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Avengers Assemble...In Therapy: An Exploration of Superheroes and their Trauma

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Avengers Assemble...In Therapy: An Exploration of Superheroes and their Trauma



**Megan Rose Butler
Senior Capstone
Division of Humanities and Communication
Fall 2016**

Avengers Assemble...In Therapy: An Exploration of Superheroes and their Trauma



"Marvel Universe Png." *Superhero Wiki Fandom*. Wikia, n.d. Web. 28 Nov. 2016.

Megan Rose Butler
Senior Capstone: Research Essay
Pre-Law Concentration
Professor Ernest Stromberg
Division of Humanities and Communication
Fall 2016

**If you think superheroes handle their trauma on their own, they don't.
Every Batman has an Alfred.**

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HCOM 475: SENIOR CAPSTONE PROPOSAL ESSAY OPTION

1. My name is Megan R. Butler and I am a Human Communication Major with a Concentration in Pre -Law.

2. The question I will be addressing is as follows; How do Comic Book Superheroes reflect the trauma experienced in our society? I chose this question because most superheroes come from a background of trauma and this trauma tends to always occur before becoming the superhero themselves. I wanted to analyze how these characters and their stories reflect incidents that happen within our society and how becoming a “superhero” is used as a coping mechanism.

3. Superheroes become superheroes usually after a traumatic event occurs in their life. Their “recovery” generally involves the person becoming a superhero or supervillain.

4. Through my project I hope to explore the history of comic books and superheroes and show how our society relates to superheroes based on this shared theme of personal trauma. I also want to show how superheroes may help individuals who experience trauma heal.

5. Working Titles:

- a. Superheroes Need Healing Too
- b. Who’s Going to Save the Hero?
- c. Avengers Assemble....in Therapy
- d. This Week the Flash Takes On Trauma; Who Will Win?

6. Superheroes are described as individuals with special abilities, or special skills, who use these skills to protect the world and the people in it from harm. But who protects them? In most comic book story, our heroes were not heroes from the beginning. A tragic event occurred in their life prior to obtaining their special skills or super abilities. Before becoming The Flash, Barry Allen lost his mother. Before becoming Batman, Bruce Wayne witnessed the murder of both his mother and father. Superman, although he already has super abilities, lost his home planet before landing on earth. We don’t read often in comic books scenes of The Hulk or The Green Arrow taking time to seek counseling for the circumstances of their lives. How do superheroes cope with the tragedies in their lives? How do we as readers interpret this in our own lives?

7. I have collect thus far, four books from the CSUMB library regarding my topic. I will also reference comic books turned into movies for my project so I will watch these adaptations as well to tie them in with my theme.

8. For my projects the next steps I will be taking include the following:

- a. Researching the origin of superheroes in comic books.
- b. Identifying massive events within the comic book world and relate them to points within our own history.

9. Timeline:

Final Senior Project Proposals	Thursday, September 22nd
Half of Paper Draft Complete	Tuesday, October 4th
Project Titles and Abstract or Summary	Thursday, October 6th
Festival Donations Due	Thursday, October 13th
Essay Drafts (have full draft of paper complete)	Tuesday, October 25th
Progress Reports internships, creative projects	Tuesday, October 25th
Resume/CV for Professional Development Plan	Tuesday, November 1st
Begin Visual Representation of Research Paper	Tuesday, November 1st
Progress Reports internships, creative projects	Tuesday, November 15th
Final Bound Portfolios	Thursday, December 8th
Festival Rehearsals	Monday, December 12th
Capstone Festival	Friday, December 16th

INTRODUCTION

In his book, “On the Origin of Superheroes: From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1”, Chris Gavalier said, “Superheroes, like most any pop culture production, reflect a lot about us. And since superheroes have been flying for decades, they document our evolution too,” (Gavalier). Superheroes have been around for our world’s most tragic events. As our society has evolved, so too have the stories within these comics and films. Each story reflecting not only superheroes with incredible abilities, but also individuals and groups with unimaginable masses of trauma. How do these superheroes reflect the individual and societal traumas many experience every day? Do superheroes aid in the healing process of trauma? These are two questions I look to answer while analyzing the films and story lines of *X-Men*, *X-Men 2: X-Men United*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man* as my case studies. By understanding these answers, one may critically analyze superheroes in film as not only a helpful tool in healing from trauma, but also an aid in finding their own superpower.

First, I would like to define what it means to be a superhero. Chuck Tate in his study, “*An Appetite for Destruction: Aggression and the Batman*,” identified superheroes as, “a character who everyone believed is trying to do some good, has a moral capacity (irrespective of the ethical choices made), and who is viewed as a hero,” (Rosenberg). For my research specifically, although there is much to discuss about villains and the traumas they suffer, I will focus solely on the characters of whom are considered “superheroes” per the definition above. Beginning with our diverse team of mutants.

XAVIER'S SCHOOL FOR GIFTED YOUNGSTERS

In Marvel's 2000 release of *X-Men*, the film follows a plot line derived from this idea of othering, and the consequences that arise from it. Othering, although there are varying definitions, is defined by Lois Weis as "that process which serves to mark and name those thought to be different from oneself" (Canales). For this first X-Men film, the movie begins in Poland, the year is 1944. Wicked storm clouds shower hundreds of people whom are being herded between two tall barbed-wired-fences, lined with soldiers carrying guns and batons. Here we watch as Young Magneto (Brett Morris), just a boy, strides in fear with his mother and father. Along the outside of one fence, a sickly man is forced to shovel away and bury the dead, bury the ones who are just like him. The ones Nazi Germany feared as "The Others". Young Magneto is split from his parents, never to see them again, and the scene ends.

Two scenes later, it is present day America, and Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) has finished giving a speech about the mutation of DNA and cells in a body at the United States capitol building. As she is finishing her lecture, Senator Kelly (Bruce Davison) interrupts, "Thank you Ms. Grey, it was quite educational, however, it fails to address the issue that is the focus of this hearing. Three words. Are. Mutants. Dangerous?" Within these early scenes of the movie, we hear a News Anchor refer to the "issue" as the "Mutant phenomenon," and witness hordes of Senator Kelly supporters. All of whom are holding signs that read "Senator Kelly-Takes Aim Against Mutants". "Send the Mutants to the Moon Forever", "Freaks of Nature", "Hang Mutants", "Earth is for Humans", and "Mutants are Dangerous, Protect Our Children." By the end of this scene Senator Kelly tells a disguised Mystique (Rebecca Romijn), "These mutants,

people like this Jean Grey- if it were up to me I'd lock them all away. It's a war. It's the reason people like me exist." Mystique, now revealed, counteracts, "People like you, are the reason I was afraid to go to school as a child."

This scene described above is all too familiar to many, both in the United States and around the world. Homosexuality, The Holocaust, Slavery, are all examples of how discrimination, segregation, and othering has hurt and divided our nation and many more, century after century. It is this behavior that forces those who identify as an "other", to hide their identities. To be someone else. Othering acts as a form of hate speech, of verbal aggression that denigrates people on the basis of cultural difference, including race (Orbe). Othering is also a form of abuse that can lead to traumatic responses and off-put behavior from victims. As Magneto later says, "Mankind has always feared what they don't understand." One Supreme Court case is an example of this.

On June 26th, 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a revolutionary decision in the case *Obergefell v. Hodges*. The decision was a 5-4 majority ruling stating same-sex marriage was a constitutional right. While many in America were filled with joyous tears and ready to celebrate, others who opposed the idea of same-sex marriage filled with disgust. Leading up to the decision of the court, many protested against the hearing. Painting a picture similar to the one in the *X-Men* scene described previously. Protesters held signs that read, "Love is between a Man and a Woman", "Homosexuals are possessed by Demons", "Homos are Sinners", "God Hates You", and many more signs with expressions of disapproval. It is this kind of speech that cause so many to fear being themselves and would rather hide their true feeling. Hide their identity because it is more convenient to others. In the *X-Men* film, Professor X (Patrick Stewart), stated, "Anonymity is a mutant's first defense against the world's hostility." It is a true

feeling for anyone who feels othered, and this sense of fear also, “calls into question basic human relationships by breaching the attachments of family, friendship, love, and community” (Herman).

In her book “*Trauma and Recovery*”, Judith Herman writes about disconnection and the impact it has on trauma victims. For, someone who is othered, whether it be physical or psychological abuse, disconnection is detrimental to their relationships both present and future.

“A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self, Trauma Forces the survivor to relive all her earlier struggles over autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy” (Herman).

Similarly to how Wolverine interacts with the other X-Men in the film, someone who experiences disconnection after trauma, conflicts to trust people or share any intimate or emotional connection for a fear of recurring trauma. This feeling of recurring trauma may arise simply because the victim does not feel as though their voice will be heard, or the event that caused/is causing the trauma will appear as minor to a bystander. By “bystander” I am referring to the person who either witnessed the traumatic event, or heard of the event, whether through the victim themselves, the perpetrator, or another bystander.

In the 2003 release of the second feature film of the X-Men series, *X-Men 2: X-Men United*, we find our extraordinary team of mutants fighting again for acceptance in a world that is unable to see their value. Colonel William Stryker (Brian Cox) is a military scientist whose son possesses mutant abilities. When his son, Jason (Michael Reid Mackay) returned home after spending a year away at Xavier’s School for Gifted Children, still possessing mutant abilities, Striker vowed to destroy anyone who was a mutant. First he hints at trying to develop his own

method of what one may consider “conversion therapy”, therapy undergone to try and convert someone who identifies as transgender, homo-, or bi-sexual to heterosexual. In the movie this idea is applied to the mutants. After failing to successfully rid his son of the mutant gene, Stryker decides to use his son’s abilities as part of a super weapon that would rid all of the mutants on earth. Jumping from conversion therapy to mass genocide, a trauma experienced in World War II during the Holocaust and mass killings of Jewish persons. At this point Stryker no longer even refers to the sickly-appearing Jason as his son, but instead as “Mutant 143,” stating to Professor X, “My son is dead, just like the rest of you,” again referring to his plan of mass genocide.

Additional scenes from this superhero sequel reflect the reactions of persons when someone they love tries to “come out” to them, and reveal their “hidden” identity. Allow me to lay this scene out for you. Bobby (Shawn Ashmore), also known as Iceman, brought Wolverine (Hugh Jackman), Rogue (Anna Paquin), and Pyro (Aaron Stanford) to his house in Boston to utilize as a safe haven. When they arrive at his house nobody’s home (in a previous scene Bobby mentions to Wolverine that his parents do not know he is a mutant, and they think he is attending a prep school). When unexpectedly Bobby’s parents and little brother arrive at the house, Bobby decides it is time to tell his family the truth. They all are sitting down together now in the living room, Bobby has just told them he is a mutant, and this is the response that follows:

Bobby’s Mom (Jill Teed): “So uh-when did you first know you were a- (the mother stops herself from saying the word, hesitate, the look of affliction across her face).

Pyro: (Finishing her sentence, begrudgingly) “A mutant?”

Bobby’s Dad (Alf Humphreys): Speaking to Rogue- “You have to understand, we thought Bobby was going to a school for the gifted.”

Rogue: “Bobby *is* gifted.”

Bobby's Dad: "We know that. We just didn't realize he was-"

Bobby's Mom: "We still love you, Bobby. It's just this mutant problem is a little-"

Wolverine: "What mutant problem?"

Bobby's Mom: "Complicated."

With everyone still sitting around the living room, Bobby's Mother ask, "Bobby, have you tried *not* being a mutant?"

Now reread that scene again, but every time you read the word "mutant", replace it with "black" or "Jewish" or "blonde" or any other word reflective to an identity. Words that have been given their own classification due to stereotyping, hate, or denial of acceptance from persons who do not identify with those traits. It is not being the mutant that is the trauma. It's the negative reactions from others when learning the person is a mutant that causes someone like Bobby, someone who is othered, to feel betrayed, act irrationally, fall into depression, lose trust, and suffer severe emotional severance.

Trauma such as this, when reflected with mass groups of people, is related to societal trauma. Societal trauma is experienced everyday by many because of their skin color, sexual orientation, or religion, to name a few factors. The X-Men are made up of just a small number of mutants on the planet, but all together, these mutants are victims of societal trauma. Examples of societal trauma include victims of the Holocaust and members of the African American community who are constantly targets of police brutality and micro aggressions. Today still, although laws have been passed to promote safety, racism and generational trauma haunt members of these communities for fear of abuse, mistreatment, and torture. Natan Kellermann wrote in the article, "*Transmission of Holocaust Trauma*," of the many factors that cause children of Holocaust survivors to experience trauma of their own in relation to the parents

experience in the Holocaust, even though they themselves were not there. These factors included four theories such as; psycho-dynamic, sociocultural, the family system, and biological points of view. Through the analysis of these theories, Natan noted the difference between some children who coped better with their parents trauma compared to some others was due to the children being “exposed to fairly open discussion of parents’ camp experiences in “non-frightening ways”, (Kellermann). Having an open dialogue when discussing traumatic experiences is one method of effective healing, because allowing a person to talk about their experiences and be heard, builds trust and builds relationships. Whereas, when a trauma victim doesn’t feel as though they are taken seriously, they begin to enter that realm of disconnection.

This is crucial when considering societal trauma in groups like the X-Men. One of the reasons the X-Men work so well as a group is because they have each other to talk to, and all understand where each of them are coming from. As we see in both X-Men films, Professor Xavier works diligently to aid Wolverine in his healing process by providing him a way to understand where he comes from. Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters builds up a community of people who are constantly being oppressed by society. This community is then able to lift each other up. But how do we stop the oppression occurring through societal trauma? To decrease the amount of widespread fear faced by some in our world, we as a whole need to listen, open-mindedly and whole-heartedly to those who are encompassed by this fear.

THE BAT AND THE SPIDER

Collectively the X-Men are a symbol for traumas largely experienced by groups of people in the world. Trauma, however, is also experienced on an individual level. Individual traumas endured by superheroes in two of our most popular of comics and movies may easily relate to personal traumas experienced in one's life. The characters further display how to turn their traumatic incidents into healing.

Growing up the most influential figures in a person's life are their parents, or the person(s) raising the child. From birth, parents are the sole providers of care for their children. In extreme cases the parent role is fulfilled by a relative, a friend, or even a foster family. The characters of Peter Parker (Spider-Man) and Bruce Wayne (Batman) are ones developed through the trauma of losing their parents. To represent the character of Peter Parker as Spider-Man I am using the 2012 film *The Amazing Spider-Man*, directed by Marc Webb, and to analyze the character of Bruce Wayne as Batman I am referencing the 2005 film *Batman Begins*, directed by Christopher Nolan. Before I go on to connect how the individual traumas experienced by Peter Parker and Bruce Wayne relate to personal trauma and healing, I first shall illustrate the traumatic scenes that occur to both characters in their respective films.

Opening *The Amazing Spider-Man*, we find a Young Peter Parker (Max Charles) circulating around the house, searching for his father in a game of hide and seek. Until, however, the game leads to Peter finding his father's office completely broken into and torn apart. This incident is what prompted the arrangement requiring Peter Parker to live with his Aunt May (Sally Field) and Uncle Ben (Martin Sheen). Without any explanation from his parents, Peter, is abandoned. Parker's life is instantly flipped upside down. It should come to no surprise then for

Peter to grow up, socially awkward, without close friends, and being bullied at school by a boy who goes by the name “Flash” (Chris Zylka). Now in high school, still struggling to accept the disappearance of his parents, Parker is faced with another atrocity as his Uncle Ben is shot and killed by a man whom Peter unknowingly had a chance to stop, just moments before the murder occurred. Angry and confused, Peter Parker uses his Spider-Man identity to search for the man responsible with for his Uncle’s death.

Similarly, as a child, Young Bruce Wayne (Gus Lewis) watches as both his mother and father are shot down in front of him by a mugger after leaving the opera. Young Batman is left in the care of the Wayne Family Butler, Alfred (Michael Caine). As he grows up, we find him still struggling to understand why it was his parents were taken away from him. Continually dropping out of different colleges, bent up with anger and rage, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) distances himself from others, He is alone and still seeking answers. Bruce even contemplated seeking his own revenge on the man who murdered his parents.

The traumatic events experienced by both Peter Parker and Bruce Wayne when they are children began the development of attachment issues and the feeling of abandonment. This excerpt from *The Positive Psychology of Superheroes* suggest how this affects the personal relationships our heroes have:

“The second psychological perspective in personal relationships is provided by attachment theory, which emphasizes the feelings that bind people together and traces them to the initial attachment between infant and mother. Securely attached infants become securely attached adults and capable of reciprocal relationships. Those without a history of secure attachment are socially challenged throughout life. In this area

superheroes appear no different than real people. Consider how many superheroes were orphans or victims of early neglect and abuse” (Rosenberg).

Spider-Man and Batman are two characters representing a deep emotional trauma experienced by individuals who have had to deal with losing their parents, friends, and loved one’s. Some of whom became orphans, lost in the foster system on top of struggling to deal with their loss.

Both of these characters first deal with their trauma through anger. Spider-Man may be pulling criminals off the street but he is only going after the criminals who look like the man who killed his Uncle Ben. Bruce Wayne returned to Gotham on the day of his parents’ murder trial with the intent to kill the man responsible after the hearing. Neither of these actions, or potential actions, helped to ease the pain of their losses. Both of our heroes were coming from a place of anger, they continued to shut out the people who were trying to help them.

For Spider-Man, this realization that he could be better, do better, came after a family dinner at Gwen Stacy’s house where Peter and Captain Stacy got into a heated conversation about whether or not Spider-Man was a hero. Captain Stacy pointed out Spider-Man’s obvious vendetta since he was only going after criminals who all looked the same. Following this dinner conversation, Spider-Man responded to an attack on the bridge where he ended up saving the life of innocent civilians. Including a little boy by the name of Jack. Finally Peter realized his true purpose and true potential as Spider-Man.

After finding his way to the League of Shadows, Bruce Wayne’s realization of his potential formed when he is asked to take the life of a criminal. Bruce refuses to take the man’s life stating that even if the man committed a crime, the punishment should be left up to the criminal justice system. Following this right of justice and due process of the law. Bruce Wayne

concludes to say that killing the man would make him no better than the criminals he wants to stop.

These characters show the importance of finding yourself after a traumatic event. They all show that it is not easy, and that healing takes time. By analyzing Batman and Spider-Man, we can teach others who are experiencing trauma that it is okay to feel anger, it is okay to feel sadness, as long as these feelings don't become you. "With great power, comes great responsibility," that is a quote extremely famous to the Spider-Man saga, and there is no reason to doubt why. Batman and Spider-Man were presented with means of power. How they chose to use this power is what truly defined them. Instead of letting the trauma of what occurred to consume them, both our heroes found greater purpose is helping others to heal.

WHY DO SUPERHEROES HELP SURVIVORS OF TRAUMA?

Other than the fact superheroes possess incredible abilities and character traits, what makes the world of Marvel, DC, and all other superhero universes popular? They provide an escape for people to give in to. Each superhero, and supervillain, encountered in comic books and movies come from similar story lines. To become a superhero, one must face a serious trauma, a setback in their life. The character then is gifted with a choice of how they use their trauma, their pain, their suffering. Whether the character is presented with power of speed like The Flash, or creates his own power with the means already in front of him like Batman, both villains and heroes are victims of traumatic events. This is why people are attracted to this genre. This is why people are attracted to superheroes.

Superman is an all-powerful, bullet proof titan but that's not why we are drawn to him. He lost his entire planet, his home, he was orphaned, and raised to hide his identity, trying and figure out who he is on his own. If Superman were always happy, raised by his super parents, never got hurt, and had all the power in the world would you still admire him? If he was "perfect" or unstoppable? The tragedies our beloved heroes face are what makes them relatable. The emotions they express remind readers and viewers that in power there is also weakness and it's okay to have vulnerabilities. Because of this, I suggest that the world of superheroes, like those in the films I described above, help those going through traumatic events to heal, or at least escape.

Spider-Man was gifted with his super spider abilities that allow him to do incredible acts, such as scaling the sides of buildings. These abilities did not heal his pain, but it did lessen it. Even with his powers we still see his vulnerabilities, he still feels anger, still feels sadness, and he has been selfish. With the X-Men, their powers were seen not as gifts, but as deformities. In each case, the powers possessed by the superheroes were not met with eternal happiness, but merely provided them with a way to cope and begin to heal from their traumas by helping people in need. They also learned about what it means to be a part of a community of people who understand and respect them. Superheroes teach us that to begin healing, one must *want* to heal and that it is okay for that healing to take time. It is okay to be vulnerable. In fact, vulnerability is a strength.

In *Batman Begins*, Bruce Wayne trains with the League of Shadows. When doing so Ra's Al Ghul physically and mentally breaks Bruce Wayne down. Helps him to acknowledge and accept the death of his parents, to understand his weaknesses, and to understand his greater purpose. He wasn't born a hero, and some still don't acknowledge whether his methods are

heroic or not as Batman. Even so, as described earlier, our heroes are heroes because they believe in morality. They are heroes because they stand up for those who are also experiencing trauma. To an audience, they are our conscience. In their essay, *The Positive Psychology of Superheroes*, Christopher Peterson and Nansook Park wrote, “The extraordinary powers of superheroes are of course interesting and compelling to readers, but we believe that the real appeal of superheroes stems from their moral qualities as opposed to their talents” (Rosenberg). These characters fight through the traumas that countless others experience in their lifetimes. From Holocaust survivors like Magneto, to sexual assault and abuse victims, like Harley Quinn.

Whether I am watching *The Avengers*, *The Flash*, *Batman*, or *Superman*, the result is all the same. There is a moment in each of them where I *feel* something inside of me. A calling to do better, and to be better. An understanding that no matter what I am going through, or what I am facing, there is more to me and more to my story. Superheroes (and villains) teach us that trauma is an experience that will affect us, but how it shapes us depends on the self. Earlier I began to describe this scene in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Peter Parker and Captain Stacy get into a discussion of whether Spider-Man was a hero, to which Stacy replies, “I wear a badge, this guy wears a mask like an outlaw. He is hunting down a bunch of criminals that all look the same like he’s got some personal vendetta, but he’s not protecting innocent people Mr. Parker.” It was true, Parker was getting criminals off the street, but only in search for the man who killed his uncle. It was this conversation that led Parker to the realization that just because he had the powers, it was what he did with them that defined him. This theme of power and responsibility is common in these superhero films. The character of Rachel Dawes (Katie Holmes) in *Batman Begins*, makes a similar comment to Bruce Wayne:

Bruce: Rachel, all of, all this,,, It’s... It’s not me. It’s.. Inside, I am...I am more.

Rachel: Bruce. Deep down you may still be that same great kid you used to be. But it's not who you are underneath...it's what you do that defines you.

How we handle our trauma, how we dig deep, that is how we are defined. It isn't the trauma itself that changes a person, it's the healing. Although Batman and Spider-Man are famous for their abilities as heroes, their alter egos and their secret identities, are the pieces that seal our attraction to them. "It is in this role that the superhero experiences everyday pleasures, goes to school, holds a job, has friends, and participates as an ordinary member of the larger society" (Rosenberg). It is the person behind the mask, behind the armor, the shield, that keeps our heroes grounded, personable, relatable, and human.

THE POWER TO HEAL: EVERYDAY SUPERHEROES

As discussed earlier, superheroes are defined by their actions in result to trauma. Within our society our everyday superheroes may not wear capes, or run around in spandex, but because of their actions, are indeed heroes. A victim to sexual assault may choose to go on and work at a rape crisis center, someone who was a victim of a crime might go on to work as a peace officer. Career choices and pathways, if not influenced by the traumatic event itself, may be influenced by the people who supported the victim afterwards. When a teacher or professor, for example, notices a change in one of their students and reaches out to them in support, they could positively impact the state of mind of that student. Which in turn may encourage them to pursue a path as a mentor to others to provide the same support they received when they needed it. Another example would be survivors of suicide who pursue pathways as counselors or work at prevention centers.

These individuals are vital members in our society. Not only do they understand and are able to empathize with trauma victims, they promote healing in a way that people who have not experienced the same trauma cannot encourage. When I was in high school, I was sexually assaulted and fell into depression. It was extremely difficult to tell anybody about what happened because I had no one around me who could truly empathize. No one understood the severity of the damage I felt had been done to my self-confidence and the way I looked at myself in the mirror. Judith Herman talks about a relationship between a victim, the perpetrator, and the bystander in her book, and touches on how more bystander's will gravitate toward the story of the perpetrator rather than the victim because for one, "it is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict," (Herman). Two:

"All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering," (Herman).

This is why it is so incredibly important that victims of trauma go on to become agents of healing. *Superheroes* of healing. The best help I ever received was from a friend I made in college who had been abused by a significant other. She understood how I was feeling and was able to be there for me emotionally, in a way no one else was able to. Now she is a teacher, and I could not imagine a better career for her because she is in a place where she will continually be able to shape the lives of her students and help them when they need it most.

GRAB YOUR CAPE

What do Batman, Spider-Man, and the various characters of the X-Men have in common? Their traumas and their healing, struggling as ordinary people do. Their stories are only captivating to their audience because their traumas are relatable.

Thinking about trauma, superheroes may not be what first comes to mind. As long as I can remember I have always felt a strong attraction to these characters, realizing now that it wasn't just their super abilities that draw me near. I connected because I empathized. While the fantasy of having superhero powers is fun and appealing, encouraging my imagination, the tragedies reminded me that I am not alone no matter what trauma I may go through or have gone through.

No matter what film or comic book you are diving into, I bet that within the story, one will find a deeper connection to trauma and to healing, than ever thought before. By using superheroes as an example I believe we can teach people who are struggling with trauma that even the greatest heroes come from stories of tragedy. If we build upon this, we can incorporate a play strategy in therapy that involves victims imagining they themselves are superheroes. What “superpower” can emerge from this? This theory can also provide that there be more of a focus on what happens *after* the trauma occurs so that the victim may begin to believe in a greater purpose. Again, this greater purpose being how the victim can give back to others who may experience the same trauma themselves. No matter what the trauma, I hope everyone learns that there are communities filled with people who understand and can help in the healing process. Now grab your cape, find your team, and become the superhero you were meant to be.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Batman Begins. Dir. Christopher Nolan. Perf. Christian Bale, Michael Caine. Warner Brothers, 2005. DVD.

*See annotation below

Canales, MK. "Othering: Toward An Understanding Of Difference." *Advances In Nursing Science* 22.4 (2000): 16-31. *CINAHL Plus with Full Text*. Web. 5 Dec. 2016.

Although this source specifically talked about “othering” in the context of nursing, I was able to incorporate its themes of othering and it’s definition into my own research paper. This source helped me to tie into my capstone the idea of othering, what othering is, and allowed me to connect it when speaking about the X-Men and the traumas experienced by persons who are othered.

Gavaler, Chris. *On the Origin of Superheroes : From the Big Bang to Action Comics No. 1*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015.

Chris Gavaler is a professor who studies and teaches about superheroes and their beginning to their evolution of what they have become today. I used this text to gain a little background knowledge on the origin of superheroes. This text also helped me to select which superheroes I was going to use as my focus and case studies.

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: BasicBooks, 1997.

In her book, which was also our course text, Judith Herman discussing the effects of trauma, different types of abuse, and the healing process needed to help a victim of trauma. This text was a huge influence to the shaping of my research essay. Specifically the chapters of; Disconnection, Captivity, A Healing Relationship, Safety, and Reconnection.

"Marvel Universe Png." *Superhero Wiki Fandom*. Wikia, n.d. Web. 28 Nov. 2016.

This website provided me with the graphics used on my capstone presentation poster. It also acts as a resource for superhero timelines and such. My primary and only use of this site, however, were for the graphics displayed on my capstone poster.

Orbe, Mark, and Tina Harris. *Interracial Communication: Theory into Practice*. Los Angeles: SAGE, 2015. Page 322.

The importance of this text lied within its usefulness of definitions. I used this text primarily to define certain concepts such as “hate speech.” I came across this text as it is my current course textbook for my class of interracial communication. This text discusses a great deal about the importance of interracial communication and how historical events have shaped the way we communicate today.

Rosenberg, Robin S., and Canzoneri, Jennifer. *Psychology of Popular Culture: The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*. Dallas, US: Smart Pop, 2008. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 25 October 2016.

This text was super helpful in crafting my research essay. This text combines multiple essays from multiple authors, all of which focus on a different aspect of superhero theory. These different perspectives allowed me to provide alternate views and ideas on my topic. I benefited from this source immensely.

Ruben, Lawrence C., *Using Superheroes in Counseling and Play Therapy*. New York: Springer, 2007.

This text provided an additional viewpoint into how to incorporate superheroes with trauma. It focuses on children and how to use superheroes as a means of play therapy.

The Amazing Spider-Man. Dir. Marc Webb. By James Vanderbilt and Alvin Sargent. Perf. Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone. Columbia Pictures, Marvel Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

*See annotation below

X-Men. Dir. Bryan Singer. By Tom DeSanto. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Marvel Enterprises, 2000. DVD.

*See annotation below

X-Men 2. Dir. Bryan Singer. By Zack Penn. Perf. Patrick Stewart, Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen. Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation and Marvel Enterprises, 2003. DVD.

*The four films cited above; *X-Men*, *X-Men 2*, *Batman Begins*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man* were used as my four case studies for my capstone. I used these films to analyze the characters of the *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, and *Batman*, and tied their stories (as portrayed in the films) to connect the theme of trauma.

FINAL SYNTHESIS ESSAY

I come from a family of first responders and cancer survivors, members of my family have endured depression, divorce, epilepsy, suicide, sexual abuse and more. So when I first looked into which capstone theme I wanted to dive into for this semester, "Trauma and Healing" immediately caught my attention. This idea of trauma and healing has always been a topic rooted into my background, and is why I chose this theme to engage in this semester (Fall 2016). Although there are many topics within this theme I could have expanded on as the focus of my capstone, I didn't want my project to be typical of what you would think when you think of trauma. I knew most of the other students in my class would be covering sensitive and intense topics, so I decided I would focus on superheroes.

Throughout my 21-years of life, I have always been fascinated with superheroes and all their incredible abilities. I would watch Teen Titans, collect action figures, play superhero related video games, and parade around my house with my toys making fictional action hero noises. Superheroes expanded my imagination. They provided me an escape to which I would spend countless hours daydreaming. It wasn't until I embarked on my capstone journey that I realized why this was. Superheroes taught me that all I needed to get through whatever it was I was going through was finding *my* superpower. Sure, when I was little, I really meant *superpowers!* Now that I am older I know my superpower isn't going to come from lightening, spider bites, or chemical waste. That it is, "not the gift of life that defines you, but what you do with it that makes you who you are." My superpower comes from what I do after experiencing the traumas I have faced. How I use those wounds to heal myself and heal others. For me, this is through service.

I wasn't entirely sure until now how my project connected to my concentration of Pre Law. After I graduate from Cal State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB), I want to go into a career that allows me to provide service to other. Allows me to be the superhero other people need in their lives. Because, I have experienced trauma, and from it I have built empathy,

compassion, and a belief that anybody can get through their experiences as long as they have someone there who will listen to them, someone who believes in them. I want to go to law school so I can stick up for those who may have lost their voice. I want to fight for human rights, and those who may have been mistreated due to their identity. Our identity, just as it is to any superhero, is extremely valuable. It is what makes us human, what leads us to be passionate.

I believe that some people look at superheroes as just another medium for fantasy. I wanted to show through my capstone project that superheroes *are* us. They reflect the societal and individual traumas experienced by many in the world. They show us the power of community, the problems with revenge, and the importance of acceptance. Overall, I want people to read my capstone and from then on view superheroes under a new light. I want people to question the underlying message of these stories and see that, although this is thought to be fictional, there is truth in that the most powerful people (superheroes), can experience trauma.

Despite my use of superheroes for my capstone project, I admit emotionally, our capstone seminar focused on harrowing topics related to trauma. The majority of the seminar we read various articles and chapters of books that centered on topics such as; PTSD, sexual assault, rape, the Holocaust, generational trauma, child abuse, and trauma linked to identity. As you can imagine, these are not topics to be taken lightly. Going into a class focused on trauma and healing, you never know who in their life may have experienced one of the aforementioned traumas we were going to be discussing. With that being said, I could not have asked for more compassionate classmates to have engaged in these topics with. At first, yes, it felt as though we were walking on eggshells. As the class developed, however, more and more people were able to participate in discussions that were rather difficult to talk about. These same discussions, many of which are reflected in the works of my colleagues. I remember one class in particular where I myself, could not push through the pain of one of the topics being discussed and I had to step out of class. Although slightly embarrassed, I was met with

reassuring looks upon my return to the discussion, and concerned classmates let me know they were there for me if I needed to talk. These are the types of classroom environments I wish all could experience. Knowing that I was in a safe place, a place where everyone understood each other, just solidified I had chosen the right capstone theme for me.

Next semester, spring 2016, will be my final venture at CSUMB, and I am thrilled to be going into it with the knowledge I have gained from my capstone seminar and project. Capstone has taken everything I have learned from the Human Communication Major and neatly tied it all together. The importance of effective and cooperative communication will always be at the forefront of my mind. With the help my classmates and the feedback they have provided me, I hope I have constructed a final project that fulfills expectations. I hope others read my paper and from it, view superheroes as an outlet for healing, and use them in lessons in how they reflect the trauma experienced in our world. Most importantly of all, I hope anyone going through a traumatic experience is able to find their starting point in the healing process. I hope you are able to grab a cape, and find your own superpower. Because again, it is not the experiences that define you, but how you learn from them, and how you choose to help others, that is your defining quality. You are your own superhero.

Megan R. Butler

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EDUCATION

California State University Monterey Bay, Seaside, CA 93955

B.A. Human Communications, Concentration in Pre Law

Expected Award Date: May 2017

Cumulative GPA 3.626

WORK EXPERIENCE

Assistant Manager, Santa Rosa Entertainment Group Theatres, April 2013-Current

- Maintain a clean and safe working environment
- Handle concession items behind counter
- Supervise Employees
- Manage finance reports and company paperwork
- Maintain communication with SR Entertainment
- Conduct in customer service with over 200 customers daily.

Student Assistant to the Area 1 Community Director at CSU Monterey Bay, August 2015- May 2016

- Manage the Area 1 Programming Budget
- Take minutes at all staff meetings
- Assist Resident Advisors in Area 1
- Check RA bulletin boards
- Evaluate the condition of fire extinguishers
- Assist A1 Community Director with tasks and special projects.
- Student Assistant of the Month, October 2015

East Campus and Main Student Assistant, September 2014- August 2015, May 2016- August 2016

- Assist in housing Check-ins/Check-outs
- Maintain and organize student housing roster
- Organize student housing records
- Knowledgeable with East Campus operations
- Address student concerns
- Promptly finish special projects and assignments

INTERNSHIPS

Mill Valley Film Festival June 2014-October 2014

Researched prospective International films to be showcased in the festival. Communicated directly with film directors from various countries around the world. Created detailed spreadsheets (one for each country) that featured all the prospective films we were considering that included all the information regarding that film. Personal assistant to Senior Programmer Karen Davis.

Legal Assistant at the Biegel Law Firm August 2016-September 2016

Answered phone calls from prospective clients seeking legal counsel. Assisted Attorneys in legal research and composition of pleadings, case files, and client personnel files. Made trips to Salinas Court to deliver legal petitions and other paperwork

STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

Area 1 Council September 2013-May 2014

President (2013-2014), Area 1 Council is a student run hall government that strives to promote community within the residence halls. We hosted programs on campus throughout the semester that engages residents and encourages them get involved on campus.

Residential Housing Association (RHA), (May 2014-May 2015)

Executive Board Member/National Residence Hall Honorary Chair (May 2014-May 2015). Held large events on campus including the RHA Ice Cream Social, and the RHA Pool Party which are traditional events promoting students to get involved and meet other students. Attended regional and international business conferences to improve legislation that revolved around RHA's and Housing Organizations at the collegiate level. Improved residential life. Provided services such as care packages and microfridges.

National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH, Otter Chapter) (May 2014-Current)

President (May 2014-May 2015), VP of Administration and Finance (August 2015-Current). The National Residence Hall Honorary (NRHH) is comprised of the top 1% of students with the highest GPAs living on campus. The purpose of the organization is to recognize students, faculty, and staff on campus. Through recognition, we encourage development and a commitment to leadership. Our two core values are service and recognition.

2016 PACURH No Frills Conference Team CSU Monterey Bay

PACURH 2016 No Frills Conference Chair. I lead a team of 13 student leaders and five professional staff members in executing the planning and preparation of the PACURH Regional Business Conference which is brought 169 delegates from 40 different schools to our university campus and community the weekend of February 26th-28th, 2016. Planning and preparing was a two years process (February 2014), preparing a bid which was submitted to the region of PACURH and then voted on against the University of Oregon, of whom was also bidding to host the conference. I led my team to secure housing, food, sponsorships, transportation, and other amenities for all the delegates during this conference where we work to promote the improvement of residential living across all college campuses

CONFERENCES ATTENDED

- PACURH 2013 at Gonzaga University- RHA selected delegate
- No Frills 2014 at La Verne University- NRHH Representative
- Nacurh 2014 at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire- NRHH President
- Connections Conference 2014 at CSU Monterey Bay- NRHH President
- PACURH 2014 at Cal Poly Pomona- NRHH President
- No Frills 2015 at Southern Oregon University- NRHH President and Bid Team
- LeaderShape 2015 at Dominican University- CSU Monterey Bay Housing Representative
- Hosting No Frills 2016 at CSU Monterey Bay (Feb. 26th-28th, 2016)- Conference Chair

FUTURE GOALS

- Attend Law School and earn my J.D. in Constitutional or Criminal Law