Spider-Man is back—but why all dressed in black?

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It’s maybe no weirder than anything else in comic books that Peter Parker—a working-class teenager from Queens who is also Spider-Man—must have a closet the size of the one at Vogue. (It’s big. So I hear.) Because over his six-decade career in comics, television, and movies, this guy has had a lot of costumes.

His new movie, *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, showcases at least four: a baseline blue-and-red, a black superspy outfit, the metallic robot-arm-equipped armor he wore in *Avengers: Endgame*, and a nifty new red-and-black suit. Now, sure, that Beyoncé-like number of outfit changes could just be a play to sell more dolls (“action figures,” pfft). But it also embeds this third cinematic Spider-Man even more deeply in a long comic-book tradition. Costume changes illustrate character development. And the color of those costumes tells you something about who these characters are at any given moment—especially if those colors, like they do in most of *Far From Home*, include black.

For sure, Spidey’s standard *lewk* hasn’t really changed since Steve Ditko created it for the hero’s 1962 debut—a small

spider emblem on the chest and a large one on the back. Red shoulders and torso, blue armpits and legs. Full face mask with big eyes. Some kind of web-embroidery. Webbed-red boots and gloves, thin enough (Ditko wrote) for the man to stick to walls. In the spiderverse, Pete acquires his powers from the bite of a radioactive (or, after more recent retcons, genetically engineered) spider, and then sews himself a costume and invents web-shooting bracelets. Pete's a bullied nerd, and his kind of heroism is predicated on helping people even if they've been horrible to him. But he doesn't just pull on a hoodie and yoga pants. He creates a symbol, albeit a DIY one. Great power, great responsibility, etc.

But why, true believers, is Spider-Man *blue*? It's controversial whether Ditko, Spidey's co-creator alongside Marvel Comics icon Stan Lee, intended the costume's legs and body to be blue or black. Comic production technology wasn't great back in the early 1960s—cheap, on crappy paper, with a four-color dot process that Georges Seurat would've appreciated. Comic book art used to often separate the jobs of penciler, inker, and colorist, and the blacks of the inking, while perfect for shading and outlines, don't show highlights well. You need them for definition, but white (which would really just be letting the paper show through) would've made the black look gray, or like reflective metal. So artists by convention used blue, like in Superman's and Wonder Woman's hair, or Batman's everything.

Ditko was a master of moody, noirish shadow, perfect for Spider-Man's creepy, more lithe design. But if you ran into Spidey in real life, would his costume be red and black? Or red and blue? Like a lot of '60s-era Marvel heroes, Spidey had a bit of darkness about him. Black wouldn't have been out of place. But when other artists, like Gene Colan or John Romita, took over, they played the blue up, and Spidey became a happier, primary-colored hero (though he was still plenty depressed in his personal life).

At this point you might ask: Why would a spider ever be blue? It's a relatively rare color in the animal world. The bugs and birds that do display blues tend to make them not from chemical pigments like melanin but with what are called structural pigments—photonic crystals, basically, that bend light into new, iridescent hues. Butterflies do it, and so do peacock spiders. Peacock spiders also manifest a structural "superblack," a none-more-black that looks utterly matte, almost dimensionless … kind of like a comic book panel, actually. In general, though, I recommend against thinking too hard about the biology of Spider-Manness. Like, why do Spider people acquire powers but remain fundamentally human-looking? (With exceptions: In the 1970s, Peter Parker tried to develop a "cure" for his powers that instead gave him four extra arms sprouting from his torso. Even Peter didn't expect that one; forewarned was not four-armed.) As others have observed, being utterly faithful to the bit would mean Spider-Man would have multiple eyes and his webs would come out of his butt. With great power comes great response-in-the-booty.

[embedded content]
The trailer for *Spider-Man: Far From Home*
Color aside, the general outlines of Spider-Man's costume stayed pretty much the same, within the bounds of various artists' interpretations—Romita's later version was more muscular and bluer—for 25 years. The color black mostly ebbed away, except in the web pattern on the red parts of the costume. The 1960s TV show that introduced the "Spider-Man, Spider-Man" theme song also featured a much simplified, less webbed design. The 1970s live-action TV show suit aimed to be true to the comics, as did the various cartoons of the '80s and '90s.

But in the 1980s, things got weird. Over the course of a yearlong series called *Secret Wars*, Spidey acquired an alien-

made all-black suit with a white spider logo, sparking a recurring black-and-white motif in Spidey costumes. (Production, printing, and art processes had improved by then.) Spider-Man in black was moodier and spookier; comics costumes tend toward that kind of visual determinism in general. Good guys wear primary colors. Bad guys wear secondary colors. Scary guys wear black.

The costume turned out to be an alien parasite; these things happen. Writer-artist Todd MacFarlane, who'd come to fame drawing a much more spidery Spider-Man with ginormous eyes and squiggly webs, was one of the creators who turned that scary black alien parasite costume into Venom, a new bad guy with fangs and a slavering tongue. (Heroes often get enemies who are their costume-opposites, literally wearing their bad intentions on their sleeves. Superman has Bizarro; the Flash has Reverse Flash. Even Venom eventually got Anti-Venom, whose origin in a more just world would've been that of an alien parasite costume infected Venom's mother's sister. But no.)

The black costume sparked an efflorescence of alternate, special-use costumes for ol' Web Head—armors, disguises, high-tech camouflage with glowing bits, hybrids with other heroes and so on. A long arc about clones yielded a casual-day costume based around a sweatshirt; nerds do love their hoodies. Newer artists experimented with the darker, maybe-black of the Ditko era; I've always been partial to Jae Lee's version, for example.

The first two sets of Spider-Man movies—Sam Raimi/Tobey Maguire and Marc Webb/Andrew Garfield—largely hoved to the comic classic. The black lines around the eyes got bigger or smaller, more angular or less. The delimiting seams between red and black went linear or curvy. But with *Far From Home* (and its predecessor, *Homecoming*) the deal between Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios to integrate the third (!) spider-iteration into the main-line Marvel Cinematic Universe led to some less traditional costumes, just as Spider-Man's

crossovers with other heroes in the comics have.

A crossover series called Civil War, the basis for the Captain America movie with that same subtitle, depicted Tony Stark making a high-tech suit with spidery arms that came out of the back—just like the suits Iron Man makes for Spider-Man in the movies. The comic version is much more red and gold, recapitulating Iron Man's colorways, but both served as visual and narrative reminders of ties between the two characters. And the introduction of Miles Morales, a parallel-universe Spider-Man, allowed artist Sara Pichelli to head off in a whole new direction—a black bodysuit with red webs around the upper torso and mask, a colorway Pichelli says she and Marvel chose specifically because it evokes that radioactive, bitey spider, and because all-black hadn't been possible for Ditko. "The new costume had to be as iconic as the classic one but with something new," Pichelli says "It isn't an easy job. It was all a matter of slight changes. In this case, 'less is more.' That's why I preferred to subtract elements rather than add more." The Miles in *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* wears a variation.

And when Spider-Man died and his arch-enemy Doctor Octopus took over his body—these things happen—Ock, declaring himself the "superior Spider-Man," went for a red and black color scheme that evokes *Far From Home*'s new one. Ock was a bad guy even when he was acting sort of good. The black made sense.

Even the stealthy black costume Spider-Man wears in *Far From Home* has comics precedent. In the early 2000s miniseries *Secret War* (no relation to the earlier one), Spidey again gets a black outfit. No aliens involved this time; artist Gabriele Dell'Otto designed secret-agent outfits for a bunch of iconic Marvel heroes, including Captain America and Wolverine.

But the stealth suit isn't the only new 'fit Spidey gets in *Far From Home*. To avoid spoilers, we won't reveal the provenance of the new duds, but suffice to say they indicate

his place in the new MCU. One, in particular, clearly shows Tony Stark’s influence on Peter Parker has taken root. There are lean, straight lines, metallic details. There are integrated web-wings and it’s chock-full of nanotech. It also forgoes comic-book blue for—of course—black.

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