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Male Characters and Masculine Representation in the Era of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Hollywood

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I. INTRODUCTION

Hollywood is responsible for most of the film and series content produced, distributed, and consumed by viewers in America. As such, the stories that Hollywood produces play a major role in influencing contemporary American culture and, of interest here, reflect and reinforce social understanding of gender. In a time where portrayals of the diversity of the human experience are being deeply examined, questioned, and revised, the representation of men is a stone left largely unturned, with the exception of extreme dominant masculinity on one side and marginalized men on the other. Men have done most of Hollywood's storytelling, and as a result, have dominated the screen time. Thus, this dominant position within the industry has led to an assumption that the boys are alright. However, the representation of men and masculinity in media is also in need of review and consideration in the larger conversation of gender representation in media.

Through ethnographic research focused on "above the line" creators (writers, directors, and producers), I found that changes to male representation were primarily a by-product of the focus on women (or non-dominant masculinities, such as LGBTQ, and BIPOC). Consideration of how male characters are portrayed is primarily in response to the inclusion of stronger, more central, and more complex female characters, pointing to the idea that male representation is only problematic in the way that it impacts non-male or non-dominant male characters. The storytelling community, and those who critique it, seem to hold a general assumption that the "aspirational" male hero is a gold standard to which other demographics should strive, and by which inclusive representation is measured. Within the current understanding of the narrative hero, more women as presidents and CEOs is viewed as a net positive – since men have traditionally been those things, those things must be good, creating what could be seen as a zero-sum game for who gets portrayed, and how. However, the "normative" male hero is, as R.W. Connell suggested, not so normative when most

men do not live up to the impossible standards of the dominant masculine man. In fact, two of the mid-career male creators in my study suggested that they did not write their seminal male characters as representative of them as men, but were (at least in part) influenced by how they saw men portrayed on screen. These creators continued to recreate male characters the way they saw men in the media, even when it didn't speak to their experiences as men.

I begin this paper by examining how men are less likely to be considered as gendered and treated either as the default (normal) person or the hero to emulate. All of the creators in this study claim to consider gender (and how gender is represented) in creating and developing projects, though when speaking of "gender," they primarily indicated women (and, to a lesser extent, non-binary and trans people). I note how this lack of a specific focus on masculinity as part of this engagement with the gender conversation is representative of masculinity missing from the effort to address old gender stereotypes.

In the subsequent sections, I will look at how media impacts culture but is amplified when it influences the people who become creators. I connect the gendered portrayals in these creators' work to the creative influences of their youth, namely the movies and TV they watched, and books they read. I will analyze how these stories, in relationship to childhood events, impacted how media artists tell stories now. I will examine how these creators (and media in general) represent men, in particular in regard to R.W. Connell's work on deconstructing masculinities and Joseph Campbell's influence on how the (male) hero is depicted in contemporary media. While the representation and diversity focus has been on non-(white, cis, hetero) males, some creators are beginning to examine their assumptions of men and masculinity as a result of the industry's reckoning with the historical lack of minority and women representation, but towards a new way of imagining the "archetypal" male hero. Finally, I will explore future trends by examining the state of diversity initiatives in Hollywood and the work being done in the ever-expanding range of gender expression, especially in regard to the disproportional underrepresentation of males in dismantling rigid gender forms.

I'm not an outsider to this conversation. After a decade of producing films, I became head of production and development for a small animation studio in 2014, where I created a program to help writers and key story creatives understand gender representation in film and television. I was aware of the gendering of girls in popular media and the ubiquity of films that didn't pass the Bechdel Test (Bechdel 1986, 22).[1] However, it wasn't until after I left that position and directed a documentary film about America's top female baseball players that I began to examine how boys and men were being represented in media (Temple 2019). I learned through dozens of interviews with female players (youth and adult) that they had all been intentionally hit by a pitch thrown by an opposing male pitcher, had experienced online bullying, and had been harassed on the field and off (one was threatened with rape). Why would these boys choose to intentionally hurt a female player in order to avoid the risk of her hitting his pitch? While men and boys are quantifiably well represented in the media, I was convinced that *how* men are portrayed, and considered within the representation discourse, was worthy of examination (GDIGM 2016) . To quote Walt Disney, "Movies can and do have tremendous influence in shaping young lives in the realm of entertainment toward the ideals and objectives of normal adulthood" (Russell and Waters 2010, 37). Exactly what constitutes "normal" for some men seems to contain questionable traits and attributes.

II. METHODS

This research consists of in-depth interviews with fifteen "above the line" (directors, producers, and writers) entertainment industry professionals, whose work amplifies, (re)creates, and perpetuates culture and are responsible for how gender is represented (at least in their projects). The primary criteria for my interviewees were that they have at least two credits as either writer, director, or producer on a film with a North American theatrical release, a non-theatrical film financed or

[1] The Bechdel Test was born out of a joke in Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, in which one of her characters laments that she will not be able to go to the movies because she has a rule that she will only "go to a movie if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have at least two women in it… who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man."

distributed by a major studio, or a TV series that aired on either broadcast, national cable, or major streaming service (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu). These criteria aim to ensure that my interlocutors are professionally engaged in the industry, dealing with the challenges of creating, pitching, and/or adhering to studio and network constraints. While most have done work for both the small and silver screens, seven are primarily TV creators, six are primarily film creators, and two were split more evenly between the two media. Three have worked predominantly in animation. Six are women, three of whom are women of color (one Latinx, one Latinx/Native American, and one Arab American). Of the nine men, seven are Caucasian, one is African American, and the other is Asian American (and the only gay creator in my sample).

All the interviews were conducted over Zoom, where the shortest interview was approximately one hour, and the longest was two hours. I had an interview guide with prioritized questions; however, I remained open and fluid with the questions and course of the interview, using techniques of *The Active Interview* to follow "leads" from my interviewees that I otherwise would miss with an overly-rigid questionnaire (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). This gave texture to the answers, but also allowed me to home in on the questions that elicited the greatest engagement and, conversely, the greatest uncertainty. For example, when I asked how they consider gender, the answers primarily referenced female characters (and, for some creators, non-binary and trans characters) and were well thought through. When I asked about male characters specifically, however, each creator needed to pause and consider the question. Garrell[2], an African American writer/director, said, "I don't know how to answer that question," while also acknowledging that father/son relationships often feature strongly in his screenplays and therefore felt certain that representation of masculinity featured strongly in his writing. Frank, an animation director with over four decades in the industry, replied, "That's a good question. I'll have to think about it." And Saul,

[2] I will use pseudonyms throughout this paper. As my interlocutors are semi-public figures whose careers and work opportunities are regularly reevaluated in both the private sphere and court of public opinion, their private thoughts on controversial matters could only be honestly expressed if their identity was protected.

a writer who was pioneering in the mythopoetic men's movement in the 1990s, also acknowledged that he hadn't brought that awareness into his screenwriting.

Deterding and Waters (2021) articulated *flexible coding* as an evolution from grounded theory, given the norms (e.g., IRB) and technological advancements (QDA software, etc.) in the last several decades. However, as I advanced through my interviews and transcribed and coded along the way, grounded theory provided an important methodological tool (Charmaz 2014; Glaser and Strauss 1967). This is in part due to the fact that questions around masculinity and representations of male characters were under-examined and unrehearsed. By employing a ground theory approach, I was able to convert what initially seemed to be a failure in my questions and methods into valuable data, where the absence of clear answers began to tell a story of its own. An advantage of this approach allowed me to explore complex questions in a rich and granular way that enabled unanticipated results to emerge and situate specific actions and attitudes within the larger context of the respondent's work and career, where these common reactions and replies highlighted a general gap in the thinking and consideration around (re)presentation of males and masculinity in media. People of higher status, as Hollywood creators generally are, can craft a good story, for the screen and for the presentation of their lives, and the under-considered questions allowed for less polished answers (Kahn and Jerolmack 2013).

Following the interviews, I transcribed the interviews and imported the text into the qualitative data program MaxQDA to organize and analyze my transcripts. In the first set of interviews, I employed open coding, leaving behind my initial ideas and hypotheses in order to see what themes emerged, which ultimately informed how I conducted the remaining interviews and coded all of the interviews. I assigned codes for emerging themes and tagged excerpts that illustrated these trends. By engaging with my community, I had to be aware to treat my interlocutors as just that, parts of my research, and not my friends or colleagues. I found that as I began to code and

analyze the anonymized interviews, the data itself trumped any connection I had with the interviewees.

The "ethnographic fieldwork" part of this study will draw on my past experiences working in the entertainment industry and will be informed, in part, by autoethnography, which will allow me to "*articulate insider knowledge of cultural experience*. This assumption suggests that the writer can inform readers about aspects of cultural life that other researchers may not be able to know" (Adams, Ellis, and Jones 2017, 3). My time in creative development and production with many collaborators over the years gives me detailed knowledge of the entertainment industry and informs my research and analysis. I hope that as my findings and conclusions come into focus, any analysis does not read as criticism, but as insight that can benefit the individual creators as well as the larger Hollywood community.

III. FINDINGS

I will start by showing how men have been degendered and thus largely omitted from the broader discourse and initiatives for gender diversity in media, and why the focus on gender representation is incomplete without males. I will then pivot to storytelling and how Hollywood creators consider, impact, and are impacted by representation of male characters. I explore how childhood media exposure inspired and influenced the stories that these creators would later tell, and how the dominance of (white) male creators and heroes in popular stories resulted in white men having a more limited exposure to diverse stories, which impacted the stories they developed and created. I will show how dominant and hegemonic masculinities have been studied and examined, leaving other forms of masculine representation overlooked or ignored, and how the mytho-heroic male character has become generally accepted as the apotheosis of representation. However, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) mandates and initiatives that are aimed at creating greater opportunities and representation for traditionally under-represented groups are opening up broader questions of what representation can mean. This leads to some of the research and pop-cultural

discourse exploring male representation, including efforts to undefine and rewrite masculinity, expressions of manness, and what it means to be male.

A. Do Men Have Gender?

Before proceeding with a conversation about males, men, and masculinity, it is vital to explain how I will use these terms. In this paper, I will often interchange or conflate men and males (assigned male at birth), as how they are represented in the media are, more often than not, interchanged and conflated. While male may be a biological designation, our beliefs about gender end up defining what being male *means* and our understanding of maleness (Fausto-Sterling 2000). In media representations of men and males, the issue of what a man *is*, I believe, is less important than what a man does or how he "performs" (Butler 1990). Both sex and gender binaries can be limiting to how people actually live and experience sex and gender, yet the understanding of gender expression and shades of maleness generally lie between two binary points of male/man/masculine on one side and female/women/feminine on the other.[3] However, this is not a paper intent on decoupling gender and sex or critiquing the binaries, but to uncover ways in which men, males, and masculinity are broadly understood, considered, represented, and portrayed in popular film and television. I will use masculinity as a descriptor, a catch-all term to describe and frame the qualities generally associated with men (and, by extension, often males), a pole on the gender continuum that stands opposite to femininity. In her groundbreaking work on masculinities, R.W. Connells attempts to boil it down in the broadest sense that masculinity "is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (Connell 2005, 71). Or, more tersely, "Masculinity is, in effect, defined as non-feminine" (Connell 2005, 70). While masculinity and

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[3] Meg-John Barker and Alex Iantaffi explore and break down binaries in their book *Life Isn't Binary: On Being Both, Beyond, and In-Between* (2019). While they deconstruct the binary as being an either/or (one can experience being at both ends at the same time, or different places at different times or different situations, for example), they still often rely on the binaries as poles between which gender and sexuality are expressed and experienced.

manness are culturally defined, the actual doings and performances of men and males (including how that is (re)produced in the media) are not theoretical and have real social impact.

The scholarship and activism of gender studies have put women (and, more recently, trans and non-binary people) at the forefront of the conversation on gender representation, resulting in the tendency for men and masculinity to be left out of the gender conversation, as if, by being dominant for so long, men are not gendered, but are the measuring stick by which gender itself is measured and understood.[4] When I asked my interlocutors how they consider gender in their work, the question was generally answered by sharing how they consider women. Garrell, an African American director, spent more time living with his father in a "male, testosterone-driven household" where he was taught to be tough and never to show emotion, "where raising men-men was a thing, whatever that means." This relationship with his father impacted the work that he created, where a strong theme of father/son relationships shows up in his work. When I asked about how he considered gender in his projects, like others, he began to talk about how he considers women in his work. "In the first iteration of the script, the mother figure was not quite prevalent. It was really all about him… I think what we were able to do successfully was to actually show just how important the mom was." He went on to discuss how he, as a writer and director, could shift character, story, and representations of this woman's role from a wife who cheers on her husband's success to a driving force in ways that are different from the man's, but no less powerful or important. This type of attention is important, as it reflects an awareness of past non-considerations of female characters and a focus on shifting expectations and stereotypes of women's roles in society and in story. Although Garell is aware of how hyper-masculinity was defining in his life, when I pressed him about how he considers male characters specifically, he said, "I don't know how to answer that

[4] This non-gendering of men in the academic community shows itself in the fact that many universities and colleges still have "Women's Studies" programs, while some, like Harvard, have incorporated the broader themes into their "Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality" department names. Some department names are more inclusive, such as The University of Chicago's "Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality"; however, the mission states its focus on "the study of women, gender, and sexuality." See also: (Wiegman 2002; Watkins and Emerson 2000; MacKinnon 2003)

question… Really, other than, say, all characters in all of my films, I hope to be three-dimensional." For someone who has shepherded character-driven films to theaters around the world, his characters meet his standard. However, as a filmmaker with a stated commitment to examining gender representation, and an awareness of how his life was impacted by dominant masculinity, his lack of a specific focus on masculinity as part of his engagement with gender portrayals is representative of masculinity's absence from the effort to address old stereotypes of gender representation in Hollywood.

A substantial body of research has shown, for example, that portrayals of women in media impact how they see themselves and what roles they believe they can fulfill in society(Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald 2002; Mumford 1998). Numerous studies elucidate specific examples, such as the impact of media on young girls' body image (Spettigue and Henderson 2004) and the role of internalized sexualization on girls' grades, career paths, and future income potential (McKenny and Bigler 2016). Much of the work on gender in the media has focused on women, non-binary, and queer representation, leaving a relative paucity of research on media shaping men's (and more specifically cis and hetero men's) self-image (Macnamara 2006). Amanda D. Lotz suggests that a lot can be said of the fact that "so little has been written about men on television" (Lotz 2014, 7). As men have dominated the stories and positions of power in Hollywood since its inception, they are rarely considered as a gendered group, compounded by the idea that male representation has been a gold standard toward which other demographics have aspired, hence such female-driven remakes and spin-offs, such as *Ghostbusters* (2016) or *Oceans 8*, and not the other way around.

Much of the existing research has focused on hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) and characteristics of masculinity that, when exhibited in extreme forms, can become "toxic," focusing on depictions that lead to a glorification of violence, objectification of women, and portrayals of reckless behavior (Mellen 1977) or how media images of emotional disengagement can lead to men to avoid emotional engagement with their partners (Ben-Zeev et al. 2012). Because (white, cis,

hetero) men have been the default person as represented in media, scholars have primarily examined male representations in their most extreme manifestations. So, while the rugged *Dirty Harrys*, violence-as-virtue *Rambos*, or invincible *Terminators* have been parsed, analyzed, and theorized time and time again, the qualities that are taken as universally heroically aspirational have not (Jeffords 1994; Cohan and Hark 1993). Beginning in the 1980s, the "new man" emerged as a form of masculine representation that incorporates more feminine qualities but, importantly, retained certain ultra-masculine features (e.g., wealth, humor, or physical prowess) and pursuit of traditional male careers (athletes, business or political leadership) that support and reinforce his masculinity and hence his hegemonic position (Milestone and Meyer 2021, 139). This focus on masculinity as hegemonic or dominant has left other masculinities and male portrayals in mass media under-examined, though a small yet growing body of scholarship on men, males, and masculinity is examining the role and effects of media on men.

Given the proliferation of series content (aka television), contemporary media offers many portrayals of men, especially male characters based on patriarchal constructions of hegemonic masculinity, whether they be cowboys, wealthy patriarchs, or a downtrodden schoolteacher turned crime boss (Lotz 2014). There is no singular representation of hegemonic or patriarchal masculinity, but "masculinities that reinforce men's dominant gender status in the culture… that assert men's "natural" place as leaders and their superiority over women" and other non-dominant men (Lotz 2014, 20). While, as noted, the implications of this dominance hierarchy on women are well researched and understood, their impacts on boys and men remain under-theorized. The Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media (GDIGM) has been a leader in gender research in media since 2004 and has tracked how women have been (under)represented. It was not until 2020 that they co-sponsored their first-ever study on how boys are portrayed. Entitled *If He Can See It, Will He Be It?,* the research examined portrayals of boys and men in TV programming for younger audiences, where they measured for such male stereotypes as *self-sufficiency, acting tough, engaging in risky behavior,*

being a leader, and *exhibiting aggressive behavior*, to name a few (GDIGM 2020). With the exception of *aggressive behavior*, the other qualities are generally considered positive, and *aggressive behavior* certainly has its place in the pantheon of masculine qualities when it comes to winning a ball game, a battle, or saving the world from destruction.

Simone de Beauvoir noted that women are not born but made – so, too, are men. As stories and media are so vital to the (re)production of what it means to be male, man, and masculine in modern society, this thesis focuses on the people who actually do the storytelling – the writers, directors, and producers whose words and images are shaping, and continually reshaping, how gender is expressed. As I will explore further, the extent to which men and masculinity are engaged as a part of gender representations in contemporary media will impact how men are made and whether a reimagining of the hero is possible.

B. Media Influences on Media Makers

Gender, as represented in media, is more than a disembodied set of numbers and statistics, but is situated within lives and society as part of the infrastructure of culture where gender ideologies broadly are often "constructed through media representation," reproduced and commodified by an industry of media professionals (Kimmel 1992, xii). The media present a consistently repeated and oftentimes simplified or distorted view of gender that, with regular exposure, can lead "viewers to cultivate or adopt social attitudes that align with the content presented. Therefore, individuals who repeatedly view television content that promotes traditional gender stereotypes are expected to be more inclined to accept these stereotypes as true and to endorse these beliefs in their own lives" (Ward and Grower 2020, 181). As Michael Kimmel notes, "images of gender in the media become texts on normative behavior, one of many cultural shards we use to construct notions of masculinity" (Kimmel 1987, 20). While determining direct impact and social causes as related to media can be tricky, culture creators do not operate in a vacuum, and all but one of my interlocutors

spoke at length of the impact of books, theater, movies, and tv on their lives. Most of us living in contemporary Western society can speak to media influence and how specific genres impacted us, or how the zeitgeist of the media in our formative years played a part in who we have become. For creators, it also became a part of the shows and movies they made, passing along trends to new generations of viewers.

Unlike the average citizen, writers, directors, and producers create and recreate within these "constructed" ideologies. Additionally, they are working within an industry that has certain standards and norms, where each project needs to conform to the mandates of a specific studio or network, market research, fiscal considerations, and the preferences of the executives who greenlight projects. As such, while all of the creators in this study had clear ideas about diversity and inclusion in the broader industry, those factors played less into their day-to-day writing and developing of scripts. Once creators enter their creative space, they appear to be guided not only by their creative inspiration, research, and observations, by also by a mix of what they learned from their training, their upbringing, and their media influences.

I asked each of my interlocutors about the movies, tv series, and books that they remember from their childhoods and the ones that influenced them the most. With the exception of *Marry Poppins*, none of the men mentioned movies, series, or books by women or with a woman as the lead character. For all the creators, this lack of gender diversity in their media consumption explicitly played into how they understood relations between male and female characters, as well as what a strong female character would look like. While I'm focused on how male characters are considered and created, male and female characters are often portrayed in relation to one another, the understanding of the female characters will impact the understanding of the male characters and vice versa. For instance, Frank spoke about what he perceived as a strong female character in the 1964 stop-motion film *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. "The doe Clarice... was awesome. She would never give up on Rudolf. Everyone else would treat him badly, but not her." In his childhood years, Frank

experienced a strong female character was one who supported the main male character in achieving *his* goals and dream. Such norms, when unexamined, get repeated by the creator who was impacted by those stories.

The women I interviewed expressed a very different perspective, especially the mid-career creators. Due to the lopsided representation in film, television, and literature in general, more male-lead or male-created media dominated the influential lists; however, movies like *My Girl* and *Clueless* were mentioned by female creators and the "holy trinity of Lily Tomlin, Carol Burnett, and Gilda Radner." This was true for books, as well, with characters like Amelia Bedelia and Ramona Quimby. Creators of color mentioned books or media that included people of color. The list of inspirations given by the white men in the study was generally homogeneous, where not a single white male creator named an influential book or media that wasn't created by a white man. In short, aspects of identity predicted exposure, and more diverse exposure equated with more expansive views on representation. Women and minority creators had a greater breadth of story experiences, which seemed to impact their awareness of diversity and equity in their own work.

Robert, a middle-aged husband, father, and creator of several series, described his father as a feminist, "so I internalized a lot about humility and about [pause] not being a typical patriarchal, he-man kind of man." On the flip side, he realized how much he was impacted by boorish or sarcastic male characters from *The Simpsons* to *Calvin and Hobbes*. He shared the cause of several concerned parent-teacher meetings:

> I, like Calvin, had a very intense and even perhaps mean or bullying relationship with some of the girls in my elementary school. And I think part of it is because I really related to this Calvin character and the way that he would quarrel with Susie. And, of course, when I was very young, I didn't quite understand that in the comics, Suzy often has the upper hand, right? And Calvin has kind of shown to be a doofus in those interactions. But he would write poems and draw pictures of Susie being impaled by spikes. And then I would do that with the girls in my school.

While Robert clearly didn't take these Calvinesque tendencies into adulthood, he did carry a defensiveness and resistance to the idea of his privilege as a white man, or the concept of patriarchy, well into his twenties. His shift in perspective around privilege and representation may have been due, in part, to his regular engagement with developing and writing new material in Hollywood in increasingly diverse writers' rooms (both in terms of demographics, but also in terms of an acceptance of, and willingness to listen to, ideas that challenged the mainstream or status quo).

Between the time when Robert began developing the pilot and the series bible for his big-break show until it got greenlit, several years elapsed, during which time he staffed on other shows. That process includes reading dozens of pilot scripts each year in order to decide which shows his agent would pitch him to. He mentioned that he was disheartened by how often the female characters were defined by their relationship with the male protagonists in a sexual or romantic way – or comically not so. "I'm not saying like one or two characters, but 100% of the female characters in most of the scripts that I read featuring a male protagonist." He turned all of those down. However, once his series got picked up, he went back to his pilot script and the bible to begin production, he realized that he had done the same thing. "This is exactly the kind of stuff that I would criticize another show. And I'm embarrassed that I fell into that trap myself." Something shifted for Robert at that moment, and it continued to shift for him. Unlike feature film creators, who often spend years from ideation to the final project of a two-hour film, Robert was continually confronted with his biases, writing weekly on a show that ran for nearly a decade.

Over the course of writing many seasons of a show with a team of collaborators (including several female writers), Robert noted how his perspective grew and shifted as a man and writer. He began to unwind some of his "own ingrained ideas about the role of female characters on a show and what purpose they served." With each episode and each season, he continued to discover storylines and tropes that no longer fit his evolving thinking about gender representation. "You watch the show – you can see the ways it evolves and the kinds of jokes it stops telling or the kinds

of characters it stops doing. And even now, there's stuff that probably happened in the last season where I'm a little bit removed from that. I probably would do that differently."

Robert noted that he does not feel represented by the boorish, womanizing character that he made famous and wondered out loud where exactly this character came from. "A lot of what we as a culture believe is male does come from these stories we see... I wonder how much subconsciously was I writing towards what I had seen, rather than based on my own experience of what being male is." Robert points to the importance of considering men and masculinity in addressing gender representation and how media production both recreates itself and, by extension, the broader performance of gender.

C. Representing Male Characters

The hero, as we see him represented in the media, often depicts a certain type of masculine character, one that exhibits at least some of the characteristics of what Connell (2005) originally described as *hegemonic masculinity,* a term used to describe the characteristics often associated with forms of masculine expressions that dominate others and, within social contexts, underscore patriarchal systems. Not all men, not even all men of the same race or class, can be a part of the hegemony. Men participate in lived expressions of masculinity in different ways. Even those who do not benefit from hegemonic masculinity, nonetheless operate in ways that support or defer to hegemonic masculinity through *subordinate, complicit,* and *marginalized masculinities.*

In the intervening years, masculinity has been further theorized and complicated, as hegemonic masculinity does not look the same in every instance. As Raymond Williams noted, "A lived hegemony is always a process [and] does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has to continually be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified" (Williams 1977, 112). As such, expressions of masculinity may be hybridized, a metamorphosis of dominance by making certain concessions in order to maintain a position of power (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Demetriou 2001).

Further, hegemonic masculinity is not necessarily socially, politically, or economically hegemonic. Non-violent masculinity could become hegemonic (Magaraggia and Connell 2012), as exemplified in McCormack's ethnography of Standard High, when he observed a large group of boys non-violently confront a bully, compelling him not only to stop bullying (in that instance), but to apologize (McCormack 2011). Additionally, Eric Anderson found that simple domination, subordination, and complicity no longer sufficed, and he turned to *inclusive masculinity* "to describe the emergence of an archetype of masculinity that undermines the principles of orthodox (read hegemonic) masculine values, yet one that is also esteemed among male peers" (Anderson 2009, 93). Thus, *hegemonic masculinity* describes the relationship between how certain expressions of masculinity stand in relation to other expressions of gender, and, while it appears to be normative, Connell asks, "What is 'normative' about a norm hardly anyone meets?" when most men will not live up to, embody, or acquire all that it takes to meet the expectations of being a hero. (Connell 2005, 70).

Dominant representations of masculinity on screen can alter, distort, and create identities that reproduce a cycle of masculinity complicit in, subordinate to, and marginalized by hegemonic masculinity. Images *create* identities and help in defining what those identities mean, how they are accepted, and even whether they are aspirational. As representations of dominant male characters are generally seen as a gold standard, this often leads to the idea that casting more women and minorities as characters that have traditionally been played by (white, cis, hetero) men is a net benefit.

In her acceptance speech for the Humanitarian Oscar in 2019, Geena Davis said, "One of the quickest ways, in my opinion, to reach gender parity is to go through a script that you're already gonna make and cross out a bunch of first names of ensemble characters and supporting characters and make them female." (Davis 2019) I have personally done this more than once and had great success. However, this underscores the assumption of male representation as the gold standard, as

though women acting in ways that men have been typically portrayed is considered the apotheosis of female representation.

Diversity initiatives in Hollywood encourage women to assume more roles that men have traditionally played, whereas the inverse of that gets less attention, as men playing roles counter to the dominant male portrayal is perceived as a regression. As Susan Bordo noted in 1994, the shifting of the masculine narrative is a painful experience for the men attempting to rewrite masculinity.

> There is something extremely depressing to me about the fact that when masculinity gets symbolically "undone" in this culture, the deconstruction nearly always lands us in the territory of the degraded, while when femininity gets symbolically undone, the result is an immense elevation in status. The description of male pecs as "tits" gets its irony from the reduction of an overbloated symbol of phallic power to a demeaning slang term for women's breasts. But when Linda Hamilton's or Sigourney Weaver's maternal devotion turns them into muscular, fierce warriors, their ascension into the masculine is nothing but admirable, even thrilling, to the popular imagination. (109)

In order to not be "undone," men are presented as an unattainable ideal that instills a sense of failure in men who do not fit the dominant masculine mold. Conversely, when males are portrayed in non-dominant ways, as alluded to in the "new man," male heroes are often then depicted taking major risks or behaving in other normative ways in order to validate their masculinity. Men in supporting roles, as caregivers, or primary the parent, for example, are a demotion for male representation into socially less-desirable masculinities, such as subordinate or marginalized masculinity.

When my interlocutors spoke of altering the dominant male narrative, it was generally from the perspective of shifting the female character to free her from such tropes as becoming the trophy for the male protagonist, being nice, or deferring to the male characters. Patricia is a TV writer who grew up in the South and was educated at a New England liberal arts university. She double majored in film and social psychology before

moving to Los Angeles, where she worked her way up from a production assistant to creating her own show, now in its second season. She is very cognizant that, as a female writer, she didn't want to create female characters who mirrored what she saw too often growing up, "the trophy, or the victim to be saved, or the annoyance." However, her consideration of how she portrays her male characters is defined by how she portrays her female characters. For example, in an action-adventure film script she wrote, the protagonist was a male with a female sidekick. Patricia did not want her female character to fall into the typical trope of a male/female partnership ending with a kiss, so Patricia created the characters and their relationship so that the film ended in mutual respect and friendship. No kiss. No trophy. Additionally, in order to give the female sidekick more purpose than a foil to her hero, Patricia gave her male hero a flaw that only the sidekick could solve. These choices, however, were inspired primarily by her creative (and social) need to avoid the trap of the main female character (as the number two character) becoming the prize at the end. Ultimately, these choices make for a more interesting and unique script, but the changes to the male representation were a result of, and guided by, how Patricia designed and presented her female characters. In this case, the impact on the male character was less pronounced, as the lead character was still a male who, with the help of his sidekick, saves the day.

Much criticism of female roles in male-led programming has been that they can be un-complex and serve only to further the aims and goals of the main (male) character. As these roles are reversed, male characters may fall into the same traps as female supporting characters have in the past. Of course, supporting characters in movies and television do have a primary purpose of serving the arc of the main character's journey, especially before secondary characters have been clearly defined with their own arc and journey.[5] Patricia

[5] Secondary characters with complex character arcs are found primarily in later seasons of television, where creators have time and space over hours of episodes and multiple seasons to give smaller characters full backstories, with character and narrative arcs.

created a show with a female lead; three of the five supporting cast are men. She mentioned that her male characters have been pilloried online, noting that "Some of the criticism of [my show] is that all the male characters in my show are all," she pauses to laugh, "snowflakes… wimps, and none of them have backbones or know their position or place. That's interesting. I guess that means it's successful; they're not tyrants." In short, she was criticized for breaking dominant male tropes where the male characters defer, often reluctantly, to Patricia's female protagonist. I want to be careful not to over-interpret her words because her comment could clearly be understood as tongue and cheek, but "not tyrants" being a "success" points again to the shift in male representation as a consequence of how female characters are represented – what they *aren't* as opposed to what they are. Again, the changes to male character representation were in reaction to a very conscious shift in how her female protagonist is designed.

While most of the male creators in my study did not have the same awareness of male representation as the women have of female representation, Wesley's experiences of feeling excluded from common masculine tropes slowly built an awareness of male representation after years in a successful directing career. As a soft-spoken, artistically inclined, bi-sexual man, the disconnect between how he felt as a boy and how his father (and community) expected him to behave sewed confusion and self-doubt. Wesley grew up in the South with a father who belittled him for his artistic leanings and lack of interest in football. Growing up in the 1980s in the American South, and in a household where the expression of sexuality beyond the heteronormative was hostilely unwelcomed, Wesley's confusion about gendered expectations or the expression of sexual orientation led him to avoid sexual encounters until later in life. Wesley's father and their relationship dominated our pre-interview conversation, and he continually came back to reference his dad throughout the interview. "I've never seen my dad cry. I didn't hug him at all, probably until way into

adulthood. He was very strict, very verbally abusive growing up… it was a version of very toxic masculinity that I never wanted to be a part of." These traumatic experiences reinforced a self-consciousness around being a man that, as he grew older and processed, helped transform his awareness around hegemonic masculinity. Through Wesley's traumatic journey as a sensitive, artistic boy who later in life realized that he was bisexual, he has become aware of the range of masculinities, rejecting his father's repeated belittlement, telling him "how not to seem effeminate, or [do the] things I shouldn't do." This choice of words reflects Susan Bordo's sentiment on the undoing of men, where the way Wesley wanted to express his (non-dominant) masculinity meant something was wrong with him.

Wesley's awareness of accepted and unacceptable forms of masculinity is a theme that evolved over time in his career and creative work and seems to have played into a much greater awareness of common masculine tropes. His first two feature films do not reflect this realization, as he initially reproduced old narratives, using his stories, in part, to express his masculinity in ways he could not do in real life. His first two films were replete with gendered roles, actions, and expectations, like the bad boy who meets the good girl who softens his heart, beautiful young women dressing to impress, meeting handsome boys, etc. Only recently, in light of the industry's focus on diversity, has he been able to articulate a new way of expressing masculinity, eventually realizing that he was the boy who needed to see men represented in different ways.

> "I used to just want to write man-woman stuff. And now I look at all these stories that I used to have that I wanted to write that were men and women. And I think, what would that be like with two women? … do I want that to be two teen boys? I think the biggest thing I have now that I never had before was sympathy for that kid that I was. It's almost like you wish you could go back in time. And help him and just let him know that it's okay."

As a man now in his late 40s, Wesley has recently begun to incorporate this newer understanding into his newer projects. The current diversity and representation discourse is giving him license to consider how he represents boys (and girls) in his films in new ways he hopes may bring new forms of masculinity to the screen.

Wesley was not the only man who came to question male representation. Taur is a gay Asian American man who realized later in life how the media he consumed played into internalized prejudice and a sense of being othered. A second-generation American from East Timor, Taur grew up in a Catholic household without a father. His mother ran a tight ship, raising four sons on her own. Taur not only lacked a father figure in his house, but he didn't see himself represented on screen either as a gay man or as a Southeast Asian. When he saw representation, it was not in an empowered way.

> If there was ever an Asian person, it was always 'long duk dong'. But even I was laughing at that because, at the time again, this is white supremacy at its most insidious; I was conditioned to believe that even for people who look like me, the only way they can exist in the story is if they are othered in a very, very, very obvious way. Right? So for me, it wasn't about, "Hey, that feels wrong." It was like, "Oh my God, that's hilarious."

Similar to Wesley, Taur othered himself and only later recognized the internalized prejudice of his own, non-hegemonic masculinity. After college, Taur moved to New York to ply his craft on the stage, but soon landed a role in a promising film that took him to Los Angeles. As he continued to audition as an actor, he quickly found that the real world for a gay Asian man in Hollywood was no better than it appeared from a distance. "I still to this day remember one of the lines I was to audition for: "My anus is a beautiful flower. Won't you come sniff sweet nectar?" And I was supposed to say it in an Asian accent." He knew that he would have to step up if he was going to find people like him represented on screen in any way beyond the stereotypes (like the non-threatening, cute, and funny gay best friend). Taur has actively pursued questioning gender representation through his collaborations with, as well as consulting with, actors and creators in the

trans community who are not in significant positions of power or fame, but who can put a perspective of gender and masculinity in a very different light.

This questioning of male and masculine representation by men who do not fit the definition of dominant masculinity are the ones who are at the forefront of questioning the old masculine paradigm in the media. Taur pointed to *The Last of Us* as an example where he has recently seen the shifting narrative in a popular television show. In Episode 3, audience expectations are turned upside down when Bill, who presents as a hardened version of dominant masculinity, is able to break from his own, self-supported version of what it means to be a man towards a different expression of masculinity. The hardened survivalist, Bill, reluctantly helps a strange man who opens his heart to true love. In this 75-minute episode (nearly as long as a feature film), Bill's character depicts the turning upside down of hegemonic masculinity and subordinate masculinity. The creators of the show created an episode that could not have existed on television when Connell was first writing about *hegemonic* and *subordinate masculinities*. As Taur points out, "That representation is incredibly valuable and beautiful." These larger themes point to masculine representations that show another type of masculinity and the ever-increasingly complex ways that males can be represented.

D. The Default Hero and the Anti-Hero

From Theseus to King Arthur to any number of Clint Eastwood or Arnold Schwarzenegger characters, male heroes often portray a "blueprint" for how men *should* be. As presented through media, these characters and stories are a vital part of maintaining a version of dominant masculinity by "setting standards, claiming popular assent and discrediting those who fall short" (Connell 2005, 250). Our stories are an integral part of what makes a man, and implicit in the glorified hero narrative is the expectation of success, victory, and "getting the girl," a success standard as unrealistic as Hollywood's beauty image (though one that seems more universally praised).

Joseph Campbell (1968) defined, synthesized, and codified the narrative of the Hero's Journey (the Monomyth) and the qualities that a protagonist must exhibit or acquire in order to be recognized as a hero. Campbell identified hero "archetypes" (based on Jungian masculine archetypes) by interpreting mythologies from around the globe, finding commonalities, synthesizing the hero experience, and then universalizing traits that define the hero. The ubiquity of male representation in hero roles has created the context for what it means to be a man by defining the hero, and, as such, "male" qualities tend to become synonymous with those of the hero. Campbell focused heavily on the male-as-hero, and the rare focus on women in the hero's journey portrays them primarily as temptress, mother, lover (often as reward), or something wild to be tamed. This codified prototypical hero entered the pop culture zeitgeist when George Lucas widely shared his use of this book as providing the story and hero framework in crafting the *Star Wars* films, after which this Campbellian mytho-hero became the guidepost by which a true, heroic character is measured in Hollywood. "No book has come close to influencing contemporary movies as pervasively as Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*," wrote film critic Michael Ventura, pointing to the fact Spielberg, Lucas, and George Miller all credited Campbell with their understanding of the mythic structure of their stories (Cousineau and Brown 1990, 175).[6]

The foundations that Campbell gave filmmakers through his exploration of the hero's journey are still followed today, as the impact of his work had a deep and lasting impact on some of the most influential filmmakers of the 1970s and 1980s. With one exception, all of my interlocutors over fifty years old had read Campbell, as they were early-career creators when the book became an industry must-read due to its impact on Spielberg and Lucas and spawned many of the largest film franchises in the world. Though many of the younger creators in my study hadn't read the book (all

[6] George Lucas gave a speech honoring Joseph Campbell at the National Arts Club in 1985. In his speech, which can be found reprinted in full in the cited book, Lucas mentions that he spent years writing hundreds of pages for Star Wars that "rambled all over." Only after reading *Hero With a Thousand Faces* did he understand how to craft the story from disparate ideas. Lucas concludes by saying, "He is a really wonderful man and he has become my Yoda"(Cousineau and Brown 1990, 180)

were quite familiar with it), the influence of Campbell was perhaps even greater. All of my interlocutors were avid film and television watchers, and they learned a lot about storytelling for the screen by observing and watching movies and series. The creators who grew up in the wake of this storytelling revolution may not have read the book, but the lessons of the book on storytelling were in most of the content they were watching.

Unsurprisingly, the hero's journey describes an unambiguous male hero "archetype," where cultural assumptions of what it means to be a hero are conflated with the journey toward, or attainment of, the archetypal male. Men*,* as default the hero, has meant that the male character as gendered, encultured beings, have missed out on opportunities to be considered and studied as such. Of course, the male hero was the default before Campbell; however, he helped codify this version of the male hero as a universal story truth, embedding it further in story production (among people to want to change the gender paradigm, as well), even as contemporary culture is shifting away from (or trying to) from the male as default. Campbell reinforced what existed in storytelling, but codified in a way that gave it a universal essentialism.

The Hero's Journey framework has even aided comedy, which uses a surprise twist to elicit laughter. Audiences must have an expectation of how men are supposed to act in order to be redirected; the Campbellian hero provides the standard from which deviation can occur and, as such, the "archetypal" hero looms large in stories of comedic or less-than-heroic characters. When I first reached out to Robert, the creator of an Emmy-nominated comedy series, he jokingly replied that his characters hardly qualify as heroes. All the comedy creators in this study expressed hesitance in the idea that the archetypal hero was relevant to their work. Nonetheless, Robert used the word "archetypal" twice to describe his lead male, who is handsome, famous, successful, sarcastically funny, and "drinks a lot. He's sexist. He uses women. He sleeps around. He doesn't understand emotions." While I would be hesitant to use the word "archetypal" for this type of male character, it is an extreme conglomeration of traits culturally assigned to men. And the nature of comedy requires

going to the edges, exaggerating the characters such that tension is created between what the creator presents and what audiences expect, or what "should be," for the story's protagonist.

While many of today's media heroes (outside of the cineplex and network television) may seem like a departure from this narrative, it is the givenness of the male hero and mytho-heroic narrative that provides a central axis around which these less-than-heroic characters orbit. Audiences love and root for sub-optimal "heroes" like Tony Soprano, BoJack Horseman, Don Draper, Walter White, or any of the male characters in *Friends* not because they are heroic, but because of the expectation of what audiences believe they can (or should) be, and want them to be. The tension between who they are and what they aim for provides cinematic tension in the form of suspense or humor that keeps us invested in, even loving, these characters with no need for textual explanation of what it means to be a hero. In darker shows where the "hero" ultimately fails, the audience gets to enjoy their heroic efforts all the way to the end, hoping that, at the last minute, they will fulfill the cycle of the hero's journey, that they will be redeemed and be deserving of the spoils that the writer has bestowed upon them in the forms of money, fame, adoration, and/or female attention.

Yale is a British-born writer and producer whose decades of executive producing have won him awards both in Britain and in America, has seen a shift in how men are presented on screen. "You look at *The Boys* on Amazon, a bunch of superheroes who are all just influencers and horrible people. I think that's great that we are actually questioning what is a hero… So maybe we're giving younger viewers, particularly young boys, a different, more realistic vision and version of what they should be aspiring to." However, the shifts that he notices are nuances added to the old paradigm, yet still, characteristics that belong to dominant masculinity and the traditional Campbellian hero. *The Boys* is a classic tale of good guys engaging in violence to beat the bad guys, only that in this show, the superheroes are the villains. This "realistic vision" of being a man is hard to find in *The Boys*, but what Yale seems to be alluding to is that some stories are now highlighting the idea that men do not become undone or discredited when they struggle or fall short of the archetypal hero (or

dominant male). Every hero in a good story is flawed, and the journey/story arc generally requires that they overcome those flaws in order to return with the rewards, spoils, or gifts – and with new knowledge. Most stories (superhero movies aside) are not about heroes, but about the story of a man becoming one, going through the alchemical process of turning base metal (a simple human) into gold (the hero).

Yale got a little closer to what I believe he was trying to say, which is that seeing (super)heroes as vulnerable people, struggling under the weight of trying to maintain an image of perfect dominant masculinity, is somehow showing men that it's okay to be imperfect and that dysfunction, failure, and vulnerability are acceptable. "You look at the current Batman, and you compare that to the original Batman – he was a perfect guy, perfect classic hero, and now he's dysfunctional, he's fucked up. We're seeing the effects of his life on him. And it's a very psychological piece." The examples of *The Boys* and *The Batman* point to a trend that Yale sees in anti-heroes becoming heroes, a complexification of male representation. More shows and movies are exploring some of the darker sides of the heroes in more depth, whether Walter White or Tony Soprano being "heroes" of their shows. However, the basic tenets of the hero still exist: violence, power, and wealth are a continuation of what we've seen before, only spotlighting the darker sides and emotional weaknesses or vulnerabilities of these characters. Tony Soprano maintains his dominant position, even on his emotional forays from the therapist couch, because the audience knows that he is a killer who instills fear into the hearts of men, and *The Batman* is still rich, sexy, and kicks serious ass. As such, this begs the question as to whether such anti-hero depictions glamorize harmful behavior toward self and other.

The idea that an anti-hero is a departure from the hero reflects the chokehold that the Western hero definition has on male representation. In the end, the hero and anti-hero are not that different. Tony Soprano could be unattractive by typical standards, but still had sex with younger women, reaped financial wealth, and showed his dominance over others. Don Draper, Walter White,

and BoJack Horseman, while missing the saving-the-world or damsel in distress, are fully representative of the male hero in stories and media. When a hero decimates a town and standers-by are hurt or killed in the ensuing battles, audiences willingly accept the collateral damage. Rooting for a Soprano, Draper, or White is not a far stretch. In fact, it may be more of the same, heroes simply doing what they have to do, and creators guide audiences to sympathize with the violent parts of (masculine) heroics by showing some vulnerability behind the hegemonic masculine façade.

E. From Influenced to Influencer

A common theme from the creators in my study was how the stories they consumed inspired them to be storytellers and to create worlds. One of my interlocutors once told me that before becoming a producer, he was studying art restoration in Florence. As he struggled to match the brush strokes of Da Vinci, he wondered what type of work Da Vinci would be doing today in order to have maximum impact today. He concluded that Da Vinci would be a filmmaker. So, he dropped out of his art restoration program, moved back to Los Angeles, and began his career as an award-winning producer. Like all the other interlocutors in my study, Bruce had a long list of movies, plays, tv, and books that inspired him to want to tell stories. In short, to be able to have some influence on culture. Yet, before becoming creators who influence culture, they were young people being influenced by the creators before them.

Frank is an animation director who relies on gags and physical humor for his character and story beats. Born in 1960 at the suburban edge of vast agricultural land, he grew up in a Christian household with a working father and a stay-at-home mother. He grew up on cartoons, Monty Python, and The Three Stooges, and read Mad Magazine and sci-fi books of that era, where expectations of how males and females behave were reinforced. His understanding of how to treat a male or female character is consequential, as he had his hand in dozens of movies and series aimed at children. As a creator working in animation for over forty years, he has inadvertently made more

male characters than female ones. "It always seems like it's easier to hit a male character in the face with a brick as opposed to a female character. Physical humor... I always tend to do with a male." Violence toward male characters, and committed by them, is a culturally accepted norm that unconsciously gets recreated in animated films, where males participating in violence is acceptable, and even humorous, for male characters to take a brick to the face with the resulting exaggerated injuries.

The separation created by animation allows taboos to be explored and broken in ways that can't be done in live action. Creators do not make live-action projects for children where characters are hit in the face with a brick. However, this harkens back to the Geena Davis Institute's study on boys in media and what is acceptable representation of male characters on TV. Frank and the studios and networks for whom he creates have agreed that males engaging in violence and dangerous acts is culturally acceptable. In short, that means more male characters in Frank's projects. But it also speaks to how creators fall back on the cultural expectations of what's okay for a male or female character to do and be.

Frank built his story chops on media created by the men of the 1950s and earlier. So, while Frank self-describes himself as a feminist, the reflexivity that he brings into his life is less a part of the intuition and flow of his creative work. When I asked how he considers male or female characters in his projects, he replied, "I'm more intuitive. I'm not mathematical. I'm not really analytical about things… So, I don't really analyze it or have a formula that I can spew out or can tell you 'It's gotta be this; it's gotta be that.' Just intuitively, I understand... and I know that there's certain things that a character needs." The flow created by working from an intuitive state is vital to creating good work, but also leads to reproductions of unconscious biases and repeating patterns. Flow, creativity, and intuition can run into conflict when they are so deeply impacted by the story culture into which the creator has been initiated.

One common comment from men in the group was that keeping a scorecard of representation was antithetical to their creative processes. Mihaly discovered what he called the state of flow as the condition that keeps people engaged in difficult tasks. “Flow is a subjective state that people report when they are completely involved in something to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself” (Csikszentmihalyi 2014, 230). Frank appears to live in a state of flow, often directing one project by day while doing story development on another project in the evenings and weekends. He draws directly into animation or drawing software on a large Cintiq (a tablet designed for drawing and painting right into programs such as Photoshop), bringing stories and characters to life. Flow is only possible when a certain amount of mastery has been attained, and the medium does not present a hindrance to the creative work. If a deeply considered understanding of gender, diversity, and representation is a skill that requires mastery, and that skill is un-honed, then working with these topics can certainly break flow. Thus, when representation is not a part of the creative process, but a mandate to be met, it can impact the flow and the creative process.

Some story constraints can be challenges that don’t have to be impediments to flow and can have a positive impact on story quality. Returning to the representation initiative that I created at the animation studio, the first writer who went through the program submitted a draft script that both failed the Bechtel Test and fell short of delivering a quality script. We reviewed the initiative and the tools such that his rewrite instructions were not presented or interpreted as a mandate, but as an opportunity to reimagine story and character tropes. By treating representation and diversity as a tool to master (through training), he began to master the new tools of gender representation and gender relationships, allowing his creative process to continue in flow.

Constraints only crimp creativity when a writer doesn’t want them or when they want the rules to be different than they are. Every writer knows that constraints give structure and even enjoys the challenge of taking a formless concept and wrestling it into a three- or five-act structure.

Robert acknowledged this duality of constraints and flow when he said, "I do think constraints can be helpful… But I think over-constraining yourself at the beginning or setting out too many rules for the way you write characters or the kinds of stories you tell, sometimes can be damaging, and put you in a box and actually limit your creativity more than they can help you." And so, this line between writing from what a writer knows, from the common and accepted patterns of character behavior, and shifting into the "constraints" of new and diverse representations becomes a confusing borderland for creators who both want to see better representation and also feel free to stay planted in the familiar. However, when gender representation becomes an integral part of the structure and process of making their work, then constraints don't create a box that limits creativity, but opens creative challenges that are a part of what makes the artistic processes so rewarding.

While my interlocutors shared that it's hard to create with prescriptions, this sentiment was most emphatically expressed by the straight men in the group. When artists say they are inspired by gut feeling in their work, they are (if subconsciously) relying on their own, ingrained social understandings — which in turn were created, in large part, by exposure to past male-dominated (and white-washed) media. Further, they are working within a gendered/racialized industry where studio notes and executives with greenlighting power are still, by and large, white men who decide who is in, who is out, who creates, and what scripts get the coveted greenlight.

When creators put stories into the world, they have impact; a story becomes an endorsement of what the creators put on screen. Thus, it's not surprising that one sees this type of disclaimer fairly often on broadcasted programs: "The views and opinions expressed in this program are of the filmmakers and do not reflect the views and opinions of the network." Robert told me about an argument in his writer's room where some writers felt that they were glamorizing bad behavior and others felt that audiences were sophisticated and did not need to be "protected," and that they could decide for themselves how to interpret the show. "I think where I landed was actually somewhere in the middle. I found that maybe 'glamorize' is too strong a word, but I think it normalizes. I think art

is a normalizing machine. And it can normalize things for good… and with intention. But I also think that it can normalize things for bad." As Robert became more and more aware of the traps that he fell into early on in his show of repeating sexist tropes and stereotypes, he also made an effort to unwind them. "I was very conscious of the way in which we examined [the character's] bad behavior, and his male gender behavior, too. I didn't want him to fall into the same trap I felt other shows did – that maybe, even inadvertently, normalized or glamorized some bad behavior." With many seasons and episodes, he was able to slowly explore unwinding and deconstructing some of the normalized tropes that he had given a platform. That said, much like Wesley, his awareness didn't start at the beginning, but through the conversation around #metoo and toxic masculinity that brought to awareness to how he had fallen into recreating old tropes.

IV. DEVELOPING TRENDS

A. Diversity in the Entertainment Industry

Hollywood is a gendered industry built on working relationships, creating a close-knit network that makes entry difficult for women and minorities to enter. While diversity and inclusion initiatives have made some progress over the past decade, male creators, writers, and directors in television still outnumber women by more than two to one, and heads of studios, who set the tone and have greenlighting power, are over 80% male (Hunt and Ramón 2020). Even agents, who make the deals between studios/networks and key talent, are predominantly male (Simon 2019). Representation in front of the camera is also lopsided, favoring representation and opportunities for men, from the amount of screen time, number of lines spoken, and background actor population to lead characters in major motion pictures (GDIGM 2016). Director members of the Director's Guild of America are 82% male and 18% women; 4.8% African American, 3.7% Latinx, and they list no statistics for Arab American members, nor have they published statistics based on sexual orientation ("DGA Diversity & Inclusion," 2021). The Writer's Guild of America is 63.3% male and 36.7%

female; 27.6% BIPOC (of which <1% is Indigenous and Middle Eastern), and 8% LGBTQ (WGA West 2022).

As the above numbers have been relatively stagnant, studios, networks, and the Academy have enacted additional interventions to impact larger structural change, including diversity mandates. For example, beginning in 2024, films must meet diversity quotas either in front of or behind the camera in order to be nominated for Best Picture. While all of the interlocutors showed support for the diversity push, late-career creators were more likely to review some of the changes and policies as going too far (with no differentiation between gender and race), whereas mid-career creators who have development deals with networks or studios generally felt that the pace was good. Those with less consistent work or stable careers were more likely to experience the change as too slow. Of the seven cisgender, heterosexual white men in my study, all but one shared stories of being impacted by these structural changes that aim to create room for more diverse creators.

Yale's long and storied career was impacted when he lost a project due to his gender and race a few years back. He and a fellow white male writer created a show about female athletes. The network was "excited, but ultimately they said, 'We've got to pass because the optics at the moment are wrong. Two males writing a female show like this… can't do it.' Even though we said we'd have a [writer's] room full of women." Wesley is also an avid supporter of diversity initiatives in Hollywood, also found himself impacted. "I literally just fired my agent because he told me he couldn't get me work because I'm a white man." Wesley was frustrated that his race and gender were explicitly used as an overt reason for his not getting certain jobs or opportunities. While both of these creators claim to support the push for great diversity and representation, the changes in mandates and diversity programs have resulted in lost work opportunities and a dissonance between the desire for greater inclusion and the frustration of lost work. For Wesley, as I noted earlier, diversity initiatives have opened up a window into his blind spots regarding how he represents men and masculinity in his own work.

On the other side of the story, women and minority creators have experienced increased opportunities due to network and studio mandates. Alejandra, who has executive produced numerous shows for major networks and streaming platforms, said that on her last project, she was given a mandate to hire 50% female directors. As a woman of color, she was happy with the mandate, while also recognizing that as a Latinx woman, she helped the network meet its mandates. “I know they have corporate mandates, even for my job. So, I'm a corporate mandate. Now, I've been a filmmaker since 1990, but right now, my gender and my ethnic name… are helping.”

Diversity behind the camera can impact diversity in front of it, as does who decides which stories will be told, whether stories of women, minorities, or other types of masculinities. For example, Patricia is developing a project for a network where “all the female executives totally get it and understand, and all the men execs don't. And if the females weren't there, there might not be as much interest in this show.” The diversity of the people telling the stories can impact the diversity of the stories that are told, and what stories will influence the next generation of media makers. Garrell is an extremely talented African American writer/director who was hired to rewrite and direct a major film that ended up earning major award nominations said, “I feel like I'm a beneficiary of a lot of people that fought for us to get to where we are. That doesn't mean that the fight doesn't continue. It just means that I feel blessed. I feel like I have been able to get in the room on movies like [these last two films] I've been able to participate in a way that maybe I could not have participated five years before”. While the progress is certainly slow, these programs and diversity initiatives appear to be impacting opportunities for minority creators.

While some of the creators I interviewed spoke comfortably about being part of corporate mandates, Dalia was less than excited about how the conversation is framed. Dalia is an Arab American filmmaker who grew up in the Midwest during the Iraq war and is unenamored with the term “diversity.” “I prefer to use inclusion … Because we have been excluded. And I feel like diversity makes it feel that I've been hired because I'm considered a little bit of color. And I don't

want to feel like you're doing me a favor. You're not doing me a favor. … you need to be inclusive and hire the best people for the job within an inclusive environment mindset." This disconnect is also highlighted by corporate mandates that are about putting women and/or minority characters in roles that used to belong to white men and can appear to be about quotas and not about actual inclusion. Garrell shared his discontentment when he gets asked by a studio, for example, about developing "*Rain Man* starring Will Smith and Kevin Hart? We can, there's nothing wrong with that. But… why? Why don't we just create our own" stories? Several of the women expressed similar frustrations. Cathy, an animation director, said that when she gets a call to direct a film, "They were like, 'We got a great movie for you. It's *The Rocketeer*, but it's a woman.' Every movie was just taking the male roles, throwing a woman in there… a woman not actually being a person, but being a man. Playing an absolute classic, archetypal, male role." It's as if the studios don't want women's stories or black stories, but they want to give minorities the chance to be the white men in hegemonic masculine stories, again pointing to an industry (or cultural) belief that traditional representations of men are inherently the best way to be represented. Thus, when Cathy or Garrell are offered to direct remakes of male-lead IP (intellectual properties), studios are perpetuating the idea that the dominant male character is also the apotheosis of female or minority representation.

B. Toward a New Male Representation

While the institutional focus of gender representation hasn't focused on how males are portrayed in media, new research in gender and sexuality is exploring the rapid broadening of possibilities away from an either/or and towards a both/and (Barker and Iantaffi 2019). The exploration isn't new, but it is becoming more and more visible, it is changing more rapidly, and beginning to focus on the relative absence of males (or assigned male at birth, AMAB). Phillip Hammack et al. have researched how young people are pushing the boundaries of gender and sexual expression. His research revealed that males are far less likely to express gender diversity and fluidity

than females (or assigned female at birth, AFAB) or to be affiliated with LGBTQ+ spaces (Hammack et al. 2022). The qualitative data suggested this imbalance is connected to socialization and the compulsory notions of expressing masculinity for males, revealing how "those assigned male undergo a process characterized by more fear and anxiety about the implications of their identity development process… these narratives reveal the psychological injustice of compulsive masculinity—the fear of direct violence that emerges from boys' concerns about gender nonconformity and diverse gender expression" (Hammack et al. 2022, 195). This stake-in-the-ground compulsion around masculinity even impacts transgender boys (AFAB). Hammack noted one who was reluctant to identify as a boy because he didn't believe others would believe he was "masculine enough" and would doubt his credibility as a boy. The pressures that boys endure to fit in, to be masculine, and to be straight are underscored and, at times, enforced with violence. As I have discussed, these pressures are supported and underscored by media representations of males.

Male heroes generally fall on the hetero and cisgender side of the spectra. However, they could be more intentionally placed elsewhere in the sexual orientation "landscape" (borrowed from Barker and Iantaffi, who suggest that the term is more accurate than a linear continuum), where they could be portrayed more intentionally as bisexual or asexual, but also "pansexual" (attraction to all genders, regardless of gender or sex identity), "graysexual" (limited sexual desire) and "demisexual" (sexual desire occurring only in the context of an emotional connection); or more broadly and ambiguously "queer" (Van Houdenhove et al. 2015; Walton, Lykins, and Bhullar 2016). In a short documentary I co-directed about representation, one young non-binary person (AMAB) lamented the challenge of looking very "masculine" and yet knowing on the inside that they don't identify as such. "You don't really see a lot of assigned male at birth non-binary people out there. And so I guess the stereotype that to be androgynous you can't look masculine… is hard for me" (Sims and Temple 2023). What being a "boy" in America means simply doesn't match the way this person expresses themselves.

In 2021, I interviewed award-winning actor, director, and executive producer Justin Baldoni for the podcast Tapping Creativity (he was unavailable for an interview during the timeframe for this study) about his journey with "undefining" his masculinity, as he wrote about in his memoir, *Man Enough* (2022). While researching how masculinity and femininity are often (or stereotypically) referred to in pop culture, he noticed that "If you look at all the masculine traits, that's how you would build a robot. And if you wanted to inject life into the robot, you'd give it the feminine traits," compassion, empathy, feeling, and sensitivity, to name a few (Temple, 2022.). The wide range of feelings and emotions that are hallmarks of the human experience is often limited in male representation in media. Of course, it's not as men are. The media don't portray men as they are, but often as a depiction of a standardized, exaggerated, and simplified "hyper-ritualization" based on how the creators (and often, our broader culture, too) think men behave, thus perpetuating the hyper-ritualized conditions that reinforces what it means to be a man (Goffman 1979, 84). How could males who want to be boys express themselves in ways that are often associated with feminine qualities, or simply not the "robotic" qualities that Baldoni speaks of? Could they be star athletes and wear make-up or high heels and still be boys? Could they express a full, or seemingly contradictory, range of expression in the gender landscape without having to give up their male identity? How can the "landscape" broaden even further?

We appear to be in a revolutionary time of reshaping what gender and sexuality mean, though, as Phillip Hammack says in his 2019 TEDx talk, it's not affecting males equally, as boys are hyper-constrained "by the legacy of gender and sexuality that we inherit. Young people are not starting from scratch. They are working from templates, and it turns out the template for boys hasn't gone through a complete redesign" (Hammack 2019). It wasn't that long ago that a gay character on screen led to the cancellation of a beloved show (*Ellen* in the 1990s) or that a woman as President of the United States was so outside of reality that such a depiction could only be introduced in a comedy (first on the big screen in *Kisses for My President* 1964 and on television in *Hail to the Chief*

1985). Depictions and representations of other forms of male, man, or masculine expression may be shocking to audiences today, but if history is any indicator, it may be more surprising to look back and see how limited those representations are today. Hollywood creators have been finding ways of successfully shifting representation for years. Robert noted that "when it comes to selling a TV show to networks and also to audiences, my philosophy is that it helps to have one foot in the familiar and one foot in something new and exciting." The tools and techniques exist, and there are men ready for the other foot to land in "something new" for male representation.

V. CONCLUSION

Male representation, and especially for white, cis, hetero men, has never appeared to be in need of advocacy in Hollywood, as they have dominated the industry from every position except for wardrobe and hair and makeup. However, as the dominant male becomes more broadly recognized as unrepresentative and insufficient, men need to be re-gendered in order to deconstruct the rigid norms of dominant masculinity and its representation. The under-focus on male character portrayals has resulted in less growth in how masculinity is depicted and underscores the notion the "archetypal" male hero is the apotheosis of representation. Thus, when men lose their place at the top of the hegemonic pyramid, they tend to be read as losing their "backbone" or becoming "wimps." Male representation is changing but, when not specifically considered, can lead to changes in male representation as being "undone" or "degraded." Diversity and inclusion initiatives do not have to be a zero-sum game if, for example, positive male representation can be found outside of the mytho-heroic tropes and on a broader landscape of gender expression. The awareness and efforts to diversify representation can open men and masculinity up to the possibility of broader and more inclusive reimagining of representation.

Male hero roles are foundational to Hollywood storytelling, and therefore how they are represented impacts both how society sees and understands men and, in turn, impacts how other

genders are represented, seen, and understood. Dominant masculinity is still glorified, which has led men and masculinity to show up in broader diversity discourses as a stand-in for patriarchy, which can lead to demonizing male portrayals, instead of as an integral part of the diversity and representation discourse. However, the men in my study who do not fall under Connell's hegemonic masculinity framework are beginning to reexamine male representation, inspired by a diversity movement aimed at bolstering women and minorities. The broader diversity discourse is giving these creators the opportunity to explore other masculinities in a very public platform. Wesley's case showed how representations of dominant masculinity can be harmful for males, while Robert acknowledged how his male characters do not represent him, thus bringing into question how past media exposure, and the conventional understanding of the mytho-hero, support the inherited "legacy" of gender and sexuality that Hammack mentions. Every man is more nuanced than a Clint Eastwood or Arnold Schwarzenegger character; through reimagining the "archetypal" male hero and how men are represented in the media, male representation, too, can be diversified.

Hammack et al.'s work points to the need to examine representations of maleness and broaden the gender landscape for males who struggle to find authentic gender expression under the rigid auspices of the dominant "norm." A (r)evolution of gender representation cannot be complete without a radical reimaging of how males and masculinity are represented. Gender is inter- and intra-relational; therefore, how men and masculinity are portrayed in film and television is equally vital to attaining equitable diversity and representation in the media and beyond. Portrayals of men and masculinity are changing, which could be part of a hegemonic adaptation to maintain power, or it can be an intentional shift that recognizes that the male "performance" can become more inclusive of many masculinities (and femininities) on a vast landscape of gender and sexuality.

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