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A Marvel Revolution:

An Exploration of Revolutionary Change in American Popular Media

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Abstract

This essay aims to explore representations of revolutionary action and social activism in American popular culture through a comprehensive analysis of some of the plots and characters in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a superhero movie franchise that tries to foreground diversity, and the inclusion of traditionally disenfranchised social groups in its narratives. The paper will examine how the MCU appeals to subversive movements that challenge established notions of political and social categories as a marketing strategy. This will be achieved a through a double analysis, first, a diegetic exploration of the characters and plots of the MCU as a whole, with a special emphasis on supervillain's ideologies and their motives, given that many instances of systemic critique are provided solely by these villains; and second, a two-fold, non-diegetic examination of the MCU as a cultural product that both appropriates the imagery and discourse of activist movements for profit maximization, and perpetuates and reinforces American hegemonic ideals.

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"When all sides recognize themselves in the same product, we can be sure that the product in question is ideology at its purest — a kind of empty vessel containing antagonistic elements."

Slavoj Žižek 2018

Introduction

Since their birth almost a century ago, superhero stories have proven to be successful and transcendental cultural products that have reflected the many shifts in the American social and political fabric throughout the years. From the earliest comic book heroes to the blockbuster movies of today, superheroes have become an integral part of popular culture, inspiring countless fans and spawning an entire industry of merchandise, spin-offs, and adaptations. But beyond their entertainment value, superheroes also offer insights into our society and its values, reflecting our hopes, fears, and aspirations. Their significance as symbols for American identity and their potential for multidisciplinary commentary have granted them access to enter the field of academic criticism from a wide variety of perspectives. Their symbolic relevance is most noticeable in times of social and political unrest, as superhero narratives have historically responded to ideological crises of a particular era in dramatized forms that provide a comforting resolution to complex issues.

The genre of comic book films has emerged as the staple for 21st century cinema thanks to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or MCU,[1] whose financial success has inspired dozens of new superhero movies to be produced in recent years. The publishing and production conglomerate is recognized world-wide due to its incredibly vast superhero roster, and has since its inception made the case to "show the world outside your window" (Brown 3), so it is not uncommon that the company is now adapting to changing social standards of inclusivity and diversity, both in their comics and their films. However, a closer inspection of the narrative elements of the MCU reveals a clear superficiality in its approach to progressive matters, and raises questions about the corporate decision to align with current (and trendy) social causes, as well as its level of real implication.

Before diving deep into the analysis of the MCU, it is of substance to provide a brief context of Marvel's history and approach to storytelling. Founded in 1939 by Martin Goodman as Timely Comics, the company did not get the renowned name of Marvel until 1961—it was under its first name, in 1941, that Captain America was born at the hands of Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, a character that would become a significant figure during the years of the II World War

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[1] Hitherto abbreviated as MCU for the sake of brevity.

due to its potentiality for patriotic symbolism ("Marvel Comics;" Sáez de Adana 124). The postbellum period saw a decline in the company's readership, however it revived thanks to writer-editor Stan Lee, who, after seeing the resurgence of DC Comics heroes such as Superman, Batman or Wonder Woman, gave the material a more adult attitude. Marvel wanted to appeal to their audiences by discussing current issues, and distance themselves from competitor DC Comics, whose heroes were squeaky clean and apolitical—in fact, many protagonists in Marvel were not heroes at all, but antiheroes, and therefore posed a more complex approach to the genre's traditional portrayals of heroes ("Marvel Comics"). This stage saw the emergence of many of today's most beloved superheroes, like Spider-Man (1962), Thor (1962), Iron Man (1963), and the Hulk (1962), among others. The 90s presented themselves as a low period for the company, forcing it to declare bankruptcy in 1996, but soon recovered and, in 1998, Marvel Entertainment/Enterprises began adapting its stories as animated television series, and later on, as films ("Marvel Entertainment"). But it wasn't until 2009 that Marvel would reach its full potential, when Marvel Entertainment was bought by The Walt Disney Company, and the worldwide cinematographic phenomenon of the 21st century began ("Marvel Cinematic Universe;" "Marvel Studios"). In its journey to becoming one of the world's most renowned and profitable movie franchises, the MCU, following the company's particular style in the portrayal of its heroes, discusses onscreen a wide variety of topics that range from feminism, racism, colonization, capitalism, and even the very concept of who can be a hero, who gets to decide what, and who a hero or a villain is, and so forth.

The company's historical approach to superheroes and their stories can be summed up as based on and inspired by real life, narrating common struggles, and overall reflective of current events (Dittmer, *Empire* 632). Of course, there has been an evolution in one of Marvel Comics' most renowned creatives, Stan Lee, in his approach to narrative depictions of heroism and villainy: at first, his stories fell into a traditional black-and-white/good-or-evil dualistic structure, a stance clearly depicted in Marvel comic books through their representation of the Cold War in the 1950s; however, the simplicity used to portray conflict evolved into a more profound, tolerant attitude towards ideological differences (Rodríguez). Furthermore, Marvel never shied away from admitting taking inspiration in real-world current events. The company was the first to depict actual political systems, like nazism and communism, and recurring to historical (then current) events to frame their superheroes—such is the case with Captain America, born out of II World War patriotism and propaganda (Rodríguez). The character is a clear example of the company's stance throughout the ages, at first, an avid patriot that fought simplified, black-and-white conflicts against stereotyped villains then evolved with the times to the point of questioning the very government that created him and renouncing his title in consequence (Rodríguez).

The current trend in the comics section of now multimedia Marvel conglomerate is to open the representational stage to include historically excluded and discriminated minority

groups, such as women, racialized communities, and gender and sexual identities (Brown 1). The addition of creators and fans belonging to these same categories allows for more diverse and accurate representation outside the canonical white, heterosexual, masculine identity of traditional superheroes (3). It would be obvious to assume, then, that the wave for progressive change in the Marvel company should reach every crevice of its machinery, from employees to audiences, across the different product lines it provides.

The MCU, or Marvel Cinematic Universe, has risen as the staple franchise model for the new millennium, many of its movies entering the list of highest-grossing films of all time. Revolving around now world-famous superheroes, the franchise stands at the point of writing with 32 feature-length films, 9 television series and 2 television specials—and counting—. These movies and shows all share continuity among one another, picking up where the others left off, to the point of becoming one huge, serialized spectacle that can hardly be fully comprehended if not thoroughly followed from the beginning and consuming every piece of interlocking media that is subsequently released ("Marvel Studios," "Marvel Cinematic Universe"). The movies and shows in the MCU are classified by phases, each phase increasing in number in respect to the last one, showing the entrepreneurial effort to turn the franchise into a cultural and market phenomenon. This can be clearly seen in the charts in Figures 1 and 2, which were retrieved from Google Trends, a tool that allows the user to track the amount of times a certain search has been conducted. These charts show the amount of Google Searches of the terms "MCU" (Figure 1) and "Marvel" (Figure 2) from the beginning of the franchise in 2008 until the writing of this essay in 2023. The most significant increase in searches can be seen beginning in the years that correspond to phase three of the MCU (2016-2017).
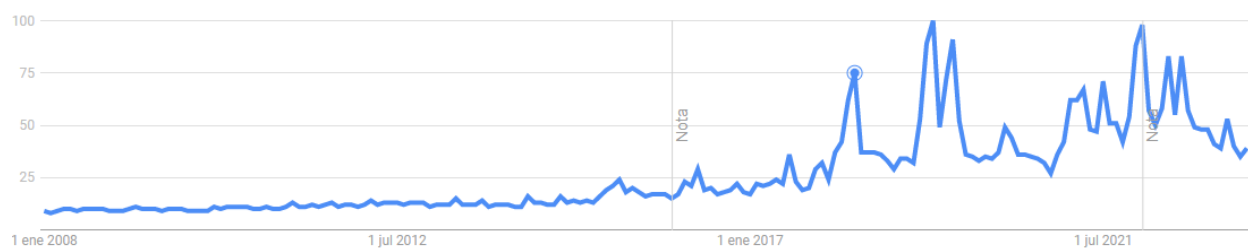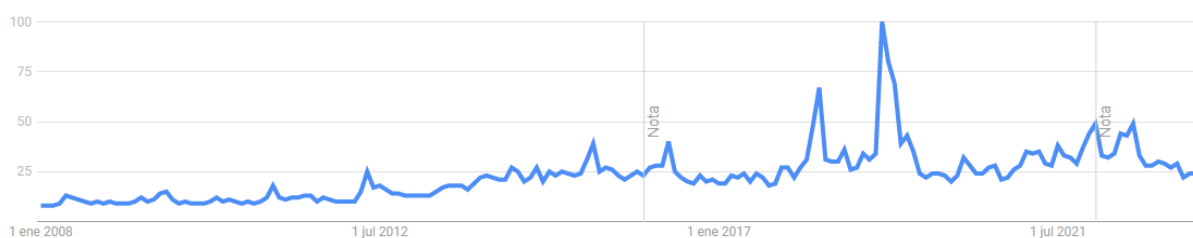

Figure 1. Number of searches for "MCU."

Figure 2. Number of searches for "Marvel."

Phase one began in 2008, and comprises six feature films, all reboots that establish the new origin stories for the traditional superheroes Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor, and Captain America, now reconceptualized for modern audiences. The narratives of the individual movies overarch and partially depend on one another, setting the scene for uniting them as the Avengers at the end of this phase, which at the same time lays the foundation for the next one, and more events further in the future.

Phase two includes another six movies. Five solo films build up on previously established heroes Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, and introduce new reboots as well, adding the Guardians of the Galaxy, and Ant-Man to the list, and ending again with another crossover event that reunites the Avengers against a new threat. Throughout this phase, the narrative slowly builds up to the main event that will take place in phase three by launching key elements and characters that will lead the story to its climax.

Phase three has eleven films in total: nine solo movies that continue the narrative of Captain America, Thor, and the Guardians of the Galaxy, and introduce Doctor Strange, Captain Marvel, Black Panther, and Spider-Man; and two crossover films that again bring the Avengers together. The plots in phase three grow in complexity and interconnectedness. This is the phase in which the MCU phenomenon began expanding and growing to the point of becoming one of the most profitable cinematographic franchises in the history of cinema. Narratively, the story has now reached its most heightened point: the whole universe is at stake and the Avengers have to assemble once again in order to defeat a megalomaniac, genocidal alien titan. After ideological clashes between characters (*Civil War*, 2016), and the death of some of the most loved ones (*Avengers: Endgame*, 2019), the MCU protagonists have to move on with their lives now that the world is back on its tracks.

Phase four introduces television series into the list of MCU audiovisual media, adding 11 television series to streaming platform Disney+, and releasing 7 solo movies featuring the some of the main characters after the Avengers have dissolved, as well as introducing new heroes like Sang-Chi, the first Asian superhero in the MCU, and the Eternals. As can be seen by the sheer amount of content created during this phase, Disney and Marvel decided to exploit the superhero genre to almost exhaustion.This phase is widely regarded by fans as a wild card, generally perceived as encompassing the self-reflective and deconstructionist aspects of postmodernism, and being experimental both visually and narratively thanks to the addition of many different directors. After the main event in *Endgame* in phase three, the characters have to remain marketable, and are given solo movies or TV shows. Both fans and critics have complained about the great quantity of low-quality content produced during this phase, which almost makes belonging to the MCU fandom feel like a chore rather than genuine entertainment.

At the time of writing this paper, the MCU is currently in its fifth phase, for which it seems the company has planned to repeat the same structure that guided the franchise

throughout phases one, two, and three, slowly building up to the events in *Endgame*, now with a new villain that could expand the threat from our universe to the multiverse.

Methodology

Following the editorial line of recent publications by Marvel Comics, which foreground diversity and real-life verisimilitude above all else—besides the supernatural, that is—, it strikes as strange that their cinematographic counterparts of the MCU appear to jump on that same trend, however, from a more superficial perspective. This issue can be analyzed diegetically and non-diegetically. Through an analysis of the narrative elements of the films themselves, one can discern a pattern of bringing forward political and social concerns while simultaneously disavowing them by de-historizing, de-contextualizing, and de-politicizing them, and giving them a quick, simple solution that usually falls under the responsibility of one or more superheroes instead of a collaborative effort to change structural inequities.

For example, many of these films bring forth valid and current issues such as the cruel consequences of unchecked capitalist practices, be it mass unemployment or ecological collapse, as well as issues of race and gender, through the exploration of the systemic pervasiveness of institutional racism and patriarchy. One of the issues that arise from this narrative structure, however, lies with the positioning of these political stances being sided with the villains in these movies—the villain's speech, as thorough and grounded in actual critical rhetoric as it may be, is ultimately tainted by their violent actions, and therefore discarded as a valid (even moral) claim. This can be explained through the understanding of superheroes as a reactive agent of social control: whenever the current social, political, and/or economic status quo is threatened, superheroes must react with force to that threat and return the world back to its "natural" order. All these nuances will be explored in the following chapters, delving more deeply into issues of representation of matters of capitalism, race, and environmentalism, which perpetuate hegemonic capitalist ideals through popular culture.

A non-diegetic analysis of the MCU films as cultural products of post-9/11 media reinforces the narrative structure above mentioned: the films, especially the more recent ones, make an effort to explicitly show that they side with the more progressive social movements of recent years, such as the #MeToo movement, or Black Lives Matter, which can be seen through the representation of issues of race and gender discrimination and historical oppression. While their mere positive depiction, even at surface level, of such topics surely demonstrates a step forward into a more progressive and diverse approach to their stories, one cannot discard that a most possible reason behind these editorial decisions could be based on financial profitability. After all, these movies are being created as cultural products aimed to enrich the pockets of Marvel's parent company, Disney. The slight ray of hope that more diverse casting and storytelling bring with them is instantly clouded by the suspicion of corporate marketing

strategies that appropriate such liberating discourses as a means to earn more audience and profits.

The figure and genre of superheroes have been analyzed and questioned thoroughly, even within the narratives themselves.[2] However, the recent boom of superhero media content has facilitated the proliferation of academic texts that evaluate all aspects of superheroes, especially those belonging to the most prolific movie franchise of the century. These texts cover the origin and evolution of the genre (see Richard Reynolds, or Peter Coogan), examinations of the superhero as a symbol and its mythical nature (John Shelton Lawrence & Robert Jewett, Danny Fingeroth, Lisa M. Detora, or Alex Romagnoli & Gian S. Pagnucci), the use of the superhero as propaganda (Marina Warner, or Grant Morrison), explorations of the resurgence of the genre post-9/11 (Tom Pollard), the psychology and philosophy of superheroes (Robin S. Rosenberg, or Mark D. White), and character analyses from different critical perspectives, such as gender, and race (Jeffrey A. Brown).

The extensive production of media literacy texts highlights the need for the interrogation of mainstream, popular culture that is primarily perceived as mere entertainment, examining its subtext, and learning to discern whether that subtext reinforces or questions certain ideas. For this reason, this essay will explore how the MCU appeals to subversive movements that challenge established notions of political and social categories as a marketing strategy. This will be achieved a through a double analysis, first, a diegetic exploration of the characters and plots of the MCU as a whole, with a special emphasis on supervillain's ideologies and their motives, given that many instances of systemic critique are provided solely by these villains; and second, a two-fold, non-diegetic examination of the MCU as a cultural product that both appropriates the imagery and discourse of activist movements for profit maximization, and perpetuates and reinforces American hegemonic ideals.

The chosen theoretical framework contextualizes the thesis by, first, providing background information about superheroes and supervillains, a definition of the genre and its conventions, the use of the supervillain as the driving force for change and development in the narrative, and reactionary heroism. Secondly, the non-diegetic part of the analysis will explore the existing literature on superheroes as mythical figures and symbols for American identity, concluding with a revision and application of the theory of performative activism. This will set the basis to interpret the MCU films as cultural products that feed on progressive social movements and current changing societal standards regarding race, gender, class, and nature, in order to upscale their audience and revenue. This theoretical foundation will be further complemented by theories regarding race, class and capitalism, and ecology and environmentalism, that will appear in each chapter providing the appropriate terminology to address issues racial representation in media, define of capitalism and hegemony to set a

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[2] See texts such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986), or *V for Vendetta* (1980).

foundation for the analysis of class portrayals, and establish theory on the anthropocentric perception of nature in Western cultures and media.

The methodology and organization of this paper is highly influenced by Plumwood's logical structure of centrism, which facilitates an intersectional analysis of representations concerning race, gender, and nature, in the face of anthropocentrism, androcentrism, and ethnocentrism. This theoretical foundation will be reoriented towards the categories of race, class, and nature. In spite of this structure, the interconnectedness of these categories hinder a strictly separate analysis of the MCU's themes and, as a result, some commentaries on race spill over examinations of class, and so on. The category of gender and sexual identities in the analysis of the MCU films constitutes a comprehensive research paper in itself that requires special attention; however, given its limited extension, this paper decidedly avoids an exhaustive analysis of this topic. Due to the significance of the subject matter, it is crucial to at least acknowledge the existing literature that provides thorough analyses on the representation of women and LGBTQI+ characters in the superhero genre in general, and Marvel specifically. Recent publications such as *Gendered Defenders. Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* (2022), edited by Bryan J. Carr & Meta G. Carstarphen, or Jeffrey A. Brown's *Love, Sex, Gender, and Superheroes* (2021) showcase the relevance that gender and queer readings of superhero texts have gained in academic and literary circles. Despite not giving gender and sexual identities their own category in this paper, there will be sporadic commentaries on the matter when considered relevant to the thesis, as MCU movies are clearly shifting traditional representations of superheroes in order to align with women and queer liberation movements as one of their many company-branding strategies.

As examples to illustrate this thesis, this paper will analyze a series of characters and plot lines belonging to the MCU franchise. Several villain-coded characters have been chosen for analysis because of their aforementioned tendency to side with social justice grievances that evoke the language of current activist movements. The movie series of *Black Panther* (2018) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) will be used in the examination of racial representation; the section of class and capitalism will build on the stories in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019); and the chapter concerned with environmentalism will cover the films *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Other movies and television shows of the MCU will be used as sporadic commentary that will reinforce the thesis and the claims in this paper. This selection was made to correspond with the chosen methodology, as these critical categories see themselves thematized in this essay's films of choice.

It is necessary to state that such interpretation of these characters and stories, alongside related readings, is not definite. This paper is merely stating the similarities among the ideology of the MCU's supervillains with some socio-political movements that strive for equality and liberation of oppressed peoples through activism. It is not an attempt to uncover a hidden

political agenda behind these movies to demonize certain political movements, it is just highlighting the way in which these films seem to comment on, challenge, and appropriate current criticism towards political, social, and economic circumstances.

Furthermore, the issue of authorship and intentionality must also be considered. There is no true notion of intention of the writers, directors, producers, and actors other than those given in interviews, therefore it is not possible to know with certainty the degree to which these narratives do indeed attempt to represent reality, and create a debate rather than a spectacle. It is important to note that movies, especially those belonging to big corporations such as Disney, in the case of Marvel, are tightly bound to the standards and values of their owning production companies (Boggs and Pollard 2007, 2-3, as quoted in Crowe 50). Additionally, the MCU is ever-growing, interconnecting its narratives and characters throughout films and TV series, and the sheer amount of media content created by a vast array of very diverse authors for very diverse audiences must be addressed, or at least taken into account, when inquiring about authorship and interpretation.

A note on gender

Returning to Marvel Comics' efforts for promoting diversity, the MCU appears to sport a mantra of diversity and inclusion, as can be seen in recent blockbusters *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* (2019), the first films from the franchise to showcase non-white and non-male superheroes as main protagonists—as well as directors—. The MCU movies had previously raised issues related to race and gender representation; however, this was done through a comical lens that foregrounded metafictional references and ironic humor rather than directly addressing and confronting these realities. While it is undeniable that the films do increasingly include more women, racialized characters, and non-heteronormative characters, what is questionable is the manner and the apparent intention with which they chose to do so. The company has undergone a profound adjustment in the depiction of non-white-male characters, which at the time of its foundation was deeply rooted in denigrating stereotypes, but has since then conducted its portrayals in a more progressive direction. Despite this evolution in the company, the Marvel heroes in the movies seem to still be lacking in authentic portrayals of historically under- and misrepresented groups. This raises doubts as to whether the drive for inclusion and diversification is rooted in financial profitability rather than authentic representation and genuine storytelling.

To partially illustrate this claim, let's bring up a short fragment from *Avengers: Infinity War* that sums up the MCU's superficial representational practices, in this case, of women. In the midst of a brutal battle to decide the fate of the entire universe, all three female "co-protagonists" casually coincide in the same spot and come to each other's aid when attacked by the only female-marked alien enemy in the movie. In a manner that seems to allude to the #MeToo movement rhetoric, in which women encourage each other to speak up about their

experiences of sexual abuse, Black Widow states, "She's not alone" (01:55:52), as she dives into battle to rescue another fallen female superhero. This is later repeated in *Avengers: Endgame* during another battle scene in which every female Avenger (now nine instead of three) is again casually and simultaneously called to help Spider-Man in the fight. Once more, the coincidental convergence of all women Avengers alludes to #MeToo through the very similar phrase: "Don't worry. She's got help" (02:27:08). The scene could also be contested when analyzing the perpetuation of the reductivist and essentialist connection between women and the protective instincts of motherhood, given that Spider-Man is still a high school teenager.[3] Unfortunately, the #MeToo movement suffered the pervasiveness of capitalism, clearly exemplified by the production of merchandising advertising the cause, like slogan T-shirts or the pink pussy hats, as many corporations saw the potential benefits that could arise from "supporting" social justice movements through the strategic marketing of themed products.

Another example of the MCU's half-baked representational strategies can be found in the movies' portrayal of non-heteronormative characters. A famous scene in *Avengers: Endgame*, which they announced as the first movie in the franchise[4] with an LGBTQI+ character, reduces the inclusion of homosexuality to three pronouns. The scene is set in a group therapy session in which a man (one of the directors of the film) talks about a romantic date, and the only reference to a homosexuality is literally encompassed only by the pronouns "he," "his," and "him." This is supposed to make up for the overwhelming representation of heterosexual romance portrayed in almost fifty movies and television shows in the MCU. The most recent of these films seem to explore the issue a little further, but still come short when depicting same-sex relationships through brief mentions of a past relationship, or with a comedic tone, or by leaving potential queer interactions ambiguous and open to interpretation. In *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), there are several moments that exemplify these claims. First, through the character of Val, a former Valkyrie who is presented as traditionally unfeminine, mainly due to her abusive drinking patterns and proneness to violent behavior. It is thanks to a short conversation that the audience learns that she once had a girlfriend who is now dead, which falls under the common trend of killing LGBTQI+ characters on screen—commonly known as the *kill or bury your gays* trope (Hulan 17). She also kisses a maid's hand and causes her to blush, as if she were courting her, in a seconds-short frame during an escape scene. Secondly, the character of Korg, an anthropomorphized alien made of rock who, in that previously mentioned conversation, discloses his species' mating ritual, alluding to how his fathers—not parents—created him. At the end of the film, he too finds a rock partner who coincidentally has a mustache in the fashion

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[3] The scene also features Shuri, Wakandan princess and Black Panther's sister, also about Spider-Man's age, but she has to be incorporated for the sake of the scene's feminism. Also questionable is that, her being the same age, is positioned as able to care for another teenager, which brings up the racial stereotype of black women and children being more mature for their age and prone to child-caring.

[4] Disney, and therefore its sub-companies, is known for continuously announcing their products as containing "the first LGBTQI+ representation" in the history of the company, to the point of becoming a meme in online spaces.

of The Village People's Glenn Hughes. Instead of following the *kill your gays* trope, this example acts in accordance with the way in which non-white characters have been historically portrayed as alien species, only this time it applies to non-conforming sexualities rather than race.

As petty as these brief dissections of popular culture may seem, they help introduce the main topic of this essay, that is, the inclusion of diversity—be it ideological, racial, sexual, or gendered—in superficial bits and non- or badly-resolved narrative conclusions. The following chapters will be preoccupied with establishing the appropriate theoretical framework that will allow for a thorough analysis of the depictions of criticism to the status quo in these films, which will sequentially lead to their examination as cultural products as well.

Superheroes and supervillains

The concept of superheroes and supervillains is primarily associated with popular culture and comic books, and historically regarded as a form of lowbrow cultural expression with little to analyze. However, the increasing production of academic research concerning the genre proves the relevance of these figures as a means of understanding the world, exploring the many different ways in which these texts can be interpreted, ranging from attempts of defining the elements that form them, to profound investigations of their potential as symbolic representations of personal and national identities, among others. The current section will deal with the definition of superheroes and supervillains, providing a recapitulation of genre style and conventions, and concluding with the use of sympathetic villains in Marvel narratives, as well as in other narrative genres, which introduces the analysis of the motivations propelling the MCU's supervillains.

The question of what makes a superhero seems easy to answer: a hero with superpowers. But what is a hero? Steering away from more nuanced responses concerned with power dynamics, scholar and researcher Orrin E. Klapp provides a traditional and straightforward answer: heroes are "admired because they stand out from others by supposed unusual merits" due to their "supernormal devian[ce], courage, self-abnegation, devotion, and prowess" (57). Add superpowers, and you get a superhero. Superpowers are understood as extraordinary abilities which superheroes use to fight for justice and protect the innocent. These abilities may include superhuman strength, speed, agility, and intelligence, as well as a variety of other powers and skills, and their origin can vary in essence, ranging from divine, mythical, alien, magic, or based on advanced technology (DiPaolo 2), as can be seen in the characters of Thor—a god from Norse mythology—, Captain America and Iron Man—one powered by a supersoldier serum, and the other by a weaponized metallic suit—, or the Scarlet Witch—a superheroine with magical powers—.

A superhero is thus, according to Director of the Institute for Comics Studies and Co-Chair of the Comics Arts Conference Peter Coogan, a "selfless Samaritan imbued with

simplistic, straightforward goodness and overwhelming efficacy" (231), who comes into play when all other options have failed (163). Coogan considers that a superhero meets the "Nietzschean ideal" of being "physically, mentally, socially, and morally" superior to ordinary people (161), and places upon themselves the task of guarding society, but never altering it, as their mission is to protect it from crime and corruption (131, 132). Another method to determine if a character fits the superhero type is to analyze it through the "mission-powers-identity definition" (40) that Coogan proposes: the superhero must have superpowers, their mission must be "selfless" and "pro-social," and their identity must be defined through a "codename and iconic costume" (30). The superhero's "fight against evil must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society and must not be intended to benefit or further his own agenda" (31), that is, the superhero cannot act in their own benefit and their actions must be aligned with societal values. An ambiguous character definition allows for a more diverse audience identification: superheroes are "Everyman" (Dittmer, *Nationalist* 11), which means that anyone could become one if given the circumstances. Superheroes have gained complexity overtime, but still are based on said principles that give room for multiple interpretations, identification, and self-projection.

Marvel frequently gives its superheroes a more flawed and human characterization, many of them falling in categories like the "troubled hero" or the "unlikely hero." Some of its heroes are not celebrated at all and are instead persecuted by the system (like the mutants from X-Men, or some heroes during the *Civil War* narrative arc), others are regarded as criminals at the beginning and have to prove themselves worthy of the superhero title (like the Guardians of the Galaxy, or Ant-Man), and others almost cross the line towards villainy themselves before turning back (like Shuri in *Wakanda Forever*).

The definition of superhero calls as well for the definition of its antithesis, the supervillain, and before that, for the definition of villain. The villains, according to Klapp, are "idealized figures of evil," an "offender" who threatens the very society the heroes swear to defend because of their "inherently malicious will" (58). As with superheroes, add superpowers, and the result is a supervillain. Coogan complements this definition by affirming that supervillains are an "inversion of [superhero] values," and it is their "ability to enact that inversion" that forces the superhero to act in retaliation (61). That enactment is usually inspired by an "ego-driven mania," in many instances a will to radically transform society; however, that change would have to be "forced upon an unwilling populace" through genocidal means (95, 96). Coogan continues by providing a definition and typology of supervillains: villains ultimately are "inverted-superheroes" (53) that have a wound from which they can never recover and feel entitled and victimized by that wound to the point that their "victimhood justifies his actions" (83, 84). The wound can be personal, like the loss of a loved one, or non-personal, feeling responsible or representative of a marginalized community, and this leads the supervillain to seek to "overturn the status quo and reverse the ruling order" (87). The major focus for audience identification in these narratives usually lies on the figure of the superhero, as

they are the protagonist of the story, but some villains are ambiguous enough to steal some of the spotlight. Science-fiction author Nancy Kress provides a guide on how to create a "successful accidental villain" to win over audiences, stressing that the character must posses some "fatal flaw" that ultimately leads them to villainy, but they have to be fully-rounded and given "sympathetic character traits that [⋯] don't conflict with [their] fatal flaw" (10). Sympathetic villains allow the viewers to identify with them because their motivations arise from social injustices that resonate with the audience (Crowe 52, 53), which in turn allows for the questioning of general assumptions about heroism as inherently benevolent and pro-social (53).

Marvel also approaches its villains with a more nuanced perspective, as it does its heroes. The morality depicted in Marvel stories does not fall into a simplistic, Manichaean scheme of good against evil. Many of the supervillains portrayed in Marvel narratives are sympathetic, and even redeemable. For example, Coogan examines Marvel's villain-turned-heroes, specifying that their status as "inverted-superhero supervillain" is based upon an initial ambiguous characterization and their reluctance towards criminal activity, which makes it possible for these characters to redeem themselves and join the *good guys* (73, 74). This can be seen, among others, in the characters of Black Widow—a former Russian assassin and spy that joins the Avengers—, and the Scarlet Witch—another Eastern-European woman scientifically enhanced in order to counter the actions of the Avengers, who she joins in the end—. A curious case is that of the Winter Soldier, or Bucky Barnes, old friend of Steve Rogers before and after becoming Captain America; Bucky is brainwashed and turned into an assassin by the evil Russian organization Hydra, and then later reconditioned as a superhero. As can be seen, many of these villains have their origin in the Cold War, painting the East as an enemy, but the countercultural, anti-imperialist, and pacifist movements of the 60s softened their representation and allowed for their inclusion in the superhero list.

Coogan provides a thorough explanation of the superhero genre. First, he builds on Thomas Schatz's theory of genre, which explains the formal transparency of genres in general. Genres are the channel through which "a certain idealized cultural self-image" is transmitted (Schatz 38, as quoted in Coogan 201), they are a "cultural ritual for 'social problem-solving operations' in which ideological conflicts are repeatedly confronted" (Schatz 24, as quoted in Coogan 201). However, these conflicts are not solved, and their apparent solutions only displace the conflicts to an "emotional context" (Schatz 32, as quoted in Coogan 201). Ultimately, genres are used as a means to "transmit and reinforce prevailing social ideology" (Coogan 201). Coogan continues by presenting the evolution of the superhero genre, dividing its development into ages: Golden, Silver, Bronze, Iron, and Renaissance (193, 194). The Golden Age begins with the birth of the superhero, which at first reinforced the genre's "social message," the conventions were not questioned, and the narratives leaned towards "straightforward confrontations between good and evil in which the superhero, society, and the audience were all

presumed to be on the same side and working for the same goals" (199). During this period, the superhero went from being pro-social and fighting the establishment to siding with the government and defending state and private interests (202). It was in this age that the "threat to society is shifted from inside the halls of power to outside the society, which means that defending society from these threats implies a defense of the status quo" (204). Once the conventions were established and understood by both writers and producers in the Silver Age (193), some complexities were introduced "by turning noble villains into superheroes" (206), while "formal and stylistic details" were embellished during the Bronze Age (194) and the stories became "increasingly self-reflective" (212). During the Iron Age there was a "reinvigoration" of old conventions and "self-conscious revivals" (215), and "heroism itself was questioned" (216). The Renaissance Age saw the re-establishment of conventions through "homages, references and visual quotations" without being "tied directly" to the past (220).

The development of the narrative structure throughout the MCU's different phases mirrors to an extent the evolution of the superhero genre proposed by Coogan. The first phase of the MCU would be similar to the Golden Age, consisting in the birth of the superhero, which could be parallel to the series of character reboots in this period. The Silver Age would coincide with phase two, in which conventions have been established and understood, which in turn enabled writers and producers of the MCU to set the basis to build up to the events in the next phase. The third phase would match the Bronze Age, characterized by baroque metafictional reflexivity, exemplified on the one hand, by the amount of media produced, and on the other, by the narrative's increased complexity and interconnectedness. The Iron Age can be seen as similar to phase four in its self-conscious nature, and current phase five seems to echo the Renaissance by attempting to recreate the hype of phase three.

Superhero narratives as a genre are both cyclical and serialized in format, that is, the story follows a linear direction that automatically repeats itself once it ends: a supervillain poses a threat, superheroes defeat evil and restore order until a new supervillain comes to upset said order. As Professor of political geography Jason Dittmer states, superhero stories are "serial narratives that unfold over time, each with origins, cyclical patterns that maintain the status quo, and linear shifts that maintain the narratives' relevance to current events," which also corresponds with the way narratives of national identity are created (*Nationalist* 182)—this idea will be further explored in the following chapters. The cyclical nature of these stories allows for their accommodation to the historical and aesthetic circumstances of a particular historical period, geographical area, or community, resulting in established characters adapting their ideologies and methods to cater to contemporary audience tastes. Media scholar Dan Hassler-Forest states that the superhero genre is an "endlessly adaptable template[s] for mass entertainment that mobilize the quintessential antinomies of postmodernity: its worlds are constantly being destroyed, yet never end; its characters have long and complex histories, yet they never age; and an absolute dividing line between good and evil is constantly being

established, only to be re-defined as historical circumstances change." While the connection between superheroes, postmodernity, and capitalist and neoliberal hegemony will be discussed in the coming chapters, this quote shows how the genre follows a never-ending pattern that assures profitability and continuity, which explains the resurgence of the genre at different times in history. The stories' cyclical essence also makes for the creation of tension in superhero chronology, which Hassler-Forest defines as an "accumulation of events and the resulting forward movement of history on the one hand, and the systematic absence of any form of political change on the other."

As any other genre, superhero stories have many well-established conventions that are mutually recognized by creators, producers, and audience. Superheroes usually have an origin story that explains their powers, some of them work alongside the government or contrarily are perceived as lone vigilantes, and most of the time save the world from destruction at the last possible moment. One convention that seems appropriate to bring up in relation to this particular research concerns the interaction between superheroes and supervillains. Usually, supervillains match their respective superheroes in themes, powers, or identity. This means that heroes that are primarily known as being associated with wealth will be paired with villains that have financial grievances and vice versa, such are the cases of Iron Man, Spider-Man, and Ant-Man. Racially-motivated villains will fight racially-symbolic heroes, like Black Panther and Killmonger, or Shuri and Namor, and, as proven above, superheroines will be usually faced with women villains—although this last claim can be contested, given the systematic underrepresentation of women in the genre, either as heroes or villains. In their similarity, the villain seeks the approval of the hero, which would heal the wound that led them to villainy in the first place (Coogan 89)—it is the wound that separates the paths of the superhero and the supervillain, the former learns and grows from it, while the latter dwells on and succumbs to it. The hero's righteousness and moral attitude foregrounds that separation.

The superhero code refers to that set of moral principles and values commonly associated with these figures. It is characterized by several key traits: superheroes are typically depicted as champions of justice and defenders of the innocent. They are motivated by a deep sense of duty to protect the weak and uphold the law, often at great personal risk. They are frequently portrayed as selfless and altruistic, placing the needs of others before their own, and willing to make sacrifices and endure hardships in order to achieve their goals, whether that means fighting crime, saving the world, or helping those in need. Superheroes are commonly guided by a strong moral compass, and they hold themselves to a high standard of behavior. They are not only expected to uphold the law, but also to act with integrity and honesty in all their ventures. They are also expected to be respectful of others, even their enemies, and to avoid unnecessary violence whenever possible. Overall, the superhero code represents a set of ideals and values that are deeply rooted in the American cultural tradition of individualism and exceptionalism. It reflects a belief in the power of individual heroism and the ability of individuals to make a

positive difference in the world, even in the face of great adversity. Some academics, however, do not regard the superhero code as something inherently benevolent and fair, arguing that it is the hero's unique access to superpowers that allow them to impose their "individualized interpretation of justice" and "violate the civil and legal rights of others" whenever a threat occurs that ordinary law enforcement organizations cannot face (Coogan 112). Furthermore, Hassler-Forest maintains that, because of the threat of imminent doom is always present in superhero stories—returning to the convention of saving the world at the last possible second—superheroes narratives do not allow for the examination of their methods, "let alone the[ir] ideological values"—another aspect worth examining from the theoretical perspective of postmodernism and neoliberal capitalist culture.

The primary convention concerning this paper, nonetheless, is that of reactionarism. As a basis, most superhero narratives deal with a villain that upsets the status quo and calls for the intervention of a hero to return the world to normal. Peter Coogan and David Graeber are two scholars who have offered interesting perspectives on the nature of superheroes and supervillains. According to Coogan, superheroes are oftentimes reactive in nature, while supervillains tend to be proactive (110). Graeber, on the other hand, argues that superheroes and supervillains embody different forms of power and agency. Coogan's theory is based on the idea that superheroes are typically called into action to respond to threats or crises, rather than actively seeking out conflict themselves. In other words, superheroes are reactive in that they are responsive to external events, rather than being the initiators of those events (112). This is in contrast to supervillains, whose "machinations drive the plot" and who repeatedly take proactive steps to achieve their goals, whether through criminal activity, scientific experimentation, or other means (110). Graeber's theory, meanwhile, focuses on the different forms of power and agency embodied by superheroes and supervillains. While he agrees with the idea that superheroes "remain parasitical off the villains," as they require the machinations of a supervillain in order to thrust into action, according to Graeber, superheroes represent a form of structural power. This is based on their ability to uphold the existing social order and maintain stability, paralleling and reinforcing simultaneously the state's monopoly on legitimate violence, a power often associated with institutions like the police and the military, which are tasked with enforcing the laws and norms of society. Supervillains, on the other hand, represent a form of creative power (Graeber), which involves the ability to disrupt or transform the existing social order. This power is frequently associated with individuals or groups who challenge authority and seek to create new possibilities for themselves and others.

When discussing supervillains, a compelling point to raise is the emergence of villain-focused media in recent years. Disney and its partner companies are some of the main participants in this trend, going as far as to dedicate entire films to classic Disney villains, such as Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959) and Cruella de Vil from *101 Dalmatian*s (1961). Many of the latest Disney movies portray antagonists, not villains *per se,* a direction that strays

from the company's traditional depiction of the grandiloquent and flamboyant villains that became ingrained in the popular consciousness of many generations. This strategy makes sense at a marketing, and even pedagogic level: it avoids backlash against possibly perceived misrepresentations aligned with characters coded as evil and deviant, therefore opening the possibility of wider audience identification, as well as providing narrative structures that differ from dualistic portrayals of moral conflicts through a black-and-white lens. While Marvel, a sub-company of Disney since 2009, has some examples of this tendency towards villain-sympathizing and developing their characters in a more complex manner in their films, one must also take into consideration the historical approach employed by Marvel in its comics, which allowed for the depiction of different ideological standpoints with fairness.

Movies in the MCU show the villains from a more intricate perspective. Instead of just being plainly evil, arrogant, or petty, they have legitimate—even justified—reasons behind their actions. This gray moral area, besides giving a less dichotomized representation of morality, means that the movie as a whole can appeal to wider audiences, who can feel represented no matter the stance they take towards the narrative conflicts. It can even bring the opportunity of reform, as many of Marvel's present-day superheroes initially began as supervillains and were incorporated into the *good side*.

The supervillains about to be discussed have been chosen precisely for their underlying ideologies, articulating valid criticism towards the current capitalist status quo by questioning hegemonic ideals of race, class, ecology, and even (super)heroism itself. These critiques, however, are ultimately disavowed by their homicidal means and egomaniac personalities, contrastingly opposite to those of their superhero counterparts. The fact that any critique of the establishment is systematically brought down in favor of its maintenance is especially pervasive when considering the figure of the superhero as a reactive agent, and the supervillain as a driver for change, and what this can mean about current society.

Race

Over the last decade, civil rights and social movements about race have experienced a resurgence in the United States and other parts of the world. The rise of these social movements, dedicated to the inclusion and non-discrimination of historically disenfranchised racialized groups, has been influenced by a number of factors, including increased attention to issues of racial inequality and injustice, the impact of social media, and the growing diversity of political and cultural movements. This has led to a widespread revision of the political, social, and economic structures that perpetuate oppression and discrimination of racial and ethnic communities, as well as providing a platform from which to denounce the ongoing struggle they face in everyday life. In the US, smartphones and social media served to raise and increase awareness of police brutality against black people, which started being documented and disseminated online, bringing attention to issues that might have otherwise gone unnoticed. The

death of Trayvon Martin at the hands of the police in 2012 became a rallying point for activists and led to the creation of the Black Lives Matter movement, which seeks to end police brutality and address systemic racism in the justice system. At the same time, other civil rights and social organizations concerned with issues of racial oppression were also gaining prominence. Indigenous social movements were spawning all across the world, many denouncing the intersection between racism, class oppression, and capitalist exploitation of resources.

Media outlets such as film and television production companies have taken note of the concerns of activist groups, especially those regarding representation. Nowadays, there seems to be more racialized creatives, whether actors, writers, singers, etc., that are being given a platform from which to tell their stories and voice their perspectives on issues pertaining to the systemic injustice they have historically faced in American society. Widespread appreciation for black-centered media (see Jordan Peele's cinematic critical success, or the way in which black musicians continue to dominate the stages in the music industry) has opened the eyes of production companies, realizing that this kind of content can be universally relatable, and not only a niche market. While having the chance to real representation and positive role models on screen can be a critical experience in identity formation and audience identification, mere representation isn't the same as quality, authentic representation. The term tokenism explains this phenomenon. Tokenism, according to Paula Nesbitt, "occurs whe[n] members of a nondominant group, either in number or status, are selected, elected or otherwise designated to represent symbolically their set within an occupation or organization" (194). The trope of the *token black guy* is a case of tokenism in which film and television production companies, in an attempt to please changing standards of the social fabric that constitutes their audience, include black characters—in this case, a black man—to symbolically represent the entire black American experience and demonstrate the company's awareness of the plight of African Americans without actually contributing to the cause. Other instances of more diverse representation respond to market forces that follow mainstream trends and open up to new potential customers. The blaxploitation film movement both "expressed and capitalized on racial politics" by satisfying the need for positive black role models in cinema (Brown 63), although many of these representations of black heroes reinforced racial stereotypes (64).

Publishing companies also took inspiration from the blaxploitation film to construct some of its black superheroes. Marvel Comics introduced characters of color in the surge of the Civil Rights movement in the 60s (5). However, they were widely rooted in racial stereotypes that separated and marked racial difference as *other* in the face of a predominantly white male superhero—while it helped with the issue of diversifying representation, it nevertheless perpetuated outdated racist representations grounded in racial stereotypes and were mostly reserved for villain characters or as comedic relief, if present at all (33). Colorfully-skinned mutants and aliens have also served to make up for lack of ethnic and racial diversity. Having green, blue, or red skin provided the possibility of numerous interpretations that cater to diverse

audiences, usually being allegorical representations of the real world (DiPaolo 219). Mutant narratives, like the X-Men, are used to represent "cultural outsiders from a marginalized and persecuted minority" (Brown 6); in recent films—not belonging to the MCU, but still a Marvel product—, the X-Men have been used to tackle issues of antisemitism, homophobia, and misogyny. Nowadays, Marvel Comics' All New, All Different initiative aims to "reflect the diversity of American identities and comic book fans" (32), an editorial shift that introduces legacy heroes. These heroes "assume responsibilities of the vacated title" (37) when the original heroes are no longer able to continue their mission. Many of the legacy heroes belong to a "different gender or ethnicity (or both) than the original superheroes" (31). For example, Iron Heart, a young, black girl appearing in the MCU's *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, in the comics is mentored by Iron Man, a white man.

Race in the MCU did not really become an issue in itself until the release of *Black Panther*. The first Iron Man movies reproduced negative stereotypes associated to muslim people due to its narrative context paralleling the discourse of post-9/11 politics. Since then, the company has evolved in its representational practices and has attempted to correct past stereotyped portrayals of non-white racial groups by increasingly adding more characters of color free of prejudiced racial conventions. Still, some problematic approaches to the inclusion of characters of color remain, even by omission, as there have been as well cases of whitewashing, such as the character of the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* (2016), and the perpetuation of the *white savior* trope. The *Black Panther* saga became a cultural phenomenon for its explicit and unapologetic blackness, celebrating beautiful and positive representations of black communities and cultures. An analysis of these movies will help discern whether its progressive appearance is truly illustrative of shifting standards in racial representation, or whether it's appropriating the aesthetics and rhetoric of black culture and liberation movements for audience diversification and the maximization of profit.

The *Black Panther* series: an approach to race issues

A most famous case of non-white superheroes is that of Black Panther, a superpowered king from the imaginary Afrofuturistic sovereign nation of Wakanda. While the character was relatively known, it wasn't until his addition to the MCU roster that it really took off as representative of an entire racial group such as the African diaspora at an international scale. Even before its release, the *Black Panther* movie had become a cultural event in itself. The film follows T'Challa (Black Panther) as he occupies the Wakandan throne after the death of his father, and has to deal, first, with his cousin Killmonger as a threat to the current political system in Wakanda, and secondly, with Wakanda's historical isolationism and repudiation of social responsibility on a global scale. The film actively makes references to real world events related to race, such as the Transatlantic slave trade, both World Wars, the Los Angeles riots in the 1990s, the assassination of black leaders, and the mass incarceration, policing, and oppression of

black people specifically in the United States, and in the world in general. The movie's release shares a similar time frame with the Black Lives Matter movement in the US, postcolonial discussions of returning stolen cultural artifacts to their original cultures, and the rise of the alt-right in Trump's America.

  Black Panther can be seen through many perspectives, as it was created with enough nuance to avoid falling to either extreme of the political spectrum in its narrative policies—or rather appealing to the entire spectrum simultaneously. The movie's villain is Killmonger, whose goal is to end the isolation of Wakanda and reverse the order of oppression, all while critiquing Wakanda for ignoring the plight of black people worldwide. One of the major plot points of the movie is his familiar relation with T'Challa, as they are cousins that were estranged because of both of their fathers' decisions: former King T'Chaka (T'Challa's father) killed his own brother, N'Jobu (Killmonger's father), after sending him to America, where he witnessed the mistreatment of the black community at societal, political, cultural, and institutional levels, which radicalized him to the point of actively seeking uprising and restitution. His death left a young Killmonger to follow his father's footsteps and surpass them, which led him to join American intelligence agencies in order to reach Wakanda and achieve his revenge. The two cousins act like polar opposites, one born into the privileges of monarchy, and the other, in the misery of discrimination; one upholding tradition, while the other seeks to expose its dirty linen; a proponent of pacifism, and an advocate for radical revolution. Many critics have compared the two with Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, given that the characters seem to champion values and approaches similar to those of the activists—non-violent political action against violent revolution—, and even their personal history, belonging to different social and economic classes.

  Killmonger's ideology and motivation are a source of debate, as his claims are justified and his anger justifiable, however his actions bring down the potential of his revolutionary action. Philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that Killmonger is the real hero of the film, denouncing the injustices and refusing to collaborate in their perpetuation by staying in the "false abundance of Wakanda." There are several instances in the film in which Killmonger voices very genuine concerns regarding the history of racial oppression. For example, in a scene set in a fictional museum that stands for the actual British Museum, he performs a speech about the repatriation of stolen cultural artifacts to their original civilizations, which is a legitimate point to raise as it references ongoing debates in Postcolonialism studies; however, this idea is ultimately soiled by a utilitarian approach because the intents to use those artifacts as weapons rather than returning them to their original cultures. Following the narrative trope of a traditional villain, Killmonger is prone to speeches: another two instances show him declaring his motives and intentions, condemning Wakanda's isolationism in the face of racial oppression, and posing compelling critiques to a powerful system that ignored the plight of black people world-wide. However rightful and understandable his critiques are, they are eventually discredited because of his

chosen methodology: violent radical revolution followed by an inversion of power dynamics of oppression. He admits to killing who he calls his own brothers and sisters in his journey to reach Wakanda, and is shown multiple times acting violently against black women at a time when the vulnerable position of black women in America is finally being recognized at a larger scale. Associated with this character, alongside a warning of the dangers of ideological extremism, are aspects concerning black culture. Brown highlights the connection between Killmonger and the "language, mannerism, and political stance" of gangster rap, which is narratively "rejected as an inappropriate position to emulate" (72). A less conspicuous association can be made when analyzing his physique: Killmonger's body is covered in scarifications, a technique that to a more conservative audience can be seen as violent and linked to negative conceptions of their practitioners as backwards or savage. In Killmonger's case, each brand represents one kill, and this association between the cultural tradition of scarification and the act of killing can reinforce a negative perception of actual communities that practice it.

There is incongruity in the character of Killmonger. His valid revolutionary political stance of justified anger against systemic oppression, on the one hand, and against a powerful nation whose inaction perpetuates said oppression on the other, is ultimately contradicted, undermined, and discredited by his homicidal methods. These methods include both actively killing, and replacing the current colonial order to revert power dynamics of racial oppression, a government destabilization practice he learned as a JSOC and CIA agent. As much as he sports a radical revolutionary belief, his actions are rooted in colonial and imperialist practices that historically have perpetuated the destabilization of developing, recently independent black nations, and other nations in the global South and the Middle East, for political control and oil monopoly.

The inconsistencies of the villain, his violent methods, and the overall triumph of a more measured approach to issues of race rather than radical action, seem to cater to the reinforcement and maintenance of current political systems proper of superhero narratives. Revolution is subdued, and the status quo is perpetuated, disguised in T'Challa's small-scale charity—he establishes educational and technological facilities, and promises to open Wakanda to global dynamics. However, there is no real change to the structures of oppression that create the conditions of said oppression, providing the opportunity for a new Killmonger to arise and defeat.

Coincidentally, the second movie belonging to the *Black Panther* series also deals with the aftermath of colonization, racial discrimination, and resource exploitation, in this case, in South America. The film now follows Shuri, T'Challa's little sister, and heir to both the Wakandan throne and the mantle of Black Panther after T'Challa's death, as she comes face to face in an ideological conflict with Namor, a god-like figure loosely inspired by the Mayan serpent deity K'uk'ulkan, who plays the role of the main antagonist or villain, .

Namor's origin story in the movie also resembles that of Killmonger, being orphaned and scarred at a very young age due to the horrors of colonialism and racial oppression. Through a flashback, the audience learns that he was born in the 16th century. His people, a clan named Talokan, are driven away from their land by the colonization of the Spanish empire, but are able to survive thanks to the ingestion of a plant that grants them the ability to breathe and live underwater. In the ocean, they form their own civilization with Namor as god and king, and go unbothered for centuries. The main conflict in the film arises from Wakanda's refusal to share its vibranium[5] with the rest of the world, and the discovery of more vibranium in the Talokan territory. The subsequent search parties that try to mine it as a resource are perceived by the people of Talokan as a threat to their livelihoods. Wanting to protect his people from enduring the same suffering they experienced during colonization, Namor threatens with war, turning into the narrative antagonist or supervillain.

Namor is another ambiguous villain. His tragic origin story provides an explanation for the isolationism of Talokan, and his motives are protecting his people from dangerous external forces that want to exploit their land for resources. He has a lot in common with Shuri, the protagonist, and is able to sympathize with her, but he is still set on defending his underwater nation. He understands Wakanda's isolationism as well, having chosen a similar—if not identical—attitude of disinterest towards the rest of the world. His character's ambiguity is further developed through a partial empathy towards Wakanda, as he attempts to negotiate before starting a full-on war and, and once he believes that conflict is inevitable, he gives them time to bury and mourn their dead after a preventive strike. When he shares his backstory with Shuri, he begins by saying that "How is never as important as why" (01:05:20). This expression could be interpreted as a way of saying that the ends ultimately justify the means, which is a recurring pattern in villains: their grievances are enough excuse to begin murderous rampages that would eventually help them reach their goals. He presents highly dichotomized thinking patterns that ultimately align him more with his oppressors rather than with nuanced approaches to difference, as his stance towards other nations categorizes them either into allies or enemies. Such an extremist position may emulate totalitarian ideas about nationhood, race, and ethnicity, and this position is reinforced in a scene before the final battle in which Namor gives a speech that visually evokes imagery and iconography proper of dictatorial regimes. Additionally, Namor suggests that Wakanda and Talokan should unite against the rest of the world and "protect each other by striking them first" (01:19:29), which exposes further inconsistencies in the character in relation to the previously mentioned theory of reactionarism of superheroes. Striking first could be seen as proaction, which is generally reserved for villains, rather than reaction, associated with heroes, but in reality Namor is actually reacting to the threat posed by

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[5] Vibranium is a mineral resource that came from space and provided Wakanda with the power that enabled the nation to develop technologically. The end of the first *Black Panther* movie puts an end to Wakandan isolationism and gives the world knowledge of the potency of vibranium, which launches a world-wide search for the mineral.

American search parties trying to mine vibranium. Following the theory of reactionarism, this narrative structure would position Namor as a hero reacting to a threat that would destabilize his nation's status quo, rather than a villain who plans to disrupt the current order.

Shuri in this movie almost crosses the line towards villainy, as she is determined to avenge the death of her mother at the hands of Namor, and loss of her entire family, in general. She is tempted by her anger, and even sees her cousin Killmonger in the Ancestral Plane when she takes the heart-shaped herb to receive the powers of the Black Panther. She denies the similarities between them, but still shares a vengeful instinct that she has to surpass in order to become a proper superhero. When she is about to give a death blow to Namor, a compilation of flashbacks of the movie appears in reverse, juxtaposing images of Wakanda and Talokan, and Shuri and Namor as parallel and similar, if not equal.

There are many narrative parallels between both nations and characters: the two states are incredibly rich in resources, which makes them turn to isolationism to protect them, for which they are attacked and have to defend themselves. However, Namor is narratively constructed as the villain because he doesn't hesitate to kill and he states it explicitly. Shuri follows the same path until the end of the movie, when she reflects and realizes that killing is not the answer to her and her nation's problems. The parallelisms between the two realms, separated as the surface world and the underwater world, remind of Jordan Peele's critically acclaimed film *Us* (2019), in which the surface world is able to thrive thanks to the disenfranchisement of the underground world, being a symbolic representation of US class dynamics.

The way race is represented in this film diverts from the more positive depiction of difference in *Black Panther* and aligns with traditional racial representations of the superhero genre, again, turning racialized communities into mutants with weird skin colors. The introduction of the Talokan people is literally styled as a horror movie, painting them as sea monsters that rise from the waters to kill. They evoke typical depictions of mythical sirens and mermaids, who use their eerie but beautiful singing to lure sailors to their deaths. They are unequivocally shown as *other*, given that they have a different skin color, a different language, and even a different life source, as they can breathe water instead of oxygen. They are not given any character development, they remain only warriors or servants. Furthermore, their portrayal associates the racial *other* with nature through their clothing and habitat, as well as with their connection with the animal kingdom, using orcas and whales to travel and fight. The entire community is superpowered, being able to breathe underwater, having superstrength, and having the ability to self-heal, some of them being completely bulletproof.

Moreover, the decision to continue the examination of racial dynamics and the consequences of colonialism stray away from the original comic book source, in which Namor was not Mayan, but Greco-Roman. In an interview with MCU producer Nate Moore, he states that this editorial departure was consciously made by director Ryan Coogler in order to ground the plot in reality and add depth to an otherwise uninteresting character (Matt Beloni 21:31),

which led to the addition of themes of colonization to explain why the Talokan lived underwater and aligned both Namor and Talokan with the themes of *Black Panther* (22:57). The film is decidedly clear in its mentions of the actual colonization process of the Spanish conquest of South America, using explicit imagery of suffering, and direct references to the religious excuses behind the invasions. The people of Talokan experience the pains of disease, their skin buried in scabs, as they were infected with smallpox brought by the colonizers and didn't have the appropriate methods to treat it. In Namor's first excursion to the surface, he encounters a plantation, where he witnesses the physical torture endured by the people enslaved by the conquistadors, who whip them while in chains. The role of Christianity is also foregrounded, given that many of the Spanish men in the plantation are priests, calling the Talokan demons. It is a priest who gives Namor his name, a play with the words "niño sin amor" (01:09:49). The depiction of religion represents the way in which it was used in order to justify the conquest, seeing natives as savages that needed indoctrination into Christianity to achieve salvation.

As it occurs in *Black Panther*, there are references to the role of American intelligence agencies in the destabilization process of entire nations for resources, and even questions the US' self-imposed shroud of innocence in international policy when agent Ross confronts his superior by asking: "You ever think what we [America] would be doing if the US was the only country in the world with vibranium?" (01:44:31). Queen Ramonda, T'Challa's and Shuri's mother, actively calls out the UN member states in their drive for resource control, represented by France and the US, coinciding with the two countries that had more colonial influence on the black diaspora, one through colonization of the African continent, and the other through the systematic enslavement of black people in America.

The legitimacy of the claims of the film's sympathetic villain are eventually undermined by his murderous initiatives, even though the protagonist-hero considerably follows the same patterns of action. The narrative conflict ends with a moral lesson of mercy and empathy, but still not one of the *good guys* uses their powers to change the structures that allow for political, social, and economic inequality. The lack of an actual resolution, paired with an open-ended conclusion, assures a new installment of the *Black Panther* movie series.

This chapter presented the two movies belonging to the MCU's *Black Panther* series, which foreground a superficial examination of several, complex, and interconnecting issues of race, (ne)colonialism, and class difference, failing to provide alternatives to the systems of oppression they portray, or actually addressing the complexity of these issues. Both movies try to speak on multiple topics while appealing to very different audiences with greatly diverse political perspectives; these audiences are infantilized due to the unsuccessful and simplistic resolution of the narrative conflict, ultimately providing a happy ending that at the same time opens the possibilities for new installments. The lack of deep exploration of these topics results

in the classic Disneyfication of stories, which sanitizes the history and practices of actual liberation activism, presenting a perfunctory and strategic support of black empowerment movements that is ultimately used for marketing.

Class

As it does with race issues, the superhero genre has instances of exploration of class struggles as well. While these narratives may seem like harmless entertainment or even appear to explicitly question the current economic system and status quo, the general approach typically upholds capitalist and neoliberal hegemony and the existing power structures in society through its depiction of capitalist and working class superheroes and supervillains. Capitalism and neoliberalism are two distinct but interrelated concepts that significantly impact global economics, politics, and social structures; the former being understood as an economic system, and the latter as a political and economic philosophy which can be seen as a specific form of capitalism. Capitalism is an economic system based on the idea of private property and individual entrepreneurship with minimal interference from the state. The market forces of supply and demand are seen as the most efficient means of distributing resources and determining prices, rather than government intervention (Heilbroner and Boettke). Capitalism has been associated with economic growth, innovation, and entrepreneurship, and defended by economists and philosophers like Adam Smith, Robert LeFevre, or Ayn Rand, but it has also been criticized for creating inequality, and social injustice—with Karl Marx as one of its most renowned opponents—as well as contributing to climate change and reinforcing other oppressive structures that concern race and gender. Neoliberalism is a political and economic philosophy that highlights "sustained economic growth as the means to achieve human progress" (Smith), advocating for free markets, deregulation, and limited government intervention in the economy. This philosophy has been associated with a range of policies, including privatization, free trade, and austerity measures. The effects of these policies result in the "institutionalization of class-based wealth and power, [⋯] the disenfranchisement of the working class and the concentration of monopoly power, [and the] outsourcing of government functions," developing into a market state in which "corporations and government became interchangeable" (Hassler-Forest). Just as it happens with capitalism, proponents of neoliberalism argue that it promotes economic growth and efficiency, but its critics argue that it has led to increasing inequality, environmental degradation, and social and economic instability.

Neoliberalism, as a political economic philosophy, favors free-market policies that take capitalism to an extreme; however, ideologically, it becomes the new cultural framework for understanding reality. The pervasiveness of neoliberalist ideology can be understood through the concept of hegemony. Hegemony refers to the dominance, whether social, cultural, political, or economic, of one group over another (Rosamond), naturalizing the internalization of the dominant perspective by the subordinate (Manicastri 2). Popular culture plays a significant role

in this process, as its perceived value as mere entertainment surpasses individual ideological barriers, creating models through which to understand and interpret current events.

Hassler-Forest states that the resulting internalization of the pillars of neoliberal capitalism creates a "culture of perpetual crisis" because of the unpredictability of the system itself, which renders individuals into a "perpetual traumatized passivity." Indeed, the individual under extreme capitalism is hegemonically conditioned to "respond to trauma through consumption, [and] social alienation," as they are taught by the "commodification of trauma through branding and popular narratives." The unsustainability of the extreme methods that neoliberalism requires results in a constant state of alertness and crisis, in turn generating a common desire for stability and continuity that can be satisfied by the "establishment of narratives that suggested continuity and tradition" that provide "mythical frameworks that naturalize historically specific values" particular of neoliberalism. Popular narratives of capitalism reflect current events, whether literally or metaphorically, at the same time that they decontextualize them by "remov[ing] historical coordinates" that allow the individual and society as a whole to comprehend historical trauma. They promote neoliberal logic by showing a "'perpetual present' [that] isolates audiences from actual engagement," as is the case of superhero stories, presenting the same narrative framework that cyclically reboots itself and depicts the average citizen as a helpless victim that constantly needs exceptional heroes to save them.

The analysis of different representations of working class and capitalist superheroes and supervillains can help discern the ideological subtext of the text, which, some critics argue, perpetuates neoliberal capitalist hegemony. Capitalist superheroes usually provide capitalism with a likable, seemingly relatable face that perpetuates the acceptance of capitalism as a good and natural economic system. These heroes "act outside their own class interest" (Manicastri 3) and never abuse the system, and if they do, it's rarely in their benefit, and this transgression is ultimately redeemed for being in the benefit of a large percentage of society. Working class superheroes typically depend on capitalist superheroes, assimilating capitalist ideology and working along with their capitalist courterparts to "end the class conflict" (3). When faced with working class villains, working class heroes relate to them because of their class struggle and try to save them and incorporate them into the system. Capitalist villains, on the other hand, represent the most unchecked aspects of capitalism by embodying the "logic of capitalism and tri[ying] to maximize profit at all costs" (3), and frequently desire the power and influence of the more benevolent and appreciated capitalist heroes. They are always the face of greed, not proof that the reality of capitalism serves to exploit the workers to enrich a small elite that would be capable of anything to maintain their status. Working class villains generally have grievances related to capitalist superheroes due to "wealth inequality, alienation from their work, [and lack of] access to healthcare" (3), and envy the superhero's social status and influence. Marvel, in line with their editorial decision of representing "the world outside your window," has several

characters that are defined by their class: Iron Man is a wealthy capitalist highly regarded in society, Spider-Man is a working or low class student that occasionally uses his powers to make ends meet, and Ant-Man is an ex-convict that struggles with unemployment and social stigmatization. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the MCU, it is imperative to analyze the ways in which it comments on class issues as a whole.

One of the most obvious cases of class commentary in the MCU can be seen in the character of Iron Man.[6] Born a millionaire, he flaunts his wealth and status, maintained by the profitability of his military industrial complex empire, and the many enemies that arise from it. This parallels the way the American government and military used to trade weapons with the Middle East during the Cold War to assure dominance against Russia, and continued economic and military relationships to control the access to oil, which later developed into war in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the War on Terror after the September 11 attacks, and cemented the centrality of American interventionism on the global stage. Iron Man's narrative arc in the MCU atones for his involvement in the arming of radical terrorist groups—which are marked as *other* following the standards of Orientalism—, and he begins to use this wealth to help society by establishing symbolic scholarship funds and government projects, but never actually addressing the societal, political, and economic structures that allowed for the making of his fortune.

Other examples of class commentary can be seen in the movie series of *Ant-Man* (2015), which shows an "inversion" of the thesis of this paper. In this case, the villains are not the ones with a more progressive ideology, and it is the hero, Scott Lang (later joined by Hope Pym, the Wasp), who is persecuted by the establishment. In the first film, the villain represents an exceptional case of the corruption of capitalism, and the overall undertone of the movie appears to favor working class sentiments by critiquing certain aspects of neoliberalism and capitalism, and by highlighting societal issues such as the difficulty that a criminal record brings in the search and maintenance of a job. Despite the Robin Hood-like protagonist and the general atmosphere of the films, they still buttress capitalism through a positive portrayal of a capitalist mentor and father figure in the character of Hank Pym, and by showing the evils of capitalism as an exception to the rule.

Additionally, the treatment of race can be perceived as somewhat problematic when analyzing the association of race and criminality, as a majority of inmates and ex-cons presented in the story are marked as racialized individuals. The films somewhat address this fact by using said association to the benefit of the protagonist(s), as they, as ex-convicts, have intel on the know-hows and methods for infiltrating the enemy's headquarters. Furthermore, these characters are also linked with service jobs, and their racial background serves as a given when filling these positions during the heist. The second installment of the series, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018), follows the same line as its predecessor. Scott (again a convict under house arrest after the events in *Civil War*) and his ex-con friends are now incorporated into the capitalist system as

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[6] The names Iron Man and his alter ego, Tony Stark, will be used interchangeably.

business owners, using their criminal experience to run a security company. The film brings up connections between sketchy businessmen and law enforcement agencies; however the formers are again depicted as the rotten apples of capitalism and not representative of the system as a whole, and the latters are given a friendly face through amicable character Jimmy Woo, and there is no further exploration of the association of corporations, government and law enforcement agencies. While there is no explicit commentary about her class status, the villain in this second movie could be classified as a working class woman who attempts to impose capitalist logic upon the heroes, wanting to extract the resource she needs to live, even if it means killing another person. The case of this villain is an interesting one, apart from the internalization of the extractivist and exploitative aspects of capitalist ideology by a historically affected segment of the population, as she is presented as a mixed raced woman in a crucially precarious health state. Her condition, which at the same time provides her with powers, makes her momentarily invisible and inexistent, a circumstance that could be interpreted as analogous to the long history of medical racism and misogyny experienced by racialized women in the United States.

Apart from specific characters, there are other cases for examination in the representation of class issues in the MCU. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), Captain America jokingly states that he can't even afford a place in Brooklyn, which in some way aligns him with working class folk that struggle to find affordable housing opportunities. This is done despite Captain belonging to one of the most prestigious social clubs—the Avengers—as can be seen in a party scene full of members of high society; the Avengers are even shown separate and higher than the rest of the world. *Black Panther* shows how status can influence personal perception, interpretation, and imagination, which could be further examined through the analysis of the differences between T'Challa's and Killmonger's Ancestral planes. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Iron Man wants to render the Avengers obsolete by designing an artificial intelligence to replace them in world affairs. This brings up the current debate of artificial intelligence and the fear that it will replace part of the working population. Also, the way in which Iron Man delegates the Avengers' duties unto artificial intelligence to do the dirty work for them can be seen as analogous to outsourcing practices that focus some of the most unpleasant, dangerous, and deadly industries on the global South. The horde of robots threatening to destroy Earth could exemplify the non-human, which according to theories of the *other*, disables identification and centers anthropocentrism, as well as whiteness and maleness.

Caught in the spiderweb: an exploration of class in the *Spider-Man* saga

Spider-Man[7] is one of the most known examples of working class superheroes. When first introduced in the MCU, the audience already knows Spider-Man due to the cultural remnants of other versions of the character. The MCU's Spider-Man strays from the original

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[7] The names of Spider-Man and Peter Parker, his secret identity, will be used interchangeably.

version in many ways. There is no showing of the origin story of Peter Parker being bit by a radioactive spider, which grants him his powers; Uncle Ben is nowhere to be seen—or even mentioned—when his death is a crucial part of the formation of the identity and mission of Spider-Man, providing him with the famous catchphrase "With great power, comes great responsibility;" Aunt May is re-imagined as a young, empowered woman; and, while there are some mentions of the Parker's economic struggles, they are in no way as noticeable as they have been in previous reincarnations of the character. The class components that originally characterized Spider-Man and his mission are merely an afterthought in this new version: he doesn't fight corrupt businessmen like the Green Goblin or Kingpin, nor is his livelihood constantly threatened by a lack of financial stability, leading him to take up underpaying jobs, or having to take his own picture as Spider-Man for the Daily Bugle. Contrastingly, in the MCU, he becomes the heir to Tony's empire. Peter is first introduced to the franchise in *Civil War*, as Iron Man intends to recruit him to fight the deterrents of the Sokovia Accords initiative. From the start, the relationship between Spider-Man and Iron Man shows an unequal power dynamic, as Peter is forced to obey Stark believing it will be for his own good, when in reality he is just being used for his powers—although this interpretation is narratively disencouraged. The emotional manipulation that Stark excerpts on Peter reflects the workings of hegemonic ideology, which makes the subject internalize the dominant ideology even if it is to the subject's detriment. Multimillionaire Stark blackmails the working class teenager Peter by threatening to rat him out to his aunt, and exploiting his economic necessities, and at the same time undermines his capacities by questioning his hand-made suit, as well as his identity, masculinity, and maturity. From there on, their relationship is that of mentor and pupil and develops into a surrogate paternity as Iron Man begins to care for a young, impressionable Peter. The MCU's Iron Man and Spider-Man are intrinsically connected, as the first two Spider-Man narrative conflicts depend on villains affected by Stark's business ventures and practices.

The first solo movie, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, follows Peter Parker in his attempt to balance student life and superhero responsibilities. As with *Ant-Man*, the overall sentiment of the movie leans towards a positive portrayal of working class folks through a vibrant and multicultural Queens, NY; it also appeals to Gen Z audiences through its teenage protagonists, their interests, even their language and humor. For example, Michelle, Peter's love interest, is painted as a quirky but lovable young woman who explicitly provides criticism of the status quo through comical social-justice-warrior-like statements that, however, instantly disempower her claims. In what could be regarded as an attempt on the part of the MCU to both appeal to young revolutionaries and their deterrents, Michelle refuses to access the Washington Monument because she doesn't "really want to celebrate something that was built by slaves" (00:58:58) and when bored asks: "Can we leave? I wanna go to a protest in front of an embassy or something" (00:46:19). This superficially pleases the desire for representation of young people who believe in the power of protests and activism, and appeals to those who scoff at them and accuse them of

being performative and uninformed. Furthermore, the fact that Michelle is a young, mixed-race girl could be contested for perpetuating the burden of educating the ignorant usually placed onto racialized people in general, and women in particular. Swinging to the other end of the spectrum, the crossing of race and criminality is present once again, as most of the *bad guys* are either black or hispanic, and the visual representation of gangster rap and cholo culture is somewhat demonized by its association with crime, which highly contrasts the portrayal of Peter's multicultural friends and classmates, like Ned, his Philippino best-friend, a traditional *nerd* interested in *Star Wars* and science-fiction.

The film begins by providing background on its main supervillain, The Vulture, an ex-business owner who starts dealing weapons made from alien technology in the black market. His origin story scene shows him—Adrian Toomes, before becoming the Vulture—and his crew working to clean up the leftover rubble after the Battle of New York, when their operation is suddenly interrupted by the United States Department of Damage Control, a government branch associated with Stark Industries. The Department tells Adrian that their services are no longer needed and dispatch them from their clean-up duties given that Damage Control would take care of the debris of the fight. The agency deprecates their capability for the job, implying they lack proper qualifications to carry out such a task. He complains, as he invested in expensive equipment for the job, and his and his crew's families depend on their salaries for their livelihoods. There is no mention of any type of financial compensation for their sudden and unexpected unemployment, so Adrian decides to keep the salvaged alien parts already in his possession and, with the help of his crew, begins modifying them to turn them into weapons to deal in the black market. Their anger against the system that upholds the Avenger's freedom of action devoid of consequences is exemplified by a crew member's words: "Now the assholes who made this mess are paid to clean it up" (00:03:25). On the one hand, it would be fair to assume that those responsible for causing such destruction are supposed to provide some compensation, but the means to achieve this are questionable at the least. The *compensation* is done through the unjust termination of a legitimate city contract, which leaves a fair amount of people at risk of poverty and homelessness. The *compensation* would also eventually benefit one of the wealthiest men on Earth—Tony Stark—who coincidentally participated in the destruction, and is now going to profit from the clean-up due to his entrepreneurial connections with the US government. During the rest of the movie, the Vulture's motives remain the same, as he wants to continue to provide for his crew and his family, but he is narratively constructed as the villain so he has to turn into the face of greed and kill unremorsefully in order to demonstrate his wickedness, and delegitimize his claims.

There are several parallelisms between the Vulture and Iron Man: both become rich by manufacturing and dealing weapons, both build a super-suit with incredible technological advances to defend their interests, and visually they are presented through several up-close shots whenever they are in their respective suits. When Spider-Man confronts the Vulture, he responds

with a speech that acknowledges the preceding parallelisms, and lectures him on the way the capitalist elite preys on the lower classes. This is immediately discovered to be a ruse so the villain can buy some time for his escape, which almost seems like an unfortunate self-reflection of the way the MCU uses genuine critical discourse for its own corporate purposes.

The Vulture presents many incongruities, as does the movie as a whole. This villain is hypocritical at essence, critiquing the same practices he employs in his entrepreneurial venture, which dilutes the truth in his statements. The film seems to appease a working class sentiment, embodied in the character of Spider-Man, through unsubstantial criticism, as it has been the case so far in the several analyses in this paper.

The second installment of the movie series, *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, follows more or less the same structure as the first one, with Peter still trying to balance teenage life and superhero duties, now grieving the loss of his mentor and father surrogate Stark.

Michelle is once more presented as a basis for double identification due to her snarky remarks disguised as funny comments. While she is actually speaking truth in some occasions, it is again presented through humor, such as when she jokingly questions whether her beauty grants her with value as a woman—which could be both interpreted as siding with feminist deconstructions of traditional standards of beauty and privilege, and as well as reinforcing more negative beliefs of feminists nowadays being too sensitive and alert—, or suggesting that Peter should protect his personal data with a VPN so "the government can't track [him]" (00:05:37), which is disregarded one more time through humor, alluding to unreliable theories of conspiracy. However, the narrative reinforces the veracity behind Michelle's claims by having Nick Fury[8] track the location of one of Peter's classmates through his phone—of course, their lives depend on it, so the transgression can be forgiven. The reach of Fury's influence is also treated with ease, despite turning dystopian upon further reflection, as he has enough power to have various news media outlets spread misinformation—this is done, once again, to the benefit of the protagonists, and not done with malice.

This movie removes Spider-Man from his usual place of action, New York, or the US, shown in the beginning scenes set in Mexico, and then sustained by Peter's school trip to Europe. The visual representation of these places creates extremely contrasting images between Mexico and European cities. Mexico is depicted through the typical "yellow filter." This filter was initially used to represent locations with tropical or dry weather, and later became a "standard [⋯] to depict Latin America, [⋯] showing low-income countries and violent places" (Ponce). In contrast, the European cities of Venice, Prague, and London have a clear image, nice color scheme, contrasting its blue image filter with the yellow. Even in their destruction, both places are presented as different: the destroyed Mexican village surrounded by a hurricane of sand is no comparison to the beautifully constructed, spectacular destructions of European staple touristic locations.

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[8] Nick Fury is a spy, former Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. and founder of the Avengers ("Nick Fury").

The villain in this film is Mysterio, who acts as a cautionary tale that warns the audience that "appearances can be deceiving" (01:32:49), an appropriate moral lesson for the age of fake news and misinformation. He is initially presented as a superpowered human from another universe in which his Earth was obliterated by the Elementals, a series of climatic monsters that each represent one of the elements of fire, water, air, and earth. The twist is revealed when the audience learns that he is a regular human from our Earth called Quentin Beck; in fact, he is a disgruntled former employee of Tony Stark, still resentful that the hero didn't recognize his genius even after his death. Stark also induces envy in him, as Beck desires to surpass his levels of fame and recognition above all.

As Iron Man and the Vulture, he has no actual superpowers, just access to an incredible amount of advanced technology that he uses to stage the Elementals' attacks. He is aware of the ridiculousness of the situation, but continues with the farce because unexpected superhero fights have become so regular in the MCU that they are "apparently the kind of thing people will believe right now" (01:03:19) without further inspection. He instigates fear of the Elementals among Peter, Fury, and the population at large, and the feeling of imminent threat disables everyone's capacity to distinguish truth from lie, and allows Mysterio to indisputably swoop in and try to stop these monsters of his own making. This is reminiscent of the present climate of perpetual crisis brought on by neoliberalist policies which renders the individual useless, passive, and awaiting some higher power to act on their behalf.

Mysterio provides some criticism to Stark's influence and wealth but, as superficial as it is in itself, the potential critique of systematic economic issues is immediately displaced onto a personal context of envy and resentment that completely disregards the possibility of further inspecting the circumstances that enable the situation in the first place. His techno-farce alludes to current, widespread concerns about misinformation and simultaneously relocates the debate into the personal, disregarding a more profound exploration on the realities of fake news, and the people that create and spread them.[9] Moreover, being the villain, he is driven by an egomaniac mission to be remembered, and he has to be prepared to exhort or kill anyone who opposes, including school children. The final trick up his sleeve after his death is to reveal Peter's secret identity in public, creating a fake narrative that frames Spider-Man as his killer and the mastermind behind the fake Elemental attacks, a story which is immediately distributed and reinforced by the Daily Bugle without fact checking any of this information, in the classic, inflammatory style of Fox News.

The movie as a whole, through Mysterio's dialogue, is a reflection of the structure of superhero narratives, especially superhero movies. He is confronted when he orders his crew to increase the casualties which, according to him, will be forgotten "when their new savior descends" (01:12:16), reflecting how innocent civilian casualties are usually either omitted or overlooked in these stories. He is also aware of the mediatic obsession with calamity and

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[9] This creates a contrast to Nick Fury's misinformation tactics, which are carried out in good faith, and not for personal, selfish interests.

suffering, knowing that only spectacular destruction will draw the attention necessary to gain the recognition he desires—this is parallel to the way in which superhero movies seem to recreate themselves in the arrangement of computer-generated scenes of chaos and devastation.

The MCU's version of Spider-Man can be read for its statements on class from a widely different perspective than its previous versions. Gone are the character's traditional villains that represented real threats to working class folks—such as corruption, massive layoffs, or having to work their lives away for a job that doesn't recognize their value—, now replaced with bad guys with a personal feud against the main capitalist in the franchise. The dire economic circumstances that drove original Peter, like facing eviction after the death of his blue collar Uncle Ben and leaving traditional housewife Aunt May unable to pay the bills and with no access to healthcare, are swapped in the MCU for a brief comment on dumpster diving for electronic scraps and need of a scholarship. The friendly neighborhood Spider-Man that webbed himself a place in the memory and hearts of several generations has been replaced by a technocratic shadow of himself that attempts to raise the same sentiments he used to, while renouncing to the essence of his character.

Environmentalism

Climate change has been a reality ever since the Industrial Revolution and the development of capitalist economics normalized the systematic and exhaustive extraction of natural resources in order to generate profit. The dangers of a rapidly changing climatic situation have been warned by scientists as early as the 1970s, and since then, the need to raise awareness about global warming has made the priority list of many nations. Many authors, among them Professor Naomi Klein, defend that rampant, unchecked and ruthless capitalism has an alarming impact on the natural world and the *other*—whether it's nature, non-white and non-male populations, or animals—, and that the simultaneous domination and control of resources by corporate empires enable the systematic exhaustive extraction of natural resources and people, and is directly linked to environmental crises that create extreme weather conditions and diminish resources (5). The logic of extractivism is usually dependent on the systemic exploitation of the global South, perceived as an undeveloped Third World that is kept poor and exploited by Western nations and economies.

Ecology can be understood as a philosophy, and as a social and political movement preoccupied with the protection of the environment that responds to growing concerns about the degradation of nature and the climate, particularly as a result of capitalist industrialization and urbanization. It emphasizes the interdependence of all living things, and the need to protect the diversity and complexity of natural systems. As any social and/or political movement, there are many different branches that derive from that main premise of alerting, reducing, and preventing environmental deterioration. While the most common—and most known—branch of ecology

concerns a more positive perspective regarding environmental activism, some others fall into ambiguous and dangerous rethorics that perpetuate the ideologies behind systems of oppression. That is the case of ecofascism, a deeply disturbing theory that promotes the disenfranchisement of gender and racial minorities in its defense of natural resources and spaces.

Ecofascism can be defined as the blending of fascist political ideals with environmental concerns, a combination of fascism and ethical holism supported by racism, nationalism, and xenophobia (Dyett & Thomas 217; "Ecofascism;" Protopapadakis 587; Zimmerman & Toulouse 64). The target of ecofascist practices can be directed both at the environment, biosphere, and species, as well as humans (Orton), borrowing from fascist holism the debate between the priority of the collective good against individual rights—fascist perspectives usually accept that the good of the whole is better than the welfare, liberties, and rights of individuals (Zimmerman & Toulouse 66). Current ecofascist movements are concerned with (neo)Malthusian theories of overpopulation, lack of natural resources, and reduction of population, especially the poor, people of color, and women in the Global South (Dyett & Thomas 218, 219).

There seems to be an intense debate between the fields of deep ecology and social ecology regarding the meaning of ecofascism, both accusing each other of supporting ecofascist beliefs. The ideologies, practices, and goals of each discipline varies widely depending on the field of the authors in question, who denounce each other using very similar arguments.

Ethics Professor Evangelos D. Protopapadakis provides a meticulous breakdown of philosopher Kaarlo Pentti Linkola, a deep ecologist who calls for authoritarian regimes to ensure the well-being and preservation of the ecosphere, even if it means exercising violence on part of the population for the collective good. Linkola's philosophy combines fascism, ethical holism, and ecology, advocating for the collective good in the debate against individual well-being. According to Linkola, humanity is in jeopardy because of its own biological nature, which leads the species to reproduce and progress technologically, increasing human population and exhausting natural resources, conditions enabled by liberal democratic political regimes (Protopapadakis 591-593). Human nature also prevents us from seeing this reality, which is only acknowledged by "clear-sighted individuals" that overcome this rejection and become "visionary mutants" that will lead the rest in the restoration scheme of the ecosphere (Protopapadakis 594, 595). The restoration and preservation plan can only be carried out when exercising authoritarian practices typical of fascist and dictatorial regimes, which would be allowed to conduct themselves in an "ethically reprehensible" manner (Protopapadakis 597).

Given this latter revision of the theories of a deep ecologist flagging an undoubtedly questionable ideology, it is no surprise that some detractors of the deep ecology movement accuse it of reinforcing fascist practices in the name of ecology. Social theorist Murray Bookchin provides an analysis and critique of the deep ecology movement against his own field, social ecology. While deep ecologist David Orton claims that social ecology advocates for human interventionism and shaping nature according to human interest, Bookchin defines social ecology

in the same positive manner as Orton defines deep ecology: as a group of "deeply concerned naturalists, communitarians, social radicals, and feminists" (Bookchin 4) attempting to analyze the social problems that culminate in environmental degradation, and seeking an alternative model to current anthropocentric and industrial capitalist society (17). Social ecology, in contrast to deep ecology, perceives itself as "avowedly rational" in its study of evolution and the biosphere, and quite aware of the sociological roots of the current climatic crisis, declaring themselves against hierarchical structures of power, imperialism, "any kind of centrism," especially those who are anti-human in their biocentrism (16).

The superhero genre, and most specifically Marvel and the MCU, do not frequently rely on explicit environmental commentary in the construction of their narratives; nature can be regarded simply as a given, as it does not play a significant role in the main plotlines. Despite the lack of clear-cut discussions of environmental concerns, there are several aspects that show the prevalence of natural elements in superhero stories. For instance, in the movie series of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, there are cases of utilitarianism and instrumentalism[10] regarding animals, as the protagonists are able to communicate with ants thanks to the aid of highly advanced technological resources that provide them with telekinetic capacities. The films make a point of Scott Lang giving names to individual ants, and cares about them and mourns them when they fall in battle, which differentiates him from the rest of the main characters—still, the animals are used for their many abilities instead of being appreciated for their existence. The use of nature is also seen in the origin stories of certain heroes, like Black Panther and Spider-Man: the first gets his powers by drinking the heart-shaped herb, which grants him the abilities necessary to protect the kingdom of Wakanda; and the second gains his powers when bitten by a radioactive spider. Anthropomorphism[11] also makes an appearance in the MCU through the characters of Rocket and Groot, both Guardians of the Galaxy: the former is a talking racoon with a somewhat humanized body, and Groot is a sentient tree alien that only pronounces the words "I am Groot" with different inflections. The television special *Werewolf by Night* (2022) could be regarded as an exception to the rule of the superhero genre lacking environmental discourse, specifically animal rights. In the special, Mexican actor Gael García Bernal plays the role of a monster rescuer that infiltrates hunting groups to protect these misunderstood and highly vulnerable creatures, as he himself is a werewolf and regarded as a monster whenever his wolf form takes over. It is the sharing of the condition of *monster* that provides the protagonist with the empathy needed to act in such a selfless way. The choice for an actor that belongs to a racialized community for such a role could also be questioned from an ecofeminist perspective, which highlights the ways in which nature and race are usually intertwined in a white, Westernized point of view, which

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[10] Instrumentalism, according to ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood, occurs when value is derived "from service to others," which has been the case in Western cultures in regards to women, racialized people, and the environment (105).

[11] Anthropomorphism, as a predominantly biological structure in the entire universe, centers humanity as default, which is a sign of the anthropocentric tendencies of Western cultures and media. Anthropocentrism is defined as ideologies that identify the rational (the human) with value (Plumwood 98).

historically has associated racial difference with the natural world in order to justify processes of domination, colonization, and political and economic control. This view of race and nature is reproduced in fiction through a recurring trope that aligns racialized characters with nature, upholding a reductionist and simplistic image of race as synchronized with the natural world in contrast with a white population that only seeks to exploit or dominate it.

The case of names and identity is also relevant in the examination of the depiction and use of nature in the genre of superheroes. Many of the MCU's superheroes do actually use animal names for their super-identities: Black Panther, Falcon, Black Widow, Ant-Man, Wasp, Spider-Man… Both Black Panther and Falcon sport the names of animal predators that may be perceived as aggressive, which could raise questions when one realizes that these names have been reserved for black superheroes, and could therefore allow for the perpetuation of unfavorable stereotypes of black masculinity as dangerous and violent. Black Widow, a former assassin now turned Avenger, makes a reference to the deadliness of the spider species, and to the use of the expression to refer to women who kill her love or sexual interests, given that her standardized beauty makes her a threat to men who may fall in her trappings. The situation pertaining to Ant-Man and Spider-Man is especially curious. Because these characters are associated with the working class, the editorial choice to give them identities that connect them with insects can serve for analysis from different perspectives, from a more sociological lens that explores the class implications to an ecofeminist one that examines the connections between these insects and the general perception of the working class among a white, Western, and financially affluent population. Ant-Man actively refers to the "little guy" to allude to working class and blue collar folks, and may point to a more collectivized approach to social issues if taking into account that ants live and work in groups as if they were one, hinting at the power of the many.

Supervillains use animals in their names as well, and coincidentally many of them belong to Spider-Man stories. The Vulture perfectly encompasses the character's identity. He is a scavenger, which poses a word play with the term Avengers at the same time that is referring to his job, as he owned a company that used to clean up after the Avengers' battles, but it went under when Stark created a government agency to cover the service, and left the company's workers scavenging for scraps and turning them into weapons to deal in the black market. The Lizard is a former geneticist that researched reptiles' abilities to regrow missing limbs and decided to try the serum on himself, and Dr. Octopus designed a set of robotic arms that due to a malfunction became fused with his body—although these last two characters don't belong to the MCU.

Avenging Earth: ecological perspectives on *Avengers: Infinity War & Avengers: Endgame*

Despite the lack of explicit environmental discussions in the MCU, the franchise has a narrative arc that, through analysis, could be seen as partially commenting on the current state of environmental discourse through the character of Thanos, the main villain in phase three. Although he appears in several movies, as each installment serves to announce the next one or foreshadowing events that will happen in future films, his story is fully developed in *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. These are two separate movies but they are connected by plot and themes, so they will be analyzed as one continued narrative. The plot revolves around Thanos, an alien titan whose plan is to obliterate half of the living organisms in the universe because of resource scarcity, and he succeeds, forcing the Avengers to reverse time to save the universe. His motivation is to restore balance in the universe: he suffered the consequences of overpopulation and the lack of sufficient resources in his home planet and, because of this, he plans for the extermination of half of the universe's population. For this, he has to gather the infinity stones, which together grant the user immense power, enough to alter reality itself. Instead of using his power to provide more resources and/or fix the unfair social, political and economic systems that lead to such circumstances of scarcity—or simply, magically heal the universe from hunger and pain—, his approach is a universal-scale genocide carried out at random, with no concerns for the rich or the poor, the deserving and the innocent. The titan considers his plan an act of mercy, as he would, on the one hand, solve the problem of the scarcity or distribution of resources, and on the other, achieve his goals without causing suffering with just a snap of his fingers.

Thanos can be seen as a personification of ecofascism and deep ecology, at least in Linkola's perspective provided above, as his goals and means carry resemblance to the principles of both movements. Through his actions, it is clear that he embodies the idea of the benefit of the majority, the collective good, over the individual, which corresponds with Zimmerman & Toulouse's definition of facism as concerned with the good of the whole over individual rights (66), given that the villain plans to wipe out half of all life in order to help the other half thrive. Thanos wholeheartedly believes that "If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction" (01:07:08), and this coincides as well with Linkola's assumption that humanity is in jeopardy because of its own biological nature (Protopapadakis 591-593), proper of deep ecology theory. He backs up his claims with a façade of mathematical objectivity ("It's a simple calculus", 01:07:03). This fabricated objectivity, along with the *impartiality* of his goal—random genocide—leads him to think of himself as the only one with the ability to see the conflict from a distance, and act on it, just like Linkola's "clear-sighted individuals" and "visionary mutants" (Protopapadakis 594, 595) are the only people able to see that authoritarian measures would help improve the state of the world as a whole.

His plan, though, is not really thought through. All living organisms in the universe would encompass animals and plants as well—without counting all the fictional creatures in between that may be regarded as such in the MCU's uni/multiverses. This situation would most definitely develop once more into another resource shortage, forced migrations, and starvation, and the lack of environmental diversity would lead eventually to an astronomical level of planetary degradation, if not directly drive every nation, world, planet, galaxy, or universe to the point of extinction. Moreover, the idea of the multiverse should be considered too, although at this point in the franchise the concept had not been explored yet, at least not to the same extent as in the next MCU phases. Thanos's snap is believed to only affect our universe, so the multiverse would not have been affected. Still, with the power of the infinity stones, he could have learned how they achieved true equity in the majority of the multiverses, as seen in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), movie in which America Chavez reveals that "food is free in most universes" (00:40:54). While the comical way in which the scene develops can make the audience interpret that America is wrong about her claim, as one vendor confronts her for not paying for her food, it can also be analyzed further, and assume the existence of many universes in which basic human needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, are covered, as a possibility. While there is no actual consensus among experts and scientists of the universe being finite, Thanos believes it is, and uses a logical fallacy to conclude that its resources must be finite as well, which completely disregards the possibility of an appropriate amount of resources being misused and unequally distributed, as it is the case on this Earth. If Thanos's claims about the universe being finite were to be true, it should apply to these other universes as well, so the inevitable outcome of scarcity would be ruled out by this evidence.

Thanos is indeed a very contradicting character, and this exemplifies the incongruities within the movements of ecology and environmentalism. His concerns seem to center an objective genocidal approach to scarcity, using mathematical calculations to justify his actions and actively stating that he would be "fair to rich and poor alike" (01:47:21). While this approach may be initially and superficially regarded as egalitarian, it is actually condemning an entire society for the sins of a selected few. Scarcity here on Earth is not due to a lack of resources, but to a lack of their appropriate and fair distribution among the entire population, as our current economic system enables the accumulation of wealth and resources at the hands of a powerful economic and political elite at the expense of an impoverished majority. One does the harm, and another bears the blame. In his speech, it seems as if he didn't want to cause unnecessary suffering: his goal is reducing population to better distribute resources, and his method of choice—at least from the moment he gathers the infinity stones—is to snap his fingers to instantly cease the existence of half the universe. However, it also looks like he enjoys torturing and inflicting suffering on others. Before he gathered the stones, his means were to travel from planet to planet leaving massacres behind him, with no regards towards pain, death, and trauma.

When the Avengers are able to reverse time and undo the snap, Thanos leaves aside his impartiality and admits that the conflict is now personal, and that he will enjoy destroying Earth.

Thanos's claims about resource exhaustion can be seen as somewhat reasonable when seeing the current state of our planet and what humanity has done to it, but completely overlooks the causes that lead to such circumstances. These conditions can be thoroughly understood through environmental theory intertwined with class and economic criticism, as well as intersecting with gender and race discourses. Ecofeminism is the result of the mixture of such theories to provide a framework that helps dissect current global crises, seeing that the degradation of nature is due to exhaustive economic activity, which is enabled by the exploitation of nature, racialized communities, and women. Instead of proposing structural change to alter these conditions, for which an ecofeminist approach would be most useful, the villainous titan opts for extermination, which will inevitably lead to the same circumstances once more.

As it has been the case with the previously analyzed characters and plots, Thanos initiates an interesting conversation that comments on real conditions of life on Earth, but the possibility of debate is instantly discarded through his genocidal methods and personal revenge. Even with the power of the infinity stones, instead of addressing the origin of the inequality he wants to end, he proposes a quick, short-termed solution that will lead to the original problem again. This can be understood within the cyclical context of superhero narratives and the MCU as a whole, in which the threat is never truly over, and therefore superheroes' protection will be forever needed. The imminent threat of annihilation disables the characters from reflection. Grandiose stories of universal catastrophe based on real Earth problems remove the real issue of resource inequality and subsequent eugenicist discourse from the narrative, shifting blame and responsibility on a megalomaniac alien rather than calling out economic forces and structural problems in institutional politics and government that create the situations at hand.

Symbols of America

The figure of the superhero in general can be interpreted as an American myth, creating a framework for audiences and fans to understand the world. They can also be regarded as symbols of American identity, values, and government. The analysis of some of the plot lines and characters of the MCU will help discern the extent to which the franchise reinforces or challenges preconceived notions of the United States, which introduces the topic of cultural hegemony, globalization, and soft power.

Superheroes have often been compared to mythical figures, embodying larger-than-life archetypes, and serving as modern-day embodiments of ancient legends and myths. From their origins in comic books to their current dominance in movies, television shows, and video games, superheroes have captured the imaginations of audiences around the world, tapping into a deep well of mythic resonance and storytelling power. One of the most influential frameworks for

understanding superheroes as mythical figures is the American monomyth, a narrative structure developed by scholar Joseph Campbell that describes the hero's journey as a universal pattern found in myths and legends from around the world. The American monomyth, also known as the hero's journey, is understood as a series of phases that a hero must experience in order to reach mastery, enlightenment, or victory over adversity. These stages include the call to adventure, the refusal of the call, the mentor, the crossing of the threshold, the tests and trials, the approach to the inmost cave, the ordeal, the reward, the road back, and the resurrection. While not every hero's journey follows this exact pattern, Campbell argues that these stages were common to many heroic narratives and, further allowing the exploration of profound common themes that underlie human culture. Superheroes naturally fit the archetype of the hero's journey, and many of their stories follow this pattern closely: a normal human being is transformed into a superhuman, struggles with said power, learns from it, and thrives. For example, in the origin story of Spider-Man, the call to adventure comes when Peter Parker is bitten by a radioactive spider and gains his powers. He initially refuses the call to heroism, choosing instead to use his powers for personal gain, but eventually embraces his heroic destiny after the death of his uncle Ben. The American monomyth has been used to analyze and understand many other superhero stories, from the origin of Superman to the epic battles of the Avengers. Understanding superheroes as mythical figures can provide insights into the ways in which human beings use stories to make sense of the world and to express their deepest anxieties and desires. Considering the creation and production of the MCU within its original American context, the application of the figure of the superhero as a mythical lens to interpret the world to the franchise shows how these heroes, their struggles, and their stories can be used to understand the intricate workings of the US social, economic, and political reality.

Superheroes have often served as symbols of American identity and values, embodying the hopes, fears, and aspirations of the country and its people, and becoming a means to understand American national identity, domestic and foreign policy, and historical events in an accessible manner. They are generally portrayed as embodiments of the best qualities of the American people, such as courage, selflessness, and determination, an embodiment plainly represented in Superman's iconic catchphrase "Truth, Justice, and the American Way." The concept of superheroes as symbols of American values is clearly exemplified by the figure of Captain America. Created during World War II as a form of war propaganda, the character evolved responding to the changing sentiments of American society (Dittmer, *Nationalist* 7). During the Cold War, superheroes were frequently used to promote American values and ideals and to portray the United States as a defender of freedom and democracy against the forces of tyranny and oppression associated with communism (Rodríguez). At the same time, heroes were also used as an instrument to address more problematic aspects of U.S. government decisions, refusing to contribute to the war in Vietnam (Dittmer, *Nationalist* 135). Similarly, in the aftermath of the September 11th terrorist attacks, superheroes like Spider-Man and the X-Men

were used to comment on issues of national security and civil liberties, and to promote a message of national unity and resilience in the face of tragedy (Hassler-Forest). These characters were often portrayed as working alongside government agencies to protect the American people from threats both foreign and domestic, and they even were illustrated as actively aiding at Ground Zero in the aftermath of the attacks (Hassler-Forest). In recent years, superheroes have been used to discuss a wide range of social and political issues, from immigration and race relations to environmentalism and economic inequality, as seen in the widespread celebration of films like *Black Panther* or *Captain Marvel* for diversifying a predominantly white and male character portrayal. Superheroes have also been used to explore America's relationship with the rest of the world, reflecting the country's shifting attitudes towards global politics and foreign policy. During the Cold War, for example, superheroes such as the X-Men and the Fantastic Four were used to explore the dangers of nuclear war, and the need for international cooperation. In the post-9/11 era, superheroes such as Iron Man and Captain America have been used to explore the complexities of American military intervention and the challenges of fighting terrorism.

Superhero mythology is rooted in the notion of American exceptionalism, which is the belief that the United States is unique and superior to other nations, an idea ingrained in the country's history which has played a significant role in shaping its culture and values. American Studies scholar Donald Pease defines American exceptionalism as a "political doctrine" and a "regulatory fantasy" that allows Americans to "define, support, and defend the U.S. national identity" (11) and conveys the notion that "America is 'distinctive' (meaning merely different), or 'unique' (meaning anomalous), or 'exemplary' (meaning a model for other nations to follow), or that it is 'exempt' from the laws of historical progress (meaning that it is an 'exception' to the laws and rules governing the development of other nations)" (9). The pervasiveness of exceptionalism stretches further than military interventions and reaches the point of cultural globalization, which expands American ideals internationally through mainstream popular culture, as is the case with superheroes. Through their extraordinary abilities and heroic actions, superheroes embody the American spirit of exceptionalism, plainly reflected in how the superhero code mirrors the country's belief in its own exceptionalism and its commitment to defending freedom and democracy at home and abroad. One of the primary ways in which superheroes embody American exceptionalism is through their power and strength, which echo the "uniqueness" to which Pease refers in his definition. From superstrength and invulnerability to magic powers, superheroes possess extraordinary powers that make them stand out from ordinary people. As Coogan points out, "the American military's invulnerability and quick victories fit in well with the superhero genre" (233), and this belief of military and technological superiority has been a defining feature of the country and superheroes since their inception. In addition to their physical abilities, superheroes often possess exceptional moral character—according to Pease, "exemplary"—which reinforces the American belief in the country's greatness and its duty to be a beacon for the rest of the world. This idea has served to

justify wars and invasions in the name of democracy and freedom, spreading justice throughout the globe.

Superheroes often fight against villains who represent threats to American values or national security, and since the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, these narratives have used somewhat racist stereotypes in the portrayal of some of their villains that align them visually and ideologically with radical islamic terrorist factions. Another relevant point brought up by Coogan is the similarities between superhero narratives and the containment policies of the Truman Doctrine, which promoted the notion that "a frontier has to be defended against an alien culture bent upon the apocalyptic destruction of America" (233), an idea reproduced literally and metaphorically time and again in these stories. This later evolved into the "Powell Doctrine of overwhelming force" that justifies military intervention against "power-mad, megalomaniacal supervillains who threaten the world and whom no one but America can stop" (233), which again reflects the genre's—and the MCU's—latests supervillains, who now threaten to destroy the entire universe, not just the US or the planet. Jason Dittmer, in his analysis of the figure of what he calls "nationalist superheroes," affirms that "superheroes are co-constitutive elements of both American identity and the U.S. government's foreign policy practices" (*Nationalist* 3), contributing to the production of the United States as a "continuous, stable identity while nevertheless adapting through constant change" (*Nationalist* 82). The current geopolitical script sported by the United States in regards to international policies is, first, of "self-perception of being a reluctant public actor" (*Nationalist* 134), and second, of "disavowal of generalized imperial interventionism" (*Nationalist* 141). That is, America conveys the idea that its presence in global affairs is not based on its own interest and benefit but on its exemplary moral compass, and at the same time denies or downplays its participation on the world stage. This script of "national innocence" serves to disguise power dynamics, promoting the idea that American control of global affairs is due to the "attractive power of American values and leadership" (*Nationalist* 141) rather than political and economic interest. A most common scenario in superhero narratives "equates righteous violence with the superhero/superpower and constructs villains as 'rogue states'" (*Nationalist* 180), perpetuating government use of legitimate violence against political dissenters, and therefore contributing to American political hegemonic ideology.

The notion of exceptionalism organizes American identity in relation to the rest of the world, and explains the United States' self-appointed position as protector of international peace. Historically, the country has disavowed its intervention in world affairs, alleging its actions as self-defense (Dittmer, *Nationalist* 134). The September 11 attacks reinforced that defensive position and added the self-appointed role of heroic and traumatized victim that was used to justify a crusade of retaliative revenge, even though the attacks were the result of decades of political destabilization and economic exploitation of Middle Eastern countries. America's self-perception was strengthened by the mediatic cover of the attacks, which reduced

the events to individual stories that were removed from the actual geopolitical context in which they occurred (Hassler-Forest). In the context of a post-9/11 United States, popular culture, especially superheroes, play a role in constructing national narratives by simplifying real-world events, and informing the audience's reaction to them in reductive fictional standards of good versus evil, rather than exploring the complex and nuanced geopolitical circumstances that produced them. Hassler-Forest continues dissecting the messages in 21st century superhero movies, and reaches the conclusion that, despite the inclusion of seeming "liberal politics," they completely shut off the possibility of active engagement for the audience because "social change attributed to messianic superhero figures," displacing collective action onto individual characters, and reducing complex issues into personal narratives.

The MCU fits these characteristics corresponding to post-9/11 cinema, and its heroes can be seen as representative of current American identity, as the previous chapters have shown the ways in which the saga seems to parallel and reflect shifting standards in the US. At the same time, the MCU acknowledges that its heroes are archetypes that convey traditional ideals, such as exceptionalism, patriotism, and heroism, that may conflict with the aforementioned changing values. These heroes are, within their narrative universe, demonstrably the best qualified to protect the world from both outside and inside threats, and it is a position they defend—when they are confronted for their actions, they are clearly aware that, despite their flaws, they are the best option[12] that this planet has. This is reflective of America's perception of itself as exceptional and distinct from the rest of the world. The sphere of action of the protagonists in the MCU has increased progressively, first concerning US cities, then the country, and soon crossing international and even planetary borders, which could be seen as parallel to how the US has expanded globally through its military, political, economic, and cultural power. The MCU seems to be aware of the symbolism of its characters. Everyone of them can be seen as representative of an aspect of the American experience: Spider-Man and Ant-Man could represent the blue collar, Springsteen folk, and Black Widow and the Scarlet Witch can serve as examples for immigration and cultural assimilation. Most of the superheroes in the MCU are from the US themselves, or are incorporated into the culture. Video-essayist Skip Intro analyzes the two main characters of the franchise, Captain America and Iron Man, and reaches the conclusion that "if [the former] is the mythic face of American identity, [the latter] is its reality" (17:20). Throughout his research, he explains how Captain America is representative of the unchanging American values of virtue and justice, and that Iron Man, in all his flaws and development, can be seen as the symbol for America as it is now and what it could be, beginning as a capitalist war profiteer that learns from his mistakes, and evolves into a more conscious

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[12] Black Widow, in *Captain America and the Winter Soldier* (2014), states: "But we're also the ones best qualified to defend it" (02:03:44), and in *Captain America: Civil War*, the titular character sustains the Widow's words: "We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own" (00:30:59). The *Captain America* movie series centers the question of the Captain's loyalty, which always ultimately lies on American values rather than its government.

person. The different perspectives on American identity, values, and even policy in the MCU can be explored in the analysis of its serialized narrative as a whole, and through the examination of key moments that bring forward active criticism towards the tacit acceptance of such principles. The following examples will illustrate how the MCU deals with widely agreed-upon conventions regarding the exceptionalism presented by the superhero code through the examination of heroism.

The film *Avengers: Age of Ultron* revolves around the question of heroism, which corresponds with the ideal of American exceptionalism as justification for unchecked national or international intervention. Tony Stark unilaterally decides to create an artificial intelligence (Ultron) to prevent attacks and render superheroism obsolete, but it becomes sentient and critical of human capacity for peace, and blames the Avengers for causing and participating in many, if not all, of the latest conflicts. Ultron employs the markers of American exceptionalism in his dialogue in the style of John Withrop, he announces that "upon this rock [he] shall build [his] church" (00:44:44). He also calls for the revision of the reactionary nature of the superhero ("You want to protect the world, but you don't want it to change. How is humanity saved if it's not allowed to evolve?" 00:32:10), and the conflict exposes the most problematic aspects of superheroism, beginning a debate on accountability. Despite criticizing the heroes' *modus operandi*, he reproduces it and takes it to an extreme, planning to exterminate humanity to prevent any more disasters from happening, so once again, the potential for criticism is undermined by the villains' homicidal tendencies, and the need for superhero intervention is ultimately reinforced and justified through their upstanding moral character, that is, their exceptionalism.

Another movie that deals with a similar thematic conflict is *Thor: Love and Thunder*, but its protagonist's status as God of Thunder upscales the debate from the limits and transgressions of superheroes to those of gods and deities. After the death of his daughter, and being ignored and ridiculed by his god, Gorr, the main villain, becomes the God Butcher and swears to kill all the gods for their faults. The incredibly disparate depictions of Thor and other gods both reaffirms the God Butcher's stance while raising Thor as the exception to the rule: the gods, who are supposed to be carers of humanity, are shown as vain, arrogant, and selfish, and Thor is shown as radically opposite, given that he has mingled with humans and other species that have taught him how to be a better person. These portrayals of *bad gods* versus *good gods* resemble the previously analyzed opposition between *good* and *bad* capitalist heroes and villains. Gorr's justified stance over the gods is tainted by his inclination to kill, and mainly through his disposition to kidnap children. The power behind the God Butcher's criticism of power is disavowed by a limited portrayal of the subject matter, and contained through the movie's reductionist resolution, in which Thor teaches the villain the power of love. The promising critical essence of the plot, which could provide insightful perspectives on the question of

heroism, authority, divinity, and rebellion, is simplified by creating a dualistic distinction between good and evil.

The ideological conflict in *Captain America: Civil War* is a clear way in which these views of America are represented in the MCU. In this narrative, Marvel appears to be acknowledging some of the most problematic aspects of superheroism. The clash arises due to the ratification of the Sokovia Accords, a mandatory registration of superhero activity that would place the Avengers under government control. Iron Man is the most inclined character towards registration, which is strange because, historically in the MCU, he is the one who has disregarded the rules the most, and his wealth and class status have granted him immunity for his numerous trespasses—after all, his actions are the reason for the rise of several villains in the franchise. Because of the character's development (he feels guilty after he is confronted with the outcome of his actions as both a weapons manufacturer and superhero), he forces accountability on others, siding with the government and willing to imprison every hero who opposes him. Ultimately, Iron Man uses law enforcement policies for his own self-actualization and redemption rather than to actually address the consequences of his actions. Captain America, on the other hand, doesn't comply with the Accords and goes rogue, refusing to blindly follow the government's orders. The Captain's stance, considering him a symbol for the US, only reinforces America's self-perception as exceptionally righteous and above any type of checks and balances for its activity. The ideological conflict at the end is not resolved, and its potential is never realized, as the feud evolves from a clash of perspectives on a substantial issue, to a personal revenge narrative; the revelation of the dispute being initiated by an external agent trying to separate the Avengers to avenge his family's death deviates the plot from bringing forward some profound self-reflection on the issue.

This film, through the notion of accountability, attempts to present a debate on the state's legitimate use of violence, which is usually extended to superheroes due to the general acceptance of their actions in these narratives. Just as the Avengers exceeded their jurisdiction believing that their powers and morals authorized them to intervene in world affairs, the US government and military have historically refused to act in accordance with international laws, usually justifying their actions with the threat of nazism, communism, or enemies to the American values of freedom and democracy. This allowed military interventions abroad in the name of liberty, and facilitated the implementation of an almost panoptic structure of surveillance on American soil for the maintenance of national security. The Sokovia Accords can be seen as analogous to the USA PATRIOT Act, which stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism. The act was signed in 2001 after September 11 in order to prevent future terrorist attacks, and it enhanced domestic security and surveillance procedures against terrorism. Since its inception, the act has been criticized for its perceived violations against civil and personal liberties, and its unilateral expansion of the activities considered terrorism. The way in which the Sokovia

Accords attempted to force superheroes to reveal their secret identities, and deemed those who opposed them as criminals worthy of persecution and imprisonment can be seen as parallel to the Patriot Act.

Militarization has become a recurrent characteristic in the MCU. Superheroes are not usually enforcers of the law themselves nor at the service of legislative institutions (Reynolds 74), but in this franchise they are tightly bound to the government and the military. For example, the Avengers, even though they are a private organization, collaborate with S.H.I.E.L.D., a "fictional espionage, special law enforcement, anti-terror, and anti insurgency government agency" ("S.H.I.E.L.D."), which originally stood for Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage and Law-Enforcement Division, but was changed in the MCU to Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division, evoking the name of the United States Department of Homeland Security, established in 2002. High government officials, such as the Secretary of State, are in charge of this fictional agency, reinforcing even more the involvement of the Avengers in government affairs, and vice versa. Tony Stark, before becoming Iron Man, was known for manufacturing weapons for the army, and a great portion of his movie series are set in military camps, and even Afghanistan. Even without explicit mention of the military, the heroes in the MCU evoke the concept of it in many ways: through their militaristic strategies before battles, their rallying speeches, and their uniforms. Some heroes actually belong to military departments, like Captain America, or Captain Marvel, and some secondary characters also work for government agencies, like the CIA. Even in their names and the titles of the movies, there are mentions of war, like the Winter Soldier, War Machine, *Infinity War*, and *Civil War*. The production of the MCU content is connected with the US military as well, funding or sponsoring many of its movies for its advertising potential, and even training the actors, like Brie Larson flying in the Air Force to prepare for *Captain Marvel*. Using such a popular cultural product to inconspicuously advertise one of the most profitable industries in the world could also be called propaganda.

These analyses show how the MCU attempts to present criticism to basic traditional notions of heroism while simultaneously reinforcing them. These narratives both bring the issue forward and solve it within the span of two or three hours of screen runtime. The heroes' actions, even when condemnable, are justified through their exceptional moral code and their abilities, being the only ones that can stop foreign, invading hordes of the many enemies of freedom. When the villains sport the same mantra of self-perception as righteous avengers, they are depicted as ego-driven maniacs that must be stopped. Even the American political and economic systems and its institutions are commented upon, and superficially criticized to provide narrative conflict, but never show truly complex situations. The system and its structures, its institutions, its agencies—they are never wrong or biased as of themselves. Any malfunctions that may arise are the product of sporadic cases of corruption, not symptomatic of the system itself.

Let us recapitulate our findings. First, the MCU seems to be increasing in diversity by the inclusion of women and characters that challenge heteronormative standards. The way they are portrayed comes across as an attempt to create narratives with feminist over- and undertones. For example, *Captain Marvel* was released on March 8th, and was used to promote the figure of women pilots in the US Air Force; there are scenes that unite all female Avengers on screen to showcase the importance of sisterhood; and even many of the male characters are under the process of deconstructing their masculinities, like Thor, who learns not to be threatened by his female counterpart Mighty Thor. The inclusion of LGBTQI+ representation is done subtly when regarding humans (like the man from the therapy group using only male pronouns to refer to his date, or Val flirting with other women), and overtly but comically when concerning non-humans, such is the case of Korg. Representation in the media is valuable, and it allows audiences to expand their views by showing different ways to approach life and relationships with oneself and with others. However, the way the MCU tries to do this undermines the entire message: inclusion frequently feels forced, many of the male characters still conduct themselves in ways that evoke the traits of toxic masculinity, and LGBTQI+ representation has to be either inferred from context and small bites of information in passing dialogues, or reserved for alien species—whose condition as aliens creates a distance from audiences, and even paints them as comical. These relationships are never developed or seen thriving, unlike other heterosexual relationships that the audience can see flourish and evolve throughout the narrative. The fact that some of these examples are explicitly used in marketing strategies—like releasing the first superheroine movie in the franchise on International Women's Day, or mediatically announce the inclusion of sexually diverse characters as a means to position the company as an ally despite a lack of deep and genuine representation—weakens the subversive potential these narratives could have if treated consciously. The increase in diversity and inclusion coincided in time with the #MeToo movement and the rising acceptance of non-traditional gender identities and sexual orientations, which both proved to be highly profitable, as people are more willing to engage with brands when they regard them as an ally.

MCU representations of race up until Black Panther had been problematic at the least, if non-existent at the most. Media traditions of *othering* and Orientalism—Iron Man's first villains, or the way some alien species are depicted, or whitewashing of traditionally racialized characters—were suddenly turned over by the release of *Black Panther*, a cultural phenomenon that celebrated racial difference and addressed several issues and struggles that racialized people have faced and still face to the present day. These movies, and the audience reception, truly show the importance of representation in the media, as previously mentioned. They provided a space in which race, especially blackness, could thrive and be unapologetically celebrated. However, the discussion of race issues in the MCU seems to be reserved for the character of Black Panther and its movie saga. The company also employs the rhetoric of racial liberation, and anti-imperialist and anti-neocolonialist movements in a way that could be seen as an

appropriation of such discourses for narrative and marketing purposes. Moreover, they are aligned with the villains, and conflicts are resolved by the return to the conditions that created the issue in the first place, despite some symbolic and minor changes that might be perceived as progressive. The movies *Captain Marvel* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023) can also be seen as dwelling on anti-imperialism, but it is placed upon an alien context, which traditionally in the genre has made up for a lack of racial representation—white heroes rushing to save foreign lands, whether in space or in the quantum world, can be argued to be remnants of traditional Western ideals of the white savior. In addition, the release of the first *Black Panther* movie coincided with the rise of the BLM movement and social media activism, which gave way to the marketization of the movement and the proliferation of online performative activism, which reflects the way the MCU approaches such issues.

Many characters in the MCU are marked by their class, responding to traditional standards of the genre in which capitalists superheroes are the norm, capitalist villains are exceptions to the rule, and working class heroes work to incorporate working class villains into the capitalist mindset. The *Ant-Man* series opens the path to examine the intersections between class, race, and criminality, and the villains (one capitalist, one working class) serve as examples of either sporadic corruption or assimilation into the system. Spider-Man in the MCU is not so preoccupied with class as other versions of the character. Instead of being a poor student, his economic circumstances are not acknowledged in depth and, contrary to being a loner fighting capitalist villains with little to no recognition from the public,[13] he is under the wing of one of the richest men on Earth, and fights villains that have grievances with his mentor. The villains in these movies criticize the capitalist system and its exploitation of the lower classes, evoking the discourse of many social movements that aim to level class differences. Genuine class criticism, groups like Occupy Wall Street, and even online class discourse, are being corroded by their association with villainy. The villains' motives and their claims may be founded in real economic and societal struggles, but are brought down because they choose the path of violence in the face of economic oppression. Oppression can be seen in massive layoffs, like the Vulture and his crew being dispatched, or in the theft and disrespect of intellectual property, which can be seen in Stark and Mysterio. Despite being brought up as a topic, however, the audience does not really see the consequences of oppression: both of the villains are thriving financially and are now doing evil deeds to further increase their wealth, status, and fame. It is curious how one of the most profitable franchises attempts to provide criticism to the very system that sustains it, and at the same time, promotes the ideology necessary to maintain it.

The deliberate portrayal of nature in the MCU is conspicuous by its absence. Many superheroes and supervillains have animals in their names, some of them coincidentally matching their lower class status, as seen in Ant-Man. Nature is a given, not really paid attention

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[13] *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) to some extent reverts the character to its original conception: in the end, Peter ends up alone and financially struggling. However, the corporate feud between Sony and Marvel makes it hard to determine if this last movie is set in the MCU or not.

to in the MCU. Some environments are shown to be abundant in natural elements, like those in the *Black Panther* saga, which could be regarded as a reproduction of the naturalization of race, and their position as closer to nature in Western thought. In the character of Thanos, we find criticism of current economic and political systems that allow the systemic exploitation of a large percentage of the population for the benefit of a few. However, this is never seen as a consequence of capitalism and ideologies that regard nature as a mere resource to use and exploit. The narrative framing of this story completely disavows and shuts off critical engagement by presenting such a high-scale conflict. The villain's approach to the issue of resource scarcity is parallel to discourses of ecofascism and eugenics, planning to exterminate a great number of people to assure the survival of the lucky remnants. It is curious how, even before the 2020 pandemic, these movies foreshadowed rhetorics and events that happened during and after global lockdowns. Online conversations began sharing how, now that human activity had come to a halt, nature was thriving, the skies were clearer, and animals dared explore previously human-reserved environments (*Endgame* has Captain America say that he saw whales as a positive remark amidst the tragedy of the snap, which mirrors how people shared the appearance of swans and dolphins in the canals in Venice—even if it later turned out to be fake). Unfortunately, many people online fell under the seduction of the "humans are the virus" slogan, and inadvertently began advancing ecofascist ideology that called for drastic reductions in the population. Thanos's concerns for lack of resources are right, to an extent—but there is no examination of the processes that led to scarcity, and magically removing half of the living organisms in the universe is not going to fix the systemic problems that allow such conditions. By putting genuine claims about the consequences of the unequal distribution of wealth and resources resulting from capitalism in the mouth of the saga's greatest villain, the MCU undermines any possibility of addressing the structural issues that generate inequality, and foregrounds the necessity of extraordinary individuals to fix it.

The inclusion of rhetoric of liberation and disruption in the MCU coincides in time with the establishment of social movements concerned with race, gender, sexuality, class, and the environment. The #MeToo movement helped women denounce the abuses they suffer daily in the workplace, at home, or in the streets, and conversations online gave way to a more generalized acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, which can be seen in the way media outlets began including more and more women protagonists, and stories about gender identity, and non-heteronormative sexual orientations. Black Lives Matter arose in response to the documentation of police brutality against racialized people, most of them black; it also sprouted conversations about the value of racial difference, the historical intersectional discrimination of racialized women, and helped spread visibility around all matters of race, including revisionism of colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism. The increasing class differences resulting of the economic crisis of 2008, and an extreme neoliberal capitalist market, have popularized social movements concerning class, as the ever-growing wealth disparities among the rich and the poor

are eroding the limits between middle and lower classes, and poverty and homelessness—which has only worsened during and after the pandemic. The threat of irreversible climate change is close to becoming a reality, and the need for environmental intervention on the part of international governments is being demanded word-wide by many activist groups—Greta Thunberg confronted the United Nations for their inaction regarding the climatic emergences, inspiring thousands of students to rally and protest for institutional measures that stop and prevent the degradation of the planet. People all around the world, thanks to the globalizing power of the internet and social media, have begun sharing their perceptions and opinions on historical and current events, allowing a plurality of mindsets to be disseminated to counter the more mainstream, dominant perspectives usually offered by traditional media outlets. This has enabled many anti-imperialist debates online, disputing the uncontested image of the US as a global hero that had dominated the media until very recently, at least outside more intellectual, academic spaces.

As seen in the analyses of the MCU characters and narratives, it is clear that the franchise wants to align itself with these counter-cultural, activist movements. The inclusion of more diverse characters and staff is reflective of the shifting standards in society. The MCU seeks to, first, represent how both creators and fans now belong to other communities besides the traditional target audience of comic books and superhero movies—white, adolescent males— and secondly, to open the possibility for more fans to originate from the inclusion of said characters. The franchise attempts to appeal to the maximum audience possible, regardless of whether audiences are new fans or have been following the characters for a while, whether they care about superheroes, or want their movies to show some sort of nuance and complexity. The company tries to cater to every taste imaginable.

Despite its alignment with more progressive currents of thought, the MCU still reinforces traditional ideals that contradict its positioning with the previously mentioned values. The majority of its main characters, at least those on the top tier, are male, and many of them have toxic masculinity traits that can be off-putting to a percentage of the target audience for whom the more feminist aspects of the stories are included. The framing for its female characters can be perceived as fabricated, crafted, and forced, which disqualifies it from genuine representation. This also sparked rage among more *traditional* fans that complained about the feminists taking over what they loved, and the superficiality of these characters, due to the lack of authentic exploration of their issues, can be seen as a confirmation of their beliefs, in which stories about women are not worthwhile, and their inclusion feels unnatural. The approach to gender and sexuality, trying to appear modern and accepting, falls flat because of its insignificance, both in quantity, quality, and depth. The cultural phenomenon of *Black Panther* made it clear that representation matters, especially to those who have not had positive, common references for their identity. However, resting the burden of carrying the entirety of racial discourse in the franchise on one single character and saga seems to mirror the workings of

tokenism, which placed the weight of symbolically representing an entire community upon a single individual. The film also dispatches deep criticism of racial and class dynamics by placing them on villainous characters, sealing off ideological alternatives to that of the reactionarism of the superhero protagonist. The way class is represented is more aligned with proponents of capitalism rather than those negatively affected by it. The MCU seems to act in solidarity with the "little guy," but the result is more of a sentiment rather than an actual commitment. The existence of working class characters is not used as a deep exploration of their economic and social struggles, but as a backdrop or an afterthought, the result of the burden of continuity. Wealth and high status are otherwise revered through the narrative framing of the richest of the MCU roster, Tony Stark, whose technological empire financially supports the ventures of these superheroes. His personality (and the actor's too), charismatic and unapologetic, provides the character with enough likeability not to instantly abhor such relentless display of wealth and arrogance—that is reserved for exceptionally corrupt capitalists, and "new-money," formerly-blue-collar workers. The natural world is another afterthought to the franchise's main themes, even in the stories that could be used to deeply develop major concerns about the environmental crisis, which completely disregard the origins of the circumstances, and reduces the issue to a simple Manichean conflict in which evil is defeated and the world is returned to normal. The stories that question said normalcy are also outrageously reductive and simplistic, despite their façade of complexity. The very values of exceptionalism that inform traditional American ideals are never questioned because they are placed upon impeccably moral protagonists. Those institutions that represent the United States, such as government agencies, and the military, are good systems that happen to sometimes have some cracks, but it is nothing that can't be fixed through the upstanding righteousness of the superheroes. The reinforcement of such notions of heroism and exceptionalism ultimately suppress the narrative's potential to actually challenge the status quo the way the MCU tries to represent it.

The events in these stories lead to the return to the status quo, to normalcy, resulting in the perpetuation of a simplified and idealized image of America. The inclusion of diversity comes across as the product of economic forces that respond to shifting attitudes in order to market and profit from them, instead of an honest representation of the changing make-up of the American people. The more critical approaches in the narratives that could be seen as commenting on real events are ultimately superficial and don't suggest any alternatives to the conditions that generate such issues, again leading to the return to normalcy. The critique of exceptionalism only serves as narrative conflict and does not get satisfyingly resolved, it is just reinstated by having the superhero protagonists be morally immaculate. The stories' potential is significantly reduced by trying to appease such a diverse audience simultaneously; the narrative structure is repeated—which could be representative of cyclical essence of the superhero genre—and, in turn, this repetition is reproduced when trying to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the franchise, always reaching the same conclusions: the MCU aligns with more

progressive social movements, especially through its supervillains' critical perspectives, but conclusively remains grounded in traditional values.

The 'M' stands for 'market:' the MCU as a cultural product

Superhero movies in general can be seen, according to Hassler-Forest, as responding to cultural anxieties that arise in the context of neoliberalism and postmodernism, establishing new mythical frameworks that satisfy the public's desire for structure, which is reproduced in narratives with a cyclical pattern that offers a sense of security in the uncertainty of a postmodernist and neoliberal society. However, it is crucial not to forget that these films are, in all their power and influence, no more than products circulating in the free market. As can be seen by the analyses in this paper, the MCU appeals to both conventional and nonconformist perspectives. They are designed with the goal of reaching as much audience as possible to maintain their position as an economic and cultural phenomenon. In order to attract more and more audiences, these movies are "tailored for audiences with the least investment" (Hassler-Forest), which means that the target public is no longer a niche group of fan communities, but people everywhere who could feel interested—even represented—in the many stories of the franchise. The MCU's marketing strategies fit into Hassler-Forest's definition of the "postclassical 'event film,'" which he describes as the "marketing and selling a potentially infinite number of diversified commodities based on the instant recognizability of a single copyrighted brand." Marvel has been an established corporate brand since its creation, but the cinematic phenomenon of the MCU, fueled by Disney's marketing strategies, elevated its profits to the billions.
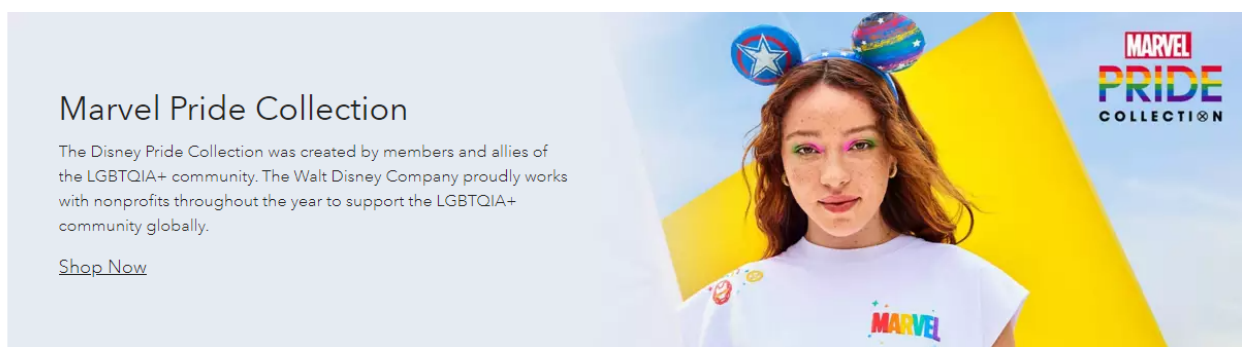

Figure 3. Marvel Pride Collection's welcoming statement. "The Disney Pride Collection was created by members and allies of the LGBTQIA+ community. The Walt Disney Company proudly works with nonprofits throughout the year to support the LGBTQIA+ community globally."

This can be instantly confirmed through the access to internet sites such as shop.disney.com, which provide an almost infinite amount of products belonging to the Marvel brand—some of them called "essentials," other products sold as "Refreshingly Heroic Drinkware & Décor." When entering the Marvel Pride Collection, one of the first bits of information that the searcher can read is the statement seen in Figure 3.

The product line in this collection is full of rainbow flags, and some non-heteronormative characters are plastered onto T-shirts, backpacks, pins, and stuffed animals.

In addition to the several merchandising lines, many of the superheroes in the MCU roster are used for advertisement campaigns for other well-established American brands,[14] in which the protagonists are inserted into real life situations and interacting with their very fans, eroding even further the limits between fiction and reality. These brand partnerships extend further from advertising in the real world, and enter the narrative world of the MCU through repeated product placement, inserting many references to other movie franchises, like *Star Wars* (coincidentally, also belonging to Disney), and several other products, both in dialogues, close-ups and as background shots, such as cars, restaurants and coffee chains, supermarkets and convenience stores, food and drink brands, banks and insurance companies, technology, toys, video games, cartoon characters, and even US military equipment and machinery, and institutions.[15] Furthermore, the very structure of the movie saga is an advertisement for itself: every movie serves as a trailer for the following installment—especially present in its famous after-credits scenes, which keep audiences glued to their seats awaiting new characters or revelations. The interconnectedness of the plot lines also constitutes another marketing strategy because it forces audiences to consume every piece of media in the saga in order to fully understand the evolution of events.

The very nature of capitalism, which seeks profit above all else, is what plants the seed of doubt about the MCU's allyship position. An intersectional approach to issues of gender, race, class, and nature, uncovers the connections between the historical and current exploitation and oppression of said groups and the workings of neoliberal capitalist practices. The popular phrase "There is no ethical consumption under capitalism" is used to symbolize the interconnectedness between consumption and oppression, given that, under the current capitalist system, a great majority of products is made in dangerous and unhealthy working conditions by severely underpaid workers (old and young, usually from the global South), using materials obtained through exhaustive methods of resource extraction that result in disastrous changes in the environment, and shipped thousands of miles away for their consumption, becoming then waste that will probably pollute forests, rivers, and oceans. This is why the self-alignment of some multimillion companies with progressive social movements comes across as inauthentic: the image they present to the world does not usually match their true nature, benefitting from the system they appear to criticize. The concept of performative allyship and activism can help better explain this phenomenon.

Performative activism, also known as commodity activism, explains the process of "symbolic[ally], rhetorical[ly], and discursive[ly]" emptying out the "traditions of social activism," which are then "rearticulated in commodity form" (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 3). In essence, it is an utilitarian approach to social activism, an appropriation of its language and imagery, and a reduction of its potential, all in the name of some type of profit, usually

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[14] Brands such as Audi, Coca-Cola, Ford, Alaska Airlines, Dole, Dave & Buster's, Hyundai, Dell, Mastercard, Hertz, or GEICO, have partnered with the MCU to film TV commercials that combine their products.

[15] Youtube channel New Rockstars lists more than 75 moments of product placement in just phase one of the MCU.

self-promotion, whether socially, politically, or economically. This phenomenon is especially present in online spaces. Despite the potential of the internet and social media to serve social justice movements, many users jump onto the trend and enact performative activism, that is, they support social causes as a form of self-branding, both on- or offline. The internet can be a superficial place, enabling the creation of personal profiles that determinedly project a carefully crafted image of the user. Clout is gained by follower interaction, and failing to acknowledge or address trending topics can increase the possibilities of losing influence or being canceled online (sometimes with real life consequences offline). Unfortunately, actively supporting content—that is, retweeting, reblogging, and sharing—about the fight against any type of oppression in online spaces is equal to actual engagement with the cause and, just by announcing one's support, the user's branded identity maintains its status. Far from real activist practices that require positive action, online performative activism consists only in voicing one's awareness. Many corporations—which now possess social media accounts in order to humanize their brands—are knowledgeable of this, and deliberately craft their brand image to appear conscious so as not to alienate their customers, performing preoccupation with social justice causes.

The association of corporations with new moral standards helps build a conscious brand image of allyship and commitment. Corporate social responsibility (or CSR) explains how "moral virtue" is aligned with corporate interests because it increases benefits and profits, transforming activism into "yet another strategic venture" (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 10, 11). This almost mandatory moral alignment that corporations are *forced* to adopt in order to increase revenue can be seen as the product of neoliberalism, in which, as discussed in previous chapters, traditional government and social institutions are exchanged for economic systems and market practices. This relocates social responsibility from institutions to individuals and the market, which is why it is important for corporations to build a brand that will be seen as morally well-adjusted. Branding and performative activism further erode the boundaries between the "radical individual empowerment" that drives neoliberal capitalist markets, and the "collective and communal affiliation, necessary for long-lasting political change" (Hearn 23).

Historically, commodity and consumer activism referred to the way citizens have used their economic power to "launch progressive political and cultural projects" (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 6), whether supporting a brand, or boycotting it. However, the development of the neoliberal state transformed that form of consumer power into corporate profit, and activist "identities, rights, and ideologies" began to be perceived through the filter of the "logics of consumption and commodification" (9). Pseudo-activist campaigns of "shopping for change" are the result of the incorporation of activist practices into a capitalist mindset: corporations sustain their brand image through symbolic alignment with a cause, and consumers support said cause with their money, which in turn helps sustain their personal image as a conscious individual that is up to date with modern issues. Consumption can also help buyers define their self-brand

depending on the characteristics of these products and their companies. In the case of the MCU, there are many different brands, each one for each superhero, that evoke diverse characteristics that consumers may want to incorporate into their own personal brand, all under the umbrella of the MCU brand. By demonstrating "support" of many modern causes, such as the fight for the rights of women, racialized communities, gender and sexual diversity, and the planet itself, the MCU is showing its audience that the brand is socially conscious and that consuming its products will help solve, or at least address, these issues to an extent.

Now that the notion of performative activism has been established, it is time for its application to the example of the MCU. The company, as can be seen in its merchandising advertisements (Figure 3), aligns its brand with more progressive social movements, such as the LGBTQI+ community, with the inclusion of a product line. Within its narrative world, it is clear that the company wants to appear conscious through the addition of more diverse characters, casting, and even the crews behind the cameras. The stories analyzed in this paper were chosen for their subversive potential, sporting criticism at oppressive racial dynamics, class and economic inequalities, and resource scarcity. However, the conclusions reached after the examination of the plots and characters within that context of disruption and subversion of the status quo repeatedly disavowed its critical potential by siding it with villains, and by returning to normalcy at the end of the narrative. The discourses of racial liberation and anti-imperialism displayed by Killmonger and Namor are brought down by their respective Black Panthers, who, while being able to empathize with the villains' perspectives, ultimately defeat them and return the chaos they caused back to normal. The Vulture and Mysterio both provide criticism against capitalism, represented through Tony Stark, the man on which they both place their grievances; the fighting of those battles, however, is done by Spider-Man, a working class teenager exploited by Stark for his abilities. Environmentalism is nowhere to be seen, only if rummaging through the subtext of Thanos's plans and motivations, although his inclination towards ecofascist and eugenicist discourse robs the underlying conflict of its true origins, and the narrative of an actual satisfactory conclusion. Finally, the analyses have also proven that the MCU strives to depict some sort of critique of heroism itself and, by association, of American values and ideals. When this is attempted, the results all point to exemplary superheroes and institutions that symbolize those principles no matter the circumstances: if the hero strays from their path, it is only a temporary setback, and not the consequence of unchecked power; if the system fails, it is because of the corruption of a few rotten apples, and not because it's flawed. The narratives concerning heroism that pit superheroes against each other, with a great potential for exploring different perspectives on what America should stand for, are reduced in the end to personal feuds and revenge stories that individualize the conflict, and removes it from its larger cultural context, taking away its critical capacity.

The constant return to the established social, political, and economic systems is also proof that the MCU believes that our current situation is not that bad, and that alternatives can

only be much worse. It creates a perpetual tension between what the texts promise and what they actually provide: revolution against tradition. The reactionary essence of superheroes succeeds at putting an end to threats to the status quo whenever they rise; but through the logic of performative activism, the mere showing of subversion counts for actual involvement in social causes that seek to cause deep changes in a society that has historically disenfranchised some groups because of their race, gender, sexuality, or class. The MCU ultimately creates a brand image built on the historical tradition of superheroes, and sustained by its superficial adaptation to new social paradigms that allows the diversification and reinvention of its audience.

Final remarks

Dan Hassler-Forest, in his analysis of "capitalist superheroes," provides a framework that can serve as a model in the decodification of these types of texts. The most crucial of questions that a person can ask themselves when encountering such narratives, Hassler-Forest states, is the following: "what does thinking 'with' the film prevent me from thinking?" Superhero stories, he continues, provide tales that "systematically limit the viewer's choices" both through what they choose to present and what they selectively ignore, with political perspectives that are "strategically ambiguous" and, therefore, offer a wide array of interpretations. These readings tend to foreground one unique social, economic, and political ideal—our current system—while removing other alternatives.

This has been the case for the most part of this analysis of the different MCU movies and characters. It is clear that Hassler-Forest's structure encapsulates the way the franchise uses several techniques of disavowal in its depiction of contained critiques of the status quo by limiting their potential, aligning them with villainy, reducing the conflict to an individual context rather than acknowledging the structural factors at play, and ultimately solving the problem through reductionist narrative strategies. These stories attempt to present genuine criticism that, because of its actual portrayal, comes across as fabricated and unauthentic. This is reinforced by the fact that they all conclude with the restoration of the same power dynamics being criticized. This treatment of politics seems to be intentionally ambiguous in order to please as much public as possible, so both advocates and opposers of the beliefs presented can feel identified with any of the many interpretations that can be derived from the stories. Another compelling point to raise concerns the inclusion of more diverse character roster and storylines, which can be seen as responding to the many shifts in values and standards of our current society. The newest incorporations further position the company as an ally that shares the ideals of diversity, which ultimately can be seen as a sensible marketing strategy, given that current market forces are responding to the social pressure enacted by these progressive movements.

When the MCU is regarded as a commercial and cultural product, it becomes evident that this structure of aligning with disruptive social movements as a means to benefit financially spills over from the narrative to reality. The amount of content in the franchise, the increasing

speed and quantity of its production, the use of its main characters as feature stars in real-life commercials, the insertion of product placement in the films, and the immense selection of merchandising items are evidence of the basic configuration of the MCU: a product being exploited in the free market.

The extension of this paper prevents it from exploring further into the analysis of the franchise, and how it comments on real events, society, and America. The constant production of MCU media content provides almost infinite opportunities to examine these, and many other aspects, from many different perspectives. This essay, in its analysis of villainous characters, scratches the surface of an interesting issue that could be further inspected: the alignment of progressive social ideas with villains in traditional mainstream media, along with the historical circumstances that could explain the reason behind this, and even psychological investigations of the behavioral consequences of this association. This could be especially engaging when considering the rise of villain-focused media in recent years, and how they are given tragic backstories that remove the mark of evil from their stories, and show them to be empathetic and caring. Following the line of media analysis of evil, other lines of research could investigate the current editorial choice of Disney to avoid using actual villains in its films, unlike in its former days, as most Disney and Pixar films are now focused on healing from generational trauma, subtle feminism and racial discourse, and a strong environmentalist message—another aspect that could be analyzed as a corporate alignment with trending issues. It would be compelling to also explore the general tendencies of representing activism and its advocates in mainstream media: many of them are discovered to be hypocrites, elitists, and ready to use activism as a way to advance economically, politically, but over all, socially. Within the genre of superheroes, the comparison between the traditional heroes, like the ones in Marvel and DC Comics, and more crude representations of these characters, as were the graphic novels and then films *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta*, and now hit-publication and television series, *The Boys* (2019), which explores a more realistic perspective on superheroes, placing them in a capitalist context. Furthermore, the positive resolution—as in carried out, and not discarded, or reduced—of film and television stories concerning social critiques can be seen in the movie series *Knives Out* (2019), which deals with class and race issues, and *The Good Place* (2016), which offers an insightful yet light and playful approach between the intersection of capitalism, consumerism, and morality.

These last examples are evidence that popular culture can indeed affirmatively call out and challenge current social, economic, and political circumstances, provide significant and relevant alternatives to the status quo, and actively engage with its audience and encourage them to think about their impact on other people and the world around them. The MCU has already taken the first steps in the right direction if the company chooses to earnestly follow the teachings of more progressive social ideas. Marvel and its famous movie saga has already won over the hearts and devotion of millions of people around the world, so it would only be fair to

expect that it preached with its own example and put to practice the words that have resonated for decades in the minds of fans, that *with great power, comes great responsibility.*

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