

THE PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE:

MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE



EDITED BY ROWAN DANEELS, PHD & ALEXANDER VANDEWALLE, PHD

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PSYCHGEIST OF POP CULTURE SERIES

Play Story Press

Pittsburgh, PA

Series Editor: Rachel Kowert, PhD

Over the last few decades, interest in pop psychology has grown faster than our Netflix backlogs. This series highlights iconic pop culture content from television, film, literature, and video games through an examination of the psychological mechanisms that endear us to these stories for a lifetime.

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YOU'VE BECOME PART OF A BIGGER UNIVERSE

ROWAN DANEELS, PHD AND ALEXANDER
VANDEWALLE, PHD

There was an idea, [...] to bring together a group of remarkable people, to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could.

— Nick Fury (*The Avengers*)¹

In 2008, the movie *Iron Man*² kickstarted the Marvel Cinematic Universe (or MCU), a shared universe of movies, TV series, One-Shot short films, and television specials based on the stories and superhero characters from the Marvel comic books. By sharing plot events, characters, and settings between different installments, the MCU presents an overarching and interwoven narrative that has proved popular among fans and critics alike. This success has led to the MCU becoming one of the biggest entertainment franchises in history, with a worldwide box office revenue of 31 billion dollars as of January 2025³.

The MCU has expanded tremendously—and is still expanding—since its inception, leading to 70 different installments at the time of writing in 2025. After titular superheroes like Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America received their individual origin films in the MCU's early days, they assembled in a first crossover movie, *The Avengers*⁴. From there on out, the overall storyline has focused on the Infinity

Stones, six ‘elemental crystals’—as Wong called them in *Avengers: Infinity War*⁵—controlling aspects like time, space, mind, and more. This ‘Infinity Saga’ culminated in *Avengers: Endgame*⁶, where after defeating the alien warlord Thanos, most of the original MCU heroes passed on the torch to new characters. At the time of this book’s publication, the MCU is nearing the end of its second overarching narrative, the ‘Multiverse Saga’. Via new characters like Shang-Chi, Moon Knight, or She-Hulk and recurrent heroes such as Spider-Man or Doctor Strange, this second major storyline explores the existence of parallel universes, different versions or ‘variants’ of the main superheroes, and how these will ultimately collide with each other in *Avengers: Doomsday*⁷ and *Avengers: Secret Wars*⁸.

At the heart of the MCU’s superhero spectacle and multiversal madness lie questions and explorations of human psychology. The MCU’s character-driven storytelling and its goal-oriented narrative structure—that is, each (or, at least most) movie(s) or television series build(s) to something new—allow the franchise to explore how major narrative events impact characters over time. How does the death of a loved one impact someone who’s capable of altering the fabric of reality like Wanda Maximoff? Does saving the universe come with its own forms of trauma, and if so, how do superheroes such as Iron Man or Thor cope with it? *The Psychgeist of Pop Culture: Marvel Cinematic Universe* explores these and other underlying psychological themes and processes represented in the MCU, gathering scholars from a variety of fields, including psychology, psychotherapy, literary studies, communication, cultural studies, sociology, and philosophy. This volume collects eleven chapters, moving from initial discussions of the original core Avengers in the MCU, to analyses of identity and trauma among multiversal “heroes” (Loki, Wanda, Deadpool), to investigations of superhero group dynamics (the Guardians of the Galaxy, the Defenders), and to examinations of psychological themes across the wider MCU, finishing with a focus on often-overlooked secondary characters like Wong, Valkyrie, or Kate Bishop. Each chapter employs theory-based scholarly analysis to explore various stories, superheroes, villains, and supporting characters in the MCU, examining how they represent essential psychological concepts and theories.

Through this collection of chapters, we hope to deliver more insight into the psychological topics and theories that are deeply rooted in the stories and characters of the MCU, which we all love and relate to. By presenting these topics in a comprehensible and comprehensive manner, this volume shows the ongoing importance of this continuously expanding pop culture franchise and its profound impact on audiences. To quote the words of Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige:

We wanted to tell a great story about one character [when making *Iron Man*⁹], hoping that if it worked, we might just be able to do a few more, and if all the stars cosmically aligned, we could assemble the Avengers in a movie. That was the bet we were making when Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury appeared in the post credit scene on *Iron Man*¹⁰. He could have easily been speaking directly to us when he said, 'Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet.' Universes have a way of growing¹¹.

GENIUS, BILLIONAIRE, PLAYBOY, PHILANTHROPIST... REAL HERO

IRON MAN'S HEROIC JOURNEY AND
PERSONAL GROWTH

ROWAN DANEELS, PHD

The truth is ... I am Iron Man.

— Tony Stark (*Iron Man*)¹

The final line of *Iron Man*² marks the birth of not only its titular hero but also an entire cinematic universe, as this movie is the first installment within the MCU. Anthony 'Tony' Stark is a high-level genius, creator, inventor, and weapons manufacturer. Where Tony excels in intelligence, he lacks a selfless (superhero) personality: S.H.I.E.L.D. initially profiled him as volatile, self-obsessed, and lacking the necessary teamwork skills. His eccentric life takes a turn after being kidnapped by a terrorist organization, the Ten Rings. He builds an arc reactor-powered armored suit (later dubbed the Iron Man suit) to escape captivity. When Tony witnesses the consequences of his own weapons falling into the wrong hands, he decides to change his life by shutting down his weapons manufacturing and becoming the superhero Iron Man to protect the world.

Iron Man's character arc continues throughout several MCU installments, meeting new allies such as the Avengers (Earth's mightiest heroes) or his mentee Spider-Man; building positive relationships with, for example, his future wife Pepper Potts; and confronting enemies

such as Ultron. In *Avengers: Endgame*³, where the Avengers have their final confrontation with the alien warlord Thanos, Tony completes his superhero journey. He makes the ultimate sacrifice by snapping away Thanos and his army, killing himself in the process. This is the culmination of his character growth throughout the MCU, which sees him develop from a narcissistic playboy to a selfless (real) hero.

This chapter will show how Tony Stark's decade-long story across multiple films creates a unique version of the Hero's Journey, a common way of how stories are usually structured in popular media⁴. Unlike traditional hero stories, Tony's character development within the interconnected MCU leads to interesting changes in the typical narrative structure, particularly when he shifts from being the main hero to becoming a mentor for other characters like Peter Parker's Spider-Man. Next to his heroic growth, this chapter also analyzes Tony's personal growth, showing how his close relationships with other characters such as Pepper Potts or Happy Hogan, his brilliant achievements, or his sense of purpose contribute to his development as a person (and a hero) throughout his story arc. To do this, we will explore Tony's character development using two approaches: the Hero's Journey⁵ and the PERMA model⁶.

THE HERO'S JOURNEY AND THE PERMA MODEL

The Hero's Journey, first introduced by literature scientist and author Joseph Campbell⁷, is the standard path of a hero as he sets off on an adventure. Also called the 'monomyth,' Campbell argued there's a universal pattern that describes the essential steps of heroic stories in various cultures⁸. These stories are commonly categorized in three major phases: *separation*, which describes the departure from the hero's current environment into the unknown adventure; *initiation*, where the hero reaches the unknown as they face trials and meet new allies; and *the return*, in which the hero comes back to their familiar environment, changed by their adventure. This prominent narrative structure is often used as a storytelling template in popular media, including George Lucas' original *Star Wars* trilogy or the installments in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU).

Campbell's template was later adapted for movies by screenwriter Christopher Vogler⁹. His Hero's Journey interpretation, which is used in this chapter because of its frequent adoption in movie analyses¹⁰, includes twelve stages divided into the previously mentioned three phases:

Separation

1. **The ordinary world:** Introduction to the titular hero, including their background story, personal history before their rise to hero status, and their current peaceful environment.
2. **The call to adventure:** An event shakes up this initial situation, prompting the hero to venture outside their known environment, into the unknown adventure.
3. **Refusal to the call:** The initially fearful hero briefly turns away from the adventure.
4. **Meeting with the mentor:** The hero comes across an experienced character, providing the hero with wisdom, advice, training, and/or equipment to kickstart their heroic journey.
5. **Crossing the threshold:** The hero commits to leaving the ordinary world by entering a new and unfamiliar world.

Initiation

6. **Tests, allies, enemies:** The hero is tested by adversaries and forms alliances with other characters in the unfamiliar, heroic world.
7. **The approach:** The hero and his allies prepare to face their biggest threat in this new, heroic world.
8. **The ordeal:** The moment when the hero confronts their greatest fear.
9. **The reward:** The hero receives the treasure (reward) they won after facing death during 'The ordeal'.

Return

10. **The road back:** The hero returns to their ordinary world after completing the adventure, overcoming their big ordeal as they try to bring the reward back home.
11. **Resurrection:** The hero gets tested for the final time, facing death a second time but on a more meaningful level, as the hero needs to make

a final sacrifice. This sacrifice ensures that the overall conflict, which started at the beginning of the journey, becomes resolved.

12. Return with the elixir: The hero finally returns home to the ordinary world, oftentimes with some aspect of the reward.

Further expanding the perspective on how a hero's journey contributes not just to a character's heroic growth but also to their personal development, the chapter uses the PERMA model (a framework from positive psychology) to explore Tony's personal growth. Created by psychologist Martin Seligman¹¹, PERMA includes the elements of positive emotions, engagement, (positive) relationships, meaning, and accomplishments:

P - POSITIVE EMOTIONS

More than just happiness, these emotions include hope, interest, joy, love, compassion, pride, amusement, and gratitude¹². Positive emotions are a prime indicator of a person's well-being, as they can broaden a person's mental state and build new resources such as knowledge, self-insight, resilience, and social connections¹³.

E - ENGAGEMENT

Being completely absorbed by or extremely focused on a certain activity, causing a person to 'live in the moment'^{14,15}.

R - (POSITIVE) RELATIONSHIPS

Interactions with partners, family, friends, colleagues, and the larger community, where individuals feel supported, loved, and valued by others^{16,17}. Such supportive social connections are key to fostering people's well-being¹⁸.

M - MEANING

People tend to experience meaning by serving something greater than themselves and feeling valued¹⁹. They often search for this meaning or purpose in life, which helps individuals to focus on what's really important.

A - ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The result of working toward and reaching specific goals, or mastering a certain activity (also known as achievement, mastery, or competence)²⁰.

Seligman argues that pursuing these five core elements allows people to personally grow or 'flourish,' which contributes to their well-being and overall quality of life. While these five elements are often pursued independently, the PERMA framework suggests that engaging actively with all of them increases the chances of living a healthy, happy, and fulfilling life.

By combining the Hero's Journey with PERMA and applying them to Iron Man's story arc, this chapter goes beyond merely rehashing the Hero's Journey, using the MCU's Tony Stark as a case study. With the analysis of Iron Man's complete MCU storyline, spanning over a decade of films, as one extended hero's journey (something that has rarely been done before), we will see how heroic characters in interconnected cinematic universes can deviate from the traditional heroic story structure. One clear example of this is when Tony takes on the mentor role for other heroes, reenacting the fourth stage of the Hero's Journey not as the main hero but as the mentor—something that is less likely to occur when analyzing standalone films. This chapter will show that while Iron Man's arc mainly follows the Hero's Journey template²¹, Tony's story occasionally strays from this narrative structure, especially during the third and final phase of his hero's journey. In addition, we connect the Hero's Journey with psychological insights from the PERMA model. By doing so, we introduce an additional layer

of personal growth, an element that is only hinted at but not really accounted for in the Hero's Journey, such as when the hero forms positive relationships by gaining allies (stage 6) or returns to the ordinary world as a changed or transformed person (stage 12). Whether it's showing love and affection in his positive relationship with Pepper, being strongly engaged with and finding meaning in his attempts to protect his world (e.g., by perfecting the Iron Man suit), or accomplishing to defeat his arch nemesis Thanos, the PERMA model provides a fitting psychological framework to explain Tony's personal growth in each of the stages of his heroic journey.

The next sections in this chapter are structured following the individual stages of the Hero's Journey, applying the PERMA elements within each of these stages (each time referring to these elements in italics).

THE ORDINARY WORLD AND THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

Interestingly, *Iron Man*²² portrays these two first stages of the Hero's Journey in non-chronological order: the movie starts with Tony's call to adventure. After a successful weapons demonstration for the US army, Tony's convoy gets ambushed by terrorists in the Afghan desert, where he is severely injured. Flashback to two days before that, where Tony's ordinary world gets introduced through a presentation at an award show: "Tony Stark. Visionary. Genius. [...] Even from an early age, the son of legendary weapons developer Howard Stark quickly stole the spotlight with his brilliant and unique mind"²³. The presentation shows several impressive engineering and academic *accomplishments* but also covers the death of his father. Tony's self-centered, ironic, and careless attitude is also portrayed here, for instance, when he chooses to gamble at a casino rather than accept his award.

The ordinary world phase mainly includes Tony's *positive emotions* and sense of *engagement* in terms of the PERMA model²⁴. For instance, he's cracking jokes with soldiers in the 'funvee,' experiencing simple emotions of amusement and joy. Tony is a prime example of *engagement*: he is actually living in the moment²⁵, pursuing not profound but rather enjoyable activities that make him happy without really consid-

ering other people's feelings. His *relationships*, on the other hand, are not yet positive at this stage, as he shows a general lack of care towards the people around him. For example, he arrives three hours late for his flight's departure to Afghanistan with his friend Colonel James 'Rhodey' Rhodes, US army liaison to Stark Industries. All of this represents Tony's ordinary world.

Back to Tony's adventure. He wakes up in a dark cave, hooked up to a car battery and a magnet to keep grenade shrapnel from reaching his heart. He's saved by Yinsen, a fellow prisoner who informs Tony that they are being held captive by the Ten Rings, an organization that wants Tony to build his advanced missile system. As if that is not enough of a shake-up, the terrorists confront Tony with a horrible truth: they have a whole arsenal of Stark Industries weapons that they use to kill innocent lives, which goes against Tony's patriotic ideas of protecting (American) people with his weapons. By showing the consequences of Tony's weapons, this stage of the narrative portrays the changing tides of his once peaceful life. The call to adventure for Tony is a very short narrative stage, which—besides experiencing gratitude towards Yinsen for saving his life as a *positive emotion*—does not connect to any of the PERMA elements.

MEETING WITH THE MENTOR AND CROSSING THE THRESHOLD

Normally, the Hero's Journey continues with the stage where the initially fearful hero briefly turns away from the adventure (i.e., stage 3, the 'Refusal to the call'²⁶). However, not every story contains all of these stages explicitly²⁷. Tony doesn't really refuse the call; he has no choice: he either devises a plan to escape his captivity, or he dies.

The revelation that the Ten Rings have access to Stark Industries weapons ushers in the fourth stage: the hero meeting a mentor. The mentor in Tony's story is fellow captive dr. Ho Yinsen, who saved Tony from his mortal injuries. His most important action is confronting Tony with his current devil-may-care hedonic lifestyle:

What you just saw... That is your legacy, Stark. Your life's work in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the

last act of defiance of the great Tony Stark? Or are you going to do something about it²⁸?

Yinsen tries to convince Tony to become a better man, to *engage* in less self-centered goals and strive towards *meaningful* deeds, and to nourish *positive relationships* (cf. PERMA model²⁹). In other words, to reach for personal growth. The mentor also helps Tony build a miniature arc reactor that powers up the first version of an armored battle suit (the Iron Man 'Mark I' suit) to escape captivity. During their escape, Yinsen sacrifices himself to reunite with his dead family and to make sure Tony can be free. As a true mentor, he parts ways with Tony with some words of wisdom: "Don't waste it. Don't waste your life"³⁰.

While Yinsen may be Tony's initial mentor that sets him on his way to becoming Iron Man, he has other mentors throughout his heroic journey in the MCU, including Tony's father Howard Stark, mostly through his past parenting and old footage serving as flashbacks in *Iron Man 2*³¹, and S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury.

The remainder of *Iron Man*³² can be situated in what Campbell and Vogler described as 'Crossing the (first) threshold' of Tony's MCU arc. In this stage, the hero commits to leaving the ordinary world by entering a new and unfamiliar world³³. For Tony, this means entering the heroic world by creating the Mark I suit that allows him to escape captivity. Witnessing the consequences of his war mongering and his weapons being sold to terrorists, another way Tony leaves his familiar world is by deciding that Stark Industries will no longer focus on weapons manufacturing. This shift in personal values, wanting to become more responsible and heading down a new path can be associated with the PERMA element of *meaning*. Tony wants to pursue a more meaningful life instead of having death and war (and one-night stands) as his only legacy³⁴. This new purpose in life includes, perhaps a bit contradictorily, building and testing more refined versions of the Iron Man suit (i.e., the Mark II and III). It also includes Tony deciding to suit up and fight off the terrorists on his own, driven by guilt and triggered by news reports addressing the human suffering caused by the terrorists. Further applying the PERMA model³⁵, Tony experiences the *positive emotion* of pride after successfully testing the suit during its

first full flight, seeing it work as a means to do good and save people. He also has a sense of *accomplishment* when creating and perfecting the Iron Man suit. Both PERMA elements contribute towards Tony becoming a better person and hero.

As he gradually crosses the threshold and transforms into Iron Man, Tony mainly receives help from his assistant Pepper Potts, the most important *positive relationship* he has during *Iron Man*³⁶. She (reluctantly) helps him uncover Obadiah Stane's attempted takeover of Stark Industries. In return, Tony puts his life on the line to save her from Obadiah, afterwards referring to her as his hypothetical superhero girlfriend. All of this exemplifies that their *relationship*, although still at a very early stage, is close, mutually supportive, and positive (cf. PERMA)^{37,38}. In the end, convincing Pepper to help him is where Tony's heroic and personal growth in this stage is exemplified the most: "I shouldn't be alive, unless it was for a reason. [...] I just finally know what I have to do. And I know in my heart that it's right"³⁹. This relates closely to the PERMA aspects of *engagement* and *meaning*, as he becomes absorbed with wanting to do good. He finds his new purpose in life, which is destroying his own misplaced weapons and protecting people as Iron Man. By revealing himself to the world as Iron Man, he commits to leaving behind his normal life and becoming a superhero, thus completing the 'Crossing the threshold' stage.

TESTS, ALLIES, AND ENEMIES

The sixth stage in the Hero's Journey, 'Tests, allies, and enemies', involves the hero being tested by adversaries and forming alliances with other characters in the heroic world⁴⁰. When analyzing Iron Man's entire MCU arc, this stage includes most of his story before *Avengers: Infinity War*⁴¹, as this movie ushers in the next stage of his heroic journey. This section will not address each of Iron Man's tests, allies, and enemies in depth, but focuses instead on the most important moments in his overall heroic journey and personal growth.

ASSEMBLING THE AVENGERS AND THE 'BATTLE OF NEW YORK'

Tony's universe expands when he bands together with other superheroes in *The Avengers*⁴². To stop the Asgardian God of Mischief Loki, S.H.I.E.L.D. director Fury recruits six superheroes, including Iron Man. The unfamiliar aspect for Tony here is that he needs to learn to work together: he's not the star of his own show anymore. Teaming up with other heroes reveals a strong clash of styles, especially between Tony and Steve Rogers/Captain America. Tony's decadent and eccentric personality (e.g., blasting AC/DC's 'Shoot to Thrill'⁴³ as he first enters the scene as Iron Man) contradicts Steve's disciplined, military attitude. The best example is a scene where the Avengers argue over Fury's intentions with the Tesseract/Space Stone, with Tony and Steve particularly clashing:

Cap: Yeah. Big man in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?

Tony: Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

Cap: I know guys with none of that worth ten of you. I've seen the footage. The only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play. [...] You may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero⁴⁴.

After Loki escapes S.H.I.E.L.D. custody (again), he starts the Battle of New York by summoning the Chitauri, an alien army given to him by the alien warlord Thanos so Loki can steal the Tesseract. Tony is severely tested here. He first tries to take on Loki alone, distracting him long enough to switch to his Mark VII armor. However, he quickly realizes he needs to work together with his fellow Avengers to save the day. Tony starts following orders from the battle-experienced Cap, works together with Hawkeye, and forms a cohesive band with the others to become the Avengers. This change of approach is associated with the PERMA elements of *meaning* and *positive relationships*⁴⁵: by serving something greater than himself, namely the Avengers, Tony finds meaning as part of a bigger whole to overcome these tests. He seems to accept help from the others and understands that he alone cannot defeat these alien forces.

The ultimate showcase of his heroic and personal growth in this movie occurs at the end of the battle. When a nuclear missile is about to blow up New York as a last resort to stave off the Chitauri, Tony steers the missile into the space portal towards the Chitauri mothership, nearly killing himself. With this action, he not only *accomplishes* to stop the Chitauri and save New York (cf. PERMA⁴⁶). Tony also proves Cap wrong here: he is the guy to make the sacrifice play.

POST-NEW YORK STRESS, PART 1: BUILDING A GAZILLION IRON MAN SUITS

While the Avengers saved the day in New York, that adventure left a severe mark on these superheroes, perhaps the most on Tony. *Iron Man 3*⁴⁷ starts with Tony being awake for 72 hours, testing the 42nd iteration of his Iron Man suit. For those of you keeping track: he was still on his seventh suit at the end of the previous movie, implying that he has built a lot of suits after NY. Rhodey and Pepper, the close *personal relationships* Tony further developed in *Iron Man 2*⁴⁸ (i.e., Rhodey becoming the hero War Machine with an adjusted Iron Man suit, and Tony kissing Pepper after saving her during that movie's final battle), are concerned for his current condition. He is clearly dealing with post-traumatic stress caused by his near-death experience during the fight with the Chitauri, as he gets severe anxiety attacks every time someone mentions New York or aliens. In Tony's words: "I'm a piping hot mess. [...] Nothing's been the same since New York. [...] You experience things and then they're over, and you still can't explain them. Gods, aliens, other dimensions. I'm just a man in a can"⁴⁹.

Translating this to PERMA⁵⁰, Tony is *engaged* with (or, rather, obsessed with) the events of NY, building more and more Iron Man suits. He also finds his new purpose or *meaning* in life: he wants to protect his world, which consists of Pepper and other close *positive relationships* (i.e., Happy Hogan, Rhodey), from imminent threats such as aliens or threats closer to home. That's why he is up so late, doing what he knows best: tinkering to *accomplish* his new protective goal and distract himself from the anxiety.

During the movie's final battle, Tony summons all of the Iron Man suits he made since New York, controlled by Jarvis, to help him out.

However, he also activates the Clean Slate protocol after the fight that self-destructs his suits. This action comes seemingly after a shift in purpose (cf. *meaning*⁵¹), as Tony attempts to have a normal, non-heroic life with Pepper—improving his *positive relationship* with her. He destroys all his suits and undergoes surgery so he doesn't need to wear the arc reactor linked to his Iron Man suit anymore, *accomplishing* to (temporarily) remove his anxiety. As such, he (temporarily) strays from the hero's journey. Leaving the heroic path, even temporary, is not something that is accounted for in the Hero's Journey⁵². It's not part of the narrative structure, making it an interesting example of how focusing on Tony's entire storyline across multiple films allows for this deviation from the traditional Hero's Journey.

POST-NEW YORK STRESS, PART 2: CREATING THE MURDER BOT ULTRON

This change of heart towards leaving the hero life behind is only temporary, though. The next time we see Tony, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*⁵³, he's back in an Iron Man suit (Mark 43) kicking butt alongside his Avengers friends to retrieve Loki's mind-controlling scepter from HYDRA. It's here that we see another consequence of Tony's continued anxiety: his obsession with the threat of alien invasion and protecting his world (cf. PERMA elements of *engagement* and *meaning*⁵⁴) leads him to experiment with the Mind Stone inside Loki's scepter. Pushed by Wanda Maximoff's nightmare vision, wherein all of the Avengers are dead by the hands of the invading Chitauri and which leaves Tony alone with survivor's guilt wondering why he didn't do more, he creates Ultron.

As an advanced AI and peacekeeping program, Ultron is designed to help the Avengers protect the world from future invasions. However, Ultron turns out to have malevolent intentions. He wrongfully interprets Tony's purpose of protecting people from outside threats by making it his mission to kill all humans, who are, according to him, their own greatest (inside) threat. As the Avengers try to figure out why Tony built Ultron without telling them, he clearly conveys his fears and the *meaningful* mission he's so *engaged* with since New York:

Anybody remember when I carried a nuke through a wormhole? Saved New York? Recall that? A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space. [...] We're the Avengers. We can bust arms dealers all the livelong day, but that up there, that's... That's the endgame. How were you guys planning on beating that? [...] We'll lose⁵⁵.

Tony feels that the threat of alien invasion is his legacy and the end of his heroic journey. In the end, the Avengers get rid of Ultron by fighting together to stop this threat. Tony decides to take a step back from the Avengers, to spend some time with Pepper. He leaves his heroic journey again, balancing his purpose in life more towards his *positive relationships* than his heroic path⁵⁶ (again, temporarily, as we will see in the following sections).

TONY BECOMING THE MENTOR

In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*⁵⁷, Tony appears in just a few scenes, where he continues his mentorship of the young hero Peter Parker/Spider-Man from *Captain America: Civil War*⁵⁸. As such, Tony grows in his heroic journey and reaches the stage where he himself becomes the mentor for younger heroes. This indicates that Tony's arc varies slightly from the traditional Hero's Journey template⁵⁹, by letting the hero become a mentor to other heroes during his own heroic journey. He upgrades Spidey's suit with Stark tech and tests Peter's motivation to be a hero. Because of Peter's young age and newness to the hero gig, Tony wants to keep him safe as he feels responsible for him. He imparts Peter with some hero advice, such as "Stay close to the ground. Build up your game by helping the little people"⁶⁰. When Peter decides to ignore these teachings and Tony needs to help him out on two awkward occasions, he takes away Peter's advanced suit to teach him the lesson that, if he's nothing without the suit, he shouldn't have it. This shows Tony's heroic growth (and failures) from the past *Iron Man* movies, indicating he's more than just the suit.

THE APPROACH AND THE ORDEAL

After the hero faces all these tests and enemies, he comes to stage seven of the Hero's Journey, 'The approach'. Here, the hero and his allies prepare to face their biggest threat⁶¹. Tony's previous adventures, including the Avengers' first fight against the Chitauri, his anxieties regarding this extraterrestrial threat, and his nightmare vision of a full-blown alien invasion, have all served as preparation for the Avengers and their allies' biggest fight against Thanos, the alien warlord who has been collecting the six Infinity Stones. While Tony tried to prepare for this endgame by creating Ultron as a suit of armor around the world, which failed miserably, perhaps his biggest preparation is the improvements he kept on making to the Iron Man suit—especially in *Iron Man 3*⁶², where he created 35 different versions. In *Avengers: Infinity War*⁶³, where the big fight happens, we see his 50th iteration of the suit. A big upgrade from his previous suits, the Mark L uses nanotechnology that easily adapts to anything Tony needs in terms of weaponry, flight systems, and shielding. Next to this, a more implicit preparation is that the Avengers have steadily expanded their ranks from the original six members in *The Avengers*⁶⁴. Not only did they find new members in Wanda Maximoff, Falcon, Vision, War Machine, and more. They also allied themselves with other heroes, including Wakanda's Black Panther and Spider-Man. Having more allies, or *positive relationships* in PERMA terms, gives the heroes a better chance at surviving this stage of Tony's heroic journey.

Finally, 'The ordeal' (stage 8) has arrived: the moment when the hero confronts their greatest fear⁶⁵. For Tony, this is Thanos and the threat of an alien invasion, which has haunted him ever since the Chitauri attacked New York. While not directly aimed at Tony, Thanos alludes to this inescapable fear at the start of *Infinity War*: "Dread it. Run from it. Destiny arrives all the same. And now it's here. Or should I say: 'I am'?"⁶⁶. Translating this to PERMA⁶⁷, Tony's *engagement* (or obsession) with Thanos from the previous movies comes to life. Tony (and the other heroes) are challenged to stop Thanos, but he's unsure whether they have the necessary skills to overcome this major ordeal. Tony's ordeal takes place on Thanos's home planet of Titan, where

Tony and his allies—Doctor Strange, Spider-Man, and several Guardians of the Galaxy—confront the Mad Titan. While Doctor Strange initiates the fight with Thanos, Tony is the final hero left standing at the end of the ordeal. Despite all the preparations and his nanotech suit, Tony is still no match for Thanos with four Infinity Stones. He's defeated by Thanos, with only Strange handing over the Time Stone preventing Tony's demise.

In terms of the Hero's Journey, Tony faces death and survives, but he doesn't overcome his ordeal⁶⁸. This is another clear example of Tony's character development digressing from the traditional Hero's Journey, as heroes usually emerge victorious from their ordeal in order to get rewarded and return back home. When Thanos gathers all six stones and snaps away half of all life in the universe, Tony sees the nightmare he's dreaded all this time come to life: the other heroes, and especially his mentee Spider-Man—the kid he wanted to protect the most—get erased from existence, while he survives the ordeal.

In terms of PERMA⁶⁹, *Infinity War*⁷⁰ is seemingly all about testing the hero (and his allies) and setting them up for failure, instead of supporting Tony's heroic development. This is exemplified in Tony not being able to *accomplish* any of his goals: while his perseverance to stop Thanos is great, he cannot keep the villain from collecting the Infinity Stones, nor can he defeat him or keep Peter from dying.

THE REWARD

In this ninth stage of the Hero's Journey, the hero receives the treasure or 'reward' they won after facing death during 'The ordeal'⁷¹. At first sight, this stage isn't included in Tony's heroic journey: he lost the ordeal with Thanos, almost losing his life and seeing his fellow heroes being snapped away into thin air. However, Tony, probably as one of the only Avengers, does get rewarded after their confrontation with Thanos. While the universe lost big time, Tony seems to have been rewarded with the non-heroic life he has wanted since the Battle of New York. He gets to return to Earth, reunites with Pepper (who wasn't killed by the Snap), and finally enjoys the family life for five years with her and their daughter Morgan in *Endgame*⁷². In terms of

the Hero's Journey⁷³, Tony is leaving the heroic world behind, which usually occurs during the next stage ('The road back'), and returns to his ordinary world of not being the superhero Iron Man. His ordinary world, however, has also changed as a result of Tony's heroic and personal growth, evolving from a narcissistic playboy to a caring family guy. Tony's character development digresses here from the traditional heroic narrative: usually, the hero overcomes death, wins their ordeal, and gets rewarded. However, Tony reaches the rewarding stage while failing his ordeal with Thanos, making this a novel take on the Hero's Journey's structure.

In terms of the PERMA model⁷⁴, Tony is *engaged* in surviving in dead space after his ordeal with Thanos. He wants to get back to Earth, back to Pepper. When he gets back, *positive emotions* of love and gratitude are key to this narrative stage of Tony's journey. He's happy that Pepper is still alive, experiencing love within his peaceful family life. This includes *positive relationships* with Pepper, leading to the birth of their daughter Morgan. Being able to finally leave the Iron Man persona behind him and settle down shows his personal growth.

THE ROAD BACK, OR BACK ON THE (HEROIC) ROAD?

Five years after Thanos's Snap, Tony and Pepper live in a quiet lake house with their daughter Morgan. This peaceful situation is shaken by the arrival of Steve (Captain America), Natasha (Black Widow), and Scott (Ant-Man), who want Tony's help to travel back in time and collect the Infinity Stones to restore everyone who was snapped away. Reluctantly, he is pulled back into the superhero life, driven to complete the adventure he started in *Iron Man*⁷⁵ and *The Avengers*⁷⁶. After 'The reward' stage, the Hero's Journey typically continues with stage ten, 'The road back', where the hero returns to their ordinary world as they try to bring the reward back home⁷⁷. As Tony's reward (i.e., gaining a loving family and retiring from being Iron Man) is not something that can be 'brought back', this specific stage does not fit Tony's storyline perfectly.

Similar to how Tony doesn't overcome his ordeal but still gets rewarded afterwards, his arc at this moment deviates from the tradi-

tional Hero's Journey structure: rather than having a 'road back', the events in *Endgame*⁷⁸ reiterate earlier stages of the Hero's Journey. He is offered a new 'Call to adventure' after leaving the superhero life for five years. He also refuses the adventure at first (cf. 'Refusal to the call'⁷⁹) because he fears that, by altering the timeline, they could make the situation even worse—creating a more dangerous enemy than Thanos—or he could lose his newfound peaceful life. As the traditional Hero's Journey doesn't account for a reiteration of previous stages⁸⁰, this can be seen as yet another example of how zooming in on Tony's story arc throughout the MCU causes deviations from the standard narrative template of the Hero's Journey.

Going back to Tony's initial refusal, it's the moral dilemma of either preserving his family life with Pepper and Morgan or jumping back into the heroic life as Iron Man and saving everyone that was snapped away by Thanos that keeps him awake. In the end, Pepper is the one who persuades him to be a hero again: "Tony, trying to get you to stop has been one of the few failures of my entire life"⁸¹. In other words, she recognizes that Tony will always have that heroic, selfless side in him that he can't ignore. Alongside his curiosity as an engineer towards the idea of time travelling and his guilt for losing Peter in the fight with Thanos, Tony's *positive relationship* with Pepper drives him to take the leap to bring everyone back (cf. 'Crossing the threshold').

In terms of *engagement*, he both wants to help the Avengers gather the Stones and snap everyone back, but he's also living in the present by wanting to preserve his current family life. This leads to the development of two different *meaningful* purposes in life: keeping his peaceful life with Pepper and Morgan, and saving everyone they lost by helping out the Avengers with their 'time heist'. After driving to the Avengers compound, Tony tells Steve the duality of his *meaningful* purpose: "We got a shot at getting these stones, but I gotta tell you my priorities. Bring back what we lost, I hope, yes. Keep what I found, I have to, at all costs. And maybe not die trying"⁸². In the end, he achieves two out of the three objectives he set out before their time heist.

THE RESURRECTION, OR TONY'S FINAL ORDEAL

The time heist, which can be connected to Tony's reiteration of the Hero's Journey's sixth stage 'Tests, allies, and enemies'⁸³, is successful: they collect all of the Infinity Stones in the past to bring everyone back. However, as Tony mentions that if "you mess with time, it tends to mess back"⁸⁴, Thanos's younger version, who found out about the Avengers' plans during their time heist, follows them back to the future for a final confrontation. This second confrontation with Thanos and the final act of *Endgame*⁸⁵ fits within Tony's (main) heroic journey as the penultimate stage of his heroic journey, 'The resurrection'. He faces death a second time but this time on a higher and more meaningful level, as the hero needs to make a final sacrifice. This sacrifice ensures that the overall conflict, which started at the beginning of the journey, becomes resolved.

Tony's final test is to defeat Thanos once and for all, first with his core team members Captain America and Thor, but later with the full line-up of Avengers and allies. During the fight, Thanos gets the Stones back in his possession. Tony wrestles with Thanos for the Stones, eventually transferring them onto his own armor. It's here that he makes the ultimate sacrifice in the climactic battle, answering Thanos's "I am inevitable" with his own "and I am Iron Man"⁸⁶, referring to the words he spoke that started his heroic adventure. He snaps away both Thanos and his army. Tony's actions resolve the Avengers' conflict during the MCU's Infinity Saga. Unfortunately, using the Stones also costs Tony his own life in a heartbreaking moment. He shares a brief moment with Rhodey, his longtime friend; with Peter, who tells him they won; and with Pepper, who reassures him that he can finally rest peacefully. His arc reactor shuts down, signaling that his heroic journey is over.

RETURNING WITH THE ELIXIR

Traditionally, the Hero's Journey ends with 'Returning with the elixir', where the hero finally returns home to the ordinary world, oftentimes with some aspect of the reward⁸⁷. In Tony's story, however, the hero selflessly sacrifices himself to make sure that everyone else gets to

return home safely. In Tony's final words, recorded before their time heist:

I'm hoping if you play this back, it's in celebration. I hope families are reunited. I hope we get it back. And something like a normal version of the planet has been restored. [...] So, I thought I'd probably better record a little greeting in the case of an untimely death. On my part. Not that death at any time isn't untimely. [...] Then again, that's the hero gig, right? Part of the journey is the end. [...] I love you 3000 [as he looks directly at his daughter Morgan]⁸⁸.

These words and this moment, heartwarming and heartbreaking at the same time, are a testament to Tony's heroic and personal growth. He fulfills the two *meaningful* goals he set out since becoming Iron Man: saving the Earth (and the universe) while also protecting his own world (i.e., his *positive relationships* with Pepper, Morgan, Peter, Rhodey, and so on)⁸⁹. To accomplish these goals, however, he had to sacrifice his own life. Tony's funeral scene at the end of the movie is a major send-off for the character that started the MCU back in 2008. It shows all the people he worked with and had strong, *positive relationships* with. In the end, Tony's journey led him to become a 'real hero'—appropriately also the name of the soundtrack theme played during Tony's funeral.

CONCLUSION

Tony Stark's Iron Man is *the* superhero that started the MCU with the movie *Iron Man*⁹⁰. This chapter addressed Tony's journey as Iron Man using two distinct yet undisputedly intertwined frameworks: the Hero's Journey^{91,92}, a classic narrative structure often used to portray heroic stories, and the PERMA model⁹³, a positive psychology framework explaining how people experience personal growth through *positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishments*.

Tony's character development mainly follows the traditional structure of the Hero's Journey, while the PERMA elements account for how

he grows as a person, next to his heroic growth. He's quickly called to adventure when witnessing the consequences of his war-profiteering actions, creating a powerful suit of armor and becoming the superhero Iron Man. On his journey, he is tested by several adversaries and teams up with many allies, like the Avengers, maintaining various *positive relationships* that evolve throughout the MCU, including Pepper Potts and Peter Parker's Spider-Man. His *engagement* (or obsession) with the threat of alien invasion after the Avengers' first battle leads Tony to have two *meaningful* life goals: wanting to protect the world, while also protecting his loved ones. After losing his first major ordeal with Thanos, Tony's heroic journey somewhat strays from the typical narrative template. Not only is he rewarded while losing his ordeal, as he temporarily leaves the hero gig and builds up a peaceful family life with Pepper and their daughter Morgan. Tony also doesn't get a peaceful road back to his ordinary world, but is instead pulled back into the heroic world in an attempt to reverse Thanos's actions. This reiterates some of the earlier stages of the Hero's Journey until Tony faces his second, final ordeal. To *accomplish* both of his *meaningful* goals, however, he makes the ultimate sacrifice in order to stop Thanos once and for all.

This chapter shows that applying the Hero's Journey to an interconnected cinematic universe instead of a single movie can instigate certain digressions from the traditional narrative template, like temporarily removing himself from the heroic path, the reiteration of previous stages or the hero becoming a mentor themselves. This seems only logical, as every single movie usually has its own smaller heroic journey. For Iron Man, this reiteration took place during the final act of his character development: after his first ordeal, he initially leaves the heroic world but is pulled back to experience earlier stages of his heroic journey. However, these stages are experienced in a different fashion: Tony has all of this prior heroic experience when he embarks on his second call to adventure, crossing of the threshold, and, more importantly, his second ordeal with Thanos. He better understands the importance of teamwork and the value of relationships, but also the impact of being a hero on his personal life, compared to his early days as Iron Man; all elements showcasing his personal growth throughout

his heroic journey, explained through the PERMA model. Furthermore, the impact of these deviations from the traditional narrative structure on Tony's character arc mainly revolves around him having a large impact on the MCU, perhaps the largest out of all the MCU's heroes. For one, he becomes a mentor to other superheroes, helping them out in their own heroic journey. Also, by not surviving the final fight with Thanos, Tony's heroic journey does not reach its final stage, where the hero returns to his ordinary world and lives out the rest of his days in peace. Instead, his sacrifice makes sure that everyone else can return home, revealing that Tony's heroic journey has a profound and strong impact on the (future of the) MCU's storytelling.

Although starting his journey as a self-centered and egotistical playboy philanthropist (using his own words), in the end, Tony Stark's Iron Man becomes a real hero that inspires the future generation of superheroes in the MCU.

WHEN SITUATIONS POINT SOUTH

CHALLENGING THE VIRTUES OF CAPTAIN AMERICA

MARK D. WHITE, PHD

When we talk about people we know, we often say things like they're honest, brave, and even simply 'good'. In the MCU, no one receives accolades like this as often as Captain America, the living legend of World War II. Steve Rogers was a scrawny young man with an irresistible desire to fight for his country, but was repeatedly turned away by the U.S. Army recruiters as too frail. His perseverance was noted by Professor Erskine, who chose him to undergo the Project Rebirth treatment, using super-soldier serum and Vita Rays to transform his body to physical perfection. Joining the battle against the Axis powers, Steve eventually gave his life in 1945 to defeat the Red Skull and was revived in the 21st century to fight HYDRA, Loki, and Thanos alongside the Avengers.

But what do we mean when we say that someone is honest, brave, or good? What about them are we describing, and what does it mean? For example, if we call Cap honest, does that mean he never lies, or just rarely? If he lies sometimes, how often can he do it and still be called honest? If he occasionally lies, does the reason matter for whether we can call him 'honest'? If we take these questions seriously, we may even doubt whether there is something about a person that justifies calling them honest (even if they usually are).

In this chapter, we will use Steve Rogers's behavior in the *Captain America* and *Avengers* films to explore the debate between *virtue ethics*¹, a system of ethics based on character traits such as honesty and courage, and *situationism*², a psychological theory that casts doubt on whether such character traits help describe or predict behavior—and if they truly exist at all. We'll use examples from Cap's behavior to illustrate the pros and cons of each view, focusing on what is perhaps his most central yet controversial character trait, before concluding with some thoughts about the psychology and philosophy of superheroes in general.

WHAT IS VIRTUE ETHICS?

When Steve Rogers, *in cognito*, visits the Captain America exhibit at the Smithsonian in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*³, one of the displays cites honor, bravery, and sacrifice as some of the hero's admirable qualities. Moral philosophers call these qualities *virtues*, character traits that help the person who has them behave ethically and lead a 'good life', as described by the most well-known scholar of virtue ethics, the Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Virtue ethics is one of the 'big three' schools of moral philosophy, alongside utilitarianism and deontology⁴. *Utilitarianism* tells us to perform acts that promote the greatest amount of good in the world, and *deontology* tells us to perform acts that correspond to basic moral principles or ideals⁵. Virtue ethics is different from both in that it doesn't judge actions themselves as 'good' or 'right' but rather assesses the character of the person who performs them as 'virtuous' or not.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*⁶, Aristotle wrote eloquently about virtues such as honesty, courage, and generosity, and how they lead to ethical behavior. After all, simply because we describe someone like Captain America as honest or courageous doesn't tell us how he expresses those character traits in terms of specific action. The other two schools of ethics provide much more detailed instruction in this regard: utilitarianism tells us to do the one thing that will lead to the greatest happiness for the greatest amount of people, and deontology tells us to do the right thing according to various moral principles and duties.

But if all virtue ethics had to say was simply ‘be honest’ or ‘be courageous’, it wouldn’t be very helpful!

Luckily, Aristotle did help out in this regard. First, he narrowed down the meaning of individual virtues when he described the proper understanding of each one as the ‘golden mean’ between two extremes. For example, courage falls between the extremes of cowardice (very little courage) and foolhardiness (too much courage). We wouldn’t consider any Marvel superhero to be courageous if they cowered in the face of danger, and we certainly wouldn’t respect their courage if they simply ran toward it without thinking first. Similarly, honesty is the golden mean between dishonesty (obviously) and forthrightness (which can be rude or cruel). Generally speaking, one shouldn’t lie, but neither should one be blunt and unfeeling; the golden mean of honesty finds the ideal balance between these two.

JUDGMENT: THE BEST SUPERPOWER

How do we find this golden mean? It’s not a simple task, and the answer may not be the same for each person (or superhero). As Aristotle wrote, in terms of courage, “whoever stands firm against the right things and fears the right things, for the right end, in the right way, at the right time, and is correspondingly confident, is the brave person” (Book 3, Chapter 7)⁷. But how does someone determine all these ‘right’ things? Aristotle said that we must use *phronēsis*, which means practical wisdom or judgment. There are no rules or formulae for judgment; as a later philosopher, Immanuel Kant, wrote on the matter, “although the understanding is certainly capable of being instructed and equipped through rules, the power of judgment is a special talent that cannot be taught but only practiced” (p. A133/B172)⁸.

Judgment turns out to be the key to converting our virtuous tendencies into action in specific circumstances⁹. Although it is easy to say ‘never lie’ or ‘always help others’, true moral dilemmas are rarely black-and-white. There are often valid arguments to be made for a number of actions, each of them invoking different virtues. Just as real-world judges do when balancing the various legal and moral arguments in a tough case, we serve as the moral judges of our own lives.

We choose our actions according to our best judgment of what is the best or right thing to do—or the thing that best reflects our moral character. Also, judgment is no less important to utilitarian or deontological decision-making: deciding on ‘the best or right thing to do’ is just as fraught with ambiguity, despite both ethical schools having a rule or formula at its heart.

Cap uses judgment when applying his virtues to the wide range of moral dilemmas he finds himself in, which we can see in his exercise of one of his less flashy virtues: humility, which can be understood as the tendency to downplay one’s own positive qualities or accomplishments. Cap regularly downplays his superlative qualities and boosts those of others. For example, in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*¹⁰, he attends Sam Wilson’s support groups for veterans and simply listens rather than drawing attention to himself, praising Sam afterwards for the important work he’s doing. Humility can be presented as the golden mean between boastful arrogance and false modesty (or outright dishonesty about one’s achievements). Cap uses judgment to balance these two extremes when, in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*¹¹, he takes a turn at lifting Thor’s hammer Mjolnir, which can only be wielded by someone ‘worthy’¹². Cap budes it but does not lift it, which can be interpreted as Cap proving to himself that he’s ‘worthy’ but not showing it off to the others (or waiting to show it at ‘the right time’). Thor does notice this but also chooses not to draw attention to it, albeit for less virtuous reasons!

The results of judgment will also be different for every individual, depending on their own capabilities and background. The ‘right’ way for Captain America to put his virtues into practice may not be the ‘right’ way for someone else. For example, at the beginning of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*¹³, we see him leap from an aircraft without a parachute. This amazes the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent watching, but not Brock Rumlow, who knew this was a routine act of courage for our hero—for almost anybody else, though, doing this would have been ridiculously foolish! A normal person can be just as courageous as Captain America, but their ‘right’ way to exercise that virtue will be different, reflecting their individual capabilities. In fact, Cap’s enhanced strength and endurance does not explain Private Steve

Rogers's extraordinary act of courage in jumping on the (dummy) grenade during basic military training in *Captain America: The First Avenger*¹⁴, though—that was pure bravery and sacrifice.

ENTER THE SITUATIONISTS

Virtue ethics is challenged not only by rival theories of moral philosophy, but by prominent theories of psychology as well. The idea that people have stable character traits that reliably lead to certain behavior has been critiqued in recent years by social psychologists known as *situationists*, of whom the best known is John M. Doris¹⁵. Doris and his fellow situationists argue that the role of character traits in determining behavior has been greatly exaggerated by both psychologists and philosophers, and the role of contextual factors has been neglected.

The situationist critique of stable and influential character traits was motivated largely by a series of psychological experiments linking ethical behavior to trivial environmental factors. These experiments generally take the form of a constructed opportunity for moral behavior, preceded by a presumably irrelevant event that may or may not affect it. For example, one of Tony Stark's thick wallets full of money is placed on the ground, which test subjects would find and then either return (the ethical choice) or keep (the unethical choice). Before they find the wallets, however, they may be guided to look in a payphone—ask someone Cap's age if you're not sure what this is—for coins, which had been planted there for some subjects but not others. These experiments revealed that the test subjects were significantly more likely to behave ethically (in this case, return the wallet) if they had a positive yet seemingly trivial experience beforehand (finding a coin)¹⁶.

Certainly, there were more ethical *and* less ethical people among both groups of test subjects. People who were more honest would return the wallet more often, and those who were less honest would do so less often. If the groups were chosen randomly and all else remained the same, we would expect to see about the same rate of honest behavior in both groups. What we would *not* expect to see, if character traits are meaningful, is that the trivial event of finding a

simple coin in a payphone significantly affects behavior that we would think was caused by a person's moral disposition.

The results of these experiments lead us to question virtue ethicists' belief in the existence of stable character traits that reliably lead to ethical behavior. If the situationists are right, there is no meaningful sense in which a person like Captain America can be said to be honest or courageous or humble: if his behavior over time and in various situations suggests this, it is likely as much a product of circumstances as anything having to do with his moral character.

THE PHILOSOPHERS RESPOND

We need to be careful here not to overstate the dispute between psychologists and philosophers over the roots of ethical behavior. For example, the experimental results do not suggest that we are all like leaves in the wind, buffeted by environmental factors beyond our control. There may be many reasons that affect our moral decisions, including utilitarian or deontological logic, without any of them taking the form of a stable character trait (or a random trivial event).

Also, the evidence does not imply that each and every person responds to trivial contextual factors more than character traits. If an experiment shows that people are ten percent more likely to give back the wallet after finding a coin, this suggests that ten percent of us would not have given the wallet back if they hadn't found the coin. What about the rest of us? Some people (like Steve Rogers) would have returned the wallet and other people (like Cap's enemy Arnim Zola) would have kept it, whether they found a coin in the payphone or not. This suggests that stable moral character traits might not be as universal as virtue ethicists maintain, but it doesn't mean they don't exist at all. There are simply some people without strong moral character traits who are always on the margin of acting virtuously, and those are the people who are particularly susceptible to contextual influences.

Even if the results were stronger and suggested that *everyone* is more likely to respond to trivial events than to character traits, this still does not prove the virtue ethicists' incorrect. There is significant

dispute in both fields over exactly what a character trait is and how it should be defined¹⁷. For example, honesty can be defined very generally, as most virtue ethicists would do, or very narrowly, such as ‘returning a wallet after checking a payphone for a coin’, as situationists define it, and there is a lot of space between those extremes as well as disagreement over them. On a related point, it is very difficult to link specific virtues and actions: generally and genuinely brave persons may behave differently in similar situations because of a number of other factors, some of which are observable by experimenters (such as external factors they can manipulate) and others they cannot (such as internal reasons for action that only the persons themselves are aware of).

Also, one could be reliably honest in certain situations but not others: there may be people in your life you’d never lie to, but others you might lie to if there were good reasons. Captain America regularly shows honesty in the movies, but not always: when on the run from S.H.I.E.L.D./HYDRA in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*¹⁸, he wears a disguise and steals a car. Does this count as a good reason for doing something that is generally unethical, or an insignificant one that makes us question whether we can call him honest at all? In other words, was this an exercise in judgment in which he balances contrasting virtues, a deliberate moral calculation that superseded any exercise of character traits at all, or an example of situational influence that Cap wasn’t even aware of? Although the story itself may suggest a most likely possibility, in general there are no easy answers to these questions. This suggests that the nature, existence, and relevance of stable character traits is a complicated question indeed, especially when viewed through the lens of complex moral dilemmas.

WHEN SITUATIONS POINT SOUTH...

Perhaps the best example of the contrast between judgment and situational factors comes from one of Captain America’s most intriguing and inspirational patterns of behavior: his resistance to authority when its orders conflict with his virtues (or moral principles, as seen from a deontological angle). We see this early on, starting in *Captain America:*

*The First Avenger*¹⁹, when he defies Colonel Phillips's orders to rescue his friend Bucky and the other soldiers from the Red Skull's fortress. It continues in the modern day when, in *The Avengers*²⁰, he starts to question and challenge director Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. once he and Tony Stark/Iron Man discover their secret plans to develop weapons using the Tesseract. This resistance increases in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*²¹. When Fury shows him Project Insight, a plan to use surveillance and weaponized Helicarriers to eliminate threats before they happen, Cap strenuously objects and tells Fury it represents "fear, not freedom"²². Obviously, this is before Cap discovers S.H.I.E.L.D. had been taken over by HYDRA, at which point any presumption of allegiance is out the window!

Perhaps the most striking example of Captain America choosing principles over orders is his refusal to sign the Sokovia Accords in *Captain America: Civil War*²³. Responding to worldwide public concern over the human consequences of superhuman battles, the United Nations passed the Accords to put the Avengers under their control and supervision. Unlike S.H.I.E.L.D.'s covert activities, which invite criticism for that reason alone, the Accords represented a transparent, legitimate, and publicly supported policy. Nonetheless, it violated core principles and ideals that Cap holds dear, especially the call to service that means, as he told Tony (who supported the Accords), "if I see a situation pointed south, I can't ignore it"²⁴. Cap can't stand by if someone needs his help, regardless of what any law or policy says. As a result, he resents and resists any such order that holds him back from doing what's right. This disagreement only builds through the MCU installments, to the point that, in *Avengers: Infinity War*²⁵, Cap tells Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross that he doesn't want forgiveness and won't be asking for permission in the fight against Thanos, instead promising to fight when he must, no matter who stands in his way.

As with so many moral dilemmas Captain America routinely struggles with, this comes down to a conflict between several of his virtues or principles, which needs to be resolved by judgment. As a trained soldier, we might expect Cap to have an inherent tendency to follow orders, but when he regards those orders as immoral, his moral integrity compels him to question them²⁶. As Cap tells Peggy Carter in

*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*²⁷, he has to do what he feels is right and can't simply follow orders; he wishes he could, but he can't trust that the people giving the orders are following the same principles he believes in²⁸. This is clear both in the case of Project Insight, when Cap disagreed with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s plans for intrusive surveillance and preemptive punishment, and also in the case of the Sokovia Accords, when he doubted the United Nations' ability to send the team where they were truly needed, not just where the UN's political positions were best advanced.

Could Cap's refusal to obey orders in some instances be explained by situationism as well? If we expected Captain America's dominant character trait to be a respect for authority—and for the most part his behavior reflects this—we might see his occasional deviances from this as responding to situational factors. The crucial factor here, though, is to determine what those situational factors are. In the most provocative situationist experiments, the events that caused the dramatic shifts in ethical behavior were relatively trivial, such as finding a coin in a payphone. Most would agree that isn't sufficiently relevant to affect one's ethical behavior—in simpler terms, it just isn't a good reason to change behavior one way or another.

However, Cap's resistance to authority doesn't come after some random minor event such as seeing a cute puppy or hearing Tony curse. When he does defy orders, it's always for a reason: namely, the pursuit of a principle that he regards, in a specific instance, as more important than his default tendency to obey authority. Furthermore, this is a deliberate and conscious reaction, as opposed to the effect of a random coin that works on our motivation in subtle ways. No one would admit to helping a stranger simply because they found a dime moments earlier, but Cap is aware, and perfectly willing to explain, why he makes the choice to challenge orders when he feels he has to. In the cases we observe in the movies, at least, we can be fairly confident that Cap defies authority because he believes it was the right thing to do, as we would expect from a man widely held as a paragon of virtue.

SOME CLOSING RESERVATIONS (BEFORE THE CREDITS ROLL)

Although I used Captain America's behavior in the MCU movies to compare the perspectives of virtue ethics and situationism, we should be careful not to take this too far. For one, as incredible as he is, Cap is just one person, and no general conclusions can be drawn from the behavior of just one person. Any one person may be perfectly average or an outlier along any dimension; only in large groups do we see tendencies from which we can draw general conclusions.

Also (and I'm sorry to break this to you), Captain America is a fictional character. Although he has starred in three of his own movies and appeared in each of the four Avengers movies, we only see a few bits of his 'life', far less than we see of his comics counterpart, who has appeared in thousands of Marvel Comics since his debut in 1941²⁹. Furthermore, all of those appearances are crafted by a team of talented screenwriters, visionary directors, and one very handsome actor to *make sense*. When we see a character in a movie do something, we usually also know *why* they do it—or they tell us, either through internal monologue or when talking to another character.

Even if we don't know for certain why our onscreen heroes do something heroic, we assume they're doing it for noble, altruistic, or principled reasons. If we see Cap leap in front of an upcoming truck to push a kid to safety, we generally assume it wasn't because he happened to find a dime in a payphone moments before. If nothing else, we *want* to believe he did it for the right reasons, to further a noble principle or goal, or in expression of a heroic character trait.

In the end, the situationists might be right about the behavior of normal people in the real world, but virtue remains important to the framing of superhero stories because it is *aspirational*. No one wants to think they make ethical decisions based on irrelevant and trivial factors; we hope we make them for the right reasons, as we believe our cinematic heroes to do. Situationism may have descriptive validity, but virtue has normative value as something to aim for³⁰.

While we try to act virtuously, situationism can help us see how these assorted other factors affect our decisions so that we can be on guard and resist them. Rather than being leaves in the wind, we want

to believe we're in control of our lives and our decisions, and it helps to be aware of the subtle influence of random factors that threaten to compromise this. We may be able to "do this all day"³¹, but at the end of the day, we want to be able to say *we* did it, acting with autonomy, authenticity, and integrity—for which super-soldier serum and Vita-Rays are not necessary.

“WHAT MORE DO I HAVE TO LOSE?”

COMPARING MARVEL’S THOR AND ZEUS’S
DIVINE VULNERABILITY AND EXISTENTIAL
ANXIETY

MACIEJ PAPROCKI, PHD

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has become a cultural phenomenon, not only for its spectacular action sequences but also for its exploration of complex characters and themes. Among its vast cast of characters, Thor, inspired by the Nordic deity of the same name, stands out as a character who has undergone significant evolution throughout the franchise. Originally introduced as the arrogant God of Thunder, Thor’s journey has been one of humbling experiences and profound personal growth. In contrast, the MCU’s version of Zeus, leader of the Greek gods and the God of Lightning, appearing briefly in *Thor: Love and Thunder*¹, serves as a pointed counterexample to Thor’s development: an uncaring god who distracts himself with fleeting pleasures, the MCU’s Zeus fears death but so far remains unable to overcome this fear in any meaningful manner.

In this chapter, I examine how these two divinely inspired characters embody different responses to divine vulnerability and existential anxiety within the MCU. By comparing their trajectories, we gain insight into broader themes of meaning-making and authenticity in the face of cosmic threats, which are likely to resonate deeply with contemporary audiences grappling with their own existential concerns.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXISTENTIAL POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY (EPP)

To analyze Thor and Zeus's journeys, I employ the framework of Existential Positive Psychology (EPP), a synthesis of existential psychology and positive psychology proposed by Paul T. P. Wong². Existential psychology focuses on confronting the dark fundamentals of human existence such as death, aimless freedom in an uncaring universe, isolation, and meaninglessness³. In contrast, positive psychology emphasizes the study of positive emotions, character strengths, and institutions that enable individuals to thrive⁴. Drawing from these seemingly opposing schools of thought, EPP provides a different approach to understanding human flourishing, recognizing that growth often emerges from confronting life's inevitable challenges and anxieties⁵. Central to EPP are the concepts of authenticity, meaning-making, and existential anxiety. Authenticity means living in accordance with one's true self and values, even in the face of external pressures or internal fears. An authentic person will stand for what they believe in, even if it costs them their job or reputation: their beliefs are more important than people around them or their inner doubts. Meaning-making involves the active process of constructing purpose and significance in one's life, particularly when confronted with suffering or loss. For example, people mourning the loss of a partner may turn to art or communal service to give their lives new meaning. Existential anxiety encompasses the deep-seated fears that are fundamental to the human condition: fear of dying, of being lost, unneeded, and separated from all that we love. EPP states that all of us have to face these fears one way or another: how well we do that will also determine the quality of our lives.

These concepts are particularly relevant to superhero narratives in the MCU, where characters often grapple with immense power and responsibility while facing threats that challenge their very existence. By applying EPP to the analysis of Thor and Zeus, we can explore how these godlike beings navigate very human struggles with identity, purpose, and the fear of powerlessness. This approach allows us to examine how characters grow (or fail to grow) through their confrontations with existential challenges. In doing so, we can better understand

why Thor’s journey resonates so strongly with audiences: consistently played by Chris Hemsworth across several films, from *Thor*⁶ to *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁷, the lovable yet overconfident braggart eventually matures into an honorable ruler and trustworthy friend, earning a place in the audiences’ hearts. In turn, Zeus’s brief appearance in *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁸ serves as a cautionary tale about the perils of avoiding authentic engagement with life’s fundamental questions.

THOR’S JOURNEY: FROM INVULNERABILITY TO EXISTENTIAL GROWTH

In the early MCU phases, Thor was a prime example of overconfidence. He is a member of the ancient civilization of Asgardians, interdimensional aliens who settled on Earth and whose contacts with ostensibly ‘lesser’ humans influenced the development of Norse myths. Descended from such a lineage, Thor believes himself invulnerable due to his status as a god, the heir to the Asgardian throne, and the beloved son of Odin and Frigga. In the first *Thor* movie⁹, however, Thor’s arrogance rekindled an ancient war between Asgard and Jötunheim: hot-tempered and easily led, Thor invaded Jötunheim because of his hurt pride—and specifically against Odin’s wishes. As a result, Odin humbled Thor by stripping him of his powers and his hammer Mjölnir, banishing him to Earth to live among them as a mortal human. This (perhaps very first) crisis in Thor’s life made him question the very foundations of his identity¹⁰, built on external validation and undeserved privilege. Due to his birth into the royal family, Thor enjoyed a life of luxury and power. He was adored by his subjects and friends, despite doing little to deserve their praise. Never having to work hard for his goals, he could not understand the less fortunate, yet still wanted to be admired by them (*external validation*). The fallen god’s outlook changed as he made friends with humans and fell in love with astrophysicist Jane Foster. Facing his own diminished power and human fragility, Thor grew to understand and appreciate them. Throughout the movie, Thor learned the significance of sacrifice and saved his friends from his brother Loki’s destructive ambitions. This act of redemption allowed him to reclaim his powers, but it also laid the groundwork for his character’s further evolution. Stirrings of

Thor's character growth resurface in *The Avengers*¹¹, where Thor recognizes Loki's belief in his superiority over humans—and thus, his unsuitability to rule over them. In overcoming his sense of arrogance and invulnerability, Thor continues to develop as a character, setting out on a path where he periodically confronts not only external threats but also his own limitations and vulnerabilities.

As Thor's narrative unfolded in subsequent MCU installments, he faced profound losses that shattered his perceived invulnerability and challenged his worldview to such a degree that he questioned everything he had believed in. Thor lost most of the significant figures in his life, including his best friend Heimdall, his brother Loki, his father Odin, and his mother Frigga, coupled with the destruction and death of half of Asgard's population after *Thor: Ragnarok*¹² and *Avengers: Infinity War*¹³, which deeply affected the prince of Asgard. Furthermore, Thor's guilt over his inability to prevent Thanos from decimating half of all life in the universe (known as the Snap) led to a destructive pattern of maladaptive coping behaviors. No longer a herogod, Thor believed himself to be an irredeemable failure and faced the specter of his own meaningless mortality. By the time of *Avengers: Endgame*¹⁴, Thor had become a shadow of his former self: grappling with depression and guilt, he soothed his pain through fast food, excessive gaming, and alcohol, leading him to retreat from his responsibilities and the hero he once embodied. Visibly overweight and depressed, Thor eventually joined the other Avengers in traveling through time to collect the Infinity Stones to bring back everyone they lost at the end of *Infinity War*¹⁵. Having met an alternate version of Frigga just before her death, mother and son had a heartfelt conversation. While Thor mourned his failures, Frigga imparted that everyone failed at becoming what they were expected to become in life while they should instead pursue their *true selves*. Reinvigorated, Thor returned into the battle and helped vanquish Thanos, reigniting his sense of purpose through acknowledging vulnerability.

Thor's journey throughout the MCU can be seen as a gradual process of authentication. His development between *Thor*¹⁶ and *Avengers: Endgame*¹⁷ demonstrates the significance of authenticity and the 'true self'¹⁸. Thor began his trajectory as an individual who was

overly concerned with what others thought of him and still thought himself better than others: accordingly, he adopted an outward attitude of unshakeable confidence, reliant on his superheroic agency and power. Yet, Thor remained utterly disconnected from his yearnings for love, companionship and meaningful engagement with others as his equals. The loss of his power in *Thor*¹⁹ and his subsequent battles with enemies greater than himself made Thor realize that his true calling lies not in winning glory but in serving others, a bitter lesson taught through many hardships—and one that, as we will see, has not entirely sunk in. As Wong notes, “[t]he process of authentication often begins with a moment of awakening, a deepening of conviction about core values, and a felt sense of one’s true identity” (p. 3)²⁰. Initially presented as an arrogant and overconfident god (mostly in *Thor*²¹), Thor’s encounters with loss and failure force him to confront his true nature and values. This aligns with Heidegger’s distinction between non-authentic and authentic modes of living, with authentic individuals, in Wong’s words, “assum[ing] responsibility to live in a way that is consistent with their true nature and core values” (p. 2)²².

*Thor: Love and Thunder*²³ marks another stage of Thor’s personal quest. Having traveled for two years with his friends, the Guardians of the Galaxy, Thor embarked on a quest for authenticity and meaning beyond his reestablished heroic façade. However, the return of Thor’s former estranged girlfriend Jane Foster, who now wielded Mjölnir as (another version of) the Mighty Thor, put Thor’s heroic identity into question, reigniting Thor’s questioning of how his superheroic persona matches against his individual identity. Together, Thor and Jane faced the threat of Gorr the God Butcher, pushing Thor to confront the complexities of vulnerable godhood and its responsibilities. The god took it upon himself to rescue kidnapped children of Asgard and to warn other gods about Gorr’s god-hating crusade, all while slowly accepting that Jane’s transformations into the Mighty Thor would hasten her inevitable death from cancer. Ultimately, after experiencing Jane’s death, Thor found it in his heart to adopt Gorr’s daughter, Love, and form a new bond that literally encapsulated love and hope. Through his transformative journey, Thor evolved from a warrior defined by invulnerability to a protector grounded in compassion. In

the end, Thor would manage his persistent existential anxiety through openness to vulnerability, love and loss, making meaning through establishing positive relationships with other impermanent beings.

The quest for meaning in the face of loss and change, evident in Thor's journey across the franchise, is the central theme in EPP²⁴. Existential psychologists believe that confronting our deepest anxieties, including the fear of death and meaninglessness, is essential for personal growth²⁵. Thor, especially in *Avengers: Endgame*²⁶ and *Thor: Love and Thunder*²⁷, gradually and haltingly confronted these anxieties, grappling with the deaths of loved ones, the freedom and responsibility of his power, feelings of isolation, and questions of his purpose as a superhero god in a changing universe. Although he did backslide and engage in some maladaptive coping strategies in *Avengers: Endgame*²⁸ after failing to prevent Thanos from killing half of the universe's population, Thor ultimately found a way to address his anxieties in a manner that aligned with values of meaningful living, as defined by Frankl: creative value, experiential value, and attitudinal values²⁹. Thor's arc in the MCU demonstrates all three: he creates new alliances and protects Earth (*creative*), experiences love and friendship (*experiential*) and ultimately adopts a positive attitude towards his losses and failures (*attitudinal*).

Perhaps the most significant contribution to Thor's development comes from his fostering of creative and experiential values through his community and relationships that help him face existential challenges. Wong, in the spirit of EPP, emphasizes that "the good life is inherently relational" (p. 6)³⁰: indeed, Thor's journey is marked by the formation of new relationships and communities. He bonded with the Avengers in *The Avengers*³¹, with the Revengers (Hulk, Loki, and Valkyrie) in *Thor: Ragnarok*³², and with the Guardians of the Galaxy in *Avengers: Infinity War*³³ and *Thor: Love and Thunder*³⁴: all these groups provided support and meaning as he faced cosmic threats. Markedly, Frankl posited that individuals who can neither *create* nor *experience* connection in any meaningful manner can still live a fulfilling life if they adopt an *attitude* of even-spirited acceptance of life's inherent unfairness and suffering³⁵. Particularly significant in this regard is the support Thor received from the past version of his mother Frigga in

*Avengers: Endgame*³⁶, who advised him to pursue what matters to him instead of fulfilling everybody else’s expectations, reinforcing the significance of authentic living. Although Thor had failed at many things that he set out to do, he no longer saw himself as a failure, drawing his solace and self-worth from an *attitude* of living in accordance with his values, along with others who share them.

ZEUS: DENIAL AND RETREAT IN THE FACE OF EXISTENTIAL THREAT

Zeus, as portrayed in *Thor: Love and Thunder*³⁷, serves as a counterpoint to Thor’s character development. Despite his brief screen time, Zeus embodies a response to divine vulnerability that stands in stark contrast to Thor and his journey, both visually and narratively. An unkept and lustful deity, Russell Crowe’s Zeus speaks with an exaggerated Greek accent and dons a flowing white skirt paired with a bulky muscle cuirass, perhaps ironically alluding to Crowe’s formerly svelte cuirassed physique in 2000’s *Gladiator*³⁸. As the leader of the gods in the MCU, Zeus was confronted with the existential threat posed by Gorr the God Butcher, a being capable of killing deities. However, rather than actively addressing this danger, Zeus chose a path of denial and retreat. His response was to hide away in the glorious Omnipotence City, surrounding himself with luxury and hedonistic pleasures with his fellow deities. This retreat into self-indulgence can be seen as a maladaptive coping mechanism not unlike Thor’s indulgence in fast food and dopamine-laden activities, an attempt to distract from the underlying existential anxiety that plagues him^{39,40}. Zeus’s public dismissal of Gorr’s victims as “a couple of low-level gods”⁴¹ betrays a deeper fear—acknowledging the threat would mean accepting his own mortality and the potential meaninglessness of his existence as a deity.

Zeus’s reaction is particularly telling when viewed through the lens of Greek mythology, which commonly (if not uniformly) depicts Zeus and the Olympian gods as immortal⁴². Scholars debate whether Greek gods as depicted in ancient myth could truly die: some argue for divine vulnerability^{43,44,45,46,47}, while others contend gods were absolutely immortal and all references to deicide in Greek myths were

hypothetical^{48,49,50,51}. Immortality, I argue, acts as a barrier to personal growth in narrative terms: the gods, secure in their eternal existence, have little impetus to change or evolve beyond their brief relationships with mortals. For example, Emily Vermeule notes that anthropomorphizing epic depictions of Greek gods have them experience fear, anger, jealousy, bitterness, and anxiety, but they “lack the sense of mortality which gives a man’s life energy and shape” (p. 122)⁵². The MCU’s Zeus seems to carry this trait, clinging to his belief in divine invulnerability even in the face of clear danger. In contrast, Norse gods, as depicted in Norse mythology/literature and Marvel films, are not invulnerable, with several of them dying in the Ragnarök myth cycle and on-screen in the MCU⁵³. As such, they fall more easily into the superheroic paradigm (which I discuss in the following section) while appearing more relatable to modern audiences.

Zeus’s behavior in *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁵⁴ falls into a pattern very different from Thor’s trajectory across the franchise, one not compatible with personal growth as seen through the lens of EPP. Since we see little of Zeus’s past and even less of his personal journey, we cannot be sure whether his retreat into hedonism represents inauthentic living or embodiment of his core values. Zeus, in his brief appearance, seems to embody “meaninglessness anxiety”, characterized by “the loss of an ultimate concern” (p. 5)⁵⁵. Although Zeus was once a mover and shaker in the shared MCU (with Thor claiming to have been inspired by Zeus’s daring deeds), by *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁵⁶, he remains unable to find a new purpose and draws satisfaction from reliving his faded glory days rather than embarking on new adventures that could risk his life and direct him towards the difficult path of self-confrontation and change.

Similarly, Zeus does not seem to embody Frankl’s fundamentals of well-lived existence⁵⁷—that is, creative, experiential, and attitudinal values. The king of the gods appears trapped in a state of uncreative meaninglessness, unable to find purpose in a changing cosmos where gods are no longer universally revered as they should but must become superheroes to win acclaim from humans. In fact, Zeus fears this change so much that he tasks his son Hercules with striking once again the fear of gods into mortal hearts in the post-credits scene of

*Thor: Love and Thunder*⁵⁸. In other words, Zeus dwells in the past, preferring to return to what once worked for him instead of searching for another source of divine fulfillment in a world of ascendant superheroes. In doing so, Zeus remains unable to form meaningful relationships with others as his equals, isolating himself in Omnipotence City among sycophants. This aligns with EPP’s view that while isolation anxiety is an existential given, “it is through our loneliness that we seek community and intimacy as major sources of personal meaning” (p. 7)⁵⁹. Zeus’s loneliness, however, drives him even deeper inward and makes him unable to face his problems with acceptance and bravery: instead, he treats Thor and his friends with initial irreverence and smoldering resentment.

However, one needs to note that neither Thor nor Zeus perfectly fall into the patterns of good and bad living according to the EPP; similarly, the franchise relies on some tropes that run against EPP’s focus on authentic living and instead promote unrealistic body standards, here wrongly equated with mental well-being. I have mentioned in passing how *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁶⁰ juxtaposes Zeus’s and Thor’s bodies to comment on their life attitudes and personal agency. Zeus, played by formerly svelte and now larger-bodied Russell Crowe, dons a muscle cuirass that projects false physical prowess Zeus no longer possesses. In contrast, Chris Hemsworth’s famously muscular Thor, clad in loose-fitting toga and then made naked through Zeus’s careless flick, boasts a tan, hyperdeveloped (and CGI-enhanced) physique that stands out sharply against Crowe’s larger body. I argue that the highlighted contrast between Zeus’s and Thor’s bodies represents their level of personal agency and mental well-being through their characters’ adherence (or lack thereof) to unattainable superheroic body standards^{61,62}. Marvel’s visual representation of divine maladaptive coping behaviors of Thor and Zeus boils down to their long, unstyled hair and excess body weight, the latter seen as personal failure. Indeed, heavier Thor is derided by Rocket in *Endgame*⁶³ for being overweight and even his supportive mother encourages him to eat more salads. In turn, Thor’s workout montage in *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁶⁴ and his return to his musclebound self signifies his improving mental state. As mentioned before, Zeus in his post-credits scene plots to remind the

universe about the gods' importance. It remains to be seen whether his increased agency in the next installment will also be coupled with Zeus's weight loss montage: perhaps, his son Hercules, played by Brett Goldstein, will serve as Thor's equally muscular adversary in Zeus's stead⁶⁵.

CONCLUSION: BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MCU AND SUPERHERO NARRATIVES

The superhero genre has undergone a significant transformation since its inception in the early 20th century. Early superheroes in the 1930s and 1940s were often portrayed as near-invulnerable beings, embodying idealized virtues and rarely facing genuine existential crises. Superman, for instance, was initially depicted as an unassailable force for good, impervious to most physical and emotional threats⁶⁶. However, as the genre has matured by the 1970s, superheroes have increasingly been portrayed as complex, flawed individuals grappling with very human struggles⁶⁷. This development fed into the increasingly blurred boundary between gods and superheroes in the Marvel Cinematic Universe and beyond. Many superheroes were initially conceived as re-mythologized Graeco-Roman deities and heroes, with DC Comics' Barry Allen/The Flash initially described as a reincarnation of Mercury⁶⁸. Since both gods and superheroes possess incredible powers brought about by technological or supernatural means, what separated them was their immortality (or lack thereof)⁶⁹. A tangible conceptual link appears to exist between the concepts of superheroic and divine vulnerability in popular culture: it is not until superheroes begin to 'die' in popular culture in the early 1980s that we then see 'gods' beginning to die by violence in the early 1990s⁷⁰. Divine death first appears in comics, in DC's *The War of the Gods* mini-series⁷¹, then on television screens in the late 1990s⁷² in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*⁷³ and *Xena: Warrior Princess*⁷⁴, and finally, in Hollywood blockbusters such as *Immortals*⁷⁵ and *Wrath of the Titans*⁷⁶ in the 2010s. The loss of immortality effectively removes any boundary between superheroes and deities. Mirroring these developments in popular culture, Thor, as the superhero god of the MCU, confused the boundary

between gods and superheroes even further, becoming the target of Zeus’s fear and anger.

Thor’s journey in the MCU exemplifies this shift towards increased superheroic vulnerability in the modern popular culture: initially presented as a god-like figure of immense power and arrogance, Thor’s character arc has led him through loss, failure, and deep existential questioning. This evolution reflects a broader trend in superhero narratives towards exploring vulnerability, mental health issues, and the psychological toll of heroism. Other examples in the MCU include Tony Stark’s struggle with PTSD in *Iron Man 3*⁷⁷ and Wanda Maximoff’s grief-driven reality manipulation in *WandaVision*⁷⁸. This shift towards more psychologically complex superheroes serves multiple purposes. It makes these larger-than-life characters more relatable to audiences, deepens the narrative possibilities within the genre, and allows for the exploration of more nuanced themes. Moreover, it reflects a changing cultural understanding of heroism, one that values resilience, emotional intelligence, and the ability to overcome personal struggles as much as physical prowess or moral rectitude.

Furthermore, the existential themes explored through characters like Thor and Zeus could resonate deeply with contemporary audiences facing their own existential crises. As Wang and Zhang argue, “the MCU’s most memorable villains have often been characters that evoke our most poignant social anxieties” (p. 191)⁷⁹. While Wang and Zhang focus on villains representing economic disparities (Vulture from *Spider-Man: Homecoming*⁸⁰), racial injustice (Killmonger from *Black Panther*⁸¹), resource scarcity (Thanos from *Avengers: Infinity War*⁸² and *Avengers: Endgame*⁸³), and misinformation or fake news (Mysterio from *Spider-Man: Far From Home*⁸⁴), the existential anxiety embodied by Zeus and confronted by Thor in *Thor: Love and Thunder*⁸⁵ speaks to broader, more universal human concerns. In an era marked by global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, and geopolitical instabilities, the primary concern behind these challenges is still the human mental fortitude needed to address them. All the problems specified by Wang and Zhang feed into the worldwide mental crisis, made manifest by feelings of loss of control over an ever-increasingly complicated world, depression, social anxiety, and burnout. The superhero narra-

tive provides a canvas for exploring these mental anxieties on a cosmic scale. Thor's journey of confronting vulnerability and finding meaning in the face of overwhelming odds mirrors the struggles many face when coming to terms with global existential threats. Conversely, Zeus's retreat into denial and hedonism reflects the very real temptation to avoid addressing these daunting challenges and bury oneself in mindless, distractive activities.

The comparison of Thor and Zeus demonstrates the rich potential of superhero narratives to explore profound existential themes. By couching complex philosophical concepts in the accessible language of popular culture, these stories can introduce audiences to ideas from existential psychology and philosophy and, arguably, raise them to epic heights. The framework of Existential Positive Psychology (EPP) finds a surprisingly apt application in the cosmic struggles of MCU characters. Furthermore, the evolution of Thor's character across multiple films allows for a nuanced exploration of concepts like authenticity, meaning-making, and the confrontation of existential anxiety. This long-form storytelling, characteristic of the MCU, provides a unique opportunity to depict character growth and philosophical exploration in a way that resonates with a wide audience. Fittingly, it remains to be seen whether future appearances of Zeus in the MCU will show him undergoing a similar character growth like Thor. The contrast between Thor and Zeus also highlights the potential for these narratives to critically examine different approaches to existential challenges. By presenting both adaptive and maladaptive responses to divine vulnerability, the MCU invites viewers to reflect on their own strategies for coping with life's uncertainties and challenges.

In conclusion, the treatment of divine characters like Thor and Zeus in the MCU reflects a maturation of the superhero genre, one that increasingly engages with complex existential themes. As these narratives continue to evolve, they offer not just escape, but a means for audiences to engage with and reflect upon some of life's most profound questions. This trend suggests a promising future for superhero storytelling as a medium for exploring and popularizing existential and philosophical concepts.

GLORIOUS PURPOSE

LOKI'S MULTITUDE OF IDENTITIES AS A
TRICKSTER, VILLAIN, AND (ANTI-)HERO

CLAIRE MEAGHER

Loki is fond of dramatic entrances. In *The Avengers*¹, he proclaims while stepping through a portal: “*I am Loki of Asgard, and I am burdened with glorious purpose*”². While this is not his first appearance in the MCU, this entrance characterizes Loki’s mantra and introduces the audience to the villainous aspect of the shape-changing trickster god. Our first true introduction to this character is in *Thor*³ as the titular Thor’s adopted, wayward brother. Seemingly a hero at first, Loki’s progression through that movie is characterized by dubious allegiances and motives. It is only in *The Avengers*⁴ that Loki seeks his ‘glorious purpose’, in which he aspires to be more than the overlooked (adoptive) son of Odin, by stepping out of Thor’s shadow. In doing so, he becomes a villain as he attempts to conquer Earth with his alien army. However, Loki is also a trickster, and a trickster is just never confined to one role, identity, or part, like being a ‘villain’. At Loki’s core, his role in the MCU is emblematic of a trickster—an archetypal character that lies, manipulates, and creates chaos⁵. Eventually, through grand heroics and introspection, along with the support of his companions, he becomes more of an anti-hero than a villain, demonstrating that a person (or a god) is not defined by just one role. As Loki strives for belonging in the MCU, his embodiment of the trickster and

anti-hero archetype opens up new possibilities—not just for himself, but for the good of the multiverse.

This chapter will examine Loki as a trickster and anti-hero starting with an exploration of Loki's mythological roots. This discussion is based on the trickster archetype⁶, or the idea that tricksters are often excluded or 'othered' from many social groups⁷. This exclusion can create a sense of belonging, which in turn may drive tricksters' actions and behavior⁸. Then, the chapter discusses the (anti-)hero⁹ and villain archetypes¹⁰, how these are integrated into Loki's character, and how they align with his inherent trickster characteristics. Finally, there will be an exploration of how Loki disrupts the narrative of the multiverse, ultimately transcending his anti-hero role to become the 'God of Stories' by sacrificing his desire for belonging and giving in to the burdens of glorious purpose.

LOKI'S MYTHOLOGICAL ROOTS AS A NORSE GOD AND A TRICKSTER

To get a sense of the character that we are dealing with, we first should look at Loki's roots in Norse mythology. Information about Norse gods can be difficult to locate, as the Vikings told stories orally and did not write much down. The written texts that have survived about Nordic myth were not penned by the Vikings themselves, but rather by storytellers, scholars, and monks from centuries after the Vikings, leading to many discrepancies in the details between myth, folklore, and shared history. Because of these discrepancies, Loki's mythological background and exact origins are extremely murky, even for mythologists¹¹. Some theorize he was a fire demon, others a Frost Giant, or some kind of kin to the Asgardian gods. Most tales, however, depict him in a sibling relationship with the Norse god of thunder, Thor, or at the very least, a partner of Thor's adventures. That is until Loki brings about Ragnarök, the apocalyptic destruction of Asgard, home of the Norse gods. Despite the shadowy origins, Loki in mythology was often the larger-than-life instigator of many stories—the kind of god that is both feared and revered.

However, Loki is not only a Norse god but a trickster. Psychologist Carl Jung defined the trickster as an archetype typified by mischief-

making, shape-changing, and generally disrupting the status quo¹². Tricksters are not just a psychological archetype but also a mythological one. Tricksters are found across world cultures: the Greeks had Hermes, the Polynesians had Maui, and West Africans had Anansi¹³. Tricksters' schemes in stories can be morally gray through benevolent or malevolent intent, which may be entirely dependent on their mood. Tricksters are liminal figures as well, meaning that they cross boundaries, both physical (like from Jötunheim, another world/realm that is the home of the Frost Giants, to Asgard) or metaphorical (from hero to villain and back)¹⁴. Tricksters and liminal figures are also difficult to identify due to this trait, as they may not have one sole identity, but rather multiple ones.

True to the trickster archetype, Loki's identity in the MCU is muddled by half-truths and lies regarding his origins. In the first *Thor*¹⁵ movie, Loki learns that he is not an Asgardian or an Odinson, but is instead the son of Laufey, king of the Frost Giants from Jötunheim and one of Asgard's sworn enemies. This revelation also means that Loki has no claim by blood to the throne of Asgard—something Odin, king of Asgard, failed to mention when telling a young Thor and Loki that one of them would become king one day—leaving Loki with a lifelong desire for a throne. It is only until after Thor's assault on Jötunheim at the start of the first *Thor*¹⁶ movie that Loki figures out he is adopted. Upon his return, he confronts Odin to demand the truth:

Loki: Am I cursed? [...] What am I?

Odin: You're my son.

Loki: What more than that? The Casket wasn't the only thing you took from Jötunheim that day, was it?

Odin: No. In the aftermath of the battle, I went into the temple and I found a baby. Small for a giant's offspring. Abandoned, suffering, left to die. [...]

Loki: [...] Why? [...] Why would you take me?

Odin: You were an innocent child.

Loki: No. You took me for a purpose. What was it? [Odin doesn't answer] Tell me!

Odin: I thought we could unite our kingdoms one day. Bring about an alliance, bring about a permanent peace. Through you. [...]

Loki: So I am no more than another stolen relic, locked up here until you might have use of me. [...] You could have told me what I was from the beginning, why didn't you?

Odin: You're my son. I wanted only to protect you from the truth.

Loki: Because I'm the monster parents tell their children about at night? [...] You know, it all makes sense now! Why you favored Thor all these years! Because no matter how much you claim to love me, you could never have a Frost Giant sitting on the Throne of Asgard¹⁷!

This scene is pivotal for Loki's sense of identity: all that was known to him before this was based on a half-truth by Odin, whom he saw as a father. With this knowledge, Loki must reconcile the two facets of his identity, his Asgardian family and his Frost Giant heritage. Instead of embracing his different sides, he tries to legitimize his claim to the Asgardian throne by seizing power and taking over control of Asgard while Odin was indisposed and Thor was banished. However, Loki denies his ties with Jötunheim by killing Laufey at the end of the movie, trying desperately to cement his connection with Asgard. He may have been "born to be a king"¹⁸, as Odin said to him (and Thor) as a child; however, Loki fears that this new knowledge about his identity as a Frost Giant will alienate him from Asgard, no longer being accepted or 'loved' by his adoptive family, his friends, and the Asgardian people.

THE TRICKSTER ARCHETYPE: OTHERNESS AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

Integral to the trickster concept is a sense of otherness, or a sense that the trickster is 'not like us'. Compared to Thor, Loki is 'othered', a term stemming from social psychology (particularly, social identity theory¹⁹), meaning that people often identify themselves based on being a member of various social groups. The 'in-group' shares similar characteristics, such as ethnicity, nationality, and so forth, while the 'out-group' falls outside of the 'in-groups' as they differ in their identity. Although Loki is raised in Odin and Frigga's household and is

thus initially part of the Asgardian ‘in-group’, he could still be considered an outcast due to his Frost Giant heritage, since anyone from Jötunheim is considered an enemy—and therefore an ‘other’. Leading up to his villainous turn, Loki’s status within the Asgardian royal family is challenged throughout *Thor*²⁰: for example, Volstagg from the Warriors Three says that Loki’s “silver tongue had turned to lead”²¹, denoting that Loki may not have the sway over the ‘in-group’ he thinks he has.

Loki is also othered by Thor’s hypermasculinity in the MCU, which shows through many aspects: Loki has a more slender build compared to Thor, Loki uses his words and cunning rather than Thor’s brute force, and Loki uses daggers and magic rather than a mighty weapon like Thor’s hammer. It is in these differences from his ‘brother’ that he is othered. While Thor embodies the physical and moral values of Asgard—courage, honor, and physical strength—in addition to the social ones, Loki does not.

The figure of the trickster is often not part of the ‘in-group’ because of their othered status, which is especially difficult because the trickster archetype embodies multiple identities²². Tricksters have difficulty finding a sense of belonging, as they often do not belong to specific groups. It is later revealed that Loki is actually motivated by a sense of belonging, feeling as though he is an outsider always trying to prove his *worth*, as it were, to the Asgardians and trying to belong to that ‘in-group’. This conflict with his outsider identity is noticeable in the titles or epithets that he uses, as he switches between his origins depending on whom he is speaking to: he uses ‘Loki of Asgard’ when introducing himself to Nick Fury in *The Avengers*²³, but emphasizes his ‘othered’ heritage by introducing himself as ‘Loki of Jötunheim’ to Malekith the Dark Elf, antagonist of *Thor: The Dark World*²⁴. The titles signal to whom he is speaking—as well as the audience—which group he seeks to be a part of. With the changing titles and moving between the ‘in-group’ and the ‘out-group’, it is difficult for the trickster to identify entirely with one specific group. However, later in Loki’s journey, when questioned about his true motives, he admits that: “I want my friends back. I don’t wanna be alone” (S2 E5)²⁵. Here, Loki admits that the trickster identity is a lonely one, one that is often isolating. This

need for belonging is an important driver for Loki's behavior and actions throughout his journey in the MCU. A sense of belonging is attributed to what psychologists call self-determination theory²⁶. This theory describes people's motivation for autonomy, competence, and relatedness/belonging, and how these needs determine people's actions and behavior. Loki's own conception of belonging sometimes conflates with the need for autonomy or control, which may manifest in violent or villainous acts. His acts of violence become what TVA agent Mobius calls a "desperate play for control" (S1 E1)²⁷. While his motives for control definitely do not condone senseless murder, they surely contribute to his role as an archetypal villain.

FROM VILLAIN TO ANTI-HERO (WHILE REMAINING A TRICKSTER)

To define a villain, we should first ask: what makes a hero? In any given story, there is usually a protagonist, or a character who is emphasized by the amount of time they are focused on in the narrative. A hero is a character who is distinguished by noble behaviour, courage, strength, and altruism. In essence, what makes protagonists different from heroes are their characteristics and behaviours that are morally 'good'. And since we are talking about superheroes, an archetypal superhero could be defined as a morally good individual who has magical or supernatural abilities, especially those with divine heritage²⁸. A hero also has a prosocial mission to help others or prevent society's destruction²⁹. In the MCU, a character like Thor would be a good example of a 'superhero', as he is morally good in that he cares for his community using his supernatural (and divine) abilities to defend Asgard from evil and destruction, demonstrating courage, strength, and altruism.

But where you have superheroes, you also must have supervillains³⁰. Villains possess characteristics opposite to those of heroes: they often have deeply antisocial missions, are selfish, and disregard the law. They do not care if their actions have dire consequences, such as imperiling and harming others. More importantly, they do not care what they have to do in order to achieve their goals. After his trickster adventures in *Thor*³¹, Loki clearly embodies this supervillain identity

in *The Avengers*³²: if he can't belong with the Asgardians and sit on their throne, he will attack Midgard (i.e., the Asgardian name for Earth) and be king there. In doing so, he kills many S.H.I.E.L.D. agents and invades New York City with an alien army. He wants to take control of Earth, killing and intimidating in order to get what he wants—showing off his selfish reasoning as a true villain. Even in his villainous arc, Loki remains a trickster: he manipulates Hawkeye to betray his friends, he tricks his brother Thor into Loki's former prison on the Helicarrier, and he kills S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Coulson with a conjured projection of himself.

After all his villainous actions, Loki is stopped by the Avengers, or rather, physically incapacitated by the Hulk. He is taken prisoner back to Asgard where he can atone for his wrongdoings against the people of Earth. This point in time is where Loki's character development in the MCU diverges into two different pathways, due to the time-traveling adventures of the Avengers in *Avengers: Endgame*³³. The 'original' Loki is present in the Thor movies and *Avengers: Infinity War*³⁴, where he slowly builds a closer bond with his brother Thor. The 'time-displaced' Loki is the one who steals the Tesseract or Space Stone during the aftermath of *The Avengers*³⁵ and continues his path in the *Loki* series³⁶. Both Loki variants move on from being a traditional villain to become more of an anti-hero.

If we've laid out what a hero and villain are, then what makes an 'anti-hero'? The literary definition specifies an anti-hero as a character that "often acts outside accepted values, norms, roles, and behaviors as a hapless everyman, a charismatic rebel, or a roguish outlaw who challenges the status quo in their often morally ambivalent quest" (p. 37)³⁷—in which case Loki certainly meets the criteria. Interestingly, the anti-hero identity actually coincides with many of the same traits as the trickster archetype³⁸. For example, both the trickster and the anti-hero are morally gray characters who may lie and manipulate others to get their way. While Loki definitely has supernatural abilities that would classify him as a superhero, he does not always use them for morally altruistic purposes. And more often than not, he tries to achieve his goals for his own selfish purposes, going against the ideals of the hero. For instance, when Thor enlists his help in *The Dark World*³⁹ to nego-

tiate with the Dark Elves after they killed Thor and Loki's (adopted) mother Frigga, Thor says, "I wish I could trust you" to which Loki replies "Trust my rage"⁴⁰. Loki knows he can't be trusted (as a trickster) and knows that Thor doesn't trust him, but here, he alludes that even though he may not align with Thor's moral compass to save the world from the Dark Elves, he will help Thor because of his own selfish reasons for revenge (given that he had a close bond with his adoptive mother).

Anti-heroes are inherently flawed characters. While a hero may work towards an altruistic goal embodying ideal virtue, an anti-hero can work towards that same altruistic goal while simultaneously exhibiting immoral behaviour that doesn't align with this goal. In other words, their methods are morally dubious or they can have alternative side intentions when pursuing a prosocial or altruistic purpose. Loki frequently lies, cheats, and uses tricks to achieve what he wants, which also coincides with the qualities of the trickster archetype. One of Loki's most successful deceptions include seizing the Asgardian throne (finally!) and disguising himself as a charismatic Odin after faking his own death at the end of *Thor: The Dark World*⁴¹.

*Thor: Ragnarök*⁴² shows Loki's true colours as an anti-hero. Even his tricks, which had lethal consequences in *The Avengers*⁴³, are markedly more playful, as Loki adventures with his brother. For instance, Loki toys with Thor using his illusions for a harmless joke. Moreover, in Thor's quest to save Asgard from the Goddess of Death, Hela, Loki actively decides to join in Thor's efforts, even at great personal risk to himself. Loki could make a selfish escape from Hela, but instead decides to return to Asgard with the Sakaarian gladiators to save the Asgardian people—and is willing to sacrifice himself. Loki dramatically proclaims, "Your savior is here"⁴⁴, and directs the Asgardians to embark a spaceship for rescue. With this action, Loki truly comes full circle as an anti-hero: although his methods are morally gray, his ultimate goal here is to protect the Asgardian people. He also starts to belong somewhere: not only does he bond with his sibling Thor, but he becomes part of the 'Revengers' team (which also includes Hulk and Valkyrie). Here, we see that his actions are driven clearly by an inherent need for relatedness, for

belonging, over his desire for autonomy or any other needs⁴⁵. With this, Loki slowly moves away from his trickster archetype, as he gets included more and more in the ‘in-group’⁴⁶ where he wants to belong.

Continuing his anti-hero path, Loki attempts to trick the alien warlord Thanos at the start of *Avengers: Infinity War*⁴⁷ to save the Asgardian refugees and his brother. At this point, he introduces himself as “prince of Asgard, Odinson, the rightful king of Jötunheim”⁴⁸, showing that, as an anti-hero rather than a hero or a villain, he is able to reconcile his Asgardian and Jötun identity in this moment. He seemingly embraces both identities, simultaneously accepting the nature of multiplicity as we can see with the trickster archetype⁴⁹ but also feeling less ‘othered’, as he’s now part of every ‘in-group’ in his introduction. Unfortunately, this identity reconciliation is short-lived, as a few moments later, Loki is killed by Thanos.

Fortunately for Loki, as a trickster, he has cheated death multiple times throughout his time in the MCU: falling off the Bifrost bridge in *Thor*⁵⁰ and faking his own death at the hands of the Dark Elves in *The Dark World*⁵¹. Even though he dies here—with Thanos alluding to his trickster ways by saying, “No resurrections this time”⁵²—his character arc does not end. When the Avengers attempt to reverse Thanos’s actions by collecting all of the Infinity Stones in the past, they cause a time-altering event. The Loki in 2012, who was a villain at the end of *The Avengers*⁵³, is able to steal the Tesseract from the Avengers and uses it to escape to a different place. Through these actions, this Loki becomes another version, or variant, than the Loki we’ve seen thus far. This new variant is not the same individual that the audience has seen grow in the second and third *Thor* films, given he’s plucked from the time stream at a moment he’s still a villain, right before he gets a chance to become an anti-hero—which is mostly caused by the deaths of his adoptive parents, Frigga and, to a lesser extent, Odin, but also through his playful adventures with his brother Thor. This new variant does not have the growing experiences mentioned in the previous sections. Nonetheless, he still shows the same anti-hero trajectory, especially since this new storyline better illustrates Loki’s motivations for belonging.

THE MULTIVERSE & (IDENTITY) VARIATIONS OF LOKI

At the beginning of the *Loki* series⁵⁴, the titular character steals the Tesseract during the Avengers heist and escapes custody. However, he is promptly taken captive by the Time Variance Authority or TVA. The TVA is a bureaucratic police-like organization dedicated to safeguarding the ‘Sacred Timeline’, which is the central storyline or universe of the MCU, by ensuring it does not get harmed by ‘variants’, or characters that made choices that diverge from the choices made in the main MCU timeline—like Loki killing Thor as a child, or stealing the Tesseract from the Avengers. 2012 Loki is one such variant, as he was not supposed to steal the Tesseract and escape, but instead let the events of *The Dark World*⁵⁵ and subsequent events play out.

While not being the first installment in the MCU’s second saga, the ‘Multiverse Saga’, the *Loki* series⁵⁶ is the first to introduce the concept of the multiverse in the MCU. Drawing on the ‘many-worlds’ interpretation derived from quantum physics, the notion of the multiverse consists of the idea that there is a multitude (possibly an infinite amount) of worlds or universes parallel to our own universe⁵⁷. The MCU has used the multiverse as a storytelling device to introduce different versions, or variants, of well-known superheroes and villains⁵⁸, including pre-MCU Spider-Men played by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*⁵⁹. For Loki, the multiverse opens up new ways to explore the variety of identities the trickster can adopt.

Back in the TVA, Loki is threatened to be ‘pruned’ (seemingly getting disintegrated) but is aided by TVA agent Mobius, who enlists Loki to help him capture another, rogue Loki variant that is causing mayhem throughout time and space. Mobius mentions that Loki, being a trickster and mischief maker, has many different variants that have tried and failed and tried again to disrupt the Sacred Timeline: Lokis are found “almost more than any other variant. And no two are alike” (S1 E2)⁶⁰. This links back to the trickster archetype⁶¹, as tricksters are liminal figures with multiple identities. As Loki gets to know Mobius, and vice versa, Mobius becomes like a moral conscience for the trickster god, forcing him to confront his actions as a villain and easing him

into the role of the anti-hero. For example, in the first episode (S1 E1)⁶², Mobius not only questions Loki about his actions but also shows him the consequences of his many villainous deeds—including those that resulted in the death of his adoptive mother, Frigga (in the timeline of the original Loki who did not steal the Tesseract). Loki eventually confesses to Mobius that he created the illusion of being a villain and hurting people, even though he didn't want to: "It's the cruel, elaborate trick conjured by the weak [Loki] to inspire fear. [...] A villain"⁶³. However, if Loki does not have his brother to help or Asgard to save—which are events that should happen to all Lokis, but didn't for this particular variant—what is his glorious purpose then? What is his motivation? Loki is forced to question this as he is told by the TVA that his only purpose in the Sacred Timeline is to be killed by Thanos, nothing more. So, in the series, Loki decides that to survive and not be killed by Thanos or the TVA, he must gain enough power to challenge the TVA themselves. This means he stays in a villainous/anti-hero mindset, at least at the start of the series, as his goal is self-serving⁶⁴.

During the series, Loki is continuously challenged with keeping the status quo and helping out Mobius, or seeking to undermine the TVA and take it for himself (as a trickster⁶⁵). Loki eventually allies himself with Mobius's target: the other rogue Loki variant named Sylvie, who wants to challenge the TVA's power as this would set her free from the TVA's persecution. Sylvie is different from Loki in several ways, despite being the same 'person'. Being different variations of each other allows us as the audience to explore Loki's/Sylvie's identity and motivations further, as well as their role in the story. One clear difference is that Sylvie does not go by the name 'Loki', instead preferring a name that she has chosen for herself. Sylvie is initially not impressed with her variant counterpart and asks, "What exactly makes a Loki a Loki?", with Loki responding: "Independence, authority, style" (S1 E3)⁶⁶. These aspects, according to our 'main' Loki, are apparently key core traits. These identifiers are tested out, especially later in the season (S1 E5)⁶⁷ when Loki runs into several more variants, including Kid Loki, Classic Loki, Boastful Loki, and the crowd favourite, Alligator Loki (or Cro-ki by the fans). Loki is indeed correct in saying that each of his variants are independent (relying on each other only out of

necessity and survival), have charisma, and sport the signature green and gold wardrobe. Independence, authority, and style. Check! However, while there are similarities between Loki, Sylvie, or the other variants, there are also differences besides their physical appearance (hence, being variations of each other). The best comparison between Loki and Sylvie comes in the third episode (S1 E3)⁶⁸. In terms of their end goals, Loki—at least in this phase of his character arc—wants to rule the TVA, while Sylvie wants to take down the power structure without the need to rule over it. Furthermore, regarding behavior and personality traits, Loki resembles the trickster archetype⁶⁹ much more than Sylvie. Not only does he use his illusion-crafting magic to trick Lamentis guards to get on a secure train, instead of Sylvie’s suggestion to use brute force. Loki also seems to be more improvising in his actions—compared to Sylvie’s meticulous planning—and he’s more playful during their secret mission on the Lamentis train, calling himself hedonistic compared to the seriousness of Sylvie. Through these examples, we see that, despite being the same character, their identities vary significantly.

Loki realizes while meeting his variants that he actually values feeling connected with those he cares about, as he did for a time with his brother on Asgard. He recognizes this in a pivotal moment when he asks Classic Loki—a variant that survived the encounter with Thanos by casting a real-life magical projection of himself and faking his own death (something all Lokis seem to do from time to time)—to describe his story, especially how the TVA tracked him down (S1 E5):

After faking my death, I simply drifted in space. Away from Thor, away from everything. Thought about the universe and my place in it, and it occurred to me that everywhere I went, only pain followed. So I removed myself from the equation. [...] I got lonely...To tell you the truth, I missed my brother, and I wondered if he missed me, if anyone else did. But as soon as I took my first steps to getting off the planet, the TVA arrived. Because we, my friends, have but one part to play, the God of Outcasts⁷⁰.

Classic Loki’s ‘The God of Outcasts’ moniker is not an official title,

but reinforces the idea of a Loki's overall trickster nature of not having a place to belong to, of being a figure with a sense of liminality no matter where they go^{71,72}. This particular example also highlights that, despite their 'othered' status as a trickster or an outcast, all Lokis' actions are, eventually, driven by a need to connect to other people⁷³, as Classic Loki missed his brother Thor. Following this monologue, the other Lokis raise their goblets in response, but Loki sets his down in defiance, as he realizes that he also feels that need to belong—if not with his brother, then with his new friends and allies in Mobius and Sylvie. However, for any of the Lokis to have a chance of belonging or survival, they must dismantle the TVA that prohibits telling other stories or veering from the proscribed path, proving they are more than just the villain, the doomed anti-hero, or the God of Outcasts.

GOD OF STORIES: LOKI TRANSCENDING HIS ANTI-HERO ROLE

How does the God of Outcasts overcome his prescribed fate of being the villain or the anti-hero in the narrative? By transcending his position as an anti-hero and using his (time-slipping) powers as a trickster. In the finale of season one (S1 E6)⁷⁴, Loki and Sylvie travel together to the Citadel at the End of Time, where they confront the man behind the TVA. He calls himself 'He Who Remains', a time-traveling scientist from the 31st century who discovered the multiverse and some of his variants from other universes. Some of them thought of these new universes as conquering opportunities, so He Who Remains isolated their timeline as the 'Sacred Timeline' in order to prevent a multiversal war. In this moment, he gives Loki and Sylvie a difficult dilemma: either they lead the TVA and leave the Sacred Timeline be, or they destroy He Who Remains, which would start a second multiversal war by exposing the main timeline to an infinite amount of his (evil) variants. Here, you see Loki transcending beyond his anti-hero role for the first time, as he wants to do good by keeping the Sacred Timeline and not exposing it to the evil of the multiverse—essentially having the prosocial attitude of a hero⁷⁵. Sylvie on the other hand, being driven by the TVA's past wrongdoings and her desire for revenge, as well as her nature as a trickster and general disrupter of the status quo⁷⁶, sends

Loki back to the TVA and kills He Who Remains without considering the consequences. This act destabilizes the Sacred Timeline, causing more branches to grow at an exponential rate and opening up the multiverse.

The second season involves Loki's (anti-)heroics trying to save the multiverse, which is on the verge of collapsing because of the growing branches, or parallel universes, out of the Sacred Timeline. The Temporal Loom, a device created by He Who Remains, cannot contain these branches, which results in the dissolution of the lives and the stories on each individual branch. Loki's purpose here shifts to protect the timelines (in all societies, everywhere, in all universes) from disappearing—this is a distinctly prosocial mission, which demonstrates yet another pivot by the trickster into heroism⁷⁷. While Sylvie tries to argue to just start over and build a completely new system, Loki wants to keep/save the TVA, saying that “Annihilation is easy... Trying to fix what's broken is hard. Hope is hard” (S2 E4)⁷⁸. This sentiment relates back to Loki's own character development—it would be ‘easy’ to destroy what is deemed ‘bad’ or ‘evil’, but it is harder to fix something and become ‘good’ or even ‘heroic’.

Fixing the Loom turns out to be hazardous, because stepping out onto the bridge in the void of time to make repairs causes people to dissolve (spaghettify, really). Loki and his TVA friends (including Mobius) find Victor Timely, a timid 19th-century variant of He Who Remains, who volunteers to make the repairs. All attempts to fix the Loom fail, however. Loki then discovers a new power: time-slipping, where he can travel through time to earlier or later versions of himself. After Loki is finally able to control his time-slipping powers, he claims that he “can rewrite the story”⁷⁹ and save the multiverse. Before doing this, however, he tries to convince Sylvie to help him on his quest. He has a heart-to-heart with Sylvie about Loki's motivation for his seemingly heroic actions (S2 E5):

Sylvie: What do you want?

Loki: I want to stop He Who Remains.

Sylvie: No. Wrong. Try again. What is it that you really want? Come on.

Loki: I want to save this. I want to save everything. All of it.

Sylvie: Is it really that hard? Come on, keep trying.

Loki: I want to save the TVA.

Sylvie: Why?

Loki: I want the TVA back.

Sylvie: And?

Loki: I want my friends back. [...] I don't want to be alone.

Sylvie: See? We're both selfish. [...] I know this is hard. But your friends are back where they belong.

Loki: But without them... Where do I belong?

Sylvie: We're all writing our own stories now. Go write yours⁸⁰.

In this powerful dialogue, Loki admits that his heroic actions to save the universe/multiverse are actually motivated by a desire to belong⁸¹, in this specific case to belong to his friends within the TVA. At this point in the series, Loki disguises his own (selfish) need to belong to an 'in-group' (the TVA)—connecting this to social identification theory⁸², and to characteristics of the anti-hero and trickster identities⁸³—and selling this as a prosocial, heroic goal⁸⁴ to save the multiverse.

Whatever they do to fix the Loom, nothing succeeds. It is in this moment that Loki faces the hardest of choices: to protect the multiverse from dying, he needs to sacrifice being with his new friends (and prevent Sylvie from killing He Who Remains); again, feeling the need to desperately belong to something, to not be alone (as a trickster). Mobius encourages him to keep "the big picture in mind. Most purpose is more burden than glory" (S1 E1)⁸⁵, linking back to Loki's catchphrase of being "burdened with glorious purpose"⁸⁶, something he has been saying since his villain days. He wants to be great, to have a throne and glory. However, by transcending his villainous and anti-heroic identity, Loki doesn't want the glory anymore, but he will be burdened with a throne nonetheless. He can uniquely solve the problem of the Loom malfunctioning—unlike his mortal companions, he is a god that will not get spaghettified by the void of time. Up until this point, he has tried to put his needs and wants first, selfishly, as a trickster and an anti-hero⁸⁷. However, in this moment, he realizes that

in order to preserve his friends' lives, he must put his own interests aside, transcending his previous anti-hero identity. So, Loki declares that "I know what kind of god I need to be...for you. For all of us" (S2 E6)⁸⁸. As he walks towards the Loom, he sheds his common TVA button-down for deep green robes and his signature horned crown, signifying his transcendence into a more god-like identity—visually showing that Loki accepts himself and his role. He breaks the Loom and uses his magic to create not another Loom, but a tree, which much resembles Yggdrasil, the world tree from Norse mythology. By doing this, he holds the strings of all the timelines together in his own hands, keeping the multiverse alive at the end of time as the God of Stories.

In creating a way for the multiverse to exist and flourish, Loki ensures that other versions of himself can exist, that he himself and his variants can be more than just the villain or the anti-hero, and that they might be able to reach their belonging and peace in other timelines. Sylvie, in particular, after her reckoning with the TVA, wants to just live. In addition to saving the future for himself and his variants, he also saves the multiverse so that Loki's other companions may have the chance to live out their lives on the timeline. In the end, he makes the altruistic and heroic choice⁸⁹ to protect the multiverse. Loki may have the throne he always wanted as the God of Stories, but it is more of a burden than glory, as he will be alone without his friends.

CONCLUSION

Similar to his counterpart in Norse mythology, Loki in the MCU is a prime example of a trickster character: a shape-shifting, mischief-causing, status quo-disrupting, morally gray figure that often has a multitude of identities. Using the trickster archetype from Jungian psychology⁹⁰ as an overarching theoretical notion, this chapter shows that Loki breaks free of his fated identity as a villain, mainly due to Loki's trickster nature and defiance of being relegated to a single role. His growth as a character—from villain to (anti-)hero—allows for new stories to be told. This growth is fueled mainly by Loki being 'othered' or excluded as a trickster, stemming from social identification theory⁹¹, and his related desire to belong to something bigger than himself

(Asgard and the Asgardian royal family, the Avengers, the TVA), which can be explained through self-determination theory⁹². Loki uses his powers as a trickster throughout the MCU to shape-shift into different identities, inspiring himself and others to change the narrative. In the end, he fully steps into this identity as the God of Stories, an identity that is indeed burdened with glorious purpose.

LOVE, LOSS, AND CHAOS MAGIC

WANDA MAXIMOFF AND THE FOUR PHASES OF GRIEF

BEN M. JONES, PHD

We get our first brief introduction to Wanda Maximoff in the MCU at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*¹, where we first see her and her brother Pietro in a containment unit, setting up their more substantial arrival in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*². In that film, she and Pietro are introduced to us as villains—agents of HYDRA hellbent on destroying the Avengers. She and Pietro have some success with this goal, as she manipulates the minds of the Avengers to create chaos in the team during their initial encounter. However, by the end of that film (and with help from a rousing speech by Hawkeye), Wanda ‘steps out of the doors and becomes an Avenger, joining the fight to save Sokovia from Ultron. At last, another hero has joined the fold.

Yet, this is not the final time that we see a change in Wanda’s alignment from villainous to heroic, as this tension will follow her across the remainder of her appearances in the MCU. From her heroic stand in *Avengers: Infinity War*³ and *Avengers: Endgame*⁴, to the harm she causes others in *WandaVision*⁵, to releasing her hold on Westview, to embracing the Darkhold in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*⁶, Wanda has anything but a straight path in her hero’s journey. This lack of a linear progression in her character is very similar to the experiences that many grieving people go through, and if there’s one char-

acter in the MCU who is well acquainted with grief and loss, it's Wanda Maximoff. Across the course of films she appears in, we see her lose her parents, her lover, her brother, and her children, with each of these losses occurring in markedly violent, traumatic ways. Things change, they change again, and then just when it seems like the hurt has healed, something else enters life to reopen the wound the loss left behind.

In the world of psychology, there are many theories that can help us make sense of what someone goes through when they experience the kind of traumatic losses that Wanda has experienced in her character's journey in the MCU. In this chapter, Wanda's journey is going to be situated within the context of Bowlby and Parkes's Four Phase Model of Grief⁷ to help explore some of the key moments that Wanda experiences in these films that mirror what grieving people from many walks of life in our real, non-superheroic universe also experience. To begin, we will explore a bit of Wanda's history of grief, loss, and trauma, then turn our focus to a more in-depth exploration of how this theory helps to provide both a guide and a normalizing perspective on what grieving people face. We will look first at how this theory of grief can explain what Wanda goes through with the loss of Vision, followed by an exploration of how a similar process can be seen in grieving the loss of her children.

WANDA'S MANY LOSSES

When we first meet Wanda in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*⁸, she's introduced as a villain who operates in alignment with HYDRA and (briefly) Ultron. As we learn more about her origin across other MCU films and shows, it is revealed that she and her brother, Pietro (Quicksilver), were orphaned as children when a missile strike hit their home. Their parents were killed in the strike, but Wanda and Pietro survived this attack and were stuck in the wreckage and rubble of their home, spending several days worried that a Stark missile in front of them would detonate and claim their lives. The loss of her parents at this young age is just the first in a series of devastating losses that Wanda endures over the course of her character arc in the MCU.

After spending the remainder of their childhood in a Sokovian orphanage, Wanda and Pietro agreed to experimentation by HYDRA. They believed this could give them the necessary powers to end the war that was still raging in Sokovia. It is in this experimentation facility that the Avengers first encounter Wanda and Pietro. Shortly after this encounter, Pietro and Wanda are recruited by Ultron, aligning themselves with his promise to help them eliminate the Avengers. This leads to another conflict with the Avengers before Wanda is able to discern that Ultron's plans are to eliminate not just the Avengers, but *all* of humanity. Taken aback by this, Wanda and Pietro choose to resist Ultron and align themselves with the team of heroes they have up until now been seeking to destroy. All of this leads to a dramatic confrontation with Ultron during which Pietro, Wanda's closest friend, twin sibling, and only living relative is killed in battle.

The loss of her parents, the innocence of her childhood, and her brother would certainly be enough loss for one lifetime. However, Wanda experiences yet more traumatic losses in the films ahead. Her accidental destruction of inhabited property that claimed the lives of many innocent civilians in *Captain America: Civil War*⁹ is seen as one of the causes for launching the Sokovia Accords (placing superheroes under the supervision of the United Nations), which ultimately leads to a loss of community on her part when the Avengers become divided. This distances her from half of the people she previously saw as friends, colleagues, or supporters in her life. All of this leads into *Avengers: Infinity War*¹⁰, where Wanda experiences the most violently traumatic loss of all.

It's perhaps a bizarre relationship to viewers not acquainted with the comics, but there is a real and intimate relationship between Wanda and Vision that develops over the course of several films. When we meet them in *Infinity War*¹¹, they are quite clearly in love, having snuck away to find some private time together before being attacked by Thanos's Black Order (previous films had already hinted at their developing connection as well). As things unfold across this film, we get a dramatic conclusion in which the only Infinity Stone that Thanos lacks for his plan to eliminate half of all life in the universe is the Mind Stone, which is securely planted in Vision's head. The conclusion of

this film sees Wanda's most acute trauma yet, when she is forced to destroy the Mind Stone to keep Thanos from getting it, knowing that doing so means she has to kill the one she loves. Vision tells her that it's all going to be okay—that it shouldn't have to be her that does this, but that only she can. Even as she is moments from killing him, Vision comforts Wanda—"You could never hurt me. I just feel you"¹². In a moment of true sacrifice, Wanda destroys the stone moments before Thanos can retrieve it, killing Vision in the process. This alone is such an acute trauma that we would expect it to reorient the rest of Wanda's life. However, it is made worse moments later when Thanos uses the Time Stone to bring Vision back, prying the Mind Stone from his head to kill him for a second time as Wanda lies nearby, helpless to save him. The sacrifice she made moments earlier is for naught, and Wanda is forced to lose Vision for a second time in a matter of minutes.

TRAUMATIC LOSS AND GRIEF

This discussion of Wanda's trauma is merely the trauma we see on-screen in the series and movies. Couple this with everything she likely experienced as a Sokovian orphan after the loss of her parents and potential other trauma she has endured off-screen, and it becomes easy to see how disruptive to Wanda's life and identity these events have been. Grief and loss are inherently difficult parts of our experience as humans, navigating a world in which we are acutely aware that our experience on this large rock floating in the abyss of space is not permanent. While the experience of grief is one that often impacts people in unique ways given their own predispositions and psychological hardwiring, there are themes and similarities that do tend to cut across our experiences of grief. Grief has an impact on our thoughts (confusion, disbelief, obsession), feelings (anger, depression, anxiety), behaviors (shutting off from others, difficulty sleeping, hypervigilance to avoid reminders of the loss), and even our physical functioning (shortness of breath, chest pains)¹³. There are a myriad of ways to think about the concept of grief, but for our purposes in this chapter, we will define it as the sum total of our reactions to the loss of someone deeply important to us. It is the heavy burden that comes

with knowing that the person for whom we grieve is never coming back and that our life will never be the same because of their loss.

Our shared mortality is a source of great distress in the human condition, making grief and loss inherently difficult to face. However, loss, something Wanda experiences exclusively as traumatic, can be particularly difficult to navigate. Green defines traumatic loss as a “loss in which the mode of death is sudden, violent, or unexpected” (p. 2)¹⁴. In the instance of traumatic loss, a person is faced with not only the normal feelings associated with grieving the loss of a loved one (sadness, hollowness, depression, etc.) but also with the additional challenges to their sense of self and safety in the world that has been shattered by the nature of said loss.

Green further explains that trauma, more broadly speaking, and bereavement specifically, involve some overlap in a person’s experience: in both instances, individuals experience significant disruption to their lives, face a sense of annihilation in the loss of their previous psychological self, and experience a profound sense of helplessness¹⁵. As such, traumatic loss often includes elements of both an intense longing for the person lost (i.e., a pervasive sense of loneliness) as well as some symptoms that are generally associated with post-traumatic stress disorder, such as intrusive thoughts or flashbacks to the event in which the person was lost¹⁶. We see Wanda navigating all these things during the fallout from her losses in the MCU during *WandaVision*¹⁷.

WANDA’S PHASES OF GRIEF

In the world of psychology and human studies, there are several models that can help us make sense of the grieving process. Among the most popular are the Kübler-Ross Five Stage Model of Grief¹⁸ and the Bowlby/Parkes’s Four Phase Model of Grief¹⁹. While the Kübler-Ross model is arguably the most well-known (with stages characterized by denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance)²⁰, Kübler-Ross originally conceived this model as a reflection of how people navigate the knowledge of their own impending deaths, not how they cope with the loss of another loved one. Alternatively, the Bowlby and Parkes model was specifically designed as a way to help

explain the experiences a grieving person goes through after losing someone else. Bowlby and Parkes argue that there are four stages that an adult moves through in grieving the loss of a partner: numbness, yearning and searching, disorganization and despair, and reorganization²¹. These four stages do not always have a clear delineation for when someone passes from one to the other and even though they are commonly experienced sequentially, individuals can cycle through the stages in ways that sometimes feel regressive: such is the predictably unpredictable nature of our grieving. In Wanda's character arc, we see her navigating each of these four stages.

NUMBNESS

When Vision is killed at the end of *Infinity War*²² (twice), Wanda has very little time to process this loss before she herself is 'dusted' by Thanos's Snap. For the next five years, she is in a state of non-existence (perhaps 'paused existence' is a better term) until she returns during the climactic fight in *Avengers: Endgame*²³, where she is thrust right into another battle with the monster that claimed her lover's life in the previous film. After the events of *Endgame*²⁴, where we last see Wanda discussing Vision and Tony's sacrifices at Tony's funeral, the next time we see Wanda is in Marvel's inaugural Disney+ show, *WandaVision*²⁵. One of the hallmarks of the numbness phase of grieving is that the grieving person is often unable to accept that the loss has occurred (i.e., feelings of denial), leading to a prolonged phase of shock during which a person shuts down and withdraws into themselves as a protective mechanism against becoming buried by the weight of their grief²⁶. In *WandaVision*²⁷, we see that Wanda has withdrawn from everyone in her life and is having such a difficult time accepting the loss of Vision that she creates a detailed fantasy world in which he still exists. This inability to accept the loss of Vision, a normal part of the grief cycle, establishes the foundation upon which her Westview delusion—the town she holds hostage in her magical Hex world—is built.

YEARNING AND SEARCHING

In the yearning and searching phase of grieving, a person is obsessed with the lost person and the relationship they shared, which often manifests as an intense focus on the memories the grieving person shares with the departed. It's a period characterized by an intense longing for the life that was once shared with the person, as the loss leaves behind a massive void in the grieving person's life²⁸. In the case of Wanda, this phase of yearning and searching is complicated by her witchcraft-based abilities to actively shape the reality around her to match her longings, which is what is happening when we find her at the start of *WandaVision*²⁹. Her yearning for a life with Vision has led to the creation of a pocket reality in the town of Westview (also called the Hex), where her neighbors are playing the bit parts assigned to them as she uses her powers to maintain the illusion of a suburban, non-heroic life lived in full with Vision. We see her yearning for a simpler way of life reflected in the earliest episodes, where she exchanges the complicated reality of her own life for the convenience of a 1960s-era scripted sitcom. No longer is she concerned with whatever threat is looming that the Avengers will have to protect the world from—she is now concerned with what to have ready for dinner when Vision is home from the office, or with what kind of new gossip Mrs. Hart may have to share about the neighborhood.

Additionally, it is not uncommon for someone in the yearning and searching phase to become preoccupied with not only the relationship that was lost, but the possibilities that were lost along with it. For Wanda, this leads her to not only resurrect Vision in the Hex she created, but also to move along their life as it could have been by bringing two children into this fantasy. Billy and Tommy are not children who were lost in the traditional sense of the term (i.e., they were never born in the world while Vision and Wanda were both living) but the possibility of having these two kids with Vision is lost when he dies. In Wanda's intense yearning for a life with Vision that was taken from her, she goes so far as to bring their previously non-existent children onto the scene as part of her extended fantasy. While this retreat to a fantasy world in which the loss did not take away someone you

loved is often a normal part of the grieving process, in Wanda's story, we will soon see how it becomes part of a larger cycle of difficulty in grappling with her legacy of trauma and loss.

DISORGANIZATION AND DESPAIR

In the disorganization and despair stage of grieving, individuals are faced with the challenge of accepting their loss and acknowledging that this loss has left their life markedly different than it otherwise would have been. Emotions that a person may experience in this stage are despair, hopelessness, helplessness, anger, rage, and confusion (among others)³⁰. It would not be uncommon for someone in this stage who had experienced a traumatic loss to experience symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder marked by features such as intrusive, distressing memories or dreams of the traumatic event (recurrent and involuntary), intentional efforts to avoid reminders of the traumatic event, negative alterations to cognitions and mood, and heightened arousal/reactivity to any stimuli associated with the traumatic event³¹. For example, there's a moment in the fourth episode of *WandaVision*³² where Wanda briefly sees Vision as his grayed-out corpse without the Mind Stone in place, which she clearly experiences as intrusive and unwanted before returning to her fantasy world in which he is still alive. This kind of 'out of nowhere' thought/visualization of the loss is a hallmark of intrusive thoughts in individuals experiencing PTSD. In *WandaVision*³³, Wanda's acceptance of Vision's loss only occurs after being confronted with the threat of Agatha Harkness (a fellow witch trying to steal Wanda's magical abilities) and being forced to reconcile with some of the memories she has been actively stifling to create the fantasy she has been existing in (as we see in great detail when she visits the property on which she and Vision would have built a home together, the pain of which serves as the initial impetus for the creation of the Hex). Wanda's ultimate acceptance of Vision's loss occurs toward the end of this series, when she sees that her fantasy is hurting the innocent citizens of Westview. As a result, Wanda lifts the spell and returns the town of Westview to its previous state before the Hex. This is *not* a happy ending for Wanda, however,

as it is one that is again marked by tremendous grief: removing the Hex not only leads to the loss of (the imaginary) Vision (again!), it also causes the loss of her children. She comes to terms with the harm she is causing long enough to acknowledge these losses and make a choice to move forward, but this still comes at great personal cost to her own emotional state.

REORGANIZATION

In the reorganization phase, a grieving person begins to reorganize their life now that they have accepted the reality of their new normal: a life without their loved one(s). In this stage of grieving, people often start to experience higher levels of energy again, re-engaging with other meaningful friendships and relationships. They can find themselves experiencing a renewed interest in the hobbies and activities they enjoy doing³⁴. When *WandaVision*³⁵ ends, this would have been the most likely predicted outcome for Wanda, as we had just seen her move through the phases of numbness, yearning and searching, and disorganization and despair. We would expect to see her reconnect with the remnants of the Avengers after the events of *Endgame*³⁶. More specifically, we see across several films that she has a meaningful connection with Hawkeye. So, we would anticipate that, at the reorganization stage, this is someone she would reconnect to (especially since he is navigating his own cycle of grief at having lost Natasha). All of this would have been likely, if the new trauma of losing her (imaginary) children had not restarted this cycle of grief for her.

AND ONE MORE TIME...

While the original description of the four-stage grieving process was in reference to the loss of a spouse or a committed intimate partner³⁷, we can clearly see Wanda go through these same stages regarding the loss of her children after the crumbling of the Westview fantasy in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*³⁸. Wanda is well acquainted with loss at this point, but these new losses of her children start her back on square one of the grieving process, as is often the case when a new loss

occurs. Based on the kinds of things we see Wanda do to cope with these losses in *Multiverse of Madness*³⁹ (i.e., her path of destruction through the Multiverse), it seems as though these new losses have actually created an even *more* intense emotional experience for Wanda than the loss of Vision did. This is not unusual from a psychological standpoint. The kind of recurring trauma that Wanda has experienced can be the basis of complex PTSD, an even more difficult condition to treat as it often leads to more severe symptoms than those seen in diagnoses of standard PTSD⁴⁰. Often, these symptoms are similar to the ones we would associate with PTSD (flashbacks, hypervigilance, anxiety, effortful avoidance of triggering stimuli, etc.) but are formed over longer periods of exposure and/or result from more recurrent traumatic events happening to a person who is already experiencing trauma. In that regard, complex PTSD can be thought of as PTSD that is somewhat cumulative in nature (note that the predominant psychiatric diagnosis tool in the world of psychology, the *DSM 5-TR*⁴¹ does not currently distinguish between the two). When Wanda loses her children, she begins the cycle of grief anew, but her experiences of grief are exponentially more intense this time (in part because of how much trauma has already preceded their loss, and in part because the loss of a child is a uniquely difficult loss to cope with).

At the start of *Multiverse of Madness*⁴², Doctor Strange seeks out Wanda's assistance in protecting America Chavez, a teen he recently met who possesses the unique ability to open portals through the multiverse and is currently being chased through said multiverse by witchcraft-powered monsters. When Strange seeks Wanda's assistance, he does not realize that she is the one who has been chasing America through the multiverse; rather, it seems that Wanda has removed herself to an idyllic location in the countryside to process and recover from the events of *WandaVision*⁴³. At first glance, this would seem like a step in the direction of reorganization, but when we see her dreaming about her children and the subsequent depression she experiences when she wakes up and they are not there with her, we sense that she is entering another season of numbness. Her dreaming, which the movie explains as people peering through a window to the lives of their multiversal selves, is motivated by her yearning and searching.

This leads to more darkness and reliance on the Darkhold to try and steal her life back from another version of herself as she navigates further through disorganization and despair, which we see play out in a series of ultimately villainous choices she makes during the film. She dreamwalks into the other Wanda's world, taking over her multiversal other's body in the process. She then uses that body to single-handedly kill the Illuminati, all in an effort to be able to finally take America Chavez's powers for herself.

This period of disorganization and despair persists across much of the film, as she is ultimately successful in capturing America and starting the process of stealing her powers on Wundagore. It is during this culminating battle that America opens a portal to expose Billy and Tommy to what she is doing as the Scarlet Witch, who are terrified of her as she causes harm to their *actual* mother in their universe. It is in this moment of seeing the pain and fear on Billy and Tommy's faces that Wanda is brought to her senses, dropping to her knees to claim that she is not a monster, as other Wanda tells her that she no longer has to worry about the children—they will be loved. In this moment, she releases her hold on America and stops trying to steal her powers, entering a period of reorganization where her identity is once again heroic. She further cements this new, reorganized identity when she ultimately sacrifices herself to destroy both the spells written into the walls of Mount Wundagore and all copies of the Darkhold throughout the multiverse, ensuring that no one else will ever be tempted by the Darkhold in the way that she was. This return to the heroic at the end of the film was ultimately possible only when she was able to accept and integrate the loss of Billy and Tommy.

WANDA'S PATH TO REORGANIZATION

There are treatments in psychology that are readily available for many of the emotional maladies that people face. Depression often responds to a combination of psychotherapy and medication. Anxiety is frequently fought by learning new coping and grounding skills. Yet grief is unlike all these things in that no matter the psychological approach taken, the objective reality is that someone you once loved

and relied on is gone. This leaves us in a place where moving forward must be about making sense of what has occurred so that we can reconstruct a life on the other side of the loss, knowing that an objective 'solution'—a life where that person is with us again—is not available to us. This is essentially the work that a person must do to arrive at the fourth phase of reorganization.

This final phase of reorganization in which a person can move forward with their life despite the terrible loss(es) they have endured is particularly difficult for individuals with complicated grief. There are several risk factors for complicated grief that we see Wanda experience, including the death of her partner, the death of her parents, unexpected loss by violent and traumatic means, and the death of multiple community members at once⁴⁴. One of the primary things a person must do on the other side of a traumatic event is to figure out a way to integrate what happened to them so that it becomes less threatening to their sense of self over time⁴⁵. This task of reconstructing a sense of self following a traumatic loss includes multiple tasks, including making sense of the loss, looking for any benefits resulting from the loss, and adapting your identity to accommodate the loss and move forward⁴⁶. This integration of trauma with identity is a task we see Wanda try to navigate across her character arc in the MCU. For example, when she loses Pietro, she joins the Avengers and seeks to make a difference as a part of this team. When she realizes that she is causing harm to the people of Westview, she lifts the spell, confronts Agatha Harkness, and retreats to solitude to heal. Every time Wanda encounters a new traumatic event, we see her respond to this (even if it seems to occasionally be on the other side of a villainous turn) by seeking to move forward without letting the traumatic moment claim her sense of self entirely. When we look at Wanda's journey in light of the Four Phase Model of Grief⁴⁷, these moments are essentially representations of the reorganization phase, in which Wanda seeks to move on in the face of what she has endured. It is an integration of the loss—not a denial of it.

Challenges to reconstructing a sense of self after a traumatic loss can be particularly difficult for those whose life experiences have made it difficult to form deep attachments with others⁴⁸. Sometimes this is because they have been hurt by others too often, or sometimes this is

because they have experienced traumatic losses that have created challenges to their ability to develop a sense of stability in their connection with others. In Wanda's case, her series of losses (starting at a young age with her parents) have most certainly created these kinds of challenges in her life. While everyone Wanda has lost is someone incredibly important in her life, the meaning she makes out of the losses, including the perceived impact it has on her life, is defining for how intense her grief will be⁴⁹. In Wanda's story, each loss has a considerable impact on her life. When all of this plays out for her in the loss of her children in *Multiverse of Madness*⁵⁰, Wanda is again faced with the challenges of making meaning out of their loss. Research has shown this ability to make some meaning from the loss to be the most salient factor in predicting the severity of grief for parents who have lost a child⁵¹. Losing her children ends up being the proverbial straw that breaks the chaos magic wielder's back, and Wanda's grief carries her into such a state of disorganization that she briefly turns into a murderous villain capable of wrecking the multiverse to find a way to be with them again—this is ultimately what costs the Illuminati their lives in this film; even these alternate reality heroes are expendable in Wanda's quest to ease her pain and suffering.

People in a reorganization phase often experience what is referred to as post-traumatic growth, which is the development that occurs after and resulting from the process of navigating a traumatic event. Some scholars suggest that part of what makes this kind of growth possible is the ability to situate the traumatic event within the context of either spirituality or some kind of transcendent meaning-making⁵². What we see Wanda do in *WandaVision*⁵³ and *Multiverse of Madness*⁵⁴ is conceptually related to these themes, but instead of couching her experience within some external transcendent level of meaning that is rooted in acceptance, she becomes transcendent in and of herself through the use of the Darkhold, with a goal not of acceptance, but of power and control. This represents not an acceptance of the loss through integrating it in the narrative of her life, but a continued denial of the loss that is more akin to the disorganization and despair phase of grief. Her quest for transcendent meaning-making does not have to entail religion or cosmological considerations necessarily—

being able to root what happened to her in a shared human experience of suffering would constitute one pathway to engagement with this idea (i.e., to varying degrees in Wanda's case, this would be the recognition that many of the people who also survived the 'dusting' experienced considerable losses as well). Being able to make sense of the loss in this kind of way is associated with experiencing fewer symptoms of complicated grief following a loss⁵⁵. This kind of ability to find meaning in the loss is a necessary ingredient of post-traumatic growth⁵⁶, which is something that people in a reorganization phase of their grieving would no doubt experience as a result of their efforts to move forward.

One of the things we often see people do as they enter a reorganization phase is to reengage relationships they may have previously pulled away from. As we watch Wanda go through all of this, we would do well to wonder where the community of superheroes around her is during all of this—did she pull away from them, or did they pull away from her? When Doctor Strange first speaks with her in *Multiverse of Madness*⁵⁷, it's clear that this is their first interaction since the events of *Endgame*⁵⁸. In some ways, this community really should have been Wanda's keepers, but occasionally, caregivers experience such an overload of grief (the sense that 'it's all just too much') in their work of supporting others that they are unable to show up for hurting people in a helpful way. When this happens, it can sometimes lead to a caregiver pulling away from the person in need of care, either overtly or discretely, thus creating feelings of abandonment on the part of the person in need⁵⁹. We would be remiss to not ask ourselves if this might be part of what happened to Wanda in the gap between where we see her in *Endgame*⁶⁰ and where we meet her again in *WandaVision*⁶¹ and *Multiverse of Madness*⁶². Everyone in her community of superheroes experienced a significant amount of sacrifice and trauma in the fight against Thanos, which would understandably leave them in a place where it would be much more difficult to find the emotional capacity to be supportive of one another. Alternatively, perhaps it is the case that Wanda distanced herself entirely from their outreach and efforts, as people often do during times of grieving. Arguably, Wanda was one of the three individuals who experienced the most permanent on-

screen loss of a romantic attachment figure (along with Peter Quill's loss of Gamora and Pepper's loss of Tony), which could have made it hard for her to feel like others understood what she was going through. Could a more engaged and supportive community have grounded her during her grief and prevented her turn into the Scarlet Witch?

CONCLUSION: WHERE HAS SHE BEEN? AND WHERE WILL SHE GO?

Wanda's journey to becoming the Scarlet Witch was paved by the various traumatic experiences she had over the course of her character's journey in the MCU. The kind of grief that Wanda endured in any one of these losses – her parents, Pietro, Vision, Billy, and Tommy – would be plenty heavy enough on its own, but the steady, consistent stream of losing all of them led her to a place where she ultimately (at least for a season) seemed to buckle under the weight of her grief. As we have seen in this chapter, her journey through the Four Phases of Grief⁶³ are similar to the ones that all of us go through in navigating the loss of a loved one. We experience intense numbness in response to the shock of the loss. We yearn and search, leaning heavily into our memories of our loved one as we grieve the loss of all that could have been. We encounter disorganization and despair as we grapple with getting our minds around having to exist in a world in which our loved one is no longer with us. We reorganize our life around the new normal and try to find a way to carry on in our loved ones' absence. The difference between us and Wanda Maximoff is that there's no chaos magic to help us recreate the world as we wish it could be. Given that she had the power to do this, is it any surprise that she (at least for a time) chose this path? To some extent, it seems grief fueled every choice she made from the end of *Avengers: Infinity War*⁶⁴ to her (supposed) demise in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*⁶⁵. This grief pushed her to do everything in her power to cope with the intensity of her losses and for Wanda Maximoff, there is *a lot* that is within her power to do.

At the time of this writing, we have yet to see a post-*Multiverse of Madness*⁶⁶ appearance from Wanda, which is doubtful given the ending

of this film where Mount Wundagore falls on top of her after she destroys the Darkhold spells written into its walls. But if you are reading this, I suspect you are enough of a comic book enthusiast to know that death in the Marvel Universe is less of a one-way ticket and more of a revolving door (looking at you, Jean Grey). I will be so bold as to say that *when* Wanda returns, she will once again be on the heroic path. Based on the themes of grief and traumatic loss we have already looked at, we have to ask... what's left for her to lose? Her parents, brother, partner, and children are already gone. It was the last of these losses that ultimately led to her most severe break with reality. At the end of *Multiverse of Madness*⁶⁷, we see her come to a momentary acceptance of this and do the right thing in sparing America Chavez's life.

When she comes back to the MCU, it will be as the most powerful version of herself—a Wanda that wields all the power of the Scarlet Witch, but whose own journey of healing, however winding, has led her to a place where these losses are integrated as part of her identity and not something she remains on the run from. She will have learned how to carry all the good of her life with Vision forward, even as she continues to long for a life that could have been. The longing will not go away, though it will change in intensity over time. There is a very real grief that Wanda will always carry with her. Such is the nature of our responses to losing those closest to us. There's a part of that hurt that never totally goes away. But that hurt can also be a beautiful reminder of what the person meant to us, because as Vision once said to Wanda after the loss of her brother, "what is grief, if not love persevering?" (*WandaVision*, S1 E8)⁶⁸.

“I MAY BE SUPER, BUT I’M NO HERO”:

DARK HUMOR, VIOLENCE, AND
SUBVERSIONS OF THE SUPERHERO IN
DEADPOOL

CHRISTINE TOMLINSON, PHD

Content Warning: This chapter contains explicit discussions of offensive humor, trauma, suicide, and abuse.

Suck it, Fox. I’m going to Disneyland.

— Wade Wilson (*Deadpool & Wolverine*)¹

Oh, hello. You might be wondering how a guy with a busted moral compass, a face that looks like the surface of the moon if it was made of bologna, and a penchant for vengeance ended up with a one-way ticket to join the ranks of the upstanding heroes of the MCU. Well, daddy’s home.

I know at this point you must be thinking, ‘Wait a minute, isn’t the author that completely unknown video game scholar? What are they doing writing about Deadpool?’ Thanks for noticing. This chapter will guide you through Deadpool’s journey on the big screen, from production hell to the MCU, drawing from the author’s status as an obsessive fan².

Hang on, some of you look a little lost. Let’s step back a bit. Who is Deadpool? Really, who is Wade Wilson? Cinematically, he got his start in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*³, which wasn’t quite what people had

come to expect from the comics, as they had his mouth sewn shut in that movie. The original handling of Deadpool as a character removed many of the elements we've appreciated from the comics, including the meta jokes, his ability to reach out to us from beyond the fourth wall, his tendency toward extreme violence, and his lack of issue with personal vendettas. This resulted in a strong desire to see the *real* character on screen⁴. In part, the failure of (the depiction of Deadpool in) *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*⁵ is likely responsible for much of the disappointment audiences felt before and the celebration after *Deadpool's*⁶ standalone release. And in the end, it was also a damn good movie. In *Deadpool*⁷, we get to see Wade in all his dishonorably discharged glory. He started in Special Forces before being ousted, becoming a dive bar mercenary and meeting the love of his life, Vanessa. From there, things take a turn for the worse when he is diagnosed with terminal cancer, sending him on a bit of a downward spiral. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and Wade finds himself seeking a solution in a serum that promises to heal his cancer, which it does, at the cost of his good looks and with the bonus (if you can call it a bonus) of not being able to be harmed or easily killed as his uncovered mutant power. This brings us to the birth of Deadpool, the guy in the red and black suit named after the dive bar betting pool on who will die next. After his filmic run at Fox, he is now on a clear trajectory toward becoming a Disney princess in the MCU. Through it all, he has experienced life, death, dismemberment, death again, love and loss; all for our amusement.

But what makes Deadpool the kind of guy audiences went to bat for? After all, studios were absolutely allergic to the idea of a Deadpool-based movie for a long time⁸. He doesn't really fit the model of what we love in superheroes, overcoming their enemies to fight for "truth and justice" (p. 149)⁹. Deadpool has a conscience, he clearly feels loyalty, but he also rejects the 'hero' label, insisting that he isn't in the business of doing good, really. Deadpool is also somewhat unique for other reasons. In the comics, he's frequently scattered and, well... comical, for lack of a better word. That's not to say that other superheroes can't be humorous, but they *feel* different. For most of the other heroes in the MCU, comedy comes second to saving the world. In the

movies, though, *Deadpool* also has something else to contend with: using humor to cover his vulnerabilities. Obviously, he can't really be harmed like we (or even many MCU heroes) could be because of his ability to regenerate seemingly endlessly¹⁰, but we see him grapple with emotions and overcome personal challenges—and audiences love an underdog. When we see characters overcoming something, it can give us a sense of hope¹¹.

We're right there with *Deadpool* when he struggles and triumphs. In some ways, because he's outside of the superheroic norm, he might even be more relatable as a morally gray yet more average person—despite his ability to regenerate limbs like he's part lizard. As audiences, our influence here shouldn't be overlooked. *Deadpool* isn't just unique for his meta jokes, fourth wall breaks, pitch-black humor, extreme violence, and personal vendettas. His challenges to the superhero archetype meant that it was an uphill battle to even get the first *Deadpool* movie¹² made, but sneaky happenings behind the scenes allowed fans to show their enthusiasm. In the end, our positive reactions to leaked test footage were the driving force behind getting the original movie green lit¹³.

As one of the most recent inductees to the MCU, this chapter explores *Deadpool's* popularity as an unlikely hero (and, let's be honest, more of an anti-hero) keeping us entertained, inspired, and hopeful. It's helpful to understand *Deadpool* in a broader context, including what makes a good movie, how *Deadpool* appeals to us, and why these movies have been successful by breaking the superhero rules. Why, despite all of these factors that should have made his success unlikely in the minds of executives (the dark humor, the violence, and the highly adult-audience-centered content), does *Deadpool* work as a franchise? Why do we as fans keep coming back? To better understand these dynamics, we will explore audience engagement with *Deadpool* as a franchise and character through theories on audience behavior (like data-driven production and the influence of taste), using dark humor as a way to cope (including as catharsis and in the face of grief), and theoretical insights into why we like anti-heroes (because we can identify with them and excuse their behavior as a result).

WHAT MAKES A GOOD MOVIE ANYWAY?

Why was there so much anxiety over making a potential *Deadpool* movie? First of all, there was the strained audience reaction to the handling of *Deadpool* in his screen debut, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*¹⁴. His initial appearance on the big screen created grief for fans who loved the quips and endless stream of jokes that usually flow from the character as, in this version, they literally took away his mouth—and just about everything else that makes him *Deadpool*¹⁵. In the first official *Deadpool*¹⁶ film, however, Fox/20th Century Studios allowed for a truer exploration of the character, for instance, by breaking the fourth wall to firmly center the film in the world of the *Deadpool* comics. The film itself acknowledges this, throwing some shade at *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*¹⁷, with *Deadpool* saying, “From the studio that inexplicably sewed his fucking mouth shut the first time comes five-time Academy Award viewer, Ryan Reynolds in an eHarmony date with destiny. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you... me! *Deadpool*!”¹⁸.

We’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here, though. Let’s start with what makes a good movie and, relatedly, what makes *money* as a movie. Movies become more successful (or profitable, from the perspective of film studios) through a number of aspects, including who is involved with its production, timing of release, and what the movie is or is about (e.g., rating, genre, and content)¹⁹. Superhero movies are a huge business, despite some initial growing pains. This is particularly true for the MCU, having reinvented the genre and taken some risks (like producing *Guardians of the Galaxy*²⁰ [GotG], despite the comic being relatively unknown and the main characters not being the original GotG team in the comics²¹). The MCU’s goal of establishing an overarching narrative has helped the major success these films have seen, in addition to trying to catch the broadest possible audience²² to ultimately create the highest grossing film franchises in movie history²³. And money is one of the driving forces behind the decisions made for these movies—who is hired, what’s in the script, and what alterations are made from the comics all have to do with what seems most enticing to audiences.

And here is where the initial trouble for a stand-alone *Deadpool* film

comes in. An R-rating *tends* to result in a less profitable movie²⁴. This could be because of a reduced potential audience, being less 'family-friendly' than PG-13, for example²⁵. There is a caveat here, however, that nudity tends to reduce revenue while violence may boost box office earnings, providing some reason for *Deadpool's* success as a franchise²⁶. Studios are acutely aware of these risks with an R-rating and it was a major halting factor for getting these movies going. Here, studios are relying on theories of audience behavior that emphasize structure-based understandings of how audiences work²⁷. There are, for example, 'taste publics' that can be regional and geographically defined that influence what people like and ultimately consume. What is popular becomes the defining factor in what could continue to be popular for people with similar backgrounds or profiles. This leads to churning out the same things over and over, which often means little can happen in way of creativity or experimentation for big companies (similar to video game studios²⁸). Believing in these models makes you afraid of risk. And *Deadpool*²⁹ was a risky concept. How could the foul-mouthed, morally grey at best, difficult-to-adapt to reality character exist within the often-sanitized for-younger-audiences PG-13 world of superhero movies? Working with this idea of how audiences function, running with what works, what's popular, and what seems to drive large scale audience behavior makes sense for big studios.

Each of the *Deadpool* movies has defied expectations, not only for R-rated movies, but for the superhero genre as a whole. Each movie has broken the mold, showing that the R-rating and aim toward a more adult audience is not necessarily a death sentence for a (comic book) film. For example, the latest film in the franchise became the highest grossing R-rated movie of all time, raking in \$1.086 billion globally as of August 2024³⁰. Given the format we have come to expect from *Deadpool* movies, the merger of Fox Studios within Disney between 2017 and 2019 resulted in initial fears of what Disney's acquisition might spell for *Deadpool* as a character and franchise in its own right. Would this mean that there would be a turn away from the R-rating? Would *Deadpool* need to go back to being a somewhat truncated version of himself? We know now that the studio has allowed the magic to continue happening, with only limited requests for adjustments to the

script. Specifically, the removal of one joke that was at the cost of Pinocchio³¹. I'll let your imagination fill in the blank here. Overall, though, Disney's first foray into R-rated Marvel adaptations has paid off big: as mentioned above, as of this writing, *Deadpool & Wolverine*³² is the highest grossing R-rated movie of all time³³.

While *Deadpool* has only recently joined the ranks of the prototypical heroes of the MCU, he directly pushes back against the formula in so many ways. His inclusion challenges the rating system, as previously mentioned. He provides social commentary directly as the protagonist, sometimes also poking fun at the companies behind these films (e.g., the running joke in the first two *Deadpool* movies^{34,35} that Fox 'could only afford two' X-Men). He also often uses offensive humor and engages in extreme violence not often associated with superheroes pursuing justice and virtue. How, then, did our scrappy merc become so beloved?

SUCCESS THROUGH FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

People the world over love a good superhero flick, contributing to the huge success of many of these films. MCU movies litter the top grossing films of all time for lifetime profits³⁶. Most of these films follow a tight formula that has driven much of this success. To a degree, *Deadpool* as a character and franchise does fall into a lot of the MCU pattern. These movies highlight heroes who feel relatable: we witness their backstory, we see them overcome challenges and rise to the occasion to ultimately save the world and defeat the bad guys, with some comfortable quips along the way³⁷. Similarly, we meet Wade Wilson as a relatable nobody, but he also happens to be a mercenary who frequents a dive bar, who is really only driven to rise to the occasion through personal vengeance, and whose quips are anything but comfortable. However, while he might follow the formula on paper, *Deadpool* is somewhat destabilizing as a heroic character. Beyond this, superhero movies tend to have a very specific approach to depicting heroism and heroes, particularly within the MCU formula. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*³⁸, for example, saving the world is framed as a 'job'³⁹. Somewhat puzzlingly, in many of these films, villains tend to be

the main source of critique toward troubling social systems⁴⁰. Superhero stories are also largely US-centric, focusing on American exceptionalism⁴¹, or the idea that there is something unique or special about the United States (although there has been some movement away from this with a focus on new heroes and stories, still largely set in the United States).

Right off the bat, *Deadpool* challenges many of these notions about what makes a good hero and who we focus on as our common superheroes. And I’m not just talking about (finally) getting comic-accurate costumes for characters like *Deadpool* and *Wolverine*. *Deadpool* is a mercenary, that much is true—he does have a job that motivates a lot of his actions. But many of the more heroic deeds he does are not born out of this sense of work-based obligation. In some ways, because of his chaotic neutral sensibilities, he exists as a free agent. His heroism is largely driven by his own wants, needs, and immediate desires. Much like Ryan Reynolds, he’s also unapologetically Canadian⁴², challenging the US-centric approach to many MCU movies in direct ways, referencing Canada directly with comments like “Oh, Canada” and “And that’s why Regina rhymes with fun!”⁴³. In part, *Deadpool*’s trademark self-awareness lends to the ability to play with the script—and with the audience.

The first major consideration in what sets *Deadpool* apart, though, is his motivation. What we understand superheroes to be, *Deadpool* is often not. Let’s ignore for now the moments where *Deadpool*, namely in the comics, is unquestionably a villain⁴⁴. As he has evolved as a character, he has become quite a bit more than his original conceptualization, embodying more of an ‘anti-hero’ characterization. We know that anti-heroes can be enticing as they refuse to buy into the typical heroic binary of good and evil⁴⁵. These characters are often protagonists, but they don’t neatly follow what we usually think of or evaluate as the moral good, bending rules⁴⁶ and potentially acting out of selfish interests⁴⁷. *Deadpool* finds himself very much aligned with the idea of the anti-hero and, in a way, it’s refreshing in a sea of cookie cutter superheroes. While some might find the dick jokes and humor punctuated with violence and pain juvenile or off-putting⁴⁸, this is exactly what draws some of us to *Deadpool* in the first place. We won’t be

seeing Doctor Strange regrow limbs in comedic fashion any time soon. The tight MCU formula that has led to so much success has also been discussed as producing a sense of ‘superhero fatigue’ in audiences⁴⁹. *Deadpool* is different—and sometimes shockingly so—especially in the wider, more family-friendly MCU.

While many MCU heroes are strictly heroic—saving the world, being the good guy, going out of their way to do the right thing—*Deadpool* is more driven by a personal moral compass and individual desire than the greater good. He reflects more of an anti-hero than a hero: he can be selfish, he does bad things, he hurts people (to be fair, usually bad guys, but to the point of overkill) for the hell of it, and he may even abandon a good cause if it doesn’t suit him in the moment. Affective disposition theory tells us that people enjoy characters through positive moral evaluations of those characters⁵⁰, but where does that leave anti-heroes who are usually not going to find themselves being evaluated positively through a moral lens? It seems with anti-heroes, audiences have to rely on other methods for enjoying watching them on the screen. Instead of engaging with or evaluating an anti-hero from a moral understanding, we tend to identify with them, excuse their behaviors as a result, and might even generally approve of the use of violence⁵¹. This makes sense when it comes to *Deadpool* as a character. He is still pretty relatable. We do want to see him succeed. He is, after all, fighting for the person he loves and for the concept of family, something many of us can identify with. We see this when he puts his life on the line to try to rescue Vanessa or tries to make life better for a young mutant (Firefist) who seems to be going down the wrong path in response to his trauma. We might even be able to see ourselves in some of Wade’s darker emotions, from grief to depression to anger, especially when he reacts to Wolverine’s death.

A second element of *Deadpool* that sets him apart is how he pushes back against gender-related cultural concepts. Ideas of masculinity are complex in *Deadpool*, challenging many of the typical ideals reified in superhero films. In the comics, *Deadpool* is a pansexual icon, and while we don’t get a complete sense of this in the films, he plays with ideas of sexuality⁵². Instead of falling into heteronormative tropes, or those that focus on and privilege heterosexuality as normal or most

desirable, Deadpool challenges masculine norms and expresses his identity more freely (for example, having a special unicorn plushie or challenging romantic relationship roles through exploration)—despite his penchant for violence and his romantic involvement with his movie girlfriend, Vanessa. His interests are revisited in the third film as a kind of gotcha for the new parent company as well, with the line, “Is that supposed to be scary? Pegging isn’t new for me, *friendo*, but it is for Disney”⁵³. This humor is also something that sets Deadpool apart from other characters in the MCU. *Everything* is potentially a joke, from grievous injury and murder to losing and comically regrowing limbs to traumatic experiences. More on that later.

Beyond his anti-hero status and less rigid gender identity, a third factor that makes Deadpool unique in both the comics and the movies is the fourth-wall-breaking connection the character has with us as the audience. While other characters, including in the MCU, have dipped their toes into this format (e.g., She-Hulk), Deadpool’s approach often pushes back against the studios, reaches out to the audience, and combines with the aforementioned aspects of the character to make him feel different. We’re part of a lot of these jokes, with Deadpool aligning himself with us against the studios, and it feels like the movies were *made for us*, the fans. Always self-aware, Deadpool works in jokes that allow us to poke fun at just about everything, including other superhero movies, the MCU, and the production companies behind the films. In one early quip with Colossus, who mentions that Deadpool will need to speak with Professor Xavier (the leader of the X-Men), Deadpool replies, “McAvoy or Stewart? These timelines can get so confusing”⁵⁴. This pokes fun at the plethora of movies and actors who have become these characters on the big screen. Even post-Disney-buyout, *Deadpool & Wolverine*⁵⁵ has continued to use violence as humor, lean into crass jokes, and use our favorite fourth-wall-breaking dialogue. In meeting another version of himself, Deadpool tells Deadpool (or Nicepool) about Dogpool, “Do not insult this animal’s autonomy, she can decide who her papa is. What’s it gonna be girl, huh? Original recipe or Van Milder here?” who tells Deadpool (and us), “Ah! That’s funny. I can gently tap the fourth wall, too. *The Proposal*”⁵⁶. This conversation refers to Ryan

Reynolds' 'Academy Award-worthy' previous film work, *The Proposal*⁵⁷ and *Van Wilder*⁵⁸.

It is worth noting that the humor in these movies is not always a hit. The desire to push the envelope does mean that these jokes can meander into the more offensive, including a remark insinuating that the antagonist character Angel is a man (or potentially transgender) due to her strength, or Wolverine's comment to Deadpool that he "couldn't even save a relationship with a goddamn stripper!"⁵⁹, referring to his absent relationship with Vanessa in the third film. Still, humor is a major piece of what makes Deadpool—as a character and as films—unique. This fits in with his broader positioning as an anti-hero, but also as a kind of anti-MCU-superhero. He doesn't follow the tropes and scripts that have made the MCU—particularly the MCU as Disney's non-violent PG-13-friendly baby—so successful. Deadpool pushes back against our ideas about what makes a good superhero movie, who a hero should be, and what kind of characters we want to be entertained by.

THE HUMAN ELEMENT OF (SUPER)HEROES

It's not all chimichangas for our titular not-quite-hero. Deadpool himself will tell you he's not a good guy, although he's gone through a number of iterations even in the comics that could call his identity into question. At the core of these movies, though, is also a vulnerability that Deadpool often faces. Deadpool alludes to experiencing trauma, has difficulty facing his emotions and shortcomings, and even experiences the depths of depression—all using juvenile humor to engage with these issues, no matter how dark. Because nothing is off limits for these jokes, this includes allusions to abuse and mistreatment early in life. We get an introduction to this fairly early on in *Deadpool*⁶⁰ when Wade Wilson meets his love interest Vanessa:

Wade: Rough childhood?

Vanessa: Rougher than yours. Daddy left before I was born.

Wade: Daddy left before I was conceived.

Vanessa: Ever had a cigarette put out on your skin?

Wade: Where else do you put one out?

Vanessa: I was *molested*.

Wade: Me, too. Uncle.

Vanessa: *Uncles*. They took turns.

Wade: I watched my own birthday party through the keyhole of a locked closet, which also happens to be...

Vanessa: Your bedroom. Lucky. I slept in a dishwasher box.

Wade: [gasps] You had a dishwasher... I didn't even know sleep. It was pretty much 24/7 ball gags, brownie mix, and clown porn.

Vanessa: [laughs] Who would do such a thing?

Wade: Hopefully you. Later tonight⁶¹?

Deadpool may be physically incredibly difficult to kill, but every superhero needs a weakness. It's clear to us as viewers that he has weaknesses and he's experienced some horrible things that have led him to become the complicated and messy person he is today. He uses this as a bonding (and flirting) point with Vanessa, another character coming from a traumatic background. They manage, though, to seemingly bring out the best in each other and, as Deadpool says about the first film, it is a love story.

The love story element is something that also shows Deadpool's vulnerabilities despite having superhero capabilities. Now, this one *is* a pretty common trope for superheroes—the people they love become a potential weakness, so getting close to people is less of an option and often results in driving their story forward when the person they love is kidnapped, harmed, or even killed⁶². In its worst forms in comics and comic-adjacent media, this is known as the trope of 'women in refrigerators', where women characters tend to be maimed or killed, often to motivate the male main character⁶³. This becomes a motivating factor for Deadpool as well, as Vanessa's well-being is a huge driving factor behind the first film.

Even suicide as a response to grief is not off limits in terms of humor. In *Deadpool 2*⁶⁴ (the *Super Duper Cut* of the film), a humorous montage starts with Deadpool visiting the polar bear exhibit at the zoo, attempting suicide by jumping into the enclosure after telling a child that his name is 'Captain Delicious Pants'. These jokes and approaches

to grief, trauma, and suicide may seem in bad taste, but it speaks to serious issues in a way that may be more accessible to us and may make them, in some ways, easier to deal with. Grief and loss can make people at increased risk of committing suicide, as we see with Deadpool⁶⁵. Dark humor can be used as a means of coping, making it easier to deal with traumatic life events⁶⁶ or traumatic stressors⁶⁷. This kind of humor underpins how traumatic experiences are handled in these films, from the example of meeting Vanessa above to how he handles his diagnosis with cancer or reactions to the effects of the serum on him (his friend Weasel saying “You look like an avocado had sex with an older, more disgusting avocado”⁶⁸). Dark humor like this can be cathartic. It can help us handle the darker, more challenging aspects of life and lighten the load⁶⁹. In a way, this might be another aspect that makes Deadpool relatable. His quips, his grief, and his willingness to challenge darkness with humor might feel similar to how we navigate our own challenges. While we see degrees of emotional struggle with other heroes in the MCU to make them feel more human and more relatable, no one gets quite as dire as Deadpool, despite the consistent flow of jokes as a common theme.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: WHY DO WE LOVE DEADPOOL?

Fans are... enthusiastic. As fans, we love our characters and we want media to do them justice, whether that’s film, comic books, or television⁷⁰. Deadpool’s challenges to the systems that are the superhero, the MCU, or even what we expect from our heroes in general are rebellious in a way that energizes us as an audience⁷¹.

As a franchise, *Deadpool* also helps us understand some elements of audiences that studios had been overlooking or misunderstanding as part of the MCU formula. *Deadpool* has unreservedly shown this, with musical and reference throwbacks, adult humor, and extreme violence. Superhero movies are, overall, about justice triumphing⁷². Deadpool does give us this as well, but from a more emotional and vengeful viewpoint. It’s less about doing what’s right or doing his job for the greater good (most of the time) and more about doing what feels right *for Deadpool*. This might seem selfish, but it’s also more relatable.

These movies defied the expectations set by data-driven, popularity patterns emphasizing structural theories of audience behavior⁷³ and R-rated unprofitability again and again, likely in part because audiences do have their own agency defined by their interests, psychology, and desires⁷⁴. Thinking of audiences only as structure-based products of cultural and behavioral trends prevents innovation and, for a long time, halted a comic-accurate *Deadpool* from reaching the big screen. A part of this may also be related to assumptions of how people relate to protagonists, main characters, and heroes through theories like affective disposition theory, assuming that moral evaluations are the primary way that audiences relate to characters⁷⁵. On the contrary, even anti-heroes can win us over if we can identify with them, regardless of how violent or morally gray they might become.

Given the R-rating, *Deadpool*⁷⁶ challenged the long-standing PG-13 *max* rating for superhero movies. Yes, there had been some forays into the adult-centered comic book movie (generally gritty, not as well-received examples, like *Sin City*^{77,78}), but they never captured the audience's attention like *Deadpool*⁷⁹ has. These movies are for fans and, beyond that, they are for comic book fans. The approach to comic book adaptations in film has often tried to reimagine characters in the context of our physical world limitations, even in the MCU. Consider making the Spider-Man we know and love more tech-based (i.e., the Iron Spider suit in *Avengers: Infinity War*⁸⁰), rather than being able to produce his webbing organically. Or reimagining Wolverine's signature yellow, black, and blue suit to be plain black or a white tank top⁸¹. Or giving *Deadpool* weird line tattoos and sealing his mouth shut in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*⁸².

These films not only challenge norms around violence in the MCU, but also humor. *Deadpool*'s katanas are only part of his sharp arsenal, as they are matched by his sharp tongue. This humor, a shield against trauma as we discussed above, is something that transcends much of what we've come to expect from superhero movies, allowing us a reprieve from the upstanding members of the MCU. This humor is dark, dirty, and often aggressively challenging to the norms of superhero movies. *Deadpool* serves as an escape in ways that the escapism offered by the MCU often lacks. It's a challenge to the system and a

shock to ours. Deadpool is unexpected and unfettered, unrestricted by the unspoken code of conduct in superhero movies and he's proven that this formula works. This also gives us a chance to explore how this type of humor can work as a cathartic release, especially in the face of stress and trauma.

Deadpool speaks to us—sometimes literally—as fans. He's in on all the jokes, he's self-aware, and he uses meta humor to great effect. In making a comic book movie for comic book fans, the movies are able to critique the way many studios have handled the superhero genre. In *Deadpool 2*⁸³, we see this in response to Cable's gruff demeanor, with Wade asking, "You're so dark. Are you sure you're not from the DC universe?"⁸⁴. Deadpool is explicitly for the fans (with an emphasis on explicit), with the movies serving as a love note to comic books and comic book movies, even amidst their criticisms. These jokes tend to be ones shared by the broader comic fan community.

So there you have it: Deadpool's transformation from sad merc knock-off cameo to Disney's own "Marvel Jesus"⁸⁵, poised to change the face (if you'll excuse my phrasing) of the MCU. And let's be honest, given the revenue of his latest movie, he's probably left a decent mark moving forward.

That's it, you've reached the end of this chapter. A true accomplishment! Go on, take a break or something. Go have a snack. Cuddle a stuffed Jeff the Land Shark. Maybe there's a postscript teasing a second volume somewhere in the next chapters or at the end of the book, I don't know what those dumb editors are doing. But this is all I have for you. Bye bye now.

WE ARE GROOT

GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY AND FAMILY PSYCHOLOGY

TIM LUISI, PHD AND MONIQUE LUISI, PHD

The Marvel Cinematic Universe's (MCU) *Guardians of the Galaxy* (GotG) trilogy chronicles the story of how several self-interested misfits become a family. The first movie of the trilogy, informally called *Vol. 1*¹, introduces us to the team. Peter Quill (a.k.a. Star-Lord) is a self-proclaimed outlaw from Earth seeking to hawk a stolen Orb for an epic payday. Gamora, the adopted and favored daughter of the villain Thanos, seeks the same trinket for her own interests. Quill and Gamora's feud on the planet Xandar attracts two bounty hunters, Rocket and Groot: one is a laboratory-enhanced raccoon while the other is a humanoid tree-like being. Ultimately, Xandar's police force, the Nova Corps, imprisons the four in the Klyin. There, they meet Drax 'the Destroyer'. On a personal quest to avenge his murdered wife and daughter, Drax joins Star-Lord, Gamora, Rocket, and Groot. Initially planned as a temporary arrangement, the quintet escape the Klyin and discover the Orb's power (it's an Infinity Stone!), which unites them on a newfound quest to protect the galaxy against the Kree zealot Ronan (and the real villain behind the curtains, Thanos). However, the Guardians' motives and principles are not always in sync: for instance, Rocket questioning Quill's actions when Quill and Gamora want to hand over the Infinity Stone to the Nova Corps:

Rocket: Are you kidding me? We're wanted by the Nova Corps. Just give it to Ronan!

Quill: So he can destroy the galaxy?

Rocket: What are you, some saint all of a sudden? What has the galaxy ever done for you? Why would you want to save it?

Quill: Because I'm one of the idiots who lives in it²!

Their journey in the second movie adds two new members to the family: Mantis, the personal assistant, slave, and (as we learn later) daughter of the celestial being Ego and Nebula, the adopted daughter of Thanos and violently jealous sister of Gamora. Together, the seven face challenges from within and without, mostly dealing with the twisted life-ending plans of Ego, Quill's biological father. The final movie of the trilogy challenges the family to rally to save the galaxy (again), as well as one of their own from the brink of death: Rocket, who gets severely injured early on in the movie. During these adventures, the Guardians encounter Rocket's original creator, the High Evolutionary, and put a stop to his animal-human experiments. Throughout the trilogy, each of the Guardians are challenged to face and make peace with their origins, identities, roles, changes, and in some cases, each other.

Mostly absent of biological relations (see the reveal in *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*³), the GotG family challenges the mediated norms of family. In this chapter, we explore the definition and themes of family in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* film trilogy and in their appearances in other MCU installments. Like many family structures, our analysis is quite complicated and yields many observations. While we are unable to cover them all in the chapter, we highlight some of the more decidedly emergent familial structure themes. Specifically, we briefly define and discuss family structures in society and media. Next, with the Guardians as the chapter's case of interest, we analyze *loss*, *estrangement*, and *maintenance* as key family themes. These themes were selected not only because they recur consistently across the Guardians' narrative arc, but also because they reflect some of the most emotionally resonant and developmentally significant processes in family psychology—particularly for families forged through choice rather

than biology⁴. This chapter first addresses loss and estrangement to reflect the narrative trajectory of the Guardians, which begins in emotional rupture and absence. By foregrounding family disruption, the chapter further emphasizes the urgency and necessity of maintenance, which emerges as a response to disconnection. This structure also mirrors real-world experiences, where many individuals become most aware of family dynamics precisely when those bonds are threatened or broken.

FAMILY STRUCTURES IN SOCIETY AND MEDIA

Traditional, conservative definitions of family are often characterized by biological and legal connections⁵. Other definitions extend to sharing of resources (e.g., a kitchen table)⁶. The nuclear family, a unit consisting of husband-and-wife pair that parent children⁷, was once the prevailing representation of family in media⁸. Variety in familial media representations, including their structures and the issues they faced, would grow in the 1970s and increase throughout the end of the century and into the next. Art is often slow to imitate life, perhaps intentionally. Much like stories are meant to teach kids the difference between right and wrong, mediated works such as films have often served to portray correct (and ideal) relationships⁹. But therein lies the problem: when an ideal is proposed (i.e., a nuclear family), the family structures that do not conform to this ideal are branded as inferior, treated as being different, or are even excluded. The consequences have included erasure of, stigma against, and lack of knowledge about different family structures^{10,11,12}. Inclusion of divergent family structures, on the other hand, provides visibility, affirmation, validation, inspiration, and awareness^{13,14,15,16,17}. If media representation indeed was a mirror, it would better reflect recent global trends: the average age of first marriage has increased, more couples opt to cohabitate and not marry at all, fertility is overall on the decline and childlessness (both involuntary and voluntarily) is growing, and divorce has become more common^{18,19}.

What, then, is family? There are enough definitions to fill entire books. However, for the purposes of this chapter, we have adopted

the following definition: people who share “a collection of implicit understandings about expectation, practices and the status of relationships” (p. 3)²⁰. In other words, a family is a group of people who have a shared sense of how they treat each other, what they expect from one another, and who is important to who, even if they do not always say those things out loud. To that end, the *Guardians of the Galaxy* characters provide a rich case study for exploring representation and themes related to diverse family structures. From the outset, the Guardians challenge conventional definitions and mediated representations of family. They are also a popular case to study. Critically acclaimed and commercially lucrative, each GotG film in the trilogy has been praised for blending humor, heart, action, and nostalgic soundtracks. Together, the films have grossed over \$2.5 billion worldwide. The Guardians continually define, negotiate, and showcase their implicit understandings and expectations of their relationships that form their family. Arguably, the powerfully recurrent and inclusive representation of family serves as a major contributor to the trilogy’s appeal.

LOSS AND ESTRANGEMENT OF FAMILY

Similar to defining family, identifying an all-encompassing term that captures the breakdown of family ties presents a challenge. Loss is a near-universal, inevitable experience. Youth often experience their first sudden loss around the age of 15 or 16. In 2021, U.S. Census data reported that more than one-quarter of the population currently had experienced the death of both of their parents²¹. However, we contend that loss implies a more involuntary circumstance, something you can’t stop or do anything about. Another term, *estrangement*, has gained traction in recent years. We like this term because it not only captures the situation, but also the process and the spectrum of a type of loss that is more intentional:

For some, estrangement equals cutting all contact with someone indefinitely. For others, it’s about limiting interactions [...]. Some families undergo multiple estrangements and reconciliations throughout their

lifetimes. Estrangement might happen very suddenly and dramatically. Or, it could be quiet and gradual (para. 3-4)²².

Additionally, loss implies a greater meaning of permanence and finality, whereas estranged folks are still present or alive²³.

PETER QUILL FILLING THE WOUNDS OF ABSENT PARENTS

In *GotG Vol. 1*²⁴, the 8-year-old Peter Quill experiences the loss of his beloved biological mother due to cancer. To cope with the loss of his mother, he keeps close a mixtape—a cassette tape she made for Peter with all the songs she grew up with. Despite the love he has for his mother, he grows up into a womanizer-type, unable (and until Gamora, uninterested) in developing meaningful connections with women. Meanwhile, it is implied that Quill's biological father, who we only later in *GotG Vol. 2*²⁵ learn is the celestial being (and planet) Ego, has been out of the picture for some time. We see the complexity in grief that accompanies Quill's multiple losses: he mourns his mother, but also his absent father that he never knew.

Additionally, there is another layer of emotion, as Quill shows signs of resenting his father and his father's absence. To cope with this absence, our Star-Lord concocted a heavily media-inspired vision of the perfect dad: the (in the 70s and 80s) popular American actor and singer, David Hasselhoff. In fact, during his childhood, Quill told other children that Hasselhoff was his father, explaining his absence was due to his work as an actor. He also carries a picture of the actor with him at all times, similar to how he carries the music his mother gave him everywhere, which shows the significance of this self-created biological father figure. This behavior is not surprising, nor is Quill's experience unique: while 20% of adults will experience estrangement from their father at some point (mothers hover around 9%)²⁶, a body of research acknowledges that children from homes where the father is absent often face social stigmatization—being perceived as damaged, problematic, or at risk—in addition to experiencing statistically higher risks for lower educational outcomes, increased mental health issues (e.g., lower self-esteem), strained familial relationships, and reduced

employment opportunities^{27,28}. Ultimately, Peter Quill's character represents the common experience of loss and estrangement, and the desire to fill the wound of losing his biological parents with totems as proxies to satisfy the parent-child portion of the idyllic nuclear family archetype.

As previously mentioned, estrangement might only be a temporary situation. To that end, Peter has an opportunity to end this fatherly estrangement when he meets his biological father, Ego, in *GotG Vol. 2*²⁹. Though hesitant at first, Quill is optimistic about this reunion and is thrilled to find out he shares traits and superpowers with his father. Ego is selling the idea of a nuclear family and a loving father-son relationship convincingly: "It was with Meredith that I first experienced love. [...] And from that love, Peter... you. I have searched for you for so long. [...] I knew you must be the son of the woman I loved"³⁰. However, when Ego's motives are questioned by Gamora (who doesn't trust Ego), the concept of biological versus chosen family—which consists of people you love or support regardless of blood or marital relationships³¹—becomes a point of contention. Quill's desire to have a piece of his nuclear family briefly exceeds the needs and concerns of his chosen family in the Guardians. Unfortunately, Quill's dreams are shattered when it is revealed that Ego does not conform to Quill's idea of a caring and cool father. He turns out to be responsible for what is the murder of Quill's mother, as he literally put the cancer in her body with his celestial powers. Additionally, Ego sees his son as a means to an end: he hopes that, together with Star-Lord's newfound celestial powers, they can become (or take over/destroy) the universe themselves, as Ego is disappointed with the existing life within the universe and he wants to spread out until everything is part of Ego. When Quill refuses to cooperate, Ego destroys the mixtape Quill got from his mother and makes Quill part of his plan by force. He is only saved from his fate by his chosen family, as Drax mentions: "We're family. We leave no one behind"³².

Albeit an extreme example, a mismatch in values is one of the principal drivers of estrangement between adult children and their parents³³. This mismatch is insurmountable, and the reality of Ego's past and future intentions stirs up Quill's concept of family, bringing

him to two distinct epiphanies. First, Peter seems to express greater confidence in what family means to him and who comprises it—his chosen family in the Guardians. Second, he realizes that his adoptive father Yondu Udonta—an alien bounty hunter hired by Ego to kidnap Peter right after his mother died (but who never delivered Quill to Ego)—was David Hasselhoff-as-father personified all along. This revelation is strengthened not only by the fact that Yondu saved young Peter from Ego’s horrible plans and raising the boy himself. It’s also exemplified in Yondu’s final heroic act, by helping the Guardians defeat Ego and sacrificing his own life to save Peter (again) in this heartbreaking moment: “He may have been your father, boy, but he wasn’t your daddy. [...] I’m damn lucky you’re my boy”³⁴.

EBBS AND FLOWS IN GAMORA’S RELATIONSHIPS WITH NEBULA AND THE OTHER GUARDIANS

Like Quill, the sisters Gamora and Nebula are separated from their biological families, as they are both kidnapped and raised by Thanos. Their arc represents familial estrangement of a different sort—one that is not so absolute. By forcing the sisters to engage in brutal competition against each other, their adoptive father Thanos fueled the sisters’ enmity and eventual estrangement. Additionally, he physically punished Nebula each time she lost in battle to Gamora, fueling resentment. A meta-analysis of existing studies that included over 14,000 participants indicates that authoritarian parenting can lead to increased feelings of sibling rivalry and ultimately estrangement between siblings, especially amongst sisters who are typically more likely to notice inconsistencies in how one sister is treated over another³⁵. Perhaps as expected then, this sibling relationship, shaped by abuse, manipulation, and inequitable treatment leaves Nebula deeply scarred, both physically and emotionally. In *Vol. 1*³⁶, Nebula is depicted as Gamora’s antagonist, driven by jealousy and hatred. In this case, their rivalry is a direct result of Thanos’s abuse. However, as the trilogy progresses, the sisters begin to reconcile their differences. Towards the end of *Vol. 2*³⁷, both sisters start talking about their (past) resentment towards each other and the emotional reasons behind their

life-long rivalry. Where Gamora was trying to survive by defeating her sister over and over, Nebula declares: “You were the one who wanted to win. And I just wanted a sister!”³⁸. She longs for a family, a sibling bond that Thanos destroyed. This is not to say that Gamora, too, does not desire familial connections. She voluntarily removes herself from Thanos’s family before the events of *Vol. 1*³⁹, finding her new normal with Nebula and the rest of the Guardians. By the end of the third installment, Nebula and Gamora have reconciled their relationship, in part because neither is trying to ‘win’ against the other anymore, with both now feeling seen and valued by the other. In clinical practice, psychologists working with estranged individuals are advised not to prescribe specific outcomes—whether reconciliation or permanent separation—but rather to support the agency and emotional readiness of the estranged person⁴⁰. While reconciliation can involve open communication, boundary-setting, and therapeutic support, the process is highly individualized and often nonlinear.

Through the Guardians, we see that the structure of family is often fluid, neither static nor nuclear. This fluidity is consistent with family systems theory, which posits that families adapt over time in response to changes both within and outside of the family unit⁴¹. However, changes in structure are not limited to external shifts, but also internal. We see this play out with Gamora, for example. In *Avengers: Infinity War*⁴², Gamora is murdered by Thanos to retrieve the Soul Stone on Vormir, leaving the Guardians (and especially Quill) feeling defeated. However, another Gamora (hereafter, alt-Gamora) from a different timeline (from before she leaves Thanos and joins the Guardians) arrives through the Avengers’ time-travelling adventures. However, alt-Gamora has different memories and experiences, which means the end of her and Quill’s romance, chillier relationships with the other Guardians, but a more amicable relationship with Nebula. The differences in alt-Gamora’s background, values, and experiences result in her no longer being a part of the Guardians family. Instead, she becomes a leader of the Ravagers, the bounty hunter clan previously led by Yondu. Thus, we witness the change of family structures aligning with a change in person, as the death of Gamora and the appearance of alt-Gamora, with all her differences, drives the

Guardians' family reconstruction. This also aligns with symbolic interactionism, which emphasizes the meanings individuals assign to relationships and roles as key to understanding family identity and cohesion⁴³.

MAINTAINING FAMILY: BONDING THROUGH SHARED EXPERIENCES AND TRADITIONS

Relational work, or maintaining (family) relationships, is what transcends family beyond biological and legal connections. In scholarship, we see that the strongest indicators of healthy familial relationships include open expressiveness, a lack of rigid and structural traditionalism, willingness to address conflict, and forgiveness^{44,45}.

Through our Guardians, we see the benefits of this maintenance work. They all start off as disconnected, lonely, depressed, anxious, and angry individuals. For example, when we first meet Drax, he is vengeful and extremely angry towards Ronan (and eventually, Thanos) for killing his biological family. Or Rocket, who is depressed and angry during most of the first two GotG movies because he looks different than the others:

You just wanna laugh at me like everyone else! [...] He thinks I'm some stupid thing! He does! Well, I didn't ask to get made! I didn't ask to be torn apart, and put back together, over and over and turned into some... Some little monster⁴⁶.

Their differences are further amplified through their differences in understanding and interpretations of language, experiences, and motives; all of which leads to several verbal (and physical) fights between members of this sometimes-dysfunctional family. However, over the course of the trilogy, the Guardians bond and find joy together over several shared experiences. One of the dominant shared experiences is music. A keystone for Quill, music eventually becomes an important part of how the entire Guardians family bond together. When describing his childhood to Gamora in the first movie, Quill shares the headset of his cassette player and Gamora listens to the

music that his mother gifted him. In sharing his music and memories, Quill has shown a vulnerable side of himself to Gamora, inviting her to share in his emotional world. Her choice to not only listen but to engage demonstrates a reciprocal step toward mutual understanding, reflecting relational maintenance strategies outlined by Canary and Stafford⁴⁷, solidifying the moment as an early act of emotional maintenance. Arguably, this moment also presents maintenance of their unity, as well as a shift in their relationship. Quill sees Gamora as more than just a sexual conquest, as worthy of romantic pursuit, and Gamora (at least for a moment) seems to consider the same as they dance together to the melody of 'Fooled Around And Fell In Love'⁴⁸. Music also becomes a powerful, joy-inducing, universe-saving medium as the trilogy progresses: Quill distracts Ronan with a dance-off long enough for Drax to take the Power Stone from him, or when the Guardians (and Rocket in particular) can't start their fight with an interdimensional beast without having some tunes to listen to (with baby Groot dancing in the background). Music even ends up moving an anti-dancing Drax to dance in one of the final sequences of *Vol. 3*⁴⁹. Music goes on to symbolize tradition. Upon Peter Quill's decision to return to Earth and leave the Guardians family, Rocket carries on the tradition of playing music sourced from Quill's mixtape while traveling across space and time.

Over time, the Guardians develop norms beyond music-sharing including coded sarcasm between various characters and adoption of cultural aphorisms (even if humorously misstated). For example, in *Vol. 2*⁵⁰, Drax tells Mantis, "You are beautiful... on the inside"⁵¹ in his typically blunt delivery. This moment reflects the group's shared norm of using sarcasm and teasing as a form of affection. Similarly, in *Vol. 1*⁵², Quill repeatedly references pop culture like 'Footloose'⁵³ and 'Kevin Bacon,' which the others initially misunderstand but eventually embrace as part of their collective language, signaling growing familiarity and group cohesion, which is similar to real world findings suggesting that teasing can increase understanding and shared identity in families⁵⁴. Perhaps the most significant new norm is their shared goal to preserve their newfound family. Groot perhaps illustrates the Guardians' family unity in the simplest, yet powerful way throughout

the trilogy. We see Groot's evolution from a fully grown tree-like creature who is only understood by Rocket through intonations of only three words "I am Groot", to a family member who is understood through the expression including two new words: "We are Groot"⁵⁵, which he uses before he sacrifices himself to save his chosen family members. Instead of dying, however, we see Groot transforming from a twig into a small child-like plant, an adolescent, and back to adulthood, with the Guardians seemingly being better at understanding his intonations of 'I am Groot'. Groot's vocabulary expands once more at the end of the third film, where he proclaims "I love you guys"⁵⁶. This moment marks a significant shift—not only in his language but also in his social identity. According to social identity theory, individuals increasingly define themselves through group membership⁵⁷, and Groot's move from a self-referential 'I' to a collective, emotionally expressive statement reflects his full integration into the Guardians family unit. By speaking in a way the audience understands, Groot affirms his shared identity and emotional bond with the group—and, symbolically, with the viewers themselves.

While rewarding, the work to maintain a relationship is not always met with ease and joy. The Guardians deal with their own personal traumas—Peter's loss of his mother and derailed father, Gamora's estrangement of her non-biological sister Nebula, or Drax's murdered wife and daughter—and are often challenged with having to choose between individual desires and group welfare. Selfish moments often have serious consequences—each character has a moment where they endanger themselves, each other, or the whole universe when they let their personal anguish drive their motives. Perhaps the most pertinent example of this is Quill's controversial actions during the battle against Thanos in *Infinity War*⁵⁸. As the Guardians and their allies manage to subdue Thanos through Mantis's powers, Peter starts confronting him about Gamora's whereabouts, only to find out she was sacrificed for the Soul Stone. Overcome with grief and rage, Quill starts attacking Thanos despite Iron Man's warnings to stay focused. Quill's outbursts break Thanos free, allowing him to regain control, defeat the heroes, and ultimately carry out the Snap—erasing half of all life in the universe. For many viewers, this emotional but selfish moment marks

a pivotal moment in the MCU, as without it, the Snap probably could have been avoided.

Each Guardian is also challenged to assess how they see themselves and others, and how they themselves are seen. Mantis, Nebula, and Drax, for example, experience frustration with each other during one of their missions in *Vol. 3*⁵⁹. Mantis thinks that Drax lacks intelligence and that he is mostly self-loving; Nebula believes Mantis's empathy is a weakness and that she, along with Drax, are incompetent; and Drax thinks that Mantis is unattractive, that Nebula is a respectable warrior he is not intimidated by (as possibly the only Guardian). However, as the mission progresses, all of their beliefs are shattered: Drax, unlike Mantis and Nebula, can speak the language of the children they are rescuing; both Mantis and Nebula have strength in their respective empathetic and terse demeanors; and Drax does believe that Mantis is beautiful, albeit in her own way.

The survival of both the universe and the Guardians' family unit often not only hinges on their cooperative efforts, but also on the ability to forgive themselves and one another in the face of mistakes. Nebula and Gamora reconcile after years of violence, Drax learns to not judge others by past affiliations and to allow himself to love others, Mantis comes to advocate for her needs, Peter Quill comes to terms with his loss and hurt to embark on an intentional journey to heal, and Rocket, who evolves from a trigger-happy 'trash panda' that alienates everyone around him to a responsible and respecting raccoon, confronts his past identity issues and distrust of humans. Research suggests that forgiveness between any family dyad, whether that be a sister forgiving a sister like Gamora forgiving Nebula, or a friend forgiving a friend like Peter forgiving Rocket, results in better family communication and well-being overall⁶⁰. Through these acts of forgiveness then, the Guardians do more than save the galaxy—they heal, grow, become and remain (or maintain) a true family through it all.

CONCLUSION

The Guardians of the Galaxy, both in their own trilogy and in other MCU installments, represent a fun, yet important, evolution in how society conceptualizes, discusses, and represents family. Though each one of us is born into a family, a multitude of internal and external circumstances and choices ultimately determine our familial journey. Despite the good intentions that may have backed portraying one decided ideal of family structure—the nuclear family of wife-husband-children—this approach has been at the expense of supporting different types of families and knowing the joy and benefits of a broadened definition of family. While media have been slow to bridge this gap between the depiction of the nuclear family experienced by a select few and the varied realities that have been experienced by many more, the GotG movies move beyond traditional nuclear family representations and highlight found or chosen families as well as other unconventional familial relationships. Unlike classic portrayals of family, often based on biological and legal ties, the Guardians construct their family unit through shared experiences, mutual care, and personal growth.

This chapter examined the Guardians of the Galaxy as a case study in family representation, analyzing key themes such as loss, estrangement, and family maintenance. For instance, Peter Quill, Gamora, and Nebula navigate complex parental relationships, from Quill's longing for his absent father to Nebula and Gamora's struggle to redefine their bond outside of their abusive upbringing under Thanos. Their character arcs reflect real-world challenges of estrangement and reconciliation, demonstrating the evolving nature of familial ties. Additionally, this chapter explores family maintenance and bonding, emphasizing the relational work required to sustain emotional connections. We addressed how the Guardians develop shared traditions—most notably through music—as a means of strengthening their unity. Moments such as Quill sharing his mixtape with Gamora, or Rocket continuing the musical legacy after Quill's departure, illustrate how symbolic traditions create continuity and emotional security within chosen families.

Ultimately, the Guardians challenge the historical dominance of the nuclear family in media. Traditional portrayals of family have often excluded non-traditional structures, leading to stigmatization and erasure. However, the success of the Guardians of the Galaxy—both critically and commercially—demonstrates the widespread resonance of alternative family representations. This redefines family in popular media, (re)shapes audience perceptions of family, and illustrates that belonging transcends bloodlines. The films emphasize that family is not solely defined by genetics and law, but by shared commitment, trust, and the willingness to grow together.

THE HERO THIS CITY NEEDS, OR NOT?

MORALITY ON THE STREETS OF MARVEL'S
NETFLIX TELEVISION

MARTIN FLANAGAN, PHD AND
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In 2012, a recently assembled collective of superheroes known as the Avengers successfully saved New York from invading Chitauri forces. The stakes of this battle were high: had the Avengers been unsuccessful, the Asgardian deity Loki would have ruled Earth. By banding together and putting aside their individual differences, the Avengers managed to avoid a disaster on a cosmic scale, leading to celebrations and popular reverence—materialized most poignantly in a joyous, if factually distorted, Broadway musical commemorating the event. Yet, while the world may have reveled in the Avengers' achievement, the people who witnessed the fight first-hand—that is, those walking the streets of New York—likely remember it very differently. The aftermath of *The Avengers*¹ has been shown at various times in the MCU: examples include the post-battle clean-up by Adrian Toomes' salvaging company in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*², or Clint Barton's heroic saving of a young Kate Bishop in the opening scenes of the *Hawkeye* series³. No MCU installments, however, have arguably focused more on the everyday concerns of the people of New York than Marvel's slate of television series released on Netflix in the second half of the 2010s.

Marvel's Netflix canon started with *Daredevil*⁴ and *Jessica Jones*⁵ in

2015, expanded with *Luke Cage*⁶ and *Iron Fist*⁷ in 2016–2017, culminated in *The Defenders*⁸ in 2017, and spun off with *The Punisher*⁹ later in that year. These series show how the Battle of New York led to disbanded families, how the rubble and destruction impacted real estate prices, and how street vendors sold videotapes of the event. Headlining the shows are characters such as the blind lawyer-vigilante Matt Murdock/Daredevil, the supernaturally powerful private investigator Jessica Jones, the physically unbreakable ‘hero of Harlem’ Luke Cage, the billionaire martial artist Danny Rand/Iron Fist, and the gun-blazing antihero Frank Castle/The Punisher. In addition to fighting long series of rapists, murderers, and mobsters, these heroes also tackle elusive criminal organizations such as The Hand, or larger-than-life villains like the wealthy crime lord Wilson Fisk/Kingpin. While the canonicity of the Netflix series has long been contested, more recent MCU entries have integrated these characters into what we, for the purpose of this chapter, will call the ‘Grand MCU’, or the ‘common fare’ MCU of the films and Disney+ television series; that is, the MCU of Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and more. Fisk, for example, served as the main villain of *Hawkeye*¹⁰ and reappeared in *Echo*¹¹, a series with a similar tone as the Netflix series¹². Here, Fisk’s ex-protégé Maya Lopez returns to her ancestral Choctaw home in Oklahoma to undermine Fisk’s enduring empire. Likewise, Matt Murdock made brief appearances in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*¹³, *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*¹⁴, *Echo*¹⁵, and *Your Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man*¹⁶ before returning to the front stage of the MCU in *Daredevil: Born Again*¹⁷. While the launch of Disney’s own streaming platform in 2019 initially meant the cancellation of its superhero shows on Netflix¹⁸, we now witness the return of many of these characters to the MCU.

Marvel’s foray into streaming television on Netflix fits within broader strategies of MCU release patterns¹⁹. Broadly speaking, Marvel Studios’ expansion to Netflix allowed the studio to appeal to different audiences beyond the mainline fans of its blockbuster films²⁰: the viewers of what is called ‘Quality TV’, or the ‘high-brow’, seemingly more ‘cultured’ variant of television²¹. Before the current ubiquity of streaming services, Netflix’s audience was described as

“urbane, globalized moviegoer[s]” (p. 107)²², indicating that the service’s viewer base likely expected television projects on par with the quality of cinematic projects. By loaning out some of its ‘harder-edged’ properties—characters like Daredevil, Punisher, or Jessica Jones who suited the 1990s/2000s ‘Marvel Knights’ or ‘MAX’ comics aimed at older readerships—to Netflix, a streaming service not constrained by network TV broadcast standards, the Marvel Netflix series have more freedom to explore these more adult, morally challenging narratives and representations. In other words, Netflix allowed Marvel Studios to tell darker, grittier, and perhaps more disturbing stories, foregrounding adult (so-called ‘TV-MA’) content like sex, nudity, drugs, alcohol, and violence; all of which would be highly inappropriate for the “intergenerational” (p. 56)²³ or even child-oriented nature of most MCU projects. Indeed, the Grand MCU generally plays alcohol or nudity for laughs (e.g., Thor’s drinking problem in *Avengers: Endgame*²⁴, or his naked appearance in *Thor: Love and Thunder*²⁵), avoids most instances of sex (a scene between Sersi and Ikaris in *Eternals*²⁶ perhaps being the only exception), prohibits depictions of drugs (as illustrated by the ‘no cocaine’ rule for the R-rated film *Deadpool & Wolverine*²⁷)²⁸, and generally doesn’t include horrifying depictions of violence beyond bruises, scratches, or relatively small splashes of blood.

This implies a stark contrast between the Grand MCU and what, for the purpose of this chapter, we will call ‘Netflix+’: the set of Netflix series from *Daredevil*²⁹ to *The Punisher*³⁰ combined with the Disney+ series which follow the Marvel-Netflix tone; specifically, *Echo*³¹ and *Daredevil: Born Again*³². While the Grand MCU includes cosmic journeys to a wide range of variously exotic planets, to dead and living Celestials, and even to locations in parallel universes, Netflix+ takes place firmly on a street level, and more particularly the streets and corners of New York. However, both the potential differences and any remaining continuities between the two groups of texts merit further attention, and especially so when it comes to topics of morality. Does Netflix+’s emphasis on more adult themes and content also lead to different, perhaps more ‘adult’ frameworks of (street-level) moral ideas that propel these heroes into action? Where lies the distinction between Daredevil and Captain America, or Hulk and Jessica Jones, if there is

one to begin with? In what follows, we first describe what exactly the street level of Netflix+ entails, before distinguishing various staples of morality in these shows, and focusing on two in particular: the crossing of moral lines, and heroes questioning whether they are even heroes at all.

MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY AND SCOPE OF THE CHAPTER

Guiding this analysis is the psychological framework of the Moral Foundations Theory or MFT³³, which argues that people are born with particular intuitions—so-called ‘foundations’—that guide moral decision-making processes. There are five sets of moral foundations: (1) care and harm, or being able to relate to the pain of others by following virtues of kindness, gentleness, nurturance, compassion, and empathy; (2) fairness and reciprocity, or attaching importance to notions of justice, reciprocal altruism, honesty, and equity; (3) in-group and loyalty, or emphasizing community bonding, working together, and self-sacrificing to benefit a group; (4) authority and respect, or respecting hierarchy, leadership, authority figures, and traditions; and (5) purity and sanctity, or striving for an elevated, noble, disciplined, and often spiritual way of living. Other important MFT-related terms are *moral reasoning*³⁴ and *moral disengagement*³⁵; respectively, the idea that people make more rational decisions when they know or reason more about a particular situation³⁶ (compared to the quick, emotional ‘gut’ reactions based on people’s moral foundations), and the arguments that people make to excuse themselves for behaving in morally questionable ways, or to transgress societal conventions of what is moral and what isn’t. While we will not perform an in-depth analysis of, for example, each instance of ‘care and harm’ in *Luke Cage*³⁷, this terminology acts as a set of guiding principles that inform our discussion. In what follows, we focus specifically on the tropes of crossing moral lines and hero morality.

In total, Netflix+ consists of around 200 hours of television. While we attempt to paint the broad strokes of morality in Netflix+ (compared to the Grand MCU), some management of scope is required here. In this chapter, we include *Daredevil*³⁸ (and *Daredevil: Born*

*Again*³⁹), *Jessica Jones*⁴⁰, *Luke Cage*⁴¹, *The Defenders*⁴², and *Echo*⁴³, meaning that we unfortunately exclude *Iron Fist*⁴⁴ and *The Punisher*⁴⁵. Since Danny's story frequently trades in the more street-level themes of New York for the mystical corners of K'un-Lun or the comparatively much more supernatural exploits of *The Hand*, *Iron Fist*⁴⁶ acts as somewhat of an outlier to Netflix+. *Punisher*, by contrast, connects well to the street-level concepts of morality found in other series, but his much more antiheroic trajectory puts him at odds with the likes of *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage*: in *Daredevil: Born Again* (S1 E4)⁴⁷, Castle even snorts at the idea of "being of service" and helping people. Additionally, Castle is the only headlining Netflix+ character who doesn't appear in the crossover series *The Defenders*⁴⁸, further differentiating him from the main group. However, we do reference both *Iron Fist* and the *Punisher* whenever they appear in the shows that we do include.

STREET-LEVEL MARVEL

In order to fully unpack what the street level of Netflix+ signifies, we need to expand on the crucial role of the concept of 'the city' in these series. *Jessica Jones*, *Daredevil*, *Luke Cage*, and—at least in her New York days—*Maya Lopez* exist amidst a teeming population where individuality can be lost, where ordinary people are easily overlooked, and where the needs of late capitalism dwarf those of law-abiding citizens who just want to be part of a supportive community. The depiction of this setting is highly notable, and stands apart from how the city is shown in other corners of the MCU. For example, although *Spider-Man* in the comics could certainly be called 'of the street level', his filmic treatment has often gone in a different direction⁴⁹: despite his home base in Queens and his repeated claims of being a 'friendly neighborhood' superhero, *Spider-Man* is frequently off fighting less street-level supervillains such as *Mysterio* (who, at least initially, is believed to be a multiversal intruder) or a five-person iteration of the *Sinister Six* (actual multiversal intruders). In *Avengers: Infinity War*⁵⁰, *Spider-Man* even travels to space, distancing him as far from the streets of New York as possible without multiversal travel. *Doctor Strange*, too, technically defends New York's Greenwich Village area,

where the Sanctum Sanctorum is based, but his hero make-up cannot be said to tie him to those streets. True street-level heroes derive purpose from the idea of restoring and caring for a safe and free city, or a particular portion of it (like Daredevil and Luke, who are tied more strongly to Hell's Kitchen and Harlem, respectively). Their city ideal is not a place which progress or capitalism will render cosmetically safe, but one where ordinary people are essentially able to pursue their way of lawful living, even if imperfections and eccentricities remain. Even Maya, exiled from New York at the start of *Echo*⁵¹, recreates the practice of defending a community in Oklahoma, and derives power from her connection with an overlooked people who represent the spirit of her hometown and wider Choctaw community, crystallized in the persons of her mother and the three metaphysically gifted ancestors who came before her. Here, moral foundations of care and loyalty intertwine: by putting the lives of their respective communities and the people in them before their own—showing off the compassion, kindness, and empathy towards innocent civilians that characterize the moral foundation of care⁵²—they portray a distinct level of loyalty towards their local community, and their city by extension. They sacrifice themselves time and again for their communities⁵³, following their innate moral foundations rather than a more rational moral reasoning. Research supports this claim, as intuitive reactions based on moral foundations, rather than moral reasoning, tend to be the key drivers of people's moral decision-making⁵⁴.

To be 'of the streets' in Netflix+ is not just to serve one's own community—which we do occasionally see with Spider-Man, or with others like Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel—but also to be inextricably connected to both the problems and potentials of ordinary life. Daredevil's father was a beloved boxer who died defying the local organized crime syndicate. Luke's attachment to Harlem is evident by his connection to a barbershop owned by local paternal figure Pop, a neutral space calming an otherwise turbulent community. To a degree, connections between heroes and those they defend resonate across the entire MCU—even with Spider-Man and Doctor Strange—but the Netflix+ heroes are indelibly associated with the fact that not just *the* city, but *their* city is run without justice, and how this affects regular

people. This connection to the city signals not only the heroes' care for and loyalty towards the communities they vow to protect, it's also a prime example of the heroes' emphasis on the moral foundations of fairness and reciprocity, or attaching importance to notions of justice, honesty, and equity⁵⁵ in their actions. Matt Murdock not only upholds (his version of) justice as the masked hero Daredevil, he also eschews amoral high-paying firms for social cases as a lawyer by daytime. Due to his dual identity, his interpretation of fairness and justice often balances a sense of retributive justice (i.e., providing justice through often violent and harmful punishment)⁵⁶ and procedural justice (i.e., believing in fair trials and using the law to reach justice)⁵⁷. Jessica Jones also portrays a sense of fairness, as she rejects a PR-orchestrated superhero life to work as a private investigator and intervene in domestic justice. This is evident, for example, in her unwavering support of Hope Shlottman who, like Jessica, has been manipulated and raped by the mind-controlling abuser Kilgrave. Even supporting characters like Franklin 'Foggy' Nelson, Karen Page, Claire Temple, Misty Knight, and Trish Walker are characters who, in their own ways, attempt to uphold justice and the fair treatment of innocent civilians: from crusading journalism to *pro bono* law, nursing, police work, or fostering public awareness of social issues.

The Netflix+ version of 'the streets', and New York by extension, thus differs from its conceptualization in the Grand MCU. This contrast is equally apparent in the way Netflix+ references, or operates in dialogue with, broader MCU characters or events. Consider, for example, the way in which the Battle of New York is described in the following scene from *Jessica Jones* (S1 E4)⁵⁸:

Audrey Eastman: You saved the city. That's what the newspapers said. You were "heroes".

Jessica Jones: Not me.

Audrey Eastman: "The city was saved". But I was there. I saw what really happened. I saw my mother crushed to death under a building that you people destroyed.

Jessica Jones: In the incident?

Audrey Eastman: I was trying to pull my mother out from the rubble,

watching her bleed to death, while all around me, you people were raining down hell.

Jessica Jones: So go after the big green guy or the flag waver, I wasn't even there!

The following lines from *Luke Cage* (S1 E1)⁵⁹, spoken by the aforementioned street vendor D.W. Griffith, are in a similar vein:

Hey, yo, my man, my man. All HD. Got it right here. Blu-ray, too, 'cause I'm nice like that. Tony Stark, the big blonde dude with the hammer, the old dude with the shield, the green monster, and I don't mean Fenway. You can't get better raw footage of the incident anywhere else than right here.

Throughout the Netflix+ series, the events of *The Avengers*⁶⁰ are only ever described as 'the incident', and names like 'Loki', 'Chitauri', or 'Infinity Stone' are consistently avoided. The same holds for the Avengers themselves, who are not described as 'the Hulk', but as 'the big green guy' or 'the green monster'; not as 'Captain America' but as 'the flag waver' or 'the old dude with the shield', and more⁶¹. D.W.'s explicit naming of Tony Stark—but not Iron Man—is the exception that proves the rule.

These differences are equally noticeable in Netflix+'s visual and cinematographic depiction of New York and its inhabitants. The infamous 'hallway scene' of *Daredevil* (S1 E2)⁶², where the titular hero busts into a building to save a kidnapped child from Russian mobsters, indicated the particular stylistic identity of these series early on: throughout the scene, the camera never cuts, instead following Daredevil in one long take, lasting several minutes where he brutally fights multiple adversaries in a small corridor. Similar shots have returned in subsequent series, but are generally avoided by other MCU installments, except for truly special moments like the final battle scenes of *The Avengers*⁶³ and *Avengers: Endgame*⁶⁴ or, more rarely, for more 'common' battles, such as the fight in the South Korean casino in *Black Panther*⁶⁵. Long takes are markedly different from the frequently more quick-paced editing in the MCU and can communicate feelings of

wonder or spectacle to the audience⁶⁶: in this case, audiences may have wondered at how starkly the Netflix+ series stand in opposition with the Grand MCU. Additional visual strategies that differentiate the series from other MCU projects include brief, vignette-like impressions⁶⁷ of the city in the series' opening credits or between scenes in *The Defenders*⁶⁸; more frequent use of night scenes and low-key lighting; a large emphasis on the 'mundane' or in some cases even 'ugly' aspects of New York (e.g., dumpsters, fences, garbage cans, pipes, warehouses) over, say, Grand Central Terminal (*The Avengers*⁶⁹) or Avengers Tower (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*⁷⁰, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*⁷¹, *Thunderbolts*^{*72}); and specific iconographies not commonly included in the films, such as a fully tilted shot at 90° depicting Daredevil walking away from a fight in *The Defenders* (S1 E2)⁷³, foregrounding the stylistics of comic books⁷⁴.

The stylistic characteristics and particular identity of Netflix+ also extend to the portrayal of characters and the narrative situations they feature in. In order to enhance the 'realism' of Quality TV projects, media scholar Andrew Lynch notes that the contrast between most MCU entries and the street-level series involves a degree of "cloaking", or withdrawing certain 'comic booky' visual icons like colorful costumes, thus sacrificing "superhero generic realism" (p. 118–120)⁷⁵. This means that original superhero costumes from the comics are frequently avoided in the Netflix+ series in favor of more realistic outfits (such as Luke's t-shirt and hoodie), ridiculed within the narrative (e.g., Trish saying "hell no" to the Hellcat outfit in *Jessica Jones*, S3 E2⁷⁶), or used only in liminal instances (e.g., the traditional Iron Fist outfit, visible only in flashbacks). This quest for realism can also be observed in narrative moments. The intensity of courtroom scenes, for instance, varies heavily between *Daredevil*⁷⁷ and *She-Hulk*⁷⁸: both series foreground lawyer characters, but while the former wrestles with complex procedures, delivers rousing speeches, and fights for the well-being of oppressed communities, the latter incongruously caricatures the legal process. These stylistic idiosyncrasies all highlight how much Netflix+ differs from the rest of the MCU. In what follows, we will observe similar contrasts between Netflix+ and Grand MCU in terms of the representation of morality.

THE MARVEL MORALISTIC UNIVERSE?

If there is such a thing as a shared morality or ‘moral universe’ in Netflix+, it is a dark, hesitant, and (for many characters) a ruthlessly pragmatic one. It is, nonetheless, a stable shared morality, and when we survey the shows for universal moral problematics, a number of candidates emerge. At least eight staples of moral concerns or tropes can be identified across the shows, and the lead characters’ values and behaviors swirl around these. These include (1) the crossing of moral lines, (2) the sins of the father (either a biological parent, or a parental figure), and the child paying for them, (3) feelings of guilt, (4) questioning what a hero is, (5) the feeling of being the ‘hero this city needs’, (6) the presence of corruption as an unchanging cycle, (7) the opponent who runs a criminal or economic empire, and (8) redemption and moving forward. Each show and character configures these staples in their own individual ways, but they can be seen as representative of the wider Netflix+ group. For instance, Maya and Jessica both work ‘in the shadows’ but they do not see themselves as the ‘hero their city needs’—or, for that matter, as a hero at all—with the intensity that others do, such as Daredevil and Luke. Working in the shadows keeps Maya and Jessica away from civic politics, while Luke cannot avoid it.

Interestingly, these categories often apply to both the titular heroes and their feared opponents. Like Daredevil, Fisk also sees himself as responsible for civic salvation, leading him to contemplate a mayoral candidacy in *Echo* (S1 E5)⁷⁹ before being elected as the mayor of New York in *Daredevil: Born Again*⁸⁰. While parallels between heroes and villains are not new ground for superhero fiction, street-level shows emphasize that what the heroes strive to prevent cannot be easily untangled from what the villains strive to achieve. In *Jessica Jones*’s second season⁸¹, Jessica’s mother Alisa’s goal of abandoning her past life of violence to become a protecting hero in concert with her daughter cannot be realized because of society’s raw feelings towards superhuman beings—a sentiment that the existence of superheroes like Jessica herself has created. Villain Mariah Dillard from *Luke Cage*⁸² is utterly corrupt, but she wants a prosperous Harlem where Black politics and business can safeguard a controlled peace. In many cases, the

heroes and villains essentially want the same—a safe Hell’s Kitchen, a thriving Harlem—but where they diverge is in how they achieve this goal.

Since we do not have the space to cover each staple in detail, we will focus on perhaps the two most salient ones: crossing moral lines, and questioning what a hero is.

CROSSING MORAL LINES

Perhaps the key moral dilemma that torments this ensemble of characters concerns how far they will go to act in the cause of right and defend the vulnerable; or, in terms of MFT, uphold moral values of fairness and care⁸³, respectively. A definitive principle for many superheroes inside and outside the MCU is ‘no (avoidable) killing’. For example, T’Challa spares Zemo in *Captain America: Civil War*⁸⁴, and Spider-Man is stopped from vengefully killing the Green Goblin by a multiversal variant of himself in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*⁸⁵. After being defeated by the hero, the fate of MCU villains is frequently left in the dark (e.g., Ultron, Kaecilius, Kang the Conqueror), but when they do die, it is frequently as a consequence of their own doing (e.g., Mysterio, Scarlet Witch, Xu Wenwu), or as a measure to prevent them from causing even greater harm (e.g., Thanos)—which already presents moral quandaries. The idea of a ‘line’ over which, once crossed, characters cannot recover their self-control and their original morality, relates to the notion of purity and sanctity as a moral foundation. Since purity and sanctity are moral values connected to striving for a noble, disciplined, and oftentimes religious way of living⁸⁶, crossing a moral line can undermine the heroes’ willingness to live a pure life. Crossing moral lines manifests in Netflix+ in various ways. Characters can converse about it directly or in voiceover (as is often the case with Jessica Jones, who relates her thoughts to the audience), and it frequently informs how battles on the all-too-human streets are constrained. The series frequently flag that an obvious ‘winning’ outcome in street battles is unattainable, because innocent people’s lives are *always* caught up with such actions. This ‘line’, however, is far from stable or eternally consistent: as Jessica states, “The line keeps

moving. And I keep stepping over it" (*Jessica Jones*, S2 E6⁸⁷). For another interesting example concerning the crossing of moral lines, we can point to a dialogue between a chained-up Daredevil and his captor, Frank Castle, from *Daredevil* (S2 E3)⁸⁸:

Punisher: Everything you do out there in the streets, Red, it doesn't work. Did you know that?

Daredevil: Oh, and what you're doing is better?

Punisher: What I do, I just do. It's out of necessity.

Daredevil: Come on. [...] I don't do this to hurt people. [...] I don't kill anyone.

Punisher: Is that why you think you're better than me? Is that why you think you're a big hero?

Daredevil: It doesn't matter what I think or what I am. People don't have to die.

Punisher: Come on, Red. You believe that?

Daredevil: I believe it's not my call, and it ain't yours either.

Punisher: [...] You know what I think of you, hero? I think you're a half-measure. I think you're a man who can't finish the job. I think that you're a coward. [...] I think that the people I kill need killing, that's what I think. [...]

Daredevil: Come on, you run around this city like it's your damn shooting gallery.

Punisher: Yeah, what do you do? [...] You act like it's a playground. You beat up the bullies with your fists. You throw 'em in jail, everybody calls you a hero, right? And then a month, a week, a day later, they're back on the streets doing the same goddamn thing. [...] I think that this world, it needs men that are willing to make the hard call. I think you and me are the same! [...] Only I do the one thing that you can't. You hit 'em, and they get back up. I hit 'em, and they stay down.

This heated dialogue between Murdock and Castle highlights the moral line of killing people: the former vows never to cross it, the latter has no issues with doing so. In fact, Castle doubts whether not crossing the line—and thus, upholding their moral foundation of care (the same as not harming)—makes someone like Daredevil a hero, as he believes

that, by stopping the bad guys for good, *he's* the hero. This is a typical example of moral disengagement, where Castle distances himself from his transgressions to cope with his feelings of guilt⁸⁹. He uses an advantageous comparison⁹⁰, suggesting that his own immoral act of killing is less harmful than the suffering his victims cause to innocent people. This, too, relates to the moral foundation of care and harm⁹¹: when heroes care for innocent people by harming bad guys, do they cross a moral line? And if heroes don't harm the bad guys, do they also harm the innocent people by not doing enough, as Castle already mentioned? This seemingly eternal conundrum exemplifies how both care and harm are key to a hero's morality, something which affects their decision-making.

Exactly how far the heroes are willing to go to combat their antagonists thus depends on both their individual characterization—by ultimately killing Kilgrave, Jessica is willing to go further than Daredevil—or on the villain's manipulation of them. Fisk's provocations, for instance, are capable of drawing others to approach uncrossable lines and jeopardize any previous purity; not only his obvious foes, Daredevil and Maya, but also secondary characters like Ellison, editor of the *New York Bulletin* in *Daredevil*⁹². Ellison entertains a financial contribution by Fisk and is accused by his own staff of crossing the line of journalistic integrity. Perhaps surprisingly, Fisk also has his own lines around which his moral values are organized, crossing them when he feels a transgression has been made against him. This is most clearly seen in his killing of news reporter Ben Urich, which drives Fisk's moral disengagement and functions as his vengeance for Urich targeting Fisk's mother in his investigation. In doing so, Fisk's line is different from Daredevil's, who repeatedly struggles with either crossing the line and not coming back, or staying on the safe side but being unable to prevent further harm. This is referenced clearly in a scene between him and his Catholic confidante, Father Lantom, from *Daredevil* (S1 E9)⁹³:

Daredevil: I know my soul is damned if I take his life. But if I stand idle, if I... if I let him consume this city, all the people that will suffer and die...

Lantom: There is a wide gulf between inaction and murder, Matthew. Another man's evil does not make you good. Men have used the atrocities of their enemies to justify their own throughout history. So the question you have to ask yourself is: are you struggling with the fact that you don't want to kill this man but have to? Or that you don't have to kill him but want to?

Here, Lantom—like *Luke Cage's*⁹⁴ Pop—takes the place of a wise advisor, someone who understands the tough moral dynamics of the streets, but lacks hero powers to rewrite them. The exchange represents a crux of moral debate in the shows, and especially highlights Daredevil's adherence to the moral foundation of purity. Due to his catholic faith, he keeps believing in redemption and second chances for the bad guys he encounters, something that prevents him from crossing that 'no killing' moral line. In the end, he wants to keep his sanctity and his spirituality, even when he's severely harming other (bad) people. Daredevil's conversations with Father Lantom also indicate how secondary characters function within the protagonist's moral thinking and decision-making: here, Lantom triggers Daredevil's moral reasoning—that is, deliberate, rational decision-making, as opposed to immediate gut reactions⁹⁵—instead of following his emotional gut reaction of lethally harming Fisk and serving him a sense of retributive justice⁹⁶ in order to stop him. In this sense, Lantom and similar characters are sometimes necessary to help the hero locate their personal line.

By all means, the existence of such moral lines is not exclusive to the Netflix+ characters—the Grand MCU also showcases heroes who have transcended the murkiest of past as assassins and killers. Clint Barton briefly transitions into Ronin between *Infinity War*⁹⁷ and *Endgame*⁹⁸, Gamora's past is full of murder and torture, and Bucky has routinely caused harm while brainwashed as the Winter Soldier. Lantom-like figures also exist in similar moral mentors like Ho Yinsen in *Iron Man*⁹⁹, or Erskine in *Captain America: The First Avenger*¹⁰⁰. This would suggest that, intended audience ages and profiles notwithstanding, Marvel's trademark superhero characterizations remain relatively consistent between film and television. Differences obviously persist, but charac-

ter, motive, and morality thus stretch at least partially from the very center of Grand MCU to the darker corners of Netflix+. Nevertheless, the televisual format and more mature audiences of Netflix+ mean that such dilemmas can be explored in further depth and with particular dramatic intensity, more so than is the case in a two-hour film. The way these narratives are told in multiple hour-long episodes affords new opportunities for exploring morality, and for developing deeper moral views that are generally unavailable to feature films, even for characters like Black Widow who log multiple appearances over a decade of storytelling. As a consequence, it is perhaps not surprising that we only see some of the aforementioned Grand MCU characters come to grips with their actions in a televisual format, as is the case for Barton in *Hawkeye*¹⁰¹, or Bucky in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*¹⁰².

AM I A HERO?

Another moral conundrum shared by the Netflix+ heroes concerns their potential 'hero' identity, and especially the contingency or transience of this title: are heroes born as heroes? Do they gradually take up a heroic mantle as the result of selfless, heroic actions? Can the hero title be lost when one crosses 'the line'? Superheroes, by nature, have a prosocial mission to protect others from harm, especially those they don't directly relate to, and stop those that cause harm to others^{103,104}. In other words, heroes should uphold the moral foundation of care by definition. On the street level, however, moral values of care, honor or victory are never framed as even achievable for the heroes in a completely pure or clean way. The closest we come to this idea is during the first meeting between Luke and Danny, which addresses Danny's wealth and general privilege. Luke argues that their hero careers are different, because if Danny wanted to spend the fortune he inherited, he could "change the world without getting anybody hurt" (*The Defenders*, S1 E3¹⁰⁵). Theoretically, Danny *could* make impactful and meaningful change without crossing any moral lines. However, he believes that that's not enough to stop The Hand, so he approaches his hero actions in a different and literally more hands-on way. For many

of the heroes, however, this means a sacrifice of their respective purity and sanctity.

The Netflix+ series leave viewers in no doubt that heroes stand in a muddled landscape. References to the shifting and contingent moral decision-making of those involved in battle appear, for example, in *The Defenders*¹⁰⁶, when villain Alexandra states that war “only works if both sides believe they’re the good guys” (S1 E6). By this logic, we could say that when someone does not fully believe that they are “a good guy”—which is often the case in Netflix+—they could potentially be capable of actions that are even darker, morally speaking. For instance, in *Luke Cage’s*¹⁰⁷ second season, Luke asks Mariah and Bushmaster to end their gang feud because of its considerable collateral damage. He even admits that watching them kill each other would not displease him; but, self-identifying as the story’s hero, he notes that he is bound to keep intervening. ‘Winning’ for Luke means that the people of Harlem (or Bushmaster’s Brooklyn) are safe, but Mariah and Bushmaster need not remain alive if this is ensured. Their deaths would even facilitate the street-level safety Luke is yearning for, but his hero status, and the moral lines that come with it, prevent him from outright winning. This is followed up in the season’s ultimate outcome, when Luke comes to an understanding that he must rule Harlem to protect it, almost like a sheriff or king. Once more, victory means sacrifice or service, which in Cage’s situation implies he decides to act on his will to care for the people of Harlem rather than retaining his noble and pure goal of being a (super)hero—effectively placing his moral values of care and loyalty over his purity. As such, Cage is undoubtedly “altering and being altered by the community he commits to protecting” (p. 46)¹⁰⁸. This example underlines that, although there are certainly consistencies to the range of moral and ethical accountability across the MCU as a whole, the Netflix+ group tends to utilize more pragmatic—and morally gray—definitions of victory and peace than the Grand MCU. Unlike Steve Rogers, the Defenders are highly unlikely to ever be able to lift Mjölfnir, as they are too conflicted and morally ambiguous to meet the enchanted hammer’s criterion of ‘worthiness’.

Here, too, it must be said that protagonists’ doubts around their

hero status do not necessarily offer anything particularly new to superhero fiction, or even the larger MCU. Such self-reflexivity is also something we see in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*¹⁰⁹ and *Captain America: Brave New World*¹¹⁰, where Sam Wilson struggles with the legacy of the Captain America title (which relates to moral foundations of loyalty—Sam’s loyalty to his friend, Steve Rogers—and authority, as carrying the shield comes with prestige and leadership¹¹¹, but also with severe responsibilities and prying eyes). The same holds for Shuri in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*¹¹², who initially refuses her mother’s pleas to research new ways of creating a synthetic heart-shaped herb to establish a new Black Panther, based on both her loyalty towards her dead brother’s memory and notions of authority and sanctity. Self-reflexivity grants these characters humility, humanity, or a character weakness with which audiences could potentially identify. Nevertheless, the Netflix+ characters’ self-doubt goes well beyond mere humility, as we see all of the leads struggle both to define what a hero is in their particular context, and how to live up to any such ideals. Throughout her first season, Jessica struggles with the shame of having killed Luke’s wife, Reva, while under the influence of Kilgrave. This, Jessica believes, means that she’ll never be able to really live up to heroic ideas held by others in her immediate surroundings. This is also illustrated clearly in *The Defenders*¹¹³, whose first episode is aptly titled ‘The H-Word’, indicating a sense of discomfort with—or even censorship of—the hero ideal. Their doubts, ultimately, do not preclude these characters from performing highly heroic tasks: the best example of this, perhaps, is Daredevil’s self-sacrifice at the end of *The Defenders*¹¹⁴, on par with those of Tony Stark, who performs similarly selfless acts in both *The Avengers*¹¹⁵ and *Endgame*¹¹⁶. In MFT terms, both characters want to protect innocent civilians and act according to their innate gut morality, but the difference between them lies in how they conceptualize their actions, or how they consider themselves after performing them. While Tony nobly describes his sacrifice in *Endgame* as part of “the hero gig”¹¹⁷, Daredevil views himself more pessimistically not as a savior, but as a devil who’s likely well beyond redemption. The contrast between these two sentiments reflects the difference in setting between the

cosmic Grand MCU on the one hand, and the street-level environments of Netflix+ on the other.

This conflicted, complex, and perhaps contradictory conceptualization of heroism can equally be connected to Netflix+'s origins in Quality TV, in addition to the series' audiovisual stylistics and cloaking noted above. Different from the perhaps more traditional, quintessential or conventional heroes of the Grand MCU, the Quality TV underpinnings of Netflix+ lead to more "realistic execution, controversial subjects, and ambiguous characters" as well as "a signature style composed of high production values, distinctive visual style, and techniques fostering reflexivity [...] [ultimately delivering a] cognitively and affectively challenging entertainment experience with added symbolic value" (p. 101)¹¹⁸. This means the protagonists are forced to face moral challenges beyond the frequently more clear-cut light vs. dark morality of ordinary network shows or the Grand MCU, as well as open endings where narrative conclusions are transcended by wider socio-political points or only partial solutions. Even the most vigorous or 'adult' Disney+ series to date, such as *Echo*¹¹⁹ or, arguably, *Moon Knight*¹²⁰, have not exemplified these more complicated themes.

CONCLUSION

The journeys and exploits of Matt Murdock, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, Danny Rand, and Frank Castle were initially pitched as a means to diversify Marvel's roster and audience demographics. They were characterized by highly adult themes and content, particularly graphic audiovisual representations of violence, and a more complex approach to heroic characterization, on par with characteristics from the Quality TV labels for which Netflix was known during the rise of streaming services in the 2010s. In this chapter, we explored how the jump to Netflix impacted the morality of its Marvel characters, through Moral Foundations Theory, and in particular the values of care towards others, loyalty to the local community, fairness and justice, and how crossing moral lines can corrupt the heroes' purity. We have noted Netflix+'s engagement with a raw 'street' morality that is found across and unites its individual shows. Yet, what emerges when we survey

these series is that stylistic or graphical specificities aside, the distinction between street-level heroics and those associated with the fantastical, multiversal adventures in the mainline fare of the MCU is not necessarily a sharp one. While the register used to depict the heroes' struggles with morality is by all means intense and sometimes unflinching, the shows continue to maintain thematic continuity and the audience benefits of being connected with the larger transmedial MCU network. Often, what haunts or concerns Netflix+ characters—for example, being hunted by family (e.g., Maya Lopez, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage)—is also true of other MCU characters, such as Gamora, Shang-Chi, or Thor, all of whom are similarly forced to square up against familial figures. What separates the Netflix+ characters from the Grand MCU, then, is not a strict opposition, but a matter of degree. On a fundamental level, the superheroic journeys and moral foundations between Netflix+ and Grand MCU characters are broadly the same, but the lengths to which these heroes are willing to go, the moral lines which they draw and/or cross, as well as their inner turmoils and troubles vary, predominantly as a consequence of their different production context, their aspired audience, and their particular setting. As these characters are now slowly starting to return to the MCU, or inspiring new ventures with similar tonalities and styles, the way might be open for comparable explorations of morality in the future—whether on the streets of New York or across the grand canvas of the multiverse.

ETERNAL DILEMMAS

EXPLORING IDENTITY, AGENCY, AND
QUEER NARRATIVES IN MARVEL'S
ETERNALS

CARLOS RAMÍREZ-MORENO, PHD

In Marvel's expansive universe, the Eternals stand apart: an ancient race of immortal beings sent to Earth by the Celestials (basically, the MCU's oldest race and creators of the universe) to guide and protect humanity from the monstrous Deviants, the Celestials' first and failed attempt to control Earth's biosphere. Created by Jack Kirby in 1976, these god-like figures have existed in the shadows for millennia, influencing civilizations yet refraining from direct interference in human conflicts. Chloé Zhao's *Eternals*¹ brings these enigmatic characters to the forefront, balancing cosmic mythology with deeply personal struggles of identity, agency, and belonging. The choice of Oscar-winning director Zhao, a self-confessed fan of the MCU², ensured the necessary balance between intimacy and epic tone needed to tell a story that goes back thousands of years in Marvel's chronology and proposes the creation of a new band of superheroes. The film follows the ten Eternals sent to Earth around 5000 BCE—Ajak, Sersi, Ikaris, Thena, Gilgamesh, Kingo, Sprite, Phastos, Makkari, and Druig—as they reunite to face a resurgence of the Deviants, only to uncover unsettling truths about their creators (the Celestials), their mission, and the fate of the planet they have called home for centuries. As the story unfolds, *Eternals*³ moves beyond the familiar structures of the MCU, shifting its

focus from high-energy spectacle to an introspective exploration of its heroes' emotional and philosophical dilemmas. This thematic depth extends to the film's approach to relationships and representation. Phastos, the first openly gay superhero in the MCU, and the inclusion of the franchise's first intimate love scene mark significant steps toward diversifying the narratives within superhero cinema. Moreover, Zhao's naturalistic aesthetic and reliance on real-world locations imbue *Eternals*⁴ with a sense of grandeur and authenticity rarely seen in the genre, enhancing its themes of timelessness and existential purpose.

While the film's unconventional tone and ambitious scope diverged from audience expectations, *Eternals*⁵ stands as a bold attempt to redefine what a Marvel story can be. By centering its narrative on identity and moral complexity rather than fast-paced action, it challenges the conventions of superhero storytelling, offering a unique meditation on duty, love, and the meaning of eternity.

This chapter explores how *Eternals*⁶ engages with identity formation through the lens of queer discourse, focusing on the tension between determinism (identity imposed by external factors like culture or biology, or having little to no autonomy) and voluntarism (identity formed through personal agency and individual autonomy) to assess how *Eternals*⁷ constructs its characters' existential dilemmas. Drawing from cultural theory and sociology (particularly the works of Stuart Hall⁸, Terry Eagleton⁹, and Daniel Ortiz¹⁰), it examines how identity is negotiated within systems of power and representation, emphasizing its dynamic and often contested nature. As such, the film reconfigures traditional superhero narratives to engage with themes of self-definition, moral responsibility, and belonging. By situating *Eternals*¹¹ within broader discussions on representation in media, the chapter argues that the film's engagement with identity also aligns with queer discourse, challenging fixed categorizations and embracing fluidity as a central theme.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT IDENTITY?

Identity arises from the way we tell stories about ourselves, which is why it is always constituted within the limits of discourse and representation, hence its tense relationship with the question of power and the media. Identification, then, is constructed on the basis of the recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group or with an ideal. Freud called it “the first expression of an emotional bond with another person” (p. 137)¹². The result of this process, identity, is an ever-changing state and dependent on others, for it is constructed through both what unites and what differentiates us.

Over the last two decades, identity has transcended academic literature and conquered social and political discourse. Any debate about representation in the media today seems to revolve around a word—culture—that has been as exploited as it has been little understood. If we read Stuart Hall, one of the great cultural theorists and sociologists of the last century, he will tell us that identity is that ‘meeting point’ between, on the one hand, the discourses that question us and, on the other, the processes that construct us as persons¹³. The search for an identity largely determines our experience as human beings. Defining ourselves before and among others is a life process that is not always pleasant, fraught with uncertainties, fears, and disappointments, often taking place in response to a threat, real or illusory. In a world so lacking in certainties, the process of identification is rarely complete. Identities constantly overlap and question each other, increasing the tension between the self and the world.

If we are to immerse ourselves in the moral debate raised by *Eternals*¹⁴, it is pertinent to establish a difference between two possible ways of categorizing any identity process: according to its *cause* and according to its *nature*. The *cause* (or *etiology*, as Ortiz calls it¹⁵) of an identity means asking about the origin of that category. The first cause, *determinism*, views identity as something imposed by external factors, such as biology (cf. nature), culture, or societal norms (cf. nurture), leaving little to no room for individual choice. On the other hand, *voluntarism* sees identity as a result of personal agency, emphasizing

individual autonomy in shaping and defining one's own identity. Next to these two concepts, it is important not to mix these with two other easily confused identity perspectives: essentialism and constructivism, which point not to the cause but to the *nature* or the intrinsic characteristics of identity. While determinism and voluntarism ask how one acquires a given identity, these two concepts concern how a given identity acquires its meaning. *Essentialism* is the view that certain identities are fixed and unchanging across time and space. *Constructivism* argue that identities are *always* socially constructed, meaning that identities are not inherent, but shaped by social, historical, and cultural forces.

These identity uncertainties are faced by the Eternals, ten cosmic entities of human appearance and synthetic nature deposited on Earth around 5000 BCE. Throughout their historical journey guarding the lives of Earthlings, they question their place in the world and their role in the evolution of humanity. In this chapter we will see how *Eternals*¹⁶ portrays the inner search for an identity, and how this search is aligned with the queer discourse that permeates the film.

DETERMINISM VS. VOLUNTARISM

The tension between determinism and voluntarism is embodied in the Eternals' struggle to reconcile their programmed purpose by the Celestials with their capacity for moral agency. The Prime Celestial Arishem's design assumes a deterministic framework, where identity is imposed externally. Each Eternal is created for a specific function (Phastos' technology-focused powers serve to slowly feed humanity's technological advancement throughout the ages, for example), their memories are erased after each mission, and their actions are dictated by an overarching cosmic plan. For instance, when Sersi first explains the purpose of the Eternals to her boyfriend Dane Whitman, she states with conviction that their imposed mission is to protect humans from the Deviants, an invading alien species. Their only condition during the last seven thousand years has been not to interfere in the armed conflicts of Earthlings, including the Avengers' fight against Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*¹⁷, as such interventions would have limited the

evolutionary power of the human species. Five hundred years after having eliminated the last Deviant, the Eternals wait scattered around the planet to be sent back to their home, the planet Olympia.

Unwavering faith in this determined purpose is compromised when Arishem reveals the true nature of the Eternals to Sersi:

I created the Deviants, Sersi, for the same purpose I created you. [...] But there was a flaw in their design. They evolved. Became predators themselves. And I lost control of them. I built and programmed you, the Eternals, to be synthetic beings and incapable of evolution, to correct my mistake¹⁸.

In a revealing sequence midway through the film, Sersi contemplates the true home world of the Eternals, the World Forge, where thousands of synthetic warriors wait to be (re)programmed to set out to conquer new host worlds. These planets are chosen by Arishem because of their favorable conditions for intelligent life to host the birth of new Celestials every few billion years. The cost is high: the lives of the planet's billions of inhabitants. An insignificant price from a Celestial's point of view, but one that places the Eternals at a moral crossroads due to their intimate relationship with the inhabitants of each planet.

Immediately after this truth is revealed to her, Sersi is convinced that the 'Emergence'—the birth of a new Celestial, Tiamut, whose creation would destroy Earth—must be stopped; showing a first clear shift in how Sersi's (and some of her fellow Eternals') deterministic identity becomes less central, giving way to an identity grounded in voluntarism. The reason why Arishem has no problem explaining everything to Sersi, other than because he needs to appoint a new Prime Eternal after Ajak's death, is surely his confidence that the Eternals pose absolutely no threat to a cosmic plan that has been in place for billions of years. There is, however, a precedent: the Deviants. As Arishem himself explains, the Deviants were the primitive version of the Eternals, a synthetic race of animaloids created to ensure the emergence of new Celestials. Due to a defect in their genetic code, the Deviants managed to evolve from their creators'

determined identity, rebelling against their own nature. So why is Arishem so sure that he has not made the same mistake with the Eternals?

In fact, Sersi is not the first to question Arishem's will. Five hundred years ago, during the siege of Tenochtitlan, the Eternal Druig alerts his companions to the warlike power achieved by mankind, reflected at that time by the indiscriminate use of arquebuses and the dominance of the Castilian cavalry over the Mexican infantry. A turning point in the historical clash between the West and the rest of the world, the siege of Tenochtitlan reflects the violent entry into modernity and the beginning of an increasingly interconnected and technologically unbridled world. "Could our mission have been a mistake? Are we really helping these people build a better world, huh? [...] We're just like the soldiers down there. Pawns to their leaders"¹⁹, Druig himself says at one point in the film, questioning their determined identity and choosing to embrace a more autonomous one.

At this point, Druig reacts to Ajak's proposal to erase Thena's mind in response to her threatening psychosis, the Mahd Wy'ry. This is a mental derangement that leads her to attack her companions, prey to images of a tragic past apparently illusory. In the end, Gilgamesh intercedes and promises to take care of Thena, asking in exchange to keep her memories intact. Only Ajak and Ikaris know the truth at that point: the mind of the Eternals has already been reset countless times. But beyond that, the film presents us with the first major conflict within the family of the Eternals, a turning point that triggers the separation of the group for five centuries.

The scene also reveals a hopeful truth: in the code of the Deviants and the Eternals lies the same potential to evolve, the same genetic defect that allows them to break out of their deterministic scheme and raise doubts about their identity. This is because, as Kingo later states, "being Eternal does not prevent you from having human emotions"²⁰. Eternals and Deviants thus emerge as a sort of advanced AI, a computer program that hides the potential to acquire full consciousness; a potential fueled by the feeling of empathy towards humans. Without this empathy, Arishem's mission would not be possible, as the Eternals would take sides in the countless human conflicts and the

emergence of new Celestials would be affected. In the code of the Eternals lies, then, their greatest virtue and their greatest flaw.

A fundamental dichotomy between determinism and voluntarism is established throughout the film, underlying the confrontation between the Eternals, the Deviants, the Celestials, and the humans. The Deviants, initially designed with a deterministic purpose, inadvertently develop the ability to evolve, an anomaly that disrupts Arishem's expectations. Likewise, the Eternals begin as mere enforcers of a predetermined order, yet their prolonged interactions with humans awaken an internal conflict between duty (cf. determinism) and autonomy (cf. voluntarism). Sersi's decision to defy Arishem and prevent the Emergence, Druig's rejection of the mission during the conquest of Tenochtitlan, and Gilgamesh's insistence on preserving Thena's memories all illustrate moments where voluntarism emerges; instances where characters reject the notion that identity is solely dictated by external forces. By choosing to act based on personal conviction rather than preordained roles, the Eternals challenge the rigid determinism imposed upon them. Ultimately, the film presents identity not as a static, externally determined construct, but as a dynamic process shaped by both inherited constraints and the capacity for individual self-definition.

NATURE VS. CULTURE

The film shows us that determinism is, in turn, intimately linked to two subcategories that also correspond to the cause of identity: *nature* and *culture*. As Ortiz points out, "Nature and nurture [culture], in fact, represent the two primary forms of determinism. [...] In neither account can people choose desires; they simply have them" (p. 1837-1838)²¹. It is a mistake to think that identity categories can only be imposed at birth. Culture significantly shapes how individuals perceive themselves and relate to others. It operates through various influences, such as family, education, peers, media, and societal norms, all of which contribute to identity formation. Family provides the foundation for values and traditions, while schools and peers introduce broader societal expectations. Media further influence perceptions by

shaping ideals around gender, race, and other identity markers. For Eagleton, culture as an “organized control of natural development” (p. 3)²² highlights its active role in directing personal growth and societal categorization. Nature produces culture, which in turn transforms nature. While nature reminds us of what unites us, culture reminds us of what differentiates us.

In the case of the Eternals, it seems evident that their identity is configured when they are born, or rather, created by Arishem. This suggests a form of biological determinism, rooted in the idea that their nature—understood as their innate characteristics and purpose—is predetermined at the moment of their creation. When the Eternals greet each other for the first time inside the Domo spaceship, about to land in the Mesopotamia of 5000 BCE, they are not infants. Instead, they resemble fully grown adults with a blank slate, unshaped by any acquired culture. They are guided only by their nature: to care for and protect humans in order to fulfill Arishem’s primordial plan. But can the Eternals really be free of acquired behavior, such as patterns of thought or habits learned through interaction with humans? Is a conscious existence among humans possible without being influenced by their culture? As Eagleton states, “nature produces the means to transcend itself” (p. 3-4)²³. Thus, culture (being human) necessarily implies a refusal against biological determinism. To be human is not to have overcome a previous stage of nature, but to have confronted it. There is no longer a nature to return to, in the same way that the Eternals can no longer return to who they were, before leaving the Domo, after their first contact with the human species.

In the midst of this nature/culture disjunction is the most transcendental relationship of the film: the one between Ikaris and Sersi. Ikaris, who refuses to get close to the human species, clings to his biological determinism to find the meaning of life. Sersi, however, endowed with an extraordinary sensitivity towards Earthlings, discovers her true purpose through cultural exchange. This inter-species dialogue is exquisitely presented by the director, who sprinkles throughout the film material and immaterial artifacts that are the result of our complex evolutionary system: agriculture, craftsmanship, music, dance, mythology, all the way to the moving image, cinema, and social networks.

For instance, agriculture is represented through Sersi, whose nurturing and life-giving powers echo humanity's shift from foraging to farming, a cornerstone of civilization. Craftsmanship finds its parallel in Phastos, whose inventive genius mirrors humanity's mastery of tools and creation of technologies that shape our societies. Music and dance are reflected in Sprite, whose storytelling prowess captures the rhythm and movement that bind communities together, just as myth and performance have done for millennia. Cinema comes alive through Kingo, whose role as a Bollywood star exemplifies how the moving image has become a global language, blending entertainment with cultural narratives. Together, these elements underscore how human creativity and innovation have evolved alongside and because of our connections to one another and the world. Not even Ikaris, the most powerful Eternal, is able to cope with his genetic defect, but only his love for Sersi will prevent him from stopping her from transforming Tiamut into inert stone. Overwhelmed by guilt and the conflict between his duty and his emotions, Ikaris ultimately flies into the sun, mirroring his mythological namesake, as a final act of penance and self-destruction.

ESSENTIALISM VS. CONSTRUCTIVISM

While the previous categories ask how one acquires a given identity, *essentialism* and *constructivism* focus on how a given identity acquires its *meaning*. Essentialism is the idea that identities are inherent and remain unchanged over time and space. This perspective is controversial because many anti-essentialist theories argue that identities are *always* socially constructed, meaning that their significance depends on the cultural context in which they emerge. These anti-essentialist views suggest that identities are not inherent, but shaped by social, historical, and cultural forces. Today, it is widely accepted that most identities are, to some extent, socially constructed. This view is often linked to constructivism, which emphasizes that the meaning and understanding of identities evolve through social processes, rather than being rooted in an essential, unchanging nature.

Returning to *Eternals*²⁴, there is a significant detail that jumps out

when Arishem presents Sersi with the World Forge: there are thousands of Eternals scattered throughout the universe, not just the ten stationed on Earth. The dilemma of the film seems to be oriented, then, towards what place these ten particular Eternals occupy in the overall scheme of the Celestials. Again, Ikaris's essentialist vision, which obeys Arishem's master plan, foreshadows that all Eternals are equal in nature. There is no identity beyond that granted at birth. Therefore, being Eternal means the same in any corner of the universe. This hypothesis is examined once more by Sersi, who, in a constructivist approach, seeks to understand what kind of Eternal—meaning, what *individual*—she can become. This reflects the idea that identity and self-concept are actively constructed through personal exploration and reflection:

Ikaris: Amazing how things change over time.

Sersi: Maybe we're the ones who've changed.

[...]

Ikaris: What you're trying to do is free humanity from the natural order.

Sersi: It's not natural to allow life on an entire planet to be destroyed²⁵.

In this scene, towards the end of the second act, Sersi opposes the belief that the Eternals are unchangeable beings. Time and place have taught Sersi—and Ajak before her—that a new identity can emerge. Like the humans she has guarded, she is not free of her historical context. "The cost of Arishem's design, it's not worth it. Not this time"²⁶, says Sersi, convinced that being human lies precisely in transfiguring nature, even if it is an ambitious project to which nature imposes strict limits. This new belief, now transmitted in a non-biological way (i.e., culturally) among the Eternals, presents a fundamental choice: it challenges the Eternals to confront a conflict between determinism, represented by their obedience to the Celestials, and voluntarism, symbolized by their newfound autonomy in choosing their own path. This shift convinces Druig, Makkari, and Thena to embark on an interplanetary crusade, spreading the truth to the rest of the Eternals. Each Eternal must now decide whether to continue following

the predetermined directives of the Celestials or to embrace their own will and join this new cause.

QUEER AS POLITICAL RESISTANCE

What we have seen so far allows us to delve into the film in search of two relevant questions: what makes one an Eternal (i.e., *cause* of an identity), and what does it mean to be an Eternal (i.e., *nature* of an identity)? This is where the queer interpretation of Chloé Zhao's film comes into play. We see how the Eternals have fought the Deviants for thousands of years, not only as a matter of survival but also as enforcers of a system established by Arishem. The Eternals view themselves as representatives of the established order, tasked with maintaining the status quo by combating those—like the Deviants—who challenge or disrupt this societal structure, whether through violence or other forms of resistance.

In the same vein, 'queer' has been claimed as a form of political resistance^{27,28} against what Rahman and Jackson describe as the institutionalized normality of heterosexuality²⁹—the social, cultural, and legal structures that uphold heterosexuality as the default or 'natural' mode of existence, marginalizing non-heteronormative identities in the process. More than just a descriptor of non-normative sexual identities, queer functions as a broader counterhegemonic stance that disrupts rigid categories of gender, identity, and desire. As theorists like Judith Butler³⁰ and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick³¹ have argued, queer resists essentialist definitions, emphasizing fluidity, intersectionality, and the destabilization of socially constructed norms. In this way, queer not only critiques heteronormativity but also questions any fixed or imposed identity, making it a powerful lens through which to analyze agency, self-determination, and resistance in the film.

The struggle between the Eternals and the Deviants is not only for control of truth or planet Earth, but between biological determinism and anti-essentialist voluntarism. Because identifying oneself as queer is a potentially political act, the Deviant is treated as an aberration of the system. In fact, the term 'Deviant' means "someone or something that deviates from a norm"³², as well as "a person who differs

markedly (as in social adjustment or behavior) from what is considered normal or acceptable"³³. To be queer is to embrace an identity that opposes the prevailing norm, because of the social significance that emanates from that purpose. But determinism can become appealing to some members of the 'resistance', who might begin to believe that their actions are preordained or inevitable. The Deviant may start to doubt its ability to exist beyond the confines of its nature, using it as an excuse for its behavior. 'This is how I was born, this is how I was made. This is who I am.' This belief, which the Eternals have held for millions of years, is now being challenged by the Prime Deviant, Kro. He actively spreads this idea among his fellow Deviants, using it as an act of resistance against Celestial authority.

According to Rahman and Jackson, "[t]he notion of an innate sexual orientation offers no challenge to hierarchies of gender and sexuality. [...] Positioning sexuality as immutable obscures the hierarchical ordering of heterosexuality and homosexuality within which the latter is constructed as the deviant category in relation to the former" (p. 120-121)³⁴. Deviants must be eliminated, as they remind the social order that those who are free from the determinism imposed by nature can 'contaminate' the rest. Marked by the same genetic defect as the Deviants, the Eternals begin to doubt their biological determinism. This evolution stems from their ability to develop emotional attachments to other Eternals and to humans. Early in the film, Sersi and Ikaris challenge the idea that Eternals cannot form close bonds with one another. Later, the relationships between Gilgamesh and Thena, or Makkari and Druig, as well as Sprite's feelings for Ikaris, elevate this issue to one of the film's central themes. "Kingo... why did Arishem make me this way?"³⁵, Sprite asks, consumed by jealousy and aversion toward her childlike body, which prevents her from forming deep connections with humans—something she now knows she desires, thanks to Sersi.

Memories are the most precious aspect of the Eternals' identity. When Ajak decides to erase Thena's memory to 'cure' her malfunction, Druig challenges her: "Why should she trust you? You're asking her to let you erase who she is"³⁶. The fear of losing her conscience looms over Thena for the rest of the film until she defeats Kro and

overcomes her fear of forgetting. Another example relates to Phastos. Phastos's moral compass, once a fervent believer in Arishem, loses all sense of direction after witnessing the ruins of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. Not only does he see the devastation caused by humanity's destructive potential, but he also grapples with the guilt of having played a part in advancing human technology, including the creation of the nuclear bomb: "Druig was right. Our mission was a mistake. These people... they're not worth saving"³⁷. His position as an explicitly queer character places him at the forefront of the Eternals' moral dilemma, torn between his past contributions and his evolving sense of responsibility. After deciding to stop secretly helping humans improve their technology, he takes refuge with his husband and son in a suburban house. However, he soon moves to the forefront of the resistance against Arishem when Sersi and the others need his help to stop the Emergence. His confrontation with Ikaris reveals a new identity that has transcended the Eternals' biological determinism:

Ikaris: I'm an Eternal, Phastos. I exist for Arishem. As do you. It's who you are.

Phastos: I wouldn't change a single thing about who I am. Born or made. But I do not exist for Arishem, I exist for my family³⁸!

In response to the imposition of an identity category by the moral order (as established by Arishem, and enforced by Ikaris), Phastos reacts by claiming his right to choose his own politically subversive identity. This identity arises from a process of abandoning biologically based determinism in favor of an anti-essentialist voluntarism, meaning it rejects the persistence of a fixed identity over time. This evolutionary process, which is repeated among all the Eternals to a greater (Sersi, Phastos, Druig) or lesser (Ikaris, Sprite, Kingo) extent, is due to the process of acculturation they undergo over centuries. Once again, we see how, without close contact with humans, the Eternals would not have developed the necessary biological flaw for their evolution, nor would it be possible for them to overcome their deterministic identity.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that identity is not determined exclusively by nature; rather, sociocultural conditions play a significant role in shaping identity in ways that transcend simple categorizations and dichotomies, such as the homosexual/heterosexual binary. These sociocultural influences can help us understand identity as a dynamic, fluid construct, shaped by both biological and social factors. By extension, if the Eternals accept that they ‘were born this way’, the risk of them disrupting the social order is minimized. This acceptance would reduce the risk of them challenging or disrupting the social order, in the same way Sersi and other Eternals do. Ikaris, initially a staunch supporter of the established order, ultimately confronts the very system he once fought to protect, but not without paying a high price, reflecting better than anyone else the internal conflict and moral dilemma of the Eternals.

This nuanced understanding of identity—where nature, culture, and individual agency intersect—shows that the Eternals’ struggle is not merely against determinism, but more specifically against *biological* determinism—the idea that our biology irrevocably defines who we are and how we live. Instead, the Eternals’ journey represents a broader challenge to the concept of essentialism, where identity is seen as fixed and preordained. Only through the articulation of the natural with the cultural can the Eternals rise to become fully autonomous beings. The resistance of the Eternals, therefore, must be both political and natural. They must not only accept themselves as beings capable of existing but also as beings capable of choosing to exist—on their own terms. This struggle is a fight for self-determination, where the Eternals seek to transcend the confines of biological and social determinism, ultimately choosing their own paths within the complex intersection of nature and culture.

THE SHAPESHIFTING PARANOIA OF 'WHO TO TRUST' IN MARVEL'S SECRET INVASION

LARS DE WILDT, PHD AND HANNE
NIJTMANS, MA

*Imagine a world where information can't be trusted. Not very hard, is it?
News service says one thing, website says another. Society starts to fray.
All we can turn to are the people we care about.
But what if those people weren't who we thought they were?
What if the ones closest to us, the ones we've trusted our whole lives
...were someone else entirely? What if they weren't even human?
— Agent Prescod (*Secret Invasion*, S1 E1)¹*

Who do we think of when we think of 'the enemy'? This seems like an incredibly paranoid question to ask, but it is one that we ask ourselves all the time. Politicians especially, throughout history and all over the world, have tried to answer this question in a way that fits the 'psycheist', so to speak. Sometimes the answer is to fear foreign invaders, or domestic terrorists, or even the (deep state) government itself. As times change, our imagined enemies change, as well as who to trust instead.

Popular culture reflects these changes, including the MCU. When many of Marvel's original heroes were created, they were directly involved with the enemy of their time: Captain America first appeared in 1940, so it is no surprise that his main enemies were the Nazis and

Adolf Hitler himself. We no longer live in such clear-cut times, it seems. The *Secret Invasion*² miniseries is the best example of this: it centers on a conspiracy by a group of shapeshifting aliens called ‘Skrulls’, led by a Skrull called Gravik. Their plan to take over Earth by infiltrating its governmental organizations is challenged, however, by the constantly shifting aims and allegiances of other Skrulls (such as Talos), various government agencies (including MI6, the UN, the US presidential administration, and S.H.I.E.L.D.), and Nick Fury (who has left S.H.I.E.L.D. in favor of the extraterrestrial, interspecies defense organization S.A.B.E.R.). Notably, the series does not always immediately reveal who is who: viewers and characters alike are often left unsure who might be a shapeshifting Skrull in disguise. As a consequence of such shapeshifting, in addition to the already complicated tapestry of allegiances, it is rarely clear who the enemy is; and once we think we can identify them, their identity keeps changing. In this chapter, we argue that *Secret Invasion*³ exemplifies a ‘shapeshifting paranoia’ that has become pervasive throughout the MCU.

What we mean by ‘shapeshifting paranoia’ is the all-encompassing distrust of identities and allegiances which results from the constant uprooting of distinctions between ally and enemy. Using the case of *Secret Invasion*⁴, we build on the concepts of the ‘paranoid style’⁵ and ‘conspiracy culture’^{6,7,8} to, first, discuss how the series initially introduces an old-fashioned ‘outside’ invader in line with the familiar binaries of past and present US foreign policies. Secondly, we show how it places an ‘inside’ conspirator alongside the outside invader. Thirdly, we argue that the series constantly uproots and confuses this distinction, even refusing to resolve this confusion for the viewer—with the exception of ‘good cop’ Nick Fury, whose impeccable instincts eventually save the day. Finally, we conclude that such ‘shapeshifting paranoia’ occurs throughout the MCU, reflecting a broader cultural paranoia about trust, truth and identity.

WHO TO TRUST?

Let us start with an example from the series’ opening scene to illustrate what we mean. In the first scene of its first episode, the series begins

with a very familiar enemy. We start out in Moscow following CIA agent Everett K. Ross, who is investigating a plot to incite war between Russia and the United States—the classic binary of the Cold War period. Within the first two minutes, however, Ross's conversation with another CIA agent, Prescod, reminds us that the world is no longer as binary as in the 20th century. Prescod speaks of "five global terrorist strikes [...] each one claimed by a different group"⁹. We know these enemies, too: they are typical for the kind of non-state actor which represented the main enemies of the War on Terror, following September 11th, 2001. Indeed, agent Ross calls such terrorism "business as usual"¹⁰. Things soon become even more complicated—we are now less than three minutes into the first episode—as Prescod's answer brings us into the 2020s: "that's precisely what *they* want you to think"¹¹.

Who are 'they' and what do they want us to think? What is 'really' going on? Agent Prescod and the series as a whole are preoccupied with this paranoid question. Although the relation between (clinical) paranoia—i.e., a (pathologically unjustified) suspicion and distrust in others¹²—and conspiracy theories—i.e., hypotheses of secret plans by powerful groups in society—is complicated and contested, authors like cultural theorist Peter Knight, political scientist Michael Barkun and cultural sociologist Jaron Harambam nonetheless speak of a general contemporary 'culture of conspiracy'^{13,14} or 'conspiracy culture'¹⁵ that is increasingly prevalent in the early 21st century. In this contemporary conspiracy culture, the internet in particular has enabled a proliferation of conspiracy theories which contest the received 'truths' narrated by governments, mainstream media and (scientific) experts. The idea that truth is 'just' an opinion of people in power, rather than an objective fact, was previously a theoretical position reserved for postmodern academics¹⁶; but has become a more broadly shared discourse of 'post-truth'¹⁷: resulting in a societal plurality of truths¹⁸. This has boosted the legitimacy of conspiracy theories, proposing in various ways that powerful institutions have covered up a 'real' truth, such as (to name a few examples) that the 1969 Apollo Moon landing was faked, that the events of September 11, 2001 were orchestrated by the Bush administration, or that the Earth is, in fact, disc-shaped, hollow, flat, or virtual.

To re-use the words of agent Prescod in *Secret Invasion*: “they want you to think”¹⁹ something else than what is really going on. In a typical depiction of such conspiracy-theoretical paranoia, Prescod’s room is filled with what is sometimes called a ‘conspiracy board’: wall-to-wall screens, paper cuttings, and post-it notes (bearing all-caps questions like ‘CONNECTED TO HEIST??’ and ‘WHO IS THE TARGET??’), with a pin-up board connecting each document with red thread. From start to finish, *Secret Invasion*²⁰ is about distrust. Nothing is as it seems. Even the CIA agent from the opening scene, Everett K. Ross, turns out to be a Skrull disguised as Ross. The premise of the series is that we can no longer trust once-familiar certainties of who our allies and enemies are, since each might be posing as the very people we trust to protect us.

Such a shift in the shape of paranoia is typical for the 21st century. The aforementioned cultural theorist Peter Knight has argued that the 20th century threat of the outside invader would be replaced in the current century by the threat of an enemy ‘within’²¹. Was Knight right? Indeed, if 20th-century fears revolved around Nazis and communists; this century’s paranoia seems pointed inward, at reptilian monsters, hidden elites, and the “far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us” (p. 5)²². However, as we argue below, *Secret Invasion*²³ problematizes Knight’s proposed succession of enemies: rather than the replacement of the ‘outside invader’ by the ‘inside conspirator’, they end up co-existent and, ultimately, indistinguishable.

SECRET INVASION’S OUTSIDE INVADERS

In its initial staging of a conflict between the US and Russia, Marvel’s *Secret Invasion*²⁴ recycles Cold War tropes, playing up “fears of ‘un-American’ subversion and invasion” (p. 5)²⁵. Both the Skrulls and Russians are cast as foreign, un-American threats to domestic safety. The Skrull rebellion in turn exploits this lingering US distrust towards Russia by attempting to provoke them into a nuclear world war, in which the Skrulls’ ability to withstand radiation would allow them to take over. American Studies scholar Joseph Masco illustrates how the

Cold War paranoia for “existential threats” (p. 6-8)²⁶ continues to be a guiding principle for US domestic and foreign policy into the 21st century. These threats themselves have evolved over time: the dominant fear during the Cold War era was a nuclear war; replaced in the post-9/11 ‘War on Terror’-era by the ‘existential threat’ of terrorist attacks.

A prime example of this is the warmongering rhetoric of Colonel Rhodes, or rather, the Skrull spy Raava, who assumed Rhodes’s identity, henceforth Raava/Rhodes. When Raava/Rhodes discusses a false-flag attack on the motorcade of President Ritson (by Skrulls disguised as Russians), he reproduces the familiar discourse of the outside invader’s existential threat to the US: “What happened on that motorway was an *all-out assault on our republic*, orchestrated by the Skrulls and the Russians who are giving them safe haven” (S1 E6)²⁷.

Such rhetoric offers a classic example of the ‘paranoid style’, as Richard Hofstadter theorized in the 1960s: “the spokesman of the paranoid style finds it directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life whose fate affects not himself alone but millions of others” (p. 4)²⁸. The paranoia for Skrulls and Russians dictates policy decisions, as Raava/Rhodes pushes for a military response: to bomb the rebel Skrull facility on Russian soil. While President Ritson is hesitant, fearing this may lead to a World War III, Raava/Rhodes convinces him by countering “I’d rather have us face a war than extinction” (S1 E5)²⁹. Indeed, at the end of the series when the Skrull plot is uncovered and the world is saved, President Ritson addresses the nation, denouncing all Skrulls and other “off-world born species” as “enemy combatants” (S1 E6)³⁰. For Ritson, the Skrulls’ terrorist attack on his life justifies the extinction of all alien species. The rhetoric of his address (“We know who you are. We know where to find you. And we will kill every last one of you”³¹) resembles that of George W. Bush after the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11th, 2001. In this now-famous ‘address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People’, he announced the War on Terror while stressing that “Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists”³². Peter Knight remarks that Bush’ immediate response after 9/11 bred paranoia, for it casts the attacks as the

work of “an enemy that personifies evil” (p. 179)³³, noting how the mainstream discourse used to explain the events of 9/11 portrayed America as “an exceptional victim,” and conveyed “a sense of urgent crisis and imminent threat to a specifically American way of life from an all-pervasive hidden enemy” (p. 180)³⁴. The MCU’s fictional President Ritson employs a similar rhetoric, casting (now literal) aliens as evil personified, to justify a violent response.

As if to painfully underline our point that the ‘outside invader’ has not been replaced by (but exists alongside) new fears of ‘inside conspirators’, one of *Secret Invasion*’s³⁵ perceived threats became a reality. During its production, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, prompting extensive reshoots because of the sensitivity of the issue, as certain devastating sequences involving Ukraine citizens hit too close to home³⁶. Rather than an all-out war-scene, the final confrontation between the rebel Skrulls and the US was resolved on a smaller, individual scale between the series’ main characters after the reshoots. Nonetheless, director Ali Selim suggests that this only illustrates the show’s relevance, “only help[ing] to make the story feel more real” (para. 4)³⁷. However, there is a marked difference between the real-world US response to the Ukrainian conflict and *Secret Invasion*’s³⁸ representation of it. In the MCU, the response to Russian tanks at the Finnish and Ukrainian borders consists of immediate and decisive military action, by US-led NATO forces. In fact, it seems almost superfluous to note that the MCU knows absolute US military *and* superhero dominance: the Avengers are all US-American or Americanized and convinced of its superiority, including former Russian secret agent Black Widow; even the brainwashed ‘Winter Soldier’ Bucky Barnes eventually joins the Avengers team. This offers a sharp contrast to our early 21st century’s geopolitical reality which, so US foreign policy experts suggest, showed the relative fragility of the US, rather than a projection of US power as it was throughout most of the 20th century. One such foreign policy expert, Richard Beck, notes that “Putin may be paranoid, but he is not a ‘madman’, and he would not have invaded Ukraine had he not decided that the US—and, by extension, the alliance system that serves as the foundation of its trans-oceanic power—was weaker than at any point in at least the past thirty years” (para.

5)³⁹. Indeed, as of writing in early 2025, the US government (counter to its MCU alter ego) has continued to refuse direct military involvement, instead sending weapons and imposing economic sanctions under the Biden administration; while the Trump administration has even appeared at various moments to side with Russia's accusation that Ukraine should be held responsible for the war with Russia⁴⁰.

Unlike the geopolitics of the 21st century, the MCU's fictional US military might is unchecked and unrivaled. This representation of absolute US power is notable at a time when the US empire is not as strong as it was in the 20th century. Two of the leading critics of US foreign policy, Noam Chomsky and Vijay Prashad, suggest that US power can be considered increasingly 'fragile' in the last decade⁴¹. Chomsky and Prashad argue that the recent withdrawals from Afghanistan, coup reversals in places like Chile, Honduras, and Bolivia, and the emergence of China as an important world power illustrate how the ability of the US to act has relatively weakened, compared to the end of the Cold War in 1991. This offers a sharp contrast to how the US is represented as dramatically inserting itself on the world stage in *Secret Invasion*⁴².

The iteration of outsider-paranoia as a justification for military intervention and the projection of unquestionable US military strength in MCU series such as *Secret Invasion*⁴³ makes sense, considering some of the connections between blockbuster cinema productions and government institutions such as the Department of Defense and the CIA. As research on this topic shows, this projection of US military strength and moral superiority is a common occurrence in the superhero genre⁴⁴. Cultural studies scholarship on the relationship between cinematic blockbuster entertainment and US military organizations such as the Pentagon and the CIA—a relationship sometimes given unwieldy names like the 'military-industrial-media-entertainment network'⁴⁵ or 'military-industrial-entertainment complex'⁴⁶—has convincingly shown that there are not just ideological affinities between Hollywood and the US military⁴⁷, but material relations as well⁴⁸. Hollywood films gain access (at reduced cost) to expensive military hardware, filming locations, and vehicles such as fighter jets, helicopters, and tanks⁴⁹. MCU examples of this military-entertainment

entanglement abound⁵⁰, including the first two *Iron Man*^{51,52} films, *Captain America: The First Avenger*⁵³, *The Avengers*⁵⁴, and *Captain Marvel*⁵⁵. In return, the literature shows “how the Pentagon has long worked in the preproduction and production stages of Hollywood filmmaking, leveraging access to its facilities, personnel, and hardware to secure positive self-imagery in popular cinema” (p. 9)⁵⁶.

Rather than be replaced, then, by paranoid fears of ‘inside conspirators’ as Knight predicted⁵⁷, the foreign threat of outside invaders remains a staple of Hollywood narratives, *alongside* the inside conspirator. The playing up of paranoia for outside (existential) threats in the MCU, including in *Secret Invasion*⁵⁸, directly reinforces political rhetoric. Without wanting to reduce the MCU to a platform for modern US military propaganda, the MCU’s fictional representation of US military might *does* play an important part in a 21st-century propaganda strategy to justify continued military spending.

SECRET INVASION'S INSIDE CONSPIRATORS

However, alongside *Secret Invasion's*⁵⁹ ‘outsider’ paranoia, the series embraces the paranoia of the ‘enemy within’. In Knight’s words, such an enemy brings about “the far more scary anxiety that we can no longer tell the difference between Them and Us” (p. 5)⁶⁰. However, rather than replace the fear of outside invaders, the fear of inside conspirators adds to, and even complicates existing fears. When Skrull rebels attempt to incite war between Russia and the United States in an attempt to take over Earth, they bomb Moscow’s Vossoyedineniye Square on a national holiday and try to pin the attack on the Americans, in particular implicating former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent and CIA associate Nick Fury. This alleged US involvement in the Moscow terrorist attacks sparks international outrage. When the US are summoned to an emergency security summit, the US treat the meeting with disdain, sending not the President but Colonel Rhodes. Unwittingly, of course, they have not sent Rhodes but Raava/Rhodes, the Skrull spy impersonating him, who appears at the meeting annoyed and impatient, joking about “carpet-bombing” the facility “if Slovakia rolls its eyes at [him] one more time” (S1 E2)⁶¹.

It is important to reiterate for our argument here, that the character played by Don Cheadle for most of *Secret Invasion*, is in fact the Skrull Raava/Rhodes in disguise—a fact unknown to viewers until the series' fourth episode, and to most characters until its last. Because of their shapeshifting abilities, the Skrulls initially made perfect spies for the US security apparatus: a flashback at the start of the series' second episode reveals that, in 1997, Nick Fury recruited Skrull refugees into a secret spy network to gather intelligence to aid S.H.I.E.L.D. and the CIA, with the promise that he would find them a new home planet. One of those Skrulls was his friend Talos, who later suggests that it was the Skrull network that allowed Fury to rise through the ranks of S.H.I.E.L.D. Under Fury's leadership, the Skrulls' unique shapeshifting skillset was supposedly used for good. As Talos puts it: "Every terror attack you prevented: we did that. Every enemy you sabotaged and ally you leveraged with dirt no one else in the world had access to: we did that" (S1 E3)⁶². When Fury fails to hold up his end of the bargain, the Skrull rebellion forms, planning to use their shapeshifting abilities to take over the planet.

As a consequence, Skrulls now dominate the MCU's public sphere and international politics. The Skrulls' ability to shapeshift into any human person allows them to easily pose as someone else and infiltrate the upper echelons of geopolitics as easily as they infiltrate the private lives of *Secret Invasion's*⁶³ main characters. The series is rife with government infiltrations and untrustworthy elites. This becomes most clear from the series' introduction of the 'Skrull council': a secret society of Skrulls who covertly occupy influential positions of international political power. Before the council's introduction, *Secret Invasion*⁶⁴ depicts a short newsreel of all kinds of responses to the potential US involvement of the (false flag) terror attack in Russia—including British Prime Minister Pamela Lawton, NATO Secretary General Sergio Caspani, and popular US news anchor Chris Stearns for Fox News-like FXN News—or rather, their Skrull impostors. After the news segment, the series cuts to Skrull rebel leader Gravik on his way to a secret meeting: all those in the broadcast turn out to be on the Skrull council, secretly plotting to take over the world. This scene appears as an amalgamation of various contemporary strands of

conspiracy thinking, including the Illuminati-like secret elite that is ruling the world, as well as the so-called reptoid conspiracy theory popularized by David Icke⁶⁵. This hypothesis, that shapeshifting reptilian alien impostors have secretly replaced our world leaders, is a staple of many conspiracy theories: that a secret group of non-human (reptilian, satanic, alien or otherwise ‘Other’) controls mainstream media and global politics^{66,67}. The series’ nod to these existing conspiracy theories not only serves to reinforce conspiracy thinking’s importance in the current ‘age of conspiracy’⁶⁸, but it further generates the suspicion that ‘nothing is what it seems’, no one can be trusted, and that an ‘enemy within’ has taken control, without us even knowing.

‘SHAPESHIFTER’ PARANOIA: A CONSTANT TRANSFORMATION OF INSIDE AND OUT

While the reveal of the Skrull council echoes the classic fear of alien (or otherwise strange) conspirators inside our own governmental elites, *Secret Invasion*⁶⁹ further ramps up the paranoia by constantly and deliberately confusing the distinction between the outside invader and the inside conspirator. Narratively, the distinction between truth and lying is thematized throughout the series, for instance, in the game played by Fury and Talos on the train. The game, which Fury used to play with his mother, is called ‘Tell Me Something I Don’t Know’. Fury explains it through the example of him lying to his mother after being asked to tell her something she doesn’t know about a girl he liked in school. After lying to pretend he does not like the girl, he explains that his “mama just smiled. Even though I’d lied through my teeth, the mere fact that I did that, told her everything she needed to know about me and Suzie” (S1 E2)⁷⁰.

As a whole, *Secret Invasion*⁷¹ is not about what is true or false. For a series about shapeshifting and conspiracies, it is fittingly about the confusion of identifying true from false and about finding identity in that confusion. That anyone could be a Skrull becomes evident as early as the opening scene discussed in this chapter’s introduction (when CIA agent Ross was revealed to be a Skrull), but the series plays into

the conspiracy paranoia that 'nothing is what it seems'. Political scientist Michael Barkun explains in his book *A Culture of Conspiracy* that at the core of conspiracy-theoretical paranoia is the idea that "appearances are deceptive, because conspirators wish to deceive in order to disguise their identities or their activities. Thus, the appearance of innocence is deemed to be no guarantee that an individual or group is benign" (p. 4)⁷². Such confusions of identity are apparent throughout *Secret Invasion*⁷³, and extend beyond just the Skrull's literal shapeshifting ability. For example, when M16 agent Sonya Falsworth is asked who she is, she replies: "I think a more apt question would be, who would you like me to be? I'm staggeringly versatile" (S1 E5)⁷⁴.

Identifying the enemy of *Secret Invasion*⁷⁵—whether inside or out—is nearly impossible, as identities and allegiances which we initially think to be obvious are in fact constantly (shape)shifting. As the series progresses, all sides of its conflicts are inconsistently divided. For example, the Skrull council disagrees on what to do, on which lies and manipulations to implement, and what their 'true' goals are behind those lies. By the fourth episode, all the introduced factions—both the outside invaders and the inside conspirators—have re-shaped and shifted into each other. The Skrull Raava, impersonating the president's closest advisor as Raava/Rhodes, picks up the US president for talks with Russia. Gravik's faction of Skrull rebels pose as Russian soldiers, while the Skrull Talos, who will later be betrayed and killed by his former Skrull friend Gravik, tries to save the US president. When one soldier shouts upon discovering Talos's true nature "He's an alien, he's trying to get to [President] Ritson", Fury has to exclaim "no, hold your fire! He is with me," quickly correcting himself: "He's with us!"⁷⁶.

In addition to narrative confusion, the series uses several directorial and cinematic techniques to sow suspicion among the viewers, suggesting that anyone can be a Skrull—perhaps even Fury. Notably, many of the actors playing the series' Skrull impersonators were cast to have non-American accents and/or directed to adopt them for the role—a common way to indicate Otherness or villainy, from Bond films to Disney^{77,78}. Examples include Kingsley Ben-Adir as Gravik (who adopts a Welsh accent for the role), Ben Mendelsohn as Talos (who is

notoriously good at adopting different accents for different roles, but was directed to speak his native Melburnian accent), and Emilia Clarke as G'iah (who similarly changes accents between roles, but sticks to her own Received Pronunciation British accent).

Another cinematic technique used to confuse the distinction between outside invader and inside conspirator is in the scene when Fury goes to meet his wife Varra/Priscilla Davis. Even the most private and intimate relations are compromised, as the opening sequence of the series already suggested: “what if the ones closest to us, the ones we’ve trusted our entire lives, were someone else entirely?” (S1 E1)⁷⁹. In the second episode, the scene revealing Fury and Varra’s relationship uses hard cuts to generate viewer suspicion and build suspense at the end of the episode. The scene starts with Fury driving his car toward a yet unknown destination. With a hard cut, the next shot shows a beautiful house surrounded by trees and birdsong. The next cut shows a Skrull woman, who we later learn is named Varra, cutting a cucumber with Otis Redding’s ‘Try a Little Tenderness’⁸⁰ playing in the background. The next shot cuts back to the house, in which we now see Fury enter, to the continuing song by Redding. However, as he enters the kitchen, there is no longer a Skrull woman cutting the cucumber: Fury and the audience see a black woman, Priscilla Davis. She makes Fury retrieve his wedding ring as they kiss, while the diegetic Redding song (i.e., the music heard by the characters) becomes louder, drowning out all other sound while the scene cuts to credits. In this situation, *Secret Invasion*⁸¹ specifically uses the cutting technique going back and forth from the house and the kitchen to show that one’s perception cannot be trusted. In cutting back and forth, the audience is shown Priscilla’s ‘real’ self, which leads to suspense as her appearance changes with Fury’s entrance. The suspense is further amplified because after this dramatic reveal that Fury’s wife is a Skrull(!), the scene cuts to the credits, leaving the audience with a cliffhanger. While this cliffhanger is somewhat artificial—the audience soon learns that Fury is aware his wife is a Skrull—this scene serves to amplify a constant sense of paranoia.

Similarly, the scene depicting the attack on Vossoyedineniye Square uses its montage and combination of shots to confuse the identity

between other and self. In this scene, the Skrull Gravik poses as Nick Fury to shoot Maria Hill, Fury's trusted right-hand and his successor as director of S.H.I.E.L.D. As the 'real' Fury watches the scene unfold, the scene's montage causes deliberate confusion as to which Fury is the real one. In this scene, the camera breaks the conventional 180-degree rule, which states that cameras should be set up to keep a continuity between how two characters are shot, so that each of two actors stay on the same side of an imaginary axis between them. Moving the camera over the axis like this is called 'jumping the line'⁸²: which, in this case, means that Samuel L. Jackson (playing either Nick Fury or Gravik impersonating Fury) is shot variably from his left or right side. This deliberate break in cinema conventions invites potential confusion. Indeed, Fury is implicated in the murder of Hill, and viewers never get full certainty on whether the Fury we see in the Vossoyedineniye Square scene—like so many other characters throughout the series—might be a Skrull himself. Unsurprisingly, many fan theories do argue for this possibility. Is Fury with the 'outside invaders', is he an 'inside conspirator', or do these boundaries simply no longer hold? In his own words: "I'm Nick Fury, even when I'm out, I'm in!" (S1 E2)⁸³.

Indeed, it could be argued that the Nick Fury we see in *Secret Invasion*⁸⁴ is no longer the Fury we know from previous MCU content, transcending boundaries of inside and out. He has quit S.H.I.E.L.D., supposedly to work for intergalactic defense organization S.A.B.E.R., which he appears to have left as he unexpectedly turns up in Moscow. Instead, he works with and on the side of many of the Skrulls he recruited to secretly work for the US government in the 1990s. And yet, throughout the series, Fury appears to be the only character whose intentions can be trusted. His role can be captured by the 'good cop', an agent of various (extra-)governmental organizations (the CIA, the US Army, S.H.I.E.L.D., S.A.B.E.R.), who might bend or break the rules, but always does so for the good of the people of the United States, humankind, and even the entire universe. In the end, his impeccable instincts of 'who to trust', clever plotting, and decisive action is what prevents the assassination of the US president, a breaking out of World War III, and the annihilation of the human race. With a combination of instinct and intelligence gathering, Fury's knowledge of 'who to trust'

is presented as key: he unmask Raava/Rhodes to the President at the crucial moment, and recruits the former Skrull-rebel G'iah to defuse Gravik and end his rebellion. This ending offers an alternative interpretation of *Secret Invasion*⁸⁵: in an era where it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish friend from foe, the series suggests that we can only truly trust the judgment of individuals like Nick Fury: American 'good cops' from various government agencies.

SHAPESHIFTING PARANOIA THROUGHOUT THE MCU

This 'shapeshifting paranoia' reverberates throughout the MCU, and corresponds to our current historical moment, in which it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish allies from enemies. Many of Marvel's superheroes, such as Captain America, have their origins in the 20th century, when the dichotomies between Us and Them were more easily distinguished: World War II's binary between Axis and Allies, and the Cold War binary between (USSR-led) communism and (US-led) capitalism provided American popular culture with clear enemies. In the 21st century, long after the fall of the Soviet Union, Marvel's heroes confront a more complex geopolitical situation without a clear antagonist. Despite efforts by the Bush administration to cement the distinction between those who are 'with us' or 'against us', confusion reigns about whose side we are on. The War on Terror further complicated this understanding, because how does one fight terror? Sociologist and surveillance expert David Lyon notes how the War on Terror initiated a "culture of suspicion" (p. 45)⁸⁶: one not just directed at outside forces, but also at regular citizens. Moreover, with its 'if you see something, say something'-mantra, regular citizens were not just turned into potential suspects, but also into spies⁸⁷. In more recent years, there is even confusion about who the enemy is on the global stage: while Putin's Russia appeared to be a clear enemy to the US under Biden's administration, especially after the invasion of Ukraine; Biden's predecessor *and* successor, Donald Trump, has repeatedly referred to Putin as an ally.

The MCU mirrors this contemporary political confusion. Fredric Jameson once called conspiracy "the poor person's cognitive mapping

in the postmodern age; it is a degraded figure of the total logic of late capital, a desperate attempt to represent the latter's system" (p. 356)⁸⁸. In other words, conspiracy theories provide a compelling but incomplete means of explaining how the world works in an era of global capitalism. Our contemporary geopolitical structures—governed as they are by the UN, WHO, WEF, NATO, EU, G7, BRICS, and a plethora of other bewildering abbreviations—have only become more alienating since Jameson's time of writing in 1991. It is no surprise then, that we find ample examples of such conspiratorial paranoia—toward the government, the truth, and the instability of (collective) identities—throughout the MCU.

Beyond the scope of *Secret Invasion*⁸⁹, other examples of shapeshifting paranoia in the MCU include the 2014 movie *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*⁹⁰, which was the first main MCU release to complicate Marvel's heritage in World War II and Cold War rhetoric. Instead, it staged a conspiratorial conflict which faded the lines between the US Army, the Soviet Union, and S.H.I.E.L.D. (infiltrated by Soviet-allied terrorist organization HYDRA). Likewise, the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*⁹¹ series is rife with betrayal, conspiracy, double agents, clone-like 'Life-Model Decoys' and an antagonist (Hive) who can secretly control people. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*⁹² features the secret society of the Illuminati. *WandaVision*⁹³ is about Wanda's increasing distrust and paranoia, as she finds out that the truth of her imprisonment is hidden behind the illusion—consisting of a postmodern collage of retro-aesthetics—that she lives an idyllic, suburban middle-class life. Moreover, in a final shapeshifting move, it is revealed that the illusion was of Wanda's own making. Our list could go on.

CONCLUSION

To understand this collapse of 'outsider' and 'insider' paranoia in *Secret Invasion*⁹⁴, we coined the term 'shapeshifting paranoia' to mean an all-encompassing distrust of identities and allegiances which results from the constant uprooting of distinctions between ally and enemy. The show portrays an amalgamation of almost all existing conspiracy

tropes. Thematically, it includes an alien invasion, the involvement of various government agencies, an Illuminati-like secret government (the Skrull Council), and renegade double agents. Aside from its conspiratorial themes, the series is adept at the visual language of paranoia, using cinematic techniques of cliffhangers, hard cuts, and montage, to create confusion, while the story largely unfolds through secret meetings in shady back rooms. As an effect, it becomes impossible to know who to trust as the series plunges its audience in suspicion and paranoia. This is not a paranoia, as we have argued with *Knight*⁹⁵, in which the fear of an outside invader is replaced by an inside conspirator, but one in which the difference between the two is constantly confused, apparently resolved, and then confused again. In this case, *Secret Invasion*⁹⁶ provides us with various representations of conspiratorial thinking as it pervades 21st-century political and popular culture. Indeed, as this book shows across all its chapters, the MCU is an accurate barometer for such aspects of the cultural zeitgeist.

In its reflection of contemporary conspiracy culture, *Secret Invasion*⁹⁷ highlights a theme that has pervaded much of the MCU over the past decade. On the one hand, we believe the reason for this is to capture a shapeshifting paranoia within the societies that the franchise caters to. As stated above, there are many reasons why the clear-cut enemy of the past has been replaced by a more complicated and ever-shifting state of paranoia. When we do not know who to blame and who to trust, perhaps we like to see our superheroes struggle with the same uncertainty. In the specific case of the MCU, we observed an attempt to retain some of the old dichotomies. In this respect, *Secret Invasion*⁹⁸, and the MCU as a whole, still largely portray the United States as the military and political hegemon, despite its geopolitical decline in light of Russia's renewed aggression, and the rise of China as a challenger to a Western economic, military, and political dominance that has long been taken for granted. Instead, the US government of the MCU is still the undisputed global political leader, and its US-dominated heroes and government agencies continue to save the day. In *Secret Invasion*⁹⁹, there is no doubt that Nick Fury provides such a familiar stability in the role of the 'good cop', who might break some rules but in the end knows what, and who, are wrong or right.

On the other hand, there is a political-economic reason why shapeshifting paranoia is such an attractive theme to benefit from. After all, if the bad guys can never be identified, such an on-going struggle makes for an infinite amount of sequels, spin-offs, and additional 'phases' to film. Moreover, not unlike the structure of conspiratorial thinking itself, it requires viewers to piece together information from various different sources.

What is true of conspiracy theories is certainly also true for the MCU: everything is connected.

“ON YOUR LEFT!”

RESILIENCE, LEGACY, MENTORSHIP, AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EVOLUTION OF SECONDARY CHARACTERS IN THE MCU

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The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has created an exquisite mythological landscape by crafting rich, deep characters. Media scholar Curtis explained that a “myth is actually integral to the creation of a world. It is what enables us to make sense of things around us and find our place” (p. 360)¹. While some of these characters operate on the sidelines, they endure psychological journeys that are anything but secondary. As a child, I gravitated towards these fantastical worlds (including all things fantasy, horror, and sci-fi), where the secondary characters often stood out for me. While the main characters took center stage, the sidekicks and secondary figures brought the myth to life. The main characters relied on their friends, family, and community, highlighting the importance of secondary characters in the narrative.

In this chapter, secondary characters are defined as pivotal characters that enrich the narrative and provide emotional and psychological depth to the story². Secondary characters enrich the plot, deepen the development of the main characters, and contribute to the story’s theme, offering deeper insight into the setting and overarching themes³. This definition deepens what we understand about how myths help us find our truths rather than accepting them at face value,

with secondary characters allowing us to acknowledge that we are not alone in our growth and development. This is why I fell in love with the MCU's storytelling: it understands that the myth cannot exist without the secondary characters who inhabit the world. As far as I could tell, the main characters couldn't exist without their friends, family, sidekicks, community, and larger world.

This chapter will dive into six secondary and equally essential MCU characters—Sam Wilson, Bucky Barnes, Valkyrie, Wong, Yelena Belova, and Kate Bishop—whose stories are marked by resilience, legacy, and mentorship themes and illustrate just how important these characters are to the overall emotional and psychological landscape of the MCU. For instance, Valkyrie's leadership of New Asgard exemplifies how trauma⁴ can be reframed into empowerment, while Bucky's efforts to make amends showcase post-traumatic growth⁵ through accountability and connection. Furthermore, Sam Wilson's ascension from a loyal friend to the mantle of Captain America and Yelena Belova's journey to rediscover herself illustrates the weight of legacy and its influence on identity, connecting this to Erikson's identity development theory⁶. Finally, Kate Bishop's transition to the Hawkeye mantle and Wong's evolution into a reluctant mentor as Sorcerer Supreme highlight how mentorship, grounded in Bowlby's attachment theory⁷, fosters identity and resilience. Through their interactions with primary heroes (and villains) and their critical roles during defining moments in the franchise, this chapter uncovers a profound interplay of growth and transformation among the MCU's secondary characters. These characters' narratives also give us a foundation to explore these concepts in ways that allow viewers to acknowledge their inner experiences. And for a geeky, Black girl who was a huge fantasy nerd developing her voice in a world that thought she was a secondary character, these stories exemplified their integral existence to the larger narrative.

VALKYRIE AND BUCKY: TRAUMA, RESILIENCE, AND POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH, OH MY!

When Vision gently asks Wanda, "What is grief, if not love persevering?"⁸ he's not just speaking to her; he's talking to all of us who have

walked the jagged path of trauma and healing. That simple yet profound line offers a window into understanding resilience, especially within the MCU. Resilience, as we'll explore it in this chapter, is the capacity to adapt and grow after experiencing trauma⁹. Trauma, as neuroscientist van der Kolk¹⁰ explains, occurs when our minds and bodies are overwhelmed by experiences that are too much to handle. This internal overwhelming feeling leaves lasting imprints on individuals, shaping their emotional and psychological identities. The MCU's secondary characters often embody this struggle, as their responses to overwhelming events shape their narratives. Trauma isn't only the catastrophic moment that upends lives in an instant; it also includes the subtle, insidious experiences that erode our sense of safety and self over time. Resilience emerges not despite trauma but because of it, transforming these challenges into opportunities for growth. This transformation is encapsulated in the concept of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG), which refers to the positive psychological changes that arise from grappling with adversity¹¹. In this section, Valkyrie and Bucky Barnes are illustrative examples of how PTG manifests in secondary characters, revealing how trauma and resilience intertwine.

Valkyrie's story is an illustrative example of resilience and PTG: she's an Asgardian warrior who endured the devastating loss of her entire squadron, known as the Valkyrie, during a brutal battle with Hela, the Goddess of Death. The guilt and grief from that loss led her to abandon Asgard entirely, drowning her sorrows in alcohol and isolating herself on the chaotic planet Sakaar: "I've spent years in a haze, trying to forget my past. Sakaar seemed like the best place to drink and forget, and to die one day"¹². But Valkyrie's journey shows us what it looks like to succumb to trauma and eventually rise from it. Her resilience comes from her ability to integrate that trauma into her identity, shifting from a state of avoidance and self-destruction to one of responsibility and purpose. By choosing to return to Asgard and help Thor defeat Hela in *Thor: Ragnarök*¹³, Valkyrie redefines herself as a warrior and a leader. After the events of *Avengers: Endgame*¹⁴, Valkyrie becomes the King of New Asgard when Thor steps away from his leadership role. This role evolves further in *Thor: Love and Thunder*¹⁵, which challenges her to grow beyond her pain. PTG refers

to the positive psychological changes that arise from enduring and overcoming trauma¹⁶. Valkyrie's journey demonstrates how resilience from trauma occurs by cultivating and building meaningful connections, such as her bonds with Thor, the Avengers (i.e., the band of heroes that challenged Hela; including Thor, Hulk, and Loki), and the remaining Asgardians, who help her rediscover her place within her community. Valkyrie's ongoing process of resilience, influenced by her embrace of leadership, exemplifies PTG, as she transforms her pain into empowerment. She's shaking hands with other world leaders, cutting ribbons, and doing more bureaucratic nonsense. But she's also protecting her people from foes like Gorr the God Butcher and leading them in times of crisis, although she's not entirely convinced of her leadership function: "I love being king. I love my people, but it's all meetings and raven-mail and meetings that could've been raven-mail. I miss fighting. I miss my sisters"¹⁷. In the end, she survives trauma and finds meaning and empowerment in its aftermath.

Next to Valkyrie, Bucky Barnes, better known as the Winter Soldier, also exemplifies how trauma and resilience intersect through the lens of Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG). Bucky's journey from WWII hero in *Captain America: The First Avenger*¹⁸ to a brainwashed assassin in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*¹⁹ is one of the most harrowing in the MCU: he is subjected to relentless mind control and forced to commit unspeakable atrocities against his will after being held as a prisoner of war within HYDRA. In *Captain America: Civil War*²⁰, Bucky's HYDRA programming is activated by the movie's antagonist, Helmut Zemo, which demonstrates the lingering grip of his trauma. Bucky is forced to revert to the Winter Soldier and attack his allies despite his efforts to break free. Though the Wakandans later removed HYDRA's programming, this act alone does not erase the emotional and psychological toll of his experiences. In Bucky's continued efforts to rebuild his identity in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*²¹, the concept of PTG is illustrated vividly. Bucky's creation of a notebook listing those he wronged is a concrete expression of this, demonstrating his commitment to finding purpose through accountability. His confrontation with Yori Nakajima, the father of a man he killed while under HYDRA's control, exemplifies the emotional weight of his journey.

Although he struggles to articulate his guilt fully, this moment marks a step toward integrating his trauma into a redemptive narrative. Bucky’s therapy sessions with Dr. Raynor further illuminate PTG, as he acknowledges his inner conflicts and expresses a desire for forgiveness (for others, but also himself). These sessions reveal the profound psychological shift necessary for PTG, moving from avoidance and self-blame to seeking connection (like with Sam and their joint therapy session!) and redemption. The therapy notebook serves as a physical and symbolic tool for accountability, reinforcing Bucky’s commitment to integrating his past actions into a narrative of redemption and growth. This process mirrors the key tenets of PTG: finding personal strength, building deeper relationships, and developing a renewed sense of purpose²². Bucky’s transformation from a man controlled by his past to actively reshaping his future underscores that resilience and growth emerge not by erasing trauma but by reframing it as a foundation for empowerment and healing.

In summary, Bucky and Valkyrie are two clear examples of secondary characters in the MCU that offer us rich narratives to explore the concepts of trauma and resilience. They each illustrate different aspects of these concepts, from the systemic overwhelm of trauma to the ongoing process of resilience and post-traumatic growth. The theory of trauma²³ provides a framework for understanding the profound, lasting impacts of these characters’ experiences, while our understanding of resilience²⁴ and PTG²⁵ offer pathways for understanding how they navigate their traumatic pasts and emerge stronger on the other side. Their stories remind us that while trauma may try to rewrite our life stories, resilience gives us the power to take the pen back and write our own endings.

SAM AND YELENA: SECONDARY CHARACTERS MUST MANAGE LEGACY AND IDENTITY

When Sam Wilson, standing in an MCU world still grappling with systemic inequities, says, “The only power I have is that I believe we can do better,”²⁶ he’s making a declarative statement: he’s challenging society to confront its prejudices, reimagine its values, and collectively

strive for a more inclusive future. This line, delivered with quiet determination at the end of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (S1 E6)²⁷, encapsulates the weight of the legacy he's stepping into as the new Captain America and how this shapes the identities of those under its weight. Legacy is a double-edged sword. It can be both a burden and a source of pride, a weighty expectation that can crush or elevate those who carry it. Here, we define legacy as the act of taking on the mantle of another or continuing the mission and goals of another, all while forging one's own identity²⁸. This concept draws from Erikson's idea of identity development²⁹, where the struggle to find identity stems from the roles we inhabit and how those roles play out in the lives of these characters³⁰. Legacy, in this sense, is about navigating the tension between the past and the present, between who you are and who you're expected to be. This framework helps illuminate the journeys of characters like Sam Wilson and Yelena Belova as they redefine themselves through the weight of legacy.

Let's start with Sam Wilson. Initially introduced as the Falcon, a secondary character supporting Captain Steve Rogers in his adventures from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*³¹ to *Avengers: Endgame*³², Sam's evolution into Captain America illustrates the MCU's exploration of legacy. As he's taken on the mantle, he's had to deal with the gamut of folks questioning his ability to be Captain America, from the pressures stemming from the decision to take the super soldier serum or not in *TfatWS*³³ to President Ross telling Sam that he's not Steve Rogers in *Captain America: Brave New World*³⁴. The legacy of Captain America is steeped in ideals of justice, patriotism, and sacrifice, but it's also tied to a history that has often excluded voices like Sam's. As a Black man in America, Sam's decision to take on the mantle of Captain America is just as much a statement about representation as it is about legacy; he grapples with the expectations placed upon him by society, Steve Rogers, and himself. Sam doubts his ability to carry the mantle, feeling the weight of its legacy and questioning whether he, as a Black man in America, can or should take on the role; his initial decision to surrender the shield to the Smithsonian Museum reflects this internal conflict. Sam's journey is shaped by interactions with others who challenge and inspire him. Isaiah Bradley, a Black super-soldier who

suffered immense injustice at the hands of the U.S. government, starkly warns Sam against taking the shield, saying, "They will never let a Black man be Captain America. And even if they did, no self-respecting Black man would ever want to be" (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, S1 E5)³⁵. This moment underscores the generational and cultural pain tied to the shield, which forces Sam to reconcile his desire to honor Steve's legacy with the reality of systemic oppression. At the same time, Bucky Barnes urges Sam to reconsider, expressing frustration that Sam gave up the shield and emphasizing the faith Steve Rogers had in him. These conversations, combined with the support of his family and community in Louisiana, push Sam to confront the deeper meaning of what it means to carry the shield and its legacy. This internal conflict is an example of Erikson's identity development, where individuals must reconcile their identity with their expected roles³⁶. For Sam, this means integrating his identity as a Black man, a soldier, and a hero with the legacy of Captain America, a role traditionally filled by a white man in the context of the MCU. By carrying the shield, Sam redefines its legacy as a symbol of justice, inclusion, and hope, reflecting a broader trend within the MCU to explore diversity and representation through its characters.

Yelena Belova's story offers another compelling perspective on legacy and identity, echoing the struggles faced by Sam Wilson. As the younger adoptive sister of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Yelena's life is deeply intertwined with her family's complex legacy. Her journey is not only about stepping out of Natasha's shadow but about reclaiming her identity and forging a new path. Erikson's psychosocial stage of identity development³⁷ is relevant here, as Yelena struggles to define herself beyond her familial and professional roles. In the post-credit scene of *Black Widow*³⁸, Valentina Allegra de Fontaine manipulates Yelena's grief resulting from losing Natasha during the events of *Endgame*³⁹ by suggesting that Clint Barton is responsible for Natasha's death, setting her on a path of vengeance. This moment underscores the burden of legacy, as Yelena feels compelled to act in her sister's name, even if the truth of Natasha's sacrifice remains unclear. However, Yelena's eventual confrontation with Clint in the *Hawkeye* series⁴⁰ serves as a pivotal

moment in her journey. During their fight, Clint recounts Natasha's decision to sacrifice herself to save the world, a revelation that forces Yelena to confront the truth and reframe her understanding of her sister's legacy. This moment of emotional reckoning is where Yelena begins to transcend her trauma, choosing not to let her grief define her actions but to honor Natasha's legacy in a way that aligns with her values. Yelena's arc parallels Sam Wilson's journey in how she redefines her identity while navigating the weight of legacy. For Yelena, her family's legacy is both a burden and a source of strength. Her struggle to reconcile her past with her future and to define herself not just as Natasha's sister but as her own person is a powerful example of how legacy can shape identity. Yelena's journey reflects this, as she moves from being a product of her past to actively shaping her future, driven by her motivations rather than the expectations of others.

As we explore these characters, it's crucial to recognize that while Sam Wilson has undeniably ascended to a main character within the MCU (given he's the protagonist in *Captain America: Brave New World*⁴¹), his journey from secondary character to central figure highlights a broader narrative evolution that extends to others like Yelena Belova and Bucky (who both shift into main character status in *Thunderbolts*⁴²). The MCU's mythological world has masterfully laid the groundwork for secondary characters to evolve, enabling them to transition from the periphery to the forefront of their own stories and perhaps even within the larger narrative fabric of the MCU. Legacy and identity are deeply intertwined in this universe, as characters navigate the expectations of their roles while forging their unique paths. Whether it's Sam Wilson redefining what it means to be Captain America or Yelena Belova reclaiming her identity from her sister's shadow (and the Black Widow programming), these characters demonstrate that legacy shapes a future authentically reflecting who they are. Their growth highlights that even from the sidelines, secondary characters embark on significant journeys that can profoundly influence the main stories in essential ways. This idea resonates with my experiences working with people who feel sidelined or relegated to supporting roles in their own lives; just as these charac-

ters find their strength and voice within the MCU, we can also find value and impact in roles that may not initially seem central.

KATE AND WONG: THE DELICATE DANCE OF MENTORSHIP AND INFLUENCE WITHIN THE MCU

Tony Stark's poignant words to Peter Parker, "If you're nothing without this suit, then you shouldn't have it,"⁴³ encapsulate the essence of mentorship within the MCU. What does it mean to mentor someone to become their best self? How does influence shape a person, whether directly or indirectly? As we explore what it means to grow and expand as a secondary character, it's not lost on me that these characters I've been drawn to my whole life continue to model what it means to play the role of supporter, lifelong learner, and, eventually, be challenged to move into the forefront. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in the MCU through mentorship, where one individual supports, guides, and facilitates another's development and fosters growth in skills, character, and self-awareness⁴⁴. Mentoring relationships often encompass two primary functions: a career-related function, where the mentor provides advice to enhance the mentee's professional performance, and a psychosocial function, where the mentor offers support and serves as a role model⁴⁵. Here, we explore Kate Bishop and Wong and how attachment theory, which highlights the importance of secure bonds in fostering resilience and development⁴⁶, supports the concept of mentorship and its influence in the MCU.

Let's start with Kate Bishop and her mentee relationship with Hawkeye. Kate, deeply enamored with the Avengers, particularly Hawkeye (as she witnesses the Battle of New York, where the Avengers and Hawkeye in particular saves her; sadly, her father is not so lucky), aspires to be part of the team. Hawkeye's mentorship profoundly influences her journey beyond archery and combat training (i.e., career-related mentoring); it's about instilling the values and principles that define heroism (i.e., psychosocial mentoring)⁴⁷. Kate observes and imitates Hawkeye's behavior, gradually adopting his ethics and sense of responsibility. For example, her admiration fuels

her aspirations to become a hero, leading her to hone her archery, martial arts, and detective work skills before meeting Clint. This admiration is especially apparent when he opens up to Kate about the sacrifices he's made, including the loss of Natasha Romanoff, showing her that being a hero often involves pain and loss. This conversation shifts Kate's understanding of heroism, making her realize that it's not just about the glory of saving people but about the emotional resilience required to shoulder such responsibilities. When Clint trusts Kate to handle critical elements of their plan to stop the Tracksuit Mafia, he encourages her to rely on her instincts and skills, signaling his belief in her capabilities. This trust empowers Kate to step into her role as a hero, culminating in her creative use of trick arrows to save civilians and defeat the mafia. Through this process, Kate's identity as a hero is shaped, highlighting how mentorship, when approached with care and intention, can influence not just the development of skills but also the formation of character and ethics⁴⁸.

Wong's journey from mystical librarian to Sorcerer Supreme is another testament to the transformative power of mentorship and its role in shaping identity. Initially introduced in *Doctor Strange*⁴⁹ as a steadfast guardian of mystical knowledge, Wong is deeply committed to the traditions and rules of the mystical order. For instance, when he discovers Stephen Strange is 'playing' with the Time Stone, he warns Strange about the dangers it could unleash: "Your curiosity could have gotten you killed. You weren't manipulating the space-time continuum, you were breaking it. We do not tamper with natural law. We defend it"⁵⁰. However, as the events of the MCU unfold, his role evolves, expanding to include mentorship and the responsibility of safeguarding the multiverse. After Thanos snaps away Strange at the end of *Avengers: Infinity War*⁵¹, Wong takes over the position of Sorcerer Supreme to continue protecting Earth from mystical threats. When Strange returns, Wong becomes a mentor to him (albeit begrudgingly) and America Chavez in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*⁵², illustrating how attachment and connection underpin the dynamics of mentorship⁵³. Attachment theory emphasizes the importance of secure relationships in fostering growth and self-discovery⁵⁴. As a mentor, Wong provides the guidance, support, and stability

necessary for his mentees to navigate their growth journeys. For Doctor Strange, Wong serves as both a mentor and an equal, challenging Strange to temper his arrogance and impulsivity with discipline and respect for the mystical order. In *Multiverse of Madness*⁵⁵, this dynamic is further explored as Wong balances his role as Sorcerer Supreme with his commitment to supporting Strange's growth, even when they disagree. Wong's approach embodies the secure base described in attachment theory, allowing Strange to take risks while knowing that Wong's guidance and support are ever-present. While not as prominent as his other mentoring roles, Wong's mentorship is also demonstrated in his relationship with America Chavez. America, a young girl who can traverse the multiverse, becomes the target of sinister forces seeking to exploit her powers. Wong steps into the role of protector and guide, recognizing her vulnerability and offering her the safety of staying in Kamar-Taj to protect her from the Scarlet Witch. His empathy and willingness to bend the rigid rules of the mystical order to prioritize America's well-being reflect the core tenets of attachment theory: providing emotional security and fostering autonomy⁵⁶. Wong's mentorship, rooted in connection and trust as described by attachment theory, enables America to embrace her powers (for instance, by training her in the ways of the mystical arts at Kamar-Taj) while highlighting how secure relationships help him adapt to a changing world. Rather than clinging to the rigid expectations of the past, Wong reshapes his legacy to reflect his values, creating a balance between safeguarding the mystical realm and nurturing the next generation of heroes. This latter aspect is also reflected in his role of guiding other new heroes in the 'Multiverse Saga'. In a role resembling Nick Fury's function of tying everything together in the early stages of the 'Infinity Saga', Wong is seen bringing in Shang-Chi and his magical rings in the wider MCU storytelling, he shows up in *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*⁵⁷ mentoring former Hulk-villain Emil Blonsky/The Abomination, and he's briefly spotted in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*⁵⁸ warning Peter Parker's Spider-Man and Doctor Strange that a forgetting spell could have dangerous consequences. Overall, Wong's mentorship underscores that legacy is not just about inheriting power but about using that power to foster growth in others.

Mentorship within the MCU shows us how guidance and support can shape identity, foster resilience, and encourage growth. This dynamic is vividly illustrated through Clint Barton's mentorship of Kate Bishop in *Hawkeye*⁵⁹, where he instills skills, values, and emotional resilience as he helps Kate embrace her role as a hero. Similarly, Wong's evolution into becoming the Sorcerer Supreme highlights the transformative power of mentorship, as he provides a secure base for mentees like Doctor Strange and America Chavez. Drawing from attachment theory, Wong fosters growth by balancing empathy with leadership and empowers America to embrace her abilities. At the same time, Kate's connection to Barton's messy heroism provides a foundation to embrace her unique identity. These relationships demonstrate that mentorship, rooted in trust and connection, is not just about imparting knowledge but also about reshaping legacy to nurture the next generation.

CONCLUSION

As we conclude our exploration of the MCU's secondary characters, we must recognize how integral these figures are to the broader narrative: not just as support to the main heroes but as vital contributors to the thematic depth of the cinematic universe. This chapter delves into the rich psychological landscapes of characters like Sam Wilson, Wong, Bucky Barnes, Yelena Belova, Valkyrie, and Kate Bishop. Each of them embodies the intersection of resilience, legacy, and mentorship in deeply human ways: Bucky and Valkyrie illustrate how trauma and pain can lead to post-traumatic growth; Sam and Yelena wrestle with the burdens and redefinition of legacy as they step into new roles; Wong and Kate show us how mentorship (whether reluctant or intuitive) can shape identity and offer emotional grounding. These characters, often overshadowed by their more prominent counterparts, reveal the depth and complexity of the MCU's storytelling. They allow us to explore themes of resilience, legacy, and mentorship, not as isolated concepts but as intricately woven into the fabric of their lives. Through their narratives, we witness how these secondary figures transform

from mere supporting players into fully realized individuals with their arcs of growth and transformation.

The MCU has masterfully crafted a universe where secondary characters are integral to the franchise’s emotional and psychological depth. These narratives have captivated me, revealing many possibilities for thriving in a world that often seems to revere the main character. Through my passion for these secondary characters, I’ve found a new voice that embodies my contributions to the main narrative of humanity by courageously embarking on my journey of healing and supporting others. Their journeys offer us valuable insights into trauma, resilience, identity, legacy, mentorship, and influence. As the MCU continues to grow, so will the roles of these characters, providing audiences with rich, complex stories that resonate on both personal and cultural levels. The future of the MCU is bright, promising even more profound explorations of what it means to be human in a world of heroes.

NOTES

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THE SHAPESHIFTING PARANOIA OF ‘WHO TO TRUST’ IN MARVEL’S SECRET INVASION

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ABOUT THE EDITORS



Rowan Daneels, PhD is a Guest Professor at the Department of Communication Studies, University of Antwerp, and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. His research expertise resides in the field of (positive) media psychology, with a particular focus on the positive and eudaimonic potential of digital games, studying games not just as sources of mindless entertainment

but as providers of meaningful experiences that can inspire personal growth and self-actualization. He applies this positive media psychology approach to a broader range of media entertainment, including superhero entertainment, which led to a recently published paper in *Communications* on how superhero films and TV series can elicit heartwarming and elevating (eudaimonic) experiences. He has contributed a chapter to *The Psychgeist of Pop Culture: The Mandalorian* on morality and to *The Psychgeist of Pop Culture: The Legend of Zelda* on the topics of loneliness and friendship. Other research interests include perceived realism of digital games, eSports, and emergent communication technologies such as VR and (generative) AI. He's a science communication advocate, which is illustrated by a series of interviews for news media outlets and a popular video lecture for the 'Universiteit van Vlaanderen'—a science communication platform supported by the Flemish universities and the Flemish public broadcast, VRT—on the negative and positive effects of digital games. When provided with the opportunity to join an MCU team, Rowan would want to be a member of the MCU's Illuminati. Who wouldn't want to have secret superhero

meetings while trying not to get spaghettified by a raging Scarlet Witch?



Alexander Vandewalle, PhD is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Ghent University, where he investigates the reception of Greco-Roman mythology and history in video games through the lens of characterization and (counter-)hegemony. He holds a PhD in Film Studies and Visual Culture from the University of Antwerp, and a PhD in Literary Studies from Ghent University. His work has focused on various aspects of the ancient world in games (including mythology, aesthetics, intertextuality, epigraphy, pedagogy, and haptic feedback) as well as characterization in video games, game analysis methodology, player experiences of historical video games, developer motivations in game production, and broader media franchises like *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He is also the creator of *Paizomen* (www.paizomen.com), a work-in-progress database of video games set in classical antiquity. If offered the opportunity (and a working portal) to jump into the MCU, he'd solve riddles (and fight tomb robbers) with Moon Knight, train with Iron Fist, geek out with Ms. Marvel, or hang with the Fantastic Four.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lars de Wildt is assistant professor in media at the University of Groningen. He studies videogames, religion, conspiracy culture, hegemony, and the relationship between media and worldviews more broadly. Lars' ideal MCU team is F.E.A.S.T., a non-profit charity for Food, Emergency Aid, Shelter & Training, run by May Parker.

Dr Martin Flanagan co-authored *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (2016, Bloomsbury), the first full-length scholarly study of the production entity, with Mike McKenny and Andy Livingstone. He has written on Marvel's presentation of its own history in *Drawing the Past* volume 1, published in 2022 with University Press of Mississippi. Publishing regularly on comic book, superheroic and general contemporary Hollywood themes (*Authorship*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *IXQUIC* and *Closure* journals), Flanagan's work has appeared at international conferences and in publications from *The Australian* to *The Independent* (UK). From 2014-2024, Flanagan led the Film Studies BA at University of Salford, UK, where he still teaches on cinema and comics topics. If he was to join an MCU team, Flanagan would surprise himself by not choosing his *favourite* team (the Fantastic Four), but the Guardians of the Galaxy. This is because he thinks he'd be recognised as a fellow traveller by this ragtag collective of disparate freaks and egos; and also that Quill would probably see him as less of a threat than Thor.

Ben Jones, PhD, is an assistant professor of marriage and family therapy at the University of Southern Mississippi, where he is currently researching parent-adolescent relationship factors that influ-

ence adolescent mental health outcomes. In addition to his time spent in research, Ben also works with couples, families, and individuals as a marriage and family therapist. He, his wife, his daughter, and their dog can be found hiking on the weekends or settling deep into their couch with good books for some family reading time (or more often than not for him, graphic novels). Ben has a deep love and appreciation for all things sci-fi and pop culture, but it's the Uncanny X-Men that hold the keys to his heart. He was introduced to them at a young age in the early 90s through a Pizza Hut promotion (he's got a framed copy of the promotional placemat in his office to prove it) and hasn't gone a day without them since. Like most fans, he's partial to the Claremont era, but all of it has kept him on the edge of his seat for the last three decades. He'd like to be clear with the readers on two things - Wanda *is* a mutant, and Magneto *is* her father. No amount of retconning can change his mind.

Monique Luisi, PhD, is an Assistant Professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, University of Missouri. Her research focuses on the intersection of health communication and media, aiming to address disparities in health discourse. Notably, her work on vaccine communication, exploring social media's impact on HPV vaccination decisions, has been published in prestigious journals like *Vaccine*. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, she expanded her research to misinformation surrounding the vaccines. Beyond vaccines, Monique investigates underserved groups' experiences in health media and the intersection of race, gender, mental health, and ethics. Her work in this area has been published in journals such as *Howard Journal of Communication*, *Journal of Homosexuality*, and *School Psychology*. Through interdisciplinary approaches and community engagement, Monique aims to contribute to a more inclusive health communication discourse. This is probably why she is a strong stand for team Guardians of the Galaxy. This ragtag group of heroes doesn't judge you (too badly) if you take a joke literally, if you have antennae, or if your parent tried to end the lives of half of your entire universe with one snap. They are often trying to get through life one-day at time as a chosen family, earn a bit of coin, rough up some bad guys, while also

trying to have some fun and listen to the banging beat – and Monique (the Destroyer) can *really* relate!

Tim Luisi, PhD, is an Assistant Teaching Professor at the University of Missouri in the Department of Communication. In addition to teaching duties, he maintains an active research agenda that focuses on representation in popular media. Tim particularly enjoys exploring the influence of masculinity, femininity, race, and other identities, and how these impact audience personal identity development across their various life stages. Lately, Tim's research has centered mainly on Disney media's influence on how people see and relate to one another. More specific, he is particularly interested in conversations between children and their guardians about Disney media as they offer insights into audience perceptions about other people, biases, family dynamics, and media literacy. Tim has published scholarship focusing on the influence of iconic works such as the *Toy Story* (1-3), *Black Panther*, *Moana*, *Wonder Woman*, *The Emperor's New Groove*, and *Pocahontas*. His work has appeared in journals such as *Journal of Children and Media*, *Psychology of Popular Media*, and *The Journal of Men's Studies*. He is excited to be a part of a team of authors exploring the Marvel Cinematic Universe. If he could join any team in the MCU, he would absolutely team up with the Guardians of the Galaxy. While other teams may be more professional, no team has as much fun, listens to better music, or sees as many sights as the Guardians. In short, Tim is Groot.

Claire Meagher has her BA from the University of Waterloo, MA from the University of Guelph, and is currently studying for her PhD from Trent University in Peterborough, Canada. Her areas of specialization include academic writing, the representation of classical mythology in popular culture, and historical narrative. Claire was drawn to the MCU as she loves how acts of heroism can be grand and stories can last for thousands of years, but also translate to the kind acts that we can do for each other, everyday. Claire would be a part of the Time Variance Authority, carefully monitoring the growth of the multiverse. In her opinion, this is the best place to be, especially when one can watch all the stories unfold from across the universes.

Hanne Nijtmans is an American Studies PhD Candidate at the University of Groningen (Netherlands). Her project, titled 'Conspiracy Care Work: Gender, Labor, and the Paranoid Style in American Podcasting' focuses on the recent resurgence of the paranoid style in American culture (2012-present), and pays special attention to the role that gender and emotional labor play in shaping paranoia in fictional podcasts. Beyond this project, her research interests include the way in which new media such as video games and interactive narratives construct agency, and the emergence of 'millennial' socialism in the US. The MCU team she would join has to be The Illuminati, because as a conspiracy theory scholar, a universe where the Illuminati are visibly in power sounds irresistible.

Maciej Paprocki is an academic specialist at the University of Wrocław, Poland, and studies ancient Greek gods as depicted in epic poetry and modern media: their powers, limitations, fears, and wants. He has worked as a historical consultant, helping to develop *Apotheon* (2015), a video game set in the mythological storyworld of ancient Greece. His recent work includes papers on deicide and divine vulnerability in popular culture and a co-edited volume on Achilles' mother, Thetis (De Gruyter). Lover of all things myth, poetry, and magic, he aspires to become another Doctor Strange and go on a fantastic adventure across the multiverse.

Carlos Ramírez-Moreno holds a PhD in Communication and is Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication and Education at Loyola Andalucía University, where he teaches *Audiovisual Language and Narrative*, and *Game Design*. He is also the coordinator of the Degree in Audiovisual Communication. He did two pre-doctoral stays at the University of Tampere and at Charles University in Prague, before receiving his PhD in 2021. He has also completed a postdoctoral stay at the International Christian University in Tokyo. Currently, his research focuses on the study of media as a space for the representation of identities, especially minority and/or subaltern ones. When academia allows him, he likes to join video game development as a game and narrative designer, having already several projects in his portfolio.

He also plays the drums from time to time. No doubt he would join the Eternals, this time to do something good for humanity!

Dr. Mercedes Samudio, DSW, LCSW (she/her/hers; residing on Tongva Land) is a licensed clinical social worker, bestselling author, international speaker, visionary entrepreneur, and innovative African American mental health researcher. She works with parents worldwide to develop a healthy parental identity with her revolutionary Parental Identity Development (PID) Model. She incorporates her Shame-Proof Parenting™ philosophy to help reduce the shame parents experience as they raise healthy children. Mercedes is also trained in trauma-informed modalities, which she uses in her work with parents to help them heal the past traumas that can influence the ways parents interact with themselves and their children. Outside of her professional life supporting parents, Mercedes is married to her best friend and soulmate, and they live in sunny Southern California with their 3 fur kids (2 cats and a dog). Mercedes is also a self-proclaimed Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) mythologist who would readily join the X-men as she feels their fight for equity and inclusion mirrors her own advocacy work!

Christine Tomlinson, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in the School of Arts, Media, and Engineering at Arizona State University. Previously, Christine was a lecturer in the School of Social Sciences at the University of California, Irvine and a postdoctoral researcher with the SDU Metaverse Lab at the University of Southern Denmark. While the author's work primarily focuses on video games, Christine also investigates popular culture and online fan interactions and has taught topics related to popular culture and the MCU's cultural influence. Christine is also a long time MCU and Deadpool fan who has often been found at movie releases or trawling the rows in local comic shops. Given the chance to work with an MCU team, Christine would want to join up with the Guardians of the Galaxy to do, "something good, something bad... bit of both" while stumbling through saving the uni-(or multi)verse.

Mark D. White is a professor of philosophy at the College of Staten Island, where he teaches courses in philosophy, economics, and law. His scholarly work is focused on ethics and economics, including his monograph, *Kantian Ethics and Economics* (Stanford University Press), and his edited volume, *The Oxford Handbook of Ethics and Economics* (Oxford University Press), as well as policy-oriented authored work such as *Rights Versus Antitrust* (Agenda) and *The Manipulation of Choice* (Palgrave). His public-facing work is focused on superheroes and philosophy; his authored books include *The Virtues of Captain America* (Wiley), *Batman and Ethics* (Wiley), and the *A Philosopher Reads...* series from Ockham, and he has also edited or co-edited seven volumes in the Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture series on Batman, the Avengers, Watchmen, and others. He hopes he will be called to understudy for the Thing in an upcoming MCU Fantastic Four film; at the very least, it would save the studio so much money by not having to use make-up or CGI.

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