Superheroes are a huge commercial tent pole in today’s pop cultural landscape. Their representations are part of the fabric of our culture, and the superhero concept comes with a history of hyper-masculinity and extreme gender expression. This paper explores three superheroes’ recent comic iterations – Hawkeye, Black Lightning, and King Tiger – to evaluate the cultural accuracy of the hero’s performance of masculine identity. The comics were coded by the researcher, and each was intercoded by a member of the race of the hero in question. While culturally accurate masculine elements were present in all character’s performances, culture is not central to their masculinities and the hegemonic ideal is still a heavy influence on all.

Headings:

Comic Books, strips, etc.

Comic book characters

Masculinity

Masculinity in literature

Intersections of race, ethnicity, and culture
EXAMINING THE CULTURAL ACCURACY OF MASCULINE PERFORMANCES
DISPLAYED BY DIVERSE COMIC BOOK SUPERHEROES

by
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Approved by

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Brian Sturm
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1: Introduction

A recent Huffington Post article explores the ways in which comics have begun expanding the amount of racial, sexual, and gender diversity they include in their narratives. The article concludes with a quote from Neal Adams, the writer who created the character John Stewart, the first Black man to be portrayed as a Green Lantern: “Times have changed… And as the audience changes, so do the superheroes” (Ostroff, 2016). This increase in diversity has been noted by many popular publications; however, there has not been much study on whether these modern, diverse heroes provide an accurate portrayal of life as an individual from an underrepresented population. Many now famous Black heroes have their roots in the 1970’s, in the wake of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements: Luke Cage/Power Man, Black Panther, and Black Lightning. As noted by the work of Rob Lendrum (2005), these heroes were from an underrepresented race, but found the source material for their representation of Black masculinity not in Black American voices, but in the Black Macho attitude of “Blaxploitation” cinema. The creators behind these products, in both the films and the comics, were most often white men, such as Stan Lee, John Romita Sr., Neal Adams, George Goodwin.

One current comics creator, Marjorie Liu, is not convinced that this modern increase in representation is being described accurately. She is quoted in a recent interview, stating: “But those are just optics, it's optics of change... Unless you have the structural diversity, the structural change behind the scenes…those optics won’t last
(Mcnally, 2015). Is the shift in comics representation merely visual, or are the representations of diverse, male heroes also accurate representations of these two intersectional identities? The goal of my proposed research is to assess the cultural accuracy of superheroes of different races, particularly as it pertains to their performance of masculine identities.
2: Literature Review

This research exists at the intersection of several fields and theories, including literary analysis, sociology, gender studies, and feminist criticism. As such, this literature review will provide a brief overview of the current state of research in these fields, focusing first on the development and rise of comics in popular culture, then briefly exploring their cultural impact and relationship to gender. From here, the review will explore “masculinity” and extend from the hegemonic masculine ideal to provide an understanding of masculinity as it is perceived by different races and how that impacts that race's representation in comics in the past. All of this leads up to the researcher’s focus on masculinity and race as intersectional identities in comics.

2.1 The History of Comics in American Culture

The first immediately relevant development for a discussion of comics came in the early- to mid-1920’s, when comic strips began to be published in news publications and magazines to increasing popularity. Popeye first appeared in a comic strip called Thimble Theater in 1919, and Floyd Gottfredson’s illustrations of Mickey Mouse and his compatriots in the Mickey Mouse strip, which began in 1930, are images that have become ingrained in the public consciousness in their fame and ubiquity (Graphic
Novels, 2006). The Mickey Mouse strip, serialized in the 1930’s, is important for its emphasis on narrative. Mickey would set out on adventures that could span many consecutive installments of the comic strip, such as the first story arc where Mickey races his nemesis Pegleg Pete to a goldmine in Death Valley (Gottfredson, 2011). This narrative continuity serves as a precursor for the next step in comics’ evolution: comic books.

In the year 1938, Action Comics #1 was published, bearing on its cover the red and blue clad figure of Superman, lifting a car above his head and cementing his place as the alpha and omega of superheroes. The success and popularity of Superman, and other comics of the time, is often linked to the nexus of historical events into which they began being published: the tail end of The Great Depression and the beginning of World War II (Kelley, 2009). While the modern connotation of comics is “superheroes,” in the “Golden Age” of comics from the 1930’s through the 40’s, comics ran the gamut of genres. Cheap to print, with deceivingly simple stories, comics quickly became a booming industry. The peak of this phase in comics history came between 1950-1954, during which time Americans spent forty-billion dollars on comics and 40% of households had at least one comics reader within them (Comic Books; Kelley, 2009). The ease of access and pop cultural nature of comic books, as compared to more “academic” classic novels, placed comics in the echelon of low-status literature (Lopes, 2006).

2.2 Low Status Literature and the “Stigma” of Comics

While comics are often categorized as low-status literature, this concept is sometimes colluded with the stigma associated with comics. “Low-status” is distinguished from “stigma” by Paul Lopes in his research on the topic. Low-status is
media that is not credited in mainstream media coverage or academic criticism. It differs from stigmatization in that stigma is a social construction which either actively discredits a person’s identity or places them in peril of such discrediting (Lopes, 2006). Stigma is defined by Lopes as the disenfranchising of a people who subscribe to or support a particular object or lifestyle. Fans of comics and other forms of popular culture “often have their social identities discredited and their behaviors dubbed pathological” (Lopes, 2006). This stigmatization of comics is linked to the ways in which comics have been researched, and the ways consumers relate to them.

Beginning with the publication of Frederic Wertham’s indictment of comics, *Seduction of the Innocent*, in 1954, comics were formally marginalized in American culture, commonly considered as potentially harmful and inevitably juvenile publications. The comics publishing industry, in an attempt to stave off this stigma and stop it from totally eliminating their business, created a self-regulating body called the Comics Code Authority. This body regulated the content of comics, with gradually decreasing levels of intensity, all the way until 2011, when Marvel and DC (the two largest comics publishers) finally stopped placing its seal of approval on their publications (Weldon, 2011).

One of the dominant ways comics appear in American culture today is through their cinematic adaptations. Most critics mark the release of Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* in 2000 as the beginning of the modern comic cinema boom, though Tim Burton’s *Batman*, released in 1989, is also evidence of the blockbuster potential of these properties. In part due to the blockbuster success of these films, which grossed $157 million and $251 million respectively (Box Office numbers retrieved from www.boxofficemojo.com),
comic book sales have been steadily rising since the early 2000’s. Between 2000 and 2013, comic book sales saw a domestic growth of over $600 million (Lubin, 2014). As comics have grown as an industry, they have also begun to receive greater critical attention and respect, moving away from their place as “low-status” media and the associated stigma. Beginning in earnest in the 1990’s, critical scholarship into the impact and value of comics in American culture began. This was closely preceded by the publication of landmark graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* (1980-1991) and Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986-1987), and the popularity of these titles as well as the merit bestowed upon them by the literary elite likely played a role in the new play of comics in American culture as objects of study and literary consideration.

The extent to which comics impact our national economy is not limited exclusively by the actual physical media that constitute the “comics canon.” The influence of this media pervades people’s daily lives and activities, leading to large scale conventions that feature cosplaying, panel sessions, and sometimes even Live Action Role-Playing events set in universes built by comics and other “nerd” literature and media. One of the largest of these conventions, that has lent its name to many smaller events in colloquial conversation, is Comic-Con, held annually in San Diego. The sold-out 2010 Comic-Con event led to an economic impact on San Diego county in excess of $160 million, which was over 100 million more than projected estimates (Hirsh, 2010). Cities in California were bidding over the right to host this massive and lucrative event, illustrating the extent to which the popularity of comics has grown and expanded into various facets of culture to reach a place of rich significance and economic import.
With this increasing financial power and cultural significance has come a renewed academic interest. Comics have been used as points of reference for historical criticism, analyzing how they reflect social mores and cultural concerns at various points in American history (Johnson, 2010; Kelley, 2009). There has been significant literary criticism of comics, and some scholars have even posited that comics form a uniquely American form of modern mythology (Przywalny, 2014).

2.3 Comics and Gender

Much research has been conducted on gender in comics, though most of it revolves around women in comics and their representation. The hypersexualization of female bodies has been a regular point of criticism for comics. A recent study revealed that female characters in modern comics are consistently illustrated in costuming and clothing that reveals significantly greater amounts of skin than their male counterparts, which the researchers concluded was evidence of the sexualization of female characters in the comic book medium (Jossy, 2015). Other researchers have levied criticism against the way women are portrayed in comic art, not only based on the merit of the overt sexualization, but also the voyeuristic way in which this sexualization is executed, creating “Good Girl Art” where the women are sensual but their sexuality is not driven by or delivering unto them independent power (Hayton, 2014).

In addition to the ways women are portrayed, both in terms of their clothing and relative power, criticism has extended to the ways in which comic book narratives position their male and female characters. Research has indicated that comic books convey common “rape culture” myths (Garland, Branch, & Grimes, 2015). Rape myths are commonly held beliefs and ideas about both victims and perpetrators of rape, as well
as the environments in which rape occurs, that are usually false and serve to subliminally justify or validate male violence against women. The previous mentioned study found that certain rape myths are perpetuated in comic narratives through a content analysis of comics featuring sequences of rape. For example, their study revealed that 30% of the narratives featured situations that portrayed the victim in a “victim blaming” light, casting doubt on the legitimacy of the rape as a rape based upon the victim’s lack of physical resistance (Garland, Branch, & Grimes, 2015). While these are important areas of study, and feminist criticism is key to the field of gender studies and the exploration of masculinity, the area of masculine representation in comics has been studied far less extensively in isolation of a discussion of masculine/feminine relations, through the feminine lens.

There has been some interesting scholarship done on masculinity in comics, usually as it pertains to race and most often as it pertains to representations of African-American and Black heroes. This is still a new area of comics study, and a few notably discussions of this content will be explored later in this review. Another relevant perspective to consider is the ways in which these representations may impact the reader. The physical depictions of superheroes of both genders are often unrealistic at best, unattainable at worst. The phenomenon of hyper-musculature and over-exaggerated physical forms has grown significantly since the “Golden Age” of comics; a study of visual representations of six DC characters over time, including Wonder Woman and Superman, found that hyper-masculine presentation of male characters and hyper-fetishized presentation of female characters has increased over time (Avery-Natale, 2013).
Scholarship on the roles the media we read and consume, and specifically comics, plays in our lives and cultures has taken multiple forms. One interesting exploration of how the negotiation of literacy can play into the construction of gender comes from Wayne Martino, publishing in the Australian Journal of Language and Literacy. In his article, Martino explores current research pertaining to boys’ literacy behaviors. Trends in one of these qualitative studies, which interviewed a group of boys’ about their literacy behaviors and masculinities, noted that the boys did not intrinsically tie being literate or illiterate to masculinity. When one boy chose to pursue more “academic” pursuits like book reading and library use, instead of traditionally masculine coded activities like sports and video games, he was applauded for his independence while being slightly marked for his lack of socialization (2003, p. 21-22). What is interesting about this research, and Martino’s further claims, is the hierarchy this seems to place on what is and is not acceptably masculine. The boy in question evaded threat to his masculine identity by maintaining self-reliance and performed heterosexuality, which it could be argued were more valued by the boys as parts of masculinity than more traditional social behaviors. It also indicated a trend that boys are not inclined to stigmatize the act of being literate as it relates to being masculine, but rather are very likely to pursue non-traditional literacies as compared to traditional print literacies (2003, p. 23). These non-traditional literacies could range from web videos to interest magazines to comic books.

The link between media consumption and body image, especially as it relates to female body image, has been well-established (Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008). Specifically, in the case of the male body in comics, researchers claim the dimensions of many of the characters are physically unattainable in reality (Long, 2000). There is some
research that suggests these relationships may not always be damaging, as images can be aspirational rather than isolating. In their research on “para-social relationships” with comic characters, Young et. al. found that young men with a strong affinity for a given superhero were protected from the potential negative impact of unrealistic superhero body portrayals on their own self-image (2013). This protection revealed itself in the form of self-identification; that is, if a reader had a strong para-social relationship with the character they were often able to see good qualities and aspects of the character reflected within themselves, and were more likely to look at themselves as “similar” to that character, even if their body was not similarly proportioned (Young et. al, 2013). Within this framework of the place of comics in culture and their current study, I plan to link criticism of gender in comics with racial analysis. As such, it will be important to understand the concept of masculinity and the ways in which the races to be studied construct and define masculinity.

2.4 Masculinity

Gender is a social construction, historically formulated in our culture as a binary opposition, assigned to individuals based on their bodies as either “male” or “female.” Judith Kegan Gardiner claims that perhaps the most important accomplishment of modern feminist research is the establishment of this notion, which conceptualizes masculinity and femininity as “loosely defined, historically variable, and interrelated social ascriptions” (2005). Defining what those variable and social ascriptions coalesce into is a difficult process, and there is not a particular consensus on what true “masculinity” is.
Two dominant conceptions on what masculinity is and the role it plays in our society have emerged. The first is defined by the concept of “Patriarchy” - a structural equality-inequality view of masculinity (Holter, 2005). The concept of patriarchy involves the utilization of the concept of masculinity to systematically disempower and oppress women and non-privileged males (Holter, 2005). The definition of what constitutes ‘non privileged’ men is bounded by differing rules depending on cultural context, both within a singular cultural community and the larger, more diverse culture of a nation. For example, within white masculine cultural groups, physical strength and heterosexuality provide a degree of privilege. When the scope of the considered community is expanded to the American nation, it could be said that a portion of this privilege extends to all white males, regardless of their male privilege within their own racial group.

The second social theory of masculinity is the concept of “Male Dominance.” This perspective describes a gender hierarchy of masculinity; this view links the ideal of masculinity with the concept of an innate, rather than a structural, predisposition to direct male dominance. This perspective is bounded by the ideal that masculinity, in essence, equals power (Holter, 2005).

Despite the difficulties of creating a set universal definition of masculinity, similar features amongst frameworks for masculinity and what is typically present in most understandings of masculine identity exist. Masculine norms are communicated through social interactions, family instruction, media representation, and other exposures that all begin at a young age. The meaning of conformity and nonconformity changes, as these ideas are defined by males against the social conditions and expectations they exist
Researchers have attempted to create metrics by which to measure masculine conformity, such as an inventory created by Mahalik et. al. which catalogues the following masculine norms: Winning, Emotional Control, Self-Reliance, Dominance, Risk-Taking, Violence, Playboy, Primacy of Work, Power over Women, Disdain for Homosexuals, and Pursuit of Status (Mahalik et. al, 2003). Some of these norms remain pronounced in many races’ and cultures’ perceptions of masculinity, and some take precedence over others or are removed altogether. Two are common to all conceptions of masculinity researched for this review: “Disdain for Homosexuals” and “Power Over Women,” or more generally, the definition of masculinity as something in direct opposition to femininity.

### 2.5 White Masculinity

One of the key features of masculinity in white culture is its direct opposition to femininity. Comic researchers have expanded on this principle, applying it to analyses of famous characters like Superman. Superman is the antithesis of his alter-ego, Clark Kent, and Clark’s behaviors as well as Superman’s are compared to the feminine model of Lois Lane, against whom Clark is shown to be lacking while Superman is impressively suave, macho, and self-assured (Lendrum, 2005). This structure of effeminate alter-egos is key to our understanding of the masculinity of white superheroes in Lendrum’s view.

Much of the above section can be considered to extend to “white masculinity,” as any study of hegemonic masculinity will typically rely on the empowered, hegemonic race as its data source. Indeed, in formulating the Masculine Norms inventory, Mahalik’s sample was almost exclusively college-aged Caucasian males (Mahalik et. al, 2003). However, there are some theories that propose ways in which the hegemonic man, and
thereby the white man, may be departing from these norms in terms of valid representations of masculinity.

Robert Bly, a leading voice in the modern “expressive men’s movement” notes in his book *Iron John* the rise in the “soft male” beginning in the 1960’s - a version of manhood defined by the removal of the aggression and abject chauvinism that defined his predecessors, but lacking the self-confidence and presence to challenge or be challenged by others with the use of strength (Bly, 2004). Additionally, as times have turned and geek culture has begun to be destigmatized, including comic books, it has been proposed that a new style of man has emerged, defined by the general “geek aesthetic.” This version of masculinity gives preferential value to “wit, humor, physical awkwardness, an awareness of personal limitations, and sexual submissiveness” over the dominance and aggression of previous visions of masculinity. In defining this version of “geeky white masculinity,” Mark Hill cites Yorick, the protagonist of the modern comic series *Y: The Last Man* (2002) by Brian K. Vaughan as a prime example (Hill, 2010).

### 2.6 Black Masculinity

Similar to hegemonic masculinity, black masculinity is often defined in opposition to femininity. Michele Wallace criticizes boiling down all masculinity to this broad conception, because though it may be true that masculinity is often defined in opposition to femininity and through the lens of male-to-female/female-to-male relationships, Black male to female relationships are fundamentally different from White male to female relationships (Wallace, 2015). For example, Lendrum posits that the emasculating force acting on Black superheroes is often not a comparison to a feminine alter-ego or a female counterpart, like the case of Superman and Lois Lane, but rather
they are emasculated by power dynamics and the inability to fill the “patriarchal” role (Lendrum, 2005).

This “patriarchal” role is what bell hooks defines as the dominant vision of black masculinity, a version of masculinity defined by these norms: authoritarianism, stoicism, muscularity, subjugation of emotions, and, in sum, the general idea of “toughness” (hooks, 1992). hooks also, like Lendrum, highlights the structural imbalance of power in American culture and how it serves to emasculate Black men by impeding their success in pursuit of the “patriarchal” ideal. Sourcing this imbalance of power to hegemonic masculinity and the ideology of Capitalism, hooks links realization of the “patriarchal” ideal to capital, both social and economic. When Black men are blocked from achieving this ideal by racism and their community circumstances, the frustration of the inability to achieve this vision of masculinity leads to increased violence, frustration, and sensations of inadequacy. The perpetuations of this vision of “patriarchal masculinity” and its frustrating influence on Black men in media, such as Blaxploitation cinema and early Luke Cage comics, contribute to this pattern being internalized and played out by Black men (hooks, 1992).

Another interpretation of the performance of Black masculinity that has been very influential in discussions of the topic is the one presented in Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America by Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson (1992). They define this construct of “cool pose” in the following quote: “Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single critical message: pride strength and control” (Majors and Billson, 1992, p. 4). Throughout the work, they
point to some of the same sorts of causes for the necessity of “cool pose” as hooks –
namely, the systemic patterns of oppression that deny Black men the same opportunities
as White men. These patterns of oppression make it easier for White men to achieve
masculine ideals, even though the research cited by Cool Pose indicates that Black men
value as important facets of manhood many of the same expressions of masculinity
conveyed by “typical” masculinity, such as aggressiveness, success at work, and self-
reliance. Research they cite by Noel Cazenave also indicated that Black men were more
likely to value protection of family, warmth, and gentleness – traits that appear to be
incompatible with “cool pose.” Thus, the pressures that make “cool pose” a viable
masculine identity and safety mechanism for Black males in a society that does not allow
other efforts at masculine success to commonly succeed (such as self-advancement
through work) may have negative repercussions on the actualization of more progressive,
diverse, and varied masculine identities for Black men.

A notable comic book example, as mentioned above, is Luke Cage. Created by a
white man for Marvel Comics, Luke Cage was originally Power Man, and his costume
consisted of a tiara and gauntlets similar to Wonder Woman’s and a chest-baring, deep-
cut, canary yellow shirt. Lendrum cites the effeminate nature of this initial costume
choice as emblematic of the way Black masculinity has been defined in comics. The
character of Luke Cage remained defined by “toughness” and an association with
symbolism representing the stereotyped vision of urban, drug-abusing, criminal
environments within which Black males are presumed to live, with the update of his
costume that eventually came not being a more nuanced and symbolic costume but rather
street clothes and gold chains (Lendrum, 2005).
2.7 Asian Masculinity

An attempt to create an overarching definition of “Asian masculinity” is hindered at the start by the wide variation amongst ethnic groups that could be categorized as “Asian.” However, there are some common values amongst Asian males, particularly among those that are of East Asian ethnic groups. These common values include: a preference for a collective worldview, attaining family recognition through achievement, maintaining rigid control over emotions, prioritization of filial piety, placing value on humility, and subscription to hierarchical relationships. Several of these are also masculine identifiers at the hegemonic level in American masculine conceptions, which may increase their reinforcement amongst Asian males; specifically, the importance of controlling emotions and acquiring recognition are common links between hegemonic masculinity and Asian concepts of masculinity (Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999).

In the case of Asian males, research has shown that some of these guidelines for masculinity are protective rather than restrictive. Much of the preceding research has highlighted the ways in which masculine expectations can be difficult to meet, and representations in comics can be impossible images, at least in terms of their physical dimensions. The more culturally reinforced elements of masculine identity have positive outcomes for the mental health of Asian American men, such as the emotional control and the idea of self-reliance. Other elements are more strongly linked to detrimental mental effects, such as avoidance and Winning and Dominance (Iwamoto, Liao, & Liu, 2010).

Stereotypes of what Asian men look like and act like abound in comics, but often as supporting characters. There is the Asian adversaries of Marvel comics, like the
dragon Fin-Fang-Foom, and the manipulative Asian mystic The Mandarin. There are even Asian mentor characters who have extreme power, most often in the martial arts or mysticism, but they are not the protagonists of their stories. Instead, they mentor white characters to take over the mantle of their Asian cultural skills, such as Lei Kung to Danny Rand’s “Iron Fist” and the Ancient One to Dr. Stephen Strange.

2.8 Research Direction

In light of these varying perceptions of masculinity amidst races, it becomes important to evaluate how the messages of masculinity are reinforced in media. The negative potential impact of culturally inaccurate and exclusively hegemonic representations has been displayed by critics like bell hooks and Michele Wallace analyzing the outcomes for Black communities. Comics do have outcomes for individuals’ self-perceptions and identity formation. Gaining an understanding of the current cultural accuracy of diverse characters can inform future directions for research, and identify places the industry can improve the portrayal of these characters in authentic contexts.
3: Research Question

Is the representation of “masculinity” in the narratives of diverse male heroes in DC, Marvel, and Dark Horse comics “culturally accurate”? 
4: Methods

The purpose of this research was to establish the cultural accuracy of the representation of masculinity in superhero comics fronted by racially diverse characters published by Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse.

Sources for data were purposively convenience sampled from available collections, accessible to the principal investigator via interlibrary loan. As noted in the National Science Foundations overview of research methodologies, document studies have a major hurdle in terms of accessing resources. The convenience sample is one way of accounting for this. The principal investigator also created criterion to focus the search for sources, and to allow for a preliminary scan to ensure that a reasonable sample will be available (Westat, 2002). Five main criterion were used to select the comics selected for analysis.

1) The main protagonist (most often recognizable by being the titular hero) of the series must be a male superhero.

2) The title must have been published within the past fifteen years.

3) The character must have been originally conceived as being the race and gender the comics used for analysis present them as.

4) The titles analyzed must not all be from the same publishing company.

5) The title must have enough material to constitute publication in a trade paperback/graphic novel form.
The reasons for these criteria were manifold, but can primarily be described as assuring the results are not biased due to inherent biases in a single publishing company, and to ensure that the character’s representation is impacted primarily by the story being told about that character, and not filtered through the lens of a legacy the character’s title carries. Point number three is particularly important, as recent attempts at diversification in the comics industry have often been realized through the recasting of a legacy hero as a character of a different race. For example, this criteria would remove a character like Sam Wilson from Marvel comics, who is an African-American man often bearing the identity of the hero Falcon, who at one point takes up the mantle of Captain America (Spencer, 2015). The mantle of Captain America carries with it a narrative legacy and cultural associations that may influence a writer’s presentation of the man who wears that costume in such a way as to obstruct their ability to be representative.

Possible sources were identified through catalog searching in library collections, publisher websites, titles used in similar research, and publishing records. The titles selected were *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon* by Matt Fraction (2013), *Black Lightning: Year One* by Jen Van Meter (2009), and *King Tiger: Son of the Dragon* by Randy Stradley (2016).

The titles were analyzed for their representation of masculine identities in both the language characters use and the images used to represent the characters and the characters’ actions. Data points were limited to the character’s themselves, rather than interpreting how other secondary characters in the title performed masculinity as well. This was to maintain a manageable scope for the research, as well as to make sure that claims were clearly focused on the protagonist as the significant character.
The research was conducted using content analysis. Quantitative analysis would not sufficiently process the synthesis of visual and prose information presented in comics, and attempting to analyze the appearance of certain words and their synonyms would not respond to the nuances of the intersectional ideas being researched: masculinity and racial culture. In order to account for an understanding of what masculinity looks like in the culture of each race being studied, current research in sociology, literary criticism, psychology, feminist/gender studies and anthropology was studied to establish current trends and understandings. The vocabulary for coding data points was created based on current research in masculinity and gender studies (as described in the literature review), and was iteratively designed to most accurately capture what occurred in the comics being analyzed. The vocabulary used became a twenty-three term list, provided in Table 1 (See Appendix 1 for a table that includes definitions for how the primary investigator conceived of these terms).

Table 1: Coding Vocabulary

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Terms Drawn From Hegemonic/General Masculinity Research</th>
<th>Terms Drawn From Research Geared Towards White Masculinities</th>
<th>Terms Drawn From Research Geared Towards Asian Masculinities</th>
<th>Terms Drawn From Research Geared Towards Black Masculinities</th>
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<td>Winning</td>
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The sources were intercoded by other individuals, all male. Each intercoder was a male of the same race as the protagonist of the comic they were intercoding for; they were not necessarily of the same cultural background as the protagonist, sometimes due to this being unclear in the source material. This intercoding is in order to account for a weakness of the content analysis methodology; namely, that the findings inherently entail interpretation by the principal investigator (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These intercoders were provided with the vocabulary, but were not told whether certain terms were derived from certain cultural research bases in order to not bias their categorization based on terms they felt they “should” use to categorize data points with a character of a particular race. Inter-coders were asked to look at the data points identified by the principal investigator and assign them between zero and three tags from the vocabulary based on how they saw masculinity being performed by the protagonist character in the given panels. The final analysis of coded data points was conducted by the principal investigator. Identified trends in the data were linked to and compared with the current research, in order to analyze the masculine performance of the characters in question and draw conclusions about the cultural accuracy of these representations.
5: Results

Tables 1, 2, and 3 display the data from the analysis of each comic. Each comic shared one major feature in common: “Violence” was the most frequently applied tag. This is not entirely unexpected, as the narrative form of comics traditionally centers narratives that rely heavily on violence as a plot device and mode of conflict resolution (McLees, 2016). When your opponent is a supervillain who eats people’s fear and cannot be killed, or a massive dragon demon that is destroying a city, hegemonic ideas of masculinity point towards strength and violence as the ways to assert the authority of the hero as good and defeat these threats.

While there was one shared term in the vocabulary that could be found in all the different cultural research sources – the idea of “emotional control” – there was surprisingly little overlap amongst the other terms: i.e., terms drawn from research on Asian Masculinity were not frequently found in the performances of masculinity seen in Hawkeye or Black Lightning, if at all. The flip side of this is that, in the case of each character, the terms affiliated with the research on their racial/cultural identity were often some of the most used tags. This was most dramatic in the case of Black Lightning, where three of the five tags that broke double digits were terms drawn from the research on Black masculinity.

Looking exclusively at the numbers, then, it would seem that the depictions of these characters are at least leaning into the cultural conceptions of masculinity as they
have been researched. What becomes more important, then, is exploring this conclusion by examining the ways in which these behaviors are realized and the images, narratives, and surroundings that contextualize them. In the next section of this paper, I will explore each comic in turn, pulling on particular examples to give greater insight into how these masculinities are performed and what messages they might be conveying.

*Table 2*

*King Tiger: Son of the Dragon Data*
Table 3

Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon Data

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<th>Intercoder Count</th>
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Table 4

Black Lightning: Year One Data

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5.1 *King Tiger*: An Ambiguous “Asian”

*King Tiger: Son of the Dragon*, by Randy Stradley, with art by Doug Wheatley, presents an adventure revolving around the titular hero’s lineage and budding association with a new assistant named Milo. The story arc follows King Tiger, described by the book as a “warrior mystic,” as he helps save Milo from a demon and is subsequently drawn into a plot on the part of his father and demonic siblings to release his mother, a powerful demon named Canthastius. Originally published by Dark Horse Comics, and collected in a trade paperback in 2016, the story features magic, swords, sorcery, and most important for the purposes of this paper, a protagonist who is Asian but who almost purposefully never fully discloses his particular place of origin. While the trends in the recorded observations of the performance of masculinity indicate a clear preference for some features of Asian masculinity, there are contradictions in the modes of hegemonic masculinity simultaneously deployed by the character.

First, it is important to explore what is meant by the idea of King Tiger being an “ambiguous” Asian. More recent research has pointed to the issues presented by our research categorization of Asian Americans as a single racial identity, one that encompasses a huge spectrum of identities and experiences. Someone who fits under the racial identity umbrella encompassed by the label “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI)” could be Indian, Polynesian, Japanese, Chinese, Cambodian, Bangladeshi, or one of a multitude of other, more granular racial identities. These cultures come from geographically diverse places and have vastly different values, traditions, challenges, and privileges.

When evaluating research data about the AAPI experience, it can be easy to label the population with the idea that they are a “model minority:” massively successful,
predisposed to academic and economic opportunity, skilled and prosperous. Over 49% of Asian-Americans over the age of 25 have a Bachelor’s degree or higher, the average household income of Asian-Americans is $66,000 a year, and 82% of surveyed Asian-Americans reported to a Pew social trends study that they were overall satisfied with their life (Piccorossi, 2012). However, this is not necessarily an accurate picture for all people who could be identified as Asian-American.

While Japanese, Filipino, and Indian communities in America have lower poverty rates than the national average, Hmong and Polynesian peoples have poverty rates that are greater than the national average, at 27% and 22% respectively (Le, 2016). This kind of obstruction of reality is perpetuated when AAPI are perceived as a monolith, rather than as a group of various races and cultures with different situations. Interestingly, most individuals who could describe themselves as Asian-American do not, choosing most often to identify as being from their country of origin or using their country of origin as the prefix to –American (Piccorossi, 2012). When trying to create an accurate understanding of the masculinity performed by King Tiger in King Tiger: Son of the Dragon, it would be ideal to use a set of cultural norms and understandings established by research of the culture that King Tiger is a part of. However, King Tiger himself perpetuates the myth of AAPI as a singular identity, as he consistently evades identifying with a more specific culture and pulls instead from an amalgamation of cultures to present his “Asian-ness.”

When we first meet King Tiger, he is emerging from an explosive looking dimensional portal, clad in bound boots and a solid orange “gi,” the type of shirt worn by practitioners of karate, a martial art associated with the Ryukyu Kingdom and influenced
by Chinese and Japanese martial arts. His features are East Asian. He has a stoic look of self-control and authority about him. His strength is clearly implied by the defined lines of his biceps and triceps on his arms, though his body is not put on display through an especially revealing costume. Its structure is more focused on lithe slimness than muscularity and bulk. In this one panel, his design leans heavily into Americanized conceptions of the lean, muscular “fighter,” especially prominent in discourses about fighting sports (Holthuysen, 2011). It remains unclear, however, what culture we are meant to read King Tiger identifying as: his outfit could link to several traditions, especially those of Japan or Tibet; the name King Tiger seems to imply a link to Chinese tradition; finally, it would be a fallacy to categorize him based on physical features alone.

This ambiguity is almost intentionally perpetuated throughout the narrative of King Tiger: Son of the Dragon. When King Tiger is training his new assistant Milo, he shares the swords he uses in his quest to combat demons with him, identifying them as “Tadehiro” and “suketaka” blades crafted by “Hizen Omi Daijo Tadahiro” and “Ozaki Minamoto Gen Goemon Ozaki Suketaka” respectively (Stradley, 2016, p. 37). These identify the swords as Japanese, and when we see them laid out on the table with other
weapons in the next panel, they are accompanied by American handguns, Japanese *shurikens*, and small daggers that appear to be most similar to *kirtan* (ceremonial blades from the Sikh tradition), among other weapons.

![Figure 2: King Tiger teaches Milo about his weapons (p. 37)](image)

There are other instances of this pulling from various Asian cultures to inform King Tiger’s identity and work, some more significant than others – Rikki – King Tiger’s girlfriend - serves Milo and Tiger Thai food for dinner; King Tiger’s father is illustrated as a stereotypical Americanized version of a Chinese villain, owing a strong aesthetic debt to Dr. Fu Manchu; and his father exclaims “kyapka” when King Tiger escapes, a Tibetan colloquialism that is often translated as “shit.” Perhaps the most telling moment where the writers evade giving the reader a clear image of King Tiger’s racial and cultural identity come when Rikki, Milo, and King Tiger are sharing a meal and reflecting on King Tiger’s less-than-heroic past, before he met Rikki. King Tiger mentions having only been in America for a short time, and when Milo asks him “So you had just come to the States? From where?” his phone rings and King Tiger excuses himself (Stradley, 2016, p. 41). While it is not fair to read this panel as the character Tiger intentionally evading the question – he did not orchestrate the phone call
presumably – it is a moment where the writer’s utilized the audience surrogate of Milo to ask King Tiger for clarity on this part of his identity and then denied both Milo and the audience that answer.

This complicates the interpretation of our results by making it impossible to impose a more specified set of criteria for masculinity on to the interpretation of this comic character. While the research cited in the literature review points to a few common threads in Asian/AAPI conceptions of masculinity, there is also great diversity within the category of AAPI. When coding King Tiger’s performance of masculinity, the conclusions drawn can only be extended in so far as King Tiger is a character that fits the Asian American identity. These conclusions cannot be made to extend to every member of that group, or to have the granularity to reflect the experiences of a more particular group within those represented by the label “AAPI.”

There are possible narrative explanations for King Tiger’s reticence to name his cultural background, as well as the need for him to pull parts of his work from various cultures. As a superhero who specializes in fighting demons, King Tiger could not only be prepared to fight demons from one culture, and if one accepts that demons exist then perhaps not all demons can be fought with a single culture’s weapons and rituals. Demons are creatures of the supernatural, and are often exempt from the ramifications of physical assault, or at least experience less severe consequences from things like gunshot wounds. In some traditions, Christian rites are required to exorcise a demon, if demon is understood to be a servant of Satan. This paper does not intend to explore the other iterations of demons, but it is worth noting that it would seem as if this mode of combat would not work against, for instance, a Japanese yokai (creatures of folklore sometimes
correlated to demons). The origin of the *yokai* is not necessarily the Christian faith and they likely have no special relationship one way or another towards Christ and Christianity, so why would recited psalms disturb a *yokai*? This may be read as a valuing of the necessity of cultural knowledge – King Tiger cannot adequately combat demons from various origins without knowledge of the culture from which they spring.

However, such an acknowledgement seems to run contrary to the dearth of acknowledged and developed cultural identity for Tiger himself. We learn in the narrative that King Tiger has a complicated relationship with his heritage, as he is the son of a mortal man and an immortal demon. His reluctance to talk about his lineage may have something to do with the nefarious nature of its roots. Despite these possible narrative explanations, the impact of this intentional ambiguity on the accuracy and power of King Tiger’s portrayal of masculinity is strong.

Since there is arguably no core tradition of masculinity that King Tiger is pulling his performance of the identity from, there are several instances where King Tiger lapses into a hegemonic masculine performance that stands in almost mutually exclusive contrast with the more traditionally “Asian” masculine traits he embodies. One of the most interesting dynamics that King Tiger plays out is how he negotiates his past, and it seems that a prior version of King Tiger was more enamored with hegemonic masculinities, while the empowered and self-reliant “hero” we see in the narrative proper is more in line with a more traditional, Asian American masculine identity.

The three most frequently applied terms for King Tiger’s masculine performance in the combined intercoder and primary investigator data are “Dominance,” “Power Over Women,” and “Risk-Taking.” All of these are strongly present in research on hegemonic
masculine identities (mostly as voiced by American and Western writers), and King Tiger performs them most often in an effort to protect Rikki. The act of being prototypically masculine becomes a self-aware performance for King Tiger. A key example of how King Tiger adopts, rebukes, and reassumes hegemonic masculinity comes in the latter half of the book, when King Tiger’s demonic family have invaded his home and taken Rikki and King Tiger captive. Once his sister smacks Rikki, King Tiger pulls out a handgun and shoots his siblings, shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Rikki is slapped, and King Tiger pulls a gun
Previously in the book, King Tiger and Rikki described to Milo how they met, when King Tiger had just arrived in America and was using his magic to attain the pleasures of the world and win at a casino – a time in his life during which King Tiger says he “was not a good man” (Stradley, 2016). However, it is also a time in his life when he was winning, sleeping with many women, achieving status and wealth…all associated with being a successful man in hegemonic masculine terms. This is the period of his life where King Tiger is adopting these hegemonic masculine ideas – when he arrives in America, he seeks identity by conforming to masculine expectations. However, his attitudes towards these are clearly acknowledged when he explicitly states that he was not a “good man” at the time – this version of masculinity is not one that comes naturally to him. It is therefore significant that he takes a violent stance utilizing a weapon deeply rooted in American vigilante culture when Rikki is endangered. This moment is also the only moment that the intercoder, a young man from Korea, identified with the tag “Violence,” which perhaps further illustrates its jarring nature. This can be read as an intentional and self-aware modulation of King Tiger’s own masculinity, and extends further into the scene.

As the scene progresses, King Tiger turns to Rikki, bound in captivity, and tells her that she brought this on herself because “women like bad boys,” which both the intercoder and primary investigator coded as an instance of King Tiger emphasizing the “Playboy” aspect of his masculinity and the primary investigator also coded as an instance of King Tiger asserting his “Power Over Women,” illustrating how his “badness” was attractive to all women and he is not to blame for Rikki’s own weakness in the face of its allure. He continues this style of speech, telling Rikki that she should
have known better – which both the primary investigator and intercoder identified as another instance of King Tiger performing his “Power Over Women.” King Tiger shifts the blame for Rikki’s predicament from himself on to her, avoiding acknowledging the ways he has run from his past and failed to inform and protect Rikki from this eventuality.

King Tiger is put into a narrative situation that is the stuff of hegemonic, violent action comics, as the woman in his life is taken and turned into a “damsel in distress.” He adapts to this context and resumes the performance of “hegemonic masculinity” to resolve the conflict. King Tiger’s cultural ambiguity here serves as an asset to the writer, who has not established a clear masculine affiliation for King Tiger to affiliate with and can therefore modulate his behavior from humble and pacifist to dominating and violent as the narrative they place him in requires. King Tiger’s culture is not as important to the character’s performance of masculinity as his context – a superhero action comic. The cultural details that signify King Tiger as Asian are reduced to window dressing that recolor the traditional superhero narrative without significantly altering it to update the character of the hero himself.
5.2 *Hawkeye: Unifying the Duality of Superheroic Masculinity*

Clint Barton, otherwise known as Hawkeye, is at least a somewhat unique member of the Avengers as he is one of a small number of heroes to join the team despite not having any supernatural/inhuman powers – his abilities are the result of intense training, natural athleticism, and a long career as a special agent and masked hero. When his character was rebooted after Marvel announced the launch of their Marvel Now! Initiative, these aspects of his character came to the forefront. In the entirety of *My Life as a Weapon*, Hawkeye’s costuming is almost exclusively street-clothing except for the very first pages of the book, where Hawkeye is tumbling from a window during a nondescript encounter, and one other notable sequence, which shows the reader a panel of a tape recording being played, showing Hawkeye in costume assassinating a world leader by firing two arrows into his eyes (Fraction, 2013, p. 65).

![Figure 4: Hawkeye assassinating dictator Du Ke Feng (p. 65)](image-url)
This change from norms in comic narratives illustrates Hawkeye’s unified sense of self – he remains much the same person both when he is functioning as a hero and when he is simply living his life as Clint Barton in New York City. It is common in the superhero genre to use the act of costume switching to indicate a switch between two identities for a character, and often the identities in question are not simply those of “mild-mannered alter-ego” and “superhero,” but also those of “masculine” and “not-masculine.” In his article “Masque-ulinities: Changing Dress as a Display of Masculinity in the Superhero genre,” Friedrich Weltzien notes the significance of costuming on the presentation of masculinity for superheroes, drawing connections between Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man’s famous costumes and the ways they relate to ideals of masculinity through pronounced musculatures, similarities to military garb, and bright and proud contrasts with the more traditional garb of their alter egos – all, he claims, using the costume to point to the “classic domain of heroic manhood.”

Looking at this dichotomy, the costume functions as symbolic visual cue to indicate a shift in overall identity. Peter Parker is able to move from being a shy, soft, insecure intellectual to acting as a strong, indomitable, willful and comedic hero. Even more striking is the shift undergone by Clark Kent, who is such a forgettable and passive figure that simply adding glasses and a beige suit makes those around him incapable of identifying him as the hyper-masculine, charming, strong, controlled and successful Superman. Without these costume changes, Hawkeye does not provide us visual cues to indicate that his identity shifts – that Hawkeye is in some way more or less masculine than Clint Barton. They are one and the same in a way that many superheroes cannot be,
who must seek the privacy of phone booths or Bat Caves to don their masculinities as costumes covering their alter egos (Weltzien, 2005, p.234).

Critics in the past have noted how costum ing and characterization in superhero comics creates a clear choice for readers – they can be the mild-mannered alter ego or they can be the strong hero; it is impossible to be both at once. As Norma Pecora puts it: “Superman is the quintessential male role model… Kent is easily dismissed, but Superman is to be emulated” (Pecora, 1992, p. 3). Societal pressures overvalue the hypermasculine hero half of this dichotomy and thereby underemphasize the fact that Clark Kent is Superman and the inclusion of both feminine and masculine coded identites in this body is part of his strength (Klein, 1993, 267-268).

It is significant, then, that the one moment of costumed Hawkeye we see in these issues is so at odds with the Hawkeye that we have grown acclimated to throughout the course of the comics so far. In the panel pictured in Fig. 3, the victim of Hawkeye’s attack is falling backwards, his fatal wounds gushing blood as Hawkeye coldly kneels outside the door, his eyes covered by his mask, his face expressionless. This extreme, uncharacteristic, dominating violence can only occur in costume – it is not the same masculinity that Clint himself would want to be associated with, but is instead a more violent and dominant version that shows a coldness beyond the pale. The dissonance for readers between the version of Clint/Hawkeye they have become familiar with and the one we see in this panel is emphasized by the costuming, and plays into the later reveal that this is actually footage from a staged tape and not the footage of the “real” Hawkeye.

When looking at both the intercoder data and the primary investigator’s data from analyzing *Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon*, two main trends of interest appear. The first is
that there is a broad spectrum of terms noted in terms of Hawkeye’s masculine performance – only two of the terms were never applied by either coder: “Work” and “Status.” The breadth of coverage can possibly be attributed to several factors. The most important of these is the identity of Hawkeye as a white male, meaning there are more terms in the vocabulary that are culturally accurate for him since hegemonic masculinity is usually constructed with the white male experience in mind.

The other notable trend is the way that terms associated with “soft masculinity” and the “geek male” appear almost as frequently as those associated with the hyper-masculine hegemonic norm. After “Violence,” the most represented term for Hawkeye is “Wit,” and after two more from the hegemonic edge of the spectrum (“Risk Taking” and “Dominance”) the fifth most represented term is “Awkwardness.” This codes Hawkeye’s masculinity as simultaneously influenced by a “geeky” masculine identity and a prototypical “masculine” identity. Not only are these the most frequently cited terms, but there are many moments where the intercoder and/or the primary investigator coded a scene as being both demonstrative of hegemonic masculinity and of “geek” masculinity.

Without the severing agent of costuming, Hawkeye is free to behave similarly when he is engaging in heroics and when he is not – he appears to always be both “nerd” and “alpha;” “superhero” and “man;” “Kent” and “Superman” at once.

We see how Hawkeye can use some of the aspects of geek masculinity to reinforce his whole image as man, given the appropriate context, in an early panel of the book. After falling from a window and crashing onto a car, we see Hawkeye talking to his doctor, who is reeling off a list of his injuries. Hawkeye responds simply “Pssh. I thought you said I was hurt, Doc…” (Fraction, 2013, p. 3). The primary investigator
coded this moment as illustrating Hawkeye’s “Wit” as well as his “Emotional Control” - rather than showing emotional fragility or becoming overwhelmed at his proximity to death, Hawkeye puts forward a front of hegemonic masculine emotional control by utilizing his quick wit and humor. The intercoder ascribed similar tags to the scene, although he chose the similar term “Stoicism” rather than “Emotional Control.”

There is a distinction between this moment of humor and emotional control and other similar, hyper-masculine representations that adopt this singular aspect of “geek” masculinity. Hawkeye does not simply adopt this comedy to put forward a collected pose. Indeed, he utilizes this comedy throughout the book – it is part of who he is both when he needs to put on airs and when he is at ease. More significantly, we can see these aspects of “geek” masculinity incorporated into Hawkeye’s hegemonic masculine performance even when they are not being used to project an appearance. In these passages, they are revealed to be genuine parts of his identity, illustrating the ways in
which Hawkeye can simultaneously fulfill aspects of hegemonic masculinity and geek masculinity – deconstructing the idea that these are mutually exclusive identities.

![Image of Hawkeye](image)

**Figure 6: Hawkeye remains awkward in the midst of superheroics (p. 59)**

In the panels shown in Figure 6, Hawkeye is taking risks, engaging in a high-octane car chase and swinging his body from an arrow onto the roof of an antagonist’s car. However, he is also still preoccupied with anxiety over the awkward slip of the tongue he makes when he tells Kate he will be “back in a sex” (Fraction, 2013, p. 59).

Hawkeye is not an infallible hero with extreme strength, agility, and muscles – he is those things with an added layer of social ineptitude, awkwardness around women, and a quick comedic wit. And in panels like the one above, where he remains uncostumed and performing both simultaneously, readers are shown that they do not have to choose one set of masculine ideals to build their version of manhood – they can be both.

This does not, however, fully deconstruct the dominating power of hegemonic masculinity and its influence on male identity formation; Hawkeye still uses violence to resolve every major conflict in the narrative, defaulting to punching his opponents or
incapacitating them with gimmicky exploding or putty arrows. It is also important to note that the other characters explored are not afforded quite the same flexibility of masculine performance – King Tiger’s portrayal is only given enough instances of culturally accurate masculinity to allow readers to see him as a vision of a non-descript “Asian” before he is written back into the hegemonic masculine hero, and Black Lightning is limited to acceptable versions of masculinity for Black males as created by hegemonic society.
5.3 Black Lightning: Frustration for a Superhero

Black Lightning is a challenging character to write about. In many ways, the masculinity he performs is demonstrative of traits that appear in Black masculinity scholarship, such as being competitive, being protective of his community and family, and being self-assured (Majors and Billson, 1992, p. 33). However, the mere presence of these traits does not make his representation culturally accurate, and the context in which they are situated seems to play on a common script for Black masculinities in American popular media, as noted by Ronald L. Jackson III in his book Scripting the Black Masculine Body: “implicit in… the projections and corporeal inscriptions discussed in this chapter is the idea that that Black masculine body is viewed as a threat much like the minstrel brute… who is dangerous not because he did anything, but because his blackness is a signifier of abnormality” (2006, p. 99).

The central conflict of Black Lightning is that Jefferson Pierce, the man who becomes Black Lightning, is returning to his childhood community to work as a principal, but the community has fallen into disrepair and is generally regarded by both the characters who reside in it and who live around it as a dangerous ghetto. As he returns, he must contend with the stress of trying to work in such a violent and broken community while keeping his lethal superpowers in check (Van Meter, 2009). It is later revealed that the cause of the community’s problems is primarily the work of an organized crime syndicate known as “The 100.” This group, “The 100,” antagonizes several characters in the DC universe. The two figureheads of the group in this story are Tobias Whale, a man who grew up in “Suicide Slum” like Jefferson and is also African-American; and Swann, one of 100 immortal cultists for whom the group is named.
The way the character of Jefferson interacts with the challenges this environment presents serves as an example of the kind of “scripting” that is central to Jackson’s critical work. In his book, Jackson puts forward the idea that the act of scripting someone’s body – scripting, as opposed to reading and interpreting – “presumes that there are social vectors that determine how bodies are inscribed and how scripted roles for foreign bodies are enacted” (Jackson, 2003, p. 53). This is given added significance when Jackson describes how the act of scripting someone else’s body usually requires the dislocation of whatever self was there to accommodate the imposed script – creating a definition for the scripted body out of the comparison between the script and the displaced “Other” identity. The body can be an individualized body, or a “composite body,” an idea akin to the concept of “body politic” where the idea of a body is used to represent a collective or community (Kantoriwicz, 1981). The script imposed on Jefferson Pierce’s narrative in *Black Lightning: Year One* is emblematic of the ideological function of scripting that Jackson posits – namely, that the scripting of Black male bodies has created a culture wherein all behaviors of the Black body “are to be read as alien, unless those bodies are complicit in almost every sense with dominant cultural norms” (2003, p. 55).

Beginning by looking simply at the data for the intercoder and primary investigator’s tagging of Black Lightning’s performance of masculinity (Shown in Table 4 on page 27), there is an obvious trend toward the terminology associated with hegemonic masculinity. “Violence” is the most cited term, appearing over 30 times in the shared data, and “Dominance” also appears frequently, with 25 total tags. These are not only key features of hegemonic masculinity, but they are also two of the features of hegemonic
masculinity that scholars have noted remain attainable for Black men (Cazenave, 1981; Majors and Billson, 1992). The barriers to traditional masculinity that systemic racism and oppression create for Black men create environments where violence can be seen as a valid option, an alternative path to achieving some of the elements of traditional masculinity that remain out of reach via alternate channels (Majors and Billson, 1992; hooks, 1992).

There are also a significant number of instances where the primary investigator tagged some of the terms that are drawn from Black masculinity – especially the ideas of the value and responsibility of protecting family and community. “Protection of Family” appeared fifteen times in the combined data, while “Protection of Community” was the second highest appearing term with twenty-six tags. It is important to note, however, that these numbers are skewed heavily by the primary investigator’s analysis. The intercoder, a Black male in his late twenties, only identified “Protection of Family” five times as compared to the primary investigator’s ten, and “Protection of Community” ten times to the primary investigator’s sixteen.
There are some panels where the primary investigator and intercoder shared an interpretation, such as the one pictured in Figure 7. Here, Black Lightning (as his alter ego, Principal Jefferson Pierce) explains to a young student who had previously tried to steal from Black Lightning’s family why he is being punished with cleaning the fountain outside the school. The explanation Black Lightning provides is that the student’s behavior “polluted the waters” (Van Meter, 2013, p. 36). This can be read as positioning the fountain and its waters as a metaphor for the community, and Black Lightning explaining how the student’s behavior had negative ramifications for that community and serving as the leader who punishes the student for it thereby positions Black Lightning/Jefferson Pierce as the protector of the community.

Perhaps more interesting are the panels where the primary investigator interpreted the behavior of Black Lightning as one of protection, while the intercoder did not. One of Black Lightning’s relatives, his brother-in-law Frank, has been working with “The 100”
to his wife’s ire and his own shame. He has become estranged from the family at large, and we see him come to Jefferson’s family home on Thanksgiving bearing a pie. He asks Jefferson to tell his family he loves them, to which Jefferson replies, “Quit the One Hundred. Go to Chicago. Tell them yourself. A man who loves his family…”

Rather than reading this sequence as one where Black Lightning is explaining his stance on the masculine value of protecting one’s family and encouraging his relative to do the same, the intercoder saw this as a display of “Power Over Women,” “Dominance,” and “Authoritarianism.” These are all traits associated with the idea of being a patriarch put forward by bell hooks, especially the idea of “Authoritarianism.” On the whole, the idea of “Authoritarianism” and “Muscularity” appeared more frequently in the intercoder data than in the primary investigator’s response, and these terms are associated with the ideas of patriarchal Black masculinity, especially the idea of “Authoritarianism” (hooks, 1992). When looking closer at the panels where the primary investigator identified “Protection of Community,” an interesting trend emerges.

Figure 8: Black Lightning/Jefferson Pierce discusses Frank's future with him (p. 45)
The intercoder gives primacy to terms that are associated with “Black masculinity” and particularly with the embattled notion of hooks’ “patriarch” and the idea of “Cool Pose” (hooks, 1992; Majors and Billson, 1992). For example, early in the book there is a sequence of panels where Black Lightning describes his father’s drive to protect and grow the community of “Suicide Slum” and his failure to do so. The primary investigator interpreted Black Lightning’s frustration as being born out of love for the community and thereby a desire to “protect” it – thus, the primary investigator applied the term “Protection of Community.” The intercoder identified “Emotional Control” and “Power Over Women” in this sequence, and did not include “Protection of Community” at all. These are ideas that are similar to the idea of the “patriarch” as developed by hooks, and position Black Lightning as a patriarch not only in how he relates to his nuclear family, but also how he relates to the community at large.

This trend continues in other places where the intercoder identifies “Protection of Community” – it is very often accompanied by terms associated with “Cool Pose” and “patriarchy.” In the intercoder data, “Protection of Community” appears ten times. Of these ten, it appears simultaneously with “Violence” three times, and “Risk-Taking” four times. This trend leans into the perceptions of black masculine performance laid out as “Cool Pose”, especially when taken with the significant increase in identification of “Muscularity” in intercoder data as compared to the primary investigator data. In their book, Billings and Majors identify “risk-taking” behaviors as a serious consequence of taking on a “cool pose,” as such a pose requires performative gestures and maintenance (1992). One cannot maintain a “cool” and “tough” exterior when under scrutiny if there is no outward element to back up these claims, and while muscularity is a visual indicator,
taking risks and engaging in violent behavior can provide quantifiable evidence to support identity claims made in the interest of presenting the “cool pose.”

What is most interesting as this trend emerges is the duality between Pierce’s performances of masculinity when in costume and when out of costume. When acting as “Black Lightning,” we see a man who engages in extreme violence, demonstrates bravado and muscularity, and finds himself frequently punching, electrocuting, and “dominating” the other black men involved in Suicide Slum’s street culture. By contrast, when we see Black Lightning out of costume, he is performing a “respectable” masculinity. The intercoder frequently tagged these moments with terms such as “Humility,” “Subscription to Hierarchy,” and “Stoicism,” while the primary investigator used these terms as well as “Work” and “Self-Reliance.”

When out of costume, Jefferson Pierce is shown pursuing traditional channels to try to enact change – he works in the school system, argues with police and the fire department about their response times and investigative responsibilities (Van Meter, 2009, pgs. 26, 28, 62), and is generally frank with even Clark Kent, Superman’s reporter alter ego, about the need for change and support in Southside/Suicide Slum (pgs.37-39). However, mirroring the frustration laid out in the literature on the frustrating barriers between black male and the attainment of hegemonic masculinity, these channels are not particularly responsive to Pierce. Even when they are, as is the case with Clark Kent, it seems more to do with something remarkable about Pierce than with the legitimate needs of the community. After all, Kent is only there to investigate Pierce and the violent, vigilante justice acts he has been pursuing as Black Lightning – not because of Pierce’s real work in the school. Kent’s exposure to that world is secondary.
While this does move the comic’s representation of masculinity towards one that considers the pressures of being a black male in America – exploring the challenges that face Black men pursuing a strong masculine identity and fulfillment of that identity through inequitable power systems, and the systemic issues that impact many predominantly Black communities – it does not move itself away from one of the key problems facing the Black superhero. This is the problem of violence.

In his article “The Super Black Macho,” Rob Lendrum studied Black Lightning comics from 1977-1978. In this comics, many features remained the same – the primary antagonists were still “The 100,” Superman was still a lacking presence in the Southside of Metropolis, and Black Lightning was still left to punch up the gang members threatening his hometown. While some of the narrative context has been shifted in interesting ways for this more modern take on the story – the police no longer are pursuing Black Lightning as if he is another criminal, and Superman is actively trying to assist Lightning instead of fighting against him – one key feature remains the same. The figure who is most responsible for getting down in the streets and taking on this crime is Black Lightning himself, and the way that is accomplished is by “violently [beating] up on black criminals and hustlers who are illegally attempting to obtain the money needed to live and sustain a family” (Lendrum, 2005, p. 370). In other words, as Black Lightning finds his attempts to achieve success as a Black man and protect his community stymied,
he is made to resort to the same violence that the very criminals he beats up have turned to in their own quest to achieve a strong, masculine identity.

While Van Meter’s narrative, and particularly Cully Hamner’s art, present a slightly more diverse cast of street criminals for Black Lightning to assault, the first two groups he encounters in his 2009 adventures are entirely comprised of young, Black men. And while the use of a white villain who feeds on the sadness, pain, and fear of Suicide Slum to sustain his immortality is potentially a compelling allegory for how structures of power continue to oppress certain populations to the benefit of others, the central shortcoming of the narratives of Black Lightning in the 1970’s remains true for this millennial interpretation: these narratives fall short of presenting a vision of this environment that is fully aware of the political causes for the situations the superheroes are combatting, and the real options for their resolution. Instead of attacking and deconstructing the systems of power that create and sustain “The 100,” Black Lightning is forced to follow the familiar pattern of finding his attempts to create change frustrated and turning towards violence as a way of creating control in his own life and momentarily protecting his community and projecting his masculinity, while the root issues remain unresolved.
6: Limitations

One of the key challenges this study encountered was the use of a vocabulary to guide analysis. While it provides a useful methodology for connecting with and engaging with current masculinity research, the way the vocabulary was developed using only terms explicitly linked to masculinity inadvertently perpetuated a masculine/feminine dichotomy in this study’s formulation of masculinity. It did not allow for coding of traditionally “feminine” behaviors as contributing to a man’s presentation of himself as masculine.

For example, in Hawkeye: My Life As A Weapon, there is an extended sequence where Hawkeye has an emotional conversation with Kate over the phone. The primary investigator and intercoder both noted how this conversation ties in with the typical masculine feature of “Power Over Women” as Hawkeye is adamant about wanting to protect Kate, and feeling an obligation to do so. There are also tones of “Homophobia” in their conversation, as Kate ribs Hawkeye about wanting to sleep with Spider-Man, however, there is emotional nuance and vulnerability to this conversation that cannot be captured by the tags as they exist, and that stands out from many codified perceptions of masculinity. This raises the question of if this emotional vulnerability becomes a “masculine” trait because a man is doing it, or if it is a “feminine” action being taken by a man, or perhaps it is a genderless action that does not fit into a dichotomized, binary
perspective of gender identity and performance? The scene illustrates the limits using this kind of vocabulary impose upon conclusions we can draw, although the absence of a tag can carry meaning in itself. The vocabulary captures already acknowledged ways masculinity might be presented, but does not have as much space for quantifying ways that masculinity may be being added to or created anew.

Figure 10: Hawkeye has an emotional conversation with Kate Bishop (p. 41)

The other significant limitation of this research was the primary investigator’s cultural background. The primary investigator is a white male, who grew up a comics reader in the middle class. This background has meant that the primary investigator has been part of a culture of masculinity himself, and has likely internalized certain
conceptions and ideas about what is and is not masculine. To try to account for these biases, the primary investigator rooted his vocabulary and analysis in research to develop his understanding of masculinity both within his own culture and in the cultures of the other heroes in this study. Intercoders were also sought from the culture of the heroes being studied to allow the primary investigator to compare the tags he associated with certain actions to those applied by a man of the same cultural background as the hero.

This interceding revealed another limitation – the presence of slightly too closely related words in the vocabulary. While the primary investigator perceived “Emotional Control” and “Stoicism” as clearly distinct terms, it is possible that the intercoders did not or saw that distinction in a different light than the primary investigator. This is evidenced by the frequency with which these terms are applied in reverse of one another, especially between the intercoder data and primary investigator data for Hawkeye: My Life as a Weapon.
7: Conclusion

While each of the characters studied displays a unique vision of masculinity, none feels completely discrete from the bounds and pressures of hegemonic masculinity. And in a way, this is to be expected. It would not be hegemonic masculinity if it were not a dominant construct, and the power dynamics at play mean that these ideas exert influence on a collective culture. However, just because the influence of hegemony is felt in most places, it is not a replacement for other, more culturally accurate representations of masculinity. Scripting hegemonic masculinity onto the bodies of men who are not part of the dominant culture necessitates the erasure of whatever unique and culturally specific masculinity was there previously.

One interesting feature of all of these stories is that none was written by a person of color. Returning to Ronald Jackson’s ideas about scripting, this means that the world view, ascriptions, and sense of self of the writer are incapable of being the same as those of the character they are scripting. The utilization of these perspectives to create the character, then, “often requires…redefining the newly affected…text as the counterpositional or oppositional Other” (2006, p. 53). As Jackson continues, he mentions that the power dynamics of doing this with Black bodies (and, I would extend, many other marginalized bodies of people of color) often entails repositioning the “Othered” body onto the periphery of the narrative and giving central credibility and power to the perspective/identity of the “I” – in this case, the privileged, colonialist hegemony (p. 53).
The findings of this study seem to corroborate Marjorie Liu’s criticism that any increase in diversity in comics is currently just at the level of an optics change. While the characters of these comics do take center stage and drive their narratives, the ways in which they are and are not allowed to perform masculinity and resolve their conflicts are most often limited to traditional, hegemonic models – dominating their opponents, employing violence to solve problems, and maintaining a sense of emotional control, detachment, and power. Even when the characters step outside this motif to foray into more progressive or culturally accurate performances of masculinity, it is either a brief interlude or a limited exploration – a “secondary” masculinity of sorts.

Arguments like Liu’s seem to point towards the need for more diverse writer’s having their work promoted. If a writer of color were to script a character of his or her own culture, then it might ameliorate at least part of the challenge of scripting as defined by Jackson’s scripting paradigm. When the scripting of characters of color is done by members of another cultural group, they are not only forced to displace the identity of the “individualized body” of the character, but also the “composite body” of the character’s culture and race. A writer who is of the same culture and/or race as the character they write may not be able to capture the truth of all members of the “composite body” their character is a part of, but they will surely have a more intimate understanding of that “composite body,” because they are a component of it as well.

When these characters are written, there is space for their performance of masculinity to be a counter-story – to present a unique mode of masculinity, an alternative mode of masculinity, a culturally accurate mode of masculinity. More research can and should be done on the presentation of masculinity in comics and
elsewhere in media. As we identify, discuss, and deconstruct the representations of masculinity in media, we can hope to create a dialogue wherein there is not a single, hegemonic masculinity that remains attainable only for some. As Jackson concludes in the epilogue to Scripting the Black Masculine Body, “there needs to be a clear admission and embrace of multiple Black masculinities, rather than an essentialist, unifocal Black masculinity” (2006, p. 151). This is true of all masculinities. In the small sample of comics studied herein, Hawkeye is the character most afforded this flexibility to embody various and nuanced masculinities. This kind of flexibility should be afforded to all folks who identify as masculine, not just those in the dominant cultural group. And what better place to begin sharing these narratives than the comics, where men can fly, or use magic, or climb sheer walls with their bare hands? If a man can be a spider in comics, then a man should be able to embody his own kind of masculinity in their panels as well.
## Appendix A: Definitions of Tags

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tag</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winning</td>
<td>Performances that engage in a competition of any sort, and result in a clear delineation of victor and loser</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Control</td>
<td>The suppression or modulation of emotion to display a front contrary to expected or actual feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reliance</td>
<td>Unwillingness to accept, or outright rejection of, support from others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominance</td>
<td>Positioning of oneself as superior to another, especially through physicality and with connotations of control over that person/thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
<td>Endangering oneself, both physically and emotionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>Intentionally harming another person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playboy</td>
<td>Demonstrating a sexual interest in women, especially through objectification and the pursuit of multiple and/or capsular partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Dedicating time and energy to traditional, money-making pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Over Women</td>
<td>Placing oneself as superior to women, both in the case of an individual woman or in relation to the idea of “women” as a group. Can manifest through physical exertions, emotional manipulations, or statements of belief.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homophobia</td>
<td>Any action that demonstrates a fear of being categorized as homosexual, or a disrespect for homosexuality as a legitimate identity, such as through the use of slurs or blue humor.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Prioritization of achieving a higher position on a hierarchal ladder, real or perceived</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stoicism</td>
<td>Maintenance of a cold, emotionless facade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarianism</td>
<td>Exerting command, and performing a sense of control and knowledge of a situation in a way that makes positions oneself as a leader/figure in command</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscularity</td>
<td>Display of the male body that prioritizes bare skin, hard muscles, and extraordinary physical strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Family</td>
<td>Actions that serve to protect the safety and well-being of a blood family unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of Community</td>
<td>Actions that serve to protect the safety and well-being of a community, both in terms of geographic proximity and intimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivism</td>
<td>Actions that indicate a preference towards an ideology focused on the interconnectedness of things and individuals, prioritizing group needs over individual needs both with respect to oneself and to others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filial Loyalty</td>
<td>Obedience to and respect for one’s elders in a family unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Diminishing one’s own power or importance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subscription to Hierarchy</td>
<td>Actions that allow a structure of power and status to guide one’s decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wit</td>
<td>Comedy, especially of a self-deprecating, punny, or quick nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awkwardness</td>
<td>Actions that cause inconvenience to others/oneself, or embarrassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacifism</td>
<td>Avoidance of violence and physical altercations, pursuit of peace</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bibliography


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