“Anyone Can Wear the Mask”: The Marginalization of Miles Morales in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*

**ABSTRACT**

*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman, 2018) marks the film debut of biracial Spider-Man Miles Morales, with the original Spider-Man, Peter Parker, playing a supporting role. Despite Miles’s centrality in the film, a confluence of narrative, industrial, and stylistic factors work together to reinforce his secondary status compared to Parker, who remains the franchise’s ideal of the real Spider-Man. In an echo of the reactionary backlash to the #BlackLivesMatter movement embodied in the hashtag #AllLivesMatter, the film’s explicit theme—that “anyone can wear the mask”—functions less to legitimize Miles as Spider-Man than to ensure his continued subordination in the broader franchise.

On the press tour for *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), longtime producer of the Spider-Man film franchise Avi Arad asserted that Peter Parker was the one and only Spider-Man that he would ever put onscreen. When asked if he would consider adapting other comic book characters who have donned the webbed mask over the years—including Ben Reilly (the Scarlet Spider), Miguel O’Hara (Spider-Man 2099), and Miles Morales—he emphat-
ically responded in the negative, claiming that previous attempts to include “multiple” Spider-Men had almost ended the franchise altogether. The words would turn out to be ironically prophetic, as *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*’s lackluster reception and box office returns definitively concluded that iteration of the film franchise, prompting Sony to cancel their planned villain-centric spin-off film *The Sinister Six* and ultimately to cut a deal with Marvel Studios that would introduce Spider-Man into the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Under that arrangement, a new cinematic Spider-Man—the third live-action take on Peter Parker within a single decade—debuted in *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2016), played by Tom Holland.²

Contrary to Arad’s stated preference, this unprecedented “industrial collaboration between Marvel and Sony” also led to Miles Morales’s cinematic debut, albeit indirectly.³ With the live-action Peter Parker now firmly associated with the MCU, appearing both in stand-alone franchise films such as *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts, 2017) and crossover events such as *Avengers: Endgame* (Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2019), Sony started to consider alternative means of exploiting one of their most lucrative licensed properties. Rather than build toward a single cohesive serialized universe that would be in direct competition with the MCU, their new strategy would divide the Spider-Man intellectual property (IP) across multiple live-action and animated versions, with their version of Spider-Man relegated to the latter so as not to compete—both at the box office and in the public imaginary—with Holland’s live-action incarnation of the character. Their first release under this new arrangement was *Venom* (Ruben Fleischer, 2018), a stand-alone live-action vehicle for the popular 1990s villain/antihero first seen onscreen in *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), which revises the character’s origin story and visual design to remove any explicit relation to his wall-crawling antagonist. Tom Hardy’s unhinged performance in the title role won the film some ardent fans (many of whom even enjoyed the film unironically) and better-than-projected box office numbers, prompting Sony to quickly announce

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1 “The one thing you cannot do, when you have a phenomena that has stood the test of time, you have to be true to the real character inside—who is Peter Parker? What are the biggest effects on his life? Then you can draw in time, and you can consider today’s world in many ways. But to have multiple ones . . . I don’t know if you remember, but Marvel tried it. And it was almost the end of Spider-Man.” It’s unclear whether Arad is referring here to the widespread negative reaction among comic book readers to “The Clone Saga,” a notoriously overlong 1990s comic book storyline, or to the initial controversy surrounding Miles Morales’s comic book debut. To say that either was “almost the end of Spider-Man,” however, is surely overstating the case. See Drew Taylor, “Interview: ‘Amazing Spider-Man 2′ Producers Avi Arad & Matt Tolmach Talk Spin-Off Plans, Crossovers & More,” *The Playlist*, April 30, 2014, https://theplaylist.net/interview-amazing-spider-man-2-producers-avi-arad-matt-tolmach-talk-spin-off-plans-crossovers-more-20140430/.

2 Tom Holland first donned the mask nine years after Tobey Maguire’s trilogy-capper *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007) and just two years after Andrew Garfield’s second appearance in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. For an analysis of these performances, see Aaron Taylor, “Playing Peter Parker: Spider-Man and Superhero Film Performance,” in *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, ed. Matt Yockey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 268–296.

a sequel, *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (Andy Serkis, 2021).4 The studio continued its villain-centric approach with *Morbius* (Daniel Espinosa, 2022).5 Despite that film’s box office failure and subsequent notoriety as fodder for ironic memes, Sony has several other live-action films centered on Spider-Man’s supporting cast of characters slated for release, including *Kraven the Hunter* (J. C. Chandor) and *Madame Web* (S. J. Clarkson).6

A new non-MCU version of Spider-Man would appear just two months after *Venom* in Sony’s *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey, and Rodney Rothman, 2018; hereafter *Into the Spider-Verse*). Unlike the six preceding Spider-Man films—and in direct opposition to Arad’s pronouncement four years prior—the CG-animated *Into the Spider-Verse* features Miles Morales (voiced by Shameik Moore) as its protagonist, with Peter Parker (voiced by Jake Johnson) playing a supporting role alongside various other spider-men (Spider-Man Noir, Spider-Man 2099 in a post-credits cameo), spider-women (Spider-Gwen, Peni Parker), and even some non-human spider-beings (Spider-Ham, SP//dr). The film assembles its cast of characters via the kind of dimension-hopping shenanigans that have long been associated with serialized superhero comics in general and “crossover events” in particular.7 In sharp contrast to the majority of live-action superhero adaptations, *Into the Spider-Verse* is not just a loose adaptation of narrative content, concepts, and characters that first appeared in comic books; it is also chockablock with stylistic flourishes meant to evoke its source medium.

To a greater extent than perhaps any live-action film, *Into the Spider-Verse* references, incorporates, and transforms various formal, aesthetic, and even technical characteristics of comics, including captions, speech balloons, onomatopoeias, motion lines, Ben-Day dots, and the multi-panel grid, to name just a few of the most obvious techniques employed throughout the film.

That said, audiences hardly need an academic article to point this out, to say nothing of cinema and media scholars. The salient question, then, is

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7 Crossover events are often extremely dense and complex affairs meant to either increase sales across a publisher’s entire line and/or to reset their narrative contiguity—itself a gesture intended to make their comics more inviting to new readers, thereby increasing sales, at least temporarily.
how should we understand this stylistic intervention? What purpose does it serve, both in the film and in relation to the broader superhero film genre? How does it shape our understanding of Miles Morales as a character? With the biracial Miles functioning as the superhero genre’s “ambassador of the diversity of 21st-century America,” it is important to consider that the representational choices used to adapt the character to the screen shape how audiences understand non-white superheroes in both overt and subtle ways.8 As André M. Carrington suggests in Speculative Blackness, “works of genre fiction . . . are both deeply invested in market imperatives that buttress the existing social order and, occasionally, more imaginative or diversionary than texts that present realistic treatments of everyday life.”9 As such, there may be no better place than a Black-led, animated, and heavily stylized superhero film to see this push-pull—between reinforcing the white status quo and celebrating the transgressive potential of the Black superhero—in action. Just as white superheroes have traditionally “[reinforced] real racial hierarchies in the world in which whites repetitively imagine victory over the forces of evil, often represented by blacks and other racial minorities,” Black superheroes function “not only as counter-hegemonic symbols of black racial pride and racial progress but possibly even as Afrofuturistic metaphors for imagining race and black racial identity in new and provocative ways.”10 A film like Into the Spider-Verse, released to a politically polarized America around the halfway point of the Trump presidency, navigates a precarious middle path between the two, attempting to satisfy each side without alienating the other.

Throughout this article, I treat the film’s style as one part of a broader strategy evinced by the film across multiple discursive registers. Specifically, I argue that the comic book stylization of Into the Spider-Verse functions in concert with other factors—including the way it depicts its protagonist’s ethnicity relative to the comics and the politics of fandom, the film’s intertextual relationship to other texts in the Spider-Man transmedia franchise, and the industrial status of animation compared to live-action—to police the franchise such that Peter Parker’s primacy over Miles Morales is maintained even as Miles is promoted as the central character of the film. In the context of the broader franchise, Into the Spider-Verse marginalizes its biracial protagonist within a self-contained animated storyworld, separate from and unequal to the MCU. While the film has been widely celebrated for its representational inclusivity, its ultimate theme—that “anyone can wear the mask”—legitimates Miles as Spider-Man while also ensuring his continued subordination in the context of the broader franchise.

Though my corpus here is limited to a single film, my argument necessitates looking at it from several different angles. In the first section, I outline Miles’s origins as a comic book character and the polarized discourse

surrounding his emergence, with particular attention to the discourse of racial colorblindness. In the second section, I focus on how the character and his world are strategically revised in the process of adaptation, arguing that changes have been made for two main reasons: (1) to distinguish Miles from the MCU iteration of Peter Parker, which draws obvious inspiration from comics featuring Miles to such an extent that faithfully adapting the comic book character would seem derivative of the MCU for general audiences, and (2) to ease racialized anxiety around the character for mainstream (white) viewers. Of course, *Into the Spider-Verse* is presented not just as a narrative alternative to the hegemonic MCU but also as an aesthetic alternative; accordingly, in the third section, I analyze the film’s visual design, paying specific attention to its remediation of comics and the industrial status of animation. Ultimately, I argue that these narrative, industrial, and stylistic factors work together in *Into the Spider-Verse* to functionally prevent Miles Morales from supplanting Peter Parker’s status as the *real* Spider-Man in the broader franchise. Finally, in the conclusion, I will grapple with the film’s success and its embrace within the very communities that I argue it underserves.

THE COLORBLIND ORIGINS OF MILES MORALES
Miles Morales was literally conceived out of a conflict within superhero fandom over the legitimacy of non-white characters in the genre. The pre-history of the character can be traced back to a brief and fairly innocuous blog post by Marc Bernardin on the science-fiction news website *Gizmodo*. Titled “The Last Thing Spider-Man Should Be Is Another White Guy,” the article bemoans the rumored casting for *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) reboot, which indicated that Sony was not considering racebending the character of Peter Parker for the film. Bernardin argues that Spider-Man “is defined by his choices, not by the color of his skin,” that “he’s a wonderfully strong character, one full of complexity and depth, who happens to be white.” In other words, Peter Parker’s canonical whiteness should be properly understood as ethnically and culturally neutral rather than a significant and necessary part of who he is; as such, a Black actor could inhabit the role without necessitating so much as another draft of the screenplay.

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11 Racebending refers to the act of casting an actor of a race or ethnicity that does not match the perceived race of the character as established in the source material. Examples include the casting of Michael Clarke Duncan as the Kingpin in *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003) and Scarlett Johansson as Motoko Kusanagi in *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017). Racebending is distinct from what Kristin J. Warner describes as colorblind casting, because there is a canonical race that is being changed in the process of adaptation, though both practices emerge out of a colorblind approach to character. For more on the subject of racebending, see Lori Kido Lopez, “Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 15, no. 5 (2011): 431–445. For more on colorblind casting, see Kristin J. Warner, *The Cultural Politics of Colorblind TV Casting* (London: Routledge, 2015).


13 This approach is not ideal if authentic representations of diverse characters are the desired goal, as “racially unmarked” tends to manifest in practice as “normatively white.” Warner, *Cultural Politics*, 62. In the case of Spider-Man, a superhero character introduced in the early 1960s whose initial novelty within the genre was...
Donald Glover—then known primarily for his role on the television sitcom *Community* (NBC, 2009–2014; Yahoo! Screen, 2015)—caught wind of the article and tweeted his desire to audition for the role. While many fans enthusiastically embraced the idea, another subset of fandom virulently opposed it, ostensibly on the race-neutral grounds of maintaining fidelity to Peter Parker as he has been visualized since his debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962).14

Such fans claimed (and likely believed) that any opposition to diversifying their beloved genre “is a matter of canon and continuity rather than racism,” as though these were separable or distinct matters.15 As Nicholaus Pumphrey explains, “The preservation of continuity directly connects current Marvel comics to a time in which black superheroes did not exist; as a result, emphasis on continuity preserves the institutionalized racism of 1960s America. Thus, arguments to retain the canon perpetuate racist ideology, in both overt and subtle ways.”16 In this case, adherence to canon (and white hegemony) won the day: Andrew Garfield was cast, and Glover was never granted an audition. In a metatextual moment referencing the online campaign, however, Glover would appear wearing Spider-Man pajamas on an episode of *Community*, which *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000–2011) writer Brian Michael Bendis would later cite as a direct influence on the creation of Miles Morales.17

*Ultimate Spider-Man* was a flagship title of the Ultimate Marvel line, a contemporary and simplified reboot of the Marvel universe meant “to attract new generations of young readers to comics” by shedding the complex mythology built up over four decades of serialized storytelling.18 By reintroducing classic characters in a contemporary context, the stories told under the Ultimate Marvel banner were markedly more diverse than their 1960s counterparts and even “opened up the possibility for . . . ethnically marked avatars of A-list originals.”19 Finally realizing that possibility some ten years after the launch of the line, Miles Morales debuted in *Ultimate Fallout* #4 (2011) as a new Spider-Man to take over the mantle after Ultimate Peter Parker’s death at the hands of the Green Goblin.20 The issue was succeeded

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16 Pumphrey, 215.
17 The shot in question can be seen on Uncle Aaron’s television screen in one scene in *Into the Spider-Verse*. In addition to appearing in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* as Aaron Davis (Miles’s uncle, though Miles himself is never seen), Glover would also go on to voice Miles Morales in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Disney XD, 2012–2017) animated television series.
19 Aldama, 73.
20 To be fair, Miles Morales was not the first explicitly racebent or racialized Ultimate Marvel character. For instance, Orson Scott Card’s version of Tony Stark/Iron Man became the explicitly Latino Antoñio Stark. See Aldama, 71–73.
the next month by the debut of the *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* (2011–2013) series, which told Miles’s superhero origin story leading up to Peter Parker’s death, culminating with his assumption of the Spider-Man legacy several issues later.

The letter column in the first issue of *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, based on responses to Miles’s brief debut in *Ultimate Fallout* #4, framed the legitimacy of diverse racial identities within the superhero genre as something that was very much up for debate. As carrington explains, “Editors and publishers exercise a great deal of influence over the role fan correspondence plays in comics, because they choose what appears and what to say about it. . . . [That] influence extends to the role comic book readers will play in negotiating with questions of race through popular culture.” 21 In this case, Marvel ensured that both sides of the issue were equally represented. A letter from a “young Hispanic male” celebrating Miles’s introduction is immediately followed by a riposte from a self-described “valued reader”; the latter is “disappointed and offended” that Marvel would replace Ultimate Peter Parker—the main continuity version of the character remained very much alive—with “an African American/Hispanic person . . . for the sole reason of diversity.” 22 The kind of white grievance that characterized so much of the reaction to Glover’s desire to audition for *The Amazing Spider-Man* was thus amplified and validated as a response to the diversification of superhero storyworlds.

Unsurprisingly, the creation of a non-white Spider-Man also led to much consternation in the conservative media ecosystem. 23 After all, the superhero genre has long functioned as a rarely challenged articulation of white exceptionalism, such that white superheroes are merely normative, whereas Black superheroes seem to signify a challenge to the very “discourses of power on which American society trades.” 24 As Sean Guynes and Martin Lund conclude in their introduction to *Unstable Masks: Whiteness and American Superhero Comics*, “The superhero is a white—and overwhelmingly cisgender, male, straight, and middle-class—ideological formation and has been so since its inception.” 25 Miles’s perceived status as an “ambassador of diversity” made him an easy target for racist attacks, including fan discourse motivated by a supposedly race-neutral devotion to canon. Such rationalizations are commonplace in these discussions, as they allow individual fans to praise diversity in theory while denouncing it in practice on the grounds that it is not being implemented in the right way: the introduction of non-white characters, they say, should be “organic rather than forced” and must not be seen as politically motivated—an impossible bar for writers and artists to clear, given that the presence of non-white (or feminist, or queer, or trans) characters will always be understood as inherently political by these readers. 26

21 carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 129.
22 *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* #1 (emphasis added).
25 Guynes and Lund, 7.
26 McKenna James Boeckner, Monica Flegel, and Judith Leggatt, “‘Not My Captain
Boeckner, Monica Flegel, and Judith Leggatt astutely write, “complaints about forced diversity come from a position that always sees diversity as forced, never as organic. Those who complain about the invasion of politics into their comic books deny both the political nature of their own identities and the political nature of comic book characters.” In other words, superheroes that do not challenge white hegemony (and implicitly prop up a culture of white supremacy) have the privilege to be seen as apolitical, whereas all other identities can be dismissed as “a kind of aesthetic affirmative action that [hurts] the quality of the story lines and the characters.”

Mary J. Henderson identifies a distinctly post-racial approach in contemporary Marvel comics, where writers and artists “ignore or downplay the social injustices that these diverse superheroes might face in their everyday life,” thereby diversifying their comics on paper while also trying to avoid “offending their largest readership (white, cis males).” While Bendis’s writing on Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man has been criticized in precisely these terms, it is undoubtedly a step forward compared to the Blaxploitation-influenced and stereotype-ridden characterizations of Black superheroes in the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Luke Cage, Black Lightning).

As a film adaptation of these comics, Into the Spider-Verse is tasked with walking this same tightrope, albeit on a much larger scale and with much more at stake, given the costs of producing a monthly comic book compared with a big-budget feature film. Sony’s primary interest in making Into the Spider-Verse, as I have suggested already, was to maximize their exploitation of the Spider-Man IP while its central character was otherwise occupied under the creative auspices of the MCU. While the filmmakers were also motivated to present positive representations for young kids of color, the market-driven imperatives of the industry dictate that they do so in moderation—that is, without triggering the powerful feelings of racial resentment that have attended Miles Morales since (and even prior to) his debut. By analyzing the film from a variety of perspectives, we can determine what ideas about race are palatable or even comforting to mass audiences, and by comparing those representations to their source material, we can see what ideas about race required revision or erasure to become suitable for white consumption. Before we get there, however, it is necessary to first establish Into the

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27 Boeckner, Flegel, and Leggatt, 188.

28 Boeckner, Flegel, and Leggatt, 184.


Spider-Verse’s context in relation to the comics, the broader Spider-Man film franchise, and the MCU.

COLORBLINDING THE BIRACIAL SPIDER-MAN

Amid a filmmaking landscape replete with remakes, reboots, sequels, prequels, and other forms of narrative serialization and franchise extension, Into the Spider-Verse is best classified as a reboot: it represents a new start for the Spider-Man franchise, stylistically distinct and diegetically separate from the preceding live-action films as well as other transmedia iterations of the franchise (e.g., comic books, animated series, video games). As a reboot, however, Into the Spider-Verse challenges the industrial and narrative logic of what William Proctor calls “the ‘reboot’ cycle” in contemporary franchise filmmaking inaugurated by the success of Batman Begins (Christopher Nolan, 2005).31 Whereas reboots typically represent an attempt by corporations to resuscitate a financially or creatively moribund IP, as was the case with Nolan’s revivification of the Batman franchise, Into the Spider-Verse reboots the Spider-Man franchise in parallel to an ongoing and thriving live-action franchise. Despite functioning as a reboot, it is less an attempt to supplant the MCU than to maximize and diversify Sony’s exploitation of the franchise. The parallel relationship between the MCU and the narrative world inaugurated in Into the Spider-Verse has a clear precedent in the relationship between Marvel Comics’ primary storyworld and the Ultimate Marvel line. The animated film should therefore be understood in relation to the MCU, with its creative possibilities restricted by and subordinate to that pop cultural behemoth.

For instance, some of the changes made to Miles’s world in the process of adaptation—most notably, the near-erasure of his best friend Ganke Lee from the narrative—were seemingly made because the MCU had already appropriated them for its own take on Peter Parker. In Homecoming and its sequels, Spider-Man: Far from Home (Jon Watts, 2019) and Spider-Man: No Way Home (Jon Watts, 2021), Peter’s best friend Ned Leeds is based not on the comic book version of Ned but rather on Ganke—in both physical appearance (both are heavyset Asian Americans) and personality (both share a marked affinity for Star Wars LEGO sets).32 The existence of Homecoming effectively foreclosed on the option of including Ganke in a film about Miles without seeming derivative of the MCU.33 Additionally, Homecoming appropriates the diversity of Miles’s storyworld more generally by racebending much of its supporting cast, including Mary Jane, Liz Allen, and Flash Thompson, as well as villains the Shocker and the Scorpion—all white in the comics universe but played by people of color in the MCU.34 According to director

32 One thing removed from the characterization of Ned compared to Ganke is the comics’ persistent suggestion that he may be in love with Miles. As Far from Home makes explicit, Ned is confidently heterosexual, erasing the comic book character’s ambiguous sexuality.
33 Ganke does appear in Into the Spider-Verse, albeit in a non-speaking role as Miles’s assigned roommate.
34 Strangely, Frederick Luis Aldama’s description of the film overlooks practically all of these characters of color: “Notably, in John [sic] Watts’s 2017 film re-creation,
Jon Watts, the diverse cast—achieved via a colorblind casting process—contributes to the film’s realism by reflecting the demography of contemporary New York City: “Peter Parker goes to high school in Queens, and Queens is one of—if not the—most diverse places in the world. So I just wanted it to reflect what that actually looks like.”

In practice, though, it is the film’s centering of its white characters—Peter Parker, Tony Stark (Iron Man), and villain Adrian Toomes (the Vulture)—that gives the filmmakers the freedom to diversify around the margins without the risk of alienating white audiences.

We see the opposite phenomenon in *Into the Spider-Verse*, whose centering of a Black/Puerto Rican superhero in Miles Morales is minimized by inserting additional white characters into the story. In terms of adaptation, *Into the Spider-Verse*’s narrative is directly inspired by particular, identifiable texts, with Dan Slott’s miniseries event *Spider-Verse* (Marvel, 2014–2015) as a conceptual linchpin. As Proctor observes, “the *Spider-Verse* event-series [tags Peter Parker] as the central Spider-Man of the Marvel multiverse. . . . From this perspective, . . . Peter Parker is the ‘real’ Spider-Man, whereas his alternate counterparts are ‘Spider-Totems,’ multiversal replicas, or analogues.”

While the *Spider-Verse* crossover event functions to confirm Peter Parker’s privileged position in Marvel Comics’ narrative multiverse, the integration of this conceit into the cinematic version of Miles’s origin has the opposite effect: that is, to de-center the protagonist from his own narrative, positioning him not as *the* Spider-Man but rather as *a* Spider-Man—merely one among many. While Miles’s origin story in the comics is a personal and private journey, in the film he is very quickly put under Peter Parker’s tutelage. Since the *Spider-Verse* event and Miles’s origin story are completely separate narratives in the source material, it is reasonable to conclude that their combination in the film was a calculated attempt to increase the presence of Peter Parker—the real Spider-Man in the eyes of producer Avi Arad and mainstream audiences—in the cinematic adaptation of Miles’s story.

In addition to the *Spider-Verse* miniseries, *Into the Spider-Verse* draws upon other comics as source material: namely, the early issues of Bendis’s *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, which outlined Miles’s superhero origin and key relationships leading up to his adoption of the Spider-Man persona in the fifth issue, followed by an arc in which he comes to terms with his uncle’s criminality; Bendis’s limited series *Spider-Men* (2012), in which the Peter Parker of the main Marvel storyworld is transported to the Ultimate Marvel universe, where he meets Miles; and its sequel *Spider-Men II* (2017), in which they team up again to fight the Kingpin. While *Into the Spider-Verse* freely draws upon

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characters, premises, dialogue, and even specific visual compositions from all four of these titles, my primary interest focus here will be *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*, in which the character was initially established. In mounting this brief comparative analysis, I want to stress that it is not my intention to hold up one text as superior to another, or to criticize the film on the grounds of infidelity to its source material. Rather, I intend to reveal the common thread uniting the most significant changes made in the process of adaptation.

One of the first images seen in the film is a ball bearing the number forty-two being selected from a lottery machine. Stripped of its narrative context and inserted into the film’s chaotic opening credits montage, the image is somewhat baffling and probably easily forgotten by most viewers. Comics readers, however, would recognize the image from Miles’s introductory scene in *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* #1, in which he is the final selection in an admittance lottery for a prestigious Brooklyn charter school. In contrast to Peter Parker, whose academic success is singularly attributable to his scientific genius, thirteen-year-old Miles faces an intergenerational legacy of systemic oppression and underinvestment and therefore relies upon policies of random chance to receive the same opportunities that his white counterpart enjoys as his birthright. Peter may have difficulties paying his bills, but access to a quality education is never in doubt. The reliance upon affirmative action for Miles’s academic success seems to be a deliberate attempt by Bendis to call attention to the scarcity of these kinds of opportunities within communities of color, which is why artist Sara Pichelli lingers on the details: the disbelieving elation of Miles’s parents when his name is called (“Oh, my God, you have a chance,” Rio Morales gasps); the tearful faces of the other children of color not selected for admittance; and Miles’s obvious guilt at being randomly selected over equally deserving students.

In *Into the Spider-Verse*, this aspect of Miles’s story—important enough that it is how the character is introduced in the comic book—is downplayed significantly. As Carol Anderson summarizes, “affirmative action, which [was] developed to ameliorate hundreds of years of violent and corrosive repression, [was] easily characterized as reverse discrimination against hardworking whites and a ‘government handout that lazy black people “choose” to take rather than work.’” Recall that the fan backlash against Miles Morales’s introduction into the Ultimate Marvel comics was constituted in part by calls of “reverse racism” of exactly this kind, with disgruntled fans and conservative pundits alike branding Miles’s debut as “a media ploy, a liberal attempt to market diversity and garner media attention” rather than a good faith effort to tell new stories that would be particularly meaningful to underserved audiences. Whereas the comic devotes space to address-

37 A fuller discussion of affirmative action and systemic discrimination in the education system is beyond the scope of this article. For more information, see the discussion of Hunter College in chapter 2 of Christopher Hayes, *Twilight of the Elites: America after Meritocracy* (New York: Crown, 2012).


ing and disarming the white critique of affirmative action, as well as to the positive impact such policies can have on victims of systemic discrimination, this material does not make it into the adaptation, which instead obscures the levers of oppression and reframes Miles’s school admittance in purely meritocratic terms. On the drive to his first day of school, Miles’s father Jefferson Davis (voiced by Brian Tyree Henry) reminds him that he earned his spot based not just on the admittance lottery (which is never depicted or referenced beyond the decontextualized lottery ball in the opening credits), but first and foremost on his test scores, sidestepping the familiar critique of affirmative action policies as providing unfair advantages to undeserving people of color at the expense of more deserving whites. Downplaying affirmative action makes strategic sense in the context of the adaptation, insofar as white grievances around the policy remain widespread and potent to this day and could easily mutate into negative feelings about Miles himself. Of course, this elision also has the effect of playing into post-racial discourse, de-emphasizing the unique challenges faced by people of color in favor of a more universal (i.e., colorblind and meritocratic) experience.

Miles’s father himself undergoes a significant transformation in the process of adaptation. Whereas Jefferson in the comics is slim and bespectacled, in the film he cuts a more imposing, muscular figure. Beyond this superficial change, however, in the comics Jefferson is a reformed criminal, highly suspicious of law enforcement agencies; in the film, by contrast, he becomes a by-the-book police officer who uses his squad car’s PA system to demand that his son say “I love you” on the steps of his new school. It is difficult not to read Jefferson’s transformation from a cynical and politically aware Black father into a cuddly police dad as a deliberate attempt to soften his characterization for white audiences. With Pew Research indicating that an overwhelming 84 percent of Black adults believe the police treat Black Americans “less fairly” than their white counterparts, this change reinforces the dominant pro-law enforcement ideology at the expense of the realities of Black experience. The move also ignores the racialized threat that American

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40 The PlayStation 4 game *Marvel’s Spider-Man* (Insomniac Games/Sony Interactive, 2018), a significant contribution to the transmedia franchise whose PlayStation 5 sequel (*Insomniac Games/Sony Interactive, 2020*) put Miles center stage, retains *Into the Spider-Verse*’s characterization of Jefferson; given that game and film alike were overseen by Sony and released within months of each other, the similarities are likely deliberate. A common critique leveled against the PS4 game was that its gameplay implicated Spider-Man (and therefore players) in police activities (e.g., surveillance) without any awareness of how these practices were problematic, especially for communities of color that are most often targeted by them. As Samantha Puc writes, “At no point does anyone [in the game] question the actions of the NYPD, nor Spider-Man’s close relationship with the cops. The game all but refuses to acknowledge the real-world implications of its main narrative and mechanics, which doesn’t sit well, especially as Black Lives Matter protests continue all over the world.” See Samantha Puc, “PSS: Spider-Man—Miles Morales Needs to Address the First Game’s COP Problem,” CBR.com, June 13, 2020, https://www.cbr.com/spider-man-miles-morales-ps5-should-tackle-first-game-cop-problem/. In addition to featuring references to #BlackLivesMatter and tributes to the late Chadwick Boseman, the Miles-centric sequel “does away with the police scanner and cop alerts that were a focus of the original *Spider-Man*. Instead, Ganke builds an app [that] lets individual people report suspicious activity, allowing Miles...
police officers often pose to Black kids in hoodies, like Miles; whereas the MCU adaptation of *Luke Cage* (Netflix, 2016–2018) employs similar imagery to comment explicitly on the epidemic of police violence against Black Americans, *Into the Spider-Verse* simply associates the police with respectability and good family values.41

Finally, *Into the Spider-Verse* offers a very different moral compared to other texts in the Spider-Man franchise. Whereas Peter Parker stories tend to emphasize his Uncle Ben’s adage that “with great power comes great responsibility,” *Into the Spider-Verse* offers a new refrain, offered initially by Peter Parker and later repeated by Miles at the film’s conclusion: “*anyone can wear the mask.*” While it may seem like an empowering message at first blush, the phrase is worth unpacking a bit further. As Arad summarizes, “diversity was . . . very important to us, because the big theme of Spider-Man is that anybody can be under that mask. What the mask says is that when you put it on, you have the heart and soul of a hero.”42 This is plainly revisionist, as the big theme of Spider-Man has always centered on personal responsibility, not diversity and inclusion, to say nothing of the obvious conflict between this sentiment and Arad’s refusal to even *consider* adapting Miles to the screen just four years prior. In an interview featured among the film’s Blu-ray bonus materials, Arad revealingly asserts that “[t]he young generation, they don’t see that, they don’t see color, they don’t see ethnicity.”43 We might interpret the producer generously and believe that what he means is that the younger generation does not *discriminate* on the basis of racial difference, but what he literally says is that kids today *don’t see race*, an explicit invocation of colorblind racism that brings us back to Miles’s colorblind origins. According to Ashley “Woody” Doane, colorblindness asserts that race “no longer ‘matters’ in American society” and therefore plays no systemic role in determining outcomes for individuals. “If racial inequality persists,” Doane explains, “then it is due to actions (or inactions) on the part of minority group members.”44 Far from offering the equality of opportunity it promises, colorblindness is used to investigate without relying on the police. . . . Miles not relying on the cops to improve his predominantly BIPOC community is a notable turnaround from the white Peter Parker, who is aligned with the police in the original game.” See Tauriq Moosa, “Spider-Man: Miles Morales Shows How Ordinary People Can Overcome the Extraordinary,” Polygon, November 6, 2020, https://wwwpolygon.com/reviews/21551212/spider-man-miles-morales-review-ps4-ps5.

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ideology perpetuates the effects of systemic racism by denying its existence and obscuring its levers and then blames the victims of racism if they fail to transcend their station.

“Anyone can wear the mask” is a product of this kind of colorblind thinking in which race supposedly does not matter. At face value, it asserts that superhero identities are not restricted to white characters but rather are universally accessible—a sentiment that is obviously intended to be empowering. But like colorblindness more generally, the proverb falsely presumes equality of opportunity, begging the question, If anyone really can wear the mask, then why are superheroes of color still so scarce? While the true answer would likely point the finger at risk-averse producers and other Hollywood gatekeepers—those, like Arad, who have the power to decide which projects get greenlit and which languish in cultural obscurity—Into the Spider-Verse shifts the blame onto those so often left on the other side of the gate.

This revisionist moral also undermines the superlative nature of the superhero archetype in the name of colorblind inclusivity. While superheroes such as Batman have “long naturalized a persistent Western belief in white exceptionalism,” as soon as the superhero is Black, the bar is lowered: suddenly anyone can be one. The denial of the superhero’s inherent exceptionalism when applied to Miles echoes a similar rhetorical move to that seen in the white backlash to #BlackLivesMatter, which John Tawa, Ruqian Ma, and Shinji Katsumoto describe thus: “The phrase ‘all lives matter’ has recently emerged in social media in an effort to counter the ‘black lives matter’ movement and national demands for addressing disparities in police violence against black men and women (Logan 2015). ‘All lives matter’ is an echo of what racial and ethnic minority psychologists refer to as ‘colorblind racial attitudes’ in which one minimizes the significance of race often by appealing to an apparently humanistic ideal of concern for the entire ‘human race.’” In keeping with #AllLivesMatter’s dismissal of lived Black realities in favor of post-racial colorblindness, Into the Spider-Verse demonstrates, under the guise of empowerment, that a Black kid is only permitted to become a superhero in a narrative that explicitly emphasizes that anyone can—up to and including a cannibalistic cartoon pig. Adilifu Nama’s description of the liberating politics of Black superheroes clearly illustrates what Miles’s colorblind treatment denies him: “because superheroes are the embodiment of American morality and the national ethos, black superheroes become that much more captivating as symbolic figures—they signify a type of racial utopia where whites can accept blacks as superhuman, intellectually and physically superior, and benevolent protectors of all humanity.” It would seem that Sony, compelled to diversify their approach to exploiting the Spider-Man IP after loaning Peter Parker to Marvel Studios, could only approach Miles Morales from the same colorblind perspective that they had previously refused to adopt when

47 Nama, Super Black, 153.
Donald Glover sought an audition for The Amazing Spider-Man. As we’ll see in the next section, the film’s reticence to fully embrace Miles’s exceptionality extends beyond the film’s narrative to include its comic book stylization and status as animation, both of which function to distinguish Into the Spider-Verse from the MCU and minimize Miles’s significance within the franchise.

STYLIZING THE SPIDER-VERSE

Despite the fact that “comics are in right now,” the majority of films that the average moviegoer would identify as “comic book films” downplay their aesthetic relationship to the comic book medium in favor of photographic verisimilitude.48 As Drew Morton notes, the consistently poor box office performance of films that engage in the stylistic remediation of comics, combined with the record-breaking successes of superhero adaptations that aesthetically efface their comic book origins (e.g., The Dark Knight, Christopher Nolan, 2008), “provides a strong incentive against the practice.”49 The MCU clearly took this lesson, and from the outset has developed a “clear house style” that owes more to David Bordwell’s concept of intensified continuity than the distinctive pop art aesthetic associated with comic books.50 In sharp contrast to the MCU, the comic book–influenced aesthetic design of Into the Spider-Verse is obvious, immediate, and pervasive. Beginning with its opening invocation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) Seal of Approval, the film establishes itself as a comic book film in the most literal sense: more than a cinematic adaptation of a comic book storyworld, the film seems to self-identify as a comic book. Even compared to “motion comics”—those literal-minded adaptations that “[appropriate and remediate] an existing comic book narrative and artwork into a screen-based animated narrative,” most often adding only limited animation and an audiobook-style voice-over to the raw materials of the comic—Into the Spider-Verse directly evokes sequential art in all its multimodal dynamism.51 As such, the film clearly sets itself up in contradistinction to the photorealistic computer-generated imagery and non-descript blockbuster aesthetic that defines the MCU’s house style, instead adopting a more playful and intermedial approach to the design and representation of its narrative world.

Ironically, though, Into the Spider-Verse is actually the first text featuring Miles Morales to bear the CCA seal, as Marvel Comics abandoned the Comics Code in 2001, a full decade before Miles debuted in Ultimate Fallout #4. This is the first of many gestures signaling that the filmmakers are primarily interested in a comic book aesthetic associated with a much earlier period.

49 Morton, 38.
of the medium’s history, one chronologically closer to the debut of Peter Parker in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 than Miles’s first appearance in 2011. As Sam Summers notes, the CCA seal’s “prominent placement at the start of the film [is] an obvious anachronism to any up-to-date comics fan. The ‘comic book’ aesthetic employed by *Into the Spider-Verse*, then, is one drawn from the popular imagining of the medium’s unique visual qualities, rooted in nostalgic cultural memories rather than in the contemporary works from which the film takes its story and characters.”

The film’s specific use of comic book film style can thus be considered as part of the same project discussed in the preceding section—that is, one geared toward accommodating comic book fans that have a nostalgic attachment to the comics they grew up with and may be skeptical of Miles Morales and the diversity that he represents. As Jason Rothery and Benjamin Woo describe, “Filmmakers and studio executives appear acutely aware of the ongoing need to court fans, and . . . these discourses [can be read] as attempts to defuse the potential negative reactions to new interpretations.”

In addition to aesthetically differentiating the film from the MCU, then, the film’s comic book stylization can also be read as an attempt to manufacture a sense of comic book authenticity—one based not on fidelity to the comics from which it adapts its narrative, but rather one specifically rooted in (white) fans’ nostalgia for 1960s superhero comics.

*Into the Spider-Verse* also integrates actual comic books into its storytelling and diegetic world, a strategy I have defined elsewhere as explicit intermediality. In so doing, the viewer is not just reminded of the film’s intertextual status as a comic book adaptation but also clued into the role of comics both within the diegetic storyworld and in its onscreen representation. As the film’s production designer Justin K. Thompson states, “the goal was to make you feel like you’re living inside a comic book.” To be more precise, the film creates a comic book storyworld that is represented through animation; it is not the viewer (the “you” in Thompson’s statement) who is “living inside a comic book,” but rather the characters in the film that exist in this multimodal, two-dimensional world. For instance, the introduction of each new spider-character in the narrative triggers an expository montage that begins with the image of a comic book cover, explicitly contextualizing them as comic book characters within a comic book world.

Similarly, when Miles’s powers first manifest at school, he retreats to his dorm room to read a comic book titled *True Life Tales of Spider-Man*, whose cover is explicitly modeled after Peter Parker’s actual first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy* #15. Let’s compare this with an equivalent moment in the

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56 These covers look quite similar without being identical to actual comic book covers featuring these characters.
comics: in *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* #21 (Marvel, 2013), Miles watches a YouTube video of Peter Parker’s battle with Venom to prepare for his own encounter with the supervillain. The comic book version of Miles seems to live in a world that reflects our own, in which video and photography serve as the best tools for documenting and learning about real-world events. Miles’s world in *Into the Spider-Verse*, by contrast, seems to be documented in comics: sequential art, rather than video, is established here as the medium best equipped to capture the true life tales of this world. Again, this is because the world itself is akin to a comic book: recalling films such as *Creepshow* (George A. Romero, 1982), *Into the Spider-Verse*’s (virtual) camera will on occasion track backward out of the diegesis itself, revealing the storyworld to consist of nothing more than panels on a comic book page.\(^{57}\) Whereas *Creepshow* uses dissolves to transition viewers between the photographic world and the illustrated images on the comic book page, *Into the Spider-Verse*’s non-photographic basis presents both versions as ontologically equivalent, identical save for the addition of speech balloons, captions, and the multi-panel grid in the comic book version.

*Into the Spider-Verse* is also unreserved in its use of comics’ expressive conventions (e.g., text captions, speech and thought balloons, onomatopoeias, motion lines), reminding viewers of the medium’s signature communicative tools with each evocation.\(^{58}\) For example, shortly after Miles is bit by the genetically altered spider, his internal monologue becomes inflected with comic book stylization: the next day at school, he starts to hear his thoughts more loudly, which manifests visually as a series of yellow caption boxes repeating what we hear in Miles’s voice-over: “Why is the voice in my head so loud?” A few minutes later, a blue caption box (reading “Later that night . . .”) serves an omniscient narrational function, separate from Miles’s internal voice. Speech balloons also appear at various points in the film, first as Miles stands precariously on the vertical wall of his school (“Keep sticking!”) and then later to provide an English translation to Scorpion’s Spanish-language dialogue.\(^{59}\) As in *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* (Edgar Wright, 2010), onomatopoeias often appear onscreen as visualized graphic text (e.g., a visible “clackity clackity clackity” as we see and hear Spider-Man type on a computer keyboard) while motion lines and impact stars accentuate characters’ rapid movements and collisions in battle, respectively.

Formal intermediality refers to “the use of comics’ formal system—sequential images, arranged spatially and available for simultaneous view—in a film, often through split-screen.”\(^{60}\) Again, this is a technique that appears throughout *Into the Spider-Verse* and especially after Miles receives his fateful spider bite. Indeed, after the bite we are immediately transported inside Miles’s body, which is represented through an array of panels, each providing a separate view of his internal anatomy: heart pumping, veins pulsing, blood vessels flowing. Notably, the style of the images also changes to a less detailed,

\(^{57}\) See Jeffries, *Comic Book Film Style*, 1–2, 94–98.

\(^{58}\) Jeffries, 23.

\(^{59}\) The latter echoes the use of speech balloons as a creative form of subtitling in *Kick-Ass 2* (Jeff Wadlow, 2013). See Jeffries, 77–78.

\(^{60}\) Jeffries, 23.
more hand-drawn aesthetic that contrasts with the film’s computer-generated representation of external reality. It would seem that the spider has injected Miles not just with the proportionate strength of a spider but also with comics’ formal properties: under a microscope, blood vessels and Ben-Day dots alike course through his veins.

The use of this technique climaxes during Miles’s first night out swinging through Manhattan as Spider-Man in the final act of the film. In combination with speed-ramping that evokes “comics’ elastic temporality and staccato rhythm,” Miles’s effervescent debut as Spider-Man uses sequential panels to great effect. The sequence begins with Miles clinging to the glass wall of a skyscraper. As he flings himself into the air, the animation ramps into slow motion, suspending him in midair as he leans back, reverse-somersaulting into a vertical dive. Cutting to an extreme long shot of an inverted Manhattan skyline, we see Miles—dead center in the frame—slowly drifting, practically floating, toward the skyscrapers above. Movement is all but arrested in this shot, recalling Scott Bukatman’s evocative description of Spider-Man co-creator’s Steve Ditko’s artwork: “One small Ditko panel gives us a rear view of Spiderman in the air over the city. His artificial web snakes slackly through his hands: this is movement in progress, not an arrested bat pose. Two buildings flank his body in the lowest part of the frame, no more than jutting corners against the open space.” The use of slow motion approximates the paradoxically dynamic stasis of the comic book panel, arresting a moment of diegetic time for extended viewing and heightening the sense of “vertiginous kinesis” that Bukatman associates with the superhero genre in both comics and cinema. Following this moment of temporal transcendence, the sheer velocity of Miles’s descent is emphasized through a series of six panels, which appear in a left-to-right sequence onscreen. Each panel’s composition centers on Miles in free fall, beginning with an extreme long shot and progressing ultimately to an extreme close-up on his mask’s left eye: the kind of panel layout that is often described as the comic book equivalent of a zoom shot, but one that clearly offers distinct visual pleasures of its own. This is also distinct from typical cinematic uses of split screen, which tend to obey a logic of simultaneity, offering viewers visual access to two separate spaces within a single composition. This (multi-)shot instead follows the sequential logic of panels arrayed on a comic book page, presenting sequential moments in time communicated through their relative arrangement in space. While the story being told across these panels is not complex, the movement across the screen clearly communicates the increasing intensity of Miles’s fall.

Throughout the film, the filmmakers also deploy aesthetic effects that bear a specifically nostalgic association with outdated comic book printing...
technologies: namely, Ben-Day dots (for color and shading) and the deliberate misalignment of line and color fills. These choices—like the CCA logo that introduces the film—eschew the aesthetics of contemporary comics (such as those featuring Miles Morales) to instead hark back to a bygone era of the medium that was aesthetically defined by microscopic dots on cheap, faded newsprint. In comics, Ben-Day dots “allowed printers to mix colors through the careful application of varying amounts of primary colors applied as a field of small dots. On close examination, the colors remain distinct, but at a casual distance, the reader’s eyes mix the colors.”

Thanks to the four-color (cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, or CMYK) printing process used for newspapers and comic books throughout much of the medium’s pre-digital history, the association between sequential art and bright, primary color palettes is strong.

Even today, when advancements in printing technology and the transition to digital coloring have given colorists the ability to draw upon the full visual spectrum, comics remain connected with garish colors and Lichtenstein-esque Ben-Day dots in the minds of filmmakers, viewers, and even many scholars. Like contemporary digitally colored comics, *Into the Spider-Verse* enjoys a rich and varied palette, perhaps closer to a live-action film than a 1960s comic book, but its lighting and shading effects are literally textured with nostalgia for vintage comics.

The film also draws upon the flaws inherent in antiquated four-pass printing processes. As art director Patrick O’Keefe describes:

In a comic book, there’s no lens. So there’s no lens blur. To stay true to the medium, we decided to go with a CMYK offsetting as our blur. The film actually has no motion blur in it, but, instead, borrows from certain anime techniques to replicate the feeling of motion with a frame. At first it was a real problem because you’d get a lot of [visual] chatter. Despite our best intentions, you still need a “lens” that can focus. So we decided, all the [sense of] focus is done with a CMYK offsetting like you’d get off a four-pass printing press. Then we were bringing in the halftones, because that’s old school comic book DNA, as well.

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67 As recently as 2007, adaptation specialist Thomas Leitch claimed that “comics and movies deploy color very differently, since comics are normally limited to six colors (eight, counting black and white), whereas the most rigidly rigidly movies usually exploit the resources of a much wider color palette.” Liam Burke provides an apt rejoinder to this antiquated observation, writing that “the restricted palette Leitch describes was rendered obsolete [in comics] by digital colouring.” See Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 194; and Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015), 210.

In both of these instances, the filmmakers have their comic book cake and eat it, too, remediating the aesthetic effects associated with obsolete printing processes but with a degree of control inaccessible to comic book printers and without any aesthetic restrictions (e.g., of color choice). As a result, they can deploy these techniques in deliberate and systematic ways, producing novel focus and depth-of-field effects in a specifically non-photographic way (i.e., without motion blur). As Ramin Zahed summarizes in the film’s Art of the Movie coffee-table book, these “visual cues . . . pay homage to the gritty origins of Spider-Man and the Golden Age of comic books.” In this quotation, however, “Spider-Man” does not refer to Miles, but to Peter Parker, whose comic book appearances throughout the first few decades of his adventures, at least, would be conveyed via these now-obsolete printing processes. Like the Spider-Verse conceit itself, then, the comic book–influenced aesthetic of the film is executed in a way that reaffirms Peter Parker’s importance to the cinematic experience, even as Miles assumes the central role in the narrative.

Animation also clearly plays a subordinate role to the live-action superhero film, again positioning Into the Spider-Verse as secondary to the live-action MCU. Historically, animated superhero films are almost always straight-to-video affairs aimed at children (e.g., Superman: Brainiac Attacks, Curt Geda, 2006) or diehard comic book readers (e.g., Teen Titans: The Judas Contract, Sam Liu, 2017); the few that are released theatrically tend to be offshoots of television series (e.g., Batman: Mask of the Phantasm, Bruce Timm and Eric Radomski, 1993; Teen Titans Go! to the Movies, Aaron Horvath and Peter Rida Michail, 2018) or original properties unrelated to existing comic book canon (e.g., The Incredibles, Brad Bird, 2004; Megamind, Tom McGrath, 2010). Though the film bucked the trend and was given a wide theatrical release, Sony clearly did not treat Into the Spider-Verse as an equivalent to their live-action Spider-Man films; it was produced on the lowest budget of any film in the franchise, played on the fewest screens of any film in the franchise, and was released theatrically in December, well outside of the May–July blockbuster season in which every other Spider-Man film to date had debuted. In the final tally, it also grossed less at the domestic box office than any other Spider-Man film—$12 million less, even, than the reboot-necessitating The Amazing Spider-Man 2, despite far better reviews and word-of-mouth. This last point may be surprising, since the film has been widely celebrated by critics and audiences alike and is often hailed as the high point of the franchise. Arguably, this success—culminating in the 2018 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature and the announcement of two sequels, currently scheduled for release in June 2023 and March 2024—speaks to the efficacy of Sony’s strategy of tempering the film’s diversification of the superhero genre

69 Zahed, Spider-Man, 191.
70 Of course, its production budget was less than half that of Amazing Spider-Man 2, making it more profitable overall. According to IMDb.com, budgets in the live-action franchise range from Spider-Man’s (Sam Raimi, 2002) $139 million to Spider-Man 3’s $258 million. Into the Spider-Verse was budgeted at $90 million.
with overt appeals to colorblindness and an aesthetic design that gives the film the veneer of 1960s comic books.

**MOVING BEYOND THE BINARIES**

Miles Morales’s relegation to a secondary, highly stylized animated storyworld speaks to Hollywood’s continued difficulty imagining characters of color headlining four-quadrant blockbuster films, especially in the superhero genre. As I have argued, the particular narrative choices made in the process of adaptation are revealing. For instance, whereas the comic narrativizes the positive impacts of affirmative action policies while also recognizing their insufficiency to redress systemic racial biases, *Into the Spider-Verse* emphasizes Miles’s deservingness under a well-functioning meritocracy. Similarly, Miles’s father is transformed from a reformed criminal to an officer of the law, emphasizing family values and respectability over the realities of racial discrimination and unequal policing practices. Additionally, the film’s central theme promotes colorblind racial ideology, which attaches a clear asterisk to any claim that the film empowers underrepresented viewers in a straightforward way. Finally, while the film’s comic book aesthetic is visually exciting and innovative in many ways, it also functions to subordinate Miles to Peter Parker and the more racially heterogeneous era of superhero comics he represents. Taking all these factors into account, *Into the Spider-Verse* demonstrates how stylistic, industrial, and narrative factors can work together to maintain white hegemony even while ostensibly diversifying a franchise.

In an article published in *The Atlantic*, Ta-Nehisi Coates attributed his love for superhero comics specifically to their “transgressive diversity,” or at least the possibility thereof, especially in contrast to their comparatively conservative film adaptations. Responding to the casting of light-skinned actress Alexandria Shipp as Storm in *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Bryan Singer, 2016), Coates flips the association between a fannish devotion to canon and white supremacy, writing:

> Hollywood can’t bring itself around to cast someone who looks like the Kenyan woman Storm actually is. This isn’t a matter of fanboy accuracy, but white supremacy. In another world, where Lupita Nyong’o’s dark is unexceptional, . . . this discussion wouldn’t be necessary. In this world, the one where we can accept Nina Simone’s music but not her face, it matters. . . . [O]ne reason I’m always cautious about the assumption that everything is improved by turning it into a movie is that the range of possibility necessarily shrinks. I’d frankly be shocked if we ever see a Storm, in all her fullness and glory, in a film.72

The possibility of Miles Morales as depicted in the comic books and the seeming impossibility of adapting the character within a live-action block-

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bustee, as well as the changes made to the character for the animated adaptation described throughout this article, seem to prove Coates’s point. Perhaps we should not be surprised that Miles would undergo significant changes in the process of adaptation, given Arad’s on-the-record dismissal of Miles as a viable live-action character in 2014, not to mention the superhero genre’s long-standing bias toward whiteness.73 Similarly to Coates’s understanding of Shipp’s casting in *X-Men: Apocalypse*, such changes function largely to reduce the sense of racialized threat and implicit (and sometimes explicit) anti-Black bias that has surrounded the character since his earliest comic book appearances—in other words, to make the character more palatable to white audiences.

And yet, like the MCU’s *Black Panther* (Ryan Coogler, 2018), *Into the Spider-Verse* succeeded in capturing Black audiences’ hearts as well as broader mainstream box office success: the presence of Black protagonists and—in the case of *Black Panther*, at least—largely non-white supporting casts seems not to have presented a significant barrier to white audiences, subverting Hollywood’s long-held hypothesis “that nonwhite characters challenged identification and marketability.”74 At the same time, the film’s injection of colorblind racial ideology does not seem to have prevented viewers of color from embracing it. As this article has done for *Into the Spider-Verse*, the celebratory discourse surrounding *Black Panther* has been tempered by various critiques; as Rebecca Wanzo describes, the film’s progressive Afrofuturistic vision is marred by the presence of regressive, neocolonialist stereotypes of African government and culture, a naively heroic representation of the Central Intelligence Agency, and its (at least partial) demonization of Killmonger’s revolutionary politics.75 In the context of such complex Hollywood texts, suspended as they are between reinforcing the white status quo and offering an olive branch to Black filmmakers and audiences to craft and support works that represent and empower them, Wanzo productively suggests that we “move beyond positive and negative binaries and recognize that the comic and film hold progressivism and conservatism simultaneously, representing ongoing conflicts over black liberatory practices.”76 We can both celebrate the experience of the child who walks out of *Into the Spider-Verse* finally feeling seen by a superhero film, and perhaps even tweet about it under the hashtag #RepresentationMatters, while also maintaining Kristen J. Warner’s position that such a framework may limit the sphere of representation to only those images that function as clear “[signifiers] of progress” while also making it more difficult to disavow colorblind (“dipped in chocolate”) representations “because alternatives are few.”77

Between the writing and publication of this article, Marvel Studios announced, produced, and released a series of MCU projects, some of which

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73 See Guynes and Lund, “Introduction.”
75 Wanzo, 207–218.
76 Wanzo, 208.
77 Kristen J. Warner, “In the Time of Plastic Representation,” *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2017): 34, 32.
leveraged their Disney+ streaming platform as a supplement (if not alternative or eventual replacement) to theatrical feature film distribution. Among them were adaptations of Marvel Comics characters introduced in the wake of Miles Morales, including Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) (played by Iman Vellani in Ms. Marvel, Disney+, 2022) and Riri Williams (Ironheart), a female heir apparent to the Iron Man mantle (played by Dominique Thorne in Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, Ryan Coogler, 2022). Both characters follow the Miles template, taking an established superhero identity and passing it down to a young person of color (Kamala is Pakistani American, Riri is African American, and both are teenage girls). Combined with Marvel’s other Phase Four releases—including The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (Disney+, 2021), Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings (Destin Daniel Cretton, 2021), and Eternals (Chloé Zhao, 2021)—the MCU is showing an increased commitment to racial diversity both in front of and behind the camera. At the same time, the third installment in the MCU’s Spider-Man series, Spider-Man: No Way Home, integrated characters from Sony’s preceding versions of the franchise, including Alfred Molina’s Doctor Octopus from Spider-Man 2 (Sam Raimi, 2004) and Jamie Foxx’s Electro from The Amazing Spider-Man 2, setting a precedent for the MCU to integrate material from licensed Marvel films made by other studios on an ad hoc basis. Should Marvel elect to also emigrate Into the Spider-Verse’s Miles Morales from Sony’s animated world to the live-action MCU—as Marvel Comics did when it integrated the character from the Ultimate Marvel line into their main storyworld—it could be another step toward bridging the gap between the “transgressive diversity” of superhero comics and the narrower (for now) range of possibilities of Hollywood cinema.

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