to their superiority and masculinity without fear of consequence or reprisal. Efforts by men to embody this particular masculine identity often accord “a higher social status than those who do not” (Higate & Hopton, 2005, 433).

This version of masculinity is intended to be viewed by audiences as brave and bold. As both Tony and Steve command attention and respect for their individually masculine characteristics, they avoid coming off as fools, and instead become men worthy of idolization and adoration. Their competition is celebrated and encouraged as similar identities rally behind each competitor to see who reigns supreme. While this powerful ideal is present throughout the film, nowhere is it more obvious than the final discussion between Fury and the World Security Council (WSC) at the end of the film, in which Fury acknowledges the strength of his heroes united:

- WSC #1: I don't think you understand what you've started, letting the Avengers loose on this world. They're dangerous.  
 Fury: They surely are. And the whole world knows it. Every world knows it.  
 WSC #1 Was that the point of all this? A statement?

Fury: A promise. (Whedon 2012)

Fury's "promise" is indeed a statement to the Universe that Earth is not to be trifled with; it is a promise that should any invaders ever again seek to invade or destroy the planet, they will be met with great resistance—the Avengers. Fury is proud that the Avengers are recognized as dangerous, because he is certain they fight for justice. Yet the true strength of the team was the result of a collaborative effort and recognition of value in each hero's individual identity. Fury believes this union can bring peace, however the idea that peace is won through war is ironic, for enabling and *embracing* violence as the characters of this film do, perpetuates the idea that violence is not only entertaining and exciting, but to be expected amongst men.

### ***Enabling/Embracing Violence***

*The Avengers* (2012) approaches violence from a comedic angle—it is meant to be attractive and appealing, which is apparent in many of the scenes which illicit laughter and applause whether due to dramatic irony, tone of voice, or even character response. Much of the major violence in the film occurs during Loki and the Ch'Tauri's alien invasion of New York; however, there are moments of aggression between the Avengers themselves. Occasionally it is overt physical combat designed to be astounding and captivating by initiating the 'cool' special effects, setting or plot devices, but more often than not it is the attitude towards violence between the characters that demonstrates an embrace of violent and destructive behaviours in the film.

It is the dialogue between heroes and villains, and the quick-witted quips that make violence between these comic characters appealing onscreen. A fight

between two characters the audience favours offers incentive for being engaged—and entertained—by the fight; traditionally, good wins over evil, but why is it appealing to watch a fight between the Avengers? If a fan prefers Thor to the Hulk, the scene in which those two fight one another is enticing and exhilarating. Thus it is worthwhile to be interested in the outcome: whether to cheer on the success of a favoured hero, or the defeat of a despised adversary, as the excitement comes from the film strategically pitting two specific characters against one another, and doing so in a manner that is attractive to the audience.

Dr. Banner's role on the team offers much in the way of constructing the Hulk's violence as thrilling. Even Dr. Banner's proclamation that "[he's] always angry," just before *intentionally* transforming into the Hulk and delivering incredible punishment to an alien invader is carefully constructed to stimulate audiences and build eager anticipation for further violent encounters between the Hulk and his prey. Prior to Dr. Banner's various Hulk transformations in the film, he is approached by different members of the team concerning his alter ego. Tony, in particular, is depicted as a fan of the Hulk (and consequently, his violent outbursts):

Tony:           It's good to meet you, Dr. Banner. Your work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled. And I'm a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.  
(Whedon, 2012)

Tony idealizes the hyper-masculine version of Dr. Banner that Banner has worked so hard to suppress. This is an interesting commentary on masculinity, however, because Dr. Banner seeks to hide the Hulk—not release him. Regularly unleashing the Hulk would reinforce the idea that the Hulk is the favoured identity of Dr. Banner, and lend further criticism to the very existence of the weaker, less powerful,

“puny” (Whedon, 2012) Bruce Banner. It could be argued that this preference for Dr. Banner over the Hulk is a critique of hyper-masculinity; however, I believe it is more likely that the suppression of the Hulk is carefully constructed to build anticipation and excitement for the Hulk’s appearance. After all, Dr. Banner does not appear to fear for his *own* safety when he becomes the Hulk—he is liberated by it, and instead fears for the safety of others, implying an awareness that the freedom of his hyper-masculine alter ego puts others at risk of harm. Thus it is interesting that the Hulk is more often the celebrated hero in the Banner/Hulk binary.

Furthermore, Tony suggests on multiple occasions that Banner might actually *enjoy* his transformation, cementing the notion that hyper-masculine characteristics are to be celebrated, and considered rewarding:

Tony: I’ve read all about your accident. That much gamma exposure should have killed you.  
 Dr. Banner: So you’re saying that the Hulk...the other guy...saved my life? That’s nice. It’s a nice sentiment. Saved it for what?  
 Tony: I guess we’ll find out.  
 Dr. Banner: You might not like that.  
 Tony: You just might. (Whedon, 2012)

Here, Tony is attempting to persuade Dr. Banner to relish the strength that the “other guy” has given him. He challenges Banner’s declaration that hulking up wouldn’t be gratifying, and instead offers the suggestion that the Hulk should be let loose and embraced.

Tony: You really have got a lid on it, haven't you? What's your secret? Mellow jazz? Bongo drums? Huge bag of weed?  
 Steve: Is everything a joke to you?  
 Tony: Funny things are.  
 Steve: Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn't funny. No offense, doctor.  
 Dr. Banner: No, it's alright. I wouldn't have come aboard if I couldn't handle pointy things.

Tony:            You're tiptoeing, big man. You need to strut. (Whedon, 2012)

This suggests a sort of ambivalence towards violence that the Banner/Hulk character combo both articulates effectively, yet also, simultaneously, criticizes the hyper-masculine aggression that is the cause of such violent destruction and devastation. It's an interesting commentary on the role of hegemonic masculinity, as the Hulk fulfills the traditional aggressive, dominant, and strong male tropes, whereas, within the same character, Dr. Banner is resistant to the hyper-masculine monster within in. On the other hand, the film (and characters) consistently undermine the shy qualities of the gamma physicist and embrace the ultimate power that lives within the Hulk; even competing masculinities such as Tony and Steve both express at some point in the film that Banner needs to release the beast and embrace his strength.

The same way audiences relate to and empathize with the underdog who becomes the hero; the same way audiences recognize that villains often appear victorious before some last-ditch effort by the hero to save the day; the same way audiences crave a similar transformation between the popular Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the Hulk is somehow the more relatable and idealized version of Dr. Banner—audiences love the concept of “little guys” becoming “big guys.” It's the sense of liberation, of freedom and self-actualization that male audiences especially can relate to in cinematic heroes, which echoes Brown's assertion that masculinity is relatable in binary extremes (1999) and supports Holter's belief that masculinity is power driven (2005). In this same way, the Hulk is constructed as the idealized version of Bruce Banner. Unleashing the beast is what audiences crave as they

celebrate the metaphorical self-actualization that becoming the Hulk represents for Dr. Banner.

Yet, if the audiences embrace and celebrate the Hulk as the true Dr. Banner, but one who also represents extreme, hyper-masculine behaviours including aggression, violence, destruction and fear, audiences then also perpetuate the notion that to achieve the most idealized version of masculinity (hegemonic), males must then fulfill those hyper-masculine stereotypes and be aggressive, violent and feared to be embraced the same way. On the other hand, once hegemonic masculinity becomes the norm, anything less than violent and aggressive behaviour is expected to be shunned or oppressed, as those kinds of men see any opposition or difference to them as a threat to their supposed superiority.

This is an interesting commentary on the social hierarchy of men and one's recognition of their own status in relation to that hierarchy. Men that do not conform to a hegemonic masculinity still support it for they have been conditioned to believe it is the ideal version of masculinity to which they should aspire. This is a significant piece of data, for it draws closer attention to the ways in which difference is shunned—even within one's own self. Even if a man appears comfortable with his identity, he cheers for and aspires to hegemony on some subconscious level because of the rewards that accompany hegemony.

If violence of this nature is enabled by the characters onscreen, and then embraced by the audiences viewing it, then aggression and masculinities which perpetuate violence and strength derived from dominating underprivileged or differing masculinities will continue to plague popular culture (Brown, 1999;

DeKeseredy & Schwartz, 2005). This contributes to a culture of fear and oppression fueled by “a certain grounding, relatability, believability, and internal consistency” (Phillips & Strobl, 2013, 139) of media forms that influence supposedly healthy masculinities and gender norms through social structures (Messerschmidt, 2005).

### ***Non-Verbal Behaviour***

Hegemonic masculinity manifests in the interactions between Avengers as they establish hierarchies and superiorities between themselves, engage in conflict and violence and challenge one another to bouts of strength, speed, and will, but it is also demonstrated in the non-verbal behaviours and body communication that occur in the film. While this particular expression of masculinity appears less overt at first glance, the body language and appearances used in the film illustrates how visibly the Avengers reinforce a dominant, idealized and hyper-sexualized form of masculinity.

One example of this non-verbal behaviour can be found in Captain America’s first interaction with Loki. Having disrupted a gala, Loki towers over guests and commands them to kneel before him. One elderly man says he will not kneel before a man like Loki, to which Loki responds “there are none like [him]”. Kneeling is metaphorical of an invisible hierarchy in which the image and concept of different levels suggests the subservience or obedience of the person on the ground to the more privileged person standing above them. Steve jumps in to protect the elderly man before rising to Loki’s challenge and stating, “you know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everyone else, we ended up disagreeing” (Whedon, 2012).

The idea that a single man believes himself worthy of towering over others is oppressive. Hegemony is the influence or control of one person, group or nation over another. Loki's belief that he can rule Earth as a God and reign supreme is an expression of hegemony and privileged hyper-masculinity that is evident in his self-made pedestal. Captain America (aggressively) reminds Loki that positioning oneself above others is dehumanizing, which is, however, hypocritical of Steve as we watch him attempt to tower over Tony during their conflict on the Helicarrier. This is an effort to reinforce his position as the alpha-male and team leader of the Avengers, which Phillips and Strobl (2013) argue is often "represented through body image... heroes that [embody hypermasculinity]" (152).

Additionally, there is a scene in which the Hulk smashes Thor across the screen during the battle of New York as vengeance for the beating Thor gave the Hulk on the Helicarrier earlier in the film (Whedon, 2012). This is a strong depiction of non-verbal hyper-masculinity (Brown, 1999). This particular act requires no dialogue, but appears intended to entertain and humour the audience, and acts as another example of asserting dominance and positioning oneself on the male hierarchy. While the audience may not foresee the retaliation, they can appreciate it as humorous for the Hulk, who appears to have been patiently waiting for this moment since his original bout with Thor earlier in the film. Although the scene occurs in four seconds, it is this brief act of violence and hyper-masculinity that illustrates the competitive relationship between the Avengers who still seek to demonstrate their strength over one another, despite having already created a cohesive team by this point in the film (Phillips & Strobl, 2013; Pollack, 1998).



Further examples of non-verbal hegemony are evidenced in the depiction of the male body and sexuality in the film, which conform to characteristics of hyper-masculinity (Polson, 2014). The Avengers all ripple with muscles in skin-tight costumes that accent one particular physique: the brawny, broad-shouldered man with enormous biceps and abdominal muscles, and one who looks intimidatingly tough. The camera carefully captures the movement of characters onscreen in ways that explicitly emphasize strength and speed, as well as superpowers and abilities, which generates an idealized image of superheroism that is synonymous with hyper-masculinity and overt sexualization (Brown, 1999).

I emphasize sexualization because the way in which male bodies are depicted onscreen has sexual connotations that lend themselves to privileged forms of hegemonic masculinity. Acknowledgements of the feats of men (especially by women) both in and out of battle suggest male sexuality—while subtle—is still crucial to the male character’s image, development and narratives. Examples of this include a brief moment between Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) and Tony at the start of the film in which Pepper whispers—in a rather sexually-suggestive way that peaks Tony’s interest—that Tony will be rewarded some unknown prize for working with S.H.I.E.L.D.; Agent Maria Hill’s (Cobie Smulders) praise of Tony’s genius-level intellect for learning thermonuclear astrophysics overnight, and Black Widow’s casual nod and assessment of Tony as an ideal man even without his Iron Man armor, once again demonstrating his worth to the team during his argument with Steve (Whedon, 2012).

While in battle, Black Widow takes orders from the men—especially Captain America, toward whom she occasionally exhibits romantic feelings—which suggests women are relegated to a submissive role and in doing so, exist to reinforce the expectation that men be dominant in all aspects of life. This particular example demonstrates how male sexuality is constructed through the subjugated roles of women, and thus further aligns male sexuality with oppressive hyper-masculinity as the women support the leadership and hegemonic qualities of the men.

In this way, the non-verbal communication in the film is critical to the complete comprehension of hegemonic masculinity as it is fed by male appearances and behaviours. Whether it is the size and positioning of bodies, acts of unnecessary violence requiring no explanation, but yet are intended to be amusing, or the depictions of male sexuality that relegate women's roles to the reinforcement of male privilege, authority and autonomy, the hegemonic masculinities inherent in many of the film's non-verbal scenes demonstrate how dominant forms of masculinity benefit from group dynamics and behaviour as much as conversation.

On the other hand, there are much more explicit challenges and threats to the masculinity of Loki—the antagonist of the film. The ways in which his character embodies an even more complex version of hegemonic masculinity lend themselves both to hyper-masculine traits, as well as those considered more traditionally feminine, which is interesting for his narrative for while he is hegemonic enough to be considered a worthy opponent to the Avengers, he is still feminine enough that ultimately, he must lose the fight.

***Masculinity & The Villain***

Loki's character in *The Avengers* (2012) is motivated by hatred for the Avenger Thor, his half-brother, and he believes himself worthy of a throne—one he feels was taken from him on Asgard, his home world. He is an intelligent, egotistical, manipulative, narcissistic and cunning half-God, known for his mischief and tricks. He uses magic and deception to achieve his goals, and does not care about how he achieves his desired end. In the film, he works with an ancient alien race known as the Ch'Tauri to attack New York City and claim Earth as his prize. Prior to the final battle, he softens the Avengers by tearing them apart from the inside, controlling their minds and using tricks and manipulation to inspire tension and competition amongst the heroes. This prepares up the film to introduce male competition and effectively reinforces the conventions of aggression and violence traditionally associated with action movies led by male heroes.

Loki's gender role is complicated in the way he behaves: he is motivated to be the man in charge, yet he does not fulfill many of the traditionally dominant traits of hegemonic masculinity that might be associated with ruling; while he is dominant in the way he commands subservience, his emotions betray him. In some ways, this does explain why Loki is considered the villain: instead of adhering to the expectations of hegemony, he embodies many characteristics of lesser masculinities, almost to the point of appearing feminine—or, at least, as opposite to the hyper-masculine attributes of hegemonic masculinity. This exposes the binary between hegemonic masculinities and other masculinities as it suggests anything less than

hegemony is wrong, negative, or to be considered villainous and thus marginalized and demonized.

The more “feminine” traits that Loki embodies include a blatant lack of body muscle or outward physical strength, shoulder-length jet-black hair that frames softer, smoother facial features, and no inherent boldness or bravery in his aggression but rather a (occasionally) calm and calculated certainty of victory. Furthermore, Loki knows when he is outmatched and he is quick to shy away from fights he knows he is bound to lose—a far cry from the competitive, brash nature of Thor. Instead, Loki uses his wit and intelligence, as well as his cunning manipulation and magic to win fights; although these strategies adhere to some qualities of hegemony, his intellect appears more intuitive than learned, and intuition is often considered a motherly or feminine characteristic. Loki is dressed conservatively, but flamboyantly: little skin is visible beneath his elegant attire, stifling an overtly sexual appearance while still demonstrating through his costume that he is a character who values presentation and showmanship; a value more typically associated with the feminine. Finally, while Loki sometimes demonstrates an awareness of self and emotion, hegemonic masculinities such as Thor’s would be likely to criticize sentiment in favour of the heat of battle and glory. In many ways, Loki is the perfect foil to Thor’s blatant hegemonic tendencies and inherently (hyper) masculine character.

In a scene between Loki and Tony prior to the invasion of New York, Loki prematurely boasts of his attack, berating Tony and the Avengers in a mocking,

sarcastic tone of voice that reinforces the superiority complex he's constructed for himself throughout the film:

Loki: Please tell me you're going to appeal to my humanity.  
 Tony: Uh, actually, I'm planning to threaten you.  
 Loki: You should have left your suit on for that.  
 Tony: Yeah, it's seen a bit of mileage. You've got the blue stick of destiny. Would you like a drink?  
 Loki: Stalling me won't change anything.  
 Tony: No, no, no! Threatening. No drink? You sure? I'm having one.  
 Loki: The Ch'Tauri are coming, nothing will change that. What have I to fear?  
 Tony: The Avengers. It's what we call ourselves... sort of like a team. 'Earth's Mightiest Heroes' type of thing.  
 Loki: Yes, I've met them.  
 Tony: Yeah, takes us a while to get any traction, I'll give you that one. But, let's do a head count here. Your brother, the demi-god; a super soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend; a man with breath-taking anger management issues; a couple of master assassins, and you, big fella, you've managed to piss off every single one of them."  
 Loki: That was the plan.  
 Tony: Not a great plan. When they come, and they will, they'll come for you.  
 Loki: I have an army.  
 Tony: We have a Hulk. (Whedon, 2012)

The scene concludes with Loki throwing Tony out a high-rise window, infuriated that he has been challenged by the Avengers, who represent a threat to his rule, and also to his status as the strongest man. His underestimation is eventually his demise, but this scene effectively contrasts the hero and villain by proving Tony the more hegemonic ideal man. He is attractive, muscular, and humorous with a cool attitude and bravery that isn't threatened even in the presence of a God, whereas Loki reacts in fury and thinly veiled fear that illustrates a break in emotional security and leaves his character vulnerable. This is why Tony is the hero (alongside the rest of the Avengers) and Loki is the villain—Tony fits the idealized mold of a 'real' man, a *better* man, while Loki fails to contend with the traits that Tony embodies as the

ideal masculine hero.

On the other hand, in many ways Loki still embraces hegemony and hyper-masculinity as he thrives on violence and war. He is quick to anger and aggression, and relishes opportunities to kill for pleasure and elevation. As the villain, he is constructed to be murderous and malevolent; he is responsible for the deaths of “eighty people in two days” (Whedon, 2012), and cherishes any opportunity to intimidate and invoke fear in his challengers. The normative message perpetuated here is that to make up for his feminine traits, his more masculine ones must be hyper-intensified, allowing him to compensate for the “lesser” sides of his character and more fully identify as the alpha-male. His aggression and fear-tactics are used as tools for protecting himself against any threat to his masculinity and to his perceived right to rule Earth; however, it comes across as desperate and smug, rather than cool and in charge. In one scene, he seeks to manipulate Black Widow, drawing on her insecurities and fears to create panic and tension:

Loki:            I won't touch Barton. Not until I make him kill you. Slowly. Intimately.  
                     In every way he knows you fear! And when he'll wake just long  
                     enough to see his good work, and when he screams, I'll split his skull.  
                     This is my bargain, you mewling quim! (Whedon, 2012)

In this way, Loki establishes himself as a force to be reckoned with—someone who will not be stopped in reaching his goal. Further, attacking the “intimate” fears of a woman as a means of intimidation closely conforms to traditionally hyper-masculine traits. Loki’s “bargain” is not just a challenge—it’s a promise to target and destroy the protagonist’s life through aggression and violence. This is a thoughtless act with no grounding or foundation upon which to build and execute the threat. It is tough talk while he is imprisoned, and masquerades as a poor attempt at

manipulating escape. Ultimately, Loki is the one being manipulated and feeds intelligence to the Black Widow, which she was deceptively probing him to deliver.

Evidently, Loki's masculinity is complex, which may be the cause of his inevitable defeat. On one hand he exhibits strong hegemonic character traits and generously feeds his desire for violence and destruction, while on the other he embodies a variety of less hegemonically masculine traits, which contrast those of the inherently hegemonic masculine heroes. As a result of this, Loki's complicated masculine identity falls short of the status and privilege he sought to obtain, and due to his different, "lesser" masculinity, he is villainized and fails in his achieving his desired goals. This is a commentary on the construction of gender, as it further suggests hegemonic masculinities—like those of the Avengers—are the more privileged, celebrated, and successful forms of manhood than those with which Loki might identify. It confirms that although there may be unsettled masculinities in competition, it still pays to identify with as many hegemonic qualities as possible to ensure success and happiness in the world—anything less results in failure.

### ***Final Thoughts***

In conclusion, *The Avengers* (2012) constructs hegemonic masculinity as an ideal that is definitive of success, while branding anything less than hegemony as lacking and bound for defeat or loss. However, although the various, competing masculinities at play within the Avengers' team dynamic initially inspire competition and discord, evidence from the film suggests that with the proper motivation, even competing hegemonic masculinities can work in tandem to accomplish a goal—or in this case, save the planet from global domination from a

character who fails to embody an entirely hegemonic male role. While peace is promoted by S.H.I.E.L.D. as the desired outcome of using the Avengers, the aggression and violence of so many hyper-masculine identities vying for power results in problematic situations stemming from constructed ideologies about masculinity that marginalize anything that does not conform to those ideals. This is a problem in both the comic universe and in real life, for as consumers of these products, we are influenced by the subject matter within. Evidently, there is a need for more peaceful approaches to problem solving, and the need for recognition that competing masculinities need not position themselves on some invisible hierarchy to successfully work together.

### ***Limitations***

Prior to illustrating how these approaches might be constructed, it is important for me to address the limitations that influenced the direction of my analysis and guided the process and development this project. While a project of this size was limited by the constraints inherent in length and space, more important were the limitations to my methodology, and the possible next steps that could be pursued with more time and resources. Specifically, the ability to complete a more in-depth analysis of masculinity theory; explore the role of women in superhero culture; investigate new, restorative and transformative social justice approaches to superheroism and comic culture; and to deconstruct Avengers narratives in a variety of their forms would have created a more well-rounded and expansive project.



Masculinity theory is a growing field. Had I been able to further delve into the literature on masculinities in popular culture and in society, I could have offered a wider breadth of knowledge on the subject and further contextualized my project within the great conversation. Moreover, anti-oppressive lenses of research require frequently fluid and transforming or adapting views of social justice, and with regards to gender and masculinity, the school of feminism offers that flexibility. I think with all of the literature that has been written on the development of feminist theory and its more recent collaboration with masculinity theorists, it would be appropriate for further research on this subject to include an even stronger application of feminist principles to the subject.

In terms of feminism and its relation to the prescribed role(s) of women in society, I think this would benefit a further analysis of the representations of women in popular culture. These representations need to be discussed not just in relation to the frequency of female depiction in film, but also in quality. How are women portrayed? What is their purpose in relation to men? More often than not, it seems women are relegated to submissive or support roles for men. In many cases, they are even the objects of sexual gratification of men; rewards to be “rightfully claimed” by men who accomplish some feat or achieve recognition for some act. In other cases, the woman’s only purpose is to serve as a plot device or catalyst for action that ultimately stirs or progresses the male narrative. Perhaps this representation is the result of a blatant Hollywood “male gaze” (Fleras, 2011) caused by an overabundance of male industry professionals that—consciously or not—perpetuate the objectification of women through camerawork, dialogue, and

action. Perhaps it is the typecast actresses that must conform to marginalizing beauty regimens and are expected to look like Victoria's Secret models to sell movies to men. Perhaps not. Ultimately, what is certain is that without the alternative perspectives of female directors, scriptwriters, and producers for major Hollywood films, some genres will continue to maintain oppressive gender norms due to the lack of diversity in Hollywood production teams.

Consequently, I believe the need for social justice approaches to popular culture forms are at an all-time high. Ideally, socially just representations of all communities and cultures should be more often considered an expectation or standard than current procedures. When Berger (1971) said that the continuous consumption of some-thing is bound to have an effect on the consumer, he, too, accurately predicted the possible effects of discriminatory practices in pop culture as influential of social culture. As such, I suggest transformative and restorative approaches to popular culture are imperative. What this means for superheroism and comic culture is a more perceptive awareness of the ways in which superheroes are constructed. In the context of this project, that means gender norms; however, the intersections of gender and race, class, ability, and creed are all vitally important to ensuring a socially just superhero—as opposed to a socially unjust hero that fights for justice but fails to see their own existence or (potential) behaviour as marginalizing in nature.

As far as specific project limitations go, the most challenging aspect of my analysis was accounting for my broader knowledge of the MCU and being careful not to implement it in the exploration of this project. The Avengers exist in many forms:

film, television, videogames, literature, clothing and merchandising, to name a few. Choosing to focus solely on one singular film (in a franchise that, at time of print, consists of eleven) proved more difficult than I originally anticipated. Given more time and space to explore the various depictions and representations of the Avengers team in all of their forms—or, even just the *The Avengers* sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015)—would have offered much more in the way of data. Furthermore, had my methodological approach to my study of the film consisted of more than just a qualitative media analysis and included human participants in a focus group or interview setting post-viewing of the film, I could have gauged the reactions of the participants and recorded it as data for consideration.

I believe this project successfully contributes to a growing conversation about gender and sexuality in superhero culture, but as with all projects, more time and resources (and less limitation) means more potential data and further analysis. This would lead to a stronger understanding of the merits of pursuing this research.

### **Creative Component**

This section of my major research paper includes an original short fiction that fulfills the creative component requirements of my project. From here until my reflection on the narrative in Subsection 6.1, the writing will be broken down into chapters, like those found in a novel. This is the story of Chase Idmon and his rise to superheroism as he struggles with finding an alternative path to a healthy masculinity. This is *Prophet: Origins*.

## Prologue

A cold wind rocked the boats docked in the harbor. The sails blew in the night breeze and an unsettling silence filled the air that could cause even the bravest men to shudder.

"I don't like this, boss," a stocky man whispered to another, sturdier man in a suit.

The suited man carried himself with an aura of confidence and certainty that aired on the side of arrogance and ego. His thick blonde hair framed his face in a manner that hid his cold blue eyes but revealed a strong jaw and devilish grin. Unphased by the biting cold and firm in his military posture and stance, the man let out a gruff sigh.

"I don't pay you to 'like' things, I pay you to follow orders, offer protection, and ensure my business enterprises remain in tact and running efficiently."

"Yes sir, sorry sir, Mr. Talos, sir," the man sheepishly stumbled.

Talos smiled coyly as a pair of headlights approached Talos and his three men from behind a shipping container.

"Finally," Talos proclaimed. A pair of men in black exited the vehicle and beckoned Talos to the trunk of the SUV.

"You ought to find a better location for our next delivery. This yard stinks of heroic opportunity," the driver stated sarcastically, in a thick German accent.

"Gentlemen, with the amount of product you've delivered this evening, we won't be meeting again anytime soon. And, as for your costumed heroes, I don't recall any thunderstorm warnings, nor do I see an imbecile in a tin costume flying around overhead. And, correct me if I'm mistaken, but spiders avoid water, do they not? Pop the trunk, I'm here to do business," Talos barked.

The open trunk revealed five large crates containing hundreds of small vials filled with a bronze-coloured fluid emitting a faint luminescent glow.

"You realize the strength and potency of this formula, correct? Even in such small dosages. These were not intended for recreational use... The wrong dose will kill a man," the passenger of the mysterious vehicle suspiciously blurted out.

"I'm counting on it. You see, I have assets in place that can synthesize an improved version of the substance; injectable, in fact. All I needed was the base formula to perfect my serum and create a product that will provide me with the perfect soldiers; something the United States military was apparently not bright enough to concoct for themselves. This, of course, before delivering it to the public and expanding their potential. The final product, while still potent and lethal if improperly used—casualties of science—is designed to enhance the base attributes of the individual and bolster testosterone production so as to... improve the man. I call it 'Solarflare,' as its sure to brighten your day. My men will have it on the streets by the end of the month. By the next quarter, the need for Solarflare will devour the city. Customers all over Manhattan will scramble for more; that's the beauty of addiction. It's so much more lucrative than real estate," Talos replied.

"We care not for your corporate greed and mad science, Talos. Our interests are more... personal. Our payment, if you would, so we may leave this place." The driver shifted impatiently.

Talos slouched as his men retrieved the crates from the trunk, moving them to their parked vehicle.

“Ah, yes, your payment. You see, with this shipment I am no longer in need of your services—though they were *exceptional!* Consequently, I regret I must terminate our business relationship, and, well, you know... loose ends.”

Without hesitation, two shots ring out in the night from the shadows behind Talos’ position and meet their mark in the two men’s heads. A man stepped out from the darkness and nodded in Talos’ direction.

“I’ll clean this up,” he muttered.

“Good, man! You shall receive payment this evening. You see boys,” Talos gestured towards his men, and then to the mysterious figure. “This is a real man! A cold-blooded killer! Learn.”

The three men shuffled back to the car they arrived in. Talos paused, gazing at the bright, glowing vials in the crates. Breathing a sigh of relief mixed with pity, he whispered to himself.

“They have no idea what awaits them. But I shall bring it to them... Greatness.”

### **Chapter One: Man In The Mirror**

“Chase, up, now!”

Friday mornings were always the hardest to get out of bed.

“I’m up! Give me a minute!” Chase bellowed from his room.

Rolling over beneath the covers, Chase Idmon glanced out the window at another rainy day. Stumbling out of bed, Chase nearly knocked over the bucket collecting water from the leaks in his bedroom ceiling.

“Ouch!” he shouted, smashing his toes on the half-full bucket from just the night before. Chase shambled towards the bathroom where he initiated his morning routine.

Assessing himself in the mirror, Chase studied the scarred side of his face that was burned as a child. The fire that had destroyed his previous home and taken his father’s life had also left a permanent reminder of how dark the world could be; the fire investigation unit believed the fire was intentional—arson—but they never found the person responsible.

“You know, we’re going to fix that one day,” Chase’s mother stated, walking into the room.

“Wha-?” Chase replied in alarm.

“The leak? We’re going to fix it. The one in my room isn’t looking any better,” his mother replied.

Chase’s mother was an age-worn woman in her late forties. Bags filled the space beneath her eyes as though sleep had eluded her for years. Grey strands lined her otherwise black hair, and they fell in soft curls around her face, complimenting her dark complexion. She wore a welcoming, but sad smile that spoke of stressful times and turmoil, struggling to make ends meet while still providing for her family. Her voice was soft, but confident. It had a warmth to it that made her sound approachable.

“Oh, I thought you meant... Never mind,” Chase trailed off.

“What? Oh, my dear boy, don’t go thinking that way; there is nothing in you needs fixing. You are my son, and you are the most handsome man I’ve had the pleasure of laying eyes on. I don’t know why you insist on staring into that mirror and convincing yourself otherwise.”

“That’s not what I do. I’m...” Chase paused. “I’m searching for something,” Chase replied.

“Searching for what?” his mother asked.

“Peace. Remember what Dad used to say? ‘Find peace within yourself so that you may share it with the world.’ I haven’t found it yet.” Chase frowned.

“Well, you’d best look for it on your way to school,” Chase’s mother evaded with a flicker of pain in her voice. “I’ve taken another shift at the hospital, so I’ll be home late. Lunch is packed.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Chase responded calmly. He hesitated. “One day I’m going to get us out of here, and into a place we belong; a place you deserve.”

His mother smiled lovingly.

“I am where I belong, so long as I have you, my darling boy,” she said.

Chase took one last look into the mirror. Beyond the burns which covered more than half his face, down his right shoulder and to his side—the burns that had left such crippling self doubt and esteem into his mind—Chase was an average seventeen year old boy. He had grown his hair out as long as he could to mask his face, and his dark skin glistened with sweat from the June humidity. A small frame made for a tall and lanky teenager in oversized clothes. His eyes shone a bright, golden hue; his favourite feature, had they not been so prominent on the face he’d tried so hard to hide.

“See you later, Mom. I love you,” he said, grabbing his bag and running out the door.

“But you forgot your—” his mother called after him, interrupted by the slamming of the door.

Chase moved like lightning as he ran, quick and agile, over dumpsters, through the windows of abandoned buildings, around minor construction sites, and up fire escapes. Years of running from school bullies had proven useful to Chase; he had become a talented young parkour artist. With his headphones in his ears and the music blasting, he nimbly navigated his way through the ghettos and towards his destination—one in the opposite direction of his school.

Moments later, a sharp left and long jump between rooftops led Chase to a scaffolding which he had frequently traversed. Nearing the ground as he descended, Chase took a misstep and fell, crashing into the ground ten feet below. The previous night’s rain had made his playground slippery.

A young girl that had been sitting nearby moved towards Chase to help. Finding his feet, Chase lifted his head to look up at the girl, who got one look at his face, squealed, and ran.

“Thanks, I’m fine...” Chase muttered.

“Ah, walk it off, kid!” a voice from above called out. “She thinks she’s seen the boogeyman!”

“Clever, Andy. You truly are the best of friends,” Chase jabbed playfully.

“Best? I’m your only friend, you miserable wreck! And don’t you forget it! I can’t believe you missed that one—what’ve we been training for again?” Andy poked.

"I slipped," Chase replied sullenly.

"You know better than to go slipping around here. Especially with your good pals from class in the neighbourhood. Especially today!"

"I'm not going to slip again today," Chase replied defensively. "And if those morons could ever catch me, I'd be ready for them. You trained me for that too, remember?"

"Yeah, well, apparently I'm not that great a coach," Andy winked, quickly descending the scaffolding. "And hey, don't let the kid get you down."

Chase looked at Andy with the admiration of a small child peering up at an older sibling. For the seven years that Chase and his mother had lived alone in the beaten down neighbourhood, Andy had looked after Chase, taken care of him as if he were family, and protected him from the cruelty of his tormentors. In the past few years, Andy had begun training Chase to run, and—when needed—to defend himself.

Andy was a few years older than Chase, living in the neighbourhood with his parents and offering martial arts and defense classes at a low cost for those unable to afford them elsewhere. He was short for his age, but had a big heart, which he wore on his sleeve, especially around Chase.

Short, thick red hair covered his head, and a cheeky grin was nearly always plastered on his face. His light complexion was noticeable in this area, but it didn't deter him from looking out for his neighbours and befriending his students. He worked part-time at the local college, doing labour to make a wage and support his family, and, at times, Chase and his mother.

Andy was a confidante as much as he was a mentor and friend to Chase; he knew all about his injury and did his best to motivate Chase towards greatness, despite Chase's inability to see beyond his deformation.

"We should get going, or we're going to miss registration," Chase said, avoiding the pain from the girl's reaction.

He pulled his hoody up over his head and started down the alley. Andy followed, chuckling under his breath.

## **Chapter Two: The Run**

People filled the streets for a full city block. Emergency services waited near the entrances. A man in a suit stood near the registration booth. Over the hum of the crowd, an announcer could be heard through speakers placed around the park.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, gather 'round for the first annual tower run competition! Gathered here today, in the heart of Manhattan, from across the nation, are athletes and parkour enthusiasts young and old to watch our runners attempt this treacherous new course and showcase their talents. The agility they'll need to reach the peak of our newly built Sky Tower is out of this world! As our runners gear up, let's take a peek at the course. Standing a whopping ten stories tall, Sky Tower is the highest open playground for parkour artists in the country, featuring countless vertical routes, a number of angled gaps, bar swings, and ledges which these runners must use to navigate the tower; let's face it, this course was *built* to challenge even the most advanced runners..."

Andy looked at Chase.

"You ready for this?"

"There's a \$10,000 prize for the first runner to pick up their flag at the top and then reach the ground with it... I'm ready. I need this. My mom..." Chase replied.

Andy smiled.

"You've got it then. Nothing to worry about—you'll do great," he said reassuringly. "Just watch yourself on the course; it was supposed to be cleaned up after last night's storm, but always look out for number one. That's you. I'll be waiting for you at the bottom."

The announcer bellowed into his megaphone.

"All runners to the course start please!"

Chase walked towards his chosen starting position. He glanced up at the tower and took a breath.

"Here we go."

"Before the race begins, we'd like to take this moment to recognize our proud sponsor for this event. Graciously donating one of his own properties for the construction of this tower, Jason Talos, owner of Titans, Inc., a statewide conglomerate of construction companies and enterprises. Mr. Talos has generously funded the development of this property and the very Sky Tower our athletes are prepared to tackle. Please give a warm round of applause for Mr. Talos!"

The man in the suit from the registration booth stepped towards the podium.

"It is an honour to have lent my support, in some small way, to the development of the young men and women of this neighbourhood..." Talos began.

"What a load of crap."

Chase turned to see Andy standing behind him. He wore a look of disgust that Chase had never seen before.

"This guy gloats about supporting the neighbourhood; he owns half, and the other half he plans to demo and rebuild at cheap wages to profit off our loss. Everyone knows it, they're just either too scared to speak out about it, or he's paid them to keep quiet. Either way, he's responsible for extorting residents in the buildings he wants to purchase and makes all kinds of threats that scare people into submission. He's as two faced as they come, and he's a ruthless, violent bastard. Folks around here even suspect *he* was the one that..."

Andy paused and swallowed hard. Chase gave Andy a quizzical look.

"What?"

"Never mind," Andy replied. "Get your head in the game, kid!"

"...and I vow to dedicate my time, energy, and resources continuing to help build this city from the ground up while seeking those responsible for bringing the injustices and devastation that has occurred in these neighbourhoods."

As Talos concluded his address, the audience erupted in cheers. Throughout the crowd, individuals and small groups of people that Chase had not seen before now picketed the event, carrying signs depicting Talos' face buried in flames, or with something called 'Solarflare' crossed out by a big red 'X' plastered on the front.

Someone from the crowd cried out amongst the deafening cheers, just loud enough for Chase to make out her words.

"Why don't you come burn down the rest of our neighbourhood, Talos? You missed a few of us at the last apartment!"



It was then that Chase recognized the woman as Ms. Brown from down the hall in his old tenement. He looked at Andy, who had dropped his head and stared at the ground.

“Talos burned down my—”

BANG! A gunshot echoed through the sky.

“Run, Chase, run!” Andy bellowed at his friend.

Disoriented and confused, Chase sprinted at the tower. Nothing made sense; everything was blurry. Rumours of arson had circulated for years, but Chase’s mother had told him it was an accidental electrical fire that had taken his father’s life and left him scarred.

“Focus,” Chase whispered to himself.

Chase ran, jumped, and climbed his way past his competitors, up flights of stairs and across chasms in the tower. His head ached and his heart pounded, but his eyes burned with a fire that spoke of a determination unfamiliar to Chase. He climbed the first few stories with ease and surpassed runners on the fifth and sixth floors. Legs aching, he leapt up onto a platform that hosted a ladder leading to a higher ledge which would offer just enough of a running start to reach a hanging rope vine. The rope provided a two-story climb advantage, which—if done quick enough—would put Chase in the lead.

Suddenly, from behind Chase, a giant of a man blundered around a corner and dove across the gap to the platform holding the ladder. He paused just briefly enough to glare back at Chase and snarl, but what caught Chase most was the way his eyes—even in daylight—glowed a bright bronze colour, as though he were possessed. The man lunged up the ladder in a blur that seemed unlikely for a man his size. Frustrated with his hesitation Chase scoured the floor for options. He had three stories left to climb before reaching the peak, grabbing his flag, and beginning his descent.

Spotting two parallel walls, Chase thrust himself between them and began wall jumping against the two, to reach the eighth floor. He caught a glimpse out a break in the wall at the man reaching towards the rope. Pushing himself to the limit, Chase glided along a curved wall, running on it as though he could fly. This gave him just enough speed to propel him through an opening out of the building and onto the rope—above the other man. At this height, Chase could barely hear the dull roar of the crowd. He glanced downwards; the next nearest runner was still two stories below him.

Enraged at Chase’s unexpected overtaking, the man growled and ascended the rope with such ferocity and speed that Chase thought he might climb right over him.

“Come here, little man!” the runner shouted.

“See if you can catch me,” Chase smirked, rising higher and higher on the rope.

Nearing the top floor, Chase could feel the man gaining on his position. Entering a panic, he prepared to leap onto the top platform which held the spire and his flag. Mid-air, Chase felt a hand close around his ankle.

“Caught you.”

Chase’s thoughts erupted in fear.

“Let go of me, man!”

Chase squirmed, sweat pouring down the side of his face while he struggled to break the man's grasp. White-knuckled, Chase held onto the ledge as tightly as he could, as gravel and jagged concrete cut into his fingertips.

"That prize is mine, kid," the man spat. "Little boys making plays at being men should learn to stay outta the way, or stay home!"

With that, the man jerked his arm backwards, still holding Chase in his grip, and released. Chase felt a drop in his stomach and tried to gasp, but air only left his lungs. Ten stories below, Andy watched his friend plummet through the sky and hit the ground.

### **Chapter Three: Premonition**

Chase opened his eyes. Crowding him were faces of concern and bewilderment. Among them, he noticed Andy, shock and awe in his expression. Chase sat up in an unfamiliar bed. He gawked at the numerous beeping machines and strange people surrounding him.

"Where am I?"

"Take it easy, son. You've been in an accident," a man in a white lab coat responded.

"An accident?"

Andy smiled. It was clear from his goofy grin that he couldn't wait to bring Chase up to speed.

"Kid, you're a living miracle! I watched you fall... Ten stories! And now... Well now you're back." Tears welled in his eyes. Chase grimaced from the pain in his head.

"I remember falling... That man... The race... My mom!" he shouted.

"Chase, I need you to relax. Your mother is on her way; she left as soon as she got the call that you'd woken up," the doctor replied. "My name is Dr. Kenzie, and I've been taking care of you. Your friend here has barely left your side since you arrived."

"Woken up?" Chase asked. A puzzled look crossed his face.

"Chase... The race was a month ago," Andy replied solemnly. "You've been asleep."

With that, the door burst open and Chase's mother flew into the room, throwing her arms around her son. Tears streamed down her face, and the sight of this brought tears to Chase.

"I'm okay, Mom, I'm okay."

"My boy, my son! I thought I'd never..." she trailed off.

Dr. Kenzie spoke softly.

"Ms. Idmon, Andrew, if you wouldn't mind giving me a moment with Chase alone... I promise you can return shortly."

Shuffling their feet, Andy and Chase's mother reluctantly left the room. Chase peered at them through the window of the closed door as they shut it behind them and walked towards the cafeteria.

"Chase, I'd like to speak with you about the accident; candidly, if I may. You suffered severe head trauma as a result of the fall. As your friend tells it, you were lucky to survive; a ten-story drop is a miraculous recovery... I hear it was a small platform that slowed your descent mid-fall. It's a mystery to my medical team how you managed to survive even that impact, let alone the second. While you were comatose, we monitored your brain activity continuously. Your brain functionality

appeared to be... in a state of flux... exhibiting increased activity and enhanced ability. We're not sure what, exactly, this means in the long run, but you may experience some disorientation and confusion as you readjust to your surroundings in the short-term; now, this is entirely normal, but I'd like you to give me a call if you feel discomfort or you experience any unfamiliar symptoms or sickness. And be careful... Over exerting yourself could cause an aneurism and put you back here, perhaps in a vegetative state."

"Sure thing, doc," Chase replied carelessly. "I feel fine right now, just a wicked headache."

"Yes, that's to be expected. You healed exceptionally well and, despite the damage to your brain and what looks to be a remaining concussion, we should be able to release you and send you home shortly—if you agree to take a break from any runs."

Dr. Kenzie smiled. He had gentle, approachable eyes. For a moment, Chase found himself staring. The doctor was much older than Chase, but still had an aura of youth to his face. He was an attractive man, by any standard.

"Yes, okay," Chase stammered.

"Good, I'll find your mother and friend and get the paperwork for your departure ready."

Nine days passed along with a few final tests, and Chase was finally cleared to return home. Checking out of the hospital, Chase, his mother and Andy packed themselves into a small red '98 Civic hatchback in serious disrepair and started down the broken streets towards home. Chase stared out the window. A dull pain had continued to plague him since he'd woken up; painkillers, sleep, nor fresh air could shake it. Chase closed his eyes in an effort to sleep his way through the drive home and avoid the pain of consciousness. He shuttered at a glimpse of Sky Tower as they passed by, and his eyelids closed.

A sharp pain filled Chase's head. Opening his eyes, he gawked as he watched the cars around him move in slow motion and, as the traffic light changed to green, his mother in the driver's seat slowly start to pass through the intersection ahead of them. He could see the speedometer move on the dash, accelerating one kilometer at a time, as though he were hypersensitive to the speed of the vehicle.

Something in the back of Chase's mind felt strange—an itch, or scratching sensation. Turning to peer out the window on his right, Chase was faced with a red pickup truck barreling towards him in slow motion, with seemingly no regard for the now-changed light. Suddenly, the world around him returned to its normal pace. Chase cringed as he watched the incoming truck collide with his door at incredible speed, and screamed.

Chase opened his eyes. Jumping upright, he looked around him in a panic, his skin paling. His mother and Andy in the backseat gazed at him with a concerned look.

"What is it?" Chase's mother asked.

"You didn't... We didn't... I'm not..." he stammered.

Chase looked ahead of him at the intersection and red light ahead of him.

"You're good, little man! Nightmare?" Andy poked.

"So real..." Chase muttered under his breath.

He peered up at the light as it changed from red to green. Chase turned to look at his mother, and glanced down at the accelerator.

“Stop!” Chase bellowed.

His mother slammed on the breaks.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

She had a look of worry in her eyes that spoke of a mother’s fear for her son’s health. Horns blared behind them as frustrated commuters shouted out their car windows at their vehicle, stalled at a green light. Chase paused. His stomach twisted and churned as he turned his head to the right. Three car lengths ahead of him, in the center of the intersection, Chase watched a red pickup truck broadside the vehicle in the adjacent lane, causing the small vehicle to barrel roll into stopped traffic on the other side of the road.

Chase held his head in his hands. Cross-legged on his bed, he recalled the events from earlier that morning: the excruciating pain in his head, the dream-like vision, and the car accident that followed. His emotions swelled within him and he shut his eyes tight to try and block out the confusion and calm himself. Chase’s mother and Andy were downstairs speaking to a police officer, offering their eyewitness recount of the events that morning. Chase had been excused to recover upstairs. Alone in his room, Chase panicked.

“What was that? What is happening to me?” he pondered aloud. “Am I crazy? Was that a dream? It was like seeing what was going to happen, before it happened. That can’t be possible...”

The tighter he held his eyes shut, the more his fear and confusion built, and the more his head spun. As suddenly as the vision from that morning came, Chase felt a drop in his stomach, and opened his eyes wide, fearing he was recalling the fall that had put him in a coma for a month. Disoriented, he looked around his room and realized it looked different. It took him a moment to realize why. Staring at himself in the mirror, Chase realized that although he was still sitting on his bed, his bed was now hovering five feet off the ground. Chase let out a scream and felt him and the bed crash to the floor with a bang. Downstairs, his mother, Andy, and the police officer looked upwards.

“Chase? Are you alright?” his mother shouted, heading towards the staircase.

“Uh, yes, fine!” Chase shouted back. “I just dropped a shelf from the dresser. I’m okay.” Chase hated lying to his mother, but he had no explanation for what was happening to him.

“This is so weird...” he mumbled, unsure if he was dreaming again, or living in a nightmare. “But stranger things have happened, I guess.”

Chase glanced at the posters on his wall. Haphazardly placed and poorly supported, Chase had plastered the wall with images of heroes—his heroes—that had saved his city countless times. Sketches he had drawn of the Norse God known as Thor, a monstrous green creature the media was referring to as a Hulk, and a soldier draped in the American flag fighting off alien threats had been taped to his wardrobe, mirror, and walls. Shifting his eyes to the ceiling, Chase took a long look at the sketch he had drawn of the only hero he had ever seen in action. A red and blue tights-clad hero dangling from a web: The Spider-Man.

When Chase was fourteen years old, he had watched as the Spider-Man swung passed his neighbourhood to interrupt a police chase through the ghetto, in which three armed robbers had held up a convenience store. He recalled staring in awe as Spider-Man flipped around and jumped from building to building in pursuit of the fleeing vehicle. Ever since that day, Chase had wanted to run; wanted to climb, and feel the freedom that had liberated Spider-Man from the ground. He had watched his heroes and dreamt of a day that he could stand for justice and fight for the little guy.

Chase paused. Then shook his head. Then hesitated. Then shouted to his mother and Andy downstairs that he was heading to bed and wished to not be disturbed. Then grabbed a bag, and climbed out the window and into the night.

#### **Chapter Four: The Deal**

Chase had never been great at listening, least of all to the doctor. Running had always felt freeing to Chase, and this night was no different. The warm evening breeze brushed against his face and calmed him. Aside from the dull pain in his head, Chase felt no distress as he navigated through the neighbourhood towards a place he had kept hidden from everyone—including Andy—as a spot he could hide when needed, and be alone.

Chase slowed down as he arrived. He took a long, deep breath and sighed as he peered around the port. The docks were always quiet, especially at night. They offered solitude and peace, for Chase to think. It also served as a playground for practicing his parkour. An old, empty shipping container had been abandoned near the roof of the administrative building, and Chase had turned it into a little ‘hangout’ spot, filling it with old blankets, a half-broken chair and table combo, some playing cards, more sketches of his heroes, and snacks. He had a small lamp that he used scavenged matches to light, which kept the container bright enough at night for Chase to visit.

Pacing in the dimly lit space, Chase tried to collect his thoughts. “I don’t know how it happened, but I saw the future,” he said to himself, raising his eyebrows in acknowledgement of how crazy it sounded, even to him. “And then I levitated myself *and* my bed, in my room. I’ve got freaking superpowers!” he said expressively, getting excited.

“Oh, god, I’ve just got to figure out how I did that! Ugh! Come on, Chase, think...”

Chase continued to move about the inside of the container, closing his eyes and focusing his thoughts on the area around him.

“How do you *make* yourself see *the future*? How do you levitate ” Chase grew frustrated. His impatience was a crutch, and it had often hindered his ability to think rationally, and carefully plan his next move in any given situation. He called it ‘spontaneity.’ His mother and Andy called it ‘immaturity.’ Chase sat down on the chair and focused his thoughts inwards. He focused on his sense of self, his awareness of his surroundings, and his desire to understand the changes he’d been experiencing.

Chase rubbed his temples as a dull throb set into his head and caused a headache. Believing he’d made no progress, Chase opened his eyes. Astonished, he

watched as the cards hovered in front of him, the lamp floated around the container, and the blankets rose to the ceiling of the large metal box.

“Ha-ha! Yes! It’s working!” Chase laughed. A grand smile stretched across his face.

Determined to do more, Chase focused on the cards. He waved his outstretched hands slowly in a circular motion, and grinned as the cards followed his palms. Bringing his hands towards his body and then thrusting them outwards and widely extending his fingers threw the cards at the wall with such force that they pierced the metal wall of the container and stuck to it.

“No way...” Chase exhaled in disbelief. Wide-eyed and smirking with glee, Chase danced throughout the container, while the trinkets of his makeshift hideaway levitated around him.

Two car horns honked from outside the container and below, close to the water. Chase stopped dancing abruptly, startled by the unexpected noise. A sharp pain pierced his head and he clenched his eyes shut. Rubbing his eyes and slowly reopening them, Chase found himself sitting in the chair, the container in exactly the state he had found it in when he first arrived. The cards were neatly tucked away in their box, the lamp sitting on the table, and his blankets folded across the floor.

“What? Was that just...?” Chase sighed. “It was just another vision?”

Groaning and standing up from the chair, Chase paused.

“It was another vision!” he spat.

Creeping to the door of the container, Chase glanced around the docks. He could see no cars, no people. Crouched down, he exited the metal box and climbed down a ladder to a lower platform that oversaw the entire port.

It was so dark, Chase could hardly see. The water was calm, and there was nobody around that he could make out from shadows. Chase descended the platform; his curiosity outweighed his intuition that said something was amiss. As his feet hit the ground, Chase heard the sound of tires rolling along asphalt.

Ducking behind an old, beaten up ferryboat, he watched the car come to a stop. From the darkness came two loud car horns. A pair of headlights illuminated the darkest corner of the pier, revealing a second, stationary vehicle that Chase had not noticed through the darkness.

The newly arrived vehicle moved towards the parked car’s location and switched off the engine. Chase watched intently, his heart pounding, as a man in a suit exited the parked vehicle and approached the new one. He strained to get a closer look. To Chase’s surprise, he recognized the suited man as none other than Jason Talos.

“Son of a—” he caught his breath. “What are you doing here?” Chase asked himself.

At this distance, all Chase could hear was muffled conversation and mumbling from the trio of men that had exited the approaching vehicle. Spotting a dumpster across from the ferry and within earshot of the meeting, Chase scrambled behind it as quickly and quietly as he could.

“You see, gentlemen, the serum is more effective than even we had previously imagined.”

Talos motioned to another man concealed in shadow. He spoke with confidence, and a certainty that sounded almost arrogant—something that had been absent in his address to the audience at Sky Tower.

The hidden man stepped forward and into the light. Chase gasped. He'd recognize the cold, bronze glow of those eyes anywhere. The man from the race. Chase's body quivered as a deadly cocktail of fear, anger, adrenaline, and impulse flooded his veins. He steadied himself, took a breath, and assured himself he needed to find out what was happening before acting.

Talos gestured to a large container—not unlike the one Chase had fixed up—covered by a thick black curtain. The group of men—Chase counted six—moved towards the container and watched as Talos unveiled a massive transparent vat filled with a glowing bronze liquid.

"I give you 'Solarflare,'" Talos stated proudly. "We synthesized the original formulas necessary to create this finished product and managed to produce massive quantities of the substance. This is your first shipment; one hundred and fifty gallons, to be distributed to your customers in two week's time."

The three men that arrived together looked at one another. One man shrugged.

"No problem," he said in a rough voice that made him sound like a heavy smoker. Talos smiled.

"Congratulations, friends! You're now the proud owners of the best product in the State!"

The man with the glowing eyes let out a rough, hearty laugh. Chase had seen enough.

"Dealing drugs? Throwing me ten stories off a rooftop? That man burnt down my home and killed my father!" Chase touched the side of his face. "And he left me with this!"

Emotions flaring, Chase looked as all around him, small objects from the pier began to rise from the ground.

"It's controlled by emotion..." Chase thought aloud to himself. "With this power, I can stop these guys from hurting anyone else!"

Chase threw up the hood on his sweater and pulled the drawstrings tight, concealing his face. Fueled by rage, he stepped out from behind the dumpster, following by the swirling objects around him. The group of men turned towards Chase. Three of the men took a step back. Talos, the man with the glowing eyes, and a third, cold looking man with a goatee held their ground, unphased.

"It's one of them mutants!" shouted one of the three men.

Talos grinned.

"Step out from the shadows, friend. Don't be shy."

"You're bringing drugs to my neighbourhood? You present yourself as some great friend to the city... But you're a fake. And you're finished!" Chase shouted.

The man with the glowing eyes leaned forward and squinted.

"It's a kid!" he laughed. "Ha! Let me handle this punk."

"And you," Chase snarled. "You're going to pay for what you did to me."

The man lunged at Chase. Without hesitation, Chase thrust a large steel barrel at the man that connected with his head at such speed and with such force that it knocked him unconscious. The sight of this caused each man—excluding Talos—to draw their weapon and train their sights on Chase. Talos' other man, the

one with the goatee, instead drew two small submachine guns in each hand and aimed at Chase. Talos raised a hand to the men.

"You idiots, lower your weapons! If you hit the vat, we lose everything," he hissed.

The goateed man lowered his guns, but the remaining three men did not move, each fearing the repercussions of losing sight of the hooded figure before them. Talos moved slowly towards the container of Solarflare. Standing with his back to it, he held a clear view of the others and figured they would not fire their weapons, risking the delivery—or Talos.

Chase, still protected by the floating tools and scrap surrounding him, ran towards the men with a shout. As quickly as he moved, however, he felt a fist connect with his ribcage. Winded, Chase staggered and stepped back. The man with the goatee had intercepted Chase's charge and gone on the offensive. Chase focused on the training Andy had provided, but this man was too fast, and too strong—a trained killer.

As Chase struggled to breath, he felt his defenses lower and fall to the ground as a sharp pain shot through his skull. The man continued his assault on Chase, who employed his running abilities and dodge-counteracted as many of the punches as he could. His headache throbbed and he could feel himself growing tired and weak. The man stopped. Chase looked at him with defiance.

"If you were going to reach for the blade in your jacket, just don't," Chase said.

"How could you have known..." the man asked suspiciously.

"I've seen it."

With that, the man hurled a concealed blade towards Chase with lightning speed, narrowly missing Chase as he leapt to the right.

"Enough!"

A shot rang out in the air and everyone turned to see Talos pointing a gun at the sky.

"End him, and let's be done with it," he said scathingly to the goateed man.

Fatigued and suffering a crippling migraine, Chase felt his strength leave him. He stood in front of the man, staring down the barrel of a gun, waiting to die. The man aimed at Chase's head.

"You know, I usually tend to avoid these parts—all that water—but I heard there was a party and I was just *devastated* that I didn't get an invite. I'm hurt, Jason!" a voice from above jabbed. "And, as they say, boys will be boys, but come on guys—it's a party! No need to fight."

Faster than anything Chase had ever seen before, he watched as the man's gun was ripped from his hand and tossed to the side before the man himself was lurched up into the night sky and out of sight. The three remaining men unleashed a barrage of gunfire into the darkness from where the voice had come moments before. Talos moved towards his vehicle.

"Where are you going, Jason? Parties not over yet!" the voice laughed.

A blue and red streak flew through the night towards Talos as the men continued to fire their weapons. Chase stared in amazement, bewildered at the timing of his rescue, before crouching down behind the dumpster once again. A loud crack pierced the sound of gunfire.

"No!" Talos screamed.



A large crack in the Solarflare vat formed, as a stray bullet pierced the glass. As if in slow motion, Chase watched the glass shatter all at once, showering Talos in the Solarflare. His screams of agony caused Chase to flinch. The sounds of his screams were those of someone being burned alive.

The remaining three men turned to flee, moving away from the glowing pool that was now host to Talos' motionless body, and ran towards their vehicle. The luminescence of the Solarflare lit up the night and illuminated Chase's savior as he fell from the sky and landed atop the men's vehicle.

Slowly standing, a black emblazoned spider stood out emphatically against the red and blue suit. The Spider-Man had just saved Chase's life.

"Well don't go anywhere just yet, boys. I've got a stern lecturing prepared just for you on your way to the NYPD blue!"

A blast of webbing spewed forth from Spider-Man's wrists as he tied the three men together and webbed shut their mouths. Chase moved from behind the dumpster towards them.

"It's you..." he trailed off, unsure of what to say.

"It's me!" Spider-Man piped back. "That was some fancy footwork you had there, pal. And that nifty 'I've seen it' stuff? *Very* cool. You're like one of those Prophets from ancient times! You got a name?"

"You saw all that?" Chase managed to get out.

"Wanted to see how you'd handle yourself. And you didn't disappoint! You've got moves, buddy."

"It's Chase."

"Chase! *I like it!*" Spider-Man responded with an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

"I'd be dead if it weren't for you," Chase replied sullenly.

"Aw, hey, don't be like that. You did fine. You new at this? Where'd you learn to do that? Reminds me of some friends I've got on the other side of town: Xavier's School For Gifted Youngsters. You from there?"

"No, I live down there..." Chase pointed to the alley towards the ghettos.

"Well, if you want to keep finding trouble like *these* boys," Spider-Man said sarcastically with a nod to the three men, "I'd suggest a better outfit. Something with more protection. You can move, but you can't take a punch!" he teased.

Chase hung his head. Spider-Man looked at him with a sideways glance. Chase spoke softly.

"I thought I could handle them."

"From what I saw, you did fine. Just need to reign in the anger a bit, pal. You let it get the best of you. It controlled you, not the other way around. Dangerous game, Chase; take it from me—it could get you, or someone you care about, hurt."

"It gave me strength," Chase retorted.

"It gave you a shock to the ribs. Look, no doubt you showed some serious strength there, but if you're gaining strength from anger, you're not better than that guy." Spider-Man pointed to Talos.

"Is he..." Chase began, worried.

"Don't think so. I'm going to get him to a hospital and let the boys in blue handle the rest. They're my biggest fans after all."

If Chase could see under the mask, he would guess that Spider-Man had just winked.

“I don’t know what to do now,” he said, his self-doubt settling.

“Stay out of trouble, Chase! You’ve got a gift, but you need to learn how to use it before jumping into situations like that—it could kill you. But once you’ve learned, you should use it to help others. That foresight thing—calling the knife before he drew it—that’s some serious power, and it could do a lot of good, if you use it appropriately,” Spider-Man replied.

“I don’t think I can. I mean, I don’t know if I want to...” Chase frowned.

“There’ll come a time when you have to. Trust me. Someone once told me that ‘with great power, comes great responsibility.’ Don’t let it be a burden, Chase. Let it be a gift!”

With that, Spider-Man picked up the three men bound by webbing, lassoing them together and holding them in one hand, and retrieved Talos from the pool of Solarflare, tossing him over his shoulder. He swung up to the roof and turned back to Chase.

“You ever need a hand, contact my buddy Peter Parker, a photographer for the Daily Bugle. He’s a friend, and he knows how to get ahold of me.”

Chase watched in awe as his hero disappeared into the night sky, whisked away by a strand of webbing. A mixture of shock, awe, and queasiness overwhelmed Chase, and while he was thrilled to have met his hero, a cloud of disappointment and self-loathing filled his heart as he walked home, ashamed of himself. In Chase’s mind, he was not the kind of man that could even save himself, let alone his city. He was not the man his heroes were.

### **Chapter Five: A Friend In Need, A Hero Indeed**

Chase woke the next morning with a splitting headache. He had overexerted himself during the battle with Talos’ men, and his introduction to Spider-Man had overwhelmed him. Excused from school while he recovered, Chase took longer than usual to prepare himself for the day. Moving slowly from the pain in his ribs in addition to the pain in his head, Chase made his way to the bathroom.

Gazing at himself in the mirror, he once again focused on the burns that had marked his face. Despite the reassurance that Talos had been apprehended and taken into custody by Spider-Man, Chase still struggled to mask his hatred for the man. This day, Chase saw no glimmer of peace, no inner sense of self that he believed his father could be proud of. Gently touching the scarred side of his face, Chase groaned and shook his head.

“You’re just not good enough,” he said to himself. “Could’ve gotten yourself killed; needed rescue from a *real* superhero. You couldn’t even fight back.”

Chase’s crippling words of self-doubt bounced off the walls around him as though they were the voices of his tormentors from school. They pierced his ears and stabbed at his heart. He was certain his powers could be developed—he’d seen what he could do without training—but he was more certain that his inability to protect himself would manifest in any effort he employed to make a difference.

Walking downstairs, Chase found his mother at the table, breakfast prepared for the two of them. She looked wearier than usual, haggard and beaten down by stressing over her child. She looked up at Chase and smiled.

"How are you feeling, darling?" she asked.

"Tired, bad headache," Chase replied. His mother nodded and dropped her head.

In truth, Chase was in agony. On the other hand, today, he wore his emotional scars more prominently than his physical ones. He leaned in over the table towards his mother as she kissed his forehead.

"You tell me whatever you need, and don't hesitate," she said warmly.

"I know, Mom. Thanks. I promise I'm going to relax today, but I need to go for a walk and get some fresh air."

"Are you sure that's really a good—"

"I'll be fine," Chase interrupted. "I'm not going far; probably just to see Andy."

Chase finished breakfast and grabbed a bag. He told his mother he loved her and went on his way. Along the walk, he contemplated what was supposed to happen next. Chase had always felt a greater purpose awaited him and his family, but he'd never known what. Chase walked the alley towards Andy's house. A small tinge of pain filled his head. As he grappled with his inner thoughts and approached Andy's street, he heard a voice called out from behind him.

"Aw, the cripple returns, more so than before! Don't think that just because you took a tumble, we'd forgotten about what a freak you are..."

Chase turned around to face the voice.

"I'm not in the mood, Trent. Not today."

"You don't get a vote, here, Scarface," Trent responded with a grunt.

Hefting up his pants, he started towards Chase. Chase rolled his eyes; he already knew what came next. Trent threw a quick flurry of punches towards Chase, which he dodged, having the foresight to know where they'd be directed. Chase countered with one of his own, connecting with Trent's jaw and sending him backwards.

"I don't want to do this, Trent. I don't want to hurt you. Just... leave me alone," Chase pleaded.

"After that, I don't care how far you fell... This time, when you hit the ground, you'll stay there." Trent spat out blood and scowled at Chase.

Wanting to avoid the fight, Chase turned to run. He clambered up a small fire escape, his head ringing, towards a ledge which he could use to maneuver away from Trent. Having done this dance before, Trent anticipated this move from Chase and jumped up to an adjacent ladder and followed Chase to the roof. Atop the small building, Chase and Trent stared each other down, both waiting for the other to move.

Fear escalating, Chase noticed a small brick shifting from his peripherals. Hoping to scare Trent away, Chase centered his emotions and focused on his fear, seeking to end the fight before it truly began. All around him, small objects began rising from the ground and flying towards Trent.

"What are you, freak?" Trent quivered as planks of wood, bits of brick and small metal screws bombarded him. Baffled, he sidestepped each flying object, narrowly avoiding further assault.

“How are you doing this?” Trent was shaking now. Fear erupted within him, as he turned and ran. “This isn’t over, Scarface!” he bellowed.

Chase, proud of himself for maintaining some control over his abilities chuckled and moved away.

“I didn’t teach you *that*.”

Chase looked up to see Andy perched on a windowsill above him. He hopped down and leapt the short gap over the alley between buildings. He had a cautious, uncertain look on his face.

“Andy...”

“What was that, Chase? How did you do that?”

“I don’t—” Chase started. Andy interrupted him.

“Don’t tell me you don’t know! I’ve been your best friend for years. I’ve always looked out for you, and I always will. But you need to tell me what’s up. You disappear in the middle of the night—yeah, don’t think I didn’t hear you—and after surviving a ten story fall? You wake up from a coma, but feel completely fine? What’s going on, Chase?”

“I don’t know how it happened, Andy. One thing I’m falling, the next I’m waking up in a hospital, and the next I’m seeing car accidents before they happen. Yeah! Sitting at that red light, I knew the truck was coming. I stopped us because I *saw* it happen. And the dresser I dropped? No, Andy, that was the bed, with me on it, falling from the ceiling. How, you ask? Because I can move things just by thinking about it!”

Chase began breaking down as tears flowed from his eyes.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can’t explain it. I get emotional and things happen. I feel like I’m in danger, and the next minute I find myself aware of what’s about to happen.”

“It was you...” Andy whispered, almost to himself, but just loud enough for Chase to hear.

“What was me?” Chase asked.

“Last night,” Andy began. “At the docks. A security surveillance camera caught everything... Some guy in a hood took on Jason Talos and five men. You went after him... He was arrested in the ICU this morning; something about dealing drugs, it’s all over the news. They say he’s pretty beat up, and that he’s... well, changed.”

Andy swallowed. Chase shook his head.

“No, Andy, you’ve got it wrong. Some of it is true, yes, but I didn’t mean to hurt anyone. Spider-Man was there, and...”

“Spider-Man?!” Andy blurted. “Do you think you’re a superhero now?”

“Andy, please...”

“No, Chase, you’re going to get yourself hurt. I can’t watch that happen! I don’t care what power you’ve got, or think you have—you need to stop!”

Out of nowhere, Chase felt a sharp pain build behind his eyes. He lurched over, his head in excruciating pain. He closed his eyes.

“Chase? Chase! What’s wrong?” Andy asked, suddenly concerned.

“It’s happening,” Chase murmured through clenched teeth. “I can see... everything.”

A barrage of images raced through Chase’s mind. The streets of New York in distress, police cruisers overturned, people fleeing, fires burning, and at the center, Spider-Man, crushed beneath some fallen debris. Standing above him was a

behemoth of a man. His giant foot hovered over Spider-Man's head, as he stood bellowing at the surrounding people to run or die.

Chase struggled to focus. He could make out more of the monster. Tattered clothing clung around the beast's body, barely concealing an enormous muscular frame. The monster's hair was long and blonde, hanging across its shoulders unkempt. His chest was puffed out, accented by what appeared to be rock solid abdominal muscles, and his arms were nearly the size of Chase's entire upper body. But one distinguishing feature stood out most to Chase: the beast's body was entirely bronze. Chase followed the creature's body up to its face and felt his blood run cold. He'd recognize that face anywhere; it was permanently burned into his mind. Jason Talos.

Chase gasped for air and stumbled as he tried to stand. Andy caught his arm and steadied him.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, clearly shaken.

"He's out. Talos' is out, they couldn't hold him."

"What are you talking about?" Andy asked.

"You said he'd changed. How? How did he change, Andy?"

"I don't know, they said his skin had bronzed and become real thick, like metal, because of some exposure to the drugs he was pushing."

"We need to go, right now. Can you take me downtown?" Chase grew frantic.

"I think so, yeah, but you need to tell me what's up."

"Along the way. I saw Talos—he's not just bronzed... He's become a monster, and he's loose. He's going to kill Spider-Man, and a lot of other people if we don't warn him."

"Warn who?" Andy scratched his head.

"His friend, Peter, at the Bugle!" Chase shot back, already on the move.

"If you just saw this... Isn't it too late?"

"If I just saw it, it hasn't happened yet!"

Bewildered, Andy caught up to Chase as they moved towards Andy's apartment and hopped into his vehicle before speeding off in the direction of the Flatiron Building.

## **Chapter Six: The Bronze Bandit**

Ignoring the pain in his head, Chase lunged up the stairs towards the Bugle's office. Bursting into the reception area, he gasped to catch his breath as employees stood to get a look at the kid that had created a commotion at the front desk. A few workers leaned towards one another, whispering, and Chase correctly assumed their hushed conversations concerned his appearance and scars. Swallowing his pride, Chase stood and spoke to the man at the desk.

"I need to see Peter Parker! Immediately, please."

"Pete just left on a tip that Spider-Man was in the area. The boss wants him capturing images of him for tomorrow's press. He's convinced that the Spider-Man is responsible for wrongfully subduing Talos and causing his new..." the man took a fleeting glance at Chase's face and coughed. "Appearance," he concluded.

"When will he be back?"

"Parker is usually gone for a few hours when he goes on these excursions. Don't know how he always manages to find the guy. It's odd, if you ask me."

Chase moaned and turned to run out the door. Flying back down the stairs, he reached Andy in the car. Chase explained the situation and instructed Andy to drive around Manhattan until they caught sight of him. They did not have to drive far; zipping around corners, in between buildings, and free falling towards the ground, Chase and Andy watched while Spider-Man engaged in combat with the bronze giant in the street.

"That's Jason Talos?" Andy shouted.

"It is now," Chase replied. "I'm going out there."

"Chase, are you crazy? Spider-Man can handle himself! Look at that thing, he'll kill you!"

"He'll die. I watched it happen! I need to do something to stop that, or this power is meaningless. With great power, comes great responsibility!"

"You're not a Hallmark card!" Andy retorted.

"Andy, *listen!* I've never believed in myself. I've never felt capable of anything; you know that better than anyone. For once, I believe in myself. For once, I know I can make a difference here. I need you to believe in me, too."

Andy paused. He looked at his friend for a moment and then smiled.

"You're right, Chase... You *can* do it. I believe in you. Go out there... Be a hero."

"Thank you," Chase grinned.

"Hey, we're going to have to talk about this get-up when you're done here, you know? Those guys all have pretty sweet costumes. You want to play hero, you better look the part, mate!"

Chase smirked at Andy.

"Yeah, next thing I know you'll have a codename for me too."

"It's in the works," Andy winked. "Go, get out there. And try not to get killed."

Chase moved towards the battle, and then turned back to Andy.

"Maybe we don't tell Mom about this..." he joked.

"And risk her kicking *my* ass? No way!"

With that, Chase turned and ran in the direction of Spider-Man and Talos. Channeling all of his thoughts towards speed, Chase focused on reaching higher ground where he could observe the fight and lend support. As he ran, he recalled his bed floating beneath him his first night home. If his power could hold an object *and* him, he should be able to use that to his advantage. Extending his arms, palms out, he watched as the ground began to crack and two large, flat rocks broke free and moved in front of him, flying forwards at the same speed as Chase.

"Here goes nothing," Chase said, jumping up and onto each step, one foot after another, using them as steps to climb higher and higher while still moving forward. The steps moved with Chase, as if they knew where to be for his foot to meet them, providing him with navigational ease.

Chase reached a rooftop where he could clearly see the ongoing battle between Spider-Man and Talos. He watched as Spider-Man flung webs towards Talos, which constricted him momentarily, but could not contain him for long. He delivered punches and kicks with incredible force to Talos' abdomen, but they only angered him more. Breaking free of the webs, Talos threw himself at Spider-Man,

colliding with him as they tumbled around the street causing damage to the surrounding area.

Withholding his anger, Chase remembered Spider-Man's advice about controlling emotions. Although he had always had an awareness of his feelings, Chase had never thought about mastering them and using them as strength. He had found ways to suppress them, hiding from bullies and those that would antagonize him for his appearance. Now, Chase focused on using his desire to save a friend to fuel his strength and embrace his abilities, rather than fear them.

Nearly ten stories below, Talos tossed Spider-Man into the base of the building from which Chase was perched. Chase watched as the behemoth dug his massive fists into the asphalt and ripped up a boulder-sized chunk.

"When I said 'the parties here, let's rock out,' I didn't mean literally, big guy!" Chase heard Spider-Man jab.

"You ruined me, insect!" Talos growled.

"Technically, I'm an arachnid, but you know, same difference to all you guys, right?"

Spider-Man moved to escape from beneath Talos, but the beast held tightly to Spider-Man's leg, refusing him any opportunity to escape or strike. Chase watched as Talos dropped the boulder on Spider-Man's chest with a thud.

"Ugh, not cool!" he shouted.

Chase blinked and suddenly realized his vision was playing out before him in real-time. Frantically, he scrambled for something to distract Talos with. Finding nothing, he allowed impulse to take over.

"Talos!" he shouted down the side of the building. "Pick on someone your own size."

"You! He bellowed with ferocity. "You are the cause of all of this! I will pick your bones clean, brat."

Talos lunged up the side of the building, scaling the wall floor by floor using claws to clutch the structure. Chase used the opportunity to lift the boulder off of Spider-Man's chest and onto the ground next to him. As he lowered it, Talos leapt up and over the side of the roof, landing feet away from Chase. He moved to attack, but hesitated. Then he let out a haunting laugh.

"I know you, kid," he snarled. "You fell from my tower. I'd recognize that scarred mug anywhere."

"And I know you, Talos." Chase said. "You burned down my home, left me with these scars, and killed my father. You're a murderer, and a thief."

"And now I'm going to kill you."

"If you can catch me," Chase replied coolly.

Talos charged at Chase with a cry and Chase dipped out of the way a fraction of a second early.

"You can't escape, not this time, kid. And your spider friend isn't going to save you this time, either. I'm always going to be a step ahead of you."

"That's where you're wrong, pal. I know exactly where you're going to step before you even step there. I see you," Chase laughed.

Enraged, Talos attacked in a feral state, his bronze skin glistening in the setting sun above them. Chase used the evening breeze to accelerate his movements around the rooftop, allowing the wind to carry his momentum and allowing him to run and jump freely about as Talos lurched around, attempting to grab Chase as he

flew. Chase worked on a plan out of this situation. He couldn't get too close to Talos or risk being crushed, but he couldn't avoid him forever, either.

Chase ascended an old water tower, baiting Talos to follow. What Chase did not anticipate was for Talos to come soaring through the sky, crashing right through the tower and into Chase. Pinned to the ground, Chase gasped for air. Talos picked him up with one hand and carried him to the edge of the roof. Chase looked down at the ground, ten stories beneath him and closed his eyes, not out of fear, but out of acceptance.

"Caught you. And now you're going to fall... This time, you'll stay down."

"You know, the last person that said that to me got quite the surprise when he saw what I was capable of..."

"Not this time, kid! I've seen what you're capable of, and I've no reason to be scared of a little punk like you."

"Maybe not me... But him, I'd be afraid of."

A moment too late, Talos turned to look behind him only to see Spider-Man come crashing down on top of him, punishing him with an arsenal of web attacks. Engulfed in webbing, Talos angrily swatted Spider-Man away with his free hand, sending him flying to the opposite side of the roof. He threw the webbing off of him and turned back to Chase with a glare. Chase felt something in his head, but there was no pain. This time, a warm sensation flowed through Chase's body and though he knew what was coming, he did not feel afraid. He felt prepared.

"Do what you've got to do, ya big 'Bronze Bandit!'"

"Cute... But your friend can't help you this time, Scarface."

Talos released his grip on Chase and let him fall over the side of the building. Spider-Man had found his feet and was prepped to leap over the edge to save Chase, but met Talos instead. Satisfied with his deed, Talos grinned evilly and walked towards Spider-Man, but paused when he heard a voice behind him. He turned to look.

"My name... is Prophet," Chase shouted. "And I saw that coming a mile away."

His golden eyes shone bright like the sun, and all around him were long, thick strands of metal debris. Floating beneath Chase's feet were the steps he had climbed to reach the roof earlier.

"Impossible," Talos said, his voice wavering slightly.

"Nothing's impossible. You ought to know that by now," Chase said calmly.

Energy surged through Chase like nothing he'd ever felt before. His outstretched palms signaled the metal debris to surround Talos, restricting him and constricting tightly around his arms and body, preventing him from moving. Despite every effort to break free, he could not muster the strength necessary to escape the makeshift prison.

"Can't use your fists to solve all your problems, Talos. And no amount of Solarflare will help you now. Looks like you're out of business."

"You wait, 'Prophet,'" Talos spat. "Just you wait. When I get out of here, and I *will* get out—" he began, before a coating of web covered his mouth.

"He sure talks a lot, doesn't he?" Spider-Man quipped.

"He does," Chase laughed.

"So, 'Prophet'; I like it."



"You said it yourself. I just ran with it. Felt right," Chase said, as he and Spider-Man laughed.

"Thanks for the assist out there, by the way. I would've been at the bottom of his boot if you hadn't showed. Your '*spidey-sense*' kick in again?"

"I had a feeling you could use a hand," Chase responded with a nod. "What now?"

"Now, we bring ol' Talos here to a special place we have to hold guys like him."

"We?" Chase asked.

"I've got some friends that I think could use a guy like you. You handled yourself real well today, and they may need the support every once in a while. I'll have 'em get ahold of you soon," Spider-Man said.

"How will they know where to find me?"

"They'll find you... Trust me, they've got a knack for it."

"Thanks, Spider-Man," Chase said.

"It's Peter. Peter Parker," Spider-Man replied.

"I know," Chase winked. Both laughed.

In the aftermath of the battle, Chase made his way to the usual rooftop where he'd meet Andy. Sure enough, Andy sat on the edge of the building, feet dangling over the side. Andy turned at the sound of footsteps to see Chase as he approached from behind.

"You did good, pal. Everyone's talking about the guy that rescued Spider-Man. You're all over the news. I hear you beat me to the codename," Andy prodded, looking out over the skyline and into the light of the setting sun.

"Yeah, sorry about that. I couldn't let you have all the fun," Chase snickered. Andy teased back.

"I'll let you have it; it's pretty cool."

"Guess you better help me with that costume now."

"Ha! You know it, I better get to design it completely," Andy perked up.

"We'll see about that."

Andy smiled at Chase, stood, and put a hand on his shoulder. He had a real proud look on his face.

"I've never seen you more at ease than you were today, running in there and doing your thing. It was really good to see that. And you made a real difference, Chase. You should have nothing but pride in yourself for that, buddy."

"It felt good. I felt peace," Chase replied.

"What you've been searching for," Andy said.

Chase thanked Andy for his help, and for keeping his abilities a secret between them. They hugged, and for a moment, it seemed to Chase as though Andy held on a moment longer than normal. When they separated, they agreed to meet up again the next day and jokingly talked about designing something flashy for Chase to wear during his heroic exploits. Chase nodded, and ran off into the night, ready for home.

Arriving at the front steps to the small townhouse, Chase burst in through the door, startling his mother, ran to her, and held her tightly.

“I love you, Mom. I just wanted you to know. I couldn’t do any of this without you. You’re very special to me, and I don’t tell you enough. Thank you for being such an incredible woman.”

“My lord, what have I done to deserve this treatment?” she sighed and relaxed into the embrace.

“Everything, Mom. You’ve done everything.”

Chase kissed his mother, and walked up the stairs to his room. A long, well-deserved sleep awaited Chase as he plummeted into his bed, drained. Tomorrow, Chase had decided, the real fun began.

## **Epilogue**

Chase woke the next morning with a fire in his eyes. While he slept, visions had come to him like moths to a flame; his dreams were filled with flashes of the future. He jumped out of bed without any hesitation and moved to the bathroom.

Staring back at him in the mirror was a confident young male; dark in complexion, and handsome—only the faded scars of a past crucible on one side of his face served as a reminder of the boy that he used to be. Now, a man appeared, absent self-doubt and brimming with an inner peace. Chase looked at the man staring back at him and smiled as he thought of his father: ‘Find peace within yourself so that you may share it with the world’ was the message he received. Chase finally understood what his father meant by that. It was a message of love and compassion.

That morning, Chase adopted a new belief: ‘Show your face to the world, and the world will reflect your image.’ Determined to bring the very peace he felt within himself to his city, Chase readied himself for the day, grabbed his things, and headed out the door. The wind rushed through his hair as he ran, jumped, and climbed the rooftops of his neighbourhood. Chase felt free, liberated from the ground as he flew through the sky and embraced his inner strength.

Reaching new heights, Chase paused to take in the surroundings and the incredible view of his beautiful city. The air smelled fresher so high in the sky. The sun shone brightly overhead, and Chase’s eyes glimmered with a golden hue, power trickling through his veins. He closed his eyes for a moment. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard a cry for help. Turning to the West, Chase opened his eyes, took one last look at the skyline, grinned, and leapt over the edge.

***Creative Component Reflection***

Developing this creative component proved to be a challenging and complicated process. Not only was carefully constructing a narrative with dialogue as well as movement and direction more demanding than initially thought, it verified in my mind just how problematic superhero narratives can be if a socially just character is the intended product. While having the hero, Chase (Prophet), fight for justice was a straightforward concept, crafting the hero himself as an embodiment of a just and healthy, alternative masculinity to the traditional, ideological version that conforms to hegemony proved significantly more difficult.

My original draft of the character featured a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, attractive young male from a middle-class neighbourhood. In many ways, then, the character himself conformed to all of the tropes that hegemonically masculine heroes follow, save for a violent or aggressive personality, which had yet to be constructed in the context of the short fiction. A second version of the character featured an African-American teenager from an impoverished neighbourhood, the victim of an injury that left his half of his face scarred and disfigured, and his mother a widow. This version of Chase even identified as homosexual. At first, this revision seemed fair—even appropriate. I was approaching masculinity from the perspective of an underprivileged, marginalized group and visible minority. After careful consideration of this draft and valuable feedback from others, I recognized the inherent flaw in my work.

Language is a crucial tool for expressing oneself, and for storytelling. Unfortunately, in my narrative, the language I had used to describe Chase was

revealed to be problematic. In many ways, I had approached the new draft with a kind of checklist; how many boxes can I check off to illustrate Chase as a person of difference—of ‘Otherness’—so that I might use him as a tool to better illustrate my point about the necessity for social justice approaches to superheroism, I wondered. Ultimately, I had inadvertently created a character that fulfilled stereotypical expectations of difference and used him as a plot device to drive home a point that sought to argue the injustice of this representation. I found the language of “ghettos” or “slums,” and the imagery of Chase’s broken down neighbourhood to conform to the oppressive stereotypes about racialized communities. Furthermore, explicit remarks about Chase’s skin colour drew unnecessary attention to his race that led to tokenism. Unsubtle and sexually suggestive dialogue and description made direct reference to Chase as homosexual.

Eventually, a third and final revision led to Chase’s current depiction. Less racially obvious, subtler in his sexual orientation, and with fewer references to a neighbourhood plagued by traditional racial stereotypes. Additionally, Chase’s single-mother was replaced with a single-father to avoid the trope that young black men often grow up without fathers, whether through violence or absenteeism. Furthermore, this reversal of traditional expectations demonstrates the heroism inherent in a single-father providing for his son, and illustrates an alternative environment with a healthy male role model.

In constructing a socially just narrative that defined a healthy masculinity as different from the idealized norm, it was necessary for me to consider depictions of violence and aggression in the text. Being that this is a superhero story, and—as per

my analysis of the *The Avengers* (2012) film—I determine violence is constructed as appealing and exciting, I had to be cautious as to how I approached that particular subject matter. In my opinion, both as a masculinity theorist and a fan of comic culture, I had to include some violence to maintain the appeal and marketability of the story. This was a fine line to balance, as any violence in the text had to be carefully designed around Chase as a foil to his character as an intervention into pop culture masculinity.

To alleviate some of the stress of this endeavor, I wrote the villain (Jason Talos) as a conforming example of hegemony and hypermasculinity. In some ways, I took inspiration from the Avengers team, and borrowed specifically hegemonic traits from the characters to create the ‘perfect’ villain; someone who was calm, cool, charismatic, attractive, wealthy, white, and popular, and turned him into a ‘hulking,’ bestial version of himself after exposure to a fictional testosterone-enhancing drug of his creation. Consequently, Talos’ own ideal sense of self were defined by the heroic traits of the Avengers (while still representing hegemony), but eventually manifested in a liberated, ideological version of masculinity (by readers’ standards), rippling with muscles and aggressive motivation designed to be appealing, much the same way The Hulk liberates puny Bruce Banner.

Conquering this villain was no easy feat for Chase—a character I designed to favour peace-making approaches over graphic violence. To assist him in this mission, I included Spider-Man in the story. Spider-Man was meant to illustrate the complex, problematic, and unsettled masculinity that exists in a young, male superhero. Peter Parker is a high school teenager that in many ways conforms to

hegemonic masculinity, but in others rivals it in his self-awareness and emotional stability. While his superhero alter-ego was in some ways meant to contrast Chase's more tender, shy, and emotionally fragile character, he was also used as a plot catalyst for Chase learning to control his powers, accept himself and his flaws, and use his emotions as a strength as opposed to considering them a weakness. Ultimately, it is this awareness in Chase that helps him to win the final battle against the Bronze Bandit (Talos), and although Spider-Man may appear to contribute more stylized violence to the battle, his strength is no match against Talos and requires Chase's intervention to save the day. This was my method of illustrating the strength that exists in traditionally "lesser" masculinities that avoid hegemony, and demonstrate how different masculinities that work together can accomplish great feats.

Finally, the process of creating my own superhero origin story was complicated and challenging to me. As a fan of superhero culture and the comic form, I struggled with my desire to go all-out and create a superhero that naturally conforms to the hegemonic version of masculinity I have deemed oppressive. It is so ingrained in our psyches as consumers of this material that power *is* linked with violence, that developing a socially just intervention into superhero culture, at times, felt impossible—at least, impossible to market effectively. At what point does replacing the beloved 'guts' of a genre alter the genre completely? Eradicating violence and aggression from superhero culture seems and injustice in and of itself; the genre is loved by many, and in many cases—founded on that very violence. I struggle with the concept of eliminating aggression entirely, but do believe as a

result of this project, that it is possible to write superheroes that undermine hegemony and express their masculinity in healthy or peaceful ways, regardless of race, sexual orientation, or class.

I think it is important to conclude with the acknowledgement that my feelings as a scholar have not necessarily changed my feelings as a fan. I believe I will continue to excitedly cheer on characters like The Hulk, or Thor, as they violently battle threats against Earth. And yet I will be more aware of my excitement, and perhaps question *why* I find this is so appealing. This is an area I am limited in exploring due to the constraints of this assignment; however, I would be interested in pursuing a study of the appeal of violence in popular culture to wide audiences. Moreover, the process of crafting the creative component showed me the value in seeking alternative paths to masculinity in two ways. First, it helped me to recognize and accept the differences in my masculinity from a hegemonic masculinity and appreciate the qualities that make me, me, the same way Chase grew to accept himself in the end. Secondly, it proved to me that social justice interventions into popular culture *are* possible, and can be effective if they are discussed creatively and with detail. Social change only occurs when existing issues are discussed; without an invested audience or genuine approach, inequality and injustice will continue to plague society. This justified the intent of this project, regardless of whether or not the narrative would be commercially successful.

### **Conclusion**

The examples offered from my analysis of *The Avengers* (2012) demonstrate just how ingrained normative gender roles and expectations are in popular and

superhero culture. These films reflect the dominant societal and cultural values of the audiences that consume them, and as such, the existence of hegemonic masculinities which target non-hegemonic gender identities (men and women alike) perpetuate the oppressive ideological expectations that society must conform to prescribed gender norms and behaviours to avoid marginalization and oppression. Anything less than complete conformity is met with resistance and competition based on the possibility that difference might challenge the status quo.

*The Avengers* (2012) is no different, and suggests that difference is to be met with adversity, and regardless of whether or not a greater goal is presented, these unsettled masculinities in competition will still strive to assert themselves as top dog; despite the success of their mission, the heroes rely on aggression and dominance to achieve these results, which further illustrates the need for a wider range of gender identities and a resistance to conformity and traditionally hegemonic characteristics so as to demonstrate a more constructive and embracing path to a healthier masculinity.

Ultimately, my goal was to demonstrate how a social justice intervention into pop culture masculinity and superhero narratives might look. To accomplish this, I created an original short fiction, which detailed the origin story of a young man named Chase who developed superhuman abilities and was forced to learn that embracing his differences, and developing an acceptance of one's identity is necessary to overcome the obstacles presented in becoming his own man. This narrative demonstrated a contrasting view of superhero masculinity and was the



first step in arguing effectively for the benefit of diversity in gender construction in popular and superhero culture.

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