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## Resistant Vulnerability in The Marvel Cinematic Universe's Captain America

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Media Studies

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## Abstract

Established in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has become a ubiquitous transmedia sensation. Its uniquely interwoven narrative provides auspicious grounds for scholarly consideration. The franchise conscientiously presents larger-than-life superheroes as complex and incredibly emotional individuals who form profound interpersonal relationships with one another. This thesis explores Sarah Hagelin's concept of resistant vulnerability, which she defines as a "shared human experience," as it manifests in the substantial relationships that Steve Rogers (Captain America) cultivates throughout the *Captain America* narrative (11). This project focuses on Steve's relationships with the following characters: Agent Peggy Carter, Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), and Bucky Barnes (The Winter Soldier).

## Keywords

Marvel Cinematic Universe, Captain America, Agent Carter, resistant vulnerability, feminist textual analysis, Avengers

## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Marion Allison, who was endlessly supportive of my academics along with everything else in my life. Wherever somewhere is, I know that she is proud; this certainty derives from the unconditional love that she shared with us. I aspire to pass her love, kindness, and compassion forward to others in my life.

It is also for my dear friend, Benjamin McGirr. I can only imagine the endearingly brusque things you would say about my adoration for Chris Evans' beard. Thank you for encouraging me to pursue my passions and for ensuring I always knew just how loved I was (am).

à l'infini...

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I owe everything I have, and everything I am, to my family: my parents Patricia and Earl, Grandpa Joe, and Aunt Leslie. A mere “thank you” is not an adequate means to express the immeasurable love and gratitude I have for you (and the perpetual flow of Diet Coke). To my younger siblings, Lindsay and Joey: you are both smart little cookies, albeit little cookies who are taller than me. I love you and am so proud to be your sister.

A wise man once said “family don’t end with blood,” which is a notion I heartily agree with. Whether it be encouraging messages, proof-reading, or “watermelons of friendship,” my friends’ boundless reassurance means everything to me. You are my family.

To my wonderful grad cohort: whilst I feel like the Little Engine That Could, you have always supported and understood me in a way I never expected. Thank you for showing me that school (and life, really) need not be a competition. After all, “Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship, and bravery.”

Sam, my beautiful partner in everything, you are incredible. You are my courage, my inspiration, and the best alarm clock ever. I could not have done this without your unwavering support and love. “I’d rather have you,” always.

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## Chapter 1

### 1 Introduction

When selecting the Marvel Cinematic Universe's *Captain America* narrative as the core text of this project, I toyed with several potential avenues of study.<sup>1</sup> Due to the MCU's significant affective value, I initially sought to understand how audiences received and interpreted these stories by analyzing fans' reparative readings of the texts, focusing specifically on femslash fanfiction.<sup>2</sup> It became clear, however, that the topic's breadth did not fit the parameters of this project. Moving forward, I considered Marvel Studios' appropriation of fan labour and meaning-making into a bait-and-switch model of queer representation, which simultaneously placates queer fans whilst remaining commercially-viable.<sup>3</sup> Yet this topic would certainly emphasize the most prominent relationships in the series – those between men – thereby offering little leeway to consider the compelling, multifaceted women of *CA*. Hence I chose to focus on the substantial relationships Steve Rogers (Captain America) cultivates with his cohorts, regardless of their gender. It is within these relationships that I explore Sarah Hagelin's notion of resistant vulnerability, which posits vulnerability as a "shared human experience" that need not be gendered female (11).

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of brevity, I will henceforth refer to the Marvel Cinematic Universe as the MCU and *Captain America* as *CA*. Please consult the appendices for guidance re: acronyms used in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Femslash refers to a subsection of fanfiction wherein a romantic and/or sexual relationship exists between two female-presenting individuals. My initial work focused on Peggy Carter and Angie Martinelli, commonly known by their portmanteau Cartinelli, from *Agent Carter*.

<sup>3</sup> My primary focus was "queer baiting," a form of pseudo-queer content in which creators knowingly tease LGBTQ2+ themes without including explicit representation of the queer community (Mitchell).

Now, I realize that selecting an ostensibly strapping alpha male as my primary figure of interest is a peculiar choice for a queer intersectional feminist; please, allow me to elucidate. Due to a nasty case of anxiety-induced perfectionism, the completion of this project has taken substantially longer than anticipated. I became disenchanted with the story that I once loved and lamentably contemplated abandoning the project altogether. I was advised to reflect upon my initial attraction to the narrative and what prompted me to study it. During the year that *The First Avenger* (2011) premiered, I lost someone very important to me. In my grief, I felt raw, disengaged, and dreadfully exposed. Although my loved ones were experiencing similar pain, I felt irrevocably alone. Soon thereafter I was introduced to the MCU and was immediately drawn to Captain America's story. Steve's courage, intelligence, and empathy are reminiscent of traits that I so admired in my dear friend – as well as his exasperating, but eternally endearing, stubbornness. I grew to cherish Steve because he exhibited an inherent and relatable aura of humanness. This familiarity was amplified with the release of the miniseries *Agent Carter* (2015-2016) in which Agent Peggy Carter navigates a post-war, and post-Steve, world. Despite battling incredible heartache, Peggy remains courageous, kind, and determined; she is someone I continue to look to for inspiration and strength.

I have always found comfort in fictional universes, especially those that feature intelligent and resourceful women. My childhood was spent with the likes of Hermione Granger, the March sisters, Anne (with an "e" of course), and Matilda. Though I did not receive a Hogwarts letter on my eleventh birthday nor sport decidedly carrot-coloured braids (much to my chagrin), their stories gave me a hopeful and comforting message:

“you are not alone.”<sup>4</sup> These characters further demonstrated that passion does not hinder intelligence but rather works to enhance one’s competency. While it is imperative to recognize bias, a researcher is not required to be a “professional faultfinder” to substantiate their credibility (Robinson 8). Moreover, the “persistence of shame” that hovers over aca-fans (particularly those of us who identify as women) must be extinguished (Zubernis and Larsen 6-11).<sup>5</sup> Pleasure and scholarly pursuit need not be mutually exclusive.

Akin to the heroines of my youth, the women in the MCU have greatly affected my life personally and academically. However, unlike when I was a child, I am now able to perceive the entrenched patriarchal constraints that determine the worlds these women inhabit and those surrounding their creation. Mary DeMarchi veritably argues that female representation in the MCU is “monolithic” and contends that women “function only to serve as love interests, objects that inspire love or fear of loss for the superheroes, or sources of (primarily emotional) support” (24). DeMarchi demonstrates her claim by reviewing the quasi-feminist images of early MCU characters. Stark Industries CEO Pepper Potts and Dr. Betty Ross, both successful women in their fields, ultimately become bargaining chips in Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Bruce Banner’s (The Incredible Hulk) battles against their adversaries. Similarly, although introduced as a brilliant astrophysicist, Jane Foster becomes an infantilized object that Thor literally carries with him through his intergalactic travels. Indeed, even Avenger Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow) falls prey to this snare; her potential for independent, nuanced exploration has

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<sup>4</sup> *Matilda* (6:50-7:25).

<sup>5</sup> Aca-fan, an academic who self-identifies as a fan, is a term popularized in Matt Hills’ *Fan Cultures* but stems from very early academic considerations of fandom.

repeatedly been denied. Though Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige has humoured inquiries regarding a Black Widow solo film for years,<sup>6</sup> Natasha's story thus far exists only within the confines of male-fronted films (Bradley).<sup>7</sup>

However, there has been an intermediate shift regarding cinematic heroines. Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* (2017) smashed box office records as the "highest grossing superhero origin film of all time" and has brought female superheroes to the forefront of cultural conversation (M. Hughes). The MCU has introduced female characters such as Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch), whose power is derived from an Infinity Stone and who is arguably the most powerful hero in the franchise thus far; Valkyrie, the sole remaining member of the elite, all-female group of Asgardian warriors called the Valkyrie; and Gamora, "the fiercest woman in the galaxy."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, *Black Panther* (2018) impressively allied its protagonist T'Challa with an assemblage of incredibly diverse women: "brave warriors, brilliant scientist, fearless spies, and queens" (Yamato).<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Marvel Studios' first female-fronted film *Captain Marvel* will be released in March of 2019. Yet even with these developments, the MCU remains a challenging and patriarchal space. One cannot ignore that Captain Marvel's cinematic debut comes almost eleven years after the MCU's inaugural film release.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, female characters remained tethered to male-dominated storylines. Wanda's entire purpose in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) is to protect Vision, remaining by his side even when she is greatly

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<sup>6</sup> As of April 2018, Marvel has reportedly hired a writer to pen a Black Widow prequel film; the Winter Soldier is rumoured to make an appearance (Hood).

<sup>7</sup> Natasha appears in *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Captain America: Civil War*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Avengers: Endgame*.

<sup>8</sup> *Infinity War* (1:07:34-1:07:48).

<sup>9</sup> These women include Dora Milaje bodyguard Okoye, T'Challa's younger sister Shuri (whose scientific prowess rivals that of Bruce Banner and Tony Stark), spy Nakia, and his mother, Queen Ramonda.

<sup>10</sup> *Iron Man* was released on May 2, 2008 in North America.



needed on the battlefield. Gamora becomes the Mad Titan Thanos' sacrificial lamb, thrown to her death so he may obtain the Soul Stone. Her death devastates him, serving to humanize the galactic warlord, as well as her boyfriend Peter Quill (Star Lord), whose grief-stricken irrationality directly contributes to Thanos' victory at *Infinity War's* conclusion.<sup>11</sup> Thus, despite moderate progression, female characters still serve to further their male cohorts' stories.

Hagelin contends that resistant vulnerability depends on counterintuitive images: “not fragile but triumphant women, and not victorious but penetrable men” (23). As exemplified by Betty Ross or Jane Foster, the MCU's portrayal of female vulnerability has often hinged on traditional notions of frailty and helplessness. However, I argue that the representation of vulnerable superheroines has shifted in the past four years, allotting female characters the nuance previously reserved for their male counterparts. Not only are women physically powerful, illustrated by Wakanda's Dora Milaje and the Valkyries for instance, but they retain their capacity to hurt.<sup>12</sup> This seemingly incongruous view correlates with Hagelin's claim that resistant vulnerability “encompasses the openness and susceptibility associated with vulnerability” with “the counterintuitive frisson of resistance” (4).

This thesis analyzes resistant vulnerability as it appears in *Captain America*, specifically regarding the relationships Steve forms throughout the narrative. I hypothesize that resistant vulnerability flourishes amidst genuine reciprocity and

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<sup>11</sup> After decimating half her planet and orphaning her, Thanos “adopts” Gamora and trains her as a ruthless warrior for almost two decades; he grows to love her whilst she detests him. She asserts in *Infinity War*: “I am not your daughter. Everything I hate about myself, you taught me” (1:05:24-1:08:16).

<sup>12</sup> The Dora Milaje are an elite force of female bodyguards sworn to protect the Wakandan royal family.

counterintuitive images of vulnerability manifest via characters' profound relationships. Nevertheless, I also consider the gendered lens through which these characters continue to be crafted and represented. I seek to discover whether resistant vulnerability truly equalizes the experiences of male and female characters, or if male-centred narratives persist.

## 1.1 The Marvel Cinematic Universe

The modern superhero narrative has thrived in popular cinema since Richard Donner's *Superman* was released in 1978. It is only recently, however, that superheroes have garnered "unprecedented" attention from scholars (Alaniz 7). Perhaps recalling such films as Joel Schumacher's "over the top" *Batman* movies, critics and audiences alike have often viewed superhero films as simplistic, mass-marketed blockbusters (Katzman).<sup>13</sup> Yet superhero films are often based in a reality palpable to viewers. For example, *X-Men* (2000) established realism from its outset per a flashback set in Auschwitz in 1944 and viewed through a child's perspective. In adopting such a serious tone, the film immediately differentiated itself from superhero movies of the past. Moreover, the *X-Men* franchise continuously uses its mutant narrative as a metaphor for the difficulties encountered by minority groups, though notably without explicit representation (Granger).<sup>14</sup> Following *X-Men*'s example, films such as Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy were approached as character studies, rather

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<sup>13</sup> *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman & Robin* (1997).

<sup>14</sup> In *X2* (2003), Bobby Drake (Iceman) "comes out" to his parents. *X2*'s script heavily recalls a formulaic coming out story. For instance, Bobby's mother desperately implores, "Have you tried *not* being a mutant?" (59:22-59:44). Interestingly, Bobby came out as gay in the comic-verse during Pride Month 2015 (Bendis).

than blockbuster films; this approach enabled audiences to relate to Peter Parker and Bruce Wayne, rather than merely witness the spectacles of a costumed web-slinger and the macabre caped crusader (NurseManhattan). It is through breaking genre expectations that superhero films of the past seventeen years have successfully presented multi-faceted characters who resonate with audiences and offer numerous opportunities for scholarly exploration. None have been as successful or genre-breaking, however, as the MCU.

Produced by Marvel Studios, a subsidiary of Walt Disney Studios, the MCU is a transmedia franchise based upon characters and stories appearing in Marvel Comics.<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that not all Marvel films are a part of the MCU. It is easy to lose track of which superhero films belong in each universe, as well as which studio produces them. To avoid bankruptcy in the 1990s, Marvel Comics Inc. was forced to sign licencing contracts allotting third party film distributors considerable control of various Marvel properties, including popular properties such as *The Incredible Hulk* (Universal Pictures), *Blade* (New Line Cinema), *Spider-Man* (Sony Pictures), *The Punisher* and *Ghost Rider* (Lionsgate), and the *X-Men*, *Daredevil*, and *The Fantastic Four* (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) (Chipman). Founded in 1996, Marvel Studios has since reclaimed the rights to most of these characters, assisted greatly by its merger with Disney in 2009 (Vejvoda). They have also worked collaboratively with other studios by honouring pre-existing distribution deals<sup>16</sup> and striking up new arrangements altogether, as was the case with their team-up

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<sup>15</sup> A transmedia franchise is “a single commercial entity deployed across multiple mediums, with content built by aggregate across disparate formats which converge together in a fluid entity” (Flanagan 29).

<sup>16</sup> Originally holding a six-film distribution contract, Paramount Pictures distributed the first four films in the MCU, discounting *The Incredible Hulk*. Walt Disney Studios bought Paramount out of the two final films in its deal in 2010, thereby reverting rights and control to Marvel Studios (Finke and Fleming Jr.). Universal maintains distribution rights to any standalone Hulk movie that Marvel Studios creates, which is perhaps why a solo Hulk film has not been made since 2008’s *The Incredible Hulk* - aside from the character’s abysmal Box Office reputation (Cannata-Bowman).

with Sony on *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017).<sup>17</sup> In independently producing their films, Marvel Studios regains the authority to create “lasting, public interpretations of these characters” (Flanagan 19). Indeed, as Kevin Feige states regarding the studios’ recent deal with Sony: “Marvel’s involvement will hopefully deliver the creative continuity and authenticity that fans demand from the MCU.”<sup>18</sup>

Since its inception with *Iron Man* in 2008, the MCU has accrued nineteen subsequent films, three ABC series, six Netflix series, five short films, and numerous one-shot comics that prelude or supplement the feature films, which remain the focal point of the franchise.<sup>19</sup> It is the highest grossing film franchise both within the United States and worldwide (7, 197.5\$), surpassing other long-running fantastical franchises such as *Star Wars* (4, 220.7\$), J.K. Rowling’s *Wizarding World* (2, 785.4\$), and *Batman* (2,407.7\$). Fox’s *X-Men* is the third most successful superhero-centric franchise (2, 362.7\$) while rival company DC’s latest films, distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures, appear much further down the list (1, 921.8\$).<sup>20</sup> Even within the superhero realm, the MCU is unique because it employs an ever-growing, interwoven narrative that cohesively sprawls between film, television, and tie-in comic books. Furthermore, due to its expansive nature, the MCU encourages engagement and affective investment; viewers must imbibe all prior “chapters” to fully comprehend and appreciate the universe (“Spider-Man” Opam). Although DC/Warner Bros. has attempted to construct an

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<sup>17</sup> Despite *Homecoming*’s success, it seems this “shared custody” of Spider-Man is an ongoing deliberation. While Peter Parker has thus far appeared in three MCU films, various Sony projects featuring Spider-Verse characters, such as *Venom* (2018), are not considered part of the MCU; as Kevin Feige states: “That is Sony’s project.” As it rests, Spider-Man/Peter Parker is an MCU character and any appearance in Sony’s forthcoming endeavors is unknown (“Spider-Man” Opam).

<sup>18</sup> “Sony Pictures Entertainment Brings Marvel Studios Into the Amazing World of Spider-Man.”

<sup>19</sup> Please see the appendices for a chronological list of MCU feature film summaries.

<sup>20</sup> Accessed from *Box Office Mojo* on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019. Film grosses are listed in millions of dollars.

interdependent universe with their *Justice League* arc, there is a pronounced disconnect between DC cinema and television and a lack of cohesion between the films themselves.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, following *Wonder Woman*'s release DC Entertainment president Diane Nelson announced DC would no longer strive for the narrative consistency that Marvel Studios has created; she affirmed that there will be “no insistence upon an overall story line or interconnectivity” going forward (Gartenberg). Thus, lavish with inimitable fodder, it is Marvel Studios' prowess as a unified story-teller that delineates the MCU as a unique forerunner for scholarly exploration.<sup>22</sup>

Much like its comic origins, the MCU consistently emphasises the physical and emotional vulnerability of its characters to construct “more honest” characters than its competitors (Quesada 150). Indeed, Marvel Comics' writer Stan Lee states:

I try to make the characters seem as believable and realistic as possible. In order to do that, I have to place them in the real world, or, if the story is set in an imaginary world, I have to try to make that imaginary world as realistic-seeming as possible, so the character doesn't exist in a vacuum. He has to have friends, enemies, people he's in love with, people he doesn't love – just like any human being. I try to take the superhero and put him in as normal a world as possible, and the contrast between him and his power and the normal world is one of the things

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<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that DC/Warner Bros. had no intention to blend its televisual and cinematic narratives. However, the lack of consistency in this “split universe” is confusing and compromises the overall impact and presentation of the franchise (Rawden).

<sup>22</sup> Notably, two of DC/Warner Bros.' six released films focus on female characters: Diana of Themyscira's origin story *Wonder Woman* and *Suicide Squad*, which features psychiatrist turned colourful supervillain Harley Quinn. Marvel Studios has taken over a decade (and nineteen films) to release a female-fronted venture, which bolsters claims of DC's “upper hand” regarding gender diversity (Child). Although outside the scope of this project, it would be interesting to compare DC and Marvel's depiction of superheroines.

that make the stories colourful and believable and interesting. (“More Than Normal, But Believable” 116)

Whether enhanced, gifted, or entirely mortal, the fundamental humanness of Marvel’s characters is underscored by their physical and emotional susceptibility to pain.<sup>23</sup> From its outset, the MCU has placed its protagonists in perilous situations that compromise their physical well-being. For example, *Iron Man* begins in war-torn Afghanistan where Tony is critically wounded by a rogue missile manufactured by his own company, Stark Industries; an electromagnet is placed in his chest to prevent shrapnel from reaching his heart. Whilst imprisoned by the terrorist organization known as the Ten Rings, Tony creates the first arc reactor: a powerful energy source which powers his body and later the eponymous Iron Man suit itself. As the first protagonist audiences encounter when stepping into the MCU, Tony is established as an incredibly fallible and physically vulnerable character. Subsequent MCU films display a plethora of situations which leave characters – even the Asgardian god of thunder, Thor – with injuries ranging from gunshot wounds to dismemberment, and in some cases, even death, thus further demonstrating the heroes’ physical vulnerability.

Furthermore, the MCU conscientiously presents larger-than-life superheroes as complex, incredibly relatable beings who encounter psychological concerns that are identifiable to viewers. Tony experiences debilitating panic attacks after the traumatic events of *The Avengers* (2012) whilst Thor struggles to maintain a relationship with his wayward brother Loki, despite the latter’s insistence on crafting mischief and

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<sup>23</sup> An enhanced individual’s power comes from human-made science and/or experimentation whereas gifted individuals are naturally born with their powers (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* 2x13, “One of Us”).

destruction.<sup>24</sup> Steve Rogers becomes progressively alienated from his team members as he attempts to navigate contemporary society, and numerous characters experience the loss of loved ones.<sup>25</sup> Through intimate portrayals of these characters, viewers become privy to their ongoing dealings with responsibility, grief, mental health, and Shakespearean levels of familial dysfunction. Moreover, the triumphs and tribulations that occur in the heroes' solo endeavors converge in the *Avengers* crossover films; the team attempts to complement each other's strengths and weaknesses in search of emotional balance and unity. Thus, as a space which presents its heroes as susceptible to weakness rather than invincibly super-powered, the MCU offers an auspicious lens through which to analyze physical and emotional vulnerability, as well as the heroes' interpersonal relationships.<sup>26</sup>

## 1.2 Vulnerability Defined

In her book *Reel Vulnerability*, Hagelin defines vulnerability as “susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury” but also refers to one's sense of self (2). She states that vulnerability habitually connotes “a system of beliefs, images, and narratives that imply a capacity to be harmed” and generally entails “a powerlessness or victimization,” especially concerning the female body (3). Hagelin seeks to dismantle this tiresome

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<sup>24</sup> Ready to sacrifice himself for the betterment of the team (and the world), Tony re-routed a missile into space, thus derailing an alien invasion; he scarcely survived an unconscious freefall back to Earth.

<sup>25</sup> This is perhaps most prominently exemplified at the end of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) when Thanos eviscerates half the universe (including many of the Avengers and the Guardians of the Galaxy).

<sup>26</sup> This differs from DC's films, in which characters are indisputably invincible: the only thing that can kill Diana, who is a god, is another god; Superman returns from the dead in *Justice League* (2017). While MCU characters have superficially cheated death through trickery or technological intervention, none have returned from the finality of the grave.

notion of female fragility in a way that surpasses “physically strong” women and “emotionally vulnerable” men (10-11). In classifying various forms of the term, Hagelin posits an embodiment of susceptibility that equalizes the experience of vulnerability between genders (11).

### 1.3 Hagelin’s Three Models of Vulnerability

Hagelin outlines three on-screen models of vulnerability: the traditional model, the model that entails “overcoming vulnerability through masculine aggression,” and the model of resistant vulnerability (3). The traditional model of vulnerability “sees women as especially vulnerable to pain and injury, and reads pain and injury as debilitating to the female subject” (3). Narratives that employ this model of vulnerability adhere to archaic gender conventions and often depict women as damsels in distress who depend on assistance from a male hero. This model has been viciously exploited by the superhero genre. One need only think of Gwen Stacy’s tragic death or the countless kidnappings of Mary-Jane (MJ) Watson to recognize this tendency.<sup>27</sup> However, the MCU’s *Spider-Man: Homecoming* marginally challenges this tradition. Contra to her habitual characterization, MJ is intelligent, socially aware, and exists on the periphery of high school popularity. While the MCU’s MJ is relatively progressive, it is important to note that she is not Peter Parker’s love interest in this film; that distinction goes to Liz Toomes. Captain of her school’s Decathlon team, Liz is also clever but finds herself in need of rescue at multiple

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<sup>27</sup> In Sony’s *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* for example, Peter Parker (Spider Man) attempts to save Gwen from a free-fall; his webbing pulls taught, breaking her back and killing her. Scott Mendelson states that despite being a compelling character, “the most important thing” about Gwen is her death, which “only matters in how it affects the male superhero and how he grows or changes.”



points in the film. As demonstrated by Liz's reliance on Peter's heroics, traditional ideas of victimhood and vulnerability remain stanchly affixed in this recent MCU venture.

Hagelin supplies two antonyms for vulnerability, "invincibility" and "resistance," which manifest in two ways: rape-revenge heroines and the objectified figures of fantasy (4). Jacinda Read contends that female-centered rape-revenge films provide a "coherent, popular, and ongoing" space to observe and chart the significance of "the changing inscription of feminism" in popular cinema (6). Tim Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992) features Selina Kyle who, through her death and subsequent feline resurrection, becomes the vigilante Catwoman. Her first act is to save a woman from a rapist and reprimand the would-be victim for being unable to defend herself. Yet rape-revenge heroines still partake in traditional models of vulnerability as their bodies are perceived as always "on the edge of violation" (Hagelin 4). In addition to losing eight of her nine lives to male violence, Catwoman's form-fitting vinyl costume could be construed as provocative, thus inviting objectification.<sup>28</sup>

There are also "invincible" fantasy figures like Wonder Woman who, while certainly empowering, concern viewers; her invulnerability feels like "a dodge, a lie, a betrayal of what we know as feminists about the ethical cost of violence" (Hagelin 4). Due to the MCU's focus on its heroes' humanity, characters are seldom presented as invincible. One such character is Jessica Jones, a private investigator and reluctant defender of Hell's Kitchen who has experienced sexual and psychological assault. One might assume that she falls into the pitfalls of both the rape-revenge heroine and, because

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<sup>28</sup> Personally, I would argue that her self-made costume enables Selina to embrace her sexuality and harness a dormant sense of independence and agency. However, her appearance does serve the traditional male gaze and could therefore be considered problematic.

she possesses superhuman strength and durability, the invincible fantasy figure. However, withstanding fragilities such as broken bones and panic attacks, Jessica’s story provides “a powerful, nuanced mediation on not only rape, but also on the nature of consent” (“Jessica Jones” Opam). Unlike much mainstream media where sexual assault is often sensationalized, *Jessica Jones* (2015-) focuses on the fallout rather than the act itself; moreover, the audience relies on Jessica’s perspective to understand her trauma.<sup>29</sup> Rather than invincibility, then, Hagelin’s interests lie in resistance – as do the interests of this project.

## 1.4 Research Questions

- 1) I hypothesize that resistant vulnerability reveals itself within the relationships Steve forms with Peggy Carter, Natasha Romanoff, and Bucky Barnes. I will explore how, and to what degree, that vulnerability is represented. I will also ascertain whether the narrative offers diverse and counterintuitive images that subvert gendered vulnerability, thereby supporting an equal “shared” experience, or remains shackled to patriarchal and corporate constraints (Hagelin 11).
- 2) As outlined in this introduction, the representation of female vulnerability in the MCU has shifted from one of abiding victimhood to a more resistant model. Nevertheless, there remains a tendency to romanticize male suffering in film at the

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<sup>29</sup> In the same year *Jessica Jones*’ premiered, HBO’s *Game of Thrones* aired a controversial episode in which Sansa Stark is sexually assaulted. The harrowing scene was exploitative and hinged on her male friend’s horror; his perspective was emphasized rather than Sansa’s (5x06 “Unbowed, Unbent, Unbroken”).

expense of female characters; vulnerability often works to further develop male characters whilst relegating female vulnerability to a mere plot-device.<sup>30</sup> I will investigate whether resistant vulnerability in *Captain America* challenges these tendencies, thus cultivating nuanced, character-driven narratives regardless of gender.

## 1.5 Avengers Assemble: Chapter Breakdown

The remainder of this project begins in Chapter 2 with a review of existing scholarship regarding the MCU, which largely focuses on transmedia viewership, female representation, and the development of Marvel’s “house style.” From there, the vulnerability of the superhero (specifically the on-screen superhero) is investigated using examples from both Marvel Comics and the MCU. The following sections focus on the patriarchal constraints of the superhero genre and the evolution of superheroines, respectfully.

Chapter 3, Methodology and Limitations, elaborates on my decision to study *Captain America* films. I chronologically summarize the core narrative from *The First Avenger* to *Infinity War*’s tantalizing cliff-hanger, focusing on details pertinent to this study. I then reflect on the limitations of my work, specifically its lack of intersectionality and reliance on the gender binary. This chapter closes with a description of my methodology and identifies challenges I encountered during my research.

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<sup>30</sup> An extreme (albeit very common) exemplification is Gail Simone’s “women in refrigerators” trope, which denotes that the death of the male hero’s wife or girlfriend furthers “said hero’s motivations and story... they have no business existing aside from being a source of pain for the hero” (Romano and Abad-Santos). A recent example would be Gamora’s death in *Infinity War* (discussed on page 5 of this thesis).

Chapters 4 and 5 contain the body of my argument. “I Know My Value” examines superheroines Natasha Romanoff and Agent Peggy Carter, exploring how they destabilize Hagelin’s traditional and aggressive models of vulnerability, respectfully, in favour of resistant vulnerability whilst “To the End of the Line” focuses on the relationship between Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes, which is a driving force in all three *CA* films.

I conclude with a review of my research questions in Chapter 6, pointing to potential for future research and the possible future of female characters in the MCU.

## Chapter 2

### 2 Literature Review

Having thrived for over a decade, the MCU's interwoven narrative provides auspicious grounds for scholarly consideration. Perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of the franchise is Martin Flanagan's *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon* (2016). Amongst chapters regarding genre tactics, the franchise's transmedia "empire," and Captain America, Flanagan reviews Marvel Studios' comic-book roots. Largely established in the mid-1960s, the defining element of Marvel Comics' house style was a "brand of tormented heroism" in which fantastic adventures entwined with the hero's interpersonal and emotional struggles (Flanagan 7, 28). Indeed, the "organic narrative ebb and flow" employed by the MCU stems from an innovative model of continuity established by Stan Lee with Spider-Man's debut in 1963 (Flanagan 243; Beaty 320). While this seemingly incongruous pairing of emotional unrest and physical action is universal in the MCU, scholars have flagged Steve Rogers' narrative as especially nuanced, its layered trajectory revealing "a more personal motivation of his desire to belong and matter" (Shaw and Hammer 119).

Marvel Studios' success lies in its "singular focus" on the superhero brand; they "maintain rigorous standards" to satiate die-hard fans whilst remaining accessible to an outside audience (Wheeler). Bart Beaty investigates the "specific textual strategies" utilized by Marvel Studios, including "anticipatory post credit sequences, Easter eggs, crossovers, linked repercussions, and modular story development;" each film acts as a

promotional tool for the next (322).<sup>31</sup> While most post-credits scenes provide insight into the next chapter of the MCU, *Spiderman: Homecoming* features a tongue-in-cheek PSA from Captain America (see figure 1):

Hi, I'm Captain America, here to talk to you about one of the most valuable traits a soldier or student can have: patience. Sometimes patience is the key to victory. Sometimes it leads to very little. It seems like it's not worth it. And you wonder why you waited so long for something so disappointing.<sup>32</sup>

These fun auxiliary additions to the core texts foster narrative expansion and audience interaction; they also extend “the commercial viability of the films into new media markets beyond theatrical distribution” (D. Johnson 7). Indeed, due to Marvel’s remarkable ubiquity, the MCU’s characters are widely recognizable, posited as provisional celeactors, and “associated with specific iconographies and practices;” moreover, they are accessible (and re-accessible) through numerous media platforms (Koh 491).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Easter eggs are extra-textual references cleverly hidden in a scene; they are “a way of training audiences in the “proper” method of engaging with these texts” (Beaty 324). An example would be the epitaph inscribed on Nick Fury’s tombstone in *The Winter Soldier* (Ezekiel 25:17) which references *Pulp Fiction*, a film starring Fury’s actor Samuel L. Jackson.

<sup>32</sup> *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2:12:30-2:13:01).

<sup>33</sup> A celeactor is a fictional character who is “either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutional feature of popular culture” (Rojek qtd. in Koh 491).



*Figure 1* *Homecoming* includes multiple PSAs featuring subjects like detention and physical education, but it is the end credit scene that posits Steve Rogers as a beacon of morality. Interestingly, Steve seems as enthralled by these PSAs (presumably filmed sometime after the formation of the Avengers in 2011) as he was selling war bonds for the government in 1943 (see Chapter 5 for a discussion of this).

Regarding transmedia viewership, Tabitha Cassidy performed a psychological and physiological experiment wherein she measured participants' brainwaves and galvanic skin responses to determine levels of engagement with various MCU media. She discovered that although the films remain participants' preferred medium, there was sufficient evidence to suggest the transmedia experience as a successful endeavor (48). Furthermore, Drew Menard's study, which sought to evaluate the extent to which Marvel Studios applies the principles of transmedia, dubbed the studio "a narrative innovator"

and “frontrunner in the emerging realm of transmedia storytelling” (5). Further work on the MCU involves inquiries as to the narrative’s use in cinematherapy.<sup>34</sup> Pointing to Steve’s difficulties adapting to a new era, Jamoki Zakia Dantzler states that the MCU is an effective means of illustrating interpersonal dilemmas but notes the scarce female presence as a potential detriment to effective treatment (483-85).

Mary DeMarchi focuses on this “woeful lack of meaningful representation” (1). She justly infers that MCU films reinforce sexism and false postfeminist ideology, citing naturalized power divisions, objectification and the male gaze, monolithic representations of women, and language constrictions as main perpetrators (4). Nonetheless, DeMarchi’s analysis covers only eight of now twenty films. She accounts for this limitation, asserting that “it is possible that representations of women may evolve into something more dimensional” as the series progresses. She observes that although their characterization has been quite lackluster thus far, female characters have become increasingly multifaceted since the MCU’s inception (85). Focusing on Agents Peggy Carter and Natasha Romanoff, I expand on DeMarchi’s analysis by exploring the evolution of female representation in the MCU over the past four years.

## 2.1 On-Screen Vulnerability

Examining war films, torture narratives, and science fiction shows from the 1950s to the late 2000s, Sarah Hagelin’s *Reel Vulnerability* spotlights the term vulnerable at “its most

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<sup>34</sup> Cinematherapy is defined as “the use of film for therapeutic purposes; uses the plot and characters to help clients understand problems in their own lives; allows for processing of difficult material in an indirect manner” (Dantzler 473-74).



visceral” (3). At the core of her text is resistant vulnerability, which aims to shift viewers’ basic cultural assumptions about the suffering body, specifically the suffering female body. Hagelin posits that cinematic representations of female vulnerability began to shift after the Cold War, contending that “tough” characters like *Alien*’s Ellen Ripley “emerged faster than cultural ideas about vulnerability changed” (17-18). Figures like Ripley, Sarah Connor, and Princess Leia Organa demanded “complex emotional work” from viewers who were required to deconstruct their prior conjectures about gendered vulnerability (18). Regarding male vulnerability, Hagelin cites *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as a narrative wherein viewers’ “protective anxiety,” habitually reserved for women, is affixed to a “vulnerable, porous, and penetrable” male body (76).<sup>35</sup>

Upholding traditional presumptions regarding superheroic bodies, Martyn Pedler asserts that they survive “no matter what [they are] put through,” be it transformation, teleportation, dismemberment, or even death (3). However, José Alaniz contends that vulnerability proves an effective lens through which to examine these ostensibly unconquerable heroes’ stories. Alaniz notes that the superhero “serves as an entry point for interrogating the social construction of the (male) body, disability, death, illness, and “normality” (5). Specifically referencing the MCU for instance, Parker Shaw and Tonya Hammer observe that “though Captain America is a super-soldier, worthy of maintaining his own safety, he still connects with the audience in maintaining basic motivational needs such as love and belongingness” (120). Hence, superhero narratives have the capacity to exemplify both the physical and emotional facets of vulnerability.

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<sup>35</sup> Notably, whilst the film attempted to shift the spectacle onto the male body “to open the vulnerability of the male body to audience scrutiny,” it ultimately reinforced “traditional, safe masculinity” (Hagelin 89).

Perhaps due to the preoccupation with the physical form in comics, much work on vulnerable superheroes deals with the heroes' bodies. Indeed, regarding superhero comics, Scott Bukatman asserts:

The body is obsessively centered upon. It is contained and delineated; it becomes irresistible force and immovable object. The body is enlarged and diminished, turned invisible or made of stone, blown to atoms or reshaped at will... The superhero body is everything – a *corporeal*, rather than *cognitive* – mapping of the subject into a cultural system.” (qtd. in Alaniz 17)

Admittedly, whether it is Ant-Man's ever-fluctuating stature or Thor's Cotati metal fibre muscles, the MCU does showcase the superheroic form.<sup>36</sup> Certainly, Steve's transformation from 90-pound asthmatic to brawny Super-Soldier plainly focuses on his body. However, while Alaniz contends such a transformation typically “whisks away any inklings of weakness, sickness, or compromised masculinity,” Steve's narrative consistently returns to his profound emotional vulnerability (87). Moreover, as Marina Berzins McCoy contends, physical wounds are “often accompanied by deeper questions about the meaning of suffering, mortality, or other forms of human frailty (*viii*).”

Alaniz also describes the “borderline” superhero, whose “deformity or disability, far from hidden, presents as the superpower itself” (87). Perhaps the most recognizable manifestation of the borderline hero in the MCU is the Hulk, Bruce Banner's antagonistic alter-ego. Hulk is an ill-tempered, brutish, and at times hostile figure; his heroics often cause considerable damage wherever the Avengers engage in battle. The borderline hero

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<sup>36</sup> When the Guardians encounter Thor in *Infinity War*, Gamora observes: “It's like his muscles are made of Cotati metal fibres.” Drax adds: “It's like a pirate had a baby with an angel” (29:30-30:30).

also evokes “a fraught destabilization of superheroic conventions;” the line between “good guy” and “bad guy” becomes increasingly abstruse (87-88). *Daredevil*’s Matt Murdock, an enhanced, blind vigilante, executes an incredibly violent technique that often blurs ethical lines. Truly even his sobriquet, bestowed upon him by the press, suggests moral ambiguity:

PUNISHER: What kind of a name is The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen, anyway? I mean, really?

DAREDEVIL: I didn’t ask for that name.

PUNISHER: I’m sorry, I don’t see you running from it.

DAREDEVIL: I don’t do this to hurt people.

PUNISHER: Yeah, so what is that, a job perk? (2x03, “New York’s Finest”)

Alaniz contends that superheroines’ disabilities largely manifest as perceived flaws in physical appearance. He examines *Fantastic Four*’s Shannon Ventura’s “grotesque” transformation into She-Thing, which prompted a suicidal bout of body dysmorphia (102-105). Similarly, *Guardian of the Galaxy*’s Nebula possesses a body that has been largely replaced with machinery; her adoptive father Thanos extracted a body part each time she failed to best her adopted sister Gamora in forced combat. Albeit harrowing, her bionic enhancements amplify her powers; Nebula’s physical appearance does not incapacitate her as Shannon’s do. Perhaps, then, the MCU offers a nuanced perspective on superheroic disability.

## 2.2 Super Research

Peter Coogan and Robin S. Rosenberg's *What is a Superhero?* kindles a dialogue between scholars and comic professionals regarding its title question. Essentially, “creators encode their idea of what constitutes a superhero through their depictions of the characters, and scholars decode what constitutes a superhero through their academic analysis of rendered depictions” (xx). Making his debut in 1938, Superman is often seen as “the definitional line” for superheroes (Busiek 134). Coogan defines a superhero as:

A heroic character with a universal, selfless, prosocial mission; who possesses superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed and/or mental skills (including mystic abilities); who has a superhero identity embodied in a code name and iconic costume which typically expresses [their] biography or character, powers, and origin. (3)

Focusing through a Marvel lens, Joe Quesada expounds that a superhero is merely “an extraordinary person placed under extraordinary circumstances who manages to do extraordinary things to ultimately triumph over evil” (147). While this is an adequate foundational definition, the fluidity of the term “superhero” must be considered.

Superheroes are inherently protean and their specificities are a result of circumstance and epoch (DeFalco 139). One thing that remains consistent, however, is the persistently androcentric eminence of the superhero.

## 2.3 With Great Power, Comes Some Damn Fragile Masculinity

Truthfully, the study of men has not been an interest of mine thus far in my academics; as an intersectional feminist, I acknowledge that patriarchal constrictions affect all genders,

but vastly prefer to direct my focus away from straight cis-gender men. Yet this project required me to approach the subject with an acclimatized attitude. The study of men as the “unexamined norm” has “grown exponentially” since the 1990s. Of consistent apprehension is the belief that contemporary masculinity is in crisis (Kimmel x; Kord and Krimmer 1). I encountered an abundance of descriptors for masculinity, a selection of which define it as multidimensional, “both omnipresent and nebulous,” and the “proud product of a prolonged struggle” (MacKinnon 51; Adams 8; Kord and Krimmer 2). Though its composition is dependent on circumstance and epoch, there exists a rampant mythology that dictates successful hard masculinity must oppose supposed soft “feminine” traits (Jeffords qtd. in Adams 9). James Penner dissects this mythic magnetism, characterizing hard masculinity thusly:

Culturally and psychologically, hardness functions as a powerful structuring mechanism that shapes and influences male behaviour and masculine gender norms... [It is] tacitly encouraged and understood as a social ideal while softness is overtly stigmatized. (15)

Though Penner maintains “hard” and “soft” are merely metaphorical descriptors of how the male body is “framed and imagined,” binary opposition acquires its “ostensible explanatory power” from heterosexism and patriarchy; these descriptors austere limit the potentially diverse scope of masculinity (Penner 22; MacKinnon 40). However, scholars also believe that the strenuous act of upholding this “performance” of hard virility reveals its “repressed antithesis – affective soft-bodied masculinity” (Penner 248). The notion of performative gender stems from Judith Butler’s contention that gender is “an ongoing discursive practice” that is “open to intervention and resignification” (33).

Indeed, MacKinnon builds upon this, stating that cultural conceptions of gender, as seen through binary thinking, are fictitious “imitations of imitations” (39).

Though masculinity is allegedly in crisis, Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer contend “crisis is correlated to catharsis;” this catharsis manifests in cultural texts, such as blockbuster cinema (2). Writing in 1981, Vito Russo observed that men were denied their “full emotional potential” in film (70-71). I reason that many contemporary narratives, including the MCU, enable men to experience a spectrum of emotionality. Yet one wonders where women figure into the equation. Regarding gender in superhero movies, Kara Kvaran states:

These films were created for a culture that privileges the masculine over the feminine, while often proclaiming itself to be gender neutral. They reflect an insecure kind of hypermasculinity, one that reinforces itself through homosocial interactions where men need to prove their manhood to other men, and women are only props in that interplay. (234)<sup>37</sup>

As a stubbornly patriarchal cultural space, the superhero genre often upholds traditional expectations of gender. Indeed, as Jeffrey A. Brown contends, “At its core, the superhero genre is about boundaries... what the superheroes repeatedly enact for readers [and viewers] is a symbolic policing of borders between key cultural concepts: good and evil, right and wrong, us and them” (78). Brown further notes that these obsessively contained boundaries separate the masculine from the feminine; the genre’s dominant male archetypes inculcate and provide a model of “the value of being dutiful subjects and

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<sup>37</sup> Kvaran defines hypersexuality as “a specific form of masculinity characterized by a belief that violence is manly and danger exciting, paired with a callous attitude towards women and the derision of anything considered female” (226).

agents of patriarchal authority” (85). But perhaps there is room for subversion, where women can remove “the cultural noose of feminine passivity” (Penner 231).

## 2.4 “Leave the saving of the world to the *men*? I don’t think so!”

First appearing in 1937, Olga Mesmer, “The Girl With the X-Ray Eyes,” is widely considered the first superpowered woman (Nicholson 15). However, it was Wonder Woman’s *All Star Comics* debut in 1941 that promulgated the birth of the female superhero.<sup>38</sup> Created by William Moulton Marston during World War II, Wonder Woman was written to have “all the strength of Superman plus the allure of a good and beautiful woman” (qtd. in Stuller 13). While she was certainly formidable throughout the 1940s, the end of the war signaled women’s return to the domestic sphere, superpowered or otherwise. Bolstered by the Comics Code Authority’s 1954 criteria, which called for an emphasis on “the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage,” comic book heroines “abandoned the heroic identity of the war years for domesticity, motherhood, and consumerism” (Zechowski and Neumann 134; Robinson 12). Keith T. Edmunds remarks that it was the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s that heralded an increase of ostensibly nuanced superheroines (211-12). One such character was *Fantastic Four*’s Sue Storm, aka the Invisible Girl, Marvel’s first female superhero. Introduced in 1961, Sue was soon joined by Janet Van Dyne (The Wasp) of the *Avengers* and the *Uncanny X-Men*’s Jean Grey (Marvel Girl) in 1963. Though each of these heroines were impressive additions to their respective teams, certain tropes relegated them to traditional portrayals

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<sup>38</sup> Wonder Woman’s first feature comic was published in 1942.

of women: Sue's ability is to literally disappear, Janet's materialistic obsession with fashion reflects post-war female consumerism, and Jean is touted as the weakest member of the X-Men due to her inability to control her powers. Yet the 1970s and 1980s brought superheroines who were "often more independent and purposeful" than their predecessors, such as She-Hulk, Valkyrie, Kitty Pryde, and Elektra (Darowski 206-09). Indeed, Stan Lee penned the following preface for *The Super Women of Marvel* in 1977:

We have been, we are, and we shall continue to make the strongest possible effort to bestow the cultural blessings of superherodom upon male and female alike. Let chauvinism be eschewed! Let equality prevail. Let historians of the future look back upon this era and proudly declare, "'Twas Marvel that led the way!" For too many years the females have been relegated to mere supporting roles. We think it's time to change all that. It's time for the Super Women! (qtd. in Stuller 33)

It is also important to recognize that although these superheroines were granted more agency and powers, their physical appearance and costumes often employed "skintight materials and generous displays of skin, as well as the amplified features of the female shape" (Edmunds 215). These hyper-feminized bodies persisted through the 1990s and 2000s and remain prevalent in present-day depictions of superheroines. Still, Jennifer K. Stuller contends that Wonder Women, "once the sole warrior to fight gender stereotypes," has been joined by a plethora of "complicated, fleshed-out, damaged, driven, intelligent, and resourceful" super women (10). Such women include Carol Danvers, who became Captain Marvel in 2012, and the new Ms. Marvel, Kamala Khan, a shape-shifting Muslim Pakistani American teenager who is hailed as "the leading superhero voice of a new generation" (Sava).



Even in an arguably feminist landscape, Marvel has struggled to create a widely-recognizable female superhero (Edmunds 211). Thanks largely to their presence in DC's ongoing film and television ventures, Marvel's chief rival boasts Wonder Woman, Supergirl, and Harley Quinn as identifiable and successful superwomen. Concerning Marvel Comics, T. Keith Edmunds observes that heroines frequently struggle to secure their individuality because they are often introduced as members of superhero teams, such as the Avengers, rather than with standalone origin stories (213). This unfortunate trend continues in the MCU. Indeed, whilst every male member of the original Avengers lineup was given an origin film prior to *The Avengers*, Black Widow made her debut in *Iron Man 2* (2010).<sup>39</sup> Wanda was introduced with her brother in *Age of Ultron* (2015). Indeed, after her twin's death, she joins the Avengers and forms a romantic relationship with The Vision. Wanda is consistently paired with a man, thus limiting the potential for a solo venture and greater understanding of her character.

However, "a new model for the superheroine" may be on the horizon (Miczo 181). Next spring will mark the release of the MCU's first female-led feature film, *Captain Marvel*, which promises to be "the representation women have been craving from the comic book movie genre for the past decade" (Bucksbaum).<sup>40</sup> Reflecting on her comic counterpart, Nathan Miczo observes that Captain Marvel transcends gendered boundaries and "owns" her powers in an unprecedented manner (174). Hopefully, this film is indicative of a greater shift in both the MCU and the genre's representation of women.

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<sup>39</sup> Notably, while he has been given significant consideration in subsequent films, Clint Barton (Hawkeye) was not given a solo film either; rather, he first cameoed in *Thor* (2011).

<sup>40</sup> *Captain Marvel* will be released on March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Methodology and Limitations

Due to the expansive nature of the MCU, my research focuses exclusively on the *Captain America* narrative. This analysis includes all three *CA* films: *The First Avenger*, *The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Civil War* (2016). Choice scenes from the *Avengers* films and *Agent Carter* will act as ancillary texts.<sup>41</sup>

There are several reasons why I chose to focus on *CA*. Firstly, the narrative excels at demonstrating the profound humanness of its characters. Facing corporeal threats as well as their inner demons, characters experience the world in a “much deeper, richer way” than those in other MCU films (Feige 2014). Chris Evans, who portrays Steve in the films, pointedly notes that directors Joe and Anthony Russo “make human stories with a superhuman feel, as opposed to a superhero movie with human touches.”<sup>42</sup> Characters encounter “feelings of grief, loss, celebration, friendship, and anger” as they search for acceptance and kinship; this familiar journey resonates with viewers (Shaw and Hammer 123). Secondly, though he was not the first superhero featured in the MCU, Captain America truly is the first Avenger; his story is foundational for what happens later in the timeline. Set in the 1940s, *The First Avenger* introduces influential characters such as industrialist Howard Stark, Tony’s father, and Agent Peggy Carter of the Strategic Science Reserve (SSR); together they create S.H.I.E.L.D., the extra-governmental agency

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<sup>41</sup> *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018).

<sup>42</sup> The Russos directed *The Winter Soldier* and *Civil War*. Due to their success with the *CA* films, they have been entrusted with the two-part Avengers’ finale *Infinity War* and *Endgame* (2019).

later responsible for the formation of the Avengers.<sup>43</sup> The film also marks the first appearance of an Infinity Stone, one of six powerful and narratively significant weapons. Thirdly, unlike most standalone character films in the MCU, *CA*'s production team remains reasonably consistent.<sup>44</sup> Over the course of two films, the Russos established a clear directorial vision for *CA*, employing an incongruous technique that melds “hand-held vérité” with “the massive scope” of the comic book film. Joe Russo further explains:

[*The Winter Soldier*] is a shift from some of the other MCU films only in that it was shot on much longer lenses. It's hand-held. It was a very specific choice to try and ground the material... The comic book film [is] traditionally known for its fantasy elements. What if you shot it as realistically as you possibly could? The lighting had a naturalism to it. The lenses were much closer to their faces to glean performance and texture and emotion (Russo et. al 2014).

Furthermore, the scripts for all three films have been penned by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely, who also co-created *Agent Carter*.<sup>45</sup> This creative cohesion creates a clear idea of who Steve is and the values for which he stands. Lastly, *CA* is the only MCU narrative that occupies significant space on both the small and silver screen. In addition to precipitating *Agent Carter*, *CA* has also explicitly engaged with *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (*AOS*). Peggy has appeared in two flashbacks for the series alongside Steve's former unit the Howling Commandos.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, *AOS*' "Turn Turn Turn" worked synergistically

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<sup>43</sup> S.H.I.E.L.D. stands for Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division. Please consult the appendices for descriptions of MCU organizations and pertinent concepts/objects.

<sup>44</sup> Notable exceptions include director Jon Favreau (*Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*), and writer/directors Joss Whedon (*The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) and James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2*).

<sup>45</sup> Markus and McFeely joined their *CA* cohorts in writing the screenplays for *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

<sup>46</sup> Peggy appears in *AOS* episodes “Shadows” (2014) and “The Things We Bury” (2014).

with *The Winter Soldier*'s cinematic release. Audiences were rewarded for attending the film's opening weekend as the following week's *AOS* episode focused on events set in motion by the film. This interaction greatly influenced the show's plot and exhibited "an innovative recasting of the relationship between theatrical cinema and network television" (Ocasio; Flanagan 31). Aside from being a brilliant marketing strategy, this collaborative storytelling further positions *CA* as an influential and foundational text for the MCU, one that prompts further consideration.

### 3.1 Core Text Synopses

The following is a chronological summary of the *CA* narrative. In the interest of brevity, extraneous details have been omitted; this streamlining is especially apt for *Civil War*.

Although it is a *CA* film, *Civil War* features an ensemble cast including several Avengers and relative newcomers Spider-Man and Black Panther, none of whom are the focus of this analysis.

Beginning in 1942, *The First Avenger* introduces audiences to Steve Rogers, a Brooklyn man who has been rejected for military service numerous times due to his poor physical health. However, when SSR scientist Dr. Abraham Erskine overhears Steve vehemently arguing about his responsibility to fight overseas, he recruits the young man as a potential candidate for Project Rebirth, a U.S. government program that aims to create war-ready Super-Soldiers using Erskine's serum. Although he is not a particularly proficient soldier, Steve is selected for Project Rebirth because of his courage, which is best demonstrated when he jumps on a grenade (unaware that it is a dud) to protect every other soldier at Camp Lehigh. Alas, because Hydra, a scientific division of the Nazi

Schutzstaffel (SS), sabotages the lab and assassinates Erskine at the behest of Johann Schmidt (Red Skull), Steve is the sole recipient of the serum (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2* Steve Rogers before and after Erskine’s Super-Soldier serum is administered. The serum affects Steve’s muscles, creating “a protective system of regeneration and healing;” he experiences enhanced speed, endurance, strength, and heightened cognitive function (*The First Avenger* 1:29:40-1:30:28).

After a reluctant stint as the USO bond-selling spectacle “Captain America,” Steve learns that the 107<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, his best friend Bucky Barnes’ unit, has been imprisoned by Hydra. Acting against orders, Peggy and Howard help Steve rescue the Allied soldiers, including Bucky. Steve establishes an elite combat unit known as The Howling Commandos who, from the tail-end of 1943 through to 1945, work to infiltrate and destroy Hydra bases across Europe. During the raid of a Hydra locomotive in 1945, Bucky falls to his alleged death. Bucky’s death furthers Steve’s crusade against Schmidt, which concludes with the villain’s ostensive death aboard an armed bomber plane set to

detonate in New York City.<sup>47</sup> Steve crashes into the Arctic, sacrificing his life for those of countless others. He remains preserved in ice for sixty-seven years before he is rescued by S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives in 2011.

Upon waking, Steve is recruited to join the Avengers: “Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.” Even within this cluster of unusual individuals, Steve is acutely out of step. Aptly dubbed “the man out of time” by *The Avengers*’ antagonist Loki, Steve struggles to adapt to the modern world.<sup>48</sup> He often fails to form a rapport with his allies because of his decades-long absence. His ideology immediately clashes with that of Tony and their tension proliferates throughout future films.

In *The Winter Soldier*, set in 2014, Steve and fellow Avenger Natasha Romanoff work together under S.H.I.E.L.D.’s directive until Hydra reveals they have been covertly operating within the agency since its inception. Alexander Pierce, the present-day head of Hydra, seeks to implement Project Insight, an operation that would involve the proactive elimination of individuals who Hydra believes pose a potential risk to national security. Steve and Natasha join forces with future Avenger Sam Wilson (Falcon), Agent Maria Hill, and former S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury to expose Pierce and thwart Hydra’s plans. In retaliation, Hydra releases their most formidable weapon to combat the remaining S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives: The Winter Soldier.

A master in martial arts, marksmanship, and assassination, The Winter Soldier “shaped the century” for Hydra; he is ruthless, exceptionally skilled, and seemingly

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<sup>47</sup> Red Skull reappears as keeper of the Soul Stone in *Infinity War*.

<sup>48</sup> *The Avengers* (41:10-41:37).

without conscience.<sup>49</sup> In a moment of shocked revelation, Steve recognizes that The Winter Soldier is Bucky. The film climaxes with an impassioned brawl aboard a damaged Helicarrier, during which Steve desperately tries to remind Bucky of their shared history. Bucky is discernibly distraught yet continues to carry out his mission: terminating Steve. Unconscious, Steve falls from the wreckage into the Potomac. Conflicted and confused, Bucky rescues Steve and leaves him on the riverbank. He later visits the Smithsonian's Captain America exhibit; he seeks to remember and understand who he is. Steve resolves to find Bucky and bring him home.

In *Civil War*, The United Nations imposes The Sokovia Accords in response to the Avengers' unbridled and destructive world-saving efforts.<sup>50</sup> Executed in 2016, The Accords dictate that the Avengers must de-privatize and "operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel only when and if that panel deems it necessary."<sup>51</sup> Guilt-ridden, Tony agrees to sign. Steve, however, views the documents as a disavowal of their culpability. The remaining Avengers align with either Steve or Tony, thus dividing the team.

Matters are further complicated when Bucky is framed and apprehended for the assassination of King T'Chaka of Wakanda. Steve rejects Tony's olive branch, choosing instead to rescue Bucky, flee governmental authority, and seek out the true perpetrator. After a series of twists, including the discovery of five additional winter soldiers, antagonist Helmut Zemo's true purpose is revealed. Zemo, whose family died in Sokovia,

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<sup>49</sup> The Winter Soldier is responsible for numerous assassinations throughout the Cold War. He was cryogenically frozen between missions to preserve his body at peak physical form.

<sup>50</sup> During the pursuit of rogue A.I. Ultron in *Age of Ultron*, Sokovia's capital Novi Grad suffered irreparable damage as well as many civilian casualties. This trauma has also occurred in multiple cities the Avengers "saved" such as Washington D.C., Johannesburg, New York City, and Lagos.

<sup>51</sup> *Civil War* (21:23-24:30).

aims to destroy the Avengers on an interpersonal level. He shows Tony, Steve, and Bucky footage of Howard and Maria Stark's death at the hands of The Winter Soldier.

Previously ignorant of the nature of his parents' death, Tony asks Steve if he was aware that Bucky had killed them. When pressed, Steve admits he knew. A fight ensues as Steve attempts to keep Tony from killing Bucky. In aiding Bucky, Steve chooses to leave Tony and incites the disintegration of the Avengers.

Knowing the truth of his father's death, newly appointed King T'Challa (Black Panther) offers Bucky refuge in Wakanda. Steve and the Avengers reunite with T'Challa and Bucky for the climactic battle in *Infinity War*. Despite their valiant effort, Thanos succeeds in eradicating half the universe, beginning with Bucky's disintegration. Steve and the original Avengers will next appear in *Endgame* (2019).<sup>52</sup>

### 3.2 Foregoing the Margins: A Lack of Intersectionality

When I began this project, I sought to utilize a comprehensive intersectional approach that would encompass gender identity, sexuality, race, ability, class, and other oppressive, inter-locking institutions of power. Ambitious as I was, I ultimately recognized that given the constraints of the project, my analysis required a much narrower focus; I simply did not have the capacity to include everything that I wanted to. Nevertheless, in diminishing my scope, I deliberately excluded critical considerations, thereby ignoring those characters, and viewers, who exist in the margins.<sup>53</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw describes

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<sup>52</sup> Notably, T'Challa, Peter Parker, and the Guardians of the Galaxy (sans Rocket and Nebula) also perish. Presumably this disappearance is not permanent as Black Panther, Spider-Man, and the Guardians all have forthcoming sequels.

<sup>53</sup> bell hooks states: "to be in the margin is to be a part of the whole but outside the main body" (*xxii*).



intersectionality as “an alternative narrative” or “prism” which reveals the dilemma of those who exist at a crossroads of injustice; for example, many social justice issues, such as sexism and racism, overlap, thereby creating multiple levels of marginality (2016). To forego a comprehensive intersectional method omits this multiplicity of experiences.

The examination and critique of varied representation in popular media is incredibly important. As a curvy queer woman, it is not often I see a nuanced version of myself reflected on-screen. While this is disappointing, I recognize that even though my sexuality exists in the margins, I am also an able-bodied, educated, cis-gender, middle-class white woman. I possess a level of privilege that many do not. In her original preface for *From Margin to Center*, bell hooks posits that feminist perspectives often emerge from “privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live on the margin” (xviii). Acknowledging one’s privilege is imperative. I will never grasp the complexities of race, disability, or class as effectively or authentically as those who exist within these intersections. Thus, in addition to the logistic constraints of the project, lack of personal experience limits my ability to employ an all-inclusive intersectional model. Moving forward, I endeavor to remain cognizant of my privilege and reflect upon the experiences of others to the best of my ability whilst completing my research.

### 3.3 Stringently Straight: A Refusal to Abolish the Gender Binary

The second major obstacle I encountered was the MCU’s rigid adherence to a hierarchal gender binary. Gender is inherently fluid and exists on a spectrum, and I wanted to ensure my research approach encompassed this fact. I was presented with the challenge of

analyzing a highly gendered object through a lens that does not rely on an antiquated and reductive binary. Moreover, I did not wish to confront “the peculiar effect” many researchers face – the reification of the very “binary connotations of male and female difference” they aim to deconstruct (Krylova 308). I quickly learned that it is incredibly difficult to deviate from a binary model of gender. Anna Krylova explains:

In contemporary gender history, the story about the making of the gender category is inseparable from the concept of ‘gender binary’ ... the concept carries a rich repertoire of connotations, which informs and influences the gender category: those of radical distinction, opposition, mutually exclusive and exhaustive differentiation, hierarchy, domination, oppression – in all their myriad historical forms. As a result, it captures the entanglement of gender – in theory, an open-ended category – in binary, that is, negatively – and positively determined connotations of feminine and masculine and, consequently, in a particular, historical form of heterosexual subjectivity, the one structured like a binary, hierarchal system. (307)

Rather than analyzing how vulnerability affects males and females specifically, a method that inevitably relies on binary opposition, I decided to look at how vulnerability is represented in the narrative itself. My wish was to observe the ways in which vulnerability is depicted in *CA* and inductively construct a non-binary research approach. Alas, vulnerability in the MCU works to establish and uphold oppositional ideas about gender that rigidly inscribe an individual as man or woman; simply put, there is no room for a non-binary approach because there are no non-binary characters.

Although the MCU’s ever-expanding repertoire of characters includes a sparse few who are canonically queer in Marvel Comics, the films have yet to include any

significant LGBTQ2+ representation. For instance, Loki, who features heavily in *The Avengers* and all three *Thor* films, is canonically genderfluid and bisexual in Marvel Comics' Earth-616 universe.<sup>54</sup> Al Ewing's *Loki: Agent of Asgard* explores and embraces Loki's queerness; readers follow Loki as he shifts forms, masculine to feminine, across panels, stating "I am **me**. First, last, and always."<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Tom Hiddleston, who depicts Loki in the films, praises Ewing's choice to include the Trickster's fluidity in the narrative.<sup>56</sup> However, rich and progressive source material notwithstanding, the MCU continues to "hammer home cis-heteronormativity" and outdated archetypes of gender and sexuality (Gardner).<sup>57</sup> Therefore, because the films' portrayal of gender remains gallingly traditional, I am forced to accept the constraint that there are only two genders represented in the MCU: a character can either be a cis-gender man or a cis-gender woman.

This limitation frustrates me incessantly. Yet, as Krylova concedes, "the question of gender's reifying and concealing properties requires of course the extended effort of more than one scholar. It entails a detailed re-evaluation of the ways the gender category became defined, theorized, and turned into an interpretive practice" (309). A single academic cannot hope to deconstruct the gender binary – certainly not within the constraints of a M.A. thesis. Nevertheless, I hope to gain a better understanding of this

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<sup>54</sup> Loki appears in *Thor* (2011), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). He also briefly appears in *Infinity War* before his death.

<sup>55</sup> Moreover, it was recently revealed that Mackenzi Lee will pen a series of young adult novels centering on Marvel anti-heroes in which Loki will be canonically pansexual and gender fluid (Jasper).

<sup>56</sup> Regarding Ewing's comic, Hiddleston states: "I think it's great. Loki's a shapeshifter... everybody can emphasize with him, you know? It means there's no box he fits into and it means he appeals to everybody and I think the more that happens in life, the better. It's great" (moviepilot).

<sup>57</sup> While Disney CEO Bob Iger recently confirmed plans for a standalone Loki television series, it will air on Disney's forthcoming streaming service Disney+, thereby severely decreasing the possibility for progressive, queer content (The Walt Disney Company, 2018).

obstacle through my research and hypothesize that characters experience vulnerability similarly, thereby refuting the power divide between male and female characters.

### 3.4 Methodology

As a fan of the MCU, I had already watched the released films multiple times prior to writing this thesis. While I have always been critical of the MCU's lack of diversity and penchant for showcasing male-dominated stories, this project required me to examine the narrative with an analytical lens. Truthfully, I was overwhelmed by the franchise's expansive, interconnected narrative. Moreover, Marvel Studios released a substantial number of films throughout the duration of my research; there was (is) a consistent influx of potentially pertinent content.<sup>58</sup> I ultimately focused on vulnerability, a "powerful conceptual tool" when exploring an integral component of the human (and super-human) experience (Fineman 8-9; McCoy *ix*).

To reiterate, Hagelin contends that counterintuitive images are crucial to resistant vulnerability, stating that they occur "most viscerally when bodies are captured on film in motion, enacting a certain set of codes that audiences are trained to read as indicators of vulnerability" (23). Through purposeful sampling, I identified "information-rich" scenes that were clearly pertinent to my study, specifically those in which my key characters interacted; an example of this is Natasha and Steve's reflective conversation after learning of Hydra's infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. (Lawrence et. al 534-535).<sup>59</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>58</sup> Eight films were released between the inception and completion of this project: *Civil War* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Infinity War* (2018), and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018).

<sup>59</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (1:10:04-1:11:16).

emergent sampling – which “takes advantage of whatever unfolds as it unfolds” – assisted me in identifying scenes that were not immediately apparent (Patton qtd. in Suri 71). It was only once I immersed myself in the narrative that I could craft a comprehensive repertoire of relevant interactions.

Hagelin further posits that rather than isolating one from others, vulnerability is “always relational: in, of, and for others” (157). It is within relationships, then, that resistant vulnerability reveals itself as an equalizing force. What follows is a feminist discourse analysis in which I explore whether Steve’s relationships with Peggy Carter, Natasha Romanoff, and Bucky Barnes stimulate resistant vulnerability or uphold traditional notions of vulnerability.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Feminist discourse analysis is “a form of feminist interpretive inquiry [that] shows how a discourse aligns (or does not align) with feminist values and practices” (Urbain 44).

## Chapter 4

### 4 “I Know My Value:” Empowered Damsels and Susceptible Super-Spies

*JARVIS. These men you call your colleagues... they don't respect you; they don't even see you. Do you honestly expect they'll change their minds?*

*PEGGY. I expect I will make them.<sup>61</sup>*



*Figure 3* Okoye, Natasha, and Wanda on the battlefield in Wakanda. This is the first occurrence of major female characters working together to defeat a foe without the aid of their male teammates in the MCU.

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<sup>61</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x05, “The Iron Ceiling.”

As *Infinity War*'s epic battle against Thanos nears its crescendo, Wanda becomes caught in combat with Proxima Midnight. Aware that Wanda is desperate to find Vision, Proxima taunts her, stating "He'll die alone, as will you." Moments later, we hear a familiar voice chime "She's not alone." A hand-held shot reveals Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow; triumphant music swells and with a turn of the camera, Wakandan warrior Okoye comes into view. Natasha and Okoye proceed to fight Proxima, moving together brilliantly against Thanos' underling. Wanda then joins the fray, using her powers to propel Proxima into the blades of an oncoming extraterrestrial tank (see Figure 3).<sup>62</sup>

When I saw the film, a collective cheer peppered with excited expletives and even a few whoops, rang through the theatre. Our Marvel ladies had finally teamed up on the big screen to defeat a considerable adversary – indeed, a *female* foe – without the benefit of their male cohorts! However, my credulous elation was short-lived; a second viewing revealed that the scene was less than a minute in length. We had been profusely excited for under one minute of footage of superheroines working together within an entire decade of films. While some consider this scene indicative of the franchise's shifting focus, believing "the future is female" for Marvel Studios, I choose to proceed with cautious anticipation (Plante). Audiences should not feign satisfaction nor cease critical viewership, but whoops should not be withheld either. The fact that three heroines even exist within the universe to band together is a considerable improvement for the MCU. However frustrating issues of representation continue to be, one cannot deny that watching three powerful women work synergistically to defeat the "bad guy" feels marvelous, even if only for a minute.

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<sup>62</sup> *Infinity War* (1:55:50-1:58:15).

As stated in this project's introduction, Hagelin suggests that three types of vulnerable bodies exist on screen: the traditionally vulnerable female body, the female body that overcomes vulnerability through masculinized aggression, and of course that which embodies resistant vulnerability (3). She argues that resistant vulnerability:

Combines two terms usually defined by antonyms because, at its heart, resistant vulnerability depends on counterintuitive images – narratives that we think we understand turned on their heads or familiar images put in patterns that push the existing cultural script away from traditional investments in female fragility. (7)

Evidence of these counterintuitive images is palpable in *Captain America*, specifically when considering Agents Peggy Carter and Natasha Romanoff. Living in the 1940s, Peggy could certainly exude a docile, traditional notion of femininity. Indeed, she nearly sacrificed her budding career as a Bletchley Park-trained code-breaker to marry a “nice” man and thus adhere to societal expectations.<sup>63</sup> Peggy instead engaged in a life of espionage and “irregular warfare,” eventually becoming the supervisory special agent at Camp Lehigh where she oversaw “all operations for the division,” including the selection process for Project Rebirth.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, Natasha has often been characterized as a “seductive foil” to her male teammates (“Widow Problem” Yamato). However, though hypersexualized in her MCU debut *Iron Man 2*, in which she is described as “potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit,” Natasha’s sexuality has progressively become the least interesting thing about her.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, her increased presence in *The Winter Soldier* and *Civil War*

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<sup>63</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x04, “Smoke and Mirrors.”

<sup>64</sup> *The First Avenger* (19:46-20:18).

<sup>65</sup> *Iron Man 2* (23:15-25:51).



supported a nuanced portrayal of Natasha, thus regarding her as more than a stock femme fatale. This chapter explores how Peggy and Natasha subvert Hagelin’s traditional and aggressive models of female vulnerability and demonstrates that resistant vulnerability reveals itself within the relationships each of them share with Steve Rogers.

#### 4.1 Her First Name Is Agent: Enter Peggy Carter

*YOUNG PEGGY: I will slay you, dragon, and save the princess!*



*Figure 4* Peggy’s mother reprimands her for roughhousing with her older brother in the yard. Peggy has resisted gender-based constraints from an early age, preferring to partake in “boyish” activities rather than “behave like a lady.”

Re-enacting a scene from her storybook, a young girl trots about her garden in knight’s attire astride her noble steed, a wooden hobby horse. She rescues the damsel from a nearby tree branch, yielding her sword as she prepares to decapitate the menacing beast. Her quest is interrupted, however, by her scandalized, irate mother: “One of these days you’re going to have to start behaving like a lady!” The girl pouts as the scene

transitions to “present day” 1947 where Agent Peggy Carter drips mayonnaise as she eats a hearty sandwich, scooping the mess up with her finger and licking it clean (see figure 4).<sup>66</sup> Lillian Robinson contends that the superheroine “originates in an act of criticism,” while male narratives largely borrow “the names and salient attributes of mythological figures,” tales of heroines “embellish” and “extend” these myths with valor, creativity, and a desire to correct the masculinist propensity of the genre (7). For instance, the traditional mythos surrounding medieval damsels and their brave knights typically adheres to strict gender conventions; little girls are to await rescue whilst young boys proactively seek adventure. Young Peggy destabilizes this tradition, choosing to cast herself as the chevalier. Even as a child, she resists categorization and straddles the division between what constitutes culturally acceptable male and female behaviour. Directly refuting Susan Wood’s notion of the Poison Maiden, Peggy is not an “inaccessible princess,” but rather her own hero (10-11).<sup>67</sup>

Although autonomous heroines are most welcome in a genre teeming with drab damsels, Peggy’s “Lone Wolf” model of heroism is often a detriment. Entrenched in conventional “uber-masculinity and isolationism,” this type of heroism disavows the strength of fellowship (Stuller 87). Yet because Peggy was a military officer during WWII, collaboration with her male peers was often met with overt and dismissive sexism. It is not until she forms a kinship with Steve Rogers that Peggy feels understood and valued. Like Peggy, Steve has been repeatedly dismissed and underestimated by those in

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<sup>66</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x04, “Smoke and Mirrors.”

<sup>67</sup> Writing about Marvel Comics, Wood contends that the Poison Maiden generally falls into three distinct categories: the heroes’ mortal girlfriend, their less aggressive super-powered girlfriends and sisters, and “incidental heroines” whose purpose is simply to be rescued by the male hero (10-11).

power. Whilst on the way to the SSR laboratory to begin Project Rebirth, Steve identifies several areas in Brooklyn where he has been beaten up:

PEGGY. Did you have something against running away?

STEVE. You start running, they'll never let you stop. You stand up, you push back. They can't say no forever, right?

PEGGY. I know a little of what that's like, to have every door shut in your face.

STEVE. I guess I just don't know why you'd want to join the army if you were a beautiful dame – a woman, an *agent*, not a dame. You are beautiful, but...

PEGGY. You have no idea how to talk to a woman, do you?

STEVE. I think this is the longest conversation I've had with one. Women aren't exactly lining up to dance with a guy they might step on.<sup>68</sup>

Peggy and Steve develop a rapport – an interpersonal, validating brand of heroism that provides them with the comradeship they had hitherto been denied (see figure 5). Yet rather than citing her prowess in diplomacy and espionage, DeMarchi contends that Peggy's "true power" is her ability to nurture Steve, stating that Peggy's "resolute belief in [Steve's] ability and devotion to his work makes her the ultimate romanticized sexist and postfeminist representation" (29-30).<sup>69</sup> These claims echo Colonel Phillips' sexist vilification of Peggy when Steve goes missing behind enemy lines after he, Peggy, and Howard defy his orders to rescue allied soldiers:

PHILLIPS. I can't touch Stark. He's rich and he's the Army's number one

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<sup>68</sup> *The First Avenger* (29:26-30:39).

<sup>69</sup> To be fair, DeMarchi's piece was published before the release of MCU projects that expand on the female characters she critiques, such as subsequent *CA* films and *Agent Carter*.

weapons contractor. *You* are neither one.

PEGGY. With respect, sir, I don't regret my actions and I don't think Captain Rogers did either.

PHILLIPS. What makes you think I give a damn about your opinions? I took a chance with you, Agent Carter, and now America's golden boy and a lot of other good men are dead 'cause you had a crush.

PEGGY. It wasn't that. I had faith.<sup>70</sup>

Peggy is resolute. She does not apologize for her decisions, nor those she advised Steve to make. She believed he was worth more than being a mere spectacle or experimentation because she appreciated him before he was shoved onto a pedestal. Peggy certainly supported Steve, but he also respected her as a superior officer, even after receiving a leadership rank himself. Their relationship is one of reciprocity, not female subservience to a man. Furthermore, though they are separated at the end of *The First Avenger*, their symbiotic heroism remains a persistent theme throughout the *CA* narrative.

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<sup>70</sup> *The First Avenger* (1:08:51-1:09:55).



*Figure 5* Peggy and Steve at Camp Lehigh in *The First Avenger*. The Project Rebirth candidates were tasked with retrieving a flag from the top of a pole; whilst no one managed to climb the pole, Steve chose to take the pin out of the flag pole's base. Retrieving the grounded flag, Steve earns his reward: a ride back to base instead of the long run. Though he is not the most physically proficient soldier, Peggy is impressed with Steve's problem-solving and is pleased to see him surprise his drill sergeant (20:36-22:49).

Following the end of the war, Peggy begins working at the SSR office in New York City where she is met with an “impenetrable curtain of hostility” (Frieden 216-17). Viewed as a glorified secretary by her chauvinist male co-workers, Peggy reverts to her solitary tactics, conducting covert investigations under the men's radar; for unless she is delivering reports, coffee, or lunch, she is “invisible” to them.<sup>71</sup> It is interesting to observe

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<sup>71</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x07, “Snafu.”

the ways in which Peggy re-purposes traditionally “feminine” objects as tactical gear. For instance, her signature red lipstick is a clandestine sleep-inducing compound which, when administered via kiss, renders the recipient unconscious. She also possesses a lock-picking brooch and safe-breaking wristwatch. A noteworthy illustration of Peggy’s ability to upturn traditional femininity is when she experiences an altercation in her apartment. Although she is trained in hand-to-hand combat, Peggy’s fighting style habitually involves much improvisation; here, she uses the domestic space to her advantage. Peggy shields herself with the refrigerator door and scorches her assailant’s hand on the oven element. She then uses one of the burner covers to twist his hand, thus disarming him, before forcibly shoving him through the window. She does this whilst wearing a floor-length evening gown and heels.<sup>72</sup> Peggy is proactive, quick-witted, and able to defend herself. Nonetheless, she does not represent a complete reversal of traditional femininity. When the fight concludes, she collapses next to her roommate, who has been murdered by the intruder. Peggy mourns her as she mourns Steve, with full and heartbreaking sincerity.

Heroines like Peggy “confound binary logic” because of their propensity to transgress and question “the naturalness of gender roles” (Hills qtd. in Inness 8; Brown 58). Peggy is not a flippant damsel, nor does she exude pure masculine aggression; such categorization is reductive and reinforces a dangerous binary. Rather, her representation reflects a model of vulnerability that advocates for images of pain and suffering that are not contingent on one’s gender: resistant vulnerability.

After Steve disappears and is presumed dead, Peggy disconnects from her emotions. She does not allow her grief to impede her work, but it does have a profound

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<sup>72</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x01, “Now is Not the End.”

effect on her. She continually dismisses Edwin Jarvis, Howard's butler who he has instructed to assist her, and all but ignores neighbour and would-be friend Angie Martinelli. Much to Jarvis' frustration, she is unwilling to accept assistance. Peggy works alone because she believes others are safer that way; she confesses, "I seem to have a habit of losing people closest to me. Perhaps "losing" is too nice a word; I get them killed."<sup>73</sup> However, after disregarding Peggy's wishes and assisting in the mission, Jarvis reminds her of the importance of companionship:

JARVIS. Your line of work requires support. People who care about your well-being, who will be there to stitch up your wounds.

PEGGY. If I allow people to get close to me, I'm putting them in danger.

JARVIS. So your solution is to remove yourself from the world you wish to protect – where's the sense in that? There is not a man *or* woman, no matter how fit he or she may be, who is capable of carrying the entire world on their shoulders.

PEGGY. Steve was.

JARVIS. From what Mr. Stark has told me, Captain Rogers relied heavily on *you* for courage, strategy, and moral guidance. You were his support. Your desire to help others is noble, but I doubt you'll find much success unless you allow others to help you.

(1x02, "Bridge and Tunnel")

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<sup>73</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x01, "Now is Not the End."



*Figure 6* Jarvis is one of the few people who respects Peggy’s skills and intellect. However, he is also not afraid to confront her in moments when she doubts her importance or stubbornly ascribes blame and responsibility to herself. Their relationship, like the one she shared with Steve, is reciprocal; he never treats her like the men in her office do and, in turn, she does not underestimate him based on his occupation. They are equals in their friendship (*Agent Carter* 1x02, “Bridge and Tunnel”).

In this pivotal scene, in which he sutures a wound on her leg, Jarvis is situated lower in the frame, looking up to Peggy. He is positioned as both an emotional confidant and healer, roles typically ascribed to women. The narrative posits that emotional support is – and should be – a reciprocal practice between two people, regardless of their gender (see figure 6).

Hagelin also contends that traditional vulnerability “reads pain and injury as debilitating to the female subject” (3). Evading antagonist Whitney Frost’s noxious clutches, Peggy drops from a landing and is impaled on a metal rebar. The camera focuses on her sweaty, pain-stricken face and shaking hands as she attempts to keep



pressure on the wound.<sup>74</sup> Though she experiences hampering distress, Peggy stubbornly continues to pursue Frost, remarking that “there’s no rest for the weary and wounded until the job is done.”<sup>75</sup> Yet much to her chagrin, Peggy is physically unable to go into the field. Importantly, she is not the only person relegated to the sidelines. Rather than watch her “improvise” through her injuries, SSR chief Daniel Sousa, a disabled war veteran, persuades Peggy to remain abeyant:

DANIEL. Not fun when your body quits on you, is it? Welcome to my world.

PEGGY. Oh, how do you cope with it?

DANIEL. I’ll tell you when I learn how, but it helps to know that sometimes  
you have to put your faith in others to get the job done.

(2x06, “Life of the Party”)

Indeed, as Sharon Ross states, “interdependency is not a sign of weakness; rather, it is the heart of toughness” (242).

Ultimately, although she disrupts traditional notions of femininity, Peggy’s narrative exists within a patriarchal framework. *Agent Carter* begins with Steve’s sacrificial dive into the North Atlantic and closes when Peggy finally succumbs to her romantic feelings for Daniel.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, season one is propelled by Howard’s redemption arc whilst season two devotes a subplot, and a musical number, to Peggy’s two male suitors.<sup>77</sup> There is also the matter of Peggy’s niece. A formidable S.H.I.E.L.D. agent until the agency’s disintegration, Sharon Carter was assigned to go undercover as

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<sup>74</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x05, “The Atomic Job.”

<sup>75</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x06, “Life of the Party.”

<sup>76</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x10 “Hollywood Ending.”

<sup>77</sup> *Agent Carter* 2x09 “A Little Song and Dance.”

Steve's neighbour in *The Winter Soldier* to protect and monitor him. Sharon sided with Steve during the Hydra uprising and aggressively aided in Pierce's defeat. While being Peggy Carter's niece was "pretty cool," Sharon admits that it was also "a lot to live up to." Indeed, she refrained from revealing their relation until she spoke at Peggy's funeral.<sup>78</sup> Though active in *The Winter Soldier*, Sharon's purpose in *Civil War* is limited to performing as Peggy's mouthpiece via her eulogy, re-uniting Steve and Bucky, and affirming Steve's heterosexuality. Sharon uses her position as supervisor of the CIA's Joint Terrorism Task Force to grant Steve confidential files, access to Bucky's cell, and returns his confiscated uniform and shield. Whilst Peggy actively assisted in Bucky's rescue in 1943 by flying with Steve to Austria, Sharon performs an act equivalent to dropping off superheroic dry-cleaning.<sup>79</sup>

Steve shares romantic moments with both Carter women but his relationship with Sharon is lackluster and wedged into a narrative where there is simply not room for it. Peggy and Steve established a reciprocal relationship prior to their kiss, which occurred as he boarded the ship to defeat Red Skull, a feat he accomplishes alone. Sharon kisses him under an overpass before the airport battle in Germany, where his allies support him as he attempts to bypass Tony. Peggy would have been on the tarmac with Steve, whereas Sharon is left behind. Indeed, very few of Sharon's actions are indicative of her own motivation past assisting Steve in his quest to save Bucky. While Steve forms relationships with other characters, his relationship with Bucky takes precedent, thereby reinforcing the notion that male-dominated narratives are par for the course in the MCU.

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<sup>78</sup> *Civil War* (32:44-33:08).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* (1:25:31-1:26:42).

## 4.2 Red in Her Ledger: Natasha Romanoff's Road to Redemption

Hagelin's model of female characters who "fight back" through masculinized aggression resembles the femme fatale (4). Mysterious and unreadable, the femme fatale resists definition; she is often understood via "a combination of manipulative sexual allure and danger" (Farrimond 10-13). Much of the scholarship surrounding the MCU's Natasha Romanoff focuses on her sexuality. I do not wish to denounce such analyses as they are undeniably factual, especially when considering Natasha's overt objectification in earlier films such as *Iron Man 2*. Aware of Tony Stark's reputation with women, Natasha uses her sexual allure to beguile him, thus ensuring she remains undetected whilst posing as his assistant. When considering her for the position, Tony turns to his former assistant and love interest Pepper Potts and remarks, "I want one."<sup>80</sup> From Pepper's jealousy to the absurd hairstyle Natasha sports when performing acrobatic hand-to-hand combat, the film re-enforces sexist images of women.<sup>81</sup> Whilst one must remain cognizant of such reductive images, I believe there are multiple facets of Natasha's character worth exploring.

Reflecting on Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, Hagelin observes that "film has explored pain's power to unmake" (73). The notion of being "unmade" is continuously explored in the MCU via instances of mind control and psychological manipulation. After she frees Agent Clint Barton (Hawkeye) of Loki's mind control in *The Avengers*, he feverishly begins to question Natasha:

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<sup>80</sup> *Iron Man 2* (23:15-25:51).

<sup>81</sup> The film's cinematography also works to reify sexism. For instance, the camera focuses on Natasha's breasts and legs as she changes into her stealth suit in the backseat of a car; the narrative stalls as she reminds Tony's bodyguard to keep his eyes on the road (1:40:11-1:40:24).

CLINT: Have you ever had someone take your brain and play? Pull you out and stuff something else in? Do you know what it's like to be unmade?

NATASHA: You know that I do.<sup>82</sup>

Natasha was raised and educated in the Red Room, a covert Soviet program designed to brainwash young girls and churn out elite assassins. Whilst enrolled in the program, the girls undergo daily physical training and are required to attend classes where they are indoctrinated into the art of espionage. An early Red Room curriculum included screening Walt Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* to demonstrate how a woman should behave to avoid suspicion; there were also subliminal messages in the film, instructing the girls to "Instill," "Fear," and "Pain." Students are often required to spar. Occasionally, the victor is required to kill their opponent, a reminder that weakness will not be tolerated (see figure 7).<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *The Avengers* (1:32:50-1:33:15).

<sup>83</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x05, "The Iron Ceiling."



*Figure 7* Russia, 1937: Young girls partake in a routine sparring match in an early iteration of the Red Room. Here a young Dottie Underwood, one of Peggy Carter’s adversaries, is instructed to kill her opponent. She does so without remorse, reflecting the deadening effect of the Black Widow program.<sup>84</sup>

An expert in martial arts, marksmanship, acrobatics, tactics, and psychological manipulation, Natasha establishes herself as one of the world’s deadliest assassins, hence her moniker: Black Widow. She utilizes her “very specific skillset” indeterminately and consequently finds herself on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s radar “in a bad way.”<sup>85</sup> Clint is sent to kill Natasha but decides to recruit her instead. Natasha becomes an asset for S.H.I.E.L.D. and a critical member of the Avengers, without the benefit of gamma radiation, gold titanium alloy suits, or Super-Soldier serum. Nevertheless, her “utilitarian blood-letting past,” which includes affiliation with the KGB, casts her as morally ambiguous and deceitful (Flanagan 109). Though she does not disavow her actions, Natasha regrets and seeks

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<sup>84</sup> *Agent Carter* 1x05, “The Iron Ceiling.”

<sup>85</sup> *The Avengers* (1:03:28-1:07:10).

atonement for them, as demonstrated when she approaches a caged Loki to bargain for Clint's life:

NATASHA. I got red in my ledger, I'd like to wipe it out.

LOKI. Can you? Can you wipe out that much red? Dreykov's daughter, São Paulo, the hospital fire? Barton told me everything. Your ledger is dripping. It's gushing red and you think saving a man no more virtuous than yourself will change anything? This is the basest sentimentality. This is a child at prayer. Pathetic! You lie and kill in the service of liars and killers. You pretend to be separate, to have your own code, something that makes up for the horrors. But they are part of you. And they will never go away.<sup>86</sup>

Rather than physical intimidation, Loki excels in manipulation and trickery, twisting his opponent's weaknesses to break them. His downfall, however, is his arrogance. Indeed, though he has been told "everything" about Natasha, presumably how she too excels in psychological warfare, he underestimates her because she is a woman.<sup>87</sup> Feigning tears, she turns away from him to conceal her ostensible hysteria. Believing he's bested her, Loki taunts Natasha and accidentally reveals his plan to unleash the Hulk. Immediately, she perks up and turns around; a master of reconnaissance, there is no trace of the anguish or terror she exuded moments before she turned her back on him. She confirms his blunder, leaving him dumbfounded with a sanguine "Thank you for your cooperation."

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<sup>86</sup> *The Avengers* (1:03:28-1:07:10).

<sup>87</sup> Indeed, Loki goes as far as to call Natasha a "mewling quim," a misogynistic slur that insults the very nature of her being a woman (Yagoda).

Considering only her characterization in *Iron Man 2*, Natasha arguably embodied what Caroline Heldman refers to as the “Fighting Fuck Toy,” a hypersexualized female character “who is able to ‘kick ass’ (and kill) with the best of them – and look good doing it” (qtd. in Hagelin 9). Audiences had thus far been presented with a superficial character who seemed mentally impervious. Indeed, although Natasha appears genuinely horrified by Loki’s monologue, it is initially unclear whether her fear was authentic or simply a part of her play. For while he was attempting to destabilize her, everything Loki said was true; Natasha is haunted and despite any benevolent action she might take, her past will not simply vanish. Natasha yearns to move forward, rallying her cohort to pursue the trickster; however, Clint discerns: “You’re a spy, not a soldier, and now you want to wade into a war. Why?” After a moment of reflection, Natasha admits that she has been “compromised” by Loki’s diatribe and reiterates that she wants to wipe the red from her ledger.<sup>88</sup>

Natasha is given space and opportunity for atonement in *The Winter Soldier*. She remains guarded at the film’s outset, conducting surreptitious assignments within Steve’s larger S.H.I.E.L.D. missions because while he would question problematic directives she is “comfortable with everything.”<sup>89</sup> Wood states that Black Widow “embodies a whole culture’s uneasy attitude to dynamic women” (17).<sup>90</sup> Notably, Steve is not made uneasy by Natasha because she is a woman; she frustrates him because she is dishonest. After Hydra reveals themselves, Steve means to retrieve a USB drive he concealed behind packages of gum in a vending machine. Horrified to find it missing, Steve recognizes

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<sup>88</sup> *The Avengers* (1:32:50-1:33:15).

<sup>89</sup> *Winter Soldier* (13:54-14:48).

<sup>90</sup> Although she is writing on Marvel Comics, Wood’s critique remains relevant to Natasha in the MCU.

Natasha's reflection in the glass; cheekily, she blows a bubble. Steve yanks her into an empty room and shoves her against the wall. What follows is a quick, intimate argument in which Steve does not hold back verbally or physically:

STEVE. Stop *lying*!

NATASHA. I only act like I know everything, Rogers!<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (51:41-53:21).





**Figure 8** Although Steve is extremely rough with her, Natasha does not read as vulnerable in this scene. Initially unsure if they can trust each other, Steve and Natasha form a salient friendship in *The Winter Soldier* that continues to flourish as the *CA* narrative progresses. For instance, Natasha attends Peggy’s funeral in *Civil War* because she “doesn’t want [Steve] to be alone” (34:28-35:07).

Hagelin observes that such images project a reversal of audience expectation; a film that depicts a man beating a woman in this manner (or violently shoving her against a wall) signals respect, not domination; it recognizes “male desire to protect women from violence as an insidious condensation” (89). Screenwriter Christopher Markus further comments: “[Steve is] treating her like an equal, both physically and mentally. She’s an Avenger. She’s on the team. She can take this kind of treatment when needed” (Russo et. al 2014). The hand-held camera technique intensifies the closeness of the heroes’ altercation (see figure 8). However, although their conversation is heated, the scene is not sexually-charged.

The decision to pair the enigmatic Black Widow with forthright Captain America seems rather incongruous. Though they fought together in *The Avengers*, the two had minimal interaction. Moreover, their differing ideologies do not seem conducive to good teamwork. Truly, I feared the worst for Natasha: relegation to a mere love interest. Markus contends that while viewers might expect sexual tension based purely on Natasha’s sheer presence in the film, a romance would “sell both characters short” (Russo et. al 2014). Instead, what emerged from this collaboration was a rich, interdependent friendship. As a spy, Natasha assumed multiple identities and operated in solitude. As an Avenger, she must learn to integrate her skills with those of her peers:

NATASHA. The truth is a matter of circumstance. It’s not all things to all people, all the time. Neither am I.

STEVE. That’s a tough way to live.

NATASHA. It’s a good way not to die, though.

STEVE. You know, it’s kind of hard to trust someone when you don’t know who that someone really is.

NATASHA. Yeah. Who do you want me to be?

STEVE. How about a friend?

NATASHA. Well, there's a chance you might be in the wrong business,

Rogers.<sup>92</sup>

This conversation takes place minutes before Steve and Natasha infiltrate the bunker at Camp Lehigh and learn that Hydra has been operating within S.H.I.E.L.D. since its inception. After a blast renders her unconscious, Steve carries Natasha from the rubble and out of harm's way.<sup>93</sup> Natasha is extremely taken aback, insisting that she now "owes" him. Her perception of their relationship is akin to the "debt" she owes Clint; she views relationships as transactions. Yet when coaxed, she confides in Steve. Natasha believed that joining S.H.I.E.L.D. would give her the chance to cleanse her ledger. Learning that she had been working for Hydra, albeit unknowingly, cancels out any amends she might have made during her time with the organization: "I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but I guess I can't tell the difference anymore." Despite this reflection, Steve, who is "always honest," reveals that he now trusts Natasha.<sup>94</sup> Salient, platonic bonds between male and female characters are rare, especially in the superhero genre. It is these bonds that encourage character growth and foster multi-faceted representations of gender and vulnerability.

Despite the progress made in *The Winter Soldier*, however, Natasha's characterization in the MCU continues to be frustratingly hackneyed. Performative feminist Joss

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<sup>92</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (57:50-58:30).

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* (1:07:05).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* (1:10:04-1:11:16).

Whedon's *Age of Ultron* is particularly trite.<sup>95</sup> While Natasha has formed significant platonic relationships with her teammates in prior films, *Age of Ultron* presents her first romance with Bruce Banner. Cringingly incongruous, yet sadly canonical, this courtship demotes Natasha to a love-struck, incapacitated moppet. Her "soothing female touch and cooing ministrations" serve to tame Bruce's brutish alter-ego; she administers a "lullaby" to calm Hulk after battle, thus bringing Bruce back to consciousness ("Widow Problem" Yamato). Indeed, though Scarlet Witch's corruptive visions affect Thor, Tony, and Steve emotionally, Natasha is the only Avenger left physically weakened by her spell. Moreover, whilst Tony and Thor's deliria is driven by images of apocalyptic destruction from which they take action, Natasha passively re-lives ruthless moments of her militaristic youth.<sup>96</sup> She later explains that graduation from the Red Room was contingent on a ceremonial hysterectomy to ensure the mission would always be the graduate's number one priority; she considers herself monstrous due to her infertility.<sup>97</sup> This revelation, along with Whedon's tendency to rely on archaic gender tropes, caused an uproar amongst fans and critics alike.<sup>98</sup> The film does not expound upon Natasha's vulnerabilities, nor does it integrate them into the narrative; rather, it corners her in a box – quite literally when she is captured and imprisoned by Ultron – and uses that vulnerability as a plot point to propel the action of her male teammates.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Once considered a feminist force in television and film, Whedon's ex-wife Kai Cole revealed via an open letter that he has used his "self-purported feminism as a shield against criticism and scrutiny." His work, though entertaining, contains "plenty of male gaze and women in refrigerators and some narratively pointless rape" (Browning).

<sup>96</sup> *Age of Ultron* (48:57-50:12; 51:37-52:03).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* (1:05:43-1:08:42).

<sup>98</sup> Whedon deleted his Twitter account shortly after *Age of Ultron*'s release largely due to the outpouring of negative critiques regarding his treatment of Natasha. Over a year later, Whedon claimed it was Natasha's "murderous actions" that made her monstrous, rather than her "unnatural" biology (W. Hughes).

<sup>99</sup> *Age of Ultron* (1:38:40-1:39:20).

However, Natasha's reputation as an extremely dexterous woman has been re-enforced not only by her post-*Ultron* appearances, but also through MCU films from which she is absent. For instance, Thor disrupts an action-packed clash in *Thor: Ragnarok* to pacify Hulk as Natasha did, whispering sweet words of encouragement and offering his hand. Hulk responds by grabbing Thor by the ankle, smashing him against the ground, then throwing him across the arena.<sup>100</sup> This scarcely-veiled parody of the Natasha/Bruce relationship is a running gag throughout *Ragnarok* and works to emphasize the pairing's absurdity.<sup>101</sup> Furthermore, when Natasha and Bruce finally reunite in *Infinity War*, the uncomfortable aura in the room is palpable; Sam Wilson even whispers, "This is awkward."<sup>102</sup> It *is* awkward. It is awkward because it is a reminder of a butchery of Natasha's character – something both Natasha and Bruce (and the MCU) largely want to depart from.<sup>103</sup>

Even if one regards *Age of Ultron* as an anomaly vis-à-vis Widow's portrayal, the fact remains that while both Bucky and Natasha undergo severe trauma, it is Natasha's trauma that boxes her into a gendered corner. Bucky's pain furthers his narrative whilst also contributing to the over-arching movement of the MCU in a profound manner. Indeed, the plots of both *The Winter Soldier* and *Civil War* hinge on the ways in which Bucky's trauma affects not only himself, but also key male characters, specifically Steve. Notice I specify that the relationship that drives Bucky's story is with a man. There is a longstanding relationship between Natasha and Bucky in Marvel Comics; they are

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<sup>100</sup> *Thor: Ragnarok* (55:54-56:41).

<sup>101</sup> Saturday Night Live also released a parody of *Ultron* in 2015, entitled *Black Widow: Age of Me* that starred Scarlett Johansson and hilariously critiqued the film's take on Widow's characterization.

<sup>102</sup> *Infinity War* (56:10-56:20).

<sup>103</sup> I hypothesize this narrative turnaround is largely due to the Russo brothers repairing Whedon's damage; the Russos took over the ensemble *Avengers* films after Whedon left Marvel Studios.

friends, allies, enemies, and lovers (Craig). Aside from miniscule nods that only comic fans would recognize, their relationship has not entered the MCU canon thus far. Instead, the films' narrative focuses on Bucky's relationship with his childhood friend, with whom he shares an intimate history. Bucky's trauma and Steve's guilt over that trauma dovetail into a male-driven narrative wherein vulnerability work to richen the story, rather than detract from their characters.

## Chapter 5

### 5 “To the End of the Line:” From Playground to Battlefield

*STEVE. You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?*

*BUCKY. Hell, no. That little guy from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight? I’m following him.<sup>104</sup>*



*Figure 9* From the back alleys of Brooklyn to the Wakandan battlefield, Bucky has continually followed Steve into “the jaws of death.” Here, the friends await Thanos’ army alongside King T’Challa, Natasha, and the warriors of Wakanda (*Infinity War*).

Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby in 1941, Captain America holds an indispensable presence in the Marvel Universe. He has appeared in over 5000 comics, books, trade publications, and other media formats, maintaining a “continuing, fluid relevance through eras [and] incarnations” (Stevens 2-3; Flanagan 98). The character epitomizes American cultural values of a given time, highlighting matters of patriotism and gender and race

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<sup>104</sup> *The First Avenger* (1:14:05-1:14:41).

relations (Stevens 8). Certainly, it is Cap's "uncompromising purity" that delineates him as Marvel's "moral center" (Stevens 277; Blumberg qtd. in Stevens 281). The MCU upholds Cap's established benevolence and sense of duty, which are largely responsible for his recruitment in Project Rebirth. As Erskine explains: "a strong man who has known power all his life may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows compassion."<sup>105</sup> It is precisely Steve's vulnerabilities that best qualify him to receive the serum, establish the Howling Commandos, and eventually lead the Avengers. Nevertheless, the MCU's narrative deviates from the comics' habitual "monomythic mold" of jingoistic patriotism via an emphasis on Steve's humility, compassion, and intrinsic vulnerability (Mills qtd. in Stevens 261).

Hagelin contends that resistant vulnerability requires "images of vulnerable men that demand our sympathy" (4). Whether lamenting over absent fathers or drowning their guilt in single-malt scotch and avoidance, "man pain" runs rampant in the MCU.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, characters' pain weaves together and forms incredibly profound bonds between men. It is within these relationships where resistant vulnerability manifests and thrives. This vulnerability is skillfully exhibited through the literary trope of hurt/comfort. Often utilized in fanfiction, hurt/comfort occurs when "pain, injury, or disability is inflicted on a character and another character provides some sort of comfort or healing" (Zubernis and Larsen 90). Further described by Mirna Cicone as the "eroticization of nurturance," hurt/comfort also:

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<sup>105</sup> *The First Avenger* (22:45-24:22).

<sup>106</sup> "Man pain" describes what happens when a narrative focuses exclusively on male angst after tragedy, while belittling or neglecting the pain of others – particularly female pain (Huang). Put one way, this phenomenon consists of "straight white male characters whining about how hard it is to be straight, white, and male" (Walker).



[Enhances] the eroticization of intimacy. Hurt/comfort provides a plausible way for any author to depict increasing closeness between two men, because when the hero is hurt, he is at his most vulnerable... Although hurt/comfort has only been labeled as an explicit genre within fannish literatures, it is yet another structure that connects amateur and professional texts. Its pervasiveness clearly demonstrates how similar concerns are being exposed across literary fields that have traditionally been considered as vastly different. Hurt/comfort is often facilitated by the homosocial warlike settings that provide ample opportunity for injury, along with the subsequent comfort. (Woledge 110-11)

The MCU is an opportune space to investigate hurt/comfort because of its emphasis on characters' vulnerability and interpersonal relationships. Steve and Bucky's friendship, for instance, is the driving force of the *CA* narrative; it propels the plot forward and sparks substantial character growth. Akin to his relationships with Peggy and Natasha, Steve's friendship with Bucky is based on reciprocity and respect. However, the two men consistently disregard personal safety and limitations to ensure each other's well-being; they are simultaneously each other's greatest impetus and most profound weakness. Following the narrative chronologically, this chapter explores Steve and Bucky's ever-revolving roles as victim and defender, damsel and knight (see figure 10).

## 5.1 “Just a Kid from Brooklyn”

Initially marginalized due to his ill health prior to receiving the serum in 1943, Steve Rogers has been continually isolated from “normal” society (Shaw and Hammer 120).<sup>107</sup> Steve maintains that he “never really fit in anywhere” decades after Project Rebirth, even amongst the Avengers.<sup>108</sup> Though he forms meaningful relationships with his modern cohorts, the only person with whom he truly feels at home is Bucky Barnes.<sup>109</sup> The two first met as young boys on a school yard in Brooklyn when Bucky defended Steve from a group of bullies, thus kindling their friendship (Ettlinger). Bucky voluntarily became Steve’s protector, shielding him not only from physical threats, but emotional trauma as well.<sup>110</sup> The friends became “inseparable” as their comradeship continued into adulthood; Steve reflects: “Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky.”<sup>111</sup>

Frequently browbeaten for his small stature, Steve developed an unwillingness to submit; playground fights became parking-lot brawls and fisticuffs a way to assuage his frustrations. This persistence is also reflected in Steve’s repeated (and illegal) attempts to enlist, despite being deemed “not acceptable for induction to military service.”<sup>112</sup> On the eve of Bucky’s deployment, the friends attend the World Expo. Steve wanders off to the fair’s recruitment centre hoping to “try his luck;” this exasperates Bucky. For while Steve

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<sup>107</sup> Steve’s file indicates that he has asthma, sinusitis, easy fatigability, and “nervous trouble of any sort.” He also had both scarlet and rheumatic fever, suffers from chronic or frequent colds and high blood pressure, experiences heart trouble including palpitation or pounding in his heart, and notes that he has had household contact with tuberculosis (8:11-9:05).

<sup>108</sup> *Civil War* (2:15:03-2:16:45).

<sup>109</sup> Notably, Steve reunites with Peggy two years prior to her death in 2016. Unlike Steve and Bucky, she had aged naturally and “lived a life.” Despite her deteriorating health, Steve was grateful to spend time with Peggy because she connected him to a world he longed for – his home (*The Winter Soldier*, 20:17-22:25).

<sup>110</sup> For instance, after Steve’s mother dies Bucky opens his home to his orphaned friend. Grateful yet stubbornly independent, Steve declines the offer.

<sup>111</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (19:24-20:17; 1:24:40-1:25:11).

<sup>112</sup> *The First Avenger* (10:00-11:13).

continually denies his limitations, Bucky adamantly emphasizes them – not to discourage his friend, but to keep him safe:

STEVE. Look, I know you don't think I can do this.

BUCKY. This isn't a back alley, Steve. It's war.

STEVE. I know it's a war. You don't have to tell me it's a war.

BUCKY. Why are you so keen to fight? There are so many important jobs.

STEVE. What do you want me to do? Collect scrap metal in my little red wagon?

BUCKY. Yes! Why not?

STEVE. I'm not gonna sit in a factory, Bucky! Come on! There are men laying down their lives. I got no right to do any less than them. That's what you don't understand. This isn't about me.

BUCKY. Right. 'Cause you got nothing to prove.<sup>113</sup>

Prior to this squabble at the Expo, Steve engages a disrespectful movie heckler in a brawl behind a cinema. Despite excessive pummeling, and the fact that the man is much larger than himself, Steve does not relent, asserting: "I can do this all day." Bucky extinguishes the fight in his cinematic debut; he pulls the man off Steve and plows him with what remains the most iconic superhero punch in the MCU.<sup>114</sup> As per his stubbornness, Steve is not particularly thankful, especially not once he notices that Bucky is wearing an olive drab uniform. Enlistment, the draft, and general wartime mobilization had a profound effect on American social attitudes regarding gender; an inability to serve was a

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<sup>113</sup> *The First Avenger* (13:08-14:03).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* (10:00-11:13); at least in this humble researcher's opinion.

condemnation of one's masculinity (Penner 72). Standing opposite Bucky, who has received his orders to fight overseas, Steve cannot help but feel inferior – infantilized, even. As much as he genuinely yearns to serve his country, he must also prove himself an adequate, able man.

After receiving Erskine's serum, Steve expects to join Bucky and the Allied forces on the frontline. However, dubbed a "science experiment" by Col. Phillips, he can either submit to ceaseless testing at a government laboratory or perform as The Star-Spangled Man with a Plan in a national USO tour. Steve recites bond-selling propaganda, serving as a "shill" for the war effort. Steve's enhanced body becomes a spectacle; once again, he is the "freak" (Flanagan 103-104).<sup>115</sup> This is best demonstrated when the "Captain America" circuit performs on the Italian frontline. Steve dodges over-ripe tomatoes and endures cat-calls from his fellow American soldiers. Alas even with the stature of the "ideal fighting man," Steve's peers consider him a "chorus girl" rather than a soldier (Flanagan 103-104). Bearing in mind this persistent emasculation, it is remarkable that Steve's call to action is not an epic feat to substantiate his masculinity; rather, it is born of love and fear of loss: rescuing Bucky from behind enemy lines:

PEGGY. What do you plan to do, walk to Austria?

STEVE. If that's what it takes.

PEGGY. You heard the Colonel. Your friend is most likely dead.

STEVE. You don't know that.

PEGGY. Even so, [Phillips is] devising a strategy. If he detects any–

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<sup>115</sup> *The First Avenger* (48:10-50:54).

STEVE. By the time he's done that it could be too late!

[...]

STEVE. You told me you thought I was meant for more than this. Did you mean that?

PEGGY. Every word.

STEVE. Then you gotta let me go.

PEGGY. I can do more than that.<sup>116</sup>

Aside from an ill-timed misunderstanding with another female officer, this is the only point in the film when Steve is disrespectful to Peggy. Scared and eager to leave camp, he raises his voice and interrupts her; his bond with Bucky supersedes all other relationships. Differing from a quest for material treasure or personal glory, Stuller posits that viewing love as a motivating force might constitute “a reimagining of heroism” (87). This initial rescue mission also symbolizes a dynamic shift in Steve and Bucky’s friendship because for the first time in their lives together, Bucky is the one in need of saving.

## 5.2 The Man on the Bridge

During his imprisonment in Austria, Bucky is experimented on by Hydra scientist Arnim Zola. It is these modifications that permit him to survive the fall from the train in 1945, albeit sans his left arm. Bucky experiences relentless physical torture and psychological manipulation once re-captured by Hydra until his compliance is absolute; he has no recollection of his life prior to his entrapment as the Winter Soldier. Moreover, though he

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<sup>116</sup> *The First Avenger* (55:04-55:42).

is far stronger than his handlers, Bucky is prepped for memory erasure without retaliation. He takes his mouth-guard as a broken horse accepts a bit – begrudging, but obedient.<sup>117</sup> Bucky’s passivity is contra to habitual male superheroes who “tend to escape and, against all odds, save the day;” indeed, he aligns more with the objectified heroine who often remains “stuck in [her] role as the submissive victim” (Edmunds 215).

When Steve unmaskes the Winter Soldier and recognizes Bucky he experiences an overwhelming emotional response (Auriemma). Guilt and disbelief wash over him as he regrets not searching harder for Bucky’s body after the accident. Whilst terminating Project Insight and stopping Hydra remains the team’s main priority in *The Winter Soldier*, liberating Bucky takes precedence for Steve. Joe Russo states:

We always said that the whole movie lives or dies on that last scene between [Steve] and Bucky. This third act is a *fait accompli*, in a way. It’s a superhero movie. The expectation is that he will win. But the real story is, will he win Bucky? Will he save his friend? Will his friend kill him? Will he have to kill his friend? The tragedy of that moment was the most important thing to us as directors in the third act. That’s the real climax of the act. (Russo et. al 2014)

Although he does not “win” Bucky, Steve cracks Hydra’s brainwashing enough to kick-start his friend’s self-directed rehabilitation. Bucky seeks refuge in Romania and attempts to regain control of his mind. In *Civil War*, Steve inspects the derelict apartment that Bucky is squatting in: cinder blocks hold wooden planks to form a makeshift bookshelf, dry-wall is broken off in chunks, and a filthy mattress and sleeping bag lay haphazard on the ground. Steve discovers a dog-eared moleskin notebook, finding a glossy photograph

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<sup>117</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (1:29:49-1:30:19).

of himself in its pages. Bucky returns to his dank home, timid and unsure of Steve. Their reunion is interrupted when Bucky is apprehended under suspicion of murder.

Once detained, Bucky is given an ersatz physiological evaluation; antagonist Helmut Zemo seeks to unleash the Winter Soldier via a set of nine code words. Bucky grows increasingly agitated with each word and repeatedly implores Zemo to stop. He begins to scream, desperate to break free of his bindings. Zemo completes the procedure. Despite spending the better part of two years reclaiming his independence, all Zemo had to do was “say the goddamn words” to imprison Bucky once more. Friederich Weltzien argues that successful superheroic masculinity requires complete control; to lose control, or to not have control in the first place, demonstrates the superhero’s failure to successfully assert his masculinity (qtd. in Alaniz 299). Zemo’s plan was to destroy the relationship between Tony and Steve, using Bucky as a pawn:

STEVE. You lost someone.

ZEMO. I lost *everyone*, and so will you. An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again, but one which crumbles from within? That’s dead forever.<sup>118</sup>

Zemo proceeds to show Steve, Bucky, and Tony archive footage from the night the Starks died. Unbeknownst to Tony, his parents were assassinated by The Winter Soldier. Horror-struck, Tony learns that Steve knew the true nature of their death. Indeed, his “willful blind-spot” for his friend leads Steve to make the most “complicated” decision thus far in his story: he refrains from telling Tony that The Winter Soldier is responsible for his

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<sup>118</sup> *Civil War* (1:58:50-2:00:51).

parents' deaths (Russo et. al 2016). In choosing not to be truthful with Tony, Steve compromises the moral pedestal he once occupied.



*Figure 10* Steve and Bucky in *The First Avenger* contrasted with the aftermath of *Civil War*'s climactic battle.



## Chapter 6

### 6 Conclusions

NATASHA. “Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes, we help make it that way. But we’re also the ones best qualified to defend it”<sup>119</sup>

The characters in *Captain America* are incredibly vulnerable individuals and it is their inherent vulnerability that enables them to yield power without losing respect for it.

While I believe that resistant vulnerability exists in the *CA* narrative, these films ultimately exist in a patriarchal framework. Moreover, Marvel Studios resides under the Disney umbrella, one of the world’s biggest media conglomerates. Disney is now “actively engaged in constructing the narratives of some of the most renowned superhero characters in the world” and, as Richard Stevens observes, this greatly affects the model of masculinity disseminated to a younger generation (290-91). *Captain America*, like all MCU narratives, is a profit-driven endeavor; marketability is of the upmost importance. Indeed, it is due to the franchise’s expansive audience reach that I believe Marvel Studios ultimately prioritizes commercial stability over the transgression of traditional notions of gender.

Nevertheless, critics note that *Black Panther*’s box-office success “has clearly persuaded Marvel that the future of the MCU lies in diversity” (Bacon). Certainly, *Captain Marvel* and *Endgame*’s exciting female-lineup are promising ventures. Yet when it comes to diverse representation, this researcher remains cautiously optimistic.

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<sup>119</sup> *The Winter Soldier* (2:03:10-2:04:02).

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: MCU Film Summaries<sup>120</sup>

<b>Phase One</b>	
<i>Iron Man</i> (2008)	When “genius billionaire playboy philanthropist” Tony Stark is taken hostage by a terrorist organization he builds a suit of armour to escape. Greatly affected by this life-threatening ordeal, Tony decides to stop manufacturing weapons indefinitely. He uses his new suit to track weapons that have been trafficked without his knowledge and break up a coup to replace him as CEO of Stark Industries.
<i>The Incredible Hulk</i> (2008)	Dr. Bruce Banner attempts to recreate the serum that was used to transform Steve Rogers into Captain America during WWII. Unfortunately, he fails. Exposed to gamma radiation, Bruce becomes the Hulk – a violent, “enormous green rage monster” – whenever his heart rate rises above two-hundred beats per minute.
<i>Iron Man 2</i> (2010)	Tony discovers that the core in the arc reactor that keeps him alive is slowly poisoning him. Unable to find a replacement, Tony becomes morose and reckless, appointing his assistant Pepper Potts as the new CEO of Stark Industries. Luckily, Tony finds a hidden message from his late father that leads him to discover a new element for the reactor.
<i>Thor</i> (2011)	Thor, a pompous prince from the godly realm of Asgard, is sent to Earth without his powers for a reality check. In his absence, his brother Loki attempts to take the throne from

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<sup>120</sup> Each film’s respective Wikipedia page was consulted whilst completing these summaries; they were written with length, clarity, and relevance to the project in mind.

	their ailing father. Thor regains his powers and defeats Loki, who disappears into a wormhole.
<i>Captain America: The First Avenger</i> (2011)	A Brooklyn man named Steve Rogers is transformed into a Super-Soldier to defeat the Axis powers during WWII.
<i>Marvel's The Avengers</i> (2012)	Thanos, an intergalactic warlord, gives Loki the task of retrieving a powerful object called the Tesseract from Earth. Heroes Iron Man, Thor, the Hulk, Captain America, Black Widow, and Hawkeye team up for the first time.

<b>Phase Two</b>	
<i>Iron Man 3</i> (2013)	Tony experiences extreme anxiety and PTSD after discovering that extra-terrestrials are real.
<i>Thor: The Dark World</i> (2013)	Thor reluctantly teams up with Loki to stop a mysterious weapon known as the Aether from falling into the wrong hands.
<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> (2014)	Hydra reveals that they have been working covertly within S.H.I.E.L.D. since its inception. Steve and Natasha seek to expose this conspiracy but are impeded by The Winter Soldier, who is revealed to be Steve's best friend Bucky.
<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> (2014)	A ramshackle group of miscreants – Peter Quill a.k.a. Star-Lord, Groot, Rocket, Drax, and Gamora – seek to keep a powerful orb from Thanos' minion Ronan.
<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> (2015)	Tony creates the super-bot Ultron, who is hell-bent on human extinction. Ultron employs the Maximoff twins, whose exposure to the Mind Stone gave them with super powers. The Stone is later used to bring The Vision to life.
<i>Ant-Man</i> (2015)	Scott Lang assists Hank Pym and daughter Hope Van Dyne in protecting Pym's Ant-Man technology, which lets one to shrink to the size of an ant whilst significantly increasing their strength.

<b>Phase Three</b>	
<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)	The U.N. invokes The Sokovia Accords, which seek to regulate superhuman activity. Divided on the issue, the Avengers split into two teams headed by Steve and Tony. Spider-Man aids Tony's team; Black Panther seeks to avenge his father's death.
<i>Doctor Strange</i> (2016)	A car accident ruins Dr. Stephen Strange's career as a neurosurgeon. Seeking a miracle cure, he learns the Mystic Arts and defends Earth from supernatural entities.
<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i> (2017)	Peter learns that his father is a celestial entity who's planted his seed on multiple planets to take over the universe. The Guardians must defeat him with the help of their new ally Mantis and Gamora's recalcitrant sister Nebula.
<i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (2017)	Peter Parker, "friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man," balances crime-fighting with his teenage obligations.
<i>Thor: Ragnarok</i> (2017)	Thor, Loki, the Hulk, and Valkyrie team up to defeat Hela and avert Ragnarök, the Asgardian apocalypse.
<i>Black Panther</i> (2018)	T'Challa returns to Wakanda to assume the throne. He is challenged by his cousin, Erik Killmonger, who seeks to abolish the country's isolationist policies.
<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> (2018)	The Avengers and Guardians attempt to defeat Thanos; he obtains the Infinity Stones and wipes out half the universe.
<i>Ant-Man and the Wasp</i> (2018)	Scott, Hank, and Hope try to open a portal to the quantum realm to rescue Janet Van Dyne, Hank's wife and Hope's mother, who has been trapped there for thirty-one years.



## Appendix B: Glossary of MCU Organizations, Objects, & Locations<sup>121</sup>

Asgardians, The	These extraterrestrial beings are like humans but possess highly advanced technology. Though not immortal, they can live up to thousands of years and exhibit superhuman abilities such as regeneration and strength.
Camp Lehigh	A U.S. military base used in 1943 to train Project Rebirth candidates. It was used as a S.H.I.E.L.D. office after WWII and was destroyed by Hydra in 2014.
Dora Milaje	An elite group of female warriors who serve as bodyguards to Black Panther and the Wakandan royal family.
Hydra	Founded in ancient times, but revived as a scientific division of the Nazi SS, Hydra is an “authoritarian terrorist-criminal-paramilitary organization bent on world domination.” Believed to be dismantled after WWII, Hydra secretly continued to operate within S.H.I.E.L.D. until exposed by Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff in 2014.
Infinity Stones, The	Six ancient and incredibly powerful “elemental crystals” that are connected to different components of the universe: space, mind, power, reality, time, and soul. Each stone is destructive on its own, but brought together their damage is unprecedented. Thanos collected all six gems and eradicated half the universe.
Joint Terrorism Task Force	A subdivision of the CIA focused on global counter-terrorism. Sharon Carter was stationed with the Task Force in Berlin when they apprehended Bucky Barnes in 2016.
Project Rebirth	A classified government project whose aim was to use Dr. Abraham Erskine’s serum to create Super-Soldiers to fight the Axis powers during WWII.

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<sup>121</sup> These glossaries contain only the organizations, locations, objects, and characters mentioned in this project. Entries were written whilst consulting the Marvel Cinematic Universe Wiki.

Project Insight	S.H.I.E.L.D.’s attempt to up global security after the Battle of New York in <i>The Avengers</i> . It involved three highly-armed, satellite-linked Helicarriers. Hydra turned the project against S.H.I.E.L.D., intending to use an algorithm designed to eliminate those they perceived as threats. Steve Rogers and his allies destroyed the Helicarriers.
Red Room, The	A clandestine Soviet program designed to brainwash young girls and churn out elite assassins.
Sokovia	A fictional country first featured in <i>Age of Ultron</i> . It was the site of the final battle against Ultron.
Stark Industries	Tony Stark’s multinational industrial company and the biggest tech conglomerate in the world. Founded in 1939 by his father Howard, Tony ceased weapons development in 2008 and appointed Pepper Potts CEO in 2010.
Strategic Scientific Reserve (The SSR)	A top-secret Allied war agency formed to combat Hydra during WWII. The SSR oversaw Project Rebirth. It was eventually absorbed by S.H.I.E.L.D. when it was formed.
Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.)	An American “extra-governmental military counter-terrorism and intelligence agency” that aims to maintain national and international security. Founded by Peggy Carter, Howard Stark, and Col. Chester Phillips of the SSR.
Ten Rings, The	A multi-national terrorist organization responsible for the kidnapping of Tony Stark in Afghanistan in 2008.
Valkyries, The	An elite force of female Asgardian warriors sworn to protect the throne. Brunnhilde is the only survivor of the Valkyries’ epic battle against Hela.
Wakanda	A fictional, isolationist country in Africa ruled by T’Challa, the Black Panther. Though it appears to be a third world country, it is the most technologically advanced society in

	the world. Wakanda was the site of the Avengers' final battle against Thanos in <i>Infinity War</i> .
War Dogs	The central intelligence service of Wakanda who collect information from around the world to protect the country.

### Appendix C: Glossary of MCU Characters

<i>Captain America</i> Characters		
	Alias/Superhero Identity	Brief Description
Alexander Pierce	N/A	Hydra sleeper agent. Bucky's handler/antagonist in <i>Winter Soldier</i> .
Angie Martinelli	N/A	Automat waitress and aspiring actor.
Arnim Zola	N/A	Hydra scientist responsible for Bucky's enhancements.
Chester Phillips	Col. Phillips	Commanding officer at Camp Lehigh; he was also involved in Project Rebirth and helped found S.H.I.E.L.D. after WWII.
Daniel Sousa	N/A	SSR chief and Peggy's eventual beau.
Unknown	Dottie Underwood	Soviet-trained undercover operative and Peggy Carter's adversary.
Edwin Jarvis	N/A	Howard Stark's butler who assists Agent Carter on her adventures.
Howard Stark	N/A	Founder of Stark Industries, co-founder of S.H.I.E.L.D., and mustachioed ladies' man.
James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes	The Winter Soldier	Steve's best friend since childhood; he is also an expertly trained Soviet assassin.
Johann Schmidt	The Red Skull	Leader of Hydra during WWII.
Margaret "Peggy" Carter	Agent Carter	SSR Agent and Steve Rogers' ally.
Natasha Romanoff	Black Widow	Russian-trained assassin and Avenger.
Sam Wilson	Falcon	Former U.S. Air Force para-rescue, VA counsellor, and Avenger.

Sharon Carter	Agent 13	Niece of Peggy Carter; S.H.I.E.L.D. agent.
Steve Rogers	Captain America	Brooklyn man who is transformed into a Super-Soldier via a serum.

<b>General MCU Characters</b>		
	Alias/Superhero Identity	Brief Description
Betty Ross	N/A	Scientist and Bruce Banner's former love interest.
Bruce Banner	The Incredible Hulk	Brilliant scientist who was exposed to gamma radiation and now has anger management issues.
Brunnhilde	Valkyrie	The last of the Valkyries & Thor's ally in <i>Ragnarok</i> ; she not a fan of sobriety.
Carol Danvers	Captain Marvel	U.S. Air Force pilot who possesses colossal cosmic power.
Clint Barton	Hawkeye	Phenomenal archer and wise-cracking Avenger.
Gamora	N/A	One of the Guardians of the Galaxy and Thanos' adopted daughter.
Hela	The Goddess of Death	Thor & Loki's elder sister who is Hel-bent on ruling Asgard in <i>Ragnarok</i> .
Jane Foster	N/A	World-renowned astrophysicist, astronomer, & Earth's premiere expert on Asgard. Thor's former girlfriend.
Loki	The God of Mischief	Norse god, prince of Asgard, and perpetual shit-disturber.
Maria Hill	Agent Hill	Former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent and Fury's right-hand woman.
Matt Murdock	Daredevil	Blind, NYC-based vigilante and lawyer.
Nakia	N/A	Wakandan spy and T'Challa's partner.
Nicholas "Nick" J. Fury	Director Fury	Former S.H.I.E.L.D. director who is responsible for the formation of the Avengers.
Okoye	N/A	General of the Dora Milaje.
Pepper Potts	N/A	CEO of Stark Industries and Tony Stark's girlfriend.

Peter Quill	Star-Lord	A half-human/half-celestial Guardian of the Galaxy who thinks <i>Footloose</i> is the greatest movie ever made.
Pietro Maximoff	Quicksilver	Wanda's twin brother who sacrificed his life for Hawkeye and a Sokovian boy.
Proxima Midnight	N/A	One of Thanos' "children" who helped him obtain the Infinity Stones.
Ramonda	N/A	Queen of Wakanda.
Shuri	N/A	Scientist in charge of Black Panther's gear and princess of Wakanda.
T'Challa	Black Panther	Sovereign ruler of Wakanda.
Thanos	The Mad Titan	A powerful, psychopathic intergalactic extremist with genocidal tendencies. His goal? Balancing the universe by exterminating half of it.
Thor	The God of Thunder	Norse god and king of Asgard. He enjoys Pop-Tarts.
Tony Stark	Iron Man	Genius billionaire playboy philanthropist. Doesn't like being handed things.
Vision, The	N/A	An android who houses the mind stone. Cannot make paprikash.
Wanda Maximoff	Scarlet Witch	Perhaps the most powerful Avenger. Her powers, derived from an Infinity Stone, include telekinesis, telepathy, and psionic energy manipulation.
Whitney Frost	Madame Masque	A 1940s Hollywood actress/genius whose dark experimentation gave her the ability to absorb her enemies into her skin.

## Curriculum Vitae

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