# Princes, Moms, and Warriors:

# A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Toxic Depictions in Film

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## ABBREVIATIONS (LISTED ALPHABETICALLY)

BHA – Beta-hydroxy Acid.

BHT – Butylated Hydroxytoluene.

BPA – Bisphenol A.

GLAAD – Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation.

LGBTQ – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer. Other variants of this abbreviation include LGBT and LGBTQIA+ (which adds "Intersex" and "Asexual," while the plus sign includes anyone else not specifically named). This thesis will use the LGBTQ abbreviation, following the lead of the GLAAD organization.

MPA – Motion Pictures Association or Motion Pictures Association of America.

MSG – Monosodium Glutamate.

NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

PTA – Parent Teacher Association.

## ABSTRACT

Various forms of toxic rhetoric have been the subject of academic study for decades. Despite some advancements toward a more progressive society, toxic rhetorics have continued to persist within the United States, especially within entertainment media. Toxic rhetorics within film, in particular, have remained steadily prevalent and continue to strongly impact audiences and constructions of identity. This thesis utilizes primarily close reading and feminist rhetorical criticism to examine rhetorics of toxicity within three popular film franchises: (1) toxic masculinity in *Coming to America* (1988) and *Coming 2 America* (2021); (2) toxic femininity in *Bad Moms*; and (3) straightwashing as a more toxic form of heteronormativity in *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020). The definitions and primary characteristics of these concepts are discussed, including brief histories of their foundations and usage. Some of the main topics addressed in this thesis include concerns regarding representation, visibility, and erasure of marginalized groups within film, as well as the problematic treatment of consent.

## INTRODUCTION

The power of speech is an irrefutable fact, demonstrated consistently throughout history. Former Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., stated speech alone can pose a "clear and present danger,"[1] depending on its context. Positive words have the power to uplift and inspire, while negative speech can cause harm. Harmful speech can also be referred to as toxic rhetoric. Toxicity can be most simply understood as the quality of being poisonous or harmful.[2] In the medical field, ingested or injected toxins have the power to inflict serious damage on the body. The introduction of toxic chemicals in nature can lead to the devastation of animal and plant species, causing a shift of balance in the environment. Correlatively, toxic rhetorics have the power to inflict serious damage on the mind. Many types of speech may be labelled toxic, whether they are more overt and clearly offensive (e.g. hate speech and racial slurs) or more subtle and manipulative (e.g. saying "I'm sorry you feel that way" as a way to escape responsibility for one's hurtful words or actions). Employers can use toxic rhetorics to exercise their authority, which often leads to emotional harm of their employees.[3] Toxic speech can be used to shape gender roles, with historically popular phrases such as "boys don't cry" and "you throw like a girl." However, toxic rhetorics need not appear directly negative. Toxic positivity is also a form of toxic rhetoric, which is defined as forced positivity in the face of adversity or stress and includes phrases such as "it could be worse" or "look on the bright side."[4] In addition to their capacity to inflict pain, toxic rhetorics also have the power to shape individual and social identities.

Toxic rhetoric is not a new topic within academic research, but the way it has been studied has changed. As a subject of scholarly study, toxic rhetoric, also previously referred to as toxic discourse, has its roots in environmentalism and engaged primarily in "retelling narratives

of rude awakening from simple pastoral to complex."[5] In this context, toxic rhetoric was applied to discuss the negative impacts of industry on the environment, and was often used as a political platform. More recently, definitions of toxic rhetoric have expanded to include the following: "language that is disrespectful to strangers, hostile to minorities, contemptuous of compromise, dismissive of adverse evidence, and intentionally untruthful. It is the use of language to harm, demean, or dominate others. Toxic rhetoric seeks to invoke a world of anger, fear, exclusion, violence, and unequivocal moral judgments on cultural and political questions."[6] Considering this definition, a distinction must be made between the rhetorics of toxicity and oppression. Some toxic rhetorics may be classified as oppressive, such as the rhetoric surrounding the concept of toxic geek masculinity, in which men identified as *geeks* position themselves in *geeky* environments as alpha-males, establishing hegemony over women sharing these spaces.[7] Though some toxic rhetorics may be classified as intentionally oppressive rhetoric, not all forms of toxic rhetoric are rooted in oppression. For instance, though some toxic rhetorics relating to constructions of identity (e.g. gender and ethnicity) are often intertwined with oppressive practices, not all toxic identities follow this pattern. The toxic jock identity is more ego-oriented, focused on positioning oneself as the best for fame and status rather than to exert power and authority over others.[8] Toxic fandom rhetorics involve bullying and aggression, but are often directed at proclaimed *assaults* on nostalgia, such as the recent *Ghostbusters* reboot which featured female Ghostbusters instead of a recast of the original male characters.[9]

Toxic rhetorics exist in many forms and across multiple environments, they are especially prominent within entertainment media. Some situational comedy television shows (or sitcoms) portray paternal characters as unintelligent or foolish, even though they were previously depicted as wise and pragmatic.[10] Though seemingly innocent, the shift of this type of rhetoric, especially

in this medium, has the potential to "reflect and shape societal norms, values, and conditions."[11] Like television, film representations have the power to influence perceptions of various people groups, as well as shape an individual's identity.

The primary rhetorical analysis method used in this thesis is feminist criticism. Examining films from a feminist perspective requires scholars to identify any elements of an artifact which contribute to the way "rhetorical construction of identity marks such as gender are used as a justification for domination, how such domination is constructed as natural, and how that naturalness can be challenged."[12] This thesis is set up in three chapters, each exploring the appearance of a different toxic rhetoric within a popular film franchise, chosen due to their level of consumption and potential impact on identity constructions. Despite featuring strong elements of toxic masculinity, *Coming to America* has been praised by audiences for decades after its release for its nearly-all Black cast, especially because the Black community has continued to feel vastly underrepresented in entertainment media.[13] *Bad Moms* has received much commendation from women who felt the movie accurately portrayed the difficulties mothers face in their everyday lives,[14] but engages a rhetoric of toxic femininity. Straightwashing as an even more toxic form of heteronormativity is studied within the *Wonder Woman* franchise. The Wonder Woman character, now part of the DC Extended Universe, has been viewed by so many people as a role model, not just by young girls but also anyone who identifies as part of the LGBTQ community.[15] These popular film franchises have attracted so many audiences, for a variety of reasons, and as a result these audiences have been exposed to the toxic rhetorics contained within them.

Though I explore the terminology more deeply in the following chapters, some basic definitions should be discussed here. Masculinity and femininity are defined as characteristics

which are generally associated with men and women, respectively, when discussing gender in binary terms. Heteronormativity follows similar patterns and involves the positioning of heterosexual relationships as natural, or normal.[16] The rhetoric involved in constructing this mindset is inherently toxic, as it places people into hierarchies of normalcy based solely on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. However, straightwashing is a more aggressive practice, in which characters who were not intended to be heterosexual are rewritten as heterosexual in film adaptations of the original medium. Each chapter follows the same basic pattern and begins with an explanation for why the particular film franchise was chosen, followed by a description of the movie(s) studied in order to set up the rhetorical context. Then I offer a brief history and explanation of the method(s) used, while also incorporating some definitions of the rhetorics being explored, as well as key concepts associated with those rhetorics. Each chapter concludes with an analysis, detailing how a specific toxic rhetoric is exemplified in the corresponding film franchise.

The first chapter, "Prince Akeem's Stolen Royal Oat: The Rhetoric and Legacy of *Coming to America*," studies the rhetoric of toxic masculinity, utilizing a comparative approach and feminist criticism to analyze the original film and its sequel, released more than thirty years apart. After describing the key plot points of these two movies, I discuss how *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America* fit the model of a legacy film franchise.[17] The categorization of *Coming to America* and its sequel as a legacy franchise is important to the discussion of toxic masculinity because of the "handover moment"[18] from the previous main character to the next main character set in the film as from father to illegitimate son, rather than father to legitimate daughter. In the following section, I explain how feminist criticism and ethics can be used to identify and analyze instances of toxic masculinity, as well as offering some discussion to the different types of

masculinities. Black masculinity is one such identity delved into more deeply within this chapter, and I note how Black masculinity has been shaped by white, mainstream media representations of Black men as sexual deviants and/or violent thugs throughout history and the way *Coming to America* is an example of the result of this treatment. The analysis primarily focuses on three central concepts in relation to the rhetoric of toxic masculinity: (1) the male gaze, (2) agency, and (3) consent. Though *Coming 2 America* appears to have been intended as a more contemporary and family-friendly version of Prince Akeem's story, there are several troubling elements in this seemingly more progressive narrative.

The second chapter, "'Don't Be Such a Mom': Identifying Toxic Femininity in *Bad Moms* through Close Reading," examines the rhetoric of toxic femininity by closely reading various components of the film, *Bad Moms*. In order to better understand the subtle ways in which the rhetoric of toxic femininity can be employed I engage close reading, a tool of analysis which considers even the most minute details within an artifact.[19] Toxic femininity has not received the same level of attention as toxic masculinity within academic research, and the definition is highly contested in nonacademic contexts. After offering a summary of *Bad Moms*, I discuss the use of feminist criticism and close reading as the method for analysis, so chosen due to the disagreement over what toxic femininity actually entails. Following these sections, I expound on the variety of proposed definitions for the term, arguing that toxic femininity should not simply be referred to as "internalized misogyny"[20] because this places men at the center of this particular construction of female identity. The main element of toxic femininity considered in this chapter is the concept of *trashing*, which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell described as the phenomenon of women criticizing and ostracizing other women for not adhering to acceptable behavior norms.[21] As the film features mothers as the main characters, I also pay attention to the

connection between toxic femininity and maternity, discussing casting choices, the movie's script, and the way maternity and sexuality are set in opposition to one another.

The third chapter, "'You're the Only Joy I've Had': Reading the Response of a Straightwashed *Wonder Woman*," analyzes the toxic rhetoric of heteronormativity, reified through the practice of straightwashing Wonder Woman, a canonically bisexual superheroine. I discuss this phenomenon across the film franchise as a single, extended artifact, rather than engaging *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* as separate texts. After describing the essential plot points within both movies, I offer some attention to the concepts of LGBTQ visibility and heteronormativity in order to establish why Wonder Woman's sexuality is problematic within the film franchise. I use a combination of reception studies and a variation of close textual-intertextual analysis to explore how audiences and other stakeholders engage the artifact. In the discussion of the franchise, I take into consideration the intent and motivations of the writer/director (Patty Jenkins) and reactions of the film's lead (Gal Gadot) in response to questions surrounding the character's sexuality. I also examine the *Wonder Woman* comic book series, the "Wonder Woman" television series from the 1970s, and *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women,* a biographical film detailing the life of the character's creator, in order to provide important context for the necessity of discussing the sexuality of the DC Extended Universe's lead superheroine.

Following the analyses of these film franchises, I will conclude this thesis by discussing how closely studying entertainment media from a feminist perspective positions scholars to identify subtler examples of toxic rhetorics. I also discuss the way the presence of toxic rhetorics overshadows progressive elements within films, briefly relating this concept to each of the franchises. I then reiterate the importance of identifying toxic rhetorics within entertainment

media and what their continued presence communicates to audiences. Finally, I suggest a possible antidote to counteract the effects toxic rhetorics have had on society.

Toxic rhetorics within film are incredibly influential on constructions of identity, especially if the narrative is framed to reflect accurate and fair representation for groups who have not historically been given this treatment. Media representations of various groups have the power to influence real-world perceptions.[22] Entertainment media also have the power to spark reflective thought and influence changes in behavior.[23] When toxic rhetorics are inserted into entertainment media, which is generally intended for leisure rather than critical thought, they become subtler. As such, film serves as a type of Trojan Horse for toxic rhetorics, inserting them into the psyche under the guise of pleasure and enjoyment. Therefore, the presence and normalization of toxic behavior and rhetoric in movies is concerning, as their audiences are at risk of becoming increasingly more comfortable engaging in toxic practices.

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# CHAPTER 1

## Prince Akeem's Stolen Royal Oat: The Rhetoric and Legacy of *Coming to America*

Film and media representations have long had an impact on perceptions of cultural and racial identities. The American movie industry in the 1970s contributed in particular to misconceptions about Black communities by reducing Black leads to stereotyped characters and rejecting films which would have provided more accurate representations of Black Americans.[1] These stereotypes, especially those illustrating Black men as violent thugs and Black women as overly sexualized vixens, have cemented preconceived notions on race and led to white people feeling vindicated in their existing views about Black communities.[2] Unfortunately, this trend has continued into the present, because, when polled in 2020, two-thirds of Black Americans have stated they do not feel fairly represented in media.[3] More importantly, the typically negative portrayals of Black characters have been shown to lead to damaging consequences to the psyche of young Black audiences.[4] Even though recent films, such as *Hidden Figures* and *Black Panther*, have provided more positive depictions of Black characters, there have not been enough of these films or roles. For this reason, Black communities have held tightly to any movie which either rightly captures the black experience in America, has a largely Black cast, or shows a genuine, multi-dimensional depiction of people who look like them. *Coming to America*, filmed in 1988, is one of these types of films.

Directed by John Landis and starring Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall, *Coming to America* has been said to have subverted black marginalization which was typical of Hollywood productions at the time and represented the true black experience.[5] The film was named Best Motion Picture in the 1988 NAACP Image Awards,[6] a ceremony designed by NAACP to reward excellence in film, television, literature, and other entertainment.[7] In *Double Negative: The Black*

*Image and Popular Culture*, Racquel Gates writes, "*Coming to America*, primarily through Murphy's influence, takes a standard Hollywood formula, one that was designed to appeal to all audiences, and reforms it into a culturally black film – a film that continues to have particular resonance with black viewers."[8] Black Americans have looked up to actors like Eddie Murphy and Arsenio Hall for decades; the latter of whom made history as "the first black person to have their own national late-night vehicle in the US,"[9] while Murphy has been a recipient of the NAACP's 1988 Best Entertainer of the Year award[10] and was just recently inducted into the NAACP Hall of Fame.[11] There is no question, *Coming to America* is an incredibly influential film and has stood the test of time, making news of its sequel, *Coming 2 America*, incredibly exciting to fans of the first movie.

Released in 2021, directed by Craig Brewer, and starring many actors who had been present in the first film, *Coming 2 America* builds off the *Coming to America* story, transforming the movies into a legacy franchise, which has been defined as "a model of serial storytelling designed to return to and renew dormant franchises for a new generation of fans and filmmaking."[12] *Coming 2 America* not only continues the beloved story of Prince Akeem of Zamunda, but also attempts to expand its storyline in a more socially-conscious way. However, *Coming 2 America* fell short of this attempt at conscious renewal in multiple areas, especially regarding gender representation. In one review of the film, USA Today writer Brian Truitt states, "'Coming 2 America' easily could have been a really neat father-daughter tale – and one celebrating young Black women – yet filmmakers instead chose the rehashed route already traveled."[13]

*Coming 2 America* missed out on the opportunity to provide more attention to the three Zamundan princesses, who some believe to have been the most interesting roles within the

film.[14] The lack of depth and attention to female characters are not the only problems within the franchise; objectification for the male gaze in *Coming to America* changes to that of the female gaze in *Coming 2 America*. Additionally, hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity are the catalysts for crucial plot points within both movies, so while some representations of men have changed within the film industry in the postfeminist and post-postfeminist eras,[15] male victimhood, like that represented in *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America*, is offered the same treatment it has typically been offered in Hollywood: none.

Despite the impact of the franchise on Black audiences and, therefore, Black identities, little academic research has focused on troublesome themes in *Coming to America*, and the recently released sequel. However, these sentiments make such research and analysis even more important, especially because many of these themes persist within *Coming 2 America*. Though the writers of the sequel make some effort to incorporate progressive elements, the endeavor is superficial, and inclusion of other components undercut the film's attempts at progressiveness. Using a feminist critique and comparative approach, this paper aims to: 1) discuss the basic plot elements of *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America*, 2) provide a brief explanation of why these movies can be categorized as a legacy film franchise, 3) investigate the concepts of hegemonic masculinity, toxic masculinity, and ethic of care, and 4) analyze these persistent themes found in both films.

***Coming to America* (1988)**

*Coming to America* was released in theaters on June 29, 1988, produced by Paramount Pictures. The film starred Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, James Earl Jones, and Shari Headley.[16] In *Coming to America*, Prince Akeem (Eddie Murphy) of Zamunda has come of age to be married but wants more than a wife who will simply do as he pleases. Instead, he wants a wife

who is engaging, intelligent, beautiful, and has interests of her own. The Prince's father, King Jaffe Joffer (James Earl Jones), objects to his son's desires and emphasizes the convenience of a wife who has been raised and groomed to specifically be Akeem's queen, doing whatever he wishes. Akeem develops a plot to trick his father into giving him time to find a bride of his choosing, agreeing to the King's suggestion that the prince should "sow his royal oats." Then Akeem, along with his friend and servant, Semmi (Arsenio Hall), plan a trip to Queens, New York, in America. Concerned with finding a wife who cares about the Prince rather than his riches, Akeem and Semmi pretend they do not come from wealthy Zamunda and pick up jobs at McDowell's, a local Queens' knock-off of fast-food giant McDonald's. This is where Akeem meets Lisa McDowell (Shari Headley), who eventually becomes his bride in the riches-to-rags-and-back-again tale of Prince Akeem.[17]

*Coming to America* made more than $20 million its first weekend in theaters, then grew to "$300 million worldwide before it closed nearly six months later."[18] As of 2018, this movie was still "one of the most financially successful black-cast films in history."[19] The film was mostly welcomed among Black audiences, who had been woefully underrepresented in Hollywood for years. Spike Lee, who previously criticized Eddie Murphy for not using his clout to create more roles for Black actors in his prior films, admitted *Coming to America* was "a serious move by Eddie Murphy to do a film by and about Black people."[20] In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Eddie Murphy responded to questions about his previous issues with Spike Lee and comparisons between their films by saying, "Spike is more of a politician than I am…I think *Coming to America* is a political movie without shoving a message down anyone's throat. It's a black love story, in which black people are seen being black people."[21] Eddie Murphy seemed to genuinely want *Coming to America* to be exclusively for Black audiences and feature Black

actors, even to the point of excluding white actors, until, as Murphy stated recently, he was told by Paramount Pictures that he must do so.[22] Additionally, the first film experienced a publicized scandal. After *Coming to America* was produced, column humorist Art Buchwald and his production partner, Alan Bernheim, sued Paramount Pictures over issues with their contract after alleging the film's story had been based on a plot outline Buchwald had written: "They argued that their contribution to the film, which the studio had brushed aside, was equal to that of the director."[23] After nearly four years of litigation, a judge ruled in favor of Buchwald and Bernheim.[24] Despite this lawsuit, Eddie Murphy and Paramount Pictures decided to work together again and develop a sequel to the much-loved classic.

***Coming 2 America* (2021)**

After being stuck at home, still living through the COVID-19 global pandemic, advertisements during the late winter months of 2020 for the approaching *Coming 2 America* film were a welcome sight for fans of Eddie Murphy, Arsenio Hall, and the original *Coming to America* film. Released nearly thirty-three years after its predecessor, *Coming 2 America* had been slated to be produced by Paramount Pictures and released in theaters in December 2020. However, the COVID-19 global pandemic led the production company to auction off its production rights,[25] thus allowing the film to be released exclusively on Amazon's streaming service, Amazon Prime Video, on March 5, 2021. The sequel features nearly all of the original film's main and supporting characters, adding Leslie Jones, Jermaine Fowler, Tracy Morgan, and Wesley Snipes to the cast, among others.[26]

In *Coming 2 America,* King Jaffe Joffer (James Earl Jones) is on his deathbed, warning Akeem that General Izzi (Wesley Snipes) from Nexdoria is planning to attack Zamunda after the King's death because Akeem and Lisa have no male heir. During the course of a conversation

with Semmi and Baba the shaman (both played by Hall), Akeem learns he has a son, conceived during his initial trip to America. Akeem and Semmi must travel again to America to bring his son Lavelle Junson (Jermaine Fowler) back to Zamunda so he may one day become king and marry the daughter of Nexdoria's General Izzi to settle conflict between the two nations, caused when Akeem dismissed his betrothal to Imani and married Lisa instead. Akeem's royal family is initially displeased with the arrival of Lavelle, his mother Mary Junson (Leslie Jones), and Uncle Reem (Tracy Morgan). Akeem's eldest daughter, Meeka, in particular seems genuinely surprised and angry at her father's quickness to bring Lavelle to Zamunda to eventually become king, especially because she had formerly thought she was the firstborn child of the royal family. Eventually, the newly blended family learns to coexist, become friends, and support Lavelle's claim to the throne, though ultimately the crown is promised to Meeka.[27]

Within a single week of its release, *Coming 2 America* received more than twelve million[i] views.[28] This movie also "scored the top opening weekend of any film launching on a streaming service in the past year,"[29] beating other highly anticipated franchise films, including *Wonder Woman 1984* and *Borat Subsequent Moviefilm*.[30] Audience and critic reviews appeared within hours of the release of *Coming 2 America* on Amazon Prime, some of which were quite favorable. A. O. Scott, from *The New York Times*, said the film is "a sweet and silly celebration of Black popular culture, with a sincere respect for history and a welcoming regard for the new generation,"[31] and others have said "*Coming 2 America* is impossible to dislike."[32]

Though many fans appreciate the nostalgia the sequel brings, as it is replete with numerous references to the first film, *Coming 2 America* was not received as well as its predecessor. On Rotten Tomatoes, a site for aggregate film critic and audience review data, the

[i] This amount was determined by dividing the total number of minutes streamed (1.41 billion minutes) by the film's runtime (110 minutes), due to its release on Amazon's streaming platform rather than being released in theaters.

sequel scored only 40% for its audience rating of over two thousand submissions,[33] compared to *Coming to America* which has received an 85% audience approval rating in a collection of more than 250,000 submissions.[34] However, the sequel was designed to be slightly more family-friendly, with a Motion Picture Association rating of PG-13, as compared to the R rating from the first film,[35] so perhaps fans were expecting the same adult-level humor found in the first movie. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Culture writer David Jesudason discussed the problems of the references by the American characters to Africa as one large singular body of people, rather than a collection of multiple diverse nations. He also noted that filming took place in Georgia as opposed to anywhere on the African continent, which is true of both films.[36] Other critics have stated "the movie feels downright lazy."[37] However, one cannot argue that *Coming 2 America* is a true sequel, featuring characters from the original film and a plot which continues the story of Prince Akeem. These components contribute greatly to the consideration of *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America* as legacy films.

**Comparing Films in a Legacy Franchise: *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America***

The comparative method being used in this paper has been previously used to evaluate similarities and differences between films and their remakes, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, the 2008 retelling of the 1951 classic, to analyze the underlying lessons within each film.[38] This method has also been employed to study sequels, such as Janice Hocker Rushing's analysis of *Alien* and its sequel, *Aliens*, to examine the use of the frontier myth within the movies.[39] This paper's comparative analysis relies on the classification of *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America* as a legacy film franchise. In their discussion of the *Rocky* and *Creed* movies as a legacy franchise, Albarrán-Torres and Golding define this model through the presence of five elements:

> [L]egacy characters returning from the original franchise; successor characters played by up-and-coming actors primed to take over the mantle of the franchise; the repetition and revision of narrative concerns and structures familiar to the original films in the franchise; a 'handover moment' between legacy and successor characters, sometimes literalized through the gifting of an object or a quest between legacy and successors…and the withering of the legacy character, which sometimes is manifested through their death.[40]

*Coming 2 America* features nearly all of the original cast from *Coming to America*, not just the actors of the primary roles. Jermaine Fowler, who plays the successor character, has been described as "new talent in the industry"[41] and is considered up-and-coming within the Black community, particularly since he has made history as the first Black announcer of the Emmy Awards.[42] Though he is working on other projects, Fowler will very likely lead within future *Coming to America* films, even though KiKi Layne's character, Meeka, is slated to become the next ruler of Zamunda. The plots and narrative elements of the two movies are so similar that some have referred to *Coming 2 America* as a "low-key remake."[43] The handover moment is represented in the affirmation of Lavelle's legitimacy as Akeem's son via the acceptance and naming of Lavelle as the crown Prince, the title formerly held by Akeem. There is certainly a physical withering of Akeem's character, due partly to the thirty-plus year gap in the two stories, so time has left him far less agile in the sequel compared to the original movie.

Albarrán-Torres and Golding discuss how race, masculinity, and gender roles are linked for the main characters of the *Rocky* and *Creed* legacy franchise, as well as the connection between boxing and toxic masculinity.[44] However, there is little discussion as to how feminist theory and criticism can offer a richer analysis and context for these concepts, even though discussions about masculinity are so deeply associated within feminism. This paper focuses more closely on the benefits of using feminist criticism to evaluate concepts such as masculinity.

**Feminist Criticism: Masculine Identities and Ethic of Care**

Credit for the initiation of feminist or gender criticism within communication studies is often given to Karlyn Kohrs Campbell for her 1973 essay, "The Rhetoric of Women's Liberation."[45] In this article, Campbell discusses the uniqueness of rhetoric surrounding women's liberation and argues that it should be considered a rhetorical genre in itself.[46] In Campbell's 2002 essay, "Consciousness-Raising: Linking Theory, Criticism, and Practice," she further discusses the importance of using a different method for scholars wanting to study the rhetoric of women. She examines not only how female authors and scholars, as well as their works, had been treated throughout history, but also the problem of looking at female scholarship through a male rhetorical lens.[47] Feminist criticism takes into account that rhetorical criticism has historically been heavily influenced by patriarchal attitudes. Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin note, "Scholars working from a feminist perspective suggest that most theories of rhetoric are inadequate and misleading because they contain a patriarchal bias – they embody the experiences and concerns of the white male as standard."[48] The "male gaze," described by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, "Narrative Pleasure and Visual Cinema," is one common topic in feminist criticism and is defined as a form of objectification in film in which female characters are included for the explicit purpose of being visually arousing for men.[49] Feminist criticism can also incorporate feminist ethics, also referred to as ethic of care.[50]

Ethic of care was introduced by Carol Gilligan within her book, *A Different Voice*: "This relational ethic transcends the age-old opposition between selfishness and selflessness, which have been the staples of moral discourse…represents an attempt to turn the tide of moral discussion from questions of how to achieve objectivity and detachment to how to engage responsively and with care."[51] Treating people, or even characters in film, with an ethic of care presupposes an inherent value unrelated to any other traits of that person.[52] This model was

introduced by feminists because "traditional ethical concepts, theories, and methods are male-biased…and not simply that they have been misapplied in practice."[53] In the traditional model, male-dominated beliefs are concerned with issues of justice, rather than care.[54] In *Feminist Ethics in Film: Reconfiguring Care through Cinema*, Joseph Kupfer shows the use of ethic of care as a method for analyzing films in his discussions of *The Squid and the Whale* as an example which embodies a failure of the ethics of care model: "The film develops our understanding of care by showing how generosity is embedded in it…We can give our sympathy and compassion, which often requires that we sacrifice the emotional satisfaction to which, in fact, we have a claim."[55]

Feminist criticism can also be used to point out the impact of societal and cultural gender expectations and norms, which partly explains why many scholars categorize this method as a type of ideological criticism.[56] For example, in *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*, Sonja Foss states, "Many feminist scholars and critics conceptualize feminism as the effort to eliminate relations of domination not just for women but for all individuals. They employ feminist or ideological criticism to discover how the rhetorical construction of identity markers are used as a justification for domination."[57] Masculinity is one of those identity markers which has been constructed due to biases within patriarchal society and culture.

By its simplest definition, masculinity is understood as qualities which are typical of men. As an ideology, masculinity encompasses a more specific definition and rules of behavior: "Masculinity ideology refers to beliefs about the importance of men adhering to culturally defined standards for male behavior, and the construct is operationalized by measures of attitudes toward the male gender role."[58] Numerous studies of masculinity have identified various masculine archetypes, such as the Marlboro Man, characterized by a man who smoked Marlboro

brand cigarettes and was a prominent symbol of white, North American masculinity, ranging in mediums such as politics and health messaging to advertisements and popular culture.[59] Bonnie Dow has been credited with the identification of other masculine archetypes, like the comedic goof male-archetype of 1970s television, as well as the career-and-family-oriented man and the "sensitive new-age guys"[60] of the 1980s. It is also important to note that Albarrán-Torres and Golding have presented various studies which report frequent positive correlations in film between masculinity and sports, warrior roles, breadwinning, and fighting in a context outside of sports.[61]

The construction of masculinity is still being studied, especially as different types of masculinity have been identified and defined. Hegemonic masculinity, for instance, relies on men being the most powerful, and identifies gender on a binary spectrum based on differences between the sexes.[62] Hegemonic masculinity offers the label of *man* only if that man is virile, strong, independent, heterosexual, athletic, and dominant.[63] In its reliance on a dualistic view of gender, hegemonic masculinity asserts that men must perpetuate, exist, and thrive in a state of exaggerated masculine traits, and consider themselves wholly separate in identity to what is considered feminine.[64] This view presupposes that men are naturally the stronger of the two sexes, which translates to possession, control, use, and abuse of the female body being viewed as natural.[65] According to R.W. Connell, this concept of dualism is not only perpetuated because of physical differences between the sexes, but also because of the other advantages that male dominance brings. She continues to say, "the dominant or hegemonic form of masculinity embodies the currently successful strategy for subordinating women…It emphasizes hierarchy and the capacity to dominate other men as well as women."[66] Toxic masculinity occurs when the

dualism of the hegemonic model and perception of *true manliness* is used to rationalize dominance over women and other men through threats or active oppression and/or violence.[67]

The term *toxic masculinity* was coined during the course of the *crisis of masculinity* movement of the 1970s and 1980s but was not used commonly in academic scholarship until around 2014.[68] There was pushback against the social changes that came with second wave feminism, leading to a crisis of masculinity: "the crisis of masculinity theory suggests that men today, more than ever, are confused about what it means to be man, and are progressively attempting to push beyond the rigid role prescriptions of the traditional concepts of masculinity that constrain male behavior."[69] As women were becoming more career-oriented and obtaining positions of power, society was made to question "the legitimacy of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power."[70] The supposed crisis inspired many men to become more aggressive in their attempts to establish, or reestablish, their dominance in society,[71] thus toxic masculinity was born.

One of the more visible views maintained by toxic masculinity is that men are "never allowed to show emotion, never allowed to ask for help, never allowed to appear passive or weak."[72] This is the kind of mindset which may lead a man to tell his crying son to "not be such a girl." Toxic masculinity not only hurts women, but men as well, especially those who exhibit behaviors patriarchal culture may label as more feminine. Male victimhood, therefore, is perceived as weakness, especially for male sexual assault victims, as this is viewed by many as something that happens only to women[73] and cannot happen to *real men*.[74] This belief contributes to the lack of attention and seriousness given to male sexual assault victims, even by rape crisis centers.[75] Unfortunately, the portrayals of male victims in film and media throughout the last several decades have paid almost no attention to this issue.[76]

In addition to the subcategory of toxic masculinity, intersectional identities also tie into ideas about masculinity, such as white masculinity or Black masculinity. White masculinity has been tied most strongly with the hegemonic model, due primarily to the fact that white men have historically dominated the political and business realms within the United States.[77] Black masculinity, however, has been shaped by centuries of oppression and abuse, as well as media depictions of Black men.[78] These portrayals show Black men as sexual deviants and criminals, which originated as a way to skew the truth of sexual exploitation and rape of male slaves during the period of American slavery in order to remove the possibility of seeing Black men as victims.[79] As a result, a strong emphasis toward sexual promiscuity and prowess have pervaded the Black masculine identity, as seen in Gordon Parks's *Shaft*, played by Richard Roundtree, in 1971: "John Shaft is a character defined by phallic power…the locus of this power is primarily sexual in Parks's film and largely focused through Shaft's sexual endeavors...Masculinity is thus clearly defined by sexual prowess and male conquest."[80]

The Black male identity has also taken on the concept of indomitability, in addition to domination, in which a Black man must have the ability to defend himself as well as being strong enough to assert power over others.[81] The remake of *Shaft* in 2000 shows this physical prowess, as the film shifts from the sexually-driven characteristics of the original to a more action-oriented retelling.[82] Discussions about the relationship between feminist critique and hegemonic and/or toxic masculinity suggest that feminism can be as liberating for Black men as it has been for women: "A (re)engagement with feminism that centralizes black men as raced subjects of feminism (or at least gender, and gendered subjects of racial ideologies) seems to be needed in order precisely to free them from their oppressive patriarchal pasts."[83] In the same way, a

feminist critique can identify the oppressive ideologies plaguing the country of Zamunda, as well as point the way to the morally correct path.

**Prince Akeem's Stolen Royal Oat**

One stark example of an attempt to flip the traditional male gaze trope can be observed in a comparison of the bath scenes in *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America*. The first film caters to the typical objectification of Black female bodies, while the sequel flips the scene, objectifying the Black male body instead. In the early scenes of *Coming to America*, the audience gets a glimpse into what life is like for the Zamundan Prince, Akeem. He is woken, bathed, dressed, and fed, by servants. The bath scene in particular exemplifies the presence of the male gaze, as the prince sits in the bathtub with two naked, female servants, one of whom simply stands at the edge of the tub. As Akeem yawns, bored with his royal routine, a third female servant, also naked, rises out of the water to announce, "The royal penis is clean, your highness."[84] In *Coming 2 America*, audiences are presented with another bath scene, though this time the script has been flipped and it is Mary Junson who is the recipient of the bath. One important facet of this scene is the frantic reaction of her son, Lavelle, when he runs to his mother telling her that his attendants have offered to bathe him: "Ma? Ma! Oh, hey. Hey, hey, look, um, I'm freaking out right now because these three girls, they in my room right now, and they just offered to bathe me."[85] Mary calmly reminds her son that they are in another country and need to respect their customs, which appear to include being bathed by servants. Lavelle leaves the room, but rather than follow him, the camera pans back to Mary and the naked male bath attendant who appears out of the water and announces: "The royal privates are clean, ma'am."[86] Instead of being bored, as Prince Akeem was in the parallel scene from the first film, Mary is enjoying the experience and instructs the servant to wash one more time. Feminism

demands that women be regarded as equals to men, but the bath scene in *Coming 2 America* mistakes *equal* treatment for the *same* treatment, offering an example of ethic of justice, rather than an ethic of care. The scene shows an ethic of justice in simply reversing the gender roles from the first film, providing an eye-for-an-eye example and giving the appearance of equality, without taking into consideration that feminism does not seek for women to be dominant *over* men, but to be in power *with* men.

While the royal family of Zamunda seem to have no gender bias when it comes to objectifying their servants, there is an obvious bias against women in the societal structure. In *Coming 2 America*, Lavelle learns from his hairdresser, Mirembe (Nomzamo Mbatha), that Zamundan law prohibits women from owning businesses. In Lavelle's promise to make changes as Zamunda's prince, Mirembe says, "Well, that is very idealistic. But every prince…[sighs]...promises to do things differently, but eventually, they do things the same way they've always been done before."[87] Considering Mirembe has likely only ever known one prince, Akeem, the audience can infer she is talking about him. Akeem was set on breaking tradition in order to find a bride of his choosing, but apparently would prefer to keep the women of Zamunda oppressed in a culture of male domination rather than break those traditions which prevent women from owning businesses.

One of the most iconic moments, and catalyst for the main plot, in *Coming to America* occurs when Akeem meets his queen-to-be, Imani Izzi (Vanessa Bell Calloway) of Nexdoria. According to King Jaffe, Akeem's bride was not only chosen, but bred for the purpose of becoming Akeem's queen: "Since she was born, she was taught to walk, speak and think as a queen."[88] When Akeem finally comes face-to-face with Imani, he discovers she was raised to have no opinions or interests of her own; she was quite literally groomed be *Akeem's* queen,

wanting only what *he* wants, obeying *his* every command, and existing only for *his* enjoyment. Imani has no agency, while Akeem has a great deal. Imani has been so disempowered that she cannot even obey Akeem's command to not do whatever he wants. When Akeem realizes this, he gives her a slew of ridiculous commands, which Imani unquestioningly follows: "Bark like a dog. A big dog"; "Hop on one leg"; "Make a noise like an orangutan."[89] At this moment the king walks in and Imani is dismissed, barking and hopping out of the room.

Akeem's main concern in finding a queen was that his future wife would stimulate his mind *and* body, so he so he is unhappy with the prospect of having a wife who simply does anything he wishes with no thoughts or cares of her own. However, Akeem seems unconcerned with the fact that Imani had spent her entire life being primed for a life of service to him. This scene shows a lack of ethic of care for women by the men of Zamunda and Nexdoria, as women are valued only for what they can provide. Nonetheless, Akeem is no different, despite the attempt to make him seem so; Akeem's wish for a woman who can arouse his intellect as well as his loins shows he is only concerned with what a wife can provide him. This attitude is expanded when he appears horrified after mistakenly thinking a larger woman running through the crowd toward the throne is his future bride. Akeem also appears to have no sympathy for the plight of his betrothed, as evidenced in *Coming 2 America* when revealed that, thirty years later, Imani is still hopping on one foot and barking, and even wearing the same dress; a scene very likely intended as a throwback to the previous film. When Akeem sees this, he simply says, "Imani, always a pleasure,"[90] rather than telling her she can stop jumping, which could also have happened at any point he chose over the last thirty years. There is an absurdity to this scene and the audience is obviously meant to find it funny that Imani is still hopping, barking, and wearing the same dress, even after thirty years. However, this is also an incredibly sad and disheartening

component of the scene as well. Akeem and Izzi both had the agency to end Imani's suffering, yet neither man did anything. Akeem could have taken the smallest action by simply speaking a few words in order to change Imani's entire life. General Izzi's apparent refusal to ask Akeem to instruct Imani to stop shows an example of the way toxic masculinity does not allow men to ask for help.[91] This scene is also a sobering allegory to the ways in which men often have the agency to aid women but choose not to do so.

In *Coming 2 America*, it would seem initially that the ruling family of Nexdoria has seen the error of their ways. General Izzi's daughter, Bopoto (Teyana Taylor), is offered up to become Lavelle's queen, appearing to have beauty, confidence, and a healthy amount of attitude in her first scenes of the film. However, Lavelle later discovers her only purpose in life, like her Aunt Imani, was to become queen for a potential male heir of Zamunda. In a scene which parallels Akeem's meeting with Imani, Bopoto reveals that she would like whatever Lavelle likes. Lavelle, who has also developed feelings for Mirembe, yet still seems open to the idea of marrying Bopoto, states he wants a connection with the person with whom he will be spending his life. Bopoto replies, "But I am just a wife."[92] At that, Lavelle instructs her to stay where she is while he walks off, which she does for at least an hour before anyone notices she has not moved. Despite the thirty years his sister spent hopping and barking, General Izzi rears his own daughter to become a devoted servant-wife. However, he allows his son, Idi (Rotimi), to develop his own personality and interests, even though the general was hoping his son would marry Akeem's eldest daughter, Meeka. What the above scenes communicate about the care for women by Zamunda and Nexdoria is that it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to be raised with no purpose beyond her usefulness to a future husband, further exemplifying a lack of ethic of care for women.

Ethic of care for men is also lacking in the films, at least for Akeem, who is positioned as the sensitive, new-age guy archetype of the 1980s,[93] against King Jaffe, Semmi, and General Izzi, who represent the stereotypical sexually dominant, promiscuous, and/or strong Black men. Semmi's only concerns seem to be related to sexual gratification. In the first film, he is excited at the prospect of "forty days of fornication,"[94] then lies about being a prince to be intimate with Lisa's sister, Patrice. King Jaffe is no different, outright telling Akeem in the first movie that he has sex with his royal bathers and suggesting that Prince Akeem sow his royal oats for forty days before marrying Imani. In the second film, Akeem's previously thought lack of a male heir was attributed to his weakness as a man, shown in the following statement by King Jaffe, made just before confirming the existence of Akeem's son: "My son, it appears your shortcomings in masculinity have turned out to be unfounded."[95] In General Izzi's initial scene, one of his soldiers introduces him as "the conqueror of countries…wrestler of lions…the most well-endowed man in Africa."[96] Even the casting of Wesley Snipes as General Izzi is significant to the character's masculine identity, particularly due to his well-known portrayal of the title character in *Blade*, a role which exudes a hypermasculine physical prowess.[97]

At the beginning of *Coming 2 America*, King Jaffe is lying on his deathbed, warning that Akeem's weakness as a man and king will be viewed as an opportunity by General Izzi to attack Zamunda after King Jaffe dies. King Jaffe tells Akeem his only solution is to find his son in America and groom him to someday become king. Prince Akeem is shocked by the news that he has a son, stating, "That is impossible! The only woman I have ever lain with is Lisa. Father, I did not sow my royal oats."[98] Semmi attempts to sneak out of the room at this point, but is ordered by King Jaffe to tell Akeem the truth and so reveals that he arranged for himself and Akeem to go home with two women during a night on the town in Queens, NY: "We scoured the

far reaches of that loathsome city, searching rather unsuccessfully for the woman of your dreams...I had had enough and I realized, if I was ever going to sow my oats on American soil, I was going to need to find someone to take care of you."[99] After hearing Semmi tell the story of meeting Mary Junson and her friend and going back to their apartment, Akeem starts to remember the evening in question: "That is not what happened, Father. I remember meeting this morally bereft woman, but there was no inappropriate mating. She offered me some of her ceremonial herbs…And then, if memory serves, a wild boar burst into the room. It came and jumped into my lap. And then it began to ram me. And ram me and ram me, ramming and ramming! And a foul…(screams, runs to Semmi, and starts to strangle him) You fool, what have you done to me?!"[100] For anyone familiar with the concept of affirmative consent, in which only an unambiguous "yes" means yes to intercourse,[101] this scene clearly depicts a rape because no such consent was given. Akeem's anger lasts a total of four seconds of film time before he shifts his attention to questions about why his son was kept from him. In fact, he seems more upset later in the film when he learns Mary has taken the royal jet, calling her a "thieving bitch."[102] No one ever discusses Akeem as a victim, though this is not unusual in film because men have historically been portrayed as dominant, work outside-of-the-home types, and as more caring, attentive, and sensitive,[103] but not typically as victims.

Akeem's sexual assault undermines the entire driving factor behind his character and plot of the first film; he wants a life in which he has the right to choose. Additionally, the assault is viewed as a positive because King Jaffe can die content in the knowledge the throne will pass to a male heir, despite Lavelle's illegitimacy, rather than pass to a woman. In fact, the only reason the knowledge was not shared sooner was that the king was hoping Akeem would be man enough to produce a legitimate son. Even so, Akeem's ability to produce a son at all grants him

slightly more respect from the other men within the film, which Akeem appears to relish. The entirety of Akeem's assault and subsequent treatment is an obvious example of toxic masculinity, which even goes beyond the screen. Reviews of the film largely glossed over the rape, either ignoring it completely or referring to it in much more casual terms, including "forgotten tryst,"[104] "one-night stand,"[105] and "in a drug-and-alcohol haze, had sex."[106] Akeem's memory of the event is framed to be comical and perpetuates the misconception that Black men cannot be rape victims.[107] Furthermore, Akeem's inadequacies as a man are only deemed unfounded through the orchestration of his assault by one of the more sexually dominant men in the movie, which more firmly cements his position in the hegemonic model as a lesser man.

Perhaps Akeem's own crisis of masculinity explains the reason he goes halfway around the world to bring back an illegitimate son, training him to be a prince and eventual king, rather than pass the crown to his more capable, and legitimate, daughter, Meeka. Truthfully, all three daughters, Meeka, Omma, and Tinashe, outshine their father, newfound brother, and General Izzi. This is made apparent during Lavelle's princely trials, which he must complete in order to be deemed worthy of his title, and he is only able to do so successfully with the help of his sisters. Meeka, in particular, is the brains behind the strategy used to obtain the whiskers from a lion, a feat which Akeem accomplished as a young prince, though he exaggerated his talent. The only trial Lavelle succeeds in alone is to sacrifice that which is most precious to him in a ceremonial circumcision. However, there is no actual circumcision, and Akeem reveals the true sacrifice was Lavelle's willingness to give up his pride. The link between a man's pride, or value, and his genitals really permeates the masculine identities within the film, which is also reflected in the battle between the Zamundan princesses and General Izzi, in which the three princesses are victorious in their use of staffs (the phallic weapon of their father). Meeka, Omma,

and Tinashe show their superior fighting skills against the hypermasculine warlord. Even Semmi succumbs to the General within seconds of commencing their battle. This scene is juxtaposed with Akeem trying to find where Lavelle is about to marry Mirembe, struggling to catch his breath while running. Meanwhile, his three daughters successfully take down a group of men who are easily more than twice their size, barely breaking a sweat, demonstrating Akeem's physical inferiority to Meeka. In fact, it is only after Meeka defeats General Izzi in one-on-one combat that Akeem recognizes her as worthy of becoming the future ruler of Zamunda. Even though the title was rightly hers in the first place, as the eldest legitimate heir, she still dismisses her own value and states, "I simply acted as my father and king has instructed,"[108] showing how deeply the hegemonic model is ingrained in Zamundan minds. At this point, the royal family and people of Zamunda dance the night away while the credits roll.

**Conclusion**

This paper, which served as a comparative study between the films *Coming to America* and *Coming 2 America*, has successfully identified the films as a legacy franchise, and demonstrated how feminist criticism can be used to analyze the themes within these films. Examining these films through a comparative lens allows us to study the development of progress within the franchise. For instance, the first film incorporated the male gaze, while the sequel attempted to remove female objectification, though reversing the roles rather than creating a more equitable environment. Furthermore, there were very few female characters in the first movie compared to the second, but the additional female roles were lacking in even depth with male roles. Though we are two decades into the twenty-first century, feminist concepts such as ethic of care are still greatly lacking in movies and other media. As more film franchise sequels are being created, film contributors and production firms should consider the ways in which they

participate in and promote stereotypes of various masculinities and femininities. Future rhetorical study could be used to analyze legacy franchises from a feminist perspective in order to identify similar themes to those scrutinized in this paper. For example, one might investigate other legacy films which incorporate toxic femininity in the way the *Coming to America* franchise does with toxic masculinity.

Between Akeem's promises to his wife to always put his family first and the decision to pass the crown on to Meeka, it would seem, to the untrained eye, the toxic masculinity which dominated Zamunda is finally on its way out. However, when looking at the film through a feminist lens, there is clearly still much work to be done. Feminism calls for fair and equal treatment, not a simple role reversal, in which men become subservient and oppressed.[109] The flipped objectification in *Coming 2 America* shows a lack of understanding in regard to the issue of the male gaze in the first film. Feminism demands appropriate attention be paid to victims of any assault.[110] The treatment of Lavelle's conception lacks any concern for those who have been assaulted under similar circumstances. Feminist ethics also requires a change in mindset; care is a moral obligation.[111] The nonexistent concern for the women who have spent their whole lives being kept from having personalities of their own also reveals an absence of awareness of the inherent value of human beings. The Nexdorian rulers are not the only offenders; everyone who says nothing about the cruelty Imani and Bopoto endured is complicit in their suffering. Additionally, the value of the Zamundan princesses should have been in their natural gifts, not in their ability to defeat their father's enemy in combat.

One important element to remember is that feminism and feminist ethics involve compassion. Some of the components of the sequel seemed genuinely well-intentioned, even if it was not as progressive as it tried to be. What can be learned from studying these films and

pointing out the failed attempts at being progressive is how to improve. Humor does not require anyone to be devalued. The second movie could have been equally funny, while also correcting the errors of its predecessor. Even so, the facts are these: *Coming to America* remains a well-loved, cult classic, and *Coming 2 America* holds a great deal of nostalgic value to fans. Regardless of what is said about these movies, the royal family of Zamunda is sure to spark new conversations, especially as Eddie Murphy engages in discussions about the possibility of a third installment in the franchise.[112]

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## CHAPTER 2

### "Don't be Such a Mom": Identifying Toxic Femininity through Close Reading

For a considerable portion of the film industry's history, female characters have served as secondary roles, often positioned as romantic interests or damsels-in-distress for the male leads or to satisfy the male gaze, and typically with little or no deeper development. As part of a trend in filmmaking over the last decade, there have been more female-centered movies, some of which show the bad side of women, which includes *Bad Moms*, as well as *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck*.[1] *Bad Moms* was written and directed by Jon Lucas and Scott Moore, the creators of other comedic films such as *The Hangover* franchise, *The Change-up*, and *21 & Over*, as well as the *Mixology* television series.[2] In line with a fairly recent shift in public thinking, which *Bad Moms* partly influenced, women have embraced being *bad* moms, showing their humanity in their shortcomings and mistakes as real people, while simultaneously raising their children.[3] On the surface, the film appears to be a light-hearted, comedic, and raunchy look into the life of the average mother, who society expects to do-it-all for her children, sacrificing her own identity in the process.[4] However, it would be more appropriate to say this movie takes a comedic look into the life of the average white, upper middle-class mother, who is expected to be the pinnacle of femininity and maternity.

Studying the rhetoric of films intended to empower women is crucial, particularly when they contain toxic behaviors and language, such as toxic femininity, which can be observed in *Bad Moms*. Very little has been written on the concept of toxic femininity within rhetorical scholarship. Most information on the subject comes from articles in popular online magazines, blogs, and opinion pages of news sites. Even within these contexts, there is little agreement regarding how narrowly toxic femininity should be defined or if it truly exists at all.[5] Some

regard this concept instead as internalized misogyny and categorize it as a direct result of the toxic elements of patriarchal culture.[6] However, this perpetuates an othering of women within a binary view of gender in which men are the focus for how both toxic masculine and feminine identities are defined. Despite the lack of consensus on a definition, or perhaps because of the lack of consensus, toxic femininity is a significant topic for rhetorical study. In order to better understand the full scope of feminine identities, toxic femininity must be defined clearly and completely.

While the creators appear to give moms credit for what they do, a few hearty laughs, and a little grace, their intentions are undercut by the presence of toxic femininity, which can be identified through a close reading of the film. The purpose of this paper is to use feminist criticism to perform a close reading of *Bad Moms*, identifying the more subtle, and potentially unintended, occurrences of toxic femininity. This will be accomplished by 1) detailing the basic plot elements of *Bad Moms*, 2) investigating the concept of toxic femininity and how it pertains to intensive mothering, hyper-maternity, and trashing, and 3) analyzing the film's casting choices and key lines, focusing on what is said and unsaid, as well as their contextual components.

***Bad Moms* (2016)**

*Bad Moms* was released on July 29, 2016, produced by STX Entertainment.[7] The film starred Mila Kunis, Kathryn Hahn, and Kristen Bell as the leading characters, who have also starred in the sequel, *Bad Moms Christmas*, which released just over a year after the first movie. *Bad Moms* made $23.4 million in the United States during its opening weekend,[8] then box office revenue grew to more than $180 million worldwide.[9] While *Bad Moms Christmas* did not perform as well in the box office as its predecessor, fans of the franchise have remained loyal enough to spark the creation of a third film, *Bad Moms' Moms*, announced in April 2019.[10] There

had also been discussions about a *Bad Dads* movie, but ultimately the project appears to have been set aside, with no apparent plans to resume.[11]

*Bad Moms* tells the tale of three mothers, trying too hard or not trying much at all to be good moms. The story is told through the eyes of Amy Mitchell (Mila Kunis), who cannot seem to catch a break. She does her son's homework, takes both of her children to school, sports practices, doctor appointments, and piano and dance lessons, appears to complete all household tasks, and also works full-time hours for part-time pay for a supervisor who does not appreciate her efforts. She is clearly striving to be a good mom, trying to do everything right, but ultimately winds up feeling like a bad mom nearly every day. After discovering her husband, Mike, has been cheating on her with a woman online for several months, Amy decides she is done following anyone else's rules and expectations, resolving to stop trying so hard to be a good mom. At an emergency PTA meeting, Amy refuses to take on the role of leading a bake sale monitoring taskforce and quits the PTA, angering PTA President Gwendolyn (Christina Applegate), the queen bee of the school's moms.

After leaving the PTA meeting, Amy heads to a nearby bar and meets Kiki (Kristen Bell), a stay-at-home mom, and Carla (Kathryn Hahn), a single working mom, becoming fast friends. During this first evening of drinking, Amy, Kiki, and Carla share some of their secret wishes, such as having a quiet breakfast alone. Kiki shares how domineering her husband is and Carla bemoans the responsibilities that come with motherhood. The three women agree there are too many rules they must follow to be good moms, so they instead decide to be bad moms, drinking and partying the rest of the night at the local grocery store. Eventually, Kiki and Carla insist Amy start dating and she soon begins a relationship with Jessie (Jay Hernandez), the handsome widower who makes all the other moms swoon.

Throughout the course of the film, tensions grow between Amy and Gwendolyn, which reaches its peak when Amy brings store-bought doughnut holes to the PTA bake sale, breaking Gwendolyn's rules against BPA, MSG, BHA, BHT, soy, sesame, nuts, eggs, milk, butter, salt, sugar, and wheat.[12] Gwendolyn and her clique, Stacy (Jada Pinkett-Smith) and Vicky (Annie Mumolo), deem this an unforgivable sin, vowing to take revenge on Amy for her transgression. After Gwendolyn gets Amy's daughter, Jane (Oona Lawrence), benched from the soccer team, Amy announces a bid for PTA president to rid the school of Gwendolyn's influence. Though Amy's campaign has a rocky start, the other moms ultimately turn their backs on Gwendolyn, driving her to take drastic action in an effort to maintain her control. Gwendolyn, Stacy, and Vicky break into the school after hours and plant drugs in Jane's locker, call in an anonymous tip, and get Jane suspended from school. At this point, Amy's life begins to spiral out of control. Jane blames her for the suspension, both children decide they want to live with their father, and Amy gets fired. Initially, Amy appears to accept defeat, until she is encouraged by Kiki and Carla to step up and fight back, especially because Gwendolyn went after Jane and Amy's motherly instinct should be to protect her daughter. Amy then shows up at the PTA election and gives a moving speech about how it is acceptable that all moms are bad moms occasionally and wins the election to become the new PTA president. By the end of the film, Amy reconciles with Gwendolyn, divorces her husband, continues her relationship with Jessie, and gets rehired at her job, with better pay, benefits, and fewer hours, all while balancing her responsibilities as a mother. Kiki stands up to her husband, who takes on a more submissive role in their marriage, and Carla starts making lunch for her son. Life appears to be better than ever.[13]

As with most films, reviews of *Bad Moms* were relatively varied, and many critics' feelings were mixed. Some really enjoyed the movie, commenting on the universality of Amy's

feelings that she is always doing something wrong in her role as a mother.[14] *Rolling Stone* writer Peter Travers stated the film was not the funniest, nor did it have the freshest ideas, but was humorous enough.[15] Others shared similar sentiments, stating the movie was mostly enjoyable, but lacked the "full-blooded humanity" of other female-driven comedies, such as *Bridesmaids* and *Trainwreck.*[16] *New York Times* writer Manohla Dargis wrote the film was funny but felt like leftovers because "like 'The Hangover'…'Bad Moms' is a comedy of outrage pegged to a gender stereotype, this time the smother mothers of America."[17] Mark Olsen, from *Los Angeles Times*, takes these attitudes a step further in suggesting the film could have been better written by women rather than Lucas and Moore, who "turn their heroines into unconvincing femme-bros."[18]

When asked what sparked their inspiration for *Bad Moms*, Lucas and Moore shared that they had noticed a difference in the nature of their lives compared to those of their wives: Lucas and Moore felt their lives were relatively boring, while their wives seemed to have no end to the responsibilities that come with being mothers.[19] Not only were mothers the inspiration for the film, but Lucas and Moore stated they gained valuable insights from many of the women working on the set, including cast and crew members.[20] Many people have shared their appreciation for the candid and fair representation of what life is like for modern-day parents in the United States. However, by performing a close reading of the film's characters and language, with the added perspective of feminist criticism, one can reveal the presence of toxic femininity in *Bad Moms*.

**Close Reading from a Feminist Perspective**

There appears to be some debate regarding the establishment of close reading as a method of textual analysis.[21] Some believe Michael Leff and Gerald Mohrmann founded the method with their 1974 essay, "Lincoln at Cooper Union: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Text," in

which they use close textual analysis to study Abraham Lincoln's Cooper Union Address.[22] There are others who believe I.A. Richards invented the method in 1929 in his book, *Practical Criticism*.[23] Regardless of who founded the method, Leff and Mohrmann showed this technique could be used to study oratory as well as fictional texts.[24] Close reading is a method by which an artifact is analyzed from the more specific aspects of a passage, such as diction, syntax, symbols, and patterns, among others.[25] Close reading does not require one to engage the entire artifact, although some may do so, and emphasizes even the smallest details, as one must assume nothing is included by accident.

Though this method has historically been used to study fictional texts, more recent scholars have shown it can be used to analyze artifacts within multiple media. Much like Leff and Mohrmann, Robert Terrill used close reading to study speeches, such as Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union," examining its style by pointing out how Barack Obama presented himself as a doubled self, without saying so directly.[26] Stephen Lucas used close reading to analyze the Declaration of Independence, studying its "artistry by probing the discourse microscopically – at the level of the sentence, phrase, word, and syllable."[27] Leah Ceccarelli wrote a recent article, "The Rhetoric of Rhetorical Inquiry," in which she employs close reading to examine the language within the works of a few well-known rhetoricians.[28]

Over time, the use of close reading as a method for rhetorical analysis developed beyond written text. In their examination of the annual Moore's Ford Lynching Reenactment, Owen and Ehrenhaus demonstrate how close reading can be used to study reenactment performances, focusing on the use of the body as a rhetorical instrument.[29] This method has also been used to study the deeper meaning of the elements within film. In fact, movies as the subjects for close reading are incredibly rich because they include far more elements than just words: "the

utterances, the force of their expression, what is said and what is left unsaid (explicit or implicit), the filmic conventions and so on – all count in films."[30] Barry Brummett employed close reading to analyze haunted house movies and the genre's use of mirrors as a symbolic tool to reflect real-life anxieties of audience members in the characters.[31]

In addition to closely reading the script and symbolic visual elements within movies, one can closely read the characters, delivery of lines, lighting, camera angles, and so much more.[32] Two different readings of *Saving Private Ryan* show how the film can be analyzed to better understand how the involvement of the United States in various wars has shaped its national identity. One of these articles focuses on post-Vietnam depictions of Holocaust memory within *Saving Private Ryan*, established through a close reading of the development and portrayal of Private Mellish, the movie's only Jewish character.[33] The other article highlights the film's narrative as a secular jeremiad using close textual analysis of camera angles, among other symbols present in the film.[34]

Close reading has also been employed to highlight components outside of film itself, sometimes paying attention to audience reception and interpretations. Rosteck and Frentz utilized this method to identify Joseph Campbell's hero myth within *An Inconvenient Truth* not only through the documentary itself but also in how it was understood by a variety of audiences.[35] Martin Medhurst used close reading to study the rhetorical structure of Oliver Stone's *JFK* focusing on the way in which the audience interacts with the film.[36] The method has also been used to study the 2009 movie, *Precious*, "in light of the social, cultural, industrial, and most importantly *cinematic* contexts from which the film emerges."[37] This paper uses close reading and feminist criticism to explore the ways in which societal norms can subconsciously influence

elements of a movie's production, such as casting, diction, and characterization, resulting in instances of toxic femininity within the film.

Feminist criticism within rhetorical theory has long been concerned with equal treatment of female scholars, both in study of historical texts by women and with a more female-centric method of analysis.[38] Rhetoricians Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin discussed the fundamental goal of feminist scholarship as the exploration of "whether existing rhetorical theories account for women's experiences and perspectives and to construct alternative theories that acknowledge and explain women's practices in the construction and use of rhetoric."[39] This method of rhetorical criticism focuses on the importance of giving fair treatment to female scholars, but also analyzing female-created artifacts without a male-centered bias.[40] Feminist criticism also serves well as a method for evaluating how textual and mediated representations of concepts such as femininity and masculinity can further influence how society shifts in its understanding of these social constructs.

From a binary view of gender, femininity has often been considered the opposite of masculinity. This view of masculinity and femininity and their associated traits has been the subject of much feminist scholarship, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, in which she details the ways in which society treats men as the norm and women as the other.[41] During the fight for voting rights for white women, suffragettes faced opposition from the Cult of True Womanhood, who argued true womanhood and femininity could only be attained by living by four main tenets: piousness, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity.[42] R.W. Connell states, "The popular ideology of gender assumes that 'masculinity' and 'femininity' are unchanging, direct expressions of male and female bodies. Male bodies are strong and dominant, female bodies are passive and nurturing."[43] In this same binary perspective of gender, some scholars claim

femininity itself is used pejoratively to imply weakness and frailty.[44] Others equate femininity as being inextricably and divinely linked to maternity.[45] Simone de Beauvoir writes on this as well: "from childhood woman is repeatedly told she is made to bear children, and the praises of motherhood are sung…the boredom of household tasks, all this is justified by this marvelous privilege she holds, that of bringing children into the world."[46] The view that women are not only capable of but expected to become mothers was a primary focus of the second wave of the feminist movement. Since then, third wave feminism, postmodern feminism, and feminist rhetorical study have become enmeshed with some more traditional views second wave feminism sought to fight against, appearing to pit the waves of the movement against each other.[47] Though there is no singular definition for toxic femininity, many accept women fighting against other women in this way as a key facet.[48]

Critics of the term point to its use by Men's Rights Activists as retaliatory to the notion of toxic masculinity. The Men's Rights Movement is "distinct from other explorations of masculinity insofar as the movement itself is fundamentally situated in opposition to feminist theory and activism…the movement frames itself as being defensive and it 'defends' the rights of men."[49] The members of this movement define toxic femininity as women using their gender to claim victimhood in order to escape consequences or other undesirable situations,[50] though there are some outside of this movement who agree with this definition as well.[51] Other groups also connect toxic femininity to toxic masculinity, but as two halves of a whole, stating, "Toxic masculinity encourages violence and domination, which hurts both men and women…'toxic femininity' encourages acceptance of violence and domination, which hurts both men and women."[52] Comparably, some believe toxic femininity is simply internalized misogyny, meaning women fighting against other women is only a component of the patriarchy which has embedded

itself into the minds of women.[53] Others argue toxic femininity is working for the advancement of others, while simultaneously harming oneself in the process.[54] In an article for *Psychology Today,* Ritch Savin-Williams writes, "Sexism says that a woman is too frail or docile to play a contact sport; toxic femininity says that you don't want to play football anyway, sweetie; you would look horrible and sweaty in the helmet and pads. Sexism is focused on robbing women of status and rights; toxic femininity is about defining womanhood so shallowly that a woman feels de-gendered by basic human acts or neutral preferences."[55] One could argue this definition supports the idea that toxic femininity is misogyny internalized as a result of hegemonic and toxic masculinity. In this model, women are viewed as objects to be used for the pleasure of men and boosting of the male ego. The example given of toxic femininity reflects not only the expectation to look pretty or be demure, but that any action which would jeopardize these traits is inherently unfeminine.

In addition to its connections to hegemonic and toxic masculinity, there are some who contend toxic femininity is the belief femininity or being a good woman are related primarily to one's ability and/or desire to have children.[56] This form of toxic femininity could be exemplified by a young woman who does not want to become a mother being told she will feel differently about children once she grows older. The condescending implication is that motherhood is a natural and integral part of becoming a woman and no woman can truly escape the desire for a maternal life. The concept of femininity has been in flux for decades, especially as it relates to maternity and the feminist movement.[57] Some scholarship has focused on the have-it-all or do-it-all mentality in which good mothers become good *working* mothers after their maternity leave is over, finding new ways to balance home and work. [58] This state of mind created the *supermom* identity, defined as "an exemplary mother; a woman who performs the traditional duties of

housekeeping and child-rearing while also having a full-time job."[59] Though *supermom* terminology appears to acknowledge something superhuman must be present in order for a good mother to maintain a full-time career and the societal expectations of motherhood, this became the ideal that all working mothers would strive to achieve.[60] Holding mothers to the standard of *supermom* is inherently toxic, as is the definition itself. If the best women are depicted as those who are good mothers *and* successful professionals, then all women who are successful but not mothers or are mothers but are unsuccessful in a professional environment are placed into a lower class of personhood.

In *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels draw attention to the belief that the "only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a 'real' woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a 'mom.'"[61] This attitude has also been regarded as a new type of female empowerment, referred to as *hyper-maternity*.[62] There is even a branch of toxic femininity which takes this a step further, forcing mothers into various subcategories, such as those relating to birth: real mothers (those who have children via natural birth) versus C-section mothers (those who have their children via caesarean delivery, done by making an incision in the mother's abdomen).[63] Similarly, women with newborns are also placed into subgroups: nursing mothers, whose babies are breastfed, and formula mothers, whose babies are fed with formula.[64] In modern scholarship, this is referred to as the "mommy wars," in which mothers are categorized into different groups, then positioned as enemies rather than allies, such as the animosity which exists between working mothers and stay-at-home mothers.[65] Karlyn Kohrs Campbell previously referred to this judgment and grouping, as well as other similar

behavior, as *trashing*: "a process by which 'sisters' are punished for deviance through criticism, ostracism, and expulsion."[66]

Throughout all the various definitions and examples of toxic femininity in film, books, news, and other media, trashing appears to be the common element, especially pertaining to motherhood and body image. Recent scholarship has identified *intensive mothering*, which consists of three main components: "(a) women as primary caregivers, (b) emotionally intensive, labor-intensive, child-centered parenting, and (c) the separation of mothering from paid work."[67] This has further perpetuated the trashing of mothers on both sides because intensive mothering appears to be the ideal, held even by mothers who work outside the home, so judgment is cast on any mother who is unable to attain this level of motherhood.[68] Women-on-women hate, abuse, judgment, exclusion, as punishment for not adhering to expectations of femininity is toxic. It is worth noting that these standards of femininity do not belong only to the patriarchy; various waves of feminism have rewritten the rules of what it means to be feminine, and trashing happens when both sets of rules are broken.[69] The concepts of the perfect mother may have initially started as a symptom of the patriarchy, but women have since taken it over and made it their own. As a rhetorical artifact, *Bad Moms* contains several instances of toxic femininity, particularly relating to what it means to be a good mother.

### *Bad Moms* and Toxic Femininity

When watching *Bad Moms*, Gwendolyn (Applegate) is the set up as the obvious villain, holding all the other mothers to incredibly high expectations, while talking about them behind their backs, and taking what it means to be a good mother to the extreme. The majority of the surface-level occurrences of toxic femininity are lines spoken by this character. She trashes Amy for not being a stay-at-home mom, then employs the same practice when referring to Kiki (Bell)

as “that little weird stay-at-home mom,”[70] despite the fact that Gwendolyn is also a stay-at-home mom, who just happens to have the responsibility of being PTA president. This character is clearly intended to be a comedic and ridiculous representation of intensive mothering. At the end of the film, after Amy (Kunis) has won the PTA presidency, she notices Gwendolyn crying in her car. When Amy asks what is wrong, Gwendolyn states the PTA was the only good thing in her life, but that is now lost. Amy responds by stating, “Come on, Gwendolyn. Your life is awesome. You have, like, three boats.”[71] In the following lines, viewers learn Gwendolyn has a great deal going on in her life, and also feels like a bad mom, despite her attempts throughout the film to keep up the façade that she is the perfect mother. This scene is a fairly obvious attempt at showing Gwendolyn’s humanity, paralleling an earlier scene in the movie in which Amy admits to crying in her car, driving the point of the film home that all the moms in the film feel like bad moms. However, it is Amy’s comment about Gwendolyn’s awesome life that stands out. By stating Gwendolyn’s life is awesome then immediately bringing up the fact that she has three boats, as well as saying nothing else in that moment, the audience can infer Amy believes Gwendolyn only cares about money and her possessions. This connects back to another of Amy’s earlier lines in the film, which occurs when Stacy (Pinkett-Smith) asks if Amy misses her children when she is working instead of being at home with them: “I do. But I also need, like, money.”[72] The use of the word *need* implies Amy has no choice but to work because the family cannot survive financially without her job. Though more subtle than other instances of toxic femininity in the film, Amy is trashing Gwendolyn’s character in the later scene, even in her emotionally weakened state, surreptitiously asserting her position as the better mother, and subsequently as the better woman, because Amy’s concerns about money are related only to giving her children a better life rather than the material possessions she is able to purchase.

Any movie fan would likely agree casting can make all the difference in whether a film succeeds or fails, whether the script itself is a masterpiece or just barely entertaining. Some critics of *Bad Moms* commented on the brilliant casting of the film, noting the chemistry between the main characters as one of the main factors.[73] Whether the casting was based on professional connections, talent, interest in drawing in certain audiences, or other reasons, one detail is glaringly obvious: all of the moms in *Bad Moms* are thin, attractive, and fit, and the vast majority of them are white. There are some who might argue this is simply the way Hollywood works, as most actresses fit the traditional ideal of beauty. However, in a film like *Bad Moms*, which even the creators admitted was intended to illustrate the lives and struggles of real moms,[74] the casting of the film perpetuates the belief that maternal success is as much about looking good as actually being a good mother. In a 2012 article, which focused on post-birth weight-loss of celebrity mothers, the authors found that not only do women rely heavily on these kinds of media narratives to illustrate what they are doing right and wrong as mothers, but also discovered that women equate maternal success with physical fitness.[75] The women in *Bad Moms* are not heavy or malnourished or unkempt or poorly groomed, despite being so busy all the time, not even Amy, who describes her entire life thusly in the first few minutes of the film:

> I'm Amy Mitchell, and I'm a mom. I had my first kid when I was twenty years old, and I've been running late ever since. My days are filled with dropping the kids off at school…then racing to work where I have meeting after meeting after meeting. I usually end up eating a shitty lunch at my desk. And I try to work out once a week…Most days I race back to school for the kids' plays and poetry readings and class projects…Which I'm always late for. And then there's PTA meetings and volunteering and parent-teacher conferences…At least once a day, I feel like the worst mom in the world. And I cry in my car. Then I shuttle the kids to piano lessons and soccer games and dance classes and doctors' appointments before my daily trip to the grocery store…But I feel like I'm screwing up all the time. Still, I love being a mom.[76]

The "shitty lunch" Amy eats every day is a homemade salad which, for anyone who has ever had to make lunch for themselves, is absolutely not a bad option for lunch when there are numerous

and easier options far less healthy than a salad. Regardless of the fact that she appears to be so busy, Amy manages to make salads for her lunches, stay in great shape, and be well-groomed throughout each busy day, establishing her as the ideal *supermom*.

The casting of Mila Kunis as Amy Mitchell, the lead character in the film, with whom the mothers in the audience are meant to strongly identify, continues the mediated tradition of placing an unrealistic expectation on mothers to look good in addition to the other responsibilities they take on as caregivers. Kiki (Bell) and Carla (Hahn) are also in excellent physical shape and Carla even reteaches Amy how to be sexy on their night out to help Amy find a man: "If you literally just try to act half normal, you are gonna get laid. Just don't be such a mom."[77] In fact, there is not a single, named, female character within this film who does not fit this model. The casting choices of the film enforce the have-it-all or do-it-all mentality, even though the plot appears to subvert it by insinuating that moms are unsexy. The message here is that because Amy is in such good shape, no man will know she is a mom unless she behaves like one. By perpetuating the notion that successful motherhood is *being* a good mom, but being sexier than a mom, trashing and toxic femininity are encouraged. If even *bad moms* can stay in shape, while barely staying on top of their other obligations, then women may find it impossible to believe they are good mothers if they are overweight or malnourished or struggle to maintain proper hygiene. This gives women who are somehow able to manage a slimmer figure an advantage on their peers and ample ammunition for their *mommy wars*.

In order to examine another illustration of a similar form of othering, two scenes must be considered, the first of which occurs near the middle of the film, in which Kiki and Carla are trying to convince Amy that it would be unwise to go after the PTA president position, placing her in direct competition with Gwendolyn. They remind her that Gwendolyn will have the

support of all the various mom categories including, but not limited to, attachment moms, tiger moms, sad moms, blogging moms, CrossFit moms, drunk moms, Black moms, lesbian moms, divorced moms, and the coveted divorced, Black, lesbian moms.[78] One can assume the writers included this list to be humorous, pointing out all the different labels which have been placed on mothers throughout the years, as Kiki and Carla quickly catalog the types, delivering their lines back and forth. While the extensive list does not include all the various categories of mothers,[79] the point is made that the title of mother is not enough on its own. Despite the fact that all of these women have entered into the same general experience and have become mothers, this scene reminds the audience that more sets them apart than what brings them together. The second scene which connects to this takes place much closer to the end of the movie, after Amy delivers her speech at the meeting for the PTA president election. Mothers within the audience start popping up and sharing the ways in which they also feel like bad moms, such as giving their children Benadryl so they can watch television uninterrupted or drinking margaritas each morning to get through their day. After several women have made their confessions, the majority of which are met with enthusiastic and encouraging cheers, one woman stands up and says, "I don't even have kids. I come to PTA meetings because I'm lonely."[80] Throughout the crowd there is a collective sigh of sympathy, while Kiki and Carla exchange a look clearly meant to communicate they find this woman's confession pathetic and strange. The woman's loneliness as motivation for attending PTA meetings is sad, but there is another element behind the crowd's reaction. All of the other women are mothers, admittedly less good than they had hoped, and all from different mom categories, but there seems to be a consensus that the women in the film are grateful for and proud of their maternal position in life. The other woman is not a mother, and as such she is a pitiable creature in their eyes. This is a different kind of trashing and othering,

which is not related to which mom is mothering better but placing non-mothers into a lower position and category of existence. This woman's presence in the film at all serves only to be the subject of mockery and shame, perpetuating the toxic belief that the only real, good, and properly adjusted women are mothers, even if they are bad moms.

**Conclusion**

This paper, which served as a close reading of *Bad Moms*, has identified explicit and implicit instances of toxic femininity, an important topic in the future of feminist discourse and study. Coming to a consensus about the most appropriate definition for toxic femininity is necessary for rhetorical scholarship, as are further investigations into its presence within other media and the ways in which it may inhibit an intersectional approach to feminism. In the earlier waves of the feminist movement, white women fought for equal rights in civic engagement and the professional realm, demanding their place was not solely in the home.[81] In the more recent waves, feminism became more intersectional as women from various backgrounds began to work together.[82] Even more recently, some women have reembraced the concept of maternity as the ultimate height of womanhood.[83] *Bad Moms* further builds on the ideas of hyper-maternity and intensive mothering, showing that only mothers are good women and only those who have everything figured out are good mothers. Despite the intersectionality of third wave feminism, women have been placing themselves and each other into various categories, forcing opposition where there should be solidarity. *Bad Moms* was intended to show the world what life is like for moms,[84] but does not attempt to steer society away from the rivalry between different types of women.

Despite the attempt at building solidarity between all moms for feeling like "bad moms," this film ultimately employs the toxic practices of trashing and othering, as well as perpetuating

the *supermom* trope and specific standards of beauty. The identification of trashing, othering, and toxic tropes within *Bad Moms* reveals how commonplace these behaviors have become. The film was intended to highlight the universal experience of motherhood, which Kristen Bell (Kiki) confirmed in an interview was the case for her stating, "it just was such an accurate depiction of what moms feel like. "[85] This movie does more than portray how moms feel because it also reveals how deeply embedded toxic femininity is within feminine identities, especially maternal identities. Rather than acknowledging that womanhood takes many forms, the film promotes maternal success as the epitome of womanhood and femininity.

Studying *Bad Moms*, as well as other films which make an attempt to be female empowered though they are truly not, is important because it highlights the direction in which society and culture are being led. This movie normalizes the categorization of different types of women and the surreptitious insults of one group of women against another and continues the belief that there is a correlation between maternal success and physical fitness. This is harmful to the real women who watch these films, in part because it promotes the shaming of feminine bodies which do not meet the standards of maternal beauty. Because of the success of the *Bad Moms* franchise and its influence on feminine identities, close examination of these types of movies is crucial, especially with the release of *Bad Moms' Moms* on the horizon.

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## CHAPTER 3

### "You're the Only Joy I've Had": Reading the Response of a Straightwashed *Wonder Woman*

Marginalized groups have been fighting for a long time for fair and equal representation in media, particularly those in the LGBTQ community. A recent study from the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Communication found the vast majority of Hollywood productions, particularly the highest-grossing films, contain stories centered on straight, white, cisgendered men, and only "1.4% of all characters in the top films of 2019 were from the LGBTQ community."[1] The difficulty in equal representation for this community is surely due, in no small part, to the continued debate over whether or not members of the LGBTQ community deserve to partake in the same basic rights as heterosexual, cisgendered counterparts. In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court settled the legal battle over same-sex marriage in the United States when they ruled same-sex marriage was a constitutional right, nullifying bans on same-sex marriage in fourteen U.S. states.[2] However, even with this major legal victory, members of the LGBTQ community have struggled with media representations that cement stereotypes, assuming they are even represented at all.

The *Wonder Woman* comics were different. Long regarded as the first LGBTQ superhero,[3] Wonder Woman was an inspiration to this marginalized community, proving they had just as much right as anyone else to be legitimately represented, at least in the world of comics. Though the writers behind *Wonder Woman* did not identify her as canonically bisexual until a 2016 interview with Greg Rucka (the comic's writer at that time) and subsequent storylines, readers saw her as a fierce warrior, who also happened to be bisexual.[4] In his interview, Rucka stated Themyscira is "supposed to be paradise. You're supposed to be able to live happily. You're supposed to be able — in a context where one can live happily, and part of

what an individual needs for that happiness is to have a partner — to have a fulfilling, romantic and sexual relationship. And the only options are women. But an Amazon doesn't look at another Amazon and say, 'You're gay.' They don't. The concept doesn't exist. Now, are we saying Diana has been in love and had relationships with other women? As Nicola and I approach it, the answer is obviously yes."[5] However, this has not translated into the *Wonder Woman* films, which have straightwashed Wonder Woman and communicated a message of heteronormativity.

Straightwashing is a term used to describe the "assimilation of someone who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual or other to fit heterosexual cultural norms. Put simply, it's the practice of portraying non-straight people or characters as straight."[6] Heteronormativity, a term introduced by Michael Warner in his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Plant: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, is the treatment of heterosexuality as the norm, or natural, orientation and positions all other sexual orientations as other.[7] Though many characters, and even historical figures, have been straightwashed in media, this practice has been especially common when comic books are translated to film. Mystique, a character from Marvel's *X-Men* franchise, is bisexual in the comics, but straight in all *X-Men* films featuring the character. *Black Panther*, another Marvel franchise, straightwashed the characters Okoye and Ayo in the film.[8] This practice alienates LGBTQ fans who go to a theater or rent a film expecting to see themselves represented on-screen because they are met with a reminder that they are not accepted within a heteronormative society.

Rhetorics of heteronormativity are inherently toxic, as they further marginalize members of the LGBTQ community, positioning straightness as appropriate and natural. Straightwashing takes this a step beyond, not only cementing this message, but actively erasing aspects of

characters who have previously resisted the heteronormative model. This type of erasure is especially damaging to audiences who expect to see themselves represented in these films, only to discover the parts of the character with which these audiences identify have been removed. As such, the straightwashing of characters within popular media franchises, such as *Wonder Woman*, is not only a worthy topic for examination in academic scholarship, but necessary to understand the ways in which popular culture perpetuates homophobic and transphobic mentalities. Using a variation of reception study and Leah Ceccarelli's close textual-intertextual analysis, this paper engages several elements of the *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Wonder Woman 1984* films. This examination includes Wonder Woman's straightwashed sexuality and the responses to the franchise. The analysis also considers how responses might be read differently when considering the comics, the television series, and the biographical film of the character's creator, Professor William Moulton Marston.

***Wonder Woman (2017)***

*Wonder Woman* (2017) was released in theaters on June 2, 2017, directed by Patty Jenkins and produced collaboratively by DC Films and RatPac Entertainment, and was distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.[9] The film starred Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Connie Nielsen, and Robin Wright. *Wonder Woman* functions as the origin story for Diana Prince (Gal Gadot), detailing her journey from her home of Themyscira into the world of men and her experiences as she becomes Wonder Woman. The film begins showing Diana as a mischievous child whose greatest wish is to become a fierce fighter like her aunt, Antiope (Robin Wright), and the other Amazons, a race of warrior women created by Zeus to protect the world of men from the war-god Ares. Diana's mother, Queen Hippolyta (Connie Nielson), who only wants to ensure her daughter's safety, reluctantly agrees to allow Diana to begin training.

The film flashes forward to Diana as a young woman, revealing that not only has she become the fighter she dreamed of being but has a power which no other Amazon possesses. Soon after, Diana saves the life of pilot Steve Trevor (Chris Pine) after he has crashed into the nearby ocean. She and the other Amazons learn of the ongoing Great War and Diana, believing Ares to be responsible, resolves to accompany Steve back to England. Eventually, Diana discovers Ares had orchestrated the Great War as the seemingly peace-minded Sir Patrick (David Thewlis) and learns in their great battle she is a demi-god, the product of an affair between Zeus and Hippolyta rather than a child molded from clay as her mother had told her. During their fight, Steve sacrifices himself to save the people of London from a deadly gas created by German scientists, and in her grief Diana finds the strength to defeat Ares.[10]

*Wonder Woman* (2017) made $223 million internationally in its opening weekend,[11] then proceeded to make more than $800 million worldwide by the end of the summer in 2017, the same year it was released, making it Warner Bros. Picture's "third-biggest domestic grosser ever not adjusted for inflation."[12] Reviews of the film were largely positive, with some critics stating the film breathed "some fresh air into the DC film universe"[13] or referring to the movie as a piece of "subversive feminism" in which multiple components function as feminist acts.[14] On *Rotten Tomatoes*, a popular film review site, the movie received a critic rating of 93% and an audience rating of 83% from more than 100,000 evaluations. Others were more critical of the film arguing "what promised to be a glass-ceiling-smashing blockbuster actually looks more like a future camp classic"[15] and resorts to "dreary, overblown action clichés."[16]

***Wonder Woman 1984* (2020)**

*Wonder Woman 1984* was originally set to release on October 2, 2020,[17] but instead released on December 25, 2020, both in theaters and on streaming services, due to the COVID-

19 global pandemic.[18] This sequel was also directed by Patty Jenkins and produced collaboratively with Atlas Entertainment, DC Entertainment, The Stone Quarry, and Warner Bros. Pictures, and was distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.[19] The film starred Gal Gadot, Chris Pine, Amy Wiig, and Pedro Pascal, while also featuring other actors from the first film in flashback scenes, such as Connie Nielson and Robin Wright. In this sequel, Diana Prince (Gadot) has been living in Washington, D.C., working as a curator at the Smithsonian Institute. While working there she meets the clumsy and well-meaning Dr. Barbara Minerva (Wiig), who desires to be strong and popular like Diana, a wish Barbara is granted when she comes into contact with the Dreamstone. The Dreamstone, sought after by the overly ambitious Maxwell Lord (Pascal), also grants Diana's wish for Steve (Pine) to be in her life once again, though she does not realize the power of the stone at the time she makes her wish. Though Steve does return, it is only his consciousness, which takes over the body of a random man living in Washington, D.C.

Eventually, Maxwell Lord obtains the Dreamstone, wishing to become the stone itself and begins granting the wishes of others, though not without a price, which leads to massive destruction. Diana, Barbara, and Steve come to discover the origin of the stone, and its connection to the god of lies, learning also that the only way to stop further damage being done is to destroy the stone or renounce all the wishes made.[20] Barbara refuses to give up her wish, protecting Maxwell Lord from Steve and Diana, and ends up making an additional wish to become an "apex predator,"[21] which causes her to become Cheetah. Ultimately, Diana gives up Steve, though not without great internal struggle, and defeats Cheetah and Maxwell Lord, setting the world right once again.

*Wonder Woman 1984* made $131.4 million worldwide during its cinematic run, though only $32.6 million was the result of domestic sales. Despite audience anticipation for this sequel,

the COVID-19 pandemic impacted attendance in theaters in North America, as well as the decision to stream the movie on HBO Max[2] the same day it was released in theaters.[22] Per the Nielsen ratings service, the total stream time of *Wonder Woman 1984* by HBO Max users amounted to approximately "14.9 million complete plays."[23] Reviews of the film were more critical than *Wonder Woman* (2017), with some calling the movie's plot and characters regressive[24] and others describing the plot as "tangled and confusing."[25] Some critics focused on the heteronormative components and the lack of exploration of a relationship between Wonder Woman/Diana Prince and Cheetah/Barbara Minerva, particularly due to their flirtatious relationship within the comic book series.[26]

**Heteronormativity and LGBTQ Visibility**

The topic of heteronormativity is becoming a more popular focus within academic scholarship centered on popular culture. Cady and Oates discuss the presence and elevation of heteronormative families within several popular zombie apocalypse films, arguing its presence has created a new "cultural logic – one that views the heteronormative family unit as indispensable to social, political, and economic order."[27] Even in some films with LGBTQ members in the primary roles, such as *Brokeback Mountain*, heterosexuality is still positioned as the norm,[28] and homosexual relationships are often only depicted as acceptable when they "approximate heteronormative models."[29] In his book, *Up From Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America*, Larry Gross explains the phenomenon of heteronormalizing LGBTQ narratives: "When previously ignored groups or perspectives do gain visibility, the manner of their representation will reflect the biases and interests of those powerful people who define the

[2] Warner Media owns HBO Max, which functions as the primary streaming service for films produced and distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures.

public agenda."[30] As such, straightwashing almost seems like an inevitability in a society still clinging to heteronormative modes of behavior.

Fair representation in media has immeasurable value to groups who have historically been marginalized. The value is not only in observing fair and accurate portrayals for people whose identities have been largely formed, but also for those who are seeking answers to questions about where they fit in the world.[31] LGBTQ characters are already extremely rare within major Hollywood film productions, but some would see their representation reduced further. For instance, the MPA rating systems has been found to disproportionately give films higher ratings (i.e. R or NC-17) when LGBTQ characters and/or themes are the center of the narrative, as compared to similar stories featuring cisgendered, heterosexual characters.[32] Per the most recent MPA "Classification and Ratings Rules," the ratings system is as follows: "G – General Audiences. All Ages Admitted," "PG – Parental Guidance Suggested. Some Material May Not Be Suitable for Children," "PG-13 – Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some Material May Be Inappropriate For Children Under 13," "R – Restricted. Children Under 17 Require Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian," and "NC-17 – No One 17 and Under Admitted."[33] The stricter ratings often lead to lack of exposure for these films, preventing access to audiences who might find them useful in identity construction.[34]

Those movies with LGBTQ story components which do make it through the ratings assessment and into mainstream theaters often have their trailers reworked and posters strategically designed by major distributors to highlight the "quality" elements of the film, such as lead actor performances or historical accuracy, and hide the LGBTQ content.[35] *The Hours, A Single Man, Transamerica,* and *Brokeback Mountain,* are just a few of these films whose trailers and movie posters were designed to be attractive to mainstream audiences.[36] Distributors are

driven by the desire for high box office sales, and in a heteronormative society "queerness becomes the very liability for these films to overcome."[37] This has been no different for the *Wonder Woman* film franchise, as seen in a close reading of the film and a review of the responses to it.

**Reception and Close Textual-Intertextual Analysis**

Though reception studies differ from close textual-intertextual analysis, both are employed in this paper in order to create a more comprehensive understanding of the problem with Wonder Woman's sexuality within the DC Extended Universe. Reception study focuses on audience reactions to a rhetorical artifact, not just what is said about the artifact, but the actions audiences take after being exposed to it. This method is crucial for study of media because, as Denise Bostdorff puts it, "rhetoric has consequences."[38] Leah Ceccarelli introduced close textual-intertextual analysis in the book *Shaping Science with Rhetoric: The Cases of Dobzhansky, Schrödinger, and Wilson*. Ceccarelli describes the method as "a variation on an established critical practice called 'close textual analysis.' The purpose of this modified approach is to explain how texts work by connecting rhetorical strategies to their effects on historical audiences."[39] The close textual analysis Ceccarelli refers to in this definition is also known as close reading (also used in the previous chapter), in which scholars examine an artifact at a near-microscopic level, considering word-choice, and grammar, among other qualities.[40]

As a relatively recently defined method of analysis, close textual-intertextual analysis does not appear to have been utilized for studying film nor its responses. However, scholars are being encouraged to use the approach to examine any medium which elicits secondary texts, including social media.[41] John Lynch, a professor of bioethics and rhetoric at the University of Cincinnati employed the method to examine the way *Brave New World* was rhetorically

mobilized in conversations concerning biotechnology, focusing on circulation rather than reception of the text.[42] Similarly, this paper also uses a variation of the close textual-intertextual analysis model, focusing primarily on one key scene within *Wonder Woman* (2017), which acts as synecdoche for the first film and lays the groundwork for the primary plot elements of the sequel, paying particular attention to the straightwashing of the titular character. Following the close reading of the two films, I engage critic and audience reviews of the films, considering how the comic book series and television series may have impacted those responses. I also engage how reception evolved with the release of *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* (2017).

**(Toxic) Heteronormativity: A Straightwashed Wonder Woman**

Though *Wonder Woman* (2017) contains many scenes worthy of study, the scene with Diana (Gadot) and Steve Trevor (Pine) sailing away from the island of Themyscira to the world of men functions as a synecdoche for the film. In this scene, Diana bids farewell to her mother, Hippolyta (Nielson), then embarks on her first journey away from home, with a man about whom she knows very little. During their travels, Diana and Steve begin to discuss their sleeping arrangements for the night. In their conversation, Diana is insisting Steve is welcome to sleep with her (i.e. next to her) and while Steve explains doing so is not appropriate outside of marriage:

> Diana: And what about you? Are you not sleeping? Does the average man not sleep?
> Steve: (stammering) Yes, we sleep. We just don't sleep with, uh…
> Diana: You don't sleep with women?
> Steve: No. I mean, I do sleep with…I sleep with…(chuckles) Yes I do. But, out of the, uh, confines of marriage, it's just…it's not polite to assume, you know?
> Diana: "Marriage"?
> Steve: Marriage. Do you not have that on…You go before a judge and you swear to love, honor and cherish each other until death do you part.
> Diana: And do they? Love each other till death?[43]

Though this is not the first instance the audience witnesses Diana's naivete about the world of men, the conversation is very telling about life on Themyscira. The Amazons may engage in long-term relationships with each other, but there appears to be no concept of marriage, evidenced by Diana's confusion regarding the term.

Their conversation shifts to Steve's curiosity about Diana's lack of knowledge about men, assuming she must have had a mother *and* father, despite the noticeable absence of any other man on Themyscira:

> Steve: Have you never met a man before? What about your father?
> Diana: I had no father. My mother sculpted me from clay and I was brought to life by Zeus.
> Steve: Well, that's neat. Where I come from babies are made differently.
> Diana: You refer to reproductive biology.
> Steve: Yes, yes.
> Diana: Yeah, I know. I know all about that.
> Steve: I mean, I refer to that, and other things.
> Diana: The pleasures of the flesh.
> Steve: Do you know about that?
> Diana: I've read all twelve volumes of *Clio's Treatises on Bodily Pleasure*.
> Steve: All twelve, huh? Did you bring any of those with you?
> Diana: You would not enjoy them.
> Steve: I don't know, maybe.
> Diana: No, you wouldn't.
> Steve: Why not?
> Diana: They came to the conclusion that men are essential for procreation, but when it comes to pleasure (sighs) unnecessary. [44]

This portion of the scene is also very telling regarding Diana's naivete, as well as her innocence. Based on what she does not say in her response to Steve's question when asking about her knowledge of the "pleasures of the flesh" the audience can assume Diana has never personally engaged in any physical relationship at this point in her life, though other Amazons presumably have. She has read the books written by the muse, Clio, but she says nothing about any personal knowledge she has on this matter. Another scene which extends the message of the boat scene and reiterates Diana's naivete about Steve's world and physical intimacy occurs after they have

saved the residents of a small village from complete destruction and Steve teaches Diana how to dance. In response to Steve offering to teach her how to slow dance like some the village couples, Diana states, "I would argue that they don't know how to dance."[45] This is telling because it further implies Diana has not experienced even this level of physical intimacy.

These scenes function as synecdoche for the film because they clearly demonstrate Diana's naivete about the world outside her home and positions an intimate relationship with Steve, which carries over into the sequel, despite his death at the end of the first film. Diana was raised on an island full of women, who presumably engaged in romantic relationships with one another, and she has never even seen a man, but Diana seems to have no hesitation in entering into a romantic relationship with Steve. While this does fit with the long-understood bisexuality of the Wonder Woman character within the comic books, there are no other hints that Diana has ever been interested or curious about physical intimacy, apart from her reading of Clio's treatises, though the audience cannot know if reading these texts stemmed from curiosity on the subject, if Diana was simply an avid bookworm, or if it was somehow part of her education on Themyscira, given that men are deemed "essential" for procreation in Clio's texts. The lack of clarity regarding Wonder Woman's sexuality within the film is glaringly obvious, which has been a matter of debate in the real world.

In an interview with Gal Gadot in 2016, prior to the release of the film, Brent Lang asked about Wonder Woman's sexuality, referencing Greg Rucka, the writer of the comics at that time, and his *belief* that Wonder Woman must have had relationships with women. In response, Gadot stated, "It's not something we've explored. It never came to the table, but when you talk theoretically about all the women on Themyscira and how many years she was there, then what he said makes sense. In this movie she does not experience any bisexual relationships. But it's

not about that. She's a woman who loves people for who they are. She can be bisexual. She loves people for their hearts."[46] In this statement, Gadot makes a good point that Wonder Woman's bisexuality need not be overtly explored within the film in order for the character to be bisexual and reading her as such would be logical, but something is clearly missing by not offering even a minor discussion of her sexuality within the movie.

Many critics celebrated the feminist triumphs of the first female superhero film in the DC Extended Universe. *The Guardian*'s Zoe Williams called the film a "masterpiece of subversive feminism," referencing the casting of Robin Wright as Antiope, Queen Hippolyta's warrior sister, and Diana's complaints about England's fashion as just a couple of the movie's "feminist acts."[47] The casting of Robin Wright as the strong, intelligent, and fierce warrior, Antiope, places a new association with the actress which rivals her portrayal as the mostly-helpless damsel-in-distress, Princess Buttercup from *The Princess Bride*. The reference to Diana's dismissal of the England-appropriate clothing occurs in one of the earlier scenes after Steve and Diana arrive in England, and is a reversal of the making-the-nerdy-girl-pretty trope, observed when Steve Trevor places glasses on Diana and Etta responds, "Really, specs? And suddenly she's not the most beautiful woman you've ever seen?"[48] Diana is patient and submits to their customs regarding what form of dress is appropriate but is concerned with the practicality of the clothing for her purposes of fighting Ares, saying, "How can a woman possibly fight in this?" and "It's itchy. It's choking me."[49]

Angelica Jade Bastien, a film reviewer for the Roger Ebert Company, also notes the subtleties of feminism and politics in the film: "It's seen in moments when characters of color comment on their station in life and Diana faces sexism from powerful men who doubt her intelligence."[50] Here, Bastien refers to Sameer (aka Sammy), played by Saïd Taghmaoui, telling

Diana he dreams of being an actor though it will never happen because he is "the wrong color"[51] as well as several moments throughout the movie when Diana is treated as though she has nothing meaningful to contribute because she is a woman, even by those who have witnessed what she is capable of doing. This highlights another subversively feminist component of the film: Diana's intelligence. Though she lacks practical experience regarding reproductive biology, it is worthy to note Diana has read all of *Clio's Treatises on Bodily Pleasure*. This is noteworthy in part because the mention of Clio, the Muse of History,[52] creates an association with knowledge. Diana also has been employed at the Smithsonian Institute, a place regarded as a seat of mass amounts of knowledge. Subtly, the writers let the audience know Diana is far more intelligent than the men in the film give her credit for, further proving Bastien's statements.

What these critics fail to address, as well as others, is what is missing from the film. In his review of *Wonder Woman* (2017), Anthony Gramuglia states, "The simple reality is that the Wonder Woman movies, despite featuring a canonically bisexual superhero, have been fairly heteronormative. There was a brief allusion to same-sex relationships in the first film, but nothing on-screen. This is not to say there needs to be queerness inserted into a movie about Wonder Woman for it to have merit, but rather that its absence is noticeable."[53] Additionally, a reading of the sequel as a continuation of the story and comments from director Patty Jenkins reveal this was not merely an oversight, but an intentional straightwashing of the character.

In *Wonder Woman 1984*, the audience learns Diana has not engaged in any romantic relationships since Steve's death more than sixty years prior. Then, when she wishes for his return and his consciousness takes hold in the body of another man, the audience sees Steve through Diana's eyes (i.e. as played by Chris Pine). Another actor (Kristoffer Polaha) was cast for the role of the body Steve's mind occupies, named "Handsome Man" in the cast list,[54] but he

only has brief moments of screen time. Diana expresses no concern with this strange phenomenon until the morning after they have reacquainted themselves with one another and are deciding whether or not they should simply stay in bed all day:

> Diana: Although…I should probably go and figure out how a stone brought my boyfriend back in someone else's body.
> Steve: That's a fair point. Let's go.[55]

As a continuation from the first film, Diana's relationship with Steve is a central component of the story, or *the* central component according to the franchise's director, Patty Jenkins, who stated, "This storyline was so clearly about Steve coming back, the whole story was about Steve. It's all a love story with Steve."[56] When pressed about why she did not explore an additional relationship between Diana and Barbara, honoring the heavy flirtation the characters have had in the comics,[57] Jenkins responded there simply "wasn't room for two for Diana" within the film's storyline.[58] This sentiment is a typical heteronormative approach to bisexuality and does not too faintly echo claims that bisexual individuals are "greedy," wanting more than what is appropriate for one person.[59]

The lack of overt confirmation of Wonder Woman's sexuality within the first film is not entirely unlike the conversations circling around the topic within the comics. One popular Wonder Woman catchphrase, "Suffering Sappho," was likely included by the character's creator as a way to somewhat subtly indicate her sexuality without directly using the words "bisexual," "lesbian," "gay," "queer," or "homosexual,"[60] as much of the work of Sappho of Lesbos is widely regarded to have homosexual themes.[61] The second film takes an entirely different path. Rather than simply not discussing it, the writers went to great lengths to cement Diana's heteronormative relationship with Steve, even though it meant she engaged in a sexual encounter with a man who was unable to give consent because he was not in control of his own body. The

writers noticeably leave out any discussion as to the state of the man's consciousness while Steve was in control of his body, though he does not seem to have any recollection of the phenomenon. With the release of *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*, the discussion of Wonder Woman's sexuality became more relevant for fans of the film franchise. The origins of the *Wonder Woman* comic series were clearly rooted in the polyamorous relationship between Professor Marston, his wife Elizabeth, and Olive Byrne, a graduate student who had assisted them with their scholarly work.[62] In fact, Wonder Woman herself has been said to be inspired by Elizabeth and Olive, and the biopic provided more visibility to the character's origins.[63] The movie itself included a number of images of the comic book series, which could be read as not-so-subtle reminders of just how much Professor Marston's life influenced his creation of the character.[64] Though the timing of the film's release was unplanned (per director Angela Robison), *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women* appeared onscreen within a few months of *Wonder Woman* (2017) and provided far more context to Wonder Woman's origins than the DC Extended Universe may have intended.[65]

Prior to the release of *Wonder Woman 1984*, fans began to rally together, creating a petition for the sequel to reflect Wonder Woman's true sexual orientation and providing representation to the bisexual community.[66] Citing the tie between bisexuality and origin of the character, portrayal in the comic book series, and comic writer Greg Rucka's affirmation of Wonder Woman's bisexuality in 2016, fans insisted the writers be more overt in expressing Wonder Woman's sexuality in the sequel.[67] However, the petition did not appear to move the director or writers and Jenkins's heteronormative thinking robs LGBTQ audiences of the opportunity to see themselves represented on the silver screen through a character with whom the community had identified previously. Furthermore, it diminishes the intention of Wonder

Woman's creator, Professor William Moulton Marston, to create a strong, independent, female superhero who breaks heteronormative conventions.

The comic book series communicated Wonder Woman's sexuality clearly enough that American psychiatrist Fredric Wertham was inspired to write *Seduction of the Innocent* which warned against the vulgarity of comics in general, including concerns that *Wonder Woman* specifically would lead young girls to explore lesbian fantasies.[68] By contrast, the film franchise clearly communicates Wonder Woman as a monogamous, heterosexual woman. The "Wonder Woman" television series did not include any romantic relationships for Diana Prince.[69] There is a different type of visibility at work in this depiction of the character. The television series was filmed in the 1970s, so there is a possibility that the show might not have been allowed to air if it incorporated homosexual relationships. While this might explain the lack of a female love interest, it does not address the lack of a male love interest for Diana Prince. Male characters often articulated how beautiful they found Lynda Carter's Wonder Woman, similar to Gal Gadot, but Carter's Wonder Woman "deflected the compliments (politely, always), and she never once used it to get something."[70] By comparison, Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman does use her beauty to her advantage within the first film, in order to obtain information from General Ludendorff, who she initially believes to be Ares. The heteronormativity within the television series is expressed more in what is not present (e.g. articulations of female attraction toward Diana), while the heteronormativity within the films is more toxic, not only erasing Wonder Woman's bisexuality but also replacing it with a single, male love interest, extended even beyond his death.

Despite their disappointment with the cementing of Wonder Woman as heterosexual and heteronormative, fans were pleased with even the hint of Dr. Barbara Minerva's bisexuality within *Wonder Woman 1984*. Canonically, Barbara/Cheetah is also bisexual, engaging in

flirtations with Wonder Woman and having a relationship with Etta Candy.[71] In the film, Barbara is enamored with Diana Prince and then with Max Lord: "her initial instinct when seeing Diana is to ask the Amazonian on a lunch date, awkward and flustered. She constantly compliments Diana, showers her with praise and admiration…It's clear from Kristen Wiig's acting that she is behaving with Diana the same way she was with Maxwell Lord – immediately connecting the two events."[72] For fans of the franchise, this is a small victory because Diana does not respond to Barbara's admiration and attraction with disgust, a typical reaction to bisexuality in film.[73]

**Conclusion**

This paper has highlighted the problematic practice of straightwashing, exemplified in the *Wonder Woman* film franchise. Studying this phenomenon requires evaluator to take into consideration not only what is present, but also what is not. One of the major hurdles facing the LGBTQ community is erasure. Like straightwashing, erasure is a form of toxicity because it involves the active removal of LGBTQ characters from the perception of audiences, not just in media but other environments as well. The sports industry and the military have engaged "don't ask, don't tell" policies in order to erase the conception that LGBTQ people existed within these environments,[74] but this has started to change. Achieving fair and accurate representation in the media continues to be a struggle for this community. LGBTQ characters are often killed off in television shows[75] and representation of families depicted with LGBTQ parents are often very limited.[76]

In viewing LGBTQ components as liabilities to box office sales, there is no surprise the screenwriters for the *Wonder Woman* movie franchise left out her bisexuality. One reviewer of the first film made the following assessment about Wonder Woman's introduction into the DC Extended Universe: "With most of the film's presumptive audience too young to remember TV

Wonder Woman Lynda Carter, Gadot and Jenkins have an unusually broad license to introduce the character to filmgoers, and they remain largely faithful to her comics origins while also crafting a hero who is both thoroughly internationalist and refreshingly old-school."[77] The creative license to reinvent Wonder Woman as a one-man woman is absolutely not remaining faithful to her origins and serves only to further limit visibility and representation for already underrepresented groups. There is some hope the trend of straightwashing characters will not exist in the near future. Representation for the LGBTQ community has recently become more common; the GLAAD *2021 Studio Responsibility Index* reported an increase in the percentage of LGBTQ characters in 2020 and even though there were fewer films released that year due to the COVID-19 global pandemic this is part of a recent trend.[78] Hopefully, with the continuation of the *Wonder Woman* franchise, or her appearance in other *Justice League* films, LGBTQ audiences will finally see themselves represented on screen as they have on the *Wonder Woman* comic book pages.

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# CONCLUSION

Toxic rhetoric in entertainment media is subtler than in other environments. Audiences often overlook rhetorics of toxicity within film for a number of reasons. Perhaps they do not notice how a certain phrase or scene could communicate a toxic message (e.g. flipped objectification) or they have clung to more progressive elements of the film (e.g. a female superhero). Scholars are able to identify the subtler elements of toxic rhetorics within a particular film and/or across a whole franchise through close reading, focusing on the finer details beyond general plot points. Close reading engages artifacts on a deeper level, considering casting decisions, word-choice, and setting, among other characteristics. When coupling this method with feminist criticism, concerns of ethics and equality become the primary focus. This practice is crucial because toxic rhetorics ultimately undercut whatever progressive triumphs might have been present in a film, much in the same way even a small amount of a chemical toxin can contaminate an otherwise healthy ecosystem.

*Coming to America* was a welcome change to previously underrepresented Black communities because the film's cast consisted of mainly Black actors. This trend is still quite rare, evidenced in the review of responses to the debates sparked by casting decisions for *Black Panther*, released in 2018: "Those of us who are not white have considerably more trouble not only finding representation of ourselves in mass media and other arenas of public life, but also finding representation that indicates that our humanity is multifaceted. Relating to characters onscreen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us. When it doesn't happen, we are all the poorer for it."[1] *Coming 2 America* also followed this model and made further attempts to be progressive by removing female objectification from the story and providing fierce female characters. While these

elements should be applauded, the rhetoric of toxic masculinity ultimately retained a place in the beloved franchise through the presence of flipped objectification, normalization of lack of female agency, and the treatment of male victimhood as laughable.

*Bad Moms* was also intended to take some progressive leaps, showing women are just as capable of engaging the kinds of silly and sometimes crude antics that are more typical of male characters in the comedy genre. The film highlights the struggles and pressures many mothers face, proven simply by the story's massive success among female audiences, even beyond what had been expected.[2] Additionally, the majority of the cast were women, who have also been underrepresented as the main characters within film. *Bad Moms* was supposed to be a movie to provide reassurance that all mothers feel like they are bad moms at some point or another, but the real message was that only *certain* mothers are really good mothers. Close reading reveals the rhetoric of toxic femininity within the film's narrative: only thin and attractive women can be good moms and working moms can only be good moms if they are working out of necessity and not choice. The movie also communicates that women *without* children are sad, pathetic, unfulfilled, strange, and/or immature.

The *Wonder Woman* franchise was in the unique position of having an established audience, unlike *Bad Moms* and the first *Coming to America* film. Fans of the *Wonder Woman* comics and the "Wonder Woman" television series were excited for a new variation in Wonder Woman's story and the film did not disappoint, at least in some areas. The writers did not shy away from making Diana Prince/Wonder Woman physically superior to every man in the movie, including the god Ares. The shopping trope was altered; rather than simply dressing up the character in a variety of outfits like a doll, Diana complained about the practicality and physical discomfort of the trendiest clothes offered in World War I-era London. However, these

progressive wins are also tainted with the presence of toxic rhetorics, namely straightwashing, the extreme version of heteronormativity. The erasure of Wonder Woman's bisexuality from her identity is not only expressed in the absence of an overt establishment of her sexuality within either film but also by highlighting her lack of practical experience with physical intimacy (i.e. implying she never engaged in a physical relationship with a woman during her entire life on Themyscira). Turning an icon and hero of the LGBTQ community into an immortal woman who can love only *one man*, even beyond his death, tells so many people they do not deserve to be represented.

The study and identification of toxic rhetorics within all media are critical, but especially within entertainment media. The messages communicated within the franchises discussed in this thesis are not just innocent narratives, even if the screenwriters intended them to be so. This medium so subtly influences what society deems appropriate and acceptable. After watching these films, audiences might be left misunderstanding the way consent *should* work (i.e. only "yes" from all involved parties means "yes"). They might also be no closer to comprehending the concept of agency than they were prior to consuming these stories. They certainly would have no exposure to fair and accurate representations of the LGBTQ community.

Toxic rhetorics bolster harmful stereotypes and reaffirm dangerous ideologies. Despite some evidence that may point to a more progressive world, toxic rhetorics still exist across a wide variety of environments, including everyday life. The rhetoric of toxic masculinity persists every time a person says, "don't be such a girl" or "real men don't cry." Telling a young woman she will regret not becoming a mother is a common refrain in the rhetoric of toxic femininity. Heteronormative rhetoric endures when homosexuality or bisexuality is treated as a phase or when transgender individuals are refused entry into a bathroom because the picture on the door

does not match their sex assigned at birth. These are a small handful of examples of the way toxic rhetoric has poisoned the world, but perhaps future study can uncover an antidote.

A rhetoric of empathy could be the antidote needed to begin treating rhetorics of toxicity. A topic most frequently discussed in the field of psychology, empathy is often defined as the ability to feel what others feel.[3] Communicating empathy involves an acknowledgement of suffering,[4] rather than a compounding of it as toxic rhetoric may do. Disney's most recent release, *Encanto*, is one example of how film narratives can successfully implement empathy rhetorics, incorporating discussions of self-care, self-acceptance, and forgiveness, among others. Though empathy is often praised and promoted as the cure needed to handle the world's toxicity problems, empathy rhetorics are not without their limits. Consequences of negative empathy is the most obvious, and perhaps the most challenging, obstacle empathy rhetorics would face. Negative empathy can be best understood as feeling another person's pain or suffering, and sometimes results in the empathizers trying to distance themselves from the subject of their empathy in order to lessen their own discomfort.[5] Despite its limitations, the engagement of empathy rhetorics in film is the antidote needed to cure and inoculate audiences from rhetorics of toxicity, exposing them to the struggles of their fellow human beings in a way which encourages reflection and conversation. If the implementation of rhetorics of empathy can replace those of toxicity, then perhaps films will induce empathetic behaviors, or at least self- reflection.

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## ADDENDUM

The thesis defense was a humbling and very instructive experience. During the course of the questions asked and issues raised, I am now aware of shortcomings within some areas of the individual chapters. In this addendum, my aim is to acknowledge these areas of concern. The matters raised in the thesis defense include the following: (1) conflation of masculinity with patriarchy; (2) lack of symmetry; and (3) incomplete explanation of heteronormativity.

My primary method of analysis throughout these chapters was close reading using a lens of feminist criticism. In my discussions of hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity, I could have better explained that these are results of patriarchal ideology. The hierarchy of the masculine over the feminine is a foundational concept of patriarchal systems. Hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity take this a step further and insert hierarchal systems within masculine groups as well. Because patriarchal ideology places the masculine in a superior position to the feminine, it is important to acknowledge that the various waves of the feminist movement have not existed outside of patriarchal ideology, as the oppression of women occurs as part of patriarchal systems.

Another limitation of my thesis was a lack of symmetry in my discussions of binary gender constructions. I clearly stated how toxic masculinity impacts men and women, but not how toxic femininity impacts both groups. I also did not discuss fatherhood and paternity, even though these are important concepts to consider alongside motherhood and maternity. The second chapter of this thesis focused mainly on the relationship between toxic femininity and motherhood. One of the key elements in this discussion is the lack of paternal involvement. For example, I included conversations in the research centering on what makes a *real* mother, but I did not explore what makes a *real* father. I also did not comment on the gendered discussions of

parenthood and how the term is often used synonymously with motherhood. My answers during the defense addressed some of these concerns and I have thought about many of these ideas. However, the analysis of these artifacts could have been stronger with more time to work on them.

In the final chapter of this thesis, I discuss heteronormativity as it relates to the LGBTQ community and the practice of straightwashing, but I do not bring up issues of masculinity and femininity. Heteronormativity relies on these binaries, placing specific expectations for roles and behaviors on men and women. One key flaw in this chapter was the lack of acknowledgement of Wonder Woman as the perfect woman, including the pedestalization of her virginal characteristics. As with the second chapter, I also could have discussed the role of Maxwell Lord as a father and how heteronormativity relates to parental expectations, though I did acknowledge this in some of the answers during my thesis defense.