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Fandom, Racism, and the Myth of Diversity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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Fandom, Racism, and the Myth of Diversity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from
The College of William and Mary


by

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Accepted for Honors
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)


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Acknowledgements

Writing about what you love is no easy task. As a longtime fan of Marvel's movies, I frequently checked fan forums and blogs for updates on my favorite characters. While lurking on these fan forums, I was disheartened to see how little some fans cared about racial diversity, but it gave me the motivation to embark on this project.

This work, which began in the fall of 2015 as an American Studies seminar paper on fandom racism, is the result of so much support from so many incredible and helpful people. Charles McGovern had a reading recommendation for me at every meeting and made sure I pushed myself beyond fandom studies. This journey has been long and difficult, but words cannot express how grateful I am for his extremely detailed, brutally honest, but ever supportive feedback on my countless outlines, drafts, and revisions. Arthur Knight introduced me to fandom studies in his introductory film course back in 2014, and his contributions at my colloquium in February have been incredibly useful. Sarah Glosson graciously agreed to serve on my committee as well, and she reassured me that the work I am doing in fandom studies is good enough for grad school, and for that I am thankful.

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Introduction

Marvel has a very strong record of diversity in its casting of films and regularly departs from stereotypes and source material to bring its MCU to life. The Ancient One is a title that is not exclusively held by any one character, but rather a moniker passed down through time, and in this particular film the embodiment is Celtic. We are very proud to have the enormously talented Tilda Swinton portray this unique and complex character alongside our richly diverse cast.¹

When Marvel Studios initially announced the casting of their 2016 *Doctor Strange* feature film, it named white British actress Tilda Swinton as the Ancient One – an East Asian man in the comic books – outcry from fans mostly stayed within the confines of their online fandom spaces. Following the first trailer premiere on April 12, 2016, the controversy entered the public sphere, forcing Marvel Studios to release the official statement quoted above. The statement reveals that the Marvel Studios executives’ definition of “diversity” actively excludes people of color.

Over the next seven months, leading up to *Doctor Strange*’s November 4, 2016 U.S. release date, Marvel Studios and its fandom would proceed to debate what diversity actually means in the context of a billion-dollar cinematic universe. Through Reddit forums, Tumblr blogs, and Twitter threads, the Marvel Cinematic Universe fandom constructed its own racial knowledge, revealing how fans understand race both in the films and in their day-to-day interactions with online peers. Mainstream media and the studio framed diversity in film as simply a matter of casting performers from underrepresented groups, a position that allows viewers as well as businesspeople to overlook stereotypes and exclusionary hiring practices so long as at least one person on screen is not straight, white, able-bodied, and male. Fans both

¹ Statement from Marvel Studios. See: Adam Rosenberg, “Marvel defends 'Doctor Strange' casting with new character info.” *Mashable.com*, April 26, 2016, <http://mashable.com/2016/04/26/doctor-strange-ancient-one-celtic/#pC54wiRpGZqf>.

contested and defended this one-dimensional sense of diversity throughout and after the making of *Doctor Strange*, but Marvel Studios proceeded with its controversial creative decisions, rendering the fandom debates insignificant in the eyes of the filmmakers.

Despite the opportunity to promote respectful depictions of marginalized groups on screen, the MCU fandom is largely reluctant to bring real-world social issues into the fandom space. Tension between those concerned with harmful representation and those who want to avoid discussing matters of difference continues to grow within the MCU fandom.

This essay analyzes how the MCU fandom constructs and understands the concept of diversity. It must be noted that this research focuses on the filmic portion of the MCU; the multiple television series, including *Agents of SHIELD* and *Daredevil* are a part of the MCU, but these shows ultimately have no significant impact on the films in terms of plot or casting (movie characters may appear in the shows, but television characters do not appear in the films so far). The MCU shows are overall more diverse than the films, but their irrelevance to the MCU movies requires filmmakers to construct their own visions of diversity. Attempting to categorize the MCU as a single franchise would be incorrect; the MCU consists of multiple franchises (i.e., Thor, Iron Man, Captain America) with their own characters and lore. Characters often cross over into other franchises for cameos and team up for ensemble features, but the relationship between the individual franchises defies easy categorization. As such, describing the diversity of Marvel Studios' works is a complex process when everything the studio produces is part of the cinematic universe.

The significance of fandom in popular culture cannot be understated. In the cast of television, for example, the fandom only makes up a portion of a program's audience, but oftentimes the fans have the power to keep a show alive. Netflix continues to revive shows with

cult followings, including *Arrested Development*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Full House*. Oftentimes, these shows and films with a large fandom following can challenge societal norms because they can transform their mutual passion into collective action. Likewise, shows with a fandom following grapple with political issues. The original *Star Trek* series famously depicted the first kiss between a Black woman and a white man on American television at a time when interracial marriage had just been legalized in the United States.²

I argue in this thesis that the competing attitudes about race in *Doctor Strange* are the result of unwavering loyalty from the filmmakers and fandom towards the Marvel empire. Marvel's grip on the fandom and the film industry simultaneously draws in anti-racist activists and whitewashing sympathizers who both find solace in close-knit superhero fan communities. The comic book history of the *Doctor Strange* characters is so entangled in Orientalist stereotypes that any attempt by a predominately white production team to integrate the character's origin story into the MCU – even while deconstructing Marvel's past depictions of Asian people – would only further perpetuate stereotypes. Even as fandom discussions on *Doctor Strange* revealed their racial biases, executives and filmmakers at Marvel Studios allowed the whitewashing of an Asian character to occur in 2016. Preserving the character of Doctor Strange maintained Marvel's abundance of whiteness, revealing their unwillingness to use their immense cultural and financial capital to bring more racial diversity to Hollywood.

Chapter one argues that the rich political history of Marvel Comics saw a limited and problematic history of racial awareness. The company emerged from a predominately Jewish-

² The kiss between Black actress Nichelle Nichols and white actor William Shatner aired in the 1968 *Star Trek* episode "Plato's Stepchildren." The Supreme Court had ruled in *Loving v. Virginia* that state bans on interracial marriage were unconstitutional in 1967. See: Bill Higgins, "Hollywood Flashback: 'Star Trek' Showed TV's First Interracial Kiss in 1968," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 26, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/tvs-first-interracial-kiss-star-896843>.

American collective of artists and writers who, while creating comics, used the medium to advocate resistance against the Nazi regime. It must also be noted, however, that while early Marvel Comics were extremely critical of Nazi ideologies, this often came at the expense of Black and Asian people, who were often portrayed in a negative light to appeal to white American readers. This chapter will also explore how Doctor Strange's earliest stories relied on orientalist tropes in order to contextualize the racial tension of the 2016 film.

The second chapter chronicles the history of the MCU and its fandom. From its initial plan to launch films featuring Black, Asian, and white female superheroes in lead roles to its actual slate of fourteen films starring white men, Marvel Studios continues to relegate underrepresented groups to hero support roles as its commercial power rises. Nevertheless, the MCU fandom is a diverse crowd with a wide variety of opinions and interests; how can such a massive group of people find a common interest in a mostly white and male-dominated brand?

Between April and November of 2016, I monitored the discussions happening in MCU fan spaces online. My findings are chronicled in chapter three, complete with an analysis of how racial knowledge developed and traveled during this time frame.

I conclude this work by discussing in chapter four how activists, filmmakers, and fans are constructing diversity in the post-*Doctor Strange* Hollywood. While the upcoming *Black Panther* film in 2018 will be the first Black superhero film in over a decade, the rest of the Marvel Studios lineup through 2019 features white actors saving the day.

The lack of diverse and equal racial representation at Marvel Studios is indicative of a larger problem in Hollywood and American popular culture as a whole. Though *Doctor Strange* is not a particularly groundbreaking film within the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the film forced race to the front and center of discussions between the fans and filmmakers. I argue that the lack

of people of color in the MCU is not the result of Marvel Studios being too risk-averse or loyal to the mostly white source material, but rather the unwillingness of executives, filmmakers, and fandom to show an interest in stories about people of color who are not connected to white narratives.

Chapter One: Not Another Origin Story: Marvel Before Movies

Marvel Comics History

Captain America made his first appearance in *Captain America Comics #1* (1941). The cover image of super-soldier Steve Rogers, dressed head to toe in American stars and stripes, punching Adolf Hitler in the face sent Timely Comics' readers the message that this was the story of a superhero who hated Nazis. Two years into WWII and nine months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, Captain America's debut was an explicit political statement against the Nazi regime and a call for Americans to acknowledge the atrocities happening in Europe. Captain America co-creator Jack Kirby explained, "Captain America was an outpouring of my own patriotism."³ Scholar John Moser explains that up until 1940, publishers were reluctant to feature actual Nazis out of fear of a defamation lawsuit. Moser also theorizes that Timely Comics worried that targeting Nazis would upset German-Americans. At the time, it took about four months to develop and release a comic book, which discouraged writers from commenting on current events that might not be relevant once the comics hit newsstands.⁴ Nicholas Yanes suggests that Jewish American comic book creators, like Jack Kirby, used comic books to motivate Americans to fight in WWII. Despite their intentions to fight Anti-Semitism in the United States, Yanes notes that these books trafficked in racism: "all Japanese were unfairly seen as evil."⁵ Yanes observes that comic book historians tend to interpret the 1930s and 1940s as an

³ John E. Moser, "Madmen, morons, and monocles: The portrayal of the Nazis in Captain America," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵ Nicholas Yanes, "Graphic Imagery: Jewish American Comic Book Creators' Depictions of Class, Race, Patriotism and the Birth of the Good Captain," in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 63.

“unprecedented progressive period for the medium,” leading them to overlook racist content in these issues.⁶

World War II was a particularly turbulent time for race relations in the United States and abroad. Daniel Kryder explains that interracial conflict was prevalent as the U.S. mobilized for war. White authorities excluded Black Americans from the Army with a mobilization policy that included a Black/white soldier ratio at one to ten. The Selective Service Act of 1942 forced the War Department to accept more Black soldiers, but a shortage of segregated facilities prevented more Black soldiers from enlisting.⁷ Asian-Americans also faced marginalization during wartime. Takashi Fujitani argues that the Japanese American 442nd Regimental Combat Team’s participation in dangerous missions “reveals as much about the low regard in which some high-ranking white officers held the lives of Japanese Americans as it does about the latter’s heroism.”⁸ The highly-decorated combat unit received so many awards in part because military leaders were willing to put Japanese American soldiers in perilous missions while assigning their white counterparts elsewhere. According to Fujitani, U.S. propaganda aimed at both domestic and international audiences created the illusion of progressive racial policies in the military and the country as a whole.⁹ In the white American public memory, WWII was a time of looking past race and fighting a common enemy. The reality was that WWII-era policies continued to marginalize people of color, giving Black activists another reason to proceed with the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s.

⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁷ Daniel Kryder, “The American State & the Management of Race Conflict in the Workplace & in the Army, 1941-1945.” *Polity* 26, no.4: 617.

⁸ Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 212.

⁹ Ibid., 212.

Yanes argues that as a persecuted community, Jewish American comic book writers “fail to capture the open mindedness associated with a lifetime of intolerance.”¹⁰ Though these writers and artists regularly challenged antisemitism in their works, they still perpetuated anti-Black and anti-Asian racism. Realizing the urgency of the Holocaust, Jewish American comic book creators encouraged the United States to fight against the Nazis; this process involved appealing not to Jewish readers, but to those in power, which Yanes concludes, “resulted in minorities being portrayed offensively by Jewish comic books just as those in power would have portrayed them.”¹¹ African Americans and Asians were the subject of most of these early negative depictions. Even *Captain America* relied on the Oriental stereotype with stories like “Captain America and the Ageless Orientals Who Wouldn't Die.” According to Yanes, the villains in this 1941 issue “are giant Orientals from Tibet's mountains” and appear skeletal, bald, and scarcely-dressed.¹² After the attack on Pearl Harbor, racist depictions of Japanese people increased in comic books as comic book writers associated Japanese people with Nazism and non-human species.¹³ According to John Cheng, the frequent depictions of Asian people as non-human, reiterated “Asians’ status as inassimilable aliens within America.”¹⁴ At a time when the term ‘alien’ was not part of the science fiction lexicon, the alienization of Asian people marked them as a racial Other to American whiteness. Julie Ha Tran notes that the tendency for science fiction authors to associate Asian people and places with advanced technology while also marking them as an Other reveals “larger anxieties about globalization and cultural homogenization.”¹⁵ Tran

¹⁰ Yanes, “Graphic Imagery,” 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 61.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹⁴ John Cheng, *Astounding, Wonder: Imagining Science and Science Fiction in Interwar America* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 148.

¹⁵ Julie Ha Tran, “Thinking about Bodies, Souls, and Race in Gibson's Bridge Trilogy,” in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S.

argues that science fiction that engages in this sort of “techno-Orientalism” paradoxically allows the alien Asian to become “associated not just with the dizzily changing world order, but with archaic and dying rituals of the past.”¹⁶

Likewise, William Svitavsky draws attention to the historic lack of enthusiasm for Black superheroes from comic book writers and readers. Svitavsky attributes this disinterest to the negative stereotypes and imagery used to depict Black superheroes. By marking the Black superhero as exotic either in geography or body, comic book creators could avoid the controversy of American racial politics and therefore make these Black superheroes consumable for white readers.¹⁷ This exoticization also had damaging effects on how white readers perceived Black people. Ora McWilliams writes that “minority groups represented in comics, and, in a larger picture, popular culture, often are not fleshed out as full characters.”¹⁸ McWilliams describes a Black character from spinoff series *The Young Allies* (1941) named Whitewash Jones: “exaggerated lips, wide eyes, and the look of a white person who was painted in black face. In addition, he was dressed outlandishly in a purple zoot suit and wide brimmed hat.”¹⁹ Yet Whitewash's inclusion “was likely an attempt to represent solidarity” of Americans of all races during wartime.²⁰ Whitewash Jones unwittingly represents the Black community, whereas the hero of the story, Bucky Barnes (Captain America's sidekick) does not speak for all white

Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 141.

¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹⁷ William L. Svitavsky, “Race, superheroes, and identity: ‘Did you know he was black?’” in *Ages of Heroes, Eras of Men: Superheroes and the American Experience*, ed. Julian Chambliss, William Svitavsky, and Thomas Donaldson (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 154.

¹⁸ Ora C. McWilliams, “Not just another racist honkey: A history of racial representation in Captain America and related publications,” in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 67.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68.

²⁰ Ibid., 68.

people. Furthermore, Whitewash is portrayed as relatively passive compared to the other Young Allies; while they dream at night about fighting Nazis, Whitewash dreams about eating watermelon. Even though the image of Whitewash eating watermelon was likely a sight gag, McWilliams writes that “in addition to the racist overtones, this scene might be taken, by some readers, as an affront to the patriotism of African Americans because Whitewash did not dream of beating the Nazis.”²¹ McWilliams argues that “Whitewash is a symbol of acceptable racism because he is a symbol of the African American in the historical and philosophical thinking of the pre-civil rights movement.”²²

According to McWilliams, *Captain America* comics “became slightly less racist” in the 1960s and 1970s.²³ The 1970s were a transitional period for Marvel as the company tried to incorporate more realism into its comic books. McWilliams explains that Marvel hoped to represent Black characters more realistically compared to the cartoonish portrayals of the past. One such effort came in the form of a Black superhero named Sam Wilson, also known as the Falcon. Wilson first teamed up with Captain America in the 70s, but according to McWilliams, his first appearance portrayed him as a stereotypical Black man. For a month after his first appearance, readers did not even know Wilson’s name; to these readers, he was just the man from Harlem who saved Captain America. The fact that Wilson's Blackness is his only identifier puts him in contrast to “white” Captain America.²⁴ Consequently, McWilliams argues that Wilson “was used as an excuse to tell a story regarding black characters ... as the Falcon’s popularity and blaxploitation waned, so did the appearances of black characters, including the

²¹ Ibid., 69.

²² Ibid., 70.

²³ Ibid., 67.

²⁴ Ibid., 70.

Falcon.”²⁵ Wilson in his earliest iteration is not a fully fleshed-out character but rather a plot device that enters only when convenient for the white hero.

The 70s also marked the rise of the blaxploitation in films. In relation to Marvel’s comic books, McWilliams defines blaxploitation as “media that focuses more on the stereotypes of blackness more than any other characteristic to create character.”²⁶ Blaxploitation films inspired Marvel to introduce superheroes like Brother Voodoo and Luke Cage, though Svitavsky argues that Marvel made the bulletproof Luke Cage “into a nonconfrontational, noncontroversial Shaft, repackaging the streetwise style and dynamic attitude of the blaxploitation hero in a form stripped of any social conflicts that white readers might find disturbing.”²⁷ Svitavsky argues that Cage’s non-political Blaxploitation reduces him “at best to the Marvel formula of an angst-ridden hero and at worst to the established stereotype of the ‘black buck’.”²⁸ Marvel watered down the African-American frustration that was central to Blaxploitation stories and consequently created the expectation for white readers that a Black superhero had to be “a ghetto-dweller and an outstanding success, a rebel and a law enforcer.”²⁹

Although Marvel had multiethnic origins with a predominately Jewish creative team, the company’s collective ambivalence towards the actual experiences of people of color from the WWII era through the early 1980s did not set a strong precedent for how the company would handle stories about people of color in the years to come.³⁰ However, there was some pushback

²⁵ Ibid., 73-74.

²⁶ Ibid., 71.

²⁷ Svitavsky, “Race, superheroes, and identity,” 155.

²⁸ Ibid., 145.

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

³⁰ Ramzi Fawaz cites the X-Men as Marvel’s response to discrimination in America in the 1970s/80s, though the original X-Men lineup was mostly white and heterosexual. See: Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 234.

from Stan Lee, who alongside Jack Kirby, created the Black Panther, Marvel's first Black African superhero in 1966. Regarding the introduction of the Black Panther and Falcon, Lee said in a 2016 interview, "A good many of our people here in America are not white. You've got to recognize that and you've got to include them in whatever you do ... At that point I felt we really needed a black superhero."³¹ Despite Lee's best intentions, the problematic and oftentimes racist depictions of people of color in the comics negatively influenced the racial politics of the Marvel fandom.

Marvel Comics Fandom

Henry Jenkins provides a model of fandom that operates on four levels: as a mode of reception, as a particular interpretive community, as a particular Art World, and as an alternative social community. Fan viewing, Jenkins writes, is a "conscious selection of a specific program which is viewed faithfully from week to week and is often reread repeatedly either through reruns or through videotape archiving."³² The distinction between casual viewing and fan viewing is apparent in how fans translate the text into cultural and social activities, such as writing fanfiction or meeting at fan conventions. Fan discussions are a crucial component of a fandom. In this process that Jenkins refers to as "fan reading," discussions produce meanings that are "fully integrated into the readers' lives and are of a fundamentally different character from

³¹ Joshua Ostroff, "Marvel Comics Icon Stan Lee Talks Superhero Diversity And Creating Black Panther." *Huffington Post*, September 1, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2016/09/01/stan-lee-marvel-superhero-diversity_n_11198460.html.

³² Henry Jenkins, "'Strangers No More, We Sing': Filking and the Social Construction of the Science Fiction Fan Community" in *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, ed. Lisa Lewis (Routledge), 210.

meanings generated through a casual and fleeting encounter with an otherwise unremarkable (and unremarked upon) text.”³³

Jenkins notes that fandoms tend to have “distinctive reading protocols and structures of meaning.”³⁴ That is to say, while there is room for different opinions in fandom, the fandom's place in society shapes the meanings developed in fan discussions. The reputation of comic book fans as “nerds,” à la Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*, places the Marvel comics fandom into a marginalized space in popular culture.³⁵ The other relationship at stake for comic book fans is the relationship between themselves and the comic book creators. Ramzi Fawaz explains that during the 1960s, Marvel Comics reframed the relationship between creators and fans as a “creative camaraderie.”³⁶ In the early years of this relationship, Fawaz writes, “Marvel writers and artists encouraged readers to see comic book aesthetics as a vehicle for producing alternative social and political imaginaries,” while readers “linked the fantasy content of Marvel Comics to larger questions of political concern, consequently demanding new forms of conceptual innovation and political accountability from the creators of their favorite series.”^{37 38} Stan Lee and Jack Kirby encouraged fans to voice their opinions on creative and political issues, which

³³ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.

³⁴ Jenkins, ““Strangers No More, We Sing,”” 211.

³⁵ Though the Marvel comic book fan may be an outcast among non-fans, the marginalization the fan may face does not compare to the marginalization experienced by people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, or any other systemically disenfranchised group.

³⁶ Fawaz, *The New Mutants*, 100.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁸ It is impossible to describe a fandom that thrived during the 1960s without taking race and the Civil Rights movement into consideration. Matthew Pustz reports that one fan in 1967 praised Marvel for introducing the Black Panther character, thereby marking “the obvious superiority of Marvel” over its competitors. While the introduction of Black superheroes marked a significant step towards racial inclusion for Marvel Comics, there is a tendency for fans to accept these representations at face value and not demand for more or better representation of people of color. See: Matthew Pustz, *Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers*, (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 53.

created a dialogue with and among readers. Fawaz asserts, however, that creators held the power in the fan/producer relationship; editors determined which fan voices would appear in the feedback section and writers had the last word in their bulletins.³⁹

Fandoms have their own Art Worlds, a term developed by Howard Becker and referenced by Jenkins to mean the “systems of aesthetic norms and generic conventions, systems of professional training and reputation building, systems for circulation, exhibition and/or sale of artworks, systems for critical evaluation.”⁴⁰ The Marvel Comics fandom has its own Art World that includes fan-made art, fiction, costumes, and film.⁴¹

The fandom is an alternative social community in that its members may never meet face to face but still share a common interest. Referring to issues of national identity formation, Benedict Anderson connects the imagined community and nation, writing that “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”⁴² By this logic, if the fandom is a nation, then it is subject to a form of nationalism that motivates members “not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.”⁴³ Although the fandom nation does not engage in actual warfare, members willingly sacrifice their time and resources to maintain their place in the imagined community. According to Jenkins, fandom is not a community defined in terms of race, gender, or region, “but rather a community of consumers defined

³⁹ Fawaz, *The New Mutants*, 100.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, ““Strangers No More, We Sing,”” 211.

⁴¹ The highly visual comic book medium encourages fans to attempt to re-create their favorite characters and scenes, and talented fan artists and writers can be rewarded with a position at Marvel.

⁴² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

through their common relationship with shared texts.”⁴⁴ Jenkins argues that fandom consciously constructs an identity in opposition to non-fans by focusing less on one's identity and more on one's contributions to the fan community. Because of the lack of emphasis on identity, Jenkins writes, fandom is attractive to people from marginalized groups who are seeking unconditional acceptance and alternative sources of status. Consequently, some fans may remain loyal to their fandoms even after they have lost interest in the canon texts. Jenkins remarks that fandom provides a space for fans to express their concerns about racism, sexism, and other forms of marginalization via fan works and fan discussions. These cultural products, Jenkins explains, “articulate the fans' frustration with their everyday life as well as their fascination with representations that pose alternatives.”⁴⁵

The Marvel comics fandom has a reputation for being stubborn in the face of questionable storylines. Matthew Pustz explains that some of the most loyal Marvel Comics fans refer to themselves as “Marvel zombies” for buying every single issue of every comic book they can find.⁴⁶ Some of these so-called Marvel zombies formed an in-group that considered themselves to be above people who did not read comic books or who supported other brands, namely DC. Marvel’s “Bullpen Bulletins,” a regular update about the goings-on in the Marvel comics office that ran in comic books from 1966 to the 1990s, listed different rankings for Marvel readers based on their devotion to the publisher. A “Real Frantic One” bought at least three issues per month, while a “Fearless Front Facer” went above and beyond to prove their loyalty.⁴⁷ Even the Marvel staff understood fan loyalty, and could not help poking fun at this

⁴⁴ Jenkins, ““Strangers No More, We Sing,”” 213.

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 289.

⁴⁶ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

loyal behavior.⁴⁸ Fans themselves may have laughed at such extreme types, but many were still devoted to the company. Fans as early as the 1960s were eager to join clubs, buy extra merchandise, and interact with the writers via the Bullpen Bulletins. Much of this enthusiasm waned by the end of the 1970s; Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby left the company while Stan Lee turned his attention to developing Marvel television programs and movies. It turned out that that era's Marvel's zombies were less loyal to the company and more loyal to Ditko, Kirby, and Lee. Although the Marvel zombies lost interest as their favorite creative minds left the company, this was not the end of the Marvel fandom.

The *Strange Tales* of Doctor Strange

A few years before Ditko left Marvel, with Stan Lee he developed a new superhero for Marvel who used magic, not muscle, to defeat opponents. Though Doctor Strange made his first appearance in *Strange Tales #110*, July 1963, in the 1970s he helped transition the Marvel fandom into the post-Ditko and Lee era. Dr. Strange was a “master of black magic” and used an ancient incense burner to enter dreams. Strange regularly uses his psychic powers to visit “a hidden temple somewhere in the remote vastness of Asia” while he works in the United States. At the temple, Strange seeks out the healing powers of the Ancient One, an old man from “Kamar-Taj, a hidden land high in the Himalayas!” (*Strange Tales #148*). These early Doctor Strange appearances involve psychedelic imagery, mysticism, and international adventures.

The Ancient One's appearance evokes images of Fu Manchu, a villainous Chinese character played by Boris Karloff in a series of films and shows between 1923-1955. The

⁴⁸ In 2005, Marvel proved their awareness of the “Marvel zombies” by running a miniseries called *Marvel Zombies*, which aptly described both the comic's zombie storyline and the exceedingly loyal readers. See: Mark R. McDermott, “History of the Marvel Zombies and Colonel America among the Marvel Zombies,” in *Captain America and the Struggle of the Superhero: Critical Essays*, ed. Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2009), 147.

character was created by Sax Rohmer in a series of adventure tales and pulps beginning in 1913. Abigail de Kosnik describes Fu Manchu as “tall and thin, with a long tapered moustache and long sharp fingernails on his index and second fingers. He wears elaborately brocaded silk robes, and he inhabits an expansive lair replete with Asian art and artifacts, including giant Buddha statues.”⁴⁹ Additionally, Fu Manchu has a doctoral degree in philosophy, law, and medicine, marking him and his surroundings as “brilliant, dangerous, technologically advanced, and eminently Chinese.”⁵⁰ The Ancient One in Ditko and Lee's *Strange Tales* bears a striking resemblance to Fu Manchu, complete with elaborate robes, a chamber full of various Asian artifacts, and knowledge of medicine and philosophy. No one can say for sure if Ditko and Lee were directly inspired by the Fu Manchu character when creating the Ancient One, but the similarities between the two characters call attention to the use of Orientalist tropes in *Strange Tales*.

Between the vaguely defined setting and the Fu Manchu-esque appearance of the Ancient One, Stan Lee and Steve Ditko played heavily with Orientalist tropes. As mentioned earlier, Marvel, along with other popular media, consistently portrayed Asian people (particularly East Asians) negatively. In the years surrounding U.S. military occupation in Vietnam, portrayals of East Asian people in popular culture were generally negative. Robert Lee contextualizes the Orientalism of the time as a shift from “Yellow Peril” to “Model Minority.” According to Lee, the attack on Pearl Harbor unraveled the Yellow Peril myth as the Chinese became a military ally

⁴⁹ Abigail De Kosnik, “The Mask of Fu Manchu, Son of Sinbad, and Star Wars IV: A New Hope: Techno-Orientalist Cinema as a Mnemotechnics of Twentieth-Century U.S.-Asian Conflicts,” in *Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media*, ed. David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 90-91.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 91.

for the United States – although China quickly became an enemy after 1947.⁵¹ Lee explains that the rise of the Model Minority myth coincided with the fetishizing of the Asian body and maintained the othering of Asian and Asian-American peoples and cultures through popular culture.⁵² Lee writes that the Model Minority image “originated in the racial logic of Cold War liberalism of the 1950s.”⁵³ Asian Americans could “successfully” assimilate into white America by adhering to heteronormative, nonmilitant, nonpolitical expectations. Encouraging ethnic assimilation was a nonradical solution to stave off communist ideologies from East Asia. The 1960s marked the rise of films like *Flower Drum Song* (1961), an adaptation of the 1957 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, that presented a “world of assimilation” with jovial, non-threatening Asian American characters.⁵⁴ The villanization of East Asian people in popular culture, though still present, was no longer the dominant stereotype.⁵⁵

From the beginning of Ditko and Lee’s run, Doctor Strange’s connections to various Asian cultures are muddled and contradictory, upholding Edward Said’s description of Orientalism as binary of West and East. Said defines Orientalism as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’.”⁵⁶ Said adds that writers who rely on Orientalist thinking “have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics,

⁵¹ Robert Lee notes that while other Asian American groups started to receive more favorable treatment, Japanese Americans were subjected to internment and exile. See: Robert Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999), 149.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁵⁵ The Fu Manchu movies would continue throughout the 1960s, but the last official Fu Manchu film, *The Castle of Fu Manchu* (1969) marked the end of the franchise. See: De Kosnik, “The Mask of Fu Manchu.”

⁵⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 10.

novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, ‘mind,’ destiny, and so on.”⁵⁷ Lee and Ditko engage in Orientalist thinking by envisioning the East (Asia) as opposite to their West (America). Though Doctor Strange never explicitly confirms his whiteness, his American identity still marks him as an outsider in the Ancient One’s territory, but his role as the protagonist designates the Ancient One and the rest of Asia as the Other in the eyes of the reader.

While Doctor Strange studies the teachings of the Ancient One, Joel Gruber describes Strange's magic as “pseudo-Tibetan” and his views as “quasi-Buddhist.”⁵⁸ Gruber goes on to say that the Doctor Strange stories reveal American pop culture's fascination with the “Orient,” especially Tibet.⁵⁹ Gruber suggests that Stan Lee's disregard for the Ancient One's location from issue to issue (one minute he is in Tibet, the next he is in India) is most likely due to a disregard for consistency or accuracy in the comic book continuity. Nevertheless, Gruber argues that the “Ancient One's name, his facial features, dress, and his Oriental place of residence” that the audience recognized indicated that “Strange's occult practices were authentically Asian, magical – and do not forget – mysteriously powerful.”⁶⁰ Gruber concludes that Lee and Ditko's “Doctor Strange provided those interested in ‘oriental’ religious views with a different mode of engaging them, in an easy to digest, visual and entertaining medium.”⁶¹

After Ditko and Lee's work on *Strange Tales*, Steve Englehart and Frank Brunner used Doctor Strange to tell “controversial, philosophically complex” stories that embraced the occult and explored philosophical issues of religion and enlightenment, bringing in a young college-age

⁵⁷ Ibid., 10-11.

⁵⁸ Joel Gruber, “The Dharma of Doctor Strange: The Shifting Representations of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism within a Comic Book Serial.” *Implicit Religion* 18, no. 3 (2015): 348.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 348.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 352.

⁶¹ Ibid., 353.

audience.⁶² The death of the Ancient One, Gruber claims, “freed future authors and illustrators from the most offensive aspect of the comic serial, the racial symbolism involving Tibet and Tibetans.”⁶³ Furthermore, Englehart “transformed Strange's religion from a fluctuating brand of Orientalist black magic ... into doctrine and praxis that was more consistent with a burgeoning American New Age movement.”⁶⁴ Gruber concludes that Brunner and Englehart “respected Buddhism and Tibetans in ways that Stan Lee and his associates never considered, much less enacted.”⁶⁵ Englehart and Brunner's work had a lasting impact on fans, even leading two fans to wind up working for Marvel and developing their own Doctor Strange stories. J.M. DeMatteis and Dan Green's graphic novel *Doctor Strange: Into Shamballa* (1986) explores Doctor Strange's spirituality, incorporating Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu iconography. Gruber writes that despite the deviations from Buddhist tradition, the graphic novel paved the way for Doctor Strange to be “both a spiritually meaningful superhero and an agent of social change capable of demystifying a few of the persistent misconceptions surrounding Tibet.”⁶⁶

The Marvel fandom's simultaneous acknowledgment of the Orientalist tropes in Doctor Strange's stories and its refusal to let the characters go the way of Fu Manchu movies suggests that the fandom's attachment to characters supersedes racial concerns. Fandom is limited by its own perceived marginalization. Matthew Pustz explains that in the pre-MCU era, “American society tends to look down on the [comic book] medium and its readers.”⁶⁷ For fans whose love of comic books is central to their identity, “being a comic book fan is a source of pain.”⁶⁸

⁶² Gruber, “The Dharma of Doctor Strange,” 356-357.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 357-358.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁶⁷ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 70.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

Though the MCU's incredible box office success shows that being a superhero fan is not as uncool as it was ten years ago, MCU fans who remember this embarrassment may bring their fears into the MCU fandom by defending the MCU at all costs to assert its coolness. However, the social stigma of being a comic book fan leads some white fans to conflate the stereotyping they face as comic book fans with the marginalization of people of color. In other words, these fans believe that the belittlement of superheroes and comic book culture is comparable to the hostility and violence that people of color experience.

After *Into Shamballa*, Doctor Strange disappeared in the midst of Marvel's financial crisis in the mid-90s and only made the occasional cameo appearance.⁶⁹ A new generation of comic book readers made up the post-bankruptcy Marvel fandom. These fans were more into X-Men and Spider-Man than Doctor Strange, who did not even have his own cartoon show.⁷⁰ It would not be until 2015 that Marvel would revive Doctor Strange for another run, likely in preparation for the upcoming feature film.

Who Are the Marvel Fans?

Despite Marvel's inattention to issues of race and racial diversity in their comics and developing movie and television franchises, many comic book fans are in fact people of color. Sarah Gatson and Robin Reid argue that ignoring race, gender, class, and sexuality in a fandom space "ends up creating the image of a 'generic' or 'normalized' fan".⁷¹ The "generic" fan's race, class, gender, and sexuality are assumed to match the default fanboy image. According to Gatson

⁶⁹ *Doctor Strange: Sorcerer Supreme* ran from 1988-1996. See: <https://www.comics.org/series/3645/>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

⁷⁰ *X-Men: The Animated Series* ran from 1992-1997, *Spider-Man* ran from 1994-1998, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0103584/> and <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0112175/>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

⁷¹ Sarah N. Gatson and Robin Anne Reid, "Race and Ethnicity in Fandom." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 8 (2011): 4.1.

and Reid, the default fanboy is assumed to be “white, middle-class, male, heterosexual,” and it shapes fandom interactions in online and offline spaces.⁷²

Gatson and Reid highlight the prevalence of racial and class stereotypes in both canon texts and fan fiction, as well as the tendency for fans to use racist terminology. They note that there are frequent disagreements within fandom on how to deal with racist language and imagery. Gatson and Reid conclude that while fans of color have been doing antiracist and intersectional work in science fiction fandom, “the scholarship on fandom has an immense gap when it comes to dealing with race.”⁷³ The lack of scholarship on the relationship between race and fandom indicates that racial biases within fandoms are largely overlooked by both academics and fans themselves.

Some of this unwillingness to investigate race in fandom may be due to the false perception that fans are homogenous. Mel Stanfill emphasizes the perils of characterizing all fans as white, heterosexual males. In fandom, Stanfill writes, “whiteness is less the outcome of pigmentation than behavior.”⁷⁴ By constructing fans as lacking privilege simply for their participation in fandom, one ignores the possibility for white fans to regain their privilege by performing white, non-fannish behaviors.⁷⁵ When one excludes fans of color from the image of the fandom, Stanfill writes, one constructs “nonwhite fans as incapable of being normalized or as operating within a logic that everyone will identify with and what to emulate the redemption of the white fan.”⁷⁶ In other words, outsiders and white fans tend to see people of color as outsiders,

⁷² Ibid., 4.1.

⁷³ Ibid., 4.12.

⁷⁴ Mel Stanfill, “Doing Fandom, (Mis)doing Whiteness: Heteronormativity, Racialization, and the Discursive Construction of Fandom.” *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 8 (2011): 2.10.

⁷⁵ These “white,” non-fannish behaviors include monitoring the behavior of other fans who may act too emotional or hostile, See: Stanfill, 4.5.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 4.5.

not leaders, in fandom because these fans of color are excluded from the fandom in the public imaginary. As a result of this perception, white fans' behavior is seen as normal while the behavior from fans of color is seen as abnormal and potentially disruptive.

I conclude this chapter by emphasizing that the Marvel Comics' history of racist depictions plays a crucial role in how the fandom comes to understand race. This racial knowledge acquired from comic books is then reproduced and shaped by fan interactions and outside experiences. Fans who grow up reading about Doctor Strange's Orientalist adventures internalize those messages about Asian peoples and cultures and may remain uncritical of those messages into adulthood if their brand loyalty and ambivalence towards people of color is strong enough. Though the Marvel Comics fandom is not a monolith, whiteness is prevalent to the point that it is acceptable in fandom spaces to police fan anger that contradicts white racial logic. While there was not exactly a strong demand for another *Doctor Strange* revival (especially compared to the push for a *Black Panther* or a *Black Widow* film) the fans-turned-producers at Marvel Studios insisted on bringing these stories rooted in Orientalist stereotypes into the twenty-first century because, as I will show in the following chapter, their experiences as white *Doctor Strange* fans were more important than those of people of color.

Chapter Two: Making a Cinematic Universe: The Rise of the MCU

Marvel Goes Bankrupt

Marvel's journey from comic book empire to Hollywood powerhouse has not been an easy one. In 1989, financier Ronald Perelman bought Marvel for \$82.5 million.⁷⁷ Perelman realized that comic book superheroes were in fashion; Warner Brothers was heavily promoting *Batman* (1989) as a summer blockbuster and the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles dominated children's entertainment. Perelman increased the paper and packaging quality of Marvel's comics, raising the price from 75 cents to \$1 per issue. Marvel's comic book sales flourished and the company's revenue increased 35% in just two years under Perelman. Reveling in his success, Perelman decided to take Marvel public. However, about \$50 million of Marvel's revenue went to Marvel's parent companies, which happened to be owned by Perelman. This arrangement left Perelman with a 60% stake in the company, giving him almost absolute control of the company's creative decisions.⁷⁸ Investors were eager to buy Marvel shares and the company continued to thrive. Following several more years of commercial and critical success, by the end of 1993, Perelman's stake in the company was worth about \$2.7 billion and he had increased his share to 80%, making it virtually impossible to overrule him without serious financial capital. Unfortunately for Perelman, his luck soon ran out. Marvel's own fans inadvertently rendered the company worthless. The rise of comic book collectors – fans who often cared more about spine creases and page tears than the actual stories – increased the value of rare back issues. Collectors

⁷⁷ Susanna Hammer, "Is Marvel Ready for Its Close-Up?" *Business 2.0* 7, no. 4 (2006).

⁷⁸ Adam Bryant, "Pow! The Punches That Left Marvel Reeling" *New York Times* (May 24, 1998).

of all ages started buying multiple copies of the latest issues, especially special editions, hoping that they could eventually turn a profit.⁷⁹

Adam Bryant of *The New York Times* explains that the bubble burst in 1995 when speculators realized that if everyone collected comics, the value of those books would not increase. Limited edition “collectible” issues became a bad investment for collectors, and sales plummeted. Apparently Marvel executives, including Perelman, were unaware of how much of a role speculators had in the comic book market, despite warnings from industry insiders like author and Sandman creator Neil Gaiman. Perelman continued to make acquisitions in trading card and sticker companies. In 1995, Marvel reported its first annual loss under Perelman of \$48.4 million on sales of \$829 million. Marvel Entertainment was now \$581.3 million in debt.⁸⁰ Many of Marvel's writers and artists left the company to work for other publishers, leaving Marvel struggling to put out high-quality titles.

In 1996, the company officially established Marvel Studios in an attempt to get Marvel movies on the big screen (previous Marvel films were made-for-television features). With the company in turmoil, this version of Marvel Studios did not have the capital to make its own movies and quickly fizzled out. Perelman then planned to merge Marvel with Toy Biz by buying the Toy Biz shares he did not already own, allowing him to get 410 million new Marvel shares at 85 cents a share (compared to the latest share price of \$4.625). Investors became angry with such insider behavior and Marvel's shares dropped 40%. Corporate raider Carl Icahn bought \$40

⁷⁹ Warner Bros. purchased DC Comics in 1968, effectively keeping the publisher from going under so long as the movie studio remained afloat. See: <https://www.warnerbros.com/studio/about-studio/company-history>, Accessed April 12, 2017.

⁸⁰ Most of this debt came from Perelman’s liberal acquisitions of trading card and sticker companies. Marvel’s purchase of the Fleer Corporation trading card company racked up \$286 million alone. See: Bryant, “Pow!”

million worth of Marvel bonds and offered Marvel a rescue package to rival Perelman's. Instead, Marvel filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy and took out a new loan of \$160 million.⁸¹

After Marvel filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the company turned its attention towards licensing its characters for toys, videogames, and movies. Desperate to get out of their dire financial situation, Marvel executives figured that there was less risk in licensing characters rather than starting new ventures. Marvel sold off the film rights of its most popular characters to various studios, including X-Men and Fantastic Four at Fox, Spider-Man at Sony, and the Incredible Hulk at Universal.⁸² Unfortunately for Marvel, there was also less commercial reward in the licensing game. Licensing out the “Men in Black” characters to Sony Pictures shut Marvel out of the \$589 million gross of *Men in Black* (1997).⁸³ *Spider-Man 2* (2004), one of the highest-grossing movies of all time,⁸⁴ gave Marvel only 5% of Sony's share of the box office revenue. With its most popular characters in the hands of other studios, Marvel needed to dig deeper into its catalogue of more than 5,000 characters to find the right character for its first studio effort.⁸⁵

A \$525 million non-recourse revolving credit facility⁸⁶ over seven years from Merrill Lynch gave Marvel the means to secure the theatrical production and distribution rights for ten Marvel characters. The facility would reimburse Marvel for initial development costs once the

⁸¹ Bryant, “Pow!”

⁸² Merissa Marr, “In New Film Venture, Marvel Hopes to Be Its Own Superhero,” *Wall Street Journal* (April 28, 2005).

⁸³ Hammer, “Is Marvel Ready.”

⁸⁴ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=spiderman2.htm>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

⁸⁵ Marr, “In New Film Venture.”

⁸⁶ A loan that privileges the borrower by preventing the lender from taking the borrower’s assets or sue should the borrower fail to repay. See: Ken Clark, “What is the difference between a non-recourse loan and a recourse loan?” *Investopedia.com*, <http://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/08/nonrecourse-loan-vs-recourse-loan.asp>, Accessed April 2, 2017.

films were approved for production.⁸⁷ Unlike with the X-Men, Spider-Man, Men in Black, and Blade franchises, Marvel Studios would have sole control over which films were greenlit.

A financial test was put in place by Merrill Lynch to ensure that Marvel upheld their end of the bargain; Merrill Lynch wrote into the agreement that if the new studio could successfully produce three films, then Marvel would finally be able to withdraw their profits.⁸⁸ The newly re-vamped Marvel Studios needed the initial support of another studio to get its feet off the ground. Paramount Pictures' parent company, Viacom, owned MTV and Nickelodeon, so an alliance with Marvel would give the comic book empire a stronger connection to the youth market.⁸⁹ Under their new agreement, Marvel could create up to ten films for Paramount within eight years, with an expected budget of \$45 million to \$180 million. Paramount would cover the advertising, but Marvel was responsible for the production costs. A special-purpose, bankruptcy-remote subsidiary of Marvel, MVL Film Finance LLC, pledged the theatrical film rights to ten Marvel characters as collateral.⁹⁰ In other words, should these Paramount/Marvel films fail, Marvel stood to lose the rights to these characters.

Despite the rumors of Captain America being the initial superhero to appear in a Marvel Studios film, by the end of 2006, Marvel made it clear that *Iron Man* would debut in early 2008, with a Hulk movie soon after (Marvel re-acquired the film licensing rights after the Paramount contract).⁹¹ In the months leading up to the *Iron Man* premiere, Business experts questioned if Marvel could become a “Pixar-level powerhouse” without Spider-Man.⁹² Paramount advertised

⁸⁷ “Marvel Launches Independently Financed Film Slate With Closing of \$525 Million Non-Recourse Credit Facility; Transforming Initiative Provides Marvel Greater Profit Potential and Control over Film Production and Release Timing,” *BusinessWire*, September 6, 2005.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ Marr, “In New Film Venture.”

⁹⁰ “Marvel Launches Independently Financed Film Slate,” *Business Wire*.

⁹¹ Hammer, “Is Marvel Ready.”

⁹² Ron Grover, “Iron Man Spawns a Marvel of a Movie Studio,” *Businessweek Online*, 2008.

the film with a Super Bowl commercial and brought *Iron Man* star Robert Downey Jr. to Comic-Con and the New York Stock Exchange.⁹³ Since the Iron Man character lacked the cultural prevalence of Spider-Man or Batman, Paramount worked on “creating awareness and promoting the movie material itself – the effects, the best scenes and lines, and leveraging its celebrity cast.”⁹⁴ Essentially, audiences unfamiliar with Iron Man’s classic storylines would still know what to expect when walking into the theater.

The decision to feature Iron Man, who was not one of the ten characters on Marvel’s original shortlist, and who was by no means Marvel’s most iconic character, in Marvel Studios’ first feature film showed that the studio was willing to risk everything the company had on *Iron Man*.⁹⁵ After withdrawing from Hollywood for substance abuse treatment, star Robert Downey Jr. was a risky (but affordable) pick to anchor a franchise. *Iron Man* director Jon Favreau explained in an interview that the studio initially turned down his suggestion to cast Downey as Iron Man. Favreau had to show the executives that Downey was the “best choice creatively” even though Downey was “a big gamble” for the studio.⁹⁶

Paramount and Marvel Studios told reporters that they anticipated a \$60 million debut for *Iron Man* on opening weekend.⁹⁷ *Iron Man* ended up accumulating about \$317 million domestically on a rumored budget of \$135 million. Marvel Studios was on its way to becoming a

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Antony Young, “‘IRON MAN’ VS. ‘THE DARK KNIGHT,’” *Advertising Age* 79, no. 29, 2008.

⁹⁵ Iron Man’s rights were owned by New Line when Marvel made the original Paramount deal. Marvel Studios went out of their way to secure the Iron Man rights.

⁹⁶ Billy Kidd, “Jon Favreau On Casting Robert Downey Jr. In Ironman, ‘That Was A Big Gamble ... And Now He’s The Biggest Star In The World,’” *JackontheWeb.CBSlocal.com*, June 3, 2014. <http://jackontheWeb.cbslocal.com/2014/06/03/jon-favreau-on-casting-robert-downey-jr-in-ironman-that-was-a-big-gamble-and-now-hes-the-biggest-star-in-the-world/>.

⁹⁷ Grover, “Iron Man Spawns a Marvel.”

major independent player in Hollywood with long-running franchises.⁹⁸ Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige anticipated future films featuring “marquee names” as well as “great stories and lesser-known characters,” adding that “Regardless of how many comics they’ve sold or TV series they’ve had, if it can be a great movie, we’ll pursue it.”⁹⁹ *The Incredible Hulk* premiered later in 2008 to a smaller but still profitable \$244 million, leading Marvel to pursue retailers with three to five year plans for Marvel properties rather than the typical month-long plans centered around a movie’s time in theaters. Adam Fogelson, the president of marketing and distribution at Universal Pictures declared that Marvel was “creating a Marvel film universe.”¹⁰⁰

Birth of the MCU Fandom

Comic book fandom and movie fandoms have a deeply connected history, and no place better embodies the relationship between the two than San Diego Comic-Con, or SDCC. The annual summer convention hosts thousands of guests from across the globe and features actors, comic book creators, and filmmakers as they talk about their upcoming projects. Every year at SDCC, Marvel holds its panel in the famed Hall H. Rob Salkowitz describes Hall H as “the 6,500-seat bedroom where the relationship between comics and Hollywood is consummated, in public, nine times a day over the long weekend.”¹⁰¹ Salkowitz refutes the popular notion that Hall H is a sign of SDCC no longer being about comic books. Not only has comic book fandom always been obsessed with movies, Salkowitz writes, but SDCC has always made space for

⁹⁸ T.L. Stanley, “Irons in the Fire,” *Brandweek* 49, no. 31 (2008).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Securing a seat for a Hall H panel is no small feat; fans will camp out in line for an entire day in the sweltering San Diego summer heat just to get in. See: Rob Salkowitz, *Comic-con and the Business of Pop Culture: What the World's Wildest Trade Show Can Tell Us about the Future of Entertainment* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012), 103.

filmmakers and movie fans alike. Science fiction and fantasy film tends to dominate SDCC; figures like special effects pioneer Ray Harryhausen and animator Ralph Bakshi made appearances at early Comic-Cons, and in 1976, Lucasfilm gave fans a preview of the new *Star Wars*. At SDCC, however, nothing quite compares to the emotional investment fans have in superhero movies. According to Salkowitz, “A great superhero film provides much more than an afternoon's entertainment for the long-time comics fan: it validates all those hours spent indulging in a disreputable passion by showing the world that there are amazing, entertaining, and very lucrative ideas packed into those weird little pamphlets.”¹⁰² Superhero films in the 1970s and 80s were often campy and deviated from the comics mindset, and while Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film briefly uplifted superhero movies into the mainstream, Joel Schumacher's 1997 *Batman & Robin* “destroyed all life within [the superhero film].”¹⁰³ It was not until the early 2000s when *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) came on the scene that the superhero film cemented its place in Hollywood.

Comic book movies are still risky in Hollywood, but studios continue to rely on the comics formula. Salkowitz suggests that studios are willing to risk making a comic book movie “because when movies of this kind hit, they hit big.”¹⁰⁴ The potential for spin-offs, sequels, and other franchise media allows the studio to reach a bigger audience with less marketing for each installment. One of the only things stopping studios from using comic book movies to print money is the comics fans themselves. Salkowitz explains that fans scrutinize every detail about upcoming films because bad renditions in the past made fans the subject of ridicule. While these fans do not make up the majority of the potential movie audience, studio marketing departments

¹⁰² Ibid., 105.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 105.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 107.

cannot risk bad buzz in the weeks leading up to a release. By extension, Salkowitz writes, “Comic-Con is the Iowa caucus for comics and genre movies: the early barometer that can make or break a campaign.”¹⁰⁵

Movie stars who come to SDCC are expected to be at least casual comics fans, while directors of comics-related properties must be able to honor their source material in front of the fans. The catch for filmmakers is that sticking the source material is not always indicative of box office success. Adhering too closely to the source material confuses the mass audience and embarrasses comics fans. Zack Snyder's *Watchmen* (2009) received mixed reviews after Snyder promised to recreate the 1986 graphic novel on screen, a result that revealed the “limitations of the originalist instincts of hard-core comics fans when it comes to making movie blockbusters.”¹⁰⁶

Even when they are unhappy with the finished product, the most devoted fans will turn out to see a superhero movie because of their proprietary feelings. Pustz explains that “comic book fans feel a sense of ownership and hence become very angry when they see professionals and publishers destroying ‘their’ hobby or ruining ‘their’ favorite characters.”¹⁰⁷ As a result, “fans might feel obligated to attend a comics-inspired film (even if they know it is not supposed to be good) or watch a comics-inspired television series.”¹⁰⁸ Consequently, the MCU has a built-in audience of comic book fans that will watch these Marvel shows out of brand loyalty, regardless of quality.

MCU fans on Reddit frequently claim ownership of Marvel Studios. In this space, fans want to see Marvel Studios' X-Men, Spider-Man, and Fantastic Four; they frequently ask when

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 108.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 111.

¹⁰⁷ Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, 71.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 71.

will “We” get the rights to these properties. This idea of ownership strengthens fans' loyalty to the brand and leads them to question anyone that does not agree. One Redditor started a discussion with “Fantastic Four sequel has been cancelled. Do you think we will get the rights back?”¹⁰⁹ While some of these proprietary feelings may be related to the fans’ faith in Marvel Studios as a company, similar discussions on Reddit concerning Deadpool, the X-Men, and Spider-Man suggest that these fans feel more connected to the MCU label than the actual characters.

That apparent unwavering loyalty to Marvel Studios enables fans to be some of the brand's most vocal critics. Henry Jenkins writes that fandom is “perhaps first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism.”¹¹⁰ Jenkins adds that while fans cannot control the fates of their favorite characters or shows, “fans claim the right to protest and protest loudly decisions contradicting their perception of what is desirable or appropriate.”¹¹¹ However, Jenkins notes that these protests “stem not from personal taste alone but from the critical consensus of the fandom.”¹¹² The issue then, is identifying what is the critical consensus of the fandom and who is part of said fandom. As stated earlier, the fandom is not a monolith, and the variety of fan spaces for MCU fans, from conventions to discussion forums to fanfiction archives, allows fans to form vastly different opinions on what is the norm in the MCU. For instance, a segment of the MCU fandom that writes Captain America/Winter Soldier fanfiction will collectively agree that Captain America kissing Agent 13 in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) goes against their consensus that Captain America only has eyes for Winter Soldier. Meanwhile, another segment

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https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/3u4x47/fantastic_four_sequel_has_been_cancelled_do_you/, Accessed April 2, 2017.

¹¹⁰ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 81.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 121.

of the fandom may have no opinion of Captain America's love life and would prefer to talk about the appearance of Black Panther or Spider-Man in *Civil War*. According to Jenkins, "participation within fandom often extends beyond an interest in any single text to encompass many others within the same genre."¹¹³ In this example, Captain America/Winter Soldier fans may also be Black Panther fans who may also be Spider-Man fans, and their discussions will often overlap because the MCU encompasses so much material. The MCU fandom essentially functions as a mega-fandom containing countless smaller fandoms that communicate, collaborate, and compete for space in the primary MCU discussion spaces. By connecting its franchises under the pretense of a cinematic universe, Marvel Studios encourages fandoms to interact with and consume each other's content regardless of whether one is invested in other MCU sub-fandoms.

MCU Fandom in the Digital Age

Fans of Marvel have been around for decades, but the MCU fandom sets itself apart from the comic book fandom by emphasizing the live-action films and television programs that fall under the MCU label. Born in the digital age, the MCU fandom developed almost entirely online, whereas Marvel Comics fans got their start in fan clubs and conventions. Nevertheless, the attitudes widely held by comic book fandom are visible in MCU fandom conversations.

While MCU fandom membership does not require knowledge of Marvel comic books, many fans are at least familiar with their favorite superhero's comic book origins. Fans who have knowledge about the comic books or consider themselves to be part of a comic book fandom will often share their knowledge with people who are only fans of the MCU, leading to more in-depth interactions. What separates comic book fandom from traditional television or movie fandoms is

¹¹³ Ibid., 37.

that “comic book fans regularly become professionals, and professionals continue to identify as fans.”¹¹⁴ This fan/professional relationship becomes complicated when the superhero comic book becomes the superhero movie. The combination of studio oversight and a need to appeal to a general (non-comic book fan) audience leads to superhero films that deviate from the source material and risk alienating die-hard comic book fans.

Jenkins argues that organized fandom functions as a “semistructured space” where viewers debate “the nature of the mass media and their own relationship to it.”¹¹⁵ In the case of the MCU fandom, social media websites provide the structure for fandom discussions. While there are specialized spaces for the sub-fandoms in the MCU, centralized discussion forums are the most visible and accessible. Reddit has specific spaces for MCU discussion, including r/MarvelStudios and r/ComicBookMovies, whereas Tumblr blogs may focus on just the MCU, such as mcfandomhatespeopleofcolor.tumblr.com, or they might include MCU content mixed among content from other fandoms, such as reverseracism.tumblr.com.

Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter note that fandoms make up a major component of Tumblr's userbase. Hillman, Procyk, and Neustaedter differentiate Tumblr from other social networking websites by noting the sense of community, use of animated GIFs, reliance on jargon, and interest in fandom. Tumblr bloggers serve as their own moderators; they are the curators of their own blogs and can edit, delete, or ignore content that they dislike. They also call attention to the presence of “social justice” within fandom spaces on Tumblr, arguing that issues of inequality, mental health, and activism are a natural part of the fandom identity.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Pustz, “Comic Book Culture,” 109.

¹¹⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 81.

¹¹⁶ Serena Hillman, Jason Procyk, and Carman Neustaedter, “Tumblr fandoms, community & culture,” *Proceedings of the companion publication of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing*, New York, NY (2014): 287.

“MCU Fandom Hates People of Color” is one such blog that combines users' interest in fandom and social justice discussions. A spinoff blog of “Fandoms Hate People of Color,” this Tumblr's bio proclaims that the blog is “Covering all the fandom racism (anti-blackness, misogynoir, racialized misogyny) within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.”¹¹⁷ The anonymous moderators, who all describe themselves as people of color, answer questions from other users, post commentary on the MCU (usually related to race, though issues of gender and sexuality frequently come up), and share interviews and footage from Marvel-related media, including the comics.

Reddit is highly accessible to Internet users without an account, making it another prime candidate for observational study. Reddit relies on a system of “subreddits” to differentiate between different topics. Subreddits are user-created and typically moderated by a small group of Redditors. Katie Anderson notes that Reddit's strength lies in its sense of community. Anderson elaborates, “the appeal, in many cases, to the users is their sense of belonging, as well as a feeling of validation when a submission or comment is upvoted.”¹¹⁸ Upvoting is a voting system in which users click on an up arrow if they like a comment, or a down arrow (downvoting) if they dislike the comment. Replies to the comment can also receive upvotes and downvotes. Besides personal validation, users benefit from upvotes through karma points. Redditors receive karma points when they receive upvotes and lose points when they receive downvotes. Anyone can view a Redditor's karma points total by clicking on their user name – those with more karma are typically more valued within the community. Anderson explains that the system “encourages users to post good content, make useful comments and also provide relevant feedback.”¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ <https://mcfandomhatespeopleofcolor.tumblr.com>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

¹¹⁸ Katie Elson Anderson, “Ask Me Anything: What is Reddit?” *Library Hi Tech News* 32, no. 5 (2015): 9.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Redditors will sometimes try to game the karma system by reposting popular comments, so one's karma score may not be an accurate measure of their credibility in a subreddit. Additionally, the downvoting aspect makes it possible for users to shame each other and make negative opinions disappear; comments that receive multiple downvotes may be hidden (but not removed) from a thread.

The Marvel community on Reddit is broken up into smaller subreddits, marking the different segments of the fandom. The main r/Marvel page has over 240,700 subscribers as of April 2017, featuring discussions on comics, video games, movies, shows, and merchandise.¹²⁰ In turn, each of these video games, movies, and shows has its own subreddit. The majority of the comic book discussion happens on specific character subreddits, as well as r/Marvel and r/ComicBooks for general topics. R/MarvelStudios is the place for discussion about Marvel's Cinematic Universe. The subreddit has over 122,200 subscribers as of April 2017 and often has hundreds of users on its front page at any given time.¹²¹ The Marvel Studios subreddit provides a filmography guide and a guide to which studio holds the rights to specific characters. Most subreddits, including r/MarvelStudios, include a series of rules specific to the community. Moderators on Reddit are users with the power to remove comments or entire discussion threads for breaking such rules. For the Marvel Studios subreddit, these rules include “No political/inflammatory posts” and “Be Civil.” According to the expanded list of rules, “if your post uses something from the MCU to tangentially relate to politics/current events/something not related to the MCU it will be removed.” Furthermore, “Name-calling[,] racism, and hate speech will not be tolerated ... Bans will [be] handed out at our discretion if we believe you are breaking the no civility rule. Racism and hate speech are not appealable. We want all our users to feel

¹²⁰ <https://www.reddit.com/r/Marvel/>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²¹ <https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

welcome and able to enjoy discussion here.”¹²² With so many subscribers, the moderators cannot catch all of the rule-breakers, allowing some tense conversations to thrive.

Most of the MCU fandom’s activities occur online, which makes it easier for fans to perpetuate racial inequality when there is minimal-face-to-face contact. As mentioned earlier, when fandom is imagined as white and male by default, fans of color struggle to make their voices heard. On a post about fandom racism, a Marvel Comics fan on Tumblr recalls, “I remember when I’ve tried to bring up the criticism over how white the Uncanny Avengers team is, with only one member not being white be Scarlet Witch, who often gets her heritage [sic] glossed over and be portrayed as white. I was mocked, told I’m overreacting an [sic] that this is not a race thing.”¹²³

Heather Kettrey and Whitney Laster argue that overt racism (as opposed to “color-blind” racism) in online spaces is due to users believing their perceived anonymity allows them to act in ways they would not normally do in public. Kettrey and Laster conceptualize the Web as a white space due to white privilege in access and content purveyed on the Internet. They also note that the Web enables people to combat racism contrary to how they would act in the offline world. To dismantle racism, users must challenge it when it occurs. The challenge in dissent, Kettrey and Laster claim, lies in the fact that “individuals who subscribe to color-blind ideology are unlikely to take racism (i.e., overt or color-blind) seriously and, thus are unlikely to dissent against it.”¹²⁴ The authors conclude that “the elusive nature of color-blind racism means that this specific rhetoric is unlikely to be noticed and, thus unlikely to be challenged.”¹²⁵ In spaces that are

¹²² <https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/wiki/rules>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

¹²³ <https://hellyeahteensuperheroes.tumblr.com/post/146711095463/the-moment-you-realized-fandom-was-racist>, Accessed April 3, 2017.

¹²⁴ Kettrey, Heather Hensman, and Whitney Nicole Laster, “Staking Territory in the ‘World White Web,’” *Social Currents* 1, no. 3 (2014): 261.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

framed as anti-racist (such as Tumblr “social justice” blogs) color-blind racist comments slip past oblivious moderators, allowing users to associate color-blind ideology with anti-racist activism. Furthermore, the opinions on one anti-racist Tumblr blog may contradict those on another anti-racist blog; “FandomsHatePeopleofColor” moderators repeatedly praise the Broadway show *Hamilton*¹²⁶ while the moderators at “ReverseRacism” argue that the show romanticizes slave owners.¹²⁷ These two competing narratives may not focus on Marvel and its movies, but they demonstrate how social justice blogs do not share a cohesive vision of racial diversity and equality. For some fans, racial inequality in media may be acceptable if there is substantial diversity in the cast and crew. For others, the context and quality of portrayals of people of color supersedes the number of people of color involved in a project. The lack of interaction between the two blogs, and between other social justice blogs for that matter, prevents constructive dialogue from occurring on Tumblr. Users can seek out the form of social justice blogging that appeals to them most and avoid seeing other opinions.

Ian Haney López's critical race theory suggests that race is constructed based on highly specific local circumstances.¹²⁸ López encourages white people to “elaborate a more critical racial self-consciousness, if only to overcome the tendency not to see themselves in racial terms.”¹²⁹ Essentially, white race-consciousness needs to focus on dismantling the idea of white identity as the “superior opposite to the identity of non-Whites.”¹³⁰ In the case of the MCU fandom, race is constructed not on phenotypic differences but on actions, language, and positions

¹²⁶ https://fandomshatepeopleofcolor.tumblr.com/post/157475700105/i-saw-the-posts-where-you-rant-about-racism-in-the#tumblr_notes, Accessed April 3, 2017.

¹²⁷ <http://reverseracism.tumblr.com/post/153404830458/im-sorry-but-can-we-stop-congratulating-the#notes>, Accessed April 3, 2017.

¹²⁸ Ian Haney López, *White by Law the Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 35.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

held by each user. On a website like Tumblr, users can choose to reveal information about themselves (including photographs) in their bio pages so that other users are aware of the blogger's race. Stating one's race on a social justice blog is meant to be either a disclosure of privilege as a white person or authority to speak on issues affecting people of color as a person of color. Reddit, however, allows for more anonymity since users typically do not post photographs of themselves or include personal identifiers in their posts. Race is still present on Reddit, though it manifests in discussions rather than in bio pages.

Racial Debates in the MCU Fandom

Over the past few years, contemporary events and new fans have forced Marvel Studios and the fans to confront race. The lack of racial and gender diversity in the films has created frustration among fans who seek better representation. Additionally, these concerned fans find themselves at odds with fans who are content with the brand's current racial and gender norms (or want even less diversity). Racism within the fandom, specifically the dismissal of fans of color, is rampant across social media platforms. The relationship between fans and producers, once revered in the comic book world, is rapidly changing as producers become more accessible via social media. Lastly, the massive amount of canonical MCU content, from films to television series to mobile games to tie-in comic books, has arguably saturated the market and left many fans feeling overwhelmed and disempowered.

Although Marvel Comics greatly expanded its roster over the seventy years after Captain America's first appearance to include people of color in heroic roles, the company's troubled history of anti-Asian and anti-Black depictions continues to haunt Marvel in the twenty-first century. Just as Simon and Kirby aimed to defeat Anti-Semitism at the expense of Black and

Asian people, the contemporary producers, writers, and artists at Marvel often find themselves producing works that support certain marginalized groups but harm others.

The current starring lineup at Marvel Studios is, for lack of a better term, astoundingly white. As stated earlier, every single film in the MCU from 2008 to 2017 stars a white man. While other franchises with similar box office success are as white as the MCU, many of these films focus on the same character from film to film (i.e. Harry Potter, James Bond) or focus on one family (i.e. *Star Wars*, *The Lord of the Rings/The Hobbit*). This observation does not excuse the absence of people of color in those franchises, but it is notable that the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which does not focus on a single character or family across its films, insists that its seven leading heroes all be white men. By exclusively telling the stories of white men, Marvel Studios inadvertently tells its audience that white men's stories are the only ones worth telling. The eventual *Black Panther* (2018) film will finally shift the MCU away from whiteness, but that seventeen films starring white men had to be made first is telling of Marvel Studios' confidence in how it handles race.

The tendency for fandoms to perpetuate and overlook racism, , explored in Chapter One, is alive and well in the MCU fandom. Fans of color are subject to silencing, harassment, erasure, and mockery across social media platforms. In the next chapter, I will delve into the treatment of fans of color, but it is important to note that despite the camaraderie and shared interests, fandom spaces are not always safe spaces and often perpetuate a racialized hierarchy rooted in offline racism.

Social media has become a volatile space for fan/producer interactions. Excessive interaction with fans can be too much of a good thing. Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis write, “fans simultaneously want to exert influence on a text in which they are highly invested,

and yet remain hidden” while “the creative side knows the value of maintaining fans' interests and is invested in pleasing fans, yet recognizes the risk of too much reciprocity in contaminating the source text.”¹³¹ Following the release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), fans took to Twitter to criticize writer and director Joss Whedon for his characterization of Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson).¹³² Whedon, once beloved by geek culture for developing *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer* and the first *Avengers* film, ended up deleting his Twitter profile after several days of receiving negative feedback. Whedon eventually re-activated his account, but his temporary withdrawal from social media left many MCU fans feeling upset. Filmmakers who fear a Whedon-esque fallout with fandom may be reluctant to interact with fans on social media.

The meteoric rise of the MCU is virtually unprecedented in popular culture; franchises like *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* have long continuities as well, but neither franchise has produced so much content in so little time. Part of what makes the MCU so remarkable is that the MCU fits Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling. According to Jenkins, “a transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”¹³³ Jenkins also notes that “each franchise entry needs to be self-contained” so that “any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole.”¹³⁴ Fans who consume more media will have a more in-depth experience, so long as the franchise continues to offer new levels of experience. Transmedia storytelling encourages artists to collaborate with other artists under the realization that no author is completely familiar with all

¹³¹ Larsen, Katherine., and Lynn S. Zubernis, *Fandom at the Crossroads: Celebration, Shame and Fan/producer Relationships* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 176.

¹³² Andrew Sims, “See the awful tweets that drove Joss Whedon to quit Twitter,” *Hypable.com*, May 5, 2015, <http://www.hypable.com/joss-whedon-quit-twitter-tweets/>.

¹³³ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 95-96.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

of the media. Since Jenkins published *Convergence Culture* shortly before the start of the MCU, he concludes that the lack of fully transmedia stories prevents critics and consumers from knowing ‘how to talk meaningfully about what works or doesn't work within such franchises.’¹³⁵

While the MCU exemplifies transmedia storytelling by spreading across film, television, comics, animation, and games, fans will often insist that there are only two entry points into the mega-franchise. The r/MarvelStudios subreddit frequently debates the merits of starting with the first MCU film, *Iron Man* (2008) or the film that happens first in the universe's chronology, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). One dedicated Redditor compiled all the films, television shows, and tie-in comics into a viewing guide, concluding that it would take 6 days, 17 hours, and 10 minutes to watch everything made up through April 16, 2017.¹³⁶ When Redditor Pand9 posted “A casual question. Where should I start?” and asked if they could start with *The Avengers*, fellow Reddit users insisted on one of the two traditional viewing orders. “Is that hard to start with Iron Man?” Shadow_Gabriel asked. Another user immediately listed off all of the feature films, short films, and television series and suggested to watch everything in the four weeks before the *Agent Carter* season premiere.¹³⁷ By constructing a transmedia body of work as having only two entry points, the MCU fandom suggests that the only way to be in the fandom is to consume all the content in the appropriate order.

The issue at stake with the “MCU zombies” is not so much their willingness to promote Marvel at all costs, but rather their unwillingness to be critical consumers. In the next chapter, I

¹³⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹³⁶ https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Xfe--9Wshbb3ru0JplA2PnEwN7mVawazKmhWJjr_wKs/edit?pref=2&pli=1#gid=0, Accessed April 16, 2017.

¹³⁷ https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/3xpdb/a_casual_question_where_should_i_start/?ref=share&ref_source=link, Accessed April 16, 2017.

will present a case study in the MCU movie promotional circuit and explore how fannish behaviors are thrown into disarray when race is forced into the discussion.

Chapter Three: A Study in *Strange*: Fandom Attitudes in the Face of Whitewashing

Why *Doctor Strange*?

Fandoms typically comprise diverse groups of people with different – sometimes competing – understandings of the popular culture they embrace. For the MCU fandom, the subject of race is especially contentious. Some members of the MCU fandom feel they must mitigate racism from other members, protest racist content in the shows and films, and navigate the complex racial history of the comic books. Online platforms allow fans to conceal their identities, but fans often choose to reveal personal details including their race, gender, and sexual orientation. While disclosing such information can help fans develop a sense of community and find like-minded people, it also exposes power imbalances in the fandom. Imagining the fandom as a micro-society, white fans have the privilege of seeing themselves represented on screen by leading actors in a heroic, positive manner. Fans of color, however, are denied this privilege because the MCU does not portray people of color outside of villainous or sidekick roles.

I chose to study the build up to *Doctor Strange* for two reasons: to track the fan discussions in real time, and to follow the fans' tendency to move on to the next film almost immediately after the latest film premieres. The online controversy that followed the first trailer prompted responses from the *Doctor Strange* filmmakers and performers. These interactions among the fandom, the media, and the filmmakers are reminiscent of the fan-creator relationships happening in the world of comic books, but when a billion-dollar mega-franchise is on the line, the stakes are higher and the tensions more visible.

Between April and November of 2016, I monitored the discussions happening in MCU fan spaces, including Reddit, Tumblr, and Twitter. In April, the first trailer for *Doctor Strange* arrived, commencing the promotional spectacle for the film that would run up until the

November wide release in the United States. The following chapter will explore the details of this eight month period, making note of how fans reacted to the promotional material and how said material constructed race.

Attempts to Justify Whitewashing

ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live* premiered the *Doctor Strange* trailer on April 12, 2016 as a way of cross-promoting ABC Studios and Marvel Studios, both owned by Walt Disney Entertainment. Immediately afterwards, the trailer surfaced on YouTube, catching the attention of Marvel fans and non-fans alike. Commenters on YouTube were quick to observe how race is presented in the trailer. User blackphoenix77 wrote, “[Doctor Strange] goes to an Asian monastery and finds a white woman in charge. Typical Hollywood BS.” In the replies to this comment, YouTubers argued over whether whitewashing occurred and if the race change was offensive. The conversation in this particular thread would continue for three months, discussing Marvel's motives for the race change, leading YouTube user laz kar to write, “It's not a racist thing, it's a money thing.”¹³⁸ Monica Ndounou discusses why Hollywood tends to favor white actors for ‘business reasons’ by exploring a Hollywood strategy used to cast the most profitable actors. The Ulmer Scale, developed by film analyst James Ulmer in 1997, scores how much influence an actor's name alone can raise financing up front for a film. Ndounou explains that studio executives rely on the Ulmer Scale to assess the financial risk of casting a particular actor. Overall, the Ulmer Scale rates African Americans as less valuable than white American actors. This system, Ndounou writes, “ensures that a white actor of a particular caliber must be included

¹³⁸ “Doctor Strange - Trailer World Premiere,” YouTube video, 1:56, posted by “Jimmy Kimmel Live,” April 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwcSki7r9cQ>, Accessed March 15, 2017.

in nonwhite, studio-produced films in order to secure competitive financing and distribution.”¹³⁹ Consequently, films with predominantly Black casts are less likely to include other people of color without impacting studio funding. The Ulmer Scale cannot predict box office success, but that does not stop executives from chasing potential profits in the international market. According to Ndounou, Hollywood has cultivated the international market's preference for films with predominantly white casts, “rendering black, Latina/o, South Asian, and Native Americans virtually invisible.”¹⁴⁰ Even though the Ulmer Scale does not explicitly factor in race and gender into its calculations, Ndounou emphasizes how the scale has real consequences for people of color. Actors of color may not even be on the Ulmer Scale because they have had so few opportunities to star in films in the first place. Obtaining a spot on the Ulmer Scale requires either years of work in Hollywood or a big break role in a commercially successful motion picture.

In the case of Marvel Studios, the hiring of actors Robert Downey Jr. and Chris Hemsworth shows the studio's willingness to take some risk with their casting, so long as those risks fit the Ulmer Scale's racial logic. As mentioned earlier, Downey's casting was a big risk for the studio because of his history of substance abuse, though director Jon Favreau pushed for Downey to get the job. *Thor* star Chris Hemsworth was another early risk for Marvel Studios. At the time of his casting, Mark Graham of *Vulture.com* called Hemsworth and Tom Hiddleston “no-names” and “virtual unknowns.”¹⁴¹ While respected actors like Anthony Hopkins and Natalie Portman rounded out the cast, Marvel's faith in Hemsworth, whose biggest Hollywood

¹³⁹ Monica White Ndounou, *Shaping the Future of African American Film: Color-coded Economics and the Story behind the Numbers* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2013), 178.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴¹ Mark Graham, “Marvel Rolls Dice, Casts No-Names for Thor,” *Vulture.com*, May 19, 2009, http://www.vulture.com/2009/05/marvel_rolls_dice_casts_no-nam.html.

role beforehand was a cameo in *Star Trek* (2009), shows that the studio was confident that an unknown actor could carry a film about one of Marvel's less iconic superheroes. In 2016, Marvel Studios was one of the most profitable studios in Hollywood; the financial risk of casting an Asian person in a movie already filled with white actors would arguably have been minimal. Yet the studio proceeded to cast white British actor Benedict Cumberbatch in the lead, white Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen as the villain, white Canadian actress Rachel McAdams as the love interest, white British actress Tilda Swinton as the “not Asian” mentor, British Chinese actor Benedict Wong as the hero support figure, and Black British actor Chiwetel Ejiofor as the sidekick-turned villain. The presence of actors of color in *Doctor Strange*, though welcome, continues the trend of relegating people of color to sidekick and/or villainous roles while white people remain at the center of the narrative.

On r/MarvelStudios, Redditors had mixed reactions to the first trailer. The “Doctor Strange Trailer Megathread” begins with a “HOLY SHIT!!!” from moderator murdockmanila, followed by several enthused responses from self-proclaimed Doctor Strange fans. Redditor leonis89 was the first to comment on the casting decision, writing “Tilda Swinton as the Ancient One is a solid choice now,” which was followed by a reply from koke84: “If you are a fan of whitewashing.” On Reddit, users can upvote comments they agree with and disagree with comments they disagree with or find unacceptable for the forum. While the pro-Swinton comment received 33 upvotes, the anti-Swinton post had 11 downvotes. Additional comments praised Swinton for looking “amazing” as the Ancient One, but there was some resistance. “Asian clothes, Asian architecture, Asian ideas, and not a single Asian person in sight. It's Hollywood, all right,” wrote Desecr8or, receiving 37 upvotes. Redditors were quick to point out that Wong, Doctor Strange’s mononymous sidekick and valet, would be making an appearance

in the film. Desecr8or noted that “Yeah, but you wouldn't know it if you'd only seen the trailer. Wouldn't be surprised if he ended up like all the other Asians in Marvel movies and got one or two lines before disappearing.” Redditor AmazingShoes added, “I don't know why Marvel hates asians [sic]. Especially now that the Chinese Market is such a big deal. But hey, I guess white guys don't have enough superheroes yet.”¹⁴² While these fans are aware of Marvel Studios' commercial needs, they assume that a studio seeking profits by any means necessary can get away with racist behavior. In other words, the ends (profit) justify the means (whitewashing) for uncritical fans who would rather see Marvel make more money to make more movies.

On April 17, *Doctor Strange*'s screenwriter C. Robert Cargill discussed Swinton's casting on the “Sunday Service” podcast on DoubleToasted.com. During the podcast, Cargill said, “There is no other character in Marvel history that is such a cultural landmine, that is absolutely unwinnable.” Cargill added, “I could tell you why every single decision that involves the Ancient One is a bad one.” Cargill acknowledges that the Ancient One in the comics was a “racist stereotype.” Cargill also said, “He originates from Tibet, so if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going, ‘Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political.’” Observing that people were much less upset about the gender change than the race change, he concludes that “We knew that the social justice warriors would be angry either way.”¹⁴³ Cargill's description of the Ancient One as a “cultural landmine” reveals his awareness

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https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/4ejsu4/the_doctor_strange_trailer_megathread/, Accessed October 10, 2016.

¹⁴³ Korey Coleman, Samuel Gonzalez, interview with C. Robert Cargill, The Sunday Service, podcast audio, April 17, 2016, <https://doubletoasted.com/show/4-17-16-the-sunday-service-live-500-pm-cst/>.

of the character's problematic history, but his assertion that there is no right way to handle the Ancient One conflicts with his (and the studio's) creative decision to keep Doctor Strange's origin story as close to Lee and Ditko's comics as possible.

On April 30, actor George Takei, a frequent advocate for Asian American representation in Hollywood, took to Facebook to criticize Marvel Studios for casting Swinton to appease the Chinese market. Takei wrote, “So let me get this straight. You cast a white actress so you wouldn’t hurt sales...in Asia? This backpedaling is nearly as cringeworthy as the casting. Marvel must think we’re all idiots.” In the comments of his post, Takei added, “They cast Tilda because they believe white audiences want to see white faces.”¹⁴⁴

While the Chinese market is playing an increasingly significant role in Hollywood, Cargill’s assertion that bringing up Tibet in *Doctor Strange* would alienate Chinese audiences is largely misguided. According to NPR reporter Frank Langfitt, Marvel Studios has a history of tailoring their films to fit what they think Chinese people want to see in their entertainment, but these filmmakers do not fully understand their Chinese audiences¹⁴⁵ In an interview with Amy Qin of the *New York Times*, Wu Jueren of the Shanghai International Film Festival said that, historically, Chinese filmmakers either used Tibet as a propaganda tool to show national unity or they depicted Tibet as a mythical healing place.¹⁴⁶place. However, a recent emergence of Tibetan

¹⁴⁴ George Takei’s Facebook page, Accessed December 1, 2016.

<https://www.facebook.com/georgetakei/posts/1561565090539605>.

¹⁴⁵ In *Iron Man 3* (2013), the studio inserted a scene exclusively for Chinese audiences featuring major Chinese movie star Fan Bing Bing. The CEO of the Chinese movie theater company Apex Entertainment, T.J. Green called the move “a blatant attempt to try to get more Chinese audiences into the movie to make a quick buck. Some in the industry took offense to that, saying you're belittling Chinese actors and talent.” See: Frank Langfitt, “How China’s Censors Influence Hollywood,” *NPR.com*, May 18, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/05/18/407619652/how-chinas-censors-influence-hollywood>.

¹⁴⁶ The Chinese Communist Party has been critical of movements for Tibetan independence, so mentions of Tibetan oppression and rebellion will not pass the SAPPRT, as well as the United

filmmakers into the Chinese film circuit demonstrates how Tibetan productions can circumvent these restrictions.¹⁴⁷ The fact that Tibetan filmmakers can show their films in China suggests that American filmmakers could incorporate references to Tibet in their films without alienating Chinese audiences, as long as those references are not overtly political or otherwise controversial. For a fantasy film like *Doctor Strange*, including references to Tibet as a mythical healing place would hardly be out of line with Wu Jueren's description of how Tibet is already portrayed in Chinese cinema.

In an interview with the *Los Angeles Daily News*, published September 9, Derrickson promoted *Doctor Strange* and answered some questions about the casting decisions. Derrickson also cited the *Doctor Strange* comics as highly influential in his childhood. Speaking on the casting process, Derrickson said, "Diversity in movies is absolutely the responsibility of producers and directors. In this movie, we have about as diverse a cast as I think you can get, and that was a very conscious decision. Tilda was a way of adding diversity in terms of not just an ethereal, enigmatic, otherworldly actress playing an ethereal, enigmatic, otherworldly character, but we're bringing a middle-aged woman who's not 28 years old in leather pants into the Marvel Universe in a major role." On Swinton's casting, Derrickson added, "I was very happy with that, but I was also very conscious that in doing that I was erasing a significant potential Asian role. I was going to leave Wong out of the movie at first; he was an Asian sidekick manservant, what was I supposed to do with that? But once the decision was made to cast Tilda, we brought Wong

Work Department, which has to approve all films involving Tibet. See: Amy Qin, "Tibet Stands Out in China's Entries at Shanghai International Film Festival" *TheNewYorkTimes.com*, June 10, 2016. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/11/arts/international/tibet-china-shanghai-international-film-festival.html?_r=0.

¹⁴⁷ Amy Qin cites *Soul on a String* (2016) and *De Lan* (2015) as Tibetan films that screened at the Shanghai International Film Festival.

back because, unlike the Ancient One, he could be completely subverted as a character and reworked into something that didn't fall into any of the stereotypes of the comics."¹⁴⁸

On May 6, Deadline.com published an interview with Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige that discussed *Doctor Strange* casting. Feige said, "We didn't want to play into any of the stereotypes found in the comic books, some of which go back as far as 50 years or more. We felt the idea of gender swapping the role of The Ancient One was exciting. It opened up possibilities, it was a fresh way into this old and very typical storyline. Why not make the wisest bestower of knowledge in the universe to our heroes in the particular film a woman instead of a man?" Feige added, "We cast Tilda out of a desire to subvert stereotypes, not feed into them. I don't know if you saw [*Doctor Strange* director] Scott Derrickson's tweet the other day. He said we're listening and we're learning, every day. That really is true. As long as we're starting on this topic, it means so much to us that people know that. We also know that people expect actions and not words in a Q&A, and I'm hopeful that some of our upcoming announcements are going to show that we've been listening."¹⁴⁹ Feige cited Gene Roddenberry's mantra, "Infinite diversity in infinite combinations," to assert his own commitment to diversity because "we want people to watch our films and see themselves reflected in the heroes, in the villains, in the storylines." When the reporter asked Feige about the impending *Black Panther* film and what it will mean to have a superhero of color "carry a movie," Feige replied, "Well, you've seen a lot but you mean in title roles." When asked about a *Black Widow* movie, Feige explained that the studio has planned the next nine movies through 2019, so while he is interested in doing a *Black Widow*

¹⁴⁸ Mike Fleming Jr, "Kevin Feige On 'Captain America: Civil War' And All Things Marvel – Deadline Q&A", *Deadline.com*, May 6, 2016.<http://deadline.com/2016/05/kevin-feige-marvel-studios-captain-america-civil-war-iron-man-doctor-strange-black-panther-1201750467/>

¹⁴⁹ Feige also clarified that the story about Marvel and Disney not wanting to offend China was "completely erroneous." See: Fleming, "Kevin Feige On 'Captain America.'"

movie, they “have a lot to do before then.” Discussing the hiring process for directors, Feige said, “You don’t have to have made a great film, but we have to believe that you are about to make a great film and wouldn’t it be nice if it was for us.” He does add that “Ryan Coogler is an exception because he has made great films and some of the others did too, before working with us.” Feige does not elaborate more on this hiring process, but his comment about Ryan Coogler, the director of *Black Panther* and the first Black male director for an MCU film, hints at some racial bias from the executives; why is Marvel Studios willing to trust up-and-coming white directors, but not people of color who want a big break in Hollywood? Feige’s interview shows his willingness to talk about race and gender in the MCU, but his assertion that he wants viewers to see themselves in the characters suggests that he thinks white people’s stories and attitudes are universal, given the lack of people of color in title roles.

The fans who insisted that the whitewashing in *Doctor Strange* was a logical Hollywood business decision ignore the racial biases held by the executives and filmmakers at Marvel Studios. Conversely, the filmmakers and executives insisting that they are running a meritocracy disregard the labor struggles of people of color in Hollywood.

You Won’t Like Fans When They’re Angry: Policing Fan Anger and Resistance

The subreddit r/comicbookmovies branch of the fandom responded with skepticism and defensiveness to Derrickson's interview. Redditor thindarkoldgaysian posted a link to the Derrickson interview and posed the question, “Will hollywood actually listen and learn though?” The most-upvoted comment in the thread came from user benmaney1, stating “Oh look, it's this idiot. He's a troll on [IGN.com discussion boards] and he's apparently made his way to reddit now.” The ensuing discussion in this thread is best summarized by a comment from user Slamfrankel: “Look bud, you are allowed to have your own opinion, voice it however you want

in any non-violent fashion, and you are more than welcome to join conversations to throw out ideas, more opinions, and whatever else you may have to say but please stop making these posts on a sub that is here for people who want to read about comic book movies. No one cares how much you hate Marvel. No one cares how smart and self righteous you think you are. This is a community for geeks to geek out. Not a place for you to try to convert people into anti marvel drones. I'm not trying to be a dick but please stop posting all this propaganda. Stay on the sub, enjoy or hate the news that pops up, contribute (not bash). Everything will be much smoother. And less people will get in arguments. Not saying you are right or wrong. Just asking as politely as possible, for you to stop raining on everyones parade. No need to reply because I will not comment again on this subject. I just needed to get that off my chest. Thank you.”¹⁵⁰ This lengthy reply reveals a commonly held attitude in the MCU fandom that the movies exist purely for escapist reasons and that any attempt to bring real-life politics into the fictional space will ruin the fun. Besides ignoring the rich political history of Marvel Comics, this fan polices the tone of a person concerned about portrayals of Asian people in popular culture, assumes that being critical of Marvel is the same as hating the company, and shuts down any opportunity for productive dialogue.

Redditors on the r/MarvelStudios page also discussed the critics’ reviews of the movie, which were mostly positive. While the casting issues were not brought up in the discussion, fans reiterated a statement from user Alvinng9: “If you love the movie, good for you; don't go harass others who don't. If you hate the movie, don't harass those who enjoy it.”¹⁵¹ While harassment is

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https://www.reddit.com/r/comicbookmovies/comments/4i1foj/director_of_dr_strange_addresses/, Accessed September 15, 2016.

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https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/58es1a/doctor_strange_critic_reaction_megathread/, Accessed November 20, 2016.

certainly a major issue online, simply calling attention to the racist content in *Doctor Strange* does not exactly qualify as harassment, especially when those critiques are targeted toward Marvel Studios, not its supporters.

Redditors frequently cite Tumblr users for calling out perceived inequalities. This fascination with Tumblr is so significant on Reddit that there are entire subreddits, such as r/tumblrination, dedicated to making fun of the “social justice warriors” on Tumblr. After a Redditor posted a thread titled “So much for white-washing controversy and tumblr boycotting Dr. Strange,” another user replied, “You know Tumblr isn't a person right? Some people saying they won't see Doctor Strange because of the casting doesn't mean everyone who's on the site it agrees with it. I'm sure you could find people on Reddit who are boycotting too.”¹⁵²

Tumblr users typically do not engage with those on Reddit. Bloggers on Tumblr repeatedly discussed their plans to avoid the *Doctor Strange* movie at all costs. Tumblr user noonasaetre wrote in October, “I may be a bad person but at least I'm not gonna see the doctor strange movie.”¹⁵³ “I hope this movie flops,” posted Tumblr user hell-jordan in October¹⁵⁴. MCU Fandom Hates People of Color launched a social media campaign on November 1 to boycott *Doctor Strange*, citing the erasure of Tibet, the whitewashing of the Ancient One, and the orientalist tropes of both the source material and the film itself.¹⁵⁵ [Appendix 1] The movement gained some traction online, but without major celebrity endorsement or media attention, the non-fan general audience did not hear these concerns.

¹⁵²

https://www.reddit.com/r/marvelstudios/comments/5bh9k9/so_much_for_whitewashing_controversy_and_tumblr/, Accessed November 20, 2016.

¹⁵³ <http://noonasaetre.tumblr.com/post/151278719063/i-may-be-a-bad-person-but-at-least-im-not-gonna>, Accessed October 31, 2016.

¹⁵⁴ <http://hell-jordan.tumblr.com/post/152129252039/bye>, Accessed October 31, 2016.

¹⁵⁵ <http://mcufandomhatespeopleofcolor.tumblr.com/post/152615854197/boycottdoctorstrange-further-reading-posts-by>, Accessed November 1, 2016.

Aware that a segment of the fandom was angry about the casting, the *Doctor Strange* cast and crew had to find a way to get these angry fans in the theaters come November. *The Hollywood Reporter* shared an interview with Swinton on April 21 in which Swinton claimed that she was not hired to play an Asian character. Swinton said, “You just have to wait and see, because it's not an Asian character.”¹⁵⁶ Swinton's suggestion to “wait and see” why her character is not Asian became a key argument in the coming months from fans and producers alike.

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, published on August 12, Tilda Swinton said, “I think when people see this film, they’re going to see that it comes from a very diverse place, in all sorts of ways. Maybe this misunderstanding around this film has been an opportunity for that voice to be heard, and I’m not against that at all. But I do think that when people see the film, they’ll see that it’s not necessarily a target for that voice.”¹⁵⁷ Swinton committed to her Hollywood duties by promoting the film at all costs, but only time will tell if Swinton understood the ramifications of taking a role away from a person of color, should she have the opportunity to return (her character dies in the film) for a prequel or cameo of sorts.

At the start of May, director Scott Derrickson tweeted, “Raw anger/hurt from Asian-Americans over Hollywood whitewashing, stereotyping & erasure of Asians in cinema [sic]. I am listening and learning.”¹⁵⁸ While Derrickson's tweet hinted at his awareness of the casting problem, his actions in the coming months contradicted his statement. Derrickson continued to defend Swinton’s casting despite his realizing the problematic nature of replacing an Asian man

¹⁵⁶ Ashley Lee, “Tilda Swinton Responds to 'Doctor Strange' Asian Whitewashing Controversy,” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 21, 2016, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/doctor-strange-asian-whitewashing-controversy-886762>.

¹⁵⁷ Clark Collis, “Doctor Strange: Tilda Swinton responds to Ancient One casting controversy” *Entertainment Weekly*, August 12, 2016, <http://ew.com/article/2016/08/12/doctor-strange-tilda-swinton-2/>.

¹⁵⁸ Derrickson, Scott. Twitter Post. May 4, 2016, 3:55 AM. <https://twitter.com/scottderrickson/status/727813975149137920?lang=en>.

with a white woman. Ultimately, Derrickson has little influence in Marvel Studios' upcoming creative projects outside of any potential *Doctor Strange* sequels, so his "listening and learning" will likely have minimal impact on the MCU for at least a few years.

As workers in the entertainment industry, the cast and crew of *Doctor Strange* were obligated to promote their movie per Marvel Studios' specifications. While the discussions on Reddit and Tumblr are critical of the *Doctor Strange* team, not much is said about reaching out to Marvel's executives or casting directors. Unable to stop the film from coming out, concerned fans called for a boycott of the film, but the lack of organization within Tumblr prevented a meaningful dialogue from reaching the non-fandom audience.

The Myth of Diversity: Marvel's Response to the (Lack of) Racial Diversity in the MCU

On April 26, an unnamed Marvel Studios spokesperson shared a statement with entertainment website Mashable.com, claiming to have a "very strong record of diversity" in its films.¹⁵⁹ While the statement is an acknowledgement of the casting controversy, Marvel Studios is not on the same page as the concerned fans.

All fourteen of the MCU films center around a white male lead, there are no women of color portraying women of color in heroic roles (Zoe Saldana plays the non-human Gamora in green body paint and Elizabeth Olsen plays a white-washed version of the canonically Romani-Jewish Scarlet Witch). There are no Native American, Latinx, Middle Eastern, or Asian superheroes on the Avengers' roster, and the few Black male superheroes are relegated to supporting roles.

¹⁵⁹ As mentioned in the introduction of this work, the statement indicates that the studio considers having an already diverse roster (in its opinion) allows for characters of color to be made white.

Though the MCU largely focuses on its white male leads, the addition of another white female character in a supporting role is not exactly revolutionary for the brand. In addition to the white female love interests (played by the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Liv Tyler, Natalie Portman, Hayley Atwell, and Rachel McAdams), there are several white female superheroes, including Black Widow, Maria Hill (Colby Smulders), Agent 13 (Emily VanCamp), and Wasp (Evangeline Lilly). There are also older (read: “not 28 years old in leather pants”) white women in the MCU, including Thor's mother Frigga (Rene Russo) and Nova Prime (Glenn Close). Marvel Studios promises that a Captain Marvel movie starring white actress Brie Larson is coming in 2019, but as of April 2017, the film has no director or cast list.

Martha Lauzen reports that in 2016, 76% of female characters in the 100 top domestic grossing films were white, showing no change in demographics from 2015.¹⁶⁰ Additionally, the percentage of Asian female characters increased from 3% to 6%.¹⁶¹ And while males accounted for 68% of all speaking characters, only 4% of those characters were Asian.¹⁶²

Much of my critique of the Doctor Strange mythos has centered around the Ancient One and the Tibetan setting. Doctor Strange's whiteness further complicates the fandom's discussions about race. As discussed in the first chapter, the Doctor Strange narrative plays into Orientalist tropes. Marvel Studios released the official synopsis for *Doctor Strange* in June, confirming that Doctor Strange travels to a fictional Asian province to heal his injured hands. By depicting an Asian space as a healing space for Benedict Cumberbatch's white Doctor Strange while simultaneously excluding an Asian character from the narrative, the filmmakers perpetuate Asian

¹⁶⁰ Martha M. Lauzen, “It’s a Man’s (Celluloid) World: Portrayals of Female Characters in the Top 100 Films of 2016.” *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film*. (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University, 2017): 3.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

exoticism. Tamara Shelton writes that American Orientalism presumed Asians were racially inferior but valued East Asian arts, material culture, and philosophy. Shelton explains that Asian exoticism “made the race both inferior and desirable” and allowed Chinese doctors in the United States to profit off Americans who distrusted American medicine.¹⁶³ Non-Chinese writers emphasized the mysticism of Chinese medicine to the point where Chinese medicine was “more a curiosity than a science.”¹⁶⁴ For Doctor Strange, American medical science fails to heal his injured hands, preventing him from continuing his lucrative medical career. Strange seeks out a cure across the world until he learns of a mystical place somewhere in Asia that he hopes will be more helpful. Changing Doctor Strange’s race would not only have diversified the MCU roster, but it would also challenge the white savior narrative the movie perpetuates. Some fans believe that the original Doctor Strange might not have even been white; an editorial piece from Donna Dickens at Uproxx.com called attention to the casting of Benedict Cumberbatch as Doctor Stephen Strange. Dickens writes, “Gun to my head, there is no way I’d label this Stephen Strange [from the original comic books] as white.”¹⁶⁵ Despite Strange's appearance in the comic books, Marvel would not clarify Strange's race.

Despite the calls for a boycott or protest, nostalgia and curiosity won out; *Doctor Strange* received mostly favorable reviews from film critics and recouped its budget at the box office. Though it was not Marvel’s most lucrative film by any measure, *Doctor Strange* topped the U.S. box office on its opening weekend. Additionally, more than half of the film’s box office came

¹⁶³ Tamara Shelton, “Curiosity or Cure?: Chinese Medicine and American Orientalism in Progressive Era California and Oregon.” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 114, no. 3 (2013): 271.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 272.

¹⁶⁵ While Cumberbatch is ostensibly white, the latest *Doctor Strange* comic book depicts the titular character with dark skin. See: Donna Dickens, “So when is Marvel going to admit Doctor Strange isn’t white?” *Uproxx.com*, September 9, 2016, <http://uproxx.com/hitfix/so-when-is-marvel-going-to-admit-doctor-strange-isnt-white/>.

from outside the United States, suggesting that further study is needed into international reactions to comic book movies and whitewashing. [Appendix 2]

Chapter Four: After the Storm: Marvel Beyond *Doctor Strange*

Doctor Strange is not the first 21st century blockbuster to whitewash a character, nor will it be the last. That being said, Marvel Studios' upcoming films will feature more diversity on screen and behind the camera. *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) is directed by Taika Waititi, who is of Maori and Jewish descent, and will feature Tessa Thompson as the first Black actress to be playing an explicitly Black and female superhero on screen. In 2018, the Ryan Coogler-directed *Black Panther* will be Marvel Studios' first film to star a Black superhero and feature a predominately Black cast. Since Marvel has not made official plans beyond 2019 at this point, the future for people of color at Marvel Studios remains to be seen. There are still no plans for any of Marvel's Latinx, Pacific Islander, or Native American superheroes to come to the big screen in any capacity, let alone star in a solo film. Though Marvel's most iconic superheroes are mostly white, Marvel Studios executives have been reluctant to utilize the many characters of color from the comics that have had brief but lasting impacts on fans of color seeking representation.

The current racial climate in Marvel comic books hints at what viewers could expect to see in future MCU installments. Newly created characters like Ms. Marvel, a Pakistani-American Muslim teenager, who is featured heavily in Marvel merchandise despite not yet appearing on the big screen, indicate that Marvel Studios is laying the foundation for a more diverse superhero movie roster. At the same time, however, recent HYDRA-centric comic book storylines, including Captain America's stint as a HYDRA Agent and the limited series *Bob: Agent of Hydra*, suggest that some writers at Marvel are more fixated on humanizing pseudo-Nazis. The

rise of the so-called “Alt-Right” in American politics suggests that more storylines that humanize pseudo-Nazis may be in Marvel’s future if there is enough demand.

Diversity in Hollywood

The obsession with diversity in Hollywood from white filmmakers is oftentimes less reflective of a genuine interest in bringing positive attention to marginalized groups and more indicative of an initiative to gain public goodwill while maintaining the *status quo*. Ultimately, Marvel’s “very strong record of diversity” is nothing more than a self-congratulatory pat on the back rooted in the misconception that bringing on several white women and people of color in supporting roles is sufficient representation for the millions of viewers who fall into these categories.

Fans on Tumblr are critical of Marvel Studios' commitment to “diversity.” Tumblr user bookgeekgrrl responded to the studio's “strong record of diversity” with the caption, “are they from some wonderful alternate universe where there's 2 black widow movies and an asian doctor strange and a deaf hawkeye.”¹⁶⁶ If fans of color and their allies are losing faith in the MCU, they will likely regain it by *Black Panther* in 2018. That being said, fans will have to be mindful of the past and ongoing racial inequalities happening in Hollywood and the MCU films – the presence of a single Black superhero in a leading role does not negate the whitewashing, erasure, and stereotyping of people of color in the rest of Marvel Studios’ catalogue.

Implications

Hugh Klein and Kenneth Shiffman refer to the underrepresentation of socially disenfranchised groups as symbolic annihilation. Klein and Shiffman explain that “when certain

¹⁶⁶ <http://bookgeekgrrl.tumblr.com/post/150454707728/marvel-has-a-very-strong-record-of-diversity-in>, Accessed April 10, 2017.

groups are not valued in [the culture-at-large], the media tend not to include them in their storylines, and in the process, cast them aside and disenfranchise them by not showing them.”¹⁶⁷ They suggest that repeated exposure to media that excludes certain groups “teaches people that there are numerous ways in which it is better or preferable socially to be Caucasian rather than a racial minority group member.”¹⁶⁸ Klein and Shiffman's study focuses on animation specifically because people are exposed to the medium at an early age; I would argue that the Marvel superhero movies are becoming as ubiquitous as cartoons in children's entertainment. While all MCU films are rated PG-13, Marvel Studios advertises its films on Disney Channel, has superhero meet-and-greets at Disney Parks, and sells branded clothing for infants and toddlers.

Marvel Studios' outreach to young audiences is especially troubling considering the current depictions of people of color in its films.¹⁶⁹ In their 2012 study on children's television use and self-esteem Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison conclude that television exposure predicted a decrease in self-esteem for all children with the exception of white boys.¹⁷⁰ Martins and Harrison attribute this pattern in part to the tendency for television shows to reinforce gender and racial stereotypes. Children who see negative messages about white girls, Black girls, and Black boys use these messages to evaluate themselves, harming their self-esteem.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁷ Hugh Klein and Kenneth Shiffman, “Underrepresentation and Symbolic Annihilation of Socially Disenfranchised Groups ('Out Groups') in Animated Cartoons.” *The Howard Journal of Communications* 20, no. 1 (2009): 57.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁶⁹ Though Marvel Studios does feature more people of color in its Netflix original programs, these shows require a Netflix subscription and contain more graphic violent and sexual content, rendering them inaccessible to very young children.

¹⁷⁰ Nicole Martins and Kristen Harrison, “Racial and Gender Differences in the Relationship Between Children’s Television Use and Self-Esteem.” *Communication Research* 39, no. 3 (2012): 351.

¹⁷¹ Martins and Harrison also note that television viewing is displacing real-life experiences that might build self-esteem. See: Martins and Harrison, “Racial and Gender Differences,” 352.

Maryann Erigha notes that there are even fewer Black science fiction filmmakers than there are Black superheroes. The international reach of Hollywood films makes these films more likely to shape American and global culture. Erigha explains that the lack of Black science fiction directors has symbolic and material consequences. Materially, Black directors are excluded from the most financially profitable genre. Symbolically, this exclusion upholds stereotypes of African Americans outside of intellectual cultures.¹⁷²

Erigha reveals that Black-directed films that are part of franchises have bigger budgets, larger theatrical releases, and better box office returns than non-franchise films. Interestingly, *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), both Marvel properties (though not from Marvel Studios) are two of the top-grossing Hollywood franchise films directed by a Black director (Tim Story) between 2000 and 2011, though neither of these films feature Black superheroes. Erigha argues that white directors without experience or successful films under their belt are entrusted with major franchise movies while Black directors often have to prove their bankability before taking on a franchise. Erigha cites Joss Whedon as an example of a commercially mediocre white director (albeit one with success in television production and in screenwriting) whose only commercially successful directorial efforts are *The Avengers* and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.¹⁷³

While Erigha hints at the possibility of unintentional bias preventing Black filmmakers from directing big-budget sci-fi franchise films, she asserts that “African Americans' marginalization occurs by deliberate design rather than by casual error.”¹⁷⁴ She reasons that if

¹⁷² Maryann Erigha, “Do African Americans Direct Science Fiction or Blockbuster Franchise Movies? Race, Genre, and Contemporary Hollywood.” *Journal of Black Studies* 47, no. 6 (2016): 552.

¹⁷³ Whedon’s films outside of the MCU, *Serenity* and *Much Ado About Nothing* were box office failures. See: Erigha, “Do African Americans Direct,” 561.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 562.

Hollywood is a profit-driven industry, then studio executives are “privileging the desires of White audiences, the proportional majority at the box office, and therefore supporting White directors who they more often assign to sci-fi films with majority White casts, themes, and stories.”¹⁷⁵ Furthermore, Erigha writes, white executives may fear that including Black directors in film franchises would challenge movies that uphold a white-dominated power structure. In material terms, hiring Black filmmakers would redistribute the privilege attached to directing profitable films across racial groups and dismantle the existing racial hierarchy in Hollywood. Although Erigha is speaking to the struggles of Black filmmakers in Hollywood, much of her argument holds true for other people of color in the American film industry, particularly at Marvel Studios.

Conclusion

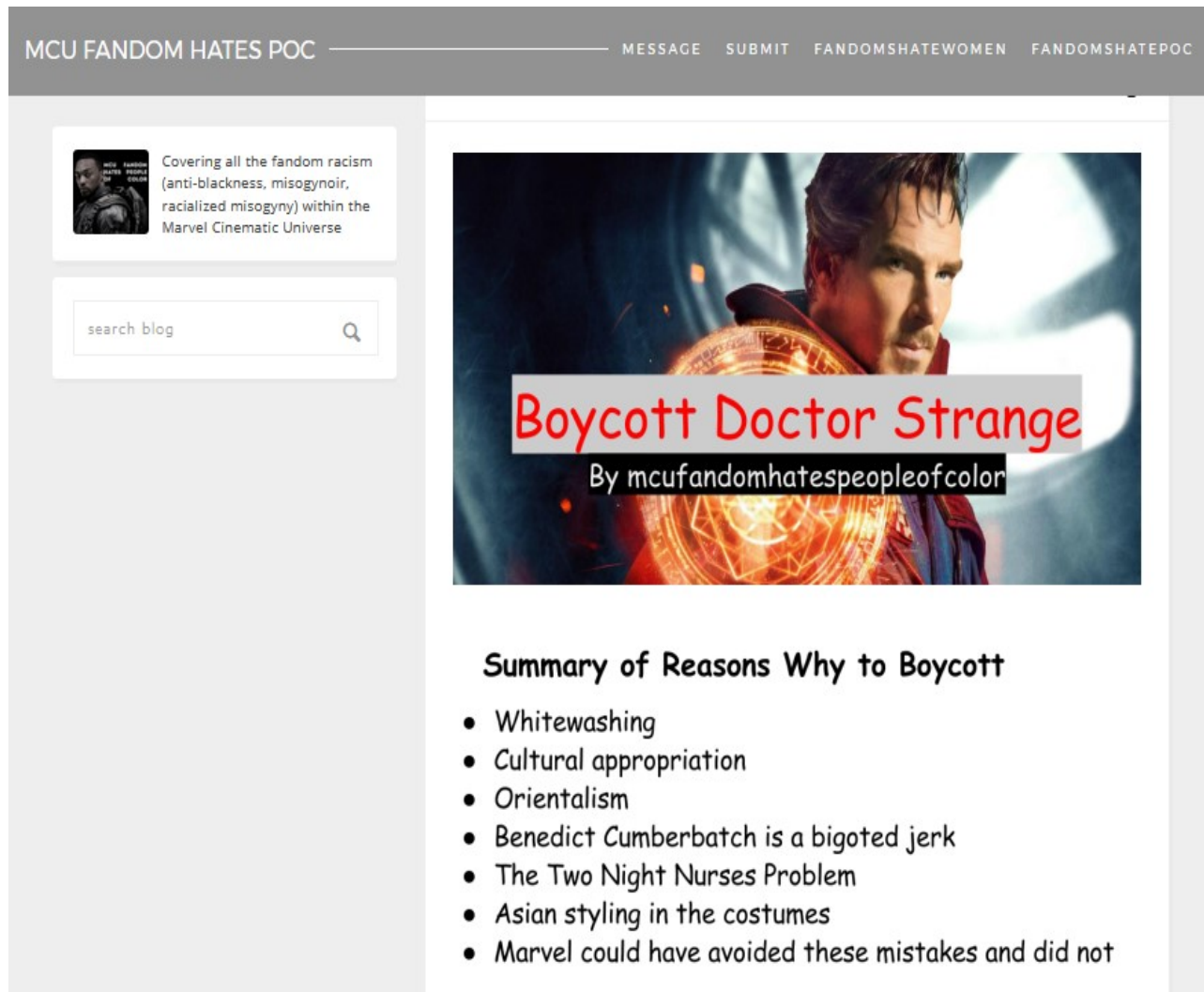
While many fans criticized the whitewashing, far fewer argued that the *Doctor Strange* movie should not exist. Out of the thousands of characters that Marvel has on its roster, why did Doctor Strange, a white man from Philadelphia, need his own movie? Though the boycott and pushback against *Doctor Strange* did not stop the movie’s commercial and critical success, there remains hope that someone at Marvel Studios is listening to the fans of color who are questioning why Hollywood needs more white saviors. Should *Black Panther* perform well both critically and commercially, and if the white executives at Marvel Studios are not threatened by Black filmmakers having a say in the future of the MCU, then the opportunities for filmmakers and actors of color may expand. This logic puts an unfair burden on the cast, crew, and fans of *Black Panther* to ensure the movie’s success, but within the status quo of white Hollywood, money talks.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 562.

If fans and filmmakers no longer want to deal with Marvel's racial hierarchy, they can always seek out alternative outlets for their superhero fix. But given the visibility of Marvel across the globe, it is imperative that fans continue to push for better representation for people of color in the MCU. At the same time, fans should not be the only ones taking action; the executives at Marvel Studios must learn to listen to the concerns of people of color and act on those concerns in a way that is respectful, even if it contradicts the racial logic of Marvel's past.

Acknowledging that one's childhood superheroes had racist histories is an uncomfortable task, but doing so allows one to deconstruct one's own understandings of race as taught by both superheroes and real life encounters. If people want to see racial diversity on screen, their actions have to match their words – that means supporting the films that provide positive representations, being critical of the ones that do not, and reconciling with the ones that do a bit of both. There is no barometer of how “problematic” a film or comic book can be, so listening to the voices of people impacted by negative portrayals is crucial to this process of critical viewing. The commercial success of *Doctor Strange* is not the end of the fight against whitewashing, but rather the first fight in what could be a long line of battles. With every entry in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, fans of all backgrounds, especially those in positions of privilege, must be willing to accept that even superhero companies have their weaknesses.


Appendix 1: “MCU Fandoms Hate People of Color” calls for a *Doctor Strange* boycott (Via <http://mcufandomhatespeopleofcolor.tumblr.com/post/152615854197/boycottdoctorstrange-further-reading-posts-by>), Accessed April 12, 2017.



MCU FANDOM HATES POC — MESSAGE SUBMIT FANDOMSHATEWOMEN FANDOMSHATEPOC

Covering all the fandom racism (anti-blackness, misogynoir, racialized misogyny) within the Marvel Cinematic Universe

search blog



Boycott Doctor Strange

By mcufandomhatespeopleofcolor

Summary of Reasons Why to Boycott

- Whitewashing
- Cultural appropriation
- Orientalism
- Benedict Cumberbatch is a bigoted jerk
- The Two Night Nurses Problem
- Asian styling in the costumes
- Marvel could have avoided these mistakes and did not

Appendix 2: *Doctor Strange* Box Office Returns (Via

<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=marvel716.htm>), Accessed April 12, 2017.

Total Lifetime Grosses

Domestic:	\$232,641,920	34.3%
+ Foreign:	\$444,924,150	65.7%

= Worldwide: \$677,566,070

Domestic Summary

Opening Weekend: \$85,058,311
(#1 rank, 3,882 theaters, \$21,911
average)

% of Total Gross: 36.6%

[> View All 19 Weekends](#)

Widest Release: 3,882 theaters

Close Date: March 16, 2017

In Release: 133 days / 19 weeks