



Still never at the top: representation of Asian and Black characters in Sony/Marvel Studios' *Spider-Man* trilogy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the portrayal of Asian and Black characters in Sony/Marvel Studios' *Spider-Man* trilogy. We analyze Ned Leeds, Brad Davis, Liz Allan, and M.J. "Michelle Jones-Watson," as well as minor characters, through the lens of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999). We focus not only on traditional white/Asian/Black comparisons across racial groups, but also on sub-triangulations *within* groups, such as positioning Black women in comparison to other Black women or Black men, or Asian men to other Asian men or Asian women, along with comparisons to white representations. Despite the trilogy's diverse cast, Ned, Brad, Liz, and M.J. remain separated from and in opposition to one another, with their existence and purpose constructed around their relationship and/or relevance to Peter Parker (Spider-Man), the white main character. The trilogy furthermore employs long-standing stereotypes about people of Asian and Black descent to help maintain whiteness at the top of all triangulations. We argue for a greater need to push beyond surface representations of "diversity" to consider *how* media actually represent different groups.

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Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) is the third movie in Sony/Marvel Studios'¹ co-produced *Spider-Man* trilogy, which includes *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019). As of May 2023, *No Way Home* has become one of the highest grossing movies of all time, reaching US\$1.92 billion (Box Office Mojo, n.d.). Actor Tom Holland plays the lead character of Spider-Man, who is white. Laura Harrier and Zendaya Coleman, biracial women of Black-and-white descent, play Spider-Man's two romantic interests; Jacob Batalon, a Filipino actor, plays Spider-Man's best friend. Harrier's, Coleman's, and Batalon's characters—or variations of them—were white in prior cinematic or comic book *Spider-Man* iterations. Actors of multiple racial and ethnic descents portray various secondary and background characters in the trilogy. This casting is part of a growing Hollywood diversity trend, which has led to claims of progress in that popular media are now reflecting the demographics of today's society (Bowman, 2017; Hoffmann, 2020). Yet discussions have arisen around whether the Sony/Marvel trilogy *is* as progressive as it is touted to be (Johnson, 2017;

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Rozsa, 2017), or if it and other seemingly racially “diverse” media are a *mask of multiculturalism* that maintains, perpetuates, and legitimizes the same stereotypes and narratives about racial/ethnic groups under a guise of diversity (Oh, 2012).

This article examines the mask of multiculturalism via a *racial triangulation* analysis (Kim, 1999; Poon et al., 2016) of Asian and Black characters in comparison to white characters in the latest Sony/Marvel *Spider-Man* trilogy. We discuss the portrayal of Spider-Man’s—aka Peter Parker’s—best friend Ned, played by Jacob Batalon, his romantic rival Brad, played by biracial Eurasian actor Remy Hii, and his love interests Liz and M.J., played by Laura Harrier and Zendaya Coleman. A key part of our analysis focuses on the multiple *sub-racial triangulations* that occur in the trilogy, specifically not only the traditional triangulation of white/Asian/Black individuals in comparison with one another, but triangulations *within* racial groups, and how gender intersects with race. We also explore Asian and Black characters with smaller roles, and we address how stereotypes emerge (or not) in the movies through specific narrative and character representation choices.

Theoretical framework and literature review

Racial triangulation and the middleman minority

Racialization, the process of defining, categorizing, and representing different groups, is *mutually constitutive* (Kim, 1999; Poon et al., 2016); that is, the way we think about, discuss, and portray any race/ethnicity depends on how we think about, discuss, and portray *other* races/ethnicities. Representations of Asian and Black Americans do not occur in isolation. They exist in relation to one another, white Americans, and all races as defined in the U.S., with groups assigned various social “positions” (Kim, 1999).

Kim (1999) described Asian Americans as *triangulated* between white Americans and Black Americans, where Asians are simultaneously “valorized” (praised) as superior to Black Americans yet are *perpetual foreigners* who will never *be* white as a means of “civic ostracism” (p. 107). Triangulation links to the positioning of Asian Americans as a “middleman” racial group, a tactic that “exploits Asian Americans, placing them in a racial bind between Whites and other people of color” (Poon et al., 2016, p. 473). “Middleman” status is part of an ideological framework that holds up certain groups of color as more successful (“better”) than other groups of color, deflecting from the fact that none of these “minority” groups will be seen as *equal* to whites. Extensions, re-imaginings, and critiques of racial triangulation have emerged over time. Recent discussions include (a) how the theory does or doesn’t address racial/ethnic power outside U.S. contexts; (b) considerations of physical space in triangulation; (c) concerns of flattening groups into homogenous populations without accounting for within-group diversity; (d) reframing aspects of the theory; and (e) focusing more on coalition building than divisions (Cheung-Miaw, 2022 ; Davies, 2022; Kim, 2022; Yu, 2022).

We consider racial triangulation as a media construction practice. As our interest is in the representation of Asian and Black Americans within a Hollywood-created movie trilogy, the U.S.-centrism of the theory is relevant, although we acknowledge the U.S. does not exist in a vacuum, and past as well as current racial/ethnic issues intersect with the racial/ethnic issues of other nations (Kawai, 2005; Kim, 2022). We agree that

the flattening of racial/ethnic groups into homogenous populations with implied monolithic experiences is an issue, which is why we deliberately wanted to look at within-group similarities and differences. Our analysis contributes to the literature and advocates for more work on within-group triangulation as well as cross-racial media representational analysis. While we focus on race and gender, socioeconomic and other factors are important, too. We further acknowledge the social positions of racial groups are not permanently fixed, and there may be instances when who has middleman status changes between one group and another, which we discuss in our article. It is why we believe that instead of utilizing a single triangulation perspective, multiple sub-triangulations can address intersectional issues, particularly in media portrayals.

Racial visibility and the centering of whiteness—middlemen within groups

Triangulation in Hollywood occurs across the white/Asian/Black categories but also within racial groups. For example, in the movie *Precious* (2009), despite its majority Black cast, whiteness remains the aspirational goal and the standard of “goodness” through the dark-skinned, Black main character’s idealization of white beauty, and the casting of lighter-skinned/multiracial actors for the professional, kind, and perceived as intelligent characters, reinforcing that lighter and closer to whiteness equates to better (Griffin, 2014). *Precious* triangulates whiteness, multiracial/lighter-skinned Blackness, and dark-skinned Blackness. *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) similarly has a biracial man of Eurasian (Asian and white) descent as the romantic lead in an all-Asian cast; this coincides with the Hollywood trend of preferring biracial men of Eurasian descent for these types of roles, as they uphold white Western conventions of beauty through their proximity to whiteness (Sebastiampillai, 2020). Biracial Asian actors take on the middleman status against whites and other Asians by being Asian enough to be “marked” as Asian, but white enough for white Western audiences. This allows media to appear progressive while maintaining the racial status quo at the most fundamental levels, with the use of biracial/multiracial actors “providing cover to both marginalize persons of color and to legitimate the existing social order” (Oh, 2012, p. 351).

Our intention is not to take away from the accomplishments or casting of multiracial or any actors of color for a role, or to attack them personally. We highlight this sub-triangulation within racial groups to illuminate how the media industry uses colorism, featurism, and various physical markers to perpetuate racial hierarchies, which includes trapping multiracial individuals within hierarchies, too.

Stereotypes and triangulations

Stereotypes are overgeneralized physical and behavioral characteristics ascribed to members of an identity-affiliated group (Dixon, 2019; Gorham, 1999; Zhang, 2010). Media have a limited amount of space to present characters. Stereotypes serve a narrative and cognitive function by allowing media consumers and producers to create mental shortcuts to assimilate information by which to judge and understand characters or real-life people (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Dixon, 2019; Ford, 1997).

Media stereotypes rely on, derive from, contribute to, and intersect with wider social myths about different groups perpetuated across political, cultural, educational, and

economic contexts (Collins, 2009; Gorham, 1999; Matthews, 2018, 2021; Toliver, 2018). Stereotypes about the poor have helped to promote the narrative that people succeed or do not due to their own efforts and whether they *work hard enough*. Stereotypes of women as less rational/overly emotional perpetuate beliefs that women cannot make decisions and should be subordinate in society. Racial stereotypes have led to Black men being seen as guiltier than white men even when committing the same crime, or Black women seen as less deserving of a job or government support (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Collins, 2009; Dixon, 2019; Ford, 1997).

Besana et al. (2020) examined Asian representation in live-action U.S. movies after 1993. *Stereotype-resisting* characters challenged existing stereotypes of Asian people, while *stereotype-confirming* characters reinforced stereotypes. Although a rise in diverse representation has emerged, stereotype-confirming representations of Asian men remain prevalent in U.S. society (Besana et al., 2020), with the *model minority* the most prevalent for Asian Americans today (Oh, 2012; Yu, 2006; Zhang, 2010). The *yellow peril* stereotype arose in the nineteenth century due to immigration fears and as part of Western imperialism rhetoric (Shim, 1998) to position Asians as “an invading, sneaky, and dangerous threat to white people” (Oh, 2016, p. 157). With the advent of the Civil Rights Movement in the twentieth century, and more complicated racial dynamics, the model minority stereotype arose to depict Asian Americans as “successful and ‘problem free’” (Yu, 2006, p. 326) hard workers who are intelligent, obedient, self-disciplined, passive, and polite *in contrast* to Black Americans (Oh, 2016; Poon et al., 2016; Yu, 2006; Zhang, 2010). Deceptively positive, the stereotype is a means “to emasculate Asian American men by presenting Asian Americans as socially awkward geeks who have lost their sexuality and humanity in their self-disciplining efforts to become a super-minority” (Oh, 2012, p. 359). An offshoot of this is the *nerd* stereotype, which expands on the geeky, socially awkward, and emasculated aspects of the model minority to present an Asian character who is often technologically knowledgeable but with poor communication and social skills. The nerd’s sexuality is either entirely invisible or utilized for comedic purposes (Oh, 2012; Zhang, 2010). The model minority and nerd stereotypes often go hand-in-hand with the *person of color sidekick or best friend*, a character with no real goals other than fulfilling the aspirations of the (typically white) protagonist. Sidekicks are also often *comedic relief*, with no well-rounded humanity, existing for punchlines and assisting the main character (Besana et al., 2020; Oh, 2012).

Media overrepresent men and show women in a greater number of subservient roles. Black Americans tend to be portrayed as more immoral and less intelligent than white Americans, with Black men shown as lazy, naturally *athletic*, physically *scarier*, and as criminals (Conrad et al., 2009; Dixon, 2019; Oh, 2012). Black women with lighter skin, white-Eurocentric features, or who favor white-Eurocentric beauty standards feature more prominently in media (Conrad et al., 2009; Dixon, 2019).

Multiple stereotypes of Black women exist in U.S. society (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Collins, 2009; Dixon, 2019; Toliver, 2018). The *jezebel* is promiscuous and has attitude, which plays into stereotypes of Black girls as more sexually mature than girls of other racial groups. The *sapphire* is the loud, rude, sassy, and often angry Black woman stereotype. The *mammy* is the asexual opposite of the jezebel who cares for her “masters”/employers and their children more than she cares about herself. There is also the asexual *magical negro*, which occurs in media representations of all Black

people regardless of gender (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009), who has no motivations or purpose beyond existing “to support, uplift, and provide wisdom to the White protagonist” (Toliver, 2018, p. 6).

Methodology

Our work drew from Oh’s (2016) analysis of Asian character representation in the superhero movies *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013), along with the Glenn and Cunningham (2009) analysis of Black character representation in movies such as *The Legend of Bagger Vance* (2000), *Bruce Almighty* (2003), *The Green Mile* (1999), and the original *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999–2003). Glenn and Cunningham (2009) analyzed filmic representations by the dimensions of “Character qualities, Black character(s) interaction with the leading White character(s), as well as the presence of stereotypical images or roles” (p. 141). Oh (2016) analyzed Asian characters who are villains against Wolverine (the white main character) or who support Wolverine against the villains, and how characters’ body sizes, height, names (or lack of names), gender norms, and stereotypes such as the *yellow peril* uphold “old racial logics about Asians/Americans” (pp. 152–153).

We combined approaches from Oh as well as Glenn and Cunningham with the employment of racial triangulation (Kim, 1999; Poon et al., 2016) on the Sony/Marvel *Spider-Man* trilogy. Both authors watched the trilogy independently, creating initial memos on characters within and across the three films. Coming together, we next engaged in a two-staged analysis.

We began with the two most prominent characters of color in the trilogy, M.J. and Ned, as the main love interest and best friend characters. Then we turned to Brad and Liz as the next two prominent characters of color as the romantic rival and secondary love interest roles. Finally, we looked at Asian and Black characters with minor roles in the trilogy. We examined (a) character traits, motivations, and desires; (b) their interactions with the white main character and other characters; (c) the trilogy’s use of stereotypical images or roles; (d) whether Asian or Black characters supported or stood in opposition to one another; (e) body size/height/coloring/features; and (f) gender norms.

After we coded for the above dimensions, we created multiple triangulation configurations and assigned *status markers* to characters: *High Status*—first position in a triangulation, *Middleman Status*—the second or middle position in the triangulation, and *Low Status*—third and bottom position in the triangulation. Characters could be assigned different status markers in different triangulation configurations, which we discuss in the findings.

Findings: racial triangulations in Sony/Marvel Studios’ *Spider-Man* trilogy

Ned and Brad, Liz and M.J.: the intersection of masculinity, femininity, and the transgressive in racial hierarchies

Filipino actor Jacob Batalon plays Ned Leeds, Peter Parker’s best friend. In the first movie of the trilogy, Ned’s introduction to the audience is in a high school hallway, asking Peter to join him in building his “Lego Death Star.” Cheerleaders overhear the conversation, calling the idea—and implicitly Ned, who suggests it—“so lame” (*Homecoming*, 11:43).

Ned is darker-skinned with a larger physical build, contrasting with Peter, who is lighter-skinned and thinner with an athletic build. While both Ned and Peter share similar interests and display high levels of intelligence and likeability, Ned is confined to the stereotypical *nerd* and *best friend/sidekick* role whereas Peter is a *nerd* but with physical prowess and leading-role desirability. When Ned discovers Peter's identity as Spider-Man, he expresses excitement to be "the guy in the chair" (*Homecoming*, 27:15), the tech support for Peter. Ned is also emotional support for Peter's romantic problems.

Brad Davis is Peter's romantic rival in the second movie of the trilogy, played by Remy Hii, who is of Chinese-Malaysian and British descent. Brad is lighter-skinned, with white-Eurocentric features and an athletic build, making his character physically closer to Peter and another contrast to Ned. Brad is introduced to the audience by Ned, who describes him to Peter as, "totally ripped and super nice and all these girls are after him" (*Far from Home*, 11:25). Brad is a stereotype-resisting character in that he is a desirable Asian man with romantic goals. Throughout the second movie, Brad makes his attraction to Peter's love interest, M.J., clear, actively trying to undermine Peter. Yet Brad's romantic arc with M.J. is one-sided. M.J. eventually humiliates Brad in front of other students. Brad's purpose in the movie, like Ned's, is for Peter's development, with Brad as a means to help bring M.J. and Peter together.

The triangulation of Peter, Ned, and Brad in some ways complicates traditional approaches. Typically, the Eurasian actor would take the middleman position, and physically Brad does occupy this status. The narrative ascribes to him positive physical attributes that are superior (more sexually desirable) to Ned. However, Brad *oversteps* his place by trying to challenge Peter for M.J., which hearkens back to the fact that Asian Americans—no matter their position—can never be as good as whites (Kawai, 2005; Kim, 1999; Shim, 1998). Brad's proximity to whiteness becomes transgressive, hence the need to humiliate him and return him to his place. Ned never approximates whiteness and remains in his place as a supportive role to Peter. As such, Ned becomes the middleman minority in this instance, as he is a model minority best friend/sidekick, which follows media traditions wherein Asian sidekicks assist a white main character against other Asian characters (Oh, 2016). Ned can even have romance, but not in competition with Peter.

During the second movie, while Brad attempts to be a romantic rival for M.J., Ned has his first (and only) on-screen romantic relationship with Betty Brant, another high school student. While this relationship could have been an opportunity to represent another Asian man as romantic and desirable, the relationship between Ned and Betty is treated as comedic. Angourie Rice, who plays Betty, is a white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes who never interacted with Ned in the first movie, nor did she exhibit prior romantic interest in him. In the second movie, the two end up seated next to each other on a plane for the school trip to Europe. By the end of the flight, they declare they are boyfriend and girlfriend, shocking Peter. The relationship never receives development beyond the two providing humor and punchlines. They abruptly break up by the end of the second movie; their relationship is not mentioned or relevant to the third movie. Ned does not have another romantic partner in the trilogy or express desire for one, which reverts him to the desexualized, nerdy, and sidekick stereotype who exists to support Peter. Ned and Betty's relationship has elements of the transgressive,

too, in that it echoes historical fears of the *yellow peril* entering into a relationship with white femininity. As such, Ned's arc with Betty follows stereotypical patterns found in earlier media in two ways. His relationship with a white woman is *temporary*, and the comedic treatment of the pair further serves to neutralize Ned's sexuality to remove the "peril" of his existence as an Asian man involved with white femininity (Kawai, 2005; Shim, 1998).

The Black biracial woman character of M.J., who approximates whiteness more than Liz does, receives the middleman superior status in the trilogy, unlike Brad. This is because her nearness to whiteness is an asset to Peter more than a threat, as she is not in competition with whiteness but the object of its desire. It is worthwhile to note that both of Peter's love interests are biracial women of color, as opposed to M.J. or Liz being in potential competition with a white woman character like Betty. This highlights how triangulation status intersects with gender dynamics for people across and within racial groups.

Liz Allan (Peter's crush in the first movie) and M.J. "Michelle Jones-Watson" (the woman lead and Peter's main love interest for the rest of the trilogy), are played by women of Black-and-white descent. Zendaya Coleman, who plays M.J., is lighter-skinned and more racially ambiguous than Laura Harrier, who plays Liz and has features/coloring more aligned with traditional representations of Blackness in the U.S., although Liz's character is biracial in the movie. White actor Michael Keaton plays Liz's father, Adrian Toomes, who is the primary villain of the first movie. Liz's introduction to the audience is through Peter's gaze, as he sees her with her friends. She has no voice; her introductory scene is to illustrate her attractiveness to Peter. M.J.'s introduction involves dialogue—she actively inserts her voice into Peter and Ned's conversation at lunch by calling them "losers" for staring at Liz (*Homecoming*, 13:31). Visually, Liz presents as conventionally feminine—skirt, cute top, hair down and shiny, nice makeup. In M.J.'s introduction, she wears her hair in a very messy bun, with messy strands on one side of her face; she appears to wear no makeup and only pants/jeans (no skirts/dresses), the conventionally attractive Zendaya's looks downplayed more than in real life.

Liz is a stereotype-resisting character in that she is *not* a loud/angry, mammy, jezebel, or one of the frequent stereotypes for Black women used in media. She is smart, a member of the Academic Decathlon team along with M.J., Ned, and Peter. She worries about Peter rather than is "angry" at his flakiness, is kind and concerned for her classmates when they are in danger; and is responsible, popular, and likeable. M.J. is also smart but a cynic with trust issues; sarcastic (teetering on the edge of "sassy"), she is a conspiracy theorist with some social awareness and suspiciousness toward the government. In the second movie of the trilogy (Liz departs at the end of the first movie), M.J. shows interest in macabre historical murders and deaths, further highlighting a *quirky* personality.

M.J. seems interested in Peter from the first movie and guesses his secret as Spider-Man in the second, whereas Liz never puts together his erratic behavior with the events that involve the superhero. M.J.'s *focus is always on Peter*, whereas Liz cares about other things—her family, school, peers, or the homecoming dance. M.J., despite her quirkiness or really because of it, becomes a stereotype-confirming woman character—although this stereotype is for women broadly and not just Black women—through being *not like other girls* (TVTropes.com, n.d.), where a woman is special or

awesome because she does not behave in a conventionally feminine way. M.J. has no significant conversation or interaction with another woman in the trilogy. She does not meet Peter's Aunt May until the third movie, and they interact briefly. Although M.J. is *not* an "asexual magical negro" due to her love interest status, she does have lingering traces of this stereotype as her primary role is to assist, comfort, and offer advice to the white main character (Glenn & Cunningham, 2009).

The triangulation of M.J. and Liz has racial and gender components. M.J.'s middleman position occurs both because she is closer to whiteness physically and because she is *closer to masculinity* than the conventionally feminine Liz. Returning to Ned and Brad, there are gender overtones, too. Brad's closeness to traditional (as portrayed in Hollywood) whiteness and especially white masculinity makes him a threat to Peter, whereas Ned's distance from white masculinity makes him more acceptable in the middleman position. A larger triangulation also exists of white masculinity/biracial Black femininity/Asian asexuality (or comedic sexuality) for Peter, M.J., and Ned, who are the main characters of the trilogy, where Blackness takes on the middleman position of Asian Americans due to M.J.'s status as Peter's love interest. M.J.'s gender and racial proximity to white masculinity elevates her status, which is not the case for Black men characters in the trilogy.

Black men characters—race, gender, and “intelligence” in triangulations

In the opening scene of the first movie, Liz's father Toomes and his salvage crew are working a legitimate job. Toomes corrects his Black employee who is doing the work "wrong" while a white employee strolls in late, with Toomes giving a half-hearted reprimand that makes it clear the tardiness is not a big deal and will have no consequences. These Black and white employees later join Toomes's illegal criminal crew. In their first fight with Spider-Man, the superhero easily bests the Black employee/crew member while the white criminal who walked into work late punches Spider-Man with one of the high-tech weapons. The Black criminal becomes the weak link in the crew as he is the one Spider-Man is able to place a tracker on; during another confrontation in the movie, Spider-Man bests him again, commenting, "I got to say, the other guy [who was white] was way better with that thing [the tech item]" (*Homecoming*, 1:14:53). This marks three instances where the narrative positions the Black man criminal as inferior to his white man criminal counterpart, feeding into the less intelligent Black men stereotype. It also creates a triangulation of white masculine hero/white masculine criminal/Black masculine criminal, with Black criminality positioned as lower status than white criminality.

Similar triangulations occur in academic contexts. When Peter receives detention after trying to ditch school for heroics in the first movie, he is able to get up and leave. The person in charge of detention is a Black man (who seems to be an athletic coach from his clothes) shown slumping in his desk/chair with hands on his cheek who is too lazy to stop or care that Peter leaves. This is an echo of the lazy Black man (who is in sports) stereotype. The lead teacher of the Academic Decathlon team in the first movie and the school trip to Europe in the second movie is Mr. Harrington, who is white. On the trip to Europe, Mr. Dell, another teacher who is Black, also leads the students. On the plane ride to Europe, Mr. Harrington comments that he and Mr. Dell are responsible for the students, but the scene cuts to Mr. Dell—his introduction to the

audience—asleep and snoring in his seat, evoking another lazy Black man stereotype. While Mr. Harrington and Mr. Dell are both targets of jokes in the movies, the types of humor used for the two have subtle differences. Mr. Harrington is almost too “nerdy” but interested in opera and culture. Mr. Dell, supposedly a science teacher charmer, spouts fears about witches and shows no intellectual engagement with culture while on the trip.

In the third movie, villains from previous *Spider-Man* franchises (which are other universes in the Sony/Marvel trilogy) end up in the Tom Holland–Peter’s universe. These villains include four characters who were scientists/engineers. One of the four was a character known as Max Dillon/Electro, played by Black actor Jamie Foxx in the Sony-only produced *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014). In that movie, Dillon is a glasses-wearing electrical engineer presented as socially awkward and an intellectual. The other three science villains from previous *Spider-Man* franchises are white. In the third movie of the Sony/Marvel trilogy, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), the three white scientists remain scientists and in line with their former character portrayals, trying to help problem-solve with Holland’s Spider-Man. In contrast, Foxx’s Dillon shows none of his former science/technical knowledge. His glasses, social awkwardness, and knowledge are gone; he is now a Black man with “swag” who makes quips and is funny rather than intelligent. Dillon’s status is lower than his white villain science counterparts, and his relationship with Peter is less complex, too.

Intelligence intersects with race and gender. Both Liz and M.J. are “smart,” yet the Black men in the trilogy come across as less intelligent. There is therefore another triangulation of race and gender, with white masculinity at the top of intelligence, Black feminine intelligence as the middleman status, and Black masculine intelligence as the lowest status. Furthermore, there is an element of colorism as the Black men characters are overall darker-skinned than Liz and especially M.J. Similar to the movie *Precious* (2009), lighter-skinned and biracial/multiracial Blackness occupies a higher status than darker-skinned Blackness in this superhero trilogy.

Relationship dynamics: Liz, Ned, and M.J.

Triangulation occurs across and within racial groups through the depiction (or lack of depiction) of relationships for different characters in the trilogy. Liz matters in the first movie because she matters to her white father (who is the main villain) and her white love interest who is the main character. The first movie shows both of her parents. Liz’s Black mother has three brief scenes and dialogue in one of those scenes. Her father, Toomes, receives character development and screen time arguably second to Peter. Liz may be a stereotype-resisting character, but her relevance does not depend on being a person in her own right; she exists to bolster and anchor the white men characters around her. Multiple triangulation configurations emerge here that utilize race, gender, and age. One is Peter at the top (young white male hero), Toomes in the middleman position (older white male villain), and Liz (young Black biracial love interest and daughter) as the lower status in terms of character development and prominence. Another configuration is Toomes at the top of his family (white father—authority figure), Liz as the middleman (biracial child), and Liz’s mother (Black woman) as the lowest status, reflected in her lack of screen time.

No member of Ned's family appears until the third movie. His lola (or grandmother in the Tagalog language, whom he calls "Nona") appears in a pivotal moment involving Ned, M.J., and two other Spider-Men from alternate universes. Ned's lola is on screen for a few minutes, speaking almost entirely in Tagalog. Though not accompanied by subtitles, Ned translates her speech into English. While the use of a foreign language could be viewed as inclusive and an acknowledgement of Ned's Filipino background, his lola is used for comedic relief during a serious moment. As Ned and M.J. encounter these other Spider-Men from alternate universes for the first time, Ned translates that his lola, "is asking if you could just get the cobweb there," and "Nona is asking if you can clean up the webs you just shot" (*No Way Home*, 1:25:45). The audience learns nothing else about her or her relationship with Ned. She does not appear again for the rest of the movie, nor does any other family member of Ned's in the trilogy.

M.J.'s family never appears on screen. She references them, and there are hints that her family life is or was unhappy and/or unstable, but she has no on-screen relationships beyond Peter (and Ned to a lesser degree). Peter has relationships or meaningful interactions with M.J., Ned, his Aunt May, Happy (May's fling/love interest and a connection to Tony Stark/Iron Man, a significant character in the wider Marvel Cinematic Universe), the villains in every movie, and other characters. This is a common media tactic to provide multidimensionality to the main character. White characters beyond Peter have relationships and interactions with multiple characters, too. In the triangulation of family and interpersonal relationships among the core three characters of Peter, M.J., and Ned, Peter occupies the top position with the richest interactions, Ned is the middleman, with his family appearing briefly on screen (albeit in a comedic way), and M.J. is at the bottom, with her family (presumably composed of some Black people) totally absent. Previous media versions of the white Mary Jane Watson character had an unhappy home life with a verbally abusive and alcoholic father, which may have served as inspiration for the current M.J. "Michelle Jones-Watson's" not-quite-clear background. However, other changes occurred for Michelle that differed from the previous Mary Jane. Her family background could have been another change, especially as the unhappy or unstable family is a common media stereotype of Black and/or Black biracial/multiracial families (Brown Givens & Monahan, 2005; Dixon, 2019; Ford, 1997; Griffin, 2014).

Wong and Cindy Moon—authority and intelligence in triangulations

The character Wong, played by Asian actor Benedict Wong, makes a brief appearance in the third movie. Wong is a sorcerer who assisted in training Dr. Strange, a white main character in other movies part of the wider Marvel Cinematic Universe. In *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), Peter enters Strange's home in need of help, where two other nameless and voiceless Asian characters clean the foyer with shovels. Wong, who is also there, reveals to Peter he is the new Sorcerer Supreme (a title denoting the greatest magic user in the world), but when Peter mentions he thought Strange was the Sorcerer Supreme, Strange says that Wong has the title due to a technicality of Strange having vanished for five years, adding, "If I'd been here, then—" (*No Way Home*, 20:06). This undermines Wong's authority and implies that he has the title because of Strange's absence. A triangulation exists for Peter, Strange, and Wong of

young white hero/older white authority figure/older Asian authority. Wong disapproves of a rule-breaking plan concocted by Strange and Peter. However, Peter and Strange proceed with the plan anyway, undermining Wong's authority. Strange is the middleman of an older white man who is sympathetic toward the younger white man's (Peter's) needs. While Wong is an authority figure with the title of Sorcerer Supreme, his authority only extends to the other Asian characters in the scene, as he orders the nameless Asians in the background to keep shoveling when they apparently stop cleaning off-screen (we see and hear only Wong's perspective). When it is clear Peter and Strange will continue their plans despite Wong's warnings, he grudgingly says, "Just leave me out of this" (*No Way Home*, 22:14) before disappearing through a magical portal. Wong is absent for the rest of the movie.

Returning to the trilogy's first movie, Tiffany Espensen plays an Asian female character named Cindy Moon, a member of the Academic Decathlon team. In the Marvel comic books, Cindy Moon is also known as Silk, an alternate version of Spider-Man. This is not referenced in the film. Cindy only speaks a few words, such as answering a practice question on the bus ride to compete at the Academic Decathlon Nationals. She is a stereotype-confirming character as a nerdy, highly competitive Asian who shows no other interests outside of academics. A triangulation exists for Tiffany, Peter, and Liz. While the narrative depicts all three characters as intelligent, it portrays Peter as the most intelligent and their best chance at winning, putting him at the top of the configuration. When Peter quits the team a week before nationals, Cindy becomes visibly upset. In contrast, Liz chooses to hear Peter out and is sympathetic toward his struggles; Liz is also the Academic Decathlon team captain, which places her above Cindy in the middleman position, intelligent but implied to be not as intellectually gifted as Peter.

Conclusion

This article provides an analysis around the portrayal of Asian and Black characters in the Sony/Marvel Studios' *Spider-Man* trilogy, via a racial triangulation analysis of Ned, Brad, Liz, and M.J. as well as secondary characters. Despite the prominence of characters of color, the trilogy still positions them as secondary to white characters, with only the "middleman" and "low" status positions in flux depending on the specific triangulations. Within this trilogy, whiteness remained at the "top" both for across-group and within-group triangulations. Ned, Brad, Liz, and M.J. have their existence constructed around their relationship to Peter, the white main character, although Liz's existence is split between her relevance to Peter and her relevance to her father, who is the white main villain of the first movie.

Additionally, Ned, Brad, Liz, and M.J. remain *separated* from and in *opposition* to one another. Liz and M.J. serve as Peter's romantic interests and are foils in many ways. Although they are both on the Academic Decathlon team, they never have significant conversations with each other, with Liz positioned as *pretty and popular* while M.J. is *not like other girls*. Even with the seeming progressiveness of having two biracial Black/white women in the first movie, their purpose is still for the white men characters. Ned and Brad exist for Peter, too. One is the best friend; the other is the romantic rival. Ned and Brad are put into opposition with each other not because of personal issues

between the two, but because of Peter's interests and desires. Ned supports Peter while Brad competes against Peter. The four most prominent characters of color have no relationship to one another, defined instead by their dynamics with Peter. Although Ned, M.J., and Peter are presented as a trio of friends, Ned and M.J.'s friendship primarily hinges on Ned and M.J.'s relationship to Peter, not to each other. Only at the end of the trilogy do we see Ned and M.J. as friends in their own right, and that is because they have literally forgotten Peter's existence due to magic. Peter always has relationships, goals, and interests outside of his relationships with Ned and M.J.

Triangulations, and especially sub-triangulations within racial groups, provide a useful lens through which to understand intersectional issues related to "diverse" media representation, and how gender and multiple factors can shift the "positions" of groups of color. The Sony/Marvel *Spider-Man* trilogy does bring more diversity to its movies than previous live-action, cinematic entries. However, diversity is more than an increase in numbers. Diversity is *how* characters are represented. The quality of portrayals matters. This does not take away from the significance of having diverse representation on screen, nor does it suggest that we cannot praise the time and energy these actors put into their roles. This does not mean we cannot enjoy superhero movies. However, we can enjoy media and still turn a critical eye toward problematic representations. We need to question *why* Ned, Brad, Liz, and M.J. appear the way they do, or why even background characters embody stereotypes such as Black men who are criminals, less intelligent, lazy, and athletic, or why Asian characters are nerdy, obedient, and secondary to white main characters. If we do not question, if we do not use that critical eye, what we call *progress* really will remain just more of the same.

Note

1. Specifically, Columbia Pictures (a division of Sony Entertainment Pictures) and Marvel Studios (a division of The Walt Disney Company) co-produced the film and its previous two installments, with Sony as the distributor.

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