The Figure of the Refugee in Superhero Cinema

In this paper we argue that superhero cinema offers an opportunity to think through the narratives and affects of the refugee crisis, which are distinct from, but related to, the relatively well-attended-to tropes of journalism. To do so we adopt both the ethical stance of feminist political geography and the analytic methods of popular geopolitics. Our analysis focuses on two films from the burgeoning Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU): *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019). Both films are not 'refugee films' *per se*, but they illustrate the ways in which the ongoing 'refugee crisis' is being dealt with in mainstream, corporate Hollywood blockbusters. The two films are considered both in their narrative and affective engineering, as part of an effort to understand the ways in which political subjects might be shaped by the act of viewing. Our analysis uncovers three themes: 1) mobility as power, 2) the aesthetic of modernity, and 3) refugee bodies. We conclude that studies like this can contribute to a broader understanding of the role of whiteness and securitisation in the portrayal of refugees in the Global North.

Introduction

Refugees are a hotly debated topic across many parts of the world, with a particular emphasis in the Global North on the securitisation of refugee bodies. Policy discourse on refugees has changed since World War 2 and the creation of the modern international refugee regime; many refugees are seen by vast swathes of the Global North as potential security threats, especially if they can be racialised as Other to the economically privileged to which they are moving (Hage 2012). This securitisation can be narrow, as in the claim that the populations are criminal or are being sent by foreign powers, or it can be broad, relying on an implicit threat to the demography that underpins white supremacy. Indeed, race and class inflect the category of the refugee,

rendering the category variously highly vulnerable or, contrarily, protected and sought after.

This article examines two popular geopolitical articulations of the security/refugee nexus that have recently emerged from an unexpected quarter: the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a multimedia franchise which focuses on superheroes such as the Avengers.[1] We argue that *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), two recent additions to the mega-franchise, represent intriguing approaches to the representational and affective politics of the ongoing refugee 'crisis' in many parts of the world, but which is narrated in the Global North as occurring primarily in the Mediterranean and the Americas. We argue that these films offer empathetic and humane representations of refugees that attempt to align the viewer with vulnerable refugees. This representation has been largely crowded out of public discourse in the US and UK because of policy and journalistic discourses that focus on securitisation (Dempsey and McDowell 2019). This is compelling for (popular) geopolitics as the superhero genre has been largely critiqued for its conservative politics and its focus on security over democratic values (DiPaolo 2011; Hassler-Forest 2012; Dittmer 2013). It is notable that a large entertainment conglomerate would produce

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[1] First founded in 1939, Marvel Comics is an American comics publishing company that specializes in the superhero genre. Marvel's comics were heavily shaped by the voices of the American Jewish immigrants who created the company, including Martin Goodman, Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Chris Claremont; though their comics were initially targeted towards a younger audience, they still carried highly political and at times propogandist material. Adapting these superhero narratives onto the big screen in the MCU would then carry similar narratives that are connected to issues of difference, securitisation, and heroism. The MCU is produced by Marvel Studios which was acquired by the Disney Cooperation in 2009. There are other film studios which own the rights to the few remaining Marvel superheroes not owned by Disney, such as Sony Pictures Entertainment with Spider-Man.

films that might cut against the highly politicised discourse around refugees at this time. However, we also wish to temper this enthusiasm by noting that the seeds of this effort's destruction are contained within this corporate enterprise, as some dubious narrative elements undercut the progressive potentials (see Hassler-Forest 2012 and Mostafanezhad 2017), especially around the racialisation of refugees.

In what follows, we first review the literature on refugees and geopolitics, eventually focusing on the *popular* geopolitics of refugees. We then focus specifically on the superhero genre and its relationship to the concept of security, narrowing our view to the evolution of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. We then turn to our case study films of *Ragnarok* and *Captain Marvel*, using them to think through three themes: the representation of the politics of mobility, the aesthetics of urban modernity, and the affective representation of refugee bodies. We conclude by arguing that further attention is required to the discursive and affective forces that are shaping political subjectivities on this crucial issue in areas beyond journalism and other non-fictional accounts of refugees. These films act as exemplars of the complex processes beyond 'the refugee crisis' itself that shape popular attitudes to refugees in the Global North.

The popular geopolitics of refugees

In its earliest incarnation, the field of geopolitics avoided concern with migration and refugees. Tesfahuney (1998) argues that might be because of the 'classical' geopolitical association of the state with stability and borders, while migration and refugees emphasise fluidity and flows (Jones 2012). Indeed, the post-World War 2 international refugee regime, established with the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, was predicated on an understanding of refugees as temporary phenomena, with resettlement the desired end state. This order was challenged right away by the creation of seemingly permanent UNRWA camps for displaced Palestinians (Fiddian-

Qasmiyeh 2019) and in the 1990s by the return of ethnic cleansing within Europe (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005). However, the roots of the contemporary situation only started to build once the end of the Cold War unleashed a complex set of uneven flows – human and otherwise – travelling under the label of 'globalisation' (Welsh 2016). Indeed, in the last decade the securitisation of refugee and migrant bodies — while not entirely new — has reached a crescendo and so we have seen a link between geopolitics, migration, and refugees become commonplace (Huysmans 2006; Coleman 2009; Squire 2009; Hyndman 2012; Allen, et al. 2018). However, this new geopolitics is not entirely due to the increased flows of refugees from the Global South to the Global North.

One of the great achievements of feminist geopolitics has been to heighten attention to human security (as opposed to state security), and this has helped to incorporate concern for refugees and their safety within the sub-discipline (Williams and Massaro 2013). Perhaps the key contribution of feminist geopolitics is the theorisation of the refugee as a trans-local figure, simultaneously an individual subject exercising agency while also caught up in regional or global political forces (Hyndman and Mountz 2008). For example, Loyd, Ehrkamp, and Secor (2018) note the role of discourses of mental health in individualising and medicalising the trauma of displacement. This is contrary to the Espiritu's (2014) imperative to contextualise refugees and understand them through their embedding in geopolitical processes. A useful way forward can be found in Sharp (Online early, 11), who argues for a forensic approach to feminist geopolitics:

> a way of considering the material in feminist geopolitics that captures both the
> fleshy materiality of bodies – individual speaking bodies, populations, injured
> bodies, body parts, dead bodies – *and* the ways in which these are brought to

bear on the formation of geopolitical representation through various expert and everyday performances that render this flesh meaningful.

That is, we must think of refugees not only as bodies, vulnerable, performing and in motion, but also as embedded in wider discourses and policies which shape their reception and field of action.

One hazard of some strands of research in refugee studies is a tendency to focus on the victimhood of refugees, rather than on the ability of refugees to navigate between the multiple social worlds they inhabit (Mountz 2011; Ehrkamp 2017). Hyndman and Giles (2017) counter this by arguing specifically for 'policy irrelevance' and instead focusing on the well-being of refugees who exist in a temporal and geographical zone of in-betweenness, working toward a solution. Hyndman (2019) advances this argument by arguing for the eclipse of feminist geopolitics by a new 'feminist political geography', which is inclusive of wider literatures relating to migrant detention and family separation (Pratt 2012; Conlon and Heimstra 2017).

> Feminist political geography eschews any singular terminology or theoretical framing, engages in subaltern analyses of violence and other power relations, traverses and unsettles lines between public and private spheres, and engages individuated and unindividuated subjects[.] Making the tent bigger but more importantly better through explicit commitments to postcolonial critique, subaltern geopolitics, and a refusal of Orientalist rescue narratives will create more space for projects that take violence, exclusion, inequality, the materiality of the bodies, and their various subjectivities seriously. (Hyndman 2019: 8)

We take inspiration from this feminist political geography, particularly its concern with, and care for, the human security of refugees.

Adjacent to feminist geopolitics for the last fifteen years has been a sympathetic, if genealogically distinct, body of research: popular geopolitics. Popular geopolitics

developed as a fusion of critical geopolitics and cultural studies, and over time it has had a range of different emphases (see Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Saunders and Strukov 2018; Dittmer and Bos 2019). Early popular geopolitics emphasised cultural analysis, illustrating how popular culture texts embedded certain colonial or imperial assumptions about various parts of the world, identifying people and places with broad brush attributions of good and evil, legitimacy or illegitimacy. While this was fruitful, it implicitly excluded a concern with refugees outside of the characterisation of their journeys' origins or destinations. This has changed, as Dempsey and McDowell (2019) argue that the media representation of refugees arriving in Europe since 2014 has evolved from a focus on a shared humanity situated within a framework of 'European values' and humanitarianism, to an inhuman force of nature, to a security threat to European societies. Similarly, Yatsyk (2018), via an analysis of Estonian art and entertainment (as well as interviews with Russian-speakers), notes that the narratives of today's refugee policy in Europe re-activate older national narratives of assimilation and difference dating back to Soviet times (see also Braghiroli and Makarychev 2018).

Within critical migration studies there has been a steady focus on the representation of transnational migrants and their difference from the communities in which they settle (Nagel 2002), as well as on the various legal or identitarian categories through which border crossers are represented (Ehrkamp 2017). Ashutosh and Mountz (2017) highlight the role of race (and racialised categories, such as religion) in the representation of refugees. Their case study of Chinese refugees notes that 'Well-rehearsed, racialised tropes drew on fear of disease and "yellow peril"' (349), as well as de-legitimating discourses of 'bogus refugees' looking to game the system (350). Chaturvedi and Doyle (2010) aptly illustrate the intersectionality of race and religion in securitisation discourse, with potential Bangladeshi climate refugees objectionable to

the British state on account of their race, and objectionable to the Indian state on account of their Islamic practices. Through this it is clear that refugees are seen as a threat to a racialised order in which whiteness and other categories of power are implicated in the perpetuation of geopolitical privilege. Baldwin (2013) highlights three discursive tropes that racialise climate-change migrants as either victims or as threats to that geopolitical privilege. These include their de-historicisation (via association with an unchanging and essential nature), their rendering as stateless, and their ambiguity and unknowability. Crucially, this discursive frame provides a route for climate-change refugees identified with whiteness to be treated differently than those identified otherwise, and also allows for climate change to play a role in the evolution of racialised categories over time. In our analysis, as will be demonstrated, the role of whiteness and racialisation in differential responses to refugees is crucial.

Later permutations of popular geopolitics — influenced by audience studies, feminist geopolitics, and non-representational theory — shifted the frame of analysis from the 'macro' of Hollywood film to the everyday of consumption and activism (Dittmer and Gray 2010). Rather than a focus on media artefacts and their production, this 'popular geopolitics 2.0' looked to the everyday processes of subject formation of which mass media were only one part. As an example, van Ramshorst (2019) looks to the everyday lived experience of Central American refugees, emphasising how one-dimensional accounts of refugee tragedy both ignore the role of humour in the refugee experience and underestimate its affective power in *enabling* refugees to transcend the obstacles in their way. That is, the refugees themselves are productive — in everyday ways — of social energies that help to drive their journey onward.

Approaches such as this emphasise the geopolitical role of affect. Affect refers to the way in which things/bodies/materials are changed — however minutely — by

encountering one another (Wilson 2017). For instance, Mostafanezhad (2017) discusses how Angelina Jolie's visit to the Thai-Burmese border was productive of popular geopolitics of hope among refugees. Central to this event is the importance of the visual, of both seeing (Angelina Jolie) and being seen (the refugees). This insight is applicable to the broader refugee context because, as Burrell and Horschelmann (2019, 47) note,

> this is a very visual "crisis". The story of refugees is being told in highly gendered and racialised images and through visual narratives ranging from racist cartoons carried in newspapers, to immigration dog whistle political campaigns, to journalists' photography of dead bodies…

Bleiker et al. (2013) note, for instance, the lack of Australian journalistic images that focus on the faces of refugees, with consequent de-humanising effects that enable a politics of fear and securitisation. Instead, published images tend to show refugees in large groups, often onboard boats. The aesthetic politics of what is sensible, and to whom, is at the crux of visuality and affect (Campbell 2007; Bleiker 2009).

In short, our review of the literature on geopolitics and refugees indicates that the representation of refugees has largely been considered through representations found in news media and also visual culture such as photography, comics, and art. These analyses have emphasised the role of racialisation in both discursive and affective registers, with this racialisation contributing to differentiation in terms of how refugee bodies are securitised. Refugees are portrayed as threats to a world order that privileges whiteness.

Notably, none of this literature on the popular geopolitics of refugees looks beyond 'the real' to consider fiction or fantasy. This is surprising given the intersection of whiteness and geopolitics that has been seen to emerge within genre fiction like

fantasy and superheroes (Young 2015). Our study, in contrast, considers the narrative and affective engineering done in superhero cinema to predispose viewers to certain geopolitical subject positions. That is, cinema presents viewers with sights and sounds that are meant to activate certain bodily capacities which shape geopolitical decision making (Protevi 2009). Further, genre conventions and pre-mediation of the film establish expectations that can shock viewers and shake loose the 'gut instincts' and somatic markers that underpin our racialised subjectivities and 'sense of self' (Connolly 2002). Here we do not draw firm lines between representation and affect, as they are experienced simultaneously; 'Affective experience and meaning are neither parallel nor separable, but firmly intertwined' (Plantinga 2009, 3). Previous work on superhero cinema identified the affective politics of superheroes as an absence in the literature thus far (Dittmer 2011; Venkatesh 2016). Indeed, a common claim regarding the superhero genre is that it is successful to the extent that it is able to give readers/viewers a sympathetic feeling of what it would be like to have bodily capacities well beyond their 'real' ones. In the next section, we review the evolution of the superhero genre, particularly the MCU, with an eye toward its relation to security.

'What we needed was a suit of armour around the world'

This quote, from Tony Stark/Iron Man in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), is perhaps the apotheosis of a trend in the MCU towards a concern with security. Originating in New York just prior to World War 2, the superhero genre bears the traces of the American exceptionalism that both kept the United States out of the war for as long as possible and also led to the United States establishing itself as the post-war hegemon. Hassler-Forest (2012, 174) argues that 'the original ascendance of superheroes in the 1930s and 1940s constituted a popularized and more accessible incarnation of modernist visions of urban order and control.' The superhero genre is not inflexible, however. He notes that

in more recent films superheroic bodies work to allay 'public anxieties related to agency and masculinity in a decentered postmodern world in which the new enemies have incorporated the logic of late capitalism and the market state' (172).

These gender dynamics, and orientation towards the state, are crucial to the superhero genre. The state is both valorised and shown to be inadequate, in need of some other masculine force to buttress it. That force must come from the outside and must exceed the legal framework lest it become as weak as the state itself. This masculine vigilantism is evident in the superhero genre through the emphasis on the pro-law, but masked and violent, superhero. This relation to the state becomes clear with the rise of the US national security state, which occupied a similar role in the international order that it helped found after World War 2.

> In conducting the Cold War, the state was neither within the order nor outside the order. The state situated itself within the order that it protected but it occupied the position of internal externality of the exception. For in order to defend the order it also represented, the state was first required to declare itself an exception to the order it regulated. (Pease 2009, 24)

That is, the topological relation of the superhero and his society is parallel to the topological relation of the 'superpower' and its world order.

The MCU, which had 23 feature films in its first three phases of development, embeds these genre conventions even as it has sought to interrogate them (often following, in a compressed narrative timeline, stories that had already featured in the original comics-based universe). Over these three phases, the films have increasingly taken security, and the politics of its provision, to be their central object. Captain America is, famously, a product of the American military-industrial complex, while *Iron Man* (2008) considers the ethics of weapons manufacturing (Dittmer 2011). The other origin films have been retroactively made to be about the provision of security.

We see in *Captain Marvel*, which premiered in 2019, that the creation of the superhero team, the Avengers, was a project by national security operative Nick Fury to secure the Earth against extra-terrestrial threats.[2] Indeed, by the final scenes of *The Avengers* (2012), it is clear that the Avengers have served this very purpose. As Hassler-Forest (2012) notes, the American exceptionalism of the superhero genre has been unmoored from its national context and it is the entire globe that is being secured; the re-scaling from the 'superpower' of the vigilante to the 'superpower' of the global hegemon is here made explicit.

Shortly thereafter, in *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), the national security state itself is deemed to be the villain, with a panopticon fantasy of state pre-emption under development within the corrupt security agency SHIELD (itself co-opted by the fascist HYDRA). The solution to the corrupt national security state was deemed to be the incorruptible superhero himself, Captain America. But by *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), the MCU was openly discussing whether or not the real threat came from the superheroes themselves, and this theme continued in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Black Panther* (2018), among others. The tension between this critique of power, and the spectacular physical combat that resolved it, remains unsettled, although the box office returns to the Disney Corporation continue to roll in (Saunders 2019).

To summarise, the relationship between superheroes and security is a strong one, embedded in the very conventions of the genre, because of its origins during World War 2. Similarly, the genre embeds within it a particular narrative relationship to the body's potential for violence, and its legitimate use to buttress the state order that the superhero

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[2] At the front and centre of the MCU, the Avengers are one of Marvel's most famous superhero teams, its members including Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Black Widow, Hulk, and Hawkeye.

endorses, but in which he or she does not fully participate. In this research we specifically examine the role of the superhero genre (specifically, recent additions to the MCU) in relation to refugees. Putting these two literatures in relation to one another is interesting for reasons that are hopefully apparent. First, if superheroes have typically been understood as avatars of the national security state, and the figure of the refugee has been perceived as a mobile threat to a statist territorialisation, then we might assume these categories to be opposed to one another when inhabiting the same narrative space. Second, if *Ragnarok* and *Captain Marvel* surprise us in this regard, then given the focus on individual heroism in superhero narratives we would expect them to indulge in the Orientalist rescue narrative of which Hyndman (2019) warns us. In the next section, we turn to our method of examining these films.

Methodology

The two movies analysed here were selected specifically because of their narrative content, and the timing of their release (during the refugee 'crisis'). Analysis was undertaken in a two-fold manner. First, close visual and narrative analysis of the films determines moments in the films during which narrative/affects were engineered to position viewers in various ways vis-à-vis key characters. While of course the range of affects experienced by a viewer far exceeds those intended by the filmmakers thanks to the incorporation of specific audience bodies and viewing contexts, our analysis focuses on the production itself. To advance this focus, paratexts were examined in order to provide insights into the production. While none of these definitively outline the affective power of the film itself as it enters into relation with viewers, they do attest to the engineering that produced the film and its intended outcomes. These include: DVD bonus features (such as the behind-the-scenes featurettes, director's commentary, and deleted scenes), the *Art of the Marvel Studios* book series (which contain concept art,

storyboards, costume designs etc.), and finally, the *Marvel Studios: Character Encyclopaedia* and *Marvel Studios: Visual Dictionary*.

In our analysis we have — like Saunders (2019) -- attempted to steer between a cynical form of criticality that sees no potential for good in popular culture and a naïve sense of politics in which any representation of the plight of Others on screen is good. Rather, we start with the assumption that every act of political representation opens up some potentials for change while precluding others. In assessing those potentials, we try to weigh them using the Hyndman rubric (2019): a postcolonial ethic of care for refugees' embodied needs.

Intergalactic Refugees

This empirical section will attend to how *Ragnarok* and *Captain Marvel* function as refugee narratives, considering the ways in which cinematography and plot combine to orient viewers towards the refugees. Neither film is conventionally understood as a movie about refugees, but we argue that a minor reading of each is fruitful for considering the narrative and affective politics at work. In *Ragnarok*, the refugees are the Asgardians, and in *Captain Marvel*, they are the Skrulls, both alien races dislocated because of regional turmoil occurring in relation to imperialist empires. The Asgardian and Skrull refugee bodies however differ in their racialization and this impacts their overall representation in these films. This analysis will be accomplished by assessing three interwoven themes: the representation of the politics of mobility, the affective power of the aesthetic of modernity, and the affective cinematography of the refugee body.

Context

Thor: Ragnarok is the third film in a trilogy which follows the solo adventures of the

Asgardian God of Thunder, Thor.[3] After the death of Thor's father, Odin, his sister Hela

(the Goddess of Death and Odin's firstborn) is freed from her imprisonment and returns

to rule Asgard as her own. Thor struggles to save his people from Hela's tyranny as well

as to stop Ragnarok, the prophesied destruction of Asgard, from transpiring.[4] The movie

culminates with the defeat of Hela and the destruction of Asgard, as the now refugee

Asgardians search for a new home.

     Captain Marvel is the first female-led superhero film in the MCU. The film

spotlights Carol Danvers, an officer in the United States Air Force given superpowers

that make her one of the most powerful beings in the MCU.[5] An origin story set in the

midst of the intergalactic war between two groups (the Kree and the Skrulls), *Captain*

Marvel begins by focusing on an amnesiac Carol who is under the illusion that she is

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[3] One of Marvel's principal superheroes, Thor Odinson was created by Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and Lee Lieber. Thor's first appearance in Marvel Comics was in *Journey into Mystery* #83 (1962). The superhero's homeworld, Asgard, which first appeared in *Journey into Mystery* #85 (1962), is a realm that is home to god-like beings called Asgardians who possess superhuman strength, speed, as well as other abilities. Both Asgard and its citizens have appeared many times over the course of the MCU, though the narrative more often than not focuses more on Asgard's royal family. The first entry in the Thor cinematic trilogy, *Thor,* was released in 2011 and its sequel, *Thor: The Dark World*, premiered in 2013.

[4] Marvel's *Mighty Thor* comics were greatly influenced by Norse mythology, as is exemplified by the titular Ragnarök, a prophesied series of events which ultimately leads to the death of several Norse gods and the destruction and rebirth of the world.

[5] In the comics, Danvers was a minor character who became Ms. Marvel in 1977, and over the past several decades, she has taken on several different superhero mantles, eventually becoming Captain Marvel. The original Captain Marvel was a male alien Kree operative named Mar-Vell who first appeared in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #12 (1967), however Carol's storyline in *Captain Marvel* is inspired by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Dexter Soys' run in *Captain Marvel* (2012).

Vers, a Kree Starforce operative.[6] After a mission gone wrong, Carol finds herself stuck on Earth. Caught in a race between the Kree and the Skrulls to find an experimental Light-Speed Engine, Carol finds clues that link her to her past and discovers her true human identity. She is ultimately faced with the Kree Empire's war crimes and vows to help the Skrull refugees who have been impacted by their conquests.

The Representation of the Politics of Mobility

The mobilities literature has long reflected the idea that who travels, and how, is political (Domosh and Seager 2001). It is perhaps not surprising then that mobility is central to the plots of superhero cinema, which are all about the spectacular use of power. What is interesting, however, is that the power of mobility is secured via advanced technology which the state powers monopolise, as is the case with Asgardian Empire in *Ragnarok*, or seek to monopolise as is seen with *Captain Marvel's* Kree Empire. Even when that power is harnessed to the superhero, the genre requires it to be monopolised so as to retain the hero's narrative significance. That is, the superhero genre implicitly justifies inequality of mobility among populations.

Ragnarok's Bifrost Bridge as a border wall

Throughout the *Thor* trilogy, the monopoly and regulation of mobility is one of the

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[6] The Kree and Skrulls are both alien races that have featured prominently, generally as villains, in Marvel's comics since the 1960s. The Kree are an advanced militaristic species, and the Skrulls are known for their shapeshifting abilities and green reptilian features. One of the Kree's many military units, Starforce is an elite military task-force. Though the Kree have previously appeared in the MCU, *Captain Marvel* provides the first appearance of the Skrulls.

greater tools employed by the Asgardian state to establish and reinforce its power. This is primarily accomplished through the Bifrost, an interdimensional power that allows the Asgardians instant access across the Nine Realms. Located at the end of the Rainbow Bridge on the very edge of Asgard's borders, the Bifrost enables rapid response to crises within the Asgardian geopolitical order and ultimately functions as a border wall. In the first two *Thor* films, the omniscient Heimdall the Watcher functions as a panoptic surveillance system for maintaining that order, as he stands watch at the Bifrost Observatory. 'I can see nine realms and ten trillion souls,' Heimdall tells Thor with his golden, unblinking gaze (*Thor: The Dark World*). Heimdall is ultimately in charge of all who enter and leave what Odin christens the 'realm eternal:' he is 'in complete control of immigration and [the] defence system of Asgard' (*Art of the Movie: Thor: Ragnarok* 268). Like the United States, however, Asgard believes in 'fighting them over there so we don't have to fight them here' (Bush 2007). For instance, in a deleted scene from *Thor*, the hero argues that Asgard must invade Jotunheim, a neighbouring realm, as that is 'the only way to defend our borders'. The Bifrost not only politicises mobility but also weaponizes it, functioning as a weapon of mass destruction as is illustrated in *Thor* when Thor's brother Loki attempts to destroy Jotunheim through the extended use of the Bifrost.

The Light-Speed Engine and female mobility

In *Captain Marvel*, the politicisation of mobility can primarily be traced to the Light-Speed Engine that underpins the narrative. The inventor of the engine is Carol's mentor, Mar-Vell, an undercover Kree operative who realizes that 'she [is] on the wrong side of an unjust war'; Mar-Vell decides to create the Light-Speed Engine in order to end the Kree-Skrull war and help the Skrull refugees escape Kree persecution. Mar-Vell's work with the Light-Speed Engine '[isn't] to fight wars, but to end them' (*Captain Marvel*).

Essentially, this advanced technology could either facilitate the exponential expansion of the Kree Empire or, in the hands of the Skrull, provide the refugees an escape from Kree pursuit and safe passage to a new home. However, Mar-Vell is assassinated by a Starforce operative in order to secure the technology and subsequently Carol destroys the engine, inadvertently absorbing its cosmic power in the process. This grants her superhuman powers, including the ability to fly through outer space. Here we see the way the politics of mobility inflects both racialised refugees and gendered superheroes.

Indeed, 'higher, further, faster' is Carol's mantra after having struggled through a life plagued by the patriarchal restrictions that constrain her agency because of her gender: as a young girl driving on a buggy track, she is told by her brother, 'You're going too fast'; as a cadet, her drill instructor tells her, 'They'll never let you fly'; and even as a Kree Starforce member, the Kree Empire suppresses her superpowers through an inhibitor and cautions her to 'Master [herself]. What was given can be taken away' (*Captain Marvel*). Both Carol and the Skrull refugees finds themselves Othered and lacking in agency and mobility; the Skrulls' subjugation is connected directly to their race, while Carol's oppression is elicited by her gender. Because she is a woman, her mobility has more often than not been suppressed, however by absorbing the engine's powers, and the mobility, both political and engendered, that it embodies, Carol is able to emancipate herself from these patriarchal constraints and also enable – in solidarity -- the Skrull refugees' mobility in their search for a new home world.[7] This unfortunately however casts Carol in the role of a messianic 'white savior,' who leads a group of

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[7] It is also important to note the politicisation of mobility in the film can also be linked to the glorification of the US Air Force. Like several earlier films in the MCU such as *Iron Man*, Marvel Studios directly collaborated with the US military while making *Captain Marvel* (see Alford 2010; Kellner 2011).

racially coded refugees to freedom, and *Captain Marvel* falls into the trap of an Orientalist rescue narrative.[8] Mobility, in both narratives, it seems is primarily connected to structures and characters supported by whiteness.

To summarise, both films embed hyper-mobility as the 'superpower' that underpins both the Asgardian and the Kree geopolitical orders, and by extension the superheroes Thor and Captain Marvel. Retaining the inequality of mobility among population groups is a logical outcome of the genre's need to protect the superhero's narrative significance. Given the significance of mobility to both plots, it is perhaps unsurprising that both films hinge on the desire of refugees to escape the dangerous contexts in which they are forced to live. And yet for both films, the audience is intended to feel affectively sympathetic with the powerful. In the next section, we consider how this is engineered.

Affective Power of Urban Aesthetics

The aesthetic modernity of Asgard and the Kree homeworld, Hala, is utilized as a powerful affective tool in both of these films to locate the imagined audience in relation to the key protagonists' worlds.[9] The presumed audience is positioned to equate modernity with economic, technological, and political advancement and superiority. Identifying with these fantastical realms, the imagined viewer positions these two planets as an ideal. By deliberately equating these two worlds with modernity, both

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[8] For more on the white savior trope in cinema, see Hughey 2014; Vera and Gordon 2003.

[9] In the MCU's space narratives, these worlds are more often than not metonymically represented by a single urban landscape; in effect the 'planet' then becomes the 'city' and the Asgard and Hala reflect "the dominant organising structure[s] of" these alien races' "culture[s]" (Webber 2007, 13).

Ragnarok and *Captain Marvel* lead the viewer to identify with the protagonists' powerful subject position. Each film then literally 'flips the script' via a critical affective moment wherein both a key character and the viewer realize that this modernity is underpinned by a hidden history of imperialism. This affective moment deconstructs the mythologies that were the foundations of these empires, producing a new affective relation between the viewer and the bodily vulnerability of the weak. The two films, however, differ in relation to how their respective refugees are politically justified.

Asgardian imperialism and frescos: 'Has no one been taught our history?'

The first two Thor films establish Asgard as a clean, modern, sleek, highly advanced civilization characterized by its gleaming golden structures. Asgard is the land of the gods: washed in the perpetual light of dawn, it is a picturesque Eden soaring on an asteroid, and at the center of its kingdom is the towering Asgardian Palace where Odin, 'Protector of the Nine Realms', rules. The visual design of Asgard has 'one foot in [the art of comics artist] Jack Kirby, one foot in Norse mythology, and one foot in modern architecture,' and Asgardian technology is ultimately 'so advanced, [that] the human mind can't perceive it' ("From Asgard to Earth" featurette, *Thor*). This sense of modernity is further bolstered by Odin's grandiose speeches which simultaneously cast Asgard as a superior peaceful nation, a 'beacon of hope, shining out across the stars,' an empire that 'brought peace to the universe,' while simultaneously whitewashing Asgardian history and dehumanizing its enemies from neighboring realms; this includes *Thor's* Jotun and *The Dark World's* Harudheen who are pejoratively labelled as 'Frost Giants' and 'Dark Elves' by the Asgardians. Asgard ultimately looms as the main superpower of the Nine Realms, establishing a political hegemony by appropriating the

core powers of the 'lesser' realms.[10] Nevertheless, through the first two movies viewers are not invited to see Asgard as anything but a medieval and Vikings-esque rendition of American hegemony.[11]

In *Ragnarok*, this mythology crumbles quite literally, in the form of the shimmering frescos that adorn the Asgardian Palace's ceilings. These murals portray the empire's proclaimed history of peace and harmony. After Hela has singlehandedly slaughtered the royal Asgardian army, she finally seizes the palace with her reluctant second-in-command and Executioner, Skurge. 'Has no one been taught our history?' Hela asks, as she gazes up at the frescos with Skurge and the audience. Influenced by early Christian art, the circular fresco depicts the Asgardian royal family adorned with halos in several vibrant and picturesque scenes with the golden Asgardian palace at its center. We see that even here Odin has perpetuated that myth of Asgard as a civilization of holy saviors who are blessed with a superior modernity. Hela rightfully mocks this:

> Look at these lies. Goblets and garden parties? Peace treaties? Odin... proud to have it... ashamed of how he got it. We were unstoppable. I was his weapon in the conquest that

[10] In the past, Asgardians have appropriated the Casket of Ancient Winters, both a technological weapon and source of life power for the Frost Giants, leading to the ruin and collapse of the Joten home world, Jotunheim, as well as the Aether from the Dark Elves in a battle which ultimately leads to the death of all but a few of their race.

[11] It should be noted that the Asgardian geopolitical order's aesthetic and cultural connection to Vikings is further complicated in its appeal to the Alt-Right movement and white nationalism. For example, the casting of black actor Idris Elba as the white Norse God Heimdall in *Thor* was met with racist backlash and a call to boycott the movie by the Council of Conservative Citizens, a white supremacist organization. For more, see Mantyla 2010; Burley 2019; Blake 2020; Mattheis 2018; and Young 2016.

built Asgard's empire. One by one, the realms became ours. But then, simply because

my ambition outgrew his, he banished me... (*Thor: Ragnarok*)

With Hela's monologue, we see a signature move of hegemony, which is an erasure of

the violence that established the status quo.

Bitter and angry, she tears down these murals to reveal the original frescos

hidden beneath, detailing how she and her father built their empire. In a key close-up

shot, Skurge, and effectively the audience, looks up at the ceiling in silent horror, as he

realizes the true origins of his warmongering people. In a sharp contrast to the earlier

reassuring, peaceful images, these murals are branded by a vicious red with Odin at its

centre, surrounded by scenes of the monarch and his daughter waging war, as slaves

build their golden empire under whip and lash. This sequence links the space opera of

Asgard to somatic markers of Western/Northern slavery and colonialism. Hela brings to

light Asgard's colonial and imperial foundations as an empire built on the backs of

slaves, and the return of the colonial repressed is complete. Suddenly the affective link

of Asgard with 'the American century' feels politically fraught.

Much later in the film, this de-mythologization occurs yet again once Thor

returns to Asgard and is faced with the true past of his ancestors. Here, however, as

Thor gazes down at a crumbled piece of fresco that depicts an idealistic and ultimately

fabricated painting of himself, a double move occurs. The viewer sees Thor confront the

full depth of his now-deceased father, and the viewer is also reminded that Thor himself

is personally innocent of the crimes portrayed. The fundamental innocence of the hero

is re-asserted, even as he is understood to have benefitted from the crimes portrayed on

the ceilings of Asgard. This assertion of his morally legitimate rule (in contrast to

Hela's claim to her birthright as firstborn) underpins his leadership of the Asgardian

people.

Hala and genocide: 'Everything I knew was a lie'

While the theme of modernity is represented in *Ragnarok* through Asgard, in *Captain Marvel* this is achieved with the Kree home world, Hala. Caught in the middle of a thousand-year war with the Skrulls, the Kree are a technologically focused, industrial race who believe themselves to be superior to all other races.[12] Hala materialises this focus through its geography, as it is a technologically advanced planet divided into two levels. The upper level parallels Asgard's spectacle of modern advancement, while leaning towards a more metropolitan atmosphere, with warm light washing over its sprawling towering buildings and streaming ships. While Asgard functions as a monarchy, the Kree Civilization is overseen by the Supreme Intelligence, an artificial collective that embodies the Kree's greatest minds. Situated on Hala's upper level, the Supreme Intelligence's Headquarters is presented as a postmodern pyramid-like structure; 'no one can look upon the Supreme Intelligence in its true form… our subconscious chooses the way they appear to us' (*Captain Marvel*). Meeting with the Supreme Intelligence is therefore a sacred, holy communion, which is a contrast with both the technologically advanced nature of the artificial hivemind and the very headquarters it presides in. That is, the Kree have ensconced rationality as their deity, and as a result, they believe they are a superior race above all others including the emotionally compromised humans and recondite, shapeshifting Skrulls.

The underground level of the planet hints at the more sinister nature of this empire. It is darker, grittier, and illuminated by blue neon lights and propaganda posters

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[12] The militaristic nature of the Kree is also evident in *Guardians of Galaxy* (2014), wherein they are caught in another thousand-year long war with the Xandarians of the Nova Empire.

which introduce the audience to the Kree's enemies: the allegedly villainous reptilian and green Skrulls. While Asgard's myth operates via speeches and frescos, the Kree Empire establishes its supremacy by operating via xenophobia, paranoia, and securitization. When meeting with an amnesiac Carol, the Supreme Intelligence describes the Skrull as 'insidious shapeshifters,' imposters 'who silently infiltrate and take over [Kree] planets'; they are creatures who have 'threatened [Kree] civilization for centuries' (*Captain Marvel*). The Skrulls are able to take the form of anybody they see, and this positions them as avatars of 'the enemy within'. Indeed, the Supreme Intelligence's recurring maxim is 'Know your enemy. It could be you' (*Captain Marvel*). All over the planet are reminders to its citizens and the audience that the Kree Civilization is at war, instilling a constant fear of Skrull infiltration and invasion; for example, the propaganda posters that are scattered all over Hala's lower levels depict growling, menacing red-eyed Skrulls who shapeshift into innocent-looking Kree (*Art of the Movie: Captain Marvel* 36). Firmly believing in their racial superiority, the Kree Empire uses its technological superiority to aggressively pursue the Skrull with near-impunity, using their military forces to defend their conquests. As with Asgard, it is all too easy for viewers immersed in news stories about white supremacy, drones, 'smart borders', and biometric authentication to affectively identify with the Kree.

The affective inversion of Hala's mythological modernity, and on a larger scale that of the Kree Empire, is triggered by an encounter by Carol with the Skrulls. Carol finally discovers the truth of her past with the help of a Skrull general named Talos. She learns of her human heritage and how she has been kidnapped, given amnesia, and manipulated by the Supreme Intelligence. She further learns that the Kree-Skrull war has been an excuse for Kree imperial expansion, the destruction of the Skrull home

world, and the genocide of the Skrull race.[13] 'Everything I knew was a lie,' Carol angrily cries as Talos explains:

> My people lived as refugees on Torfa. Homeless, ever since we resisted Kree rule and they destroyed our planet. Now the handful of us that are left will be slaughtered next. Unless you will help me finish what Mar-Vell started… We just want a home. You and I lost everything at the hands of the Kree. (*Captain Marvel*)

Carol and the Skrulls are both revealed as victims of the Kree; however, consumed by her anger and frustration, Carol is still somewhat skeptical of the Skrull 'terrorists,' as she calls them, and therefore the audience is not fully impacted by Talos's decolonization of the Kree narrative. Just like the twofold affective process witnessed in *Ragnarok*, it is only when Carol is faced with the actual Skrull refugees hiding on Mar-Vell's ship, with visible proof of the dwindling members of a race who have been subjected to ethnic cleansing, that the audience finally repositions Hala and the Kree as villains. The crucial step is the portrayal of Skrull heteronormative family relations, which are familiar to the Western viewer and activate deeply set somatic markers. In a medium close-up shot, Carol's face is a blend of empathy and guilt as she watches Talos reunite with his wife, daughter, and the rest of his people. As Carol approaches them, Talos' wife is visibly alarmed at the threat she poses, completing this shift of self/other and hero/villain: 'I'm so sorry. I didn't know,' Carol tells them after Talos vouches for her (*Captain Marvel*). Like Thor, she is found personally innocent of the system that she buttressed.

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[13] It is worth mentioning that there are other Marvel superheroes who similarly grapple with the themes of prejudice, detention, and genocide, perhaps the most well-known being the X-Men.

Asgard and Hala ultimately function as mirror images. They are both imperial powers presented to the audience as civilizations that establish their mythology through aggressive military power and cultural hegemony. As the acquisition of both of these empires is in the past, the audience accepts the status quo and only perceives the implicit imperial maintenance and policing of their acquired realms and planets. For instance, in the *Thor* trilogy, this maintenance is visible in the panoptic surveillance that Heimdall the Watcher provides, as well as through more aggressive tactics, as seen in *The Dark World*. With the temporary destruction of the Bifrost Bridge, Thor argues with Orientalist language that 'the Nine Realms erupted into chaos, wars were raging, marauding hordes were pillaging,' and the superhero battles alongside the Asgardian army to maintain the 'peace' across their empire. In *Captain Marvel*, implicit examples of the Kree Empire's maintenance of their geopolitical order are witnessed through the powerful reach of Starforce and the Accusers, as well as the violent air raid that takes place at the beginning of the film during one of Carol and Starforce's covert mission. The reversal of the viewers' instinctive affinity to Asgard and Hala's modernity sets up two distinct relations to the refugee body, rooted in their racialisation, as we will see in the next section.

Affective Dimensions of the Refugee Body

While the affective representation of modernity is quite similar in both of these films, there is a racialised contrast between the Asgardians in *Ragnarok* and the Skrulls in *Captain Marvel* with regard to the affective representation of the refugee body. While the audience sympathizes and even identifies with the Asgardians before they become refugees, the representation of the Skrulls is initially demonizing and Othering. We argue that this distinction is produced because of the difference in how these bodies are racially coded. With both peoples, however, the refugee body is ultimately feminized,

characterized by a lack of agency, and the portrayal of violence further problematizes these representations.

The Asgardian refugee body as white

In *Ragnarok*, Hela's seizure of Asgard and the expansion of her own forces, the undead Berserkers, results in hundreds of the realm's citizens being left defenceless and on the run. The human-like Asgardians are familiar to the audience and easily sympathized with, representing godly, more beautiful and powerful versions of humans. Identification with them is simply easy. With the aesthetic modernity of their empire, their connection to Norse mythology, the Medieval tone of their culture, dress, and speech, the Asgardians are essentially coded as white. Throughout the first two Thor films, at the forefront of Asgard are the royal family and its warriors. Little is seen of the actual Asgardian citizens until *Ragnarok*; however, even then there are no focal characters, only quiet, frightened masses. These Asgardians are dressed in simple clothing, carrying very little with them; they are women, children, families, the elderly, all terrified and unsure. Victimized and lacking agency, the representation of the Asgardians is highly gendered as opposed to racialized. The feminization of these citizens firmly relies on yonic imagery as the Asgardians first find shelter in a hidden stronghold in the mountainous region of Asgard where they remain hidden for most of the movie. Presumably because of a lifetime of stability and peace provided by Asgard's wealth and privilege, the Asgardians are helpless and unable to defend themselves; their lack of agency is exemplified by the fact that they require first Heimdall's help to hide from Hela and then Thor and his allies to rescue them from Hela on the Rainbow Bridge during the climax of the film, both of whom represent masculine forces. As victims of Hela's political upheaval, the Asgardians lack any agency, and their innocence is invariably connected to their whiteness when compared

to the racialization of the Skrulls.

Several times over the course of *Ragnarok*, Odin reiterates, 'Asgard is not a place, but a people.' Thor eventually understands this proverb and is inspired to trigger Ragnarok by resurrecting a colossal fire demon named Surtur whose flames consume Asgard. This results in Hela's defeat and the destruction of Asgard, while the remaining Asgardians, now refugees, leave Asgard's ruins searching for a new home. The Ragnarok event, as a thinly veiled metaphor for climate change, further casts the Asgardians as climate refugees.[14] *Avengers: Endgame* would later establish that the Asgardian refugees find a home on Earth in a reinvented Tøsnberg, Norway. Crucially, the white-coded Asgardians can 'pass' as human (as opposed to the Skrulls) and are rendered political innocents, so consequently they are never subject to the securitisation to which refugees on Earth are subject. As climate refugees, they skip the racialization process that Baldwin (2013) highlights since they are rendered as innocent, and it is only because of the differentiation in their racialization that they are granted agency and power when welcomed as new citizens of Earth.

Racializing the Skrull refugee body

The first two acts of *Captain Marvel* are dominated by Carol and the Kree perpetuating the Othering of the Skrulls to the audience. Once the viewer actually encounters the Skrull, they are already prepared to be frightened, disgusted, and shocked by this so-

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[14] For more on climate refugee narratives see Kaplan (2016), Horn (2018), and Murray & Huemann (2016).

called evil race.[15] Indeed, Carol and Starforce's first encounters with Skrull combatants reveal a cunning, dangerous foe. With green skin, bald heads, grooved chins, and large elongated ears, the Skrull are considered monstrous in comparison to the more human features of the Kree, let alone *Ragnarok's* Asgardians. Even in terms of their dress, 'the idea,' costume designer Sanja Milkovic Hays explains, 'was to make them as different as possible from Starforce and, in a sense, all the other Marvel heroes' (*Art of the Movie: Captain Marvel* 162). The first Skrull we meet on Torfa, a planet where the Skrull refugees are hiding, is an impersonator who tries to kill a Starforce member, and the battle that then commences has orientalised hordes of Skrulls baring their teeth, grunting, and shouting war cries as they attack (or rather, defend themselves from Starforce and Carol). As Young (2016, 24) argues, 'fantasy habitually constructs the Self through Whiteness and Otherness through an array of racist stereotypes', and the Skrulls easily fall into this trap as throughout the film, they are seen as little more than terrorists and kidnappers who are aggressively pursuing Carol and the Light-Speed Engine; what is emphasized is their Otherness via their looks, language, and behaviour. Even Talos, while impersonating a human, participates in this practice as he describes one of his dead brethren as looking like an 'ugly bastard' (*Captain Marvel*). Interestingly, though the Skrulls cannot be characterized as climate refugees, Baldwin's (2013) discursive tropes of climate change refugees still apply to the Skrull refugee body as they represent a security threat, dehistoricized by the Kree, stateless because of that empire, their shapeshifting abilities casting them as truly ambiguous and recondite. Through these racialised tropes, as well as their alien physical features, language, dress,

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[15] Arguably, comic book fans may also come with their own preconceived notions of the Skrulls' evil nature as they have been a longstanding villainous fictional race in the comics.

and culture, the Skrulls remain firmly marked as Other, 'somatically different to the White Self of Good, [embodying] degradation, and the threat of miscegenation' and infiltration (Young 86).

It is only when the audience is introduced to the Skrull refugees on Mar-Vell's ship that the Skrull body is rendered familiar to a certain degree. This affective re-evaluation of the Skrull body is triggered when Talos, searching for his people on the ship, sounds out a beautiful call; the response is echoed back to him as the Skrull refugees come out of hiding and approach both him and Carol. Frightened and timid, these refugees are dressed in a combination of ragged, mismatched Skrull and, more crucially, human clothes. It is the first time we meet Skrull women and children. The Skrull body is finally humanized, and the audience is suddenly positioned to empathize with these refugees, as they transition from terrorist border crossers to asylum seekers escaping genocide. The recognition of the Self in the Skrulls is further reinforced by the end of the film when Talos and his family enjoy a dinner at Carol's friend Maria's house. Chatting on the stairs, Maria's daughter Monica avidly tells Talos's daughter, 'You guys have the best eyes. Don't ever change your eyes' (*Captain Marvel*). Ultimately, though the Skrull body is rendered familiar, *Captain Marvel* falls into the trap of presenting an Orientalist rescue narrative by the end of the film, as the refugees require Captain Marvel help to be rescued, casting Carol as a white saviour. The film concludes with Captain Marvel taking them away to find a new home; however, unlike the Asgardians, they are not allowed to settle on Earth.

Violence and the refugee body

Further embedded within the portrayal of the refugee body is a subtext on the appropriateness of violence. Depicted as helpless masses who lack agency, the Asgardian refugees are detached from any form of violence, save that which

underpinned their imperial society. When Heimdall and then Thor are forced to resort to violence to protect them, they do not kill conscious sentient beings, but rather the undead Berserkers that form Hela's guard. Arguably this reinforces the re-inscribed innocence of both Thor and the Asgardians *vis-à-vis* Hela.

The Skrulls, on the other hand, are initially represented as violent terrorists and infiltrators, though they are in fact protecting themselves as they try to eke out a living after being colonised by the Kree. These refugees are linked to terrorism by the Supreme Intelligence, Starforce, Ronan the Accuser, and even explicitly Carol herself at one point.[16] Ultimately, though the Skrulls exercise their agency, it is ultimately held against them because of the manner in which they are racialized as Other. Furthermore, though Talos may be converted from a terrorist to a freedom fighter after the affective re-orientation of the Skrull refugee body, the audience are reminded that he and the other Skrull have killed actual subjects throughout the course of this war, including Starforce members. 'Carol,' Talos explains, 'this is war. My hands are filthy from it' (*Captain Marvel*). Almost like a punishment or penance for his transgressions, Talos, in a predictable cinematic trope, is seriously injured in battle immediately after this confession. It would seem that the victimized white-coded Asgardians parallel the media representations of refugees pre-2014, as Dempsey and McDowell (2019) argue, their acceptance on Earth based on a shared sense of humanity and community. In contrast, because of their racialized otherness and relationship to violence, the Skrulls as a security threat must find a new home, reflecting current media attitudes on the refugee crisis. Unfortunately, *Captain Marvel* ultimately frames the Skrull resistance

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[16] Previously appearing as the main villain in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), Ronan pursues and kill Skrulls for the Kree Empire and is the face of the Accusers in *Captain Marvel*.

movement, and accordingly the refugee body, in a dangerously conservative light while *Ragnarok* provides a hollow and oversimplified representation. The inability to re-home the Skrulls on Earth — despite their shapeshifter capabilities — reflects this securitisation.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with recent superhero films to detail the narrative and affective engineering through which refugees are brought to the Big Screen. Both stories share a common narrative manoeuvre, in which the hegemonic state is revealed to be an imperial aggressor. However, *Captain Marvel* and *Ragnarok* differ quite significantly in the refugees' portrayal. The colonial Asgardians are turned into innocent (white) refugees, fleeing the fire demon Surtur in a way that recalls contemporary climate change refugees. The Skrulls, by contrast, are racialised on account of their physiognomy and tainted by their connection to the violence of their liberation struggle. Even as both are viewed positively, they receive very different treatment by Earth-bound characters.

A study like this always runs the risk of being portrayed as un-serious in contrast to more engaged, activist work. However, we nevertheless think that work like this is crucial in understanding the popular geopolitics of refugees. First, superhero cinema has grown immensely over the last two decades, disseminating their Manichaean narratives of good and evil all over the world. This has clearly had an impact on the refugee narratives here, as the refugees are either cast as Others or easily rehabilitated as the Self, or both. Going further, it is clear to see that the refugees themselves — even when reconciled with their Earthly audience/hosts — are understood as 'good' and 'bad' refugees who must be securitised differently. Here we see both the hazards of representation as well as its benefits (Saunders 2019); while the plight of refugees is

clearly demonstrated in both films, they nevertheless ensconce problematic divisions within and among the category of the refugee.

Second, we have examined the ways in which the body is central to *Captain Marvel* and *Ragnarok* — not only the racialised and gendered bodies of the superheroes and their associated refugees, but also the body of the viewer, who is linked to the films through affective relations which might trigger somatic markers (Sharp, Online early). This is most clear in both the aesthetics of modernity that begin each film, and also in the recognition of familial love and care (e.g., the Skrull children and Asgardian families). The narrative and the affective must be understood as always *both* at work, and most important when these dimensions of film (and of wider geopolitics) resonate with one another.

Finally, these films both draw significantly in the 'white saviour' trope that Hyndman eschews. This makes it clear that the (relatively, and heavily caveated) positive vision of refugees in the films comes at a high price. This is especially true for *Captain Marvel*, where the hero's connection to the U.S. Air Force is in a paradoxical tension with her apology for the Kree violence in which she partook. This tension — between statist violence and concern for human security — continues to underlie many debates about the geopolitics of refugees.

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