

## **Crossing Over: The Migrant “Other” in the Marvel Cinematic Universe**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Two mainstream films from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) reflect anxiety about the alien (migrant) “other” through difference and crisis. In this article, we explore how refugees and “shithole” planets form a major plot point in *Captain Marvel* (2019). At the most extreme, alien exclusion is articulated in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), from the villain’s perspective, as a Malthusian need for extermination of lives to preserve environmental balance. Seemingly innocuous, these narratives are symbolic of a creeping right-wing discourse that dehumanizes outsiders, refugees, and migrants in popular culture. Inspired by the call to consider how film and new media converge, and to bridge the gap between media and migration studies, we assert that the representation of and rhetoric about migrants deserve study in popular culture beyond their mere textual representation. Symbolic convergence theory (SCT) is used to do a close reading of the texts and the fandom communities around them, drawing out discourses and themes that resonate in popular discussion. We find translations of anti-immigrant narratives bleeding into fan communities, mediated through irony and internet culture.

**Keywords:** Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), Other, Migrant, Symbolic Convergence Theory, Captain Marvel, Avengers Infinity War

In negotiations with Congress over the extension of Temporary Protected Status for refugees from Haiti, El Salvador, and other countries, U.S. President Donald Trump was caught asking why "all these people from shithole countries" wanted to come to the United States. Over a year later Marvel Studios released *Captain Marvel*. At the beginning of the film a character later revealed to be villainous calls Earth a "real shithole." Later in 2018, before the child separation crisis came to a head on the U.S.-Mexico border, *Avengers: Infinity War* featured a villain who sought to exterminate those whom the universe could not afford to feed or house.

This article discusses two films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) released at the end of the 2010s and their fan communities. This time period corresponds with a general rise of right-wing political movements in Europe and the United States finding electoral success by demonizing immigrants. Their anti-immigrant rhetoric frames immigrants as a threat to both national culture and national security. Both *Captain Marvel* and *Infinity War* are analyzed within this context of anti-immigrant politics. Using a symbolic convergence theory (SCT) perspective, we analyze both the films themselves as texts and the fandom communities around them as a co-productive meaning-making phenomenon.

Fandom communities have been well studied within the field of communication. Scholars have noted how fans are able to assemble a multiplicity of narratives and knowledge through transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). In turn, fans of media properties like the MCU also develop social capital through their often-arcane knowledge of back issues and post-credit teases. Since the rise of Web 2.0, the fans of the MCU have turned to online media platforms like YouTube and Reddit to discuss and share their fan theories of the series. Fans on these platforms create and consume content, blurring the boundary between creator and fan. More passive consumers of the MCU also encounter these fandom communities and view their content. The relative popularity of these new media platforms as a site for fan discussion prompts us to consider them a useful source of data for this study beyond the texts themselves.

This study integrates the analysis of fandom, new media, the MCU, and anti-immigration discourse into its structure. We first synthesize critical perspectives on the figures of alien "others" in science fiction and comics to discuss how popular films can both serve as forms of resistance to marginalizing discourses and reify them in the popular imagination. Superhero films have long dealt with themes of marginalization and assimilation, while science fiction has dealt with themes of invasion and border control. Subsequently we detail our process of SCT, and how analyzing texts situated adjacent to fan communities can reveal how meaning flows in our hybrid media environment. We then discuss our analysis of the two MCU films and fan reactions. Finally, we consider the implications of our findings within the broader media and political universe.

## **IMMIGRATION AND ALIENS IN POPULAR CULTURE**

Popular culture can function as a site of both reification and resistance toward power. For instance, science fiction and fantasy films are often expressions of social anxiety and national paranoia. Similarly, superhero films have also been studied as expressions of post 9/11 anxieties about the War on Terror (McSweeney, 2018) and institutional politics (Acu, 2016). Their general features of aliens, invasion, and superhuman powers are fertile ground for those interested in understanding how popular culture shapes the perceptions of migration politics. This study brings these media studies into conversation with works relating to immigration and representation. The following section first focuses on the genres of science fiction and fantasy and then moves to discuss comics and superheroes as a genre and medium.

Marginalization of the alien "other" in science fiction films dates back to the rise in popularity of the genre in the 1950s, when popular culture reacted to what Sontag (1965) referred to as "world-wide anxieties," particularly the Red Scare and fear of the spread of communism. In these films, defeating the alien "other"

served to diminish these anxieties and ease the collective psyche of a nation fearful of a communist invasion via both military force and ideas. According to Broderick (1993), these films also served to assuage fears by “reinforcing the symbolic order of the status quo via the maintenance of conservative social regimes of patriarchal law” (p. 362). As the genre evolved, science fiction films’ marginalization of the alien “other” evolved as well, reacting to anxieties over nuclear war and terrorism, but also increasingly around the issues of nationalism, isolationism, and fear of globalization. Cornea (2017) notes that these films became increasingly obsessed with an “overwhelming concern with the defence [sic] of the nation throughout this period” and “the frequent narrative emphasis on confrontation (whether competitive, threatening, or violent) across circumscribed borderlines.” Throughout these films, even when future globalization seems imminent, we see a resistance or hesitancy to fully embrace open borders and cooperation between humans on Earth and aliens from another planet, which symbolize the immigrant “other.”

To understand why aliens (extra-terrestrials) are symbolic of aliens (immigrants), we must first look at Ramírez Berg’s (2012) work that posits that since the 1980s, the science fiction alien in movies is “a figure for the tide of alien immigrants who have been entering the country in increasing numbers for the past several decades,” specifically Latinx aliens, as they constitute the majority of immigrants, when the designations of naturalized, documented, and undocumented are all taken into account. Ramírez Berg argues that these aliens are represented either as destructive monsters bent on extinguishing humanity, such as in *Predator* (1987) and *Independence Day* (1996), or as the virtuous and/or lovable (but still incompatible) sympathetic aliens that offer us wisdom, but still must go home to their planet at the end of the movie, such as in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982). The only way an alien can stay on Earth (alive) is to “adapt, assimilate, and finally become native” through offering humanity the gift of its special abilities, a sacrifice that both Superman and Spock in the *Superman* and *Star Trek* franchises, respectively, were willing to make. Alien monsters are ideal for serving as symbolic imagery of alien immigrants. As Kearney (2005) explains, they are particularly “liminal creatures” that “defy borders,” making them an ideal symbol for immigrants.

The othering of migrants as aliens in popular science fiction also extends to material and political consequences, as Lechuga (2015) notes. *Independence Day* (1996) and *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011) are two films that “demonstrate that U.S. state and military interests continue to shape the actual borderlands between the U.S. and México” (p. 259) by encouraging audiences to jingoistically support a militarized southern border. Extremists can then play out (or even cosplay) their mediated fantasies, as seen with the Minutemen Project and other right wing paramilitary groups. Further, the relationship between science fiction, the migrant “other”/alien, and dystopian futures has also become clearer in recent popular culture as the effects of climate change have become more acute. Lechuga, Avant-Mier, and Ramírez (2018) discuss the rise of ecology inequality themes in science fiction films from the 21<sup>st</sup> century like *Children of Men* (2006), *Elysium* (2013), and *Sleep Dealer* (2008). According to them, these “three films take the alien- monster narrative and flip the script, making the alien-migrant character the protagonist while rendering the authoritarian state system of control the antagonist—or in other words, the terrorizing monster.” In the face of looming ecological disaster these science fiction films showcase a dark future where the majority of humans become alien “others” on their own barren planet.

These themes also appear in comics too. Blanc-Hoang (2017) examines the “alien invasion” subgenre within the Latin American comic books *Barbara* (1979–1982), *Lose Tecnopadres* (1998–2006), and finally *O Viajante* (1989). Relations between humans and non-humans are represented as three frames of the alien colonization process: the conquest, pre- and post-independence periods, and contemporary times. The aliens of these comic books are compared to Spanish *conquistadores* colonizing new territory. Sutton (2016) calls attention to the names of alien characters within the 1960s *Legion of Super-Heroes* comic series. The alien characters of this comic become “othered” through their skin color and names, but still appear and act like a

white person. The aliens did not become “diverse” until the 1970s, when inclusivity and diversity were more prevalent within comic book storylines. Finally, Gárdan (2020) states that both Marvel and DC Comics have translated the alien “other” into blockbuster films with complex stories about humans, mutants, gods, demi-gods, *inhumans* (superpowered aliens from Marvel), and *metahumans* (superpowered beings from DC). These “othered” characters were culturally objectified as weapons for good or evil by their powers and capabilities, not their voices. There has been some but not much discussion of “otherness” in the MCU. For example, McSweeney (2018) notes that almost all the Avengers characters are from or based in the United States and the villains are often foreigners, aliens, or robots. Yet the connections between the science fiction–inspired “other” and the popular film series have not been shown. The MCU films themselves have blended elements of science fiction (along with many other genres) into their action-adventure, comic book–based superhero films. As we argue in the next sections, the constructions of alien otherness must be also contextualized with audience reception, something that symbolic convergence theory lends itself to.

### **SYMBOLIC CONVERGENCE THEORY APPLIED**

A rhetorical analysis of media texts, shared media universes, and their fandom communities is best achieved by conducting a fantasy theme analysis (FTA), guided by the larger theoretical orientations of symbolic convergence theory (SCT). Bormann (1972, 1982) developed SCT to interpret how dramatic messages can catch on in a dedicated community and develop a shared rhetorical vision for the group. Using FTA as a methodology requires the identification of the fantasy themes present in the text. In the case of each MCU film we are analyzing, we do so by paying close attention to the anti-immigrant narratives present in the text. FTA also requires the identification of *dramatis personae*, or the protagonists and antagonists of the drama. Plotlines and scenes are also described in FTA. Finally, a key part of this kind of rhetorical analysis involves describing the sanctioning agent, or the force that gives the drama its purpose. For example, in *Avengers: Infinity War* the sanctioning agent for the antagonist Thanos is to “give balance to the Universe,” while the protagonists view their sanctioning agent as preventing genocide.

One of the benefits of FTA is that it is a form of rhetorical analysis that requires one to look beyond the text and consider the implications of the narrative for its community of fans. Cragan and Shields (1995) define the process of groups associating with a narrative as a common shared reality as developing a “rhetorical vision.” The most popular mass media franchises often have dedicated fans who adopt a rhetorical vision, and the conglomerates that produce the media are often strongly supportive of this deep identification, as in the case of the MCU (Bryan, 2018).

Cragan and Shields find that most rhetorical visions are undergirded by foundational master analogs present throughout society. These master analogs are righteous, social, or pragmatic (p. 42). Righteous rhetorical visions are typically moral or ethical dramas in which good and evil are clearly defined, and the community adopts a feeling of righteousness through their association with the text. Social analogs focus on themes like friendship and comradeship. Pragmatic analogs are those associated with utility and practicality.

In this study we apply FTA to the texts of *Captain Marvel* and *Avengers: Infinity War*. Given the expansive nature of the MCU, there are often a multiplicity of themes present in the films. The vast number of long-running themes, such as institutional teamwork and the post-9/11 security state (Acu, 2016; Chambliss et al., 2018; McSweeney, 2018), are not the focus of this study. We focus on the anti-immigrant narratives present in the texts and explore how the various elements of the drama (*dramatis personae*, plot, scene, sanctioning agent) give meaning to those themes. Further, we approach analyzing *Captain Marvel* slightly differently than *Avengers: Infinity War*. Since *Captain Marvel* is a superhero origin movie, we focus in more detail on the plot. Since *Avengers: Infinity War* is an ensemble crossover, we focus more on “assembling” the themes of the MCU

up to that point with the sanctioning agent of Thanos. We then use media platforms like Reddit and YouTube to determine to what extent these themes have “chained out” into the online fandom communities of the MCU.

### **CAPTAIN MARVEL: ALIENS AMONG US**

Most of the discourse surrounding the release of *Captain Marvel* (2019) primarily focused on Marvel Studios' first stand-alone film centered on a female superhero protagonist. Warner Bros. released *Wonder Woman* (2017) two years earlier, and the critical and trade press outlets questioned why Marvel Studios, releasing consistently more profitable superhero films than Warner Bros., was so late to the game with respect to female superhero representation. There was also discussion surrounding *Captain Marvel's* rhetoric regarding immigrants and white nationalism. The film's plot centers on what is described as an ongoing war between the Kree, a powerful human-like race, and the Skrulls, an alien race positioned as the immigrant “other” in juxtaposition to the self-described “noble warrior heroes” that make up the Kree.

To apply FTA and SCT to this film, we must first identify the *dramatis personae* (i.e., the protagonists and antagonists). The film's protagonist, referred to simply as Vers (Brie Larson), is suffering from memory impairment regarding her past before assimilating with the Kree, but she has aligned herself completely with their ideals and displays much of their strength and some unique powers of her own. The Kree are led by an all-knowing artificial intelligence known as the Supreme Intelligence, which is the primary channel of collective memories and information the Kree share regarding their purpose and their sanctioning agent (i.e., the force of purpose), to stop their enemy, the Skrulls (the apparent antagonists), from becoming an unstoppable force. Initially, Vers shares this sanctioning agent, but through the course of the film rediscovers her past and with it the truth about the conflict between the Kree and the Skrulls, leaving her to question her own identity and her allegiance to the Kree.

The Kree's hatred of the Skrulls is informed directly by the Supreme Intelligence, which presents itself in sessions with the Kree as the individual each person most respects. In an early session with Vers, the Supreme Intelligence reminds her of the dangers of “the Skrull expansion that has threatened our civilization for centuries.” It refers to the Skrulls as “impostors who silently infiltrate, then take over our planets,” and positions them as the destructive aliens that Ramírez Berg tells us must be destroyed. The first representation the audience sees of a Skrull is featured in one of Vers's memories, in which a Skrull emerges from a fog of smoke, angrily firing a weapon, presumably at her. Just as the Skrulls' status as the Kree's enemy is reinforced through the Supreme Intelligence, the Skrulls' initial status as the film's antagonists is reinforced to the audience through the depictions of the Skrulls as alien “others.” The Skrulls are green and scaly and have pointed ears, almost resembling goblins. At one point in the film, they are referred to as “lizards” and “ugly bastards.” And yet the Skrulls' upright stature, in addition to their two arms and two legs, presents them as anthropomorphic.

This juxtaposition of the human form and the alien form in science fiction films is an important part of the scholarly discourse surrounding alien “others.” Sobchack (1997) argues that in the science fiction genre the “articulation of resemblance between aliens and humans preserves the subordination of ‘other worlds, other cultures, other species’ to the world, culture, and ‘speciality’ of white American culture.” However, as Ramírez Berg notes, depicting the aliens as vastly different from the human form, or distorting them, dehumanizes them and represents them as monsters to the viewer. Lechuga argues that this distortion is a result of the “process of affective conditioning” and reshapes “the borderland as. . . a place of violent exclusion for those perceived as alien” (p. 242). Lechuga et al. write that “Hollywood is using extremely distorted images of aliens to create large, menacing, hyper-violent, extraterrestrial invaders” that “are the furthest distorted from humans” (p. 246). Thus, when given the option of identifying with the monstrous alien “other” or the

nationalist U.S. military forces ordered to destroy it, the audience is conditioned to choose the latter.

However, in *Captain Marvel*, discerning the human-like Kree from the monstrous Skrulls is not always so easy. The Skrulls can shapeshift into anyone they see, and this complicates the Kree's goal of stopping them. Throughout the film, Skrull citizens take on the form of surfers, government agents, and members of the Kree. The inability to distinguish between the alien Skrulls and the human-like Kree triggers the same anxiety that nationalists feel when they are not able to identify their immigrant enemies. If an immigrant doesn't look like an immigrant, how can they be subjugated or deported? This trope of the invisible other has been deployed in film since the 1950's around Cold War fears of Communist infiltration, most famously in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).

The Skrulls' green, scaly appearance sets them apart as the alien "other," similar to how people of color are positioned as "others" through physical features marked as different by supremacists. But when a Skrull takes on the appearance of a Kree, those visual differences are eliminated, presenting multiple questions. Are the Kree and the Skrulls so different after all? And if the Skrulls look just like us, the Kree wonder, then how do we identify the true enemy? The anxiety these questions produce in the Kree is foreshadowed at multiple points in the film. Early on, the audience is introduced to Korath (Djimon Hounsou), a Kree swordsman, who recalls his confrontation with a Skrull who mimicked his own form: "I stared into the face of my mortal enemy and the face staring back was my own." Later in the film, Yon-Rogg (Jude Law), Vers's Kree commander, warns her, "Know your enemy. It could be you." These anxieties even foreshadow how anti-immigrant sentiment can cause political paranoia and a societal turn inward.

The Kree further position the Skrulls as alien "others" through their use of anti-immigrant rhetoric. The Kree describe the presence of the Skrulls as an "infiltration," an "invasion," and an "infestation." These terms evoke dehumanizing anti-immigrant rhetoric, often used by nationalists to compare immigrants to pests and insects. Ramírez Berg points out that comparing aliens to non-human entities, such as animals, pests, or insects, makes them all the easier to exterminate from the perspective of both the characters in the film and the audience (Berg, 2012). Ronan the Accuser (Lee Pace) verbalizes this desire to eliminate the Skrulls: "The infestation will be eradicated." The audience also discovers that the Kree's anti-immigrant sentiment is leveled not just at the Skrulls but also at inhabitants of Earth. Minn-Erva (Gemma Chan), a Kree sniper, refers to Earth as "a real shithole." While the line is played for laughs in the film, the term *shithole* serves as a racist dog whistle for nationalists, especially in the wake of President Donald Trump, a vehement nationalist himself, who referred to places such as Haiti and El Salvador as "shithole countries." Even the protagonists of the film mock and dehumanize the Skrulls for a laugh. Maria Rambeau (Lashana Lynch) asks Talos (Ben Mendelsohn), the shape-shifting leader of the Skrulls, if he can turn himself into a filing cabinet. Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) also quips, "I'll give you fifty bucks right now if you turn into a venus fly trap!" Ultimately, it is Talos who convinces them of the importance of treating the Skrulls as equals: "You really should be kinder to your neighbors. You never know when you're going to need to borrow some sugar."

This realization that the Skrulls are not the destructive aliens nor the antagonists of the film after all, but the sympathetic aliens instead, begins the character arc of Carol Danvers, Vers's newly discovered pre-Kree identity, and alters her sanctioning agent from stopping the Skrulls to helping them instead. Her memory loss regarding her past gives her a blank slate from which to build her own opinions of the Skrulls rather than accept the collective conditioning of the Supreme Intelligence and the Kree. She begins to question her identity, as do the other characters of the film, who ask her, "Is that really who you are now?" Danvers also resents those characters who try to tell her who she is: "You don't know me! You have no idea who I am!"

When she agrees to help Talos, Danvers transports him to a cloaked ship hovering over the Earth's atmosphere, where she discovers that Talos's family and other Skrulls have been hiding for years. Talos's reunion with his family serves as a humanizing moment for his character and the other Skrulls, ultimately

forcing Danvers to admit she was wrong in believing they were her enemies. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know,” she says. For the remainder of the film Danvers serves to stop the Kree, save the Skrulls, and help them find a new home. Like other sympathetic aliens before them, the Skrulls do not have the option of staying on Earth. Following Ramírez Berg’s model, since the Skrulls are unwilling to assimilate with the humans, they must find somewhere else to live.

By the conclusion of the film, it is evident that the Kree are the actual antagonists of the narrative and the true destructive aliens of the film. Danvers states her new sanctioning agent to Yon-Rogg: “Tell the Supreme Intelligence ... I’m coming to end it.” By “it,” she is referring to not only the war between the Kree and the Skrulls but also presumably the habitual subjugation practiced by the Kree upon alien “others” and “shithole planets.” This assertion that she is no longer under the Kree’s control also serves as a feminist statement for Danvers, as she was continuously oppressed not only by Yon-Rogg and the Supreme Intelligence but also by human men in her time on Earth, the instances of which come flooding back to her when her memories return. Throughout the film Yon-Rogg and other male characters tell her she doesn’t belong, she’s not strong enough, she’s too emotional, and to “lighten up” and “smile.” The toxic masculinity displayed by Yon-Rogg and others may not seem relevant to a discussion about immigrants at first glance, but it is important to note that the nationalist groups that spread anti-immigrant rhetoric in our current sociopolitical climate are the same groups that often-spread misogynist rhetoric in online forums and social media. Thus, the nationalist movement represents not just white nationalism but specifically white male nationalism, with respect to both the movement’s tenets and its agenda of maintaining the white male power structure. The movement’s apparent absence of female leadership or even abundant representation further enforces the notion that white nationalists are interested in maintaining their perceived racial and gender dominance, as men such as Patrick Casey, Richard Spencer, Gavin McInnes, and Alex Jones, and groups such as The Proud Boys, make up the public face of white nationalism. However, there are women involved in the ranks of both the alt-right and white nationalist movements, and as much as their involvement in these movements may be marginalized by the leadership, their efforts to spread the rhetoric of white male nationalism and expand its membership base should not be discounted either. *USA Today* and other publications have published stories about the difficulty these movements have in expanding their female membership, though, noting “how the leadership of far-right groups has portrayed women in the media and [created] a culture of excluding women from certain groups and in certain instances advocating for violence against women” (Pitofsky, 2018). Thus, it’s important to understand that the concept of the “other” with respect to the white nationalist movement applies not only to non-whites and non-Americans but in most cases also to anyone who does not fit into a traditional identity.

These same white male nationalist groups attempted to create a fan backlash against *Captain Marvel* upon its release, staging boycotts, online review bombing, and social media campaigns designed to impact the film’s box office. FTA encourages us to examine these reactions and identify their implications. Many online fan reviews of the film not linked to white nationalist accounts praised what they saw as the pro-immigrant message of the film, but other fans saw the film as an endorsement of Trump’s current nationalist policies. A fan review on the white nationalist site Delarroz.com, titled “Captain Marvel: FINALLY, A Movie Supporting Trump’s Immigration Policies” (Del Arroz, 2019), praised the ending of the film in which the Skrulls leave Earth as an endorsement of Trump’s immigration policy, which closes the door to refugees from countries destroyed by war. So, while some fans saw the Skrulls’ status as the sympathetic aliens as positive representation, others saw the required outcome of the sympathetic aliens leaving Earth as support for their nationalist ideology. Other fans found sympathetic characters in the toxic white men that Captain Marvel defeated. In a deleted scene from the finished film, Captain Marvel encounters a mouthy, misogynistic biker, named “the Don,” who repeatedly demands she smile for him. Through justified force, she convinces “the Don” to give her his helmet and motorcycle. A fan on Cosmic Book News saw this as a direct attack not only

on white men, but on Donald Trump himself, through the use of the nickname “the Don.” The fan identified with the biker and asked, “What if the roles were reversed and the footage showed a male doing this to a female?” (McGloin, 2019). Here we see most clearly a fan adoption of the righteous rhetorical vision, which develops through a relationship with the text by reading the hero of the film (and Disney/Marvel) as the true villain and the right-wing audience as the victim.

Marvel did little to dissuade these fan reactions that clearly identified with the unintended protagonists of the *dramatis personae*. In fact, outlets such as Screen Rant questioned why Disney felt the need to delete the aforementioned motorcycle scene at all, calling the decision “mistaken” and “inexplicable” (Bacon, 2019). Marvel was likely unconcerned with this reception of the film by white nationalists, as the film was highly successful and would go on to gross over \$1 billion worldwide, setting up *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) to become the all-time global box office earner just two months later. Given this massive success, Marvel Studios likely felt little need to denounce the white nationalist attacks and the white nationalist support for the film or explain its complicated depiction of the alien “other.”

### **INFINITY WAR: CRISIS AND EXTERMINISIM**

Preceding *Captain Marvel* in release date but taking place later in the chronological timeline of the MCU, *Avengers: Infinity War* focuses on the Avengers’ attempt to prevent Thanos from collecting the Infinity Stones. The Infinity Stones, which Thanos needs in order to accomplish his goal of extermination, serve as a plot device (sometimes called a McGuffin). The Avengers end up failing and Thanos collects all the stones. The film concludes with Thanos accomplishing his goal.

The plot has a real-world resonance. The effects of the climate crisis go beyond destruction of the natural environment and ecological systems and species loss. Rising sea levels, drought, and other increasingly common climate catastrophes will affect the most vulnerable human populations. The idea that climate change has a sociological and political layer, which leads to civil unrest, war, immigration, and refugees, is gaining currency in foreign policy and international studies (Parenti, 2011). For example, a devastating drought in Syria set the stage for the destructive and brutal Syrian civil war (Selby et al., 2017). Droughts and severe weather in Central America are also to blame for disrupting the developing economies and livelihoods of the marginalized in Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador (Hallett, 2019). Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020 further exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in these Central American countries. Both extreme climate events have left close to 3.5 million people food insecure, prompting many to seek refuge in the United States (Narea, 2021). Climate change will only further worsen the lives of those most vulnerable. And the stark response from the United States and countries in Europe will more than likely not be to limit the effects of climate change and accept refugees, but to close borders and prevent those escaping catastrophes from entering—protecting what they have at all costs.

A frighteningly similar scenario is presented as the sanctioning agent for the main antagonist, Thanos (Josh Brolin), in *Avengers: Infinity War*. In a scene heavy with expositional dialogue set on his desolate home world, Thanos explains to Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) that his planet “Titan was like most planets—too many mouths and not enough food to go around.” As a response to this crisis, Thanos offers a neo-Malthusian solution: the random genocide of half the population. He is declared a madman and, as he predicts, the extinction of his people comes to pass.

Earlier in the film Thanos expands upon his neo-Malthusian ideology, arguing that the resources of the universe are limited. In dialogue with his pseudo-daughter who he separated from her parents, he says, “Little one, it’s a simple calculus. This universe is finite, its resources, finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correcting.” This kind of thinking is an underlying feature of right-wing discourse

about immigrant populations. Immigrants, whether they are from Central America or North Africa, are essentialized as resource-draining, job-stealing figures. They exist as a threat to the resources meant for the rightful inhabitants of a country. Even the supposed fertility of immigrants is constructed as a threat. Chavez (2013) writes about how the U.S. Right is particularly obsessed with the supposed fecundity of Latina women and their “anchor babies.” These new children and their immigrant parents are further threats to the perceived limited resources they believe should be reserved for “true” citizens. The response has been to prevent immigrants from entering through border securitization or removing them once they arrive through a vast apparatus of immigrant surveillance and control.

What makes Thanos especially villainous in *Avengers: Infinity War* is that he suggests a final solution: extermination. The Avengers are thus set up in the film as characters trying to prevent this outcome. The main protagonists of the MCU up until *Avengers: Infinity War* have been Iron Man (Robert Downey, Jr.) and Captain America (Chris Evans). In the climax of the film both characters lead different teams trying to prevent Thanos from collecting the stones and both fail. We argue that both Iron Man and Captain America play symbolic roles here as the primary opponents of Thanos in his quest. Iron Man functions as a representation of the scientific, technocratic, neo-liberal, interventionist order. As McSweeney (2018) argues, the MCU is explicitly situated in the post-9/11, War on Terrorism world. McSweeney also argues that in the first *Iron Man* film, the capturing of Tony Stark by vaguely Arabic-looking soldiers and the eventual creation of the Iron Man suit represents the ability of U.S. military technology to win the war on terrorism. More specifically, once Stark has learned the immorality of his previous life as a weapons maker, he decides to unilaterally intervene in a foreign country and destroy his former captors, while utilizing technologies of force that spare the innocents. This mimics the fantasy that the U.S. can intervene “cleanly” in other countries with minimal civilian casualties. Throughout the rest of the MCU films, Stark as a character embraces the Avengers as a force for good in the world to atone for his past life. However, in his new role he often forgets his past lessons and ends up creating problems (see the villains Ivan Vanko in *Iron Man II*, Ultron in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and Aldrich Killian in *Iron Man III*) through his own vanity and arrogance. By the time of *Captain America: Civil War*, Tony Stark has come to represent (by taking the pro-registration side) the ultimate fusion of the neo-liberal state: highly reliant on privatized technology to protect the world from danger while fully legitimized through state power.

Captain America’s symbolic role is more nuanced, as one might categorize his character as representative of the United States and nationalism. Right before *Avengers: Infinity War*, Captain America is on the run from the government for refusing to register as a licensed superhero in *Captain America: Civil War*. While his earlier films portrayed him as trusting the government and institutions, by *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War* he has learned that institutions have been corrupted inside and out. In *Avengers: Infinity War*, Captain America leads the resistance to gather in the techno-utopia of Wakanda. As a result, Captain America, while opposing Thanos, comes to represent those who resist and protest their governments as they proceed toward further militarization and immigrant removal. He upholds higher values and principles, refusing to “trade lives” to stop Thanos. The film ends up portraying Captain America’s moral intransigence as a vice rather than virtue. The final Infinity Stone is held by Vision, whom Cap refused to sacrifice earlier in the film. The resistance fails at the end because they were unwilling to sacrifice their moral “vision.”

This might be the most frightening outcome of all, as even our best intentions may not be good enough in the face of crisis and exterminism. Vision (Paul Bettany), an android character introduced in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, can be considered a synthesis of the best features of Iron Man and Captain America. It is fitting that by the time Thanos has dealt with the other characters, the last Infinity Stone is held by Vision. Thanos coldly rips the Mind Stone out of Vision’s head, turning the android’s body into a grey and hollowed-out shell. He then paternalistically comforts Vision’s romantic partner, Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olson), calling her “my child,” and later fulfills his goal of exterminating half the universe. Thanos often refers to his victims and

followers as “his children.” This tying of exterminism with a discursive formation of the benevolent father reveals how anti-immigrant authoritarianism would work in a world without Infinity Stones: with a thin veneer of humane concern to justify monstrosity. Children may be coldly separated from their parents, but it’s for their *own good*.

Eventually right-wing paternalistic authoritarianism often turns its attention from policing the borders of the nation to policing the nation *using* the technologies of border control and colonization. Look no further than the use of a Border Patrol drone to “monitor” the 2020 summer protests over racial injustice (Kanno-Youngs, 2020). As Cope (2012) argues, “Geographically speaking, on its own soil fascism is imperialist repression turned inward” (p. 294). According to the ideology of Thanos, half of the universe must be exterminated due to material overuse. In this formulation Thanos becomes emblematic of the authoritarian state monsters motivated to control and repress their restive populations in an ecological crisis, as Lechuga et al. (2018) discuss.

Finally, we also position the recent MCU texts in the way they are received by audiences and fandom. *Avengers: Infinity War* was one of the most popular films of 2018. Indeed, many were shocked but also intrigued by the cliffhanger of the film, wondering if their favorite superheroes would come back from the “snap.” Some fans also wondered if they might have survived such a snap. One group emerged on Reddit as a subreddit called */r/thanosdidnothingwrong*. As the group grew in popularity, many of the memes were similar in theme to Figure 1.

You don't have to feed half the  
population if they're dead



Figure 1: A meme posted on Reddit

A similar post in the subreddit featured a meme that used the infamously edited photograph of Stalin and Nikolai Yezhov on the Moscow Canal. The first photograph, which included Yezhov, adds a speech bubble where another person in the photograph says, “Sir, we don’t have enough food to feed everyone. What should we do?” Stalin, with the infinity gauntlet (Thanos’ weapon from the film), then appears to “snap out” the existence of Yezhov, who in real life was executed after he fell out of Stalin’s favor. USSR censors also edited the original photo to literally erase the existence of Yezhov. The comments cleverly fused historical knowledge with quotes from the film, with little reflexivity and loads of irony.

This line of thinking, especially taking Thanos’ plan half-seriously was prominent on other online platforms too. A YouTube video with over 12.5 million views as of April 2021, claimed that “if you stop and look at the economics, statistics, and historical precedents, Thanos may actually be right” (The Film Theorists, 2018). Specifically, they note how the Black Death in Europe, which killed over 1/3 of the population, led to higher wages in the years after. While the video ends up concluding that human life is priceless and genocide is never a solution, most of the video is spent justifying Thanos’ quest with social science. Here we see the

adoption of the practical analog rhetorical vision. Several TikTok videos, with a heavy dose of Internet irony and humor, also claimed Thanos did nothing wrong like the many memes saying the same.

Returning to /r/thanosdidnothingwrong, a member of the group proposed that half of the members of the subreddit be randomly banned (following the logic of Thanos). The actor who portrayed Thanos, Josh Brolin, and even the Marvel Studios Twitter account got in on the action. An article on *Mashable* (Connellan, 2018) told readers they could watch the live stream of the ban on Twitch. As of 2021, the subreddit is still active with over 600,000 members. The event was emblematic of the transmedia phenomenon of MCU fandom. Much of internet humor is deeply ironic, but the event also signifies how easily extermination can be depoliticized and treated as humorous. In this post-modern age, irony and humor are some of the best tools for someone attempting to mobilize a cynical and distracted group of young men online toward authoritarian goals.

### **IN THE ENDGAME NOW**

These film texts show the extent to which anti-immigrant discourses have been normalized. These discourses are troubling as the ecological and political crises become clearer in the early 2020s. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights many of these issues. For example, while most were ordered to shelter in place, many migrants were caught in limbo. Most were not able to receive government stimulus. COVID-19 also spread in migrant and refugee encampments on the Mexican border and other places. While political attention and the public agenda have moved on from the migrant caravan and the child separation crisis, these issues persist. Just as worrisome, however, is the emergence of Thanos-inspired eco-fascism thinking among well-intentioned people. As COVID-19 forced the economy to shut down, memes spread online claiming that dolphins had returned to Venice and the air had never been cleaner in Los Angeles and in China. The memes went even further, claiming that humans are the virus on the planet. This kind of thinking is dangerous, as the *Avengers: Infinity War* example shows. Even in *Avengers: Endgame* Captain America notes that he saw “a pod of whales when I was coming over the bridge.” The writer of a *Forbes* article uses this very line to argue that the science of the film really does prove that Thanos did nothing wrong (Chamary, 2019).

These anti-immigrant narratives are assigned to the villains of the films, so perhaps it is a stretch to say they represent the film’s message. One of the directors of *Infinity War* calls Thanos “an extreme sociopath with a messianic complex,” leaving no doubt they intended for his actions to be viewed as villainous. Yet audience reception is complex and meaning can be derived from a text that the authors did not intend. As Chemers (2017) argues, villains arise out of a societal desire to self-define through negation. In other words, the villain is the dark marginal figure who the audience can see “caught and punished” in a temporary victory over the forces they represent in society. As discussed earlier, in the 1950’s film villains were often either foreign or alien others, which represented Cold War anxieties. The villains of the late 2010s are more complex. They generally have goals with legitimate rationales (see Killmonger in *Black Panther*) with extremely violent means. Yet specifically because the villains of the late 2010’s have somewhat legitimate goals as compared to the outright evildoers of the past, some segments of the audience might even identify with the villains’ means and ends. This is even the case given the highly polarized political and social differences in the late 2010s. So, while some might cheer when Captain Marvel defeats the supremacist Kree, others might see the meta-textual narrative of the film as an attack on their worldview.

The stakes are certainly high. The mass shooting at a Walmart in the U.S./Mexico border city of El Paso, TX horrifically exemplified anti-immigrant violence committed under the ideology of white nationalism. The targeted area in El Paso was a popular shopping area known as a major destination among Mexican tourists who cross into El Paso. It was later discovered that the shooter had posted a white-supremacist and anti-immigrant manifesto online to an online forum prior to the shooting and stated that he intended to

kill as many Mexicans as possible (Arango et al., 2019; Baker & Shear, 2019; Hafez, Farid, 2019). Within his manifesto, he referred to the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooting, and a white nationalist right-wing conspiracy theory known as “The Great Replacement” as inspiration for the attack. This horrific event further exemplifies in an extreme case how those considered the “other” or those who do not fit white nationalist movements’ identity are treated. By no means do we suggest that watching MCU films will subtly imbue the viewer with racist beliefs or inspire violence. However, as this article shows - there are elements in the films that can be interpreted by fan communities online which further anti-immigrant narratives. As we show, this is a complex process. It involves heavy doses of internet irony and in many cases, identifying with the villain and against the protagonist.

In summary this article has discussed how anti-immigrant narratives have been infused into popular culture and specifically in two recent MCU films. These narratives take the concept of the alien “other” from science fiction and transfer it to the genre of superhero films. The anxieties now being represented revolve around political and ecological crises of late capitalism. In one case, *Captain Marvel*, the discourse is used to resist othering. Meanwhile, in *Avengers: Infinity War* the othering and extermination are done by the villain but also presented as potentially good for the universe. These discourses are then interpreted by fans and shared on new media platforms, using an ironic and humorous distance. Both films must be understood not as simplistically promoting these anti-immigrant narratives, but by assigning them to the villains, as an example of how contemporary society is grappling with these issues amid social strife and change. Further, we argue they cannot simply be analyzed in isolation, but also understood in relation to the fans that consume and interpret the content of the MCU.

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