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Fetishizing Captain America's sidearm: iconography, exceptionality, and the politics of representing guns

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ABSTRACT In 2007, Captain America, or Cap to his peers, died outside the courthouse where he would answer for leading a band of superheroes against the government's Superhuman Registration Act in a plot line *Fox and Friends* took issue with, condemning Marvel Comics for killing Cap "while we're at war," referring to President George W. Bush's war on terror. In 2008, former sidekick Bucky took up the Cap banner. Legacy characters are common in comics, but fans noted an unexpected addition to the costume: a handgun. Cap's shield, a symbol of defense, now had an offensive accent. News media outlets lauded the new gun as a "sign of the times," as *Rolling Stone* said, considering it a critique on the post-9/11 cultural landscape, but fan communities felt uneasy about the decision. The gun's presence on Bucky Cap's belt marks a continuous period of exceptionality, the kind Giorgio Agamben warns against in *State of Exception*. When Bucky's predecessor would return to the role of Captain America, the sidearm would no longer remain, but the character would confront issues related to guns, and media and fans would once again respond. Even though Cap only encounters guns a few times during the 2010s, reception to these moments is more significant than that of characters who regularly use lethal weapons. Fetishistic emphasis on Captain America's gun exposes the state of exception inherent in all superhero media, prompting a digital discourse across professional and amateur platforms on gun-related subjects. This project analyzes how superhero media portray gun use and the subsequent reception from both news media and digital fandom. A sampling of comics, television series, and films are textually analyzed, along with digital news media and online fan forums pertaining to those examples.

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Introduction

In a 2007 Marvel Comics story arc, Captain America died outside the courthouse where he would answer for leading a band of superheroes against the government's Superhuman Registration Act, which effectively made all superheroes a military tool. In response, *Fox and Friends* chastised the comics publishing giant. "You do not kill Captain America when we're at war," one host said on the March 7, 2007 broadcast, referring to President George W. Bush's war on terror. This also seemed to confirm previous criticism from the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a conservative think tank that focuses on military policy, who commissioned a white paper on Captain America's allegedly less patriotic contemporary depiction. "As if Defense Department officials didn't face enough challenges in disarming Iraq and defeating al-Qaeda," the paper begins, "they must now prepare to face our enemies without a celebrated component of past victories over diabolical foes" (Medved and Lackner, 2003, p. 1). For the World War II super soldier Steve Rogers, who deputed in 1941 punching Hitler in the face, to die in 2007 (one of many deaths in the Marvel Universe), amidst civil unrest on page and a sitting president's dipping approval ratings, was disrespectful, conservative pundits declared.

In 2008, former sidekick James 'Bucky' Barnes would wield the shield with a shinier star-spangled getup. Along with sartorial upgrades, including bulletproof cloth, he added a sidearm to the ensemble. News media outlets lauded the espionage story, grittier character origin, and addition of a gun as a "sign of the times," *Rolling Stone* said in its March 6, 2008 "Top 10." Other fans and bloggers protested: "Any Cap holding a gun is wrong," said one, while another added, "It's not true to the spirit of the character" (Cunningham, 2009, p. 176). As a World War II soldier, Rogers Cap has used a gun before, but such moments were exceptional, never permanent. The gun's presence on Bucky Cap's belt marked a continuous period of exceptionality, the kind Agamben warns against in *State of Exception*. This is prevalent amongst other superheroes who use firearms, but Cap, as a symbol of moral purity, gradually evolved into something beyond a marksman. The gun revealed a more vulnerable figure whose idealism was now dirtied by reality.

Once Steve Rogers returned to life in 2010 at the conclusion of *Captain America: Reborn*, the gun would no longer remain part of the ensemble, but at least three confrontations relevant to gun culture would transpire in the proceeding years, and comics news media and fan forums would excessively focus on Cap's use of guns, fetishizing those few occurrences. Comics commonly fetishize guns, saturating stories with their presence, but Cap's usage during the 2010s sparked substantial digital debate, especially considering how little print space comics writers and artists provide such moments. Excessive emphasis on the events of only a few comics panels fetishizes these moments, highlighting a dilemma built into any superhero story. The following analysis examines how a sampling of contemporary superhero media portray gun use, drawing upon digital news media and online fandoms to develop a cultural barometer that superficially gauges public reception to superhero media's representation of guns. The stories of Captain America serve as a telling case study in the politics of representing guns since Cap is "a moral exemplar" in both Marvel Comics and "for us in the real world" as well (White, 2014, p. 25).

Fetish is generally understood as a sexual condition, based on Sigmund Freud's usage. Generally, it describes obsessive interest in one object that substitutes for another actual—or unconscious—interest in another that is truly desired. For Metz, a film theorist who finds the Freudian definition inadequate, fetishism permits a "combination of desire and fear," especially among the "the play of framings" that occur in horror films meant to evoke various

emotional reactions (Metz, 1985, p. 88). Fetishism does not merely prompt desire but an array of emotions. It marks an obsessive interest in something, perhaps resulting in contradictory compulsions. A central argument for Cap's use of guns surrounds the idea that a fetishized interest in these moments occurs; they are obsessively dwelled upon, both feared and desired. When actor Jamie Lee Curtis starred in the 2018 film *Halloween*, for example, *Fox News* ran a story with the headline, "Jamie Lee Curtis wields firearms in new 'Halloween' movie despite advocating for gun control." For an actor to depict gun use while espousing contrary political views prompted *Fox News* to highlight a "conundrum" at work in liberal Hollywood amongst celebrities "who have all made their living portraying gun-toting characters while calling for stricter gun reform" (Casiano, 2018). *Fox News* turns the gun into an object of fetish, placing excessive emphasis on its cinematic meaning for public life.

This example prompts a particular challenge for superhero media, especially stories about Captain America: How should superheroes address gun use, if at all? Certainly stories about vigilantes, soldiers, warriors, antiheroes, terrorists, and supervillains are afforded more creative room to address such a topic, but criticisms held by organizations like the Defense of Democracies and *Fox News* incorrectly assume this is a new dilemma. Dating back to the 1960s, Marvel Comics has long attempted to maintain broad appeal, particularly amongst college-educated readers who enjoyed the writings of Albert Camus and Karl Marx alongside Marvel, which was perceived as "hip" and "irreverent" (Lopes, 2009, p. 65). With fetish comes the dilemma of contradiction. For some, it can be too easily explained (i.e., *liberals enjoy violent media because of unconscious conservative impulses*), while a more complicated analysis must consider the allure of opposites, from readers of both Marx and Marvel—often a champion of individualistic heroes—to *Star Wars* fans whom perhaps dress as Darth Vader at a convention but do not champion his politics. The complexity of fictional play is beyond the parameters of this analysis, but it does provide a transition from fetish into another problematic concept amongst superhero media that is received with varying degrees of acceptance and resistance: the superhero's exceptional relationship with law enforcement.

Superhero media relies on the state of exception, defined as the alleged necessity of breaking or suspending the law—creating an exception to the law—in order to preserve the law. The concept originates with Nazi theorist Carl Schmitt's analysis of the "sovereign"—a ruler or ruling body—who dictates what constitutes legality, illegality, and exceptionality. As Agamben says, "The sovereign, who can decide on the state of exception, guarantees its anchorage to the juridical order" (Agamben, 2003, p. 35). This concept is foundational to any superhero story that depicts a masked figure performing acts not condoned by a governing body. McGowan previously noted this connection in a study of *The Dark Knight* (2008), characterizing Batman as "a figure outside the law on whom the law relies to respond to the most recalcitrant criminal elements" (McGowan, 2009). Superheroes might not directly exemplify the "sovereign" as sanctioned rulers, but they borrow the power of a "sovereign," often in service of the sovereign (i.e., Batman's work with Gotham police, Hellboy's job at a secret paranormal agency) or despite the sovereign's wishes (i.e., the Punisher executing criminals as he sees fit) to appease of their own desires regardless of sovereign authority. This usually occurs with the help of sheer strength or skilled use of weaponry and results in a new kind of sovereignty, one that heightens the state of exception to the hyperreal territory often depicted in superhero comic books. Such hyperexceptionalism embodies manifest destiny in superheroes through the random circumstances that result in the acquisition

of superpowers or special abilities, which then become a means to fight crime without regulation, similar to a sovereign's use of exceptionalism. Superheroes present an even more problematic state of exemption than the sovereign's, however, since they are a third party, obliged to no law enforcement agency.

Both fetishism and exceptionality are integral to understanding superhero media's portrayal of guns and their subsequent reception. Considering the growing popularity of superhero media (superhero films alone garnered at least \$5 billion each year at the global box office from 2016 to 2019), matters pertaining to fetishized gun use and heroic exceptionality are part of a rising trend. Through firearms' actual presence or implied presence in the form of superpowers, guns and the violence that tends to accompany their depiction are prominent across American superhero media. And with this obsessive—fetishistic—interest in guns, exceptionality normally follows, especially when these stories across comics, television series, and films positively represent the politics of vigilantes working outside the law. Captain America is not the only example of this phenomenon, but his overt connection to American iconography and complicated depiction over the past 15 years prompts a unique analysis of a broader trend.

Superheroes on guns

While regulatory organization the Comics Code Authority was created allegedly to protect young audiences, adult readership remained a significant demographic of comic books dating back as far as the 1940s (Pustz, 1999, p. 31). Once Marvel Comics developed a larger fanbase in the late 1960s, those readers often wrote letters to the editors inquiring about “the Bullpen’s opinion about such diverse subjects as Viet Nam, civil rights, the war on poverty, and the upcoming election,” Stan Lee discussed in a “Stan’s Soapbox” column that appeared in the back pages of *Avengers* #56 (Lee, 1968a). Remaining diplomatic, Lee responded that no “unanimous Bullpen opinion” exists:

That’s why we seek to avoid editorializing about controversial issues—not because we haven’t our opinions, but rather because we share the same diversity of opinion as Americans everywhere. But we’d like to go on record about one vital issue—we believe that Man has a divine destiny, and an awesome responsibility—the responsibility of treating all those who share this wondrous world of ours with tolerance and respect—judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed, or color. That we agree on—and we’ll never rest until it becomes a fact, rather than just a cherished dream!

Soon after, however, Lee would more overtly address racism in another “Soapbox,” claiming it is “among the deadliest social ills plaguing the world today” (Lee, 1968b).

Each “Soapbox” exemplifies challenges faced by superhero media creators, dating back more than fifty years ago. While racism was the line for Marvel Comics, establishing clear political affiliations would ostracize a large portion of readers. Superhero films face similar challenges, tending to avoid such controversies, finally broaching more overt social issues with racism in *Black Panther* (2018) and women’s rights in *Captain Marvel* (2019), both to the success of more than \$1 billion at the worldwide box office each. As for small screen superhero content, major television networks again tend to avoid political issues to appease larger viewerships. But superhero media created by The CW, the fifth largest free-to-air television network targets younger demographics (Maheshwari and Koblin, 2018). In so doing, it favors more socially charged content, ranging from greater representation of LGBTQ+ characters and people of color than other major

networks. In 2018, *Supergirl* (2015), in particular, featured the first transgender superhero, also played by a transgender actor. Gun use is a different matter. From mainstream films to select television media, a similar dilemma continues to haunt superhero media across decades: taking sides.

While prejudice is easily confronted and vilified, superhero media gradually established two approaches to depicting allegedly more debatable topics like gun use: the engraved approach and the overt approach. The engraved approach to covering gun use—and other social issues as well (i.e., capital punishment, economic systems, privacy)—infuses the topic into the story. Rather than directly address gun use, gun control, or gun violence, a position on such topics evolves in the background, becomes engraved in a character’s motivation. For example, Batman does not use guns, and when he disarms foes, he tends to dismantles their guns, which signifies an understanding of gun mechanics and conscious rejection of their use during combat. A problematic term for this process might be “natural,” as in, *the topic of guns naturally unravels throughout the issue, episode, or film*. For example, *The A.V. Club* notes the contradictory challenge of gun-friendly superheroes on television series that attempt to address gun control: “Turning a show about vigilante superheroes into a lesson in gun control isn’t the most natural fit (just ask *The Punisher*)” (Siede, 2018). The engraved approach is not a new concept but one that invokes the definition of “Nature,” according to Barthes. Examining the Restoration period, Barthes notes how the “bourgeoisie, only recently in power, operated a kind of crisis between Morality and Nature, giving the one the protection of the other” (Barthes, 1957, p. 149). When nature merges with morality, taste, and history, the result is commonly referred to as “common sense,” as Barthes says. The engraved approach is not actually natural. Instead, it relies on audiences’ slow digestion of politically charged material, perhaps unbeknownst to them.

Batman’s anti-gun stance is engraved into the character’s origin and scripted behavior. He never dwells on the subject beyond telling a team-up partner, sometimes mid fight, “no guns, no killing,” as he demands of Catwoman in *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), clearly equating the former with the latter. He continually rejects their use, aware they can tempt him to become an executioner. According to *Gizmodo*, however, Batman does break his unbendable rule on several occasions, revealing the exceptionality of such moments (Whitbrook, 2014). Returning to Captain America, Bucky Cap’s gun use might be overtly addressed, but the character does not spend an entire issue debating the merits of this decision. He uses the gun, gradually expanding his reasoning along the way. In another instance in *Fear Itself* #6, Rogers Cap’s use of guns is also depicted as an extreme exception: Only when the world might come to an end does Cap pick one up.

The second approach to addressing guns is far less *natural*. Here, gun use is explicitly addressed, its dissection overtly laid bare in dialogue and plot points. In an illustrated interview in *The Death of Captain America*, Captain America explains why he carries a sidearm. “The weapons don’t make or unmake the man, or the hero,” Bucky says. “They’re simply tools. I don’t have the enhanced strength and speed that Steve did, so using other weapons might give me an edge against multiple attackers” (Brubaker et al., 2007, p. 155). While the conversation overtly addresses gun use, it is an imperfect example. It establishes a practical reason for a sidearm free of any ethical dilemmas that might occur when representing it. Two examples from superhero television are more beneficial, especially by using the television trope of “a very special episode.”

The CW’s *Arrowverse*, a transmedia superhero franchise, attempted to address the politics of guns more overtly. In a special episode of *Arrow* (2012–2019), “Spectre of the Gun,” 5.13,

the titular superhero, also the mayor of Star City, debates drafting gun-control reform. The Green Arrow's vigilante teammates, some of whom wield guns, engage in explicit debates about access to firearms. The episode's conclusion is built into one character's summary of the problem: "It became impolite to talk politics. You can't help but wondering that maybe that's why our country is the way it is today," says Curtis/Mr. Terrific. To the dismay of *Screen Rant*, the episode "didn't actually have the teeth to be called preachy, or the content to be viewed as making any political statement, whatsoever. Those hoping to see a show immersed in guns and gun violence acknowledge either will be disappointed, because *Arrow's* first look at 'guns as the enemy' gives new life to the out of date 'after school special'" (Dyce, 2017). This aligns with a central criticism of "very special episodes": "the problem is resolved quickly, and once it is resolved, it is never mentioned again—leaving no mark on the characters involved" (Ross, 2008, p. 64). The events of the episode are never revisited, no characters change their minds about gun use, and the outcome of the proposed law is unknown.

A year after *Arrow's* attempt at "a very special episode," *Supergirl* addressed the sale of illegal firearms in "Not Kansas," 3.21. Unlike *Arrow's* nonpartisan indecisiveness, however, *Supergirl* borrows from a different television trope when confronting gun use, according to *The A.V. Club*: "beyond feeling like an awkward PSA, the bigger problem is that the gun control storyline is just poorly thought out. It continues a weird trend of TV shows arguing that the best way to stop mass shooters is to literally stand in front of their loaded guns and reach out to them with empathy" (Siede, 2018). Guns are presented negatively in the episode, but the solution is similarly unhelpful, including no extended discussion of legislation or cultural norms. But like *Arrow*, the topic is overtly addressed. As *io9* claims about another *Supergirl* episode: it has "the subtlety of a super punch to the face" (Cranz, 2018), which is a clear marker of overt depiction. Unlike Buck Cap's gun use, both CW superheroes confront guns as an ethical concern, overtly—albeit, perhaps unhelpfully—outlining real-world debates on their role in American culture.

Captain America enters this mediascape hesitantly, rarely addressing gun control directly, never overtly taking sides on this or many other issues as well. Even in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), Cap's pro-gay stance—revealed in a positive exchange between Cap and a male trauma survivor who discusses a date with another man—remains the only example of any overt LGBTQ + representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's 23 films, as of 2019. Instead, Cap's political beliefs unravel gradually—or naturally, based on the previous definition. And in the few instances he does use a gun, they are matters of great importance. The three following examples depict a combination of engraved and overt tactics, though their presence in Marvel Comics are quite conservative, lasting no more than a few pages total. This modest page count is telling, however, considering the degree of attention Cap receives from news outlets, fans, and, even, Marvel's own marketing strategy.

The fetish of "raising a militia"

Actions films commonly fetishize firearms. Actor Keanu Reeves alone performs in two action film franchises overflowing with guns. In *The Matrix* (1999), Neo requests "guns, lots of guns," and each entry in the *John Wick* (2014) film series includes scenes in which the titular hitman is fitted for suits and weapons in the same boutique shop. Even in Marvel Comics, the Punisher, Deadpool, and a host of other characters regularly employ firearms. But Captain America is more cautious, hence even minimal encounters are cause for digital news media coverage, fandom debates, and even comic book marketing, all of which fetishize

Cap's token use of arms. For Salter, the gun is a prominently "fetishized object" of armament culture "invested with mystified economic and sexual forces," which "[promises] individual and collective renewal through violence" (Salter, 2013, p. 166). Unlike other characters, Cap is the walking embodiment of a country in look and behavior, and when he holds a gun with all its loaded—possibly mystical—meaning, a fetishistic obsession with the significance of such moments transpires.

Fear Itself #6 (2011), part of a crossover event featuring multiple superheroes joining forces to confront a much larger foe, depicts Captain America in his darkest hour, standing his ground alone against impending doom. The issue concludes with Rogers Cap addressing confused and armed civilians staring at a portal opening in the sky. "This is the end of the world, fellas," Cap tells them. "And I'm raising a militia to make a stand right here. You can stay with me and die fighting. You can go be with your families. It's your choice. You won't be judged. But if you leave... leave your weapons. I'll need 'em" (Fraction and Immonen, 2011a). A variant cover of issue six even features the star-spangled hero himself adorned in ammo and surrounded by an armed militia.

Outdoor Life, an outdoors publication known for gun reviews, covered the issue upon release, claiming it definitively proves Cap is not longer confused by *politically correct* culture, instead firmly supporting the Second Amendment:

In recent years, critics allege, the iconic comic character went PC. He was critical of the same values he once espoused. Like the nation itself, Captain America appeared a bit confused, no longer certain of what he stood for.

But with the most recent edition of Captain America, *Fear Itself* #6, there's no ambiguity in where the superhero stands (Haughey, 2011).

The initial claim that Cap "went PC" was previously addressed by the Defense of Democracies, which considers how comics stories paint the U.S. military, politicians, and American history in unsavory ways:

we might expect such blame-America logic from Hollywood activists, academic apologists, or the angry protesters who regularly fill the streets of European capitals (and many major American cities). When such sentiments turn up, however, disguised within star-spangled packaging in comic books aimed at kids, we need to face squarely some of the deep cultural malaise afflicting our nation in the midst of a significant war (Medved and Lackner, 2003, p. 7).

The entertainment industry, higher education, and metropolitan areas are all common targets as leftist PC culture. Cap's transition in *Fear Itself* #6, however, appears to flip the script, based on *Outdoor Life's* description.

However, *Outdoor Life* does not actually reference the issue itself, but cites an article from *Bleeding Cool*, a prominent comics news source. A literal reading of the article by *Bleeding Cool* creator Rich Johnston supports *Outdoor Life's* claim:

As destruction rains from on high, Captain America embodies the Second Amendment. As the apocalypse rolls across the Earth, he picks up a rifle, bearing arms. And appeals to raise a militia to make a stand. Using that exact language, straight from the American Constitution: "A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the People to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."

What *Outdoor Life* omits is the next sentence: "Time for the Tea Party to cheer for Captain America again" (Johnston, 2018).

Johnston, in fact, does not consider his writing objective journalism but tabloid gossip meant “to entertain more than inform” (Dean, 2005, p. 22). Based on Johnston’s own characterization of his media writing, the alleged pro-Second Amendment depiction of Cap is likely more sarcastic, a piece of exaggerated entertainment journalism more than proof of Cap’s resistant to gun-use “ambiguity,” as *Outdoor Life* claims.

Further, the last panel of *Fear Itself* #6, following his monologue, reveals that all the civilians flee, leaving Cap to fight alone with their guns, which diminishes a pro-militia reading. Fetishized gun use, however, remains as Cap bears arms in a teaser at the end of issue six promoting the events of the final installment. Come *Fear Itself* #7, Cap dons an array of firearms in a total of nine panels across four pages (Fraction and Immonen, 2011b). But he soon replaces them with another weapon, Thor’s hammer Mjölmir, which grants worthy wielders the power of a god. The iconic imagery of Cap raising Thor’s hammer into the sky would resurface nine years later during the climactic final battle in *Avengers: Endgame*. While Marvel marketed Cap’s militia, the larger reveal was his ability to both pick up and fight with the magical hammer that only works for a chosen few (previously he only held the hammer for a brief moment, not full combat). Teasing a pro-gun Cap implies dire stakes for the finale of the *Fear Itself* crossover event, which comes to a climax not when Cap attacks incoming foes with the townspeople’s private cache of rifles but when he lifts Mjölmir to the sky, causing lightning to strike as he leads the Avengers into battle.

To claim Cap entirely leaves behind gun fetishism in this moment ignores a more complex trend at work in this issue and others as well. His upgrade from rifles to magical hammer aligns with superhero comics’ oversaturated storytelling, the continual escalation of stakes and visual spectacle. Just as superheroes exaggerate the state of exception, they also exaggerate gun fetishism. In place of simple hunting rifles, or even more complex military-grade ones, Cap now wields the power of lightening. Further, this weapon can also be thrown or used during intimate combat, borrowing from characteristics of a rifle with a bayonet, which can also inflict damage in various ways. This is not new but foundational to superhero comics. Like the state of exception, firearm fetishism is on display implicitly, engraved in the thematic core of superhero lore, even when its overt depiction appears to have ended. Cap’s transition in the *Fear Itself* arc from shield to rifles to Mjölmir merely serves as an overt depiction of something at work across comics: Superhero weapons (i.e., a shield, a Batarang, laser beams shooting from eyes) are exaggerated guns. The primary difference, however, relies on how superheroes use their special weapons. And most share Cap’s concern for the preservation of all life, enemies included. Superhero weaponry—similar to the state of exception—is a find of wish fulfillment, the ability to fight an enemy effectively without collateral damage, which surpasses the Second Amendment as a guiding principle.

For Krips, fetish “stands in the place of that which cannot be remembered directly. It substitutes for that which is and must remain repressed” (Krips, 1999, p. 7). So what is repressed in the case of Cap’s gun use? That answer for *Outdoor Life* would be a definitive pro-stance on the gun debate. As Sharpiro argues, “Loss of the gun is the loss of an individualized internal sovereignty” (Sharpiro, 2015, p. 430). The Second Amendment instills in gun users the power of the state—“an individualized internal sovereignty”—hence the repression of the gun through restrictive laws amounts to a loss of national and intertwined personal identity. For Cap to promote gun use, gun enthusiasts find a colorful, blatant symbol of nationhood on their side. And Cap is a far less problematic figure to reach this aim than the more commonly used Punisher, whose logo is a rallying cry on social media for

many police unions in solidarity with the Blue Lives Matter movement. *Newsweek* covered this trend, noting the antihero’s own objections to police support for Punisher iconography in the latest *Punisher* issue at the time. “I’ll only say this once: We’re not the same,” the Punisher tells police officers excited by the encounter in *Punisher* #13. “You took an oath to uphold the law. You help people. I gave that up a long time ago. You don’t do what I do. Nobody does. You boys need a role model? His name is Captain America and he’d be happy to have you” (Avery, 2019). Captain America is the ideal choice for both the Punisher and, at least, *Outdoor Life*.

Fear Itself marks the closest Cap has come to a Punisher-like depiction, even prompting *Comic Book* to compose the headline “Captain America Goes Gun Happy” and identify a “right-wing turn” for the character in recent years, asking the question, “Is Marvel Comics taking Captain America back to his gun-toting, American soldier roots?” (Johnson, 2017). Eventually the answer to *Comic Book*’s question became clear: Cap’s foray into alleged pro-gun territory ended with the conclusion of *Fear Itself*. No major comics events would garner further debate about his pro-gun position. The opposite, however, would occur several years later, and one news outlet would object to Cap’s latest revelation with more aggression than *Outdoor Life*’s praise.

“Weaponry destroyed,” no exception

At the conclusion of *Avengers: Shards of Infinity* #1 (2018), Captain America pontificates about the future. “Perhaps under other circumstances,” he says, “wouldn’t it be cause for rejoicing if all the world’s weaponry were destroyed?” When his teammates wonder how a World War II soldier could say such a thing, Cap responds: “No one knows the horrors of global conflict better than I do. And no one wants an end to war more than a man whose very purpose in life is to fight. It reminds me of what John Lennon said—imagining a world where all people could live together in peace” (Macchio, 2018). The text bubbles never mention guns specifically, but one column from *Bounding Into Comics* sees this exchange as proof the comics writers wish to depict Cap as “a gun control advocate,” which the writer vehemently resists: “Captain America should not be advocating for gun control ever” (Trent, 2018).

Reddit users in a 2016 forum on the topic—“How would Captain America react to modern events?”—would disagree with this claim, one summarizing the group’s consensus that Cap would support “sensible gun control.” Another added, “as a crime fighter, he’d appreciate making guns harder to come by” (FootballMan15, 2016). For these digital fans, what occurs in the comics is canon that need not be questioned. For *Bounding Into Comics*, however, overtly addressing weapons politicizes the character and creates a canonical contradiction since Cap is “a living weapon” (Trent, 2018). While *Bounding Into Comics* claims *Shards of Infinity* “jumps the shark” with Cap’s characterization, it does call attention to a problematic contradiction engraved in all stories depicting superhero vigilantism, though not quite in the way *Bounding* considers.

Superheroes are always vigilantes—always political figures—whether they work directly with law enforcement (i.e., Batman, Superman) or despite what law enforcement might demand (i.e., Daredevil, Luke Cage). For example, in Frank Miller’s graphic novel, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Batman responds to Superman’s claim that superheroes should work with the government instead of remain criminals. “Sure we’re criminals,” Batman retorts. “We’ve always been criminals. We have to be criminals” (Miller, 1986). For Skoble, Batman’s words are “accurate in a technical way,” as he only bends the law to defeat villains “violating more important laws” (Skoble, 2005, p. 31).

This is familiar justification for gun use in cases of self-defense: To take life with a gun is a violation of the law in a “technical” sense to prevent “violating more important laws.” Batman and other superheroes, and gun users defending open-carry laws, exist in a state of exception. They break the law to preserve it. They momentarily suspend some laws for the sake of the greater good. As vigilantes, superheroes can do this, though the level of training for someone like Batman, who refuses to use guns, or Bucky, a trained assassin who maims rather than kills, is far greater than even minimal requirements for open-carry or concealed-carry. Protecting others is a noble cause, but Agamben warns that suspensions of law—states of exception—are dangerous tools that “produce a situation in which the emergency becomes the rule, and the very distinction between peace and war (and between foreign and civil war) becomes impossible” (Agamben, 2003, p. 22). Both Bucky Cap’s sidearm and open-carry signify extended exceptions with no clear end to the heightened conflicts that prompted their acceptance.

Superhero media rely on the state of exception to never end. Temporary peace might be the goal of a specific series, but the cyclic trajectory of these stories reveals worlds eternally at war. At the beginning of *The Dark Knight*, for example, Batman already helped preserve the peace, but he also inspired “copycat vigilantes” to dress like Batman and use shotguns to fight crime. As McGowan says, “Once one embraces the exception, the need for exceptionality will constantly expand insofar as the exception augments the very problem that it is created to fight against” (McGowan, 2009). Batman decides that the only way to keep the city safe without encouraging others to follow his exceptional lead is to become the villain, publicly that is. Marvel Comics also address the importance of pure symbols. Cap’s former child-sidekick, who also premiered in 1941, eventually died. When he returned as the Winter Soldier, a brainwashed Soviet agent, “Bucky was reinvented as an assassin who did the dirty work that Captain America could not be seen to do” (Dittmer, 2012, p. 139). While Cap prefers to keep his hands clean, recasting Bucky as his assassin-sidekick during World War II exposes a contradiction on display in Captain America as a symbol: His hands stay clean at the moral expense of his team members.

Superhero stories provide iconic and, at times, controversial visuals laced with rhetorical significance. For example, the first image of Bucky as the new Captain America was commissioned by Alex Ross, who favors photorealist painting instead of digital art or hand-drawn illustration. In the inaugural image, Cap dons a sidearm while bursting out of an American flag, evoking a politically sublime image. This Cap might represent darker times with his new sidearm, but a sparkling costume on display in the extradiegetic space of an American flag constructs a visually transcendent and emotionally—excessively so—dramatic icon of Americanness. This juxtaposes decades of the character’s transition from soldier to superhero, from one who abides by American law to one who transcends national identity for the greater good of all (Cunningham, 2009, p. 177). The iconography of this first look does not introduce a new side of Cap. It merely makes overt what was previously engraved. Captain America has always resided in an eternal state of exception as a heroic figure meant to preserve the law without clear obligation to law enforcers or lawmakers, only his idealized understanding of American values as global—galactic, on occasion—values. And as Dittmer notes, he continually recruits a superhero team that is not obligated to preserve life as he does (Dittmer, 2012, p. 139). The shield previously served as a symbol of defense and restraint (complimented by Cap’s unique ability to utilize it like a boomerang), but Bucky Cap’s sidearm and Rogers Cap’s exceptional gun use in *Fear Itself* overtly call attention to the state of exception already inherent in vigilantism.

During Marvel Comics’s 2006–2007 crossover event *Civil War*, in which superheroes collide over a new law requiring metahumans to register their secret identities with the U.S. government, Iron Man says, “Every super hero is a potential gun... and the last time I checked, guns required registration” (White, 2014, p. 11). Responding to the arc’s ethical dilemma, *io9* adds: “the Superhuman Registration Act is not the world’s worst idea. We regulate cars, guns (kind of), and other potentially fatal things” (Bricken, 2015). This point of view is shared by two *Business Insider* columnists whom debate whether Iron Man or Captain America is right in the film *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), which explores the same ethical dilemma. To make their case, the columnists also consider the film an analogy for gun control: “If you compare the superhuman registration debate in ‘Captain America: Civil War’ to the real-world debate of gun control in the U.S., then the answer—at least in my eyes—is clear: Tony Stark is right” (Clark and Wittmer, 2018). If superheroes are like guns, they must be regulated to ensure the safety of all citizens. Otherwise, the exception becomes the rule.

Of course, the matter is more complicated than that for superheroes. Folks with superpowers are not solely weapons but individuals with inalienable rights. And those same individuals often feel compelled to act when they encounter threats to the safety of others. As Peter Parker’s uncle said, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Superheroes and their superpowers would necessitate Stand Your Ground Laws, as they feel compelled to act; *it’s in their blood, literally*. Otherwise, the law would require superheroes to act against their nature, what is part of their anatomy, their DNA. For this reason, superheroes serve as a complicated analogy for gun use since they are a convergence of weapon and body, and with this convergence, the weapon becomes a natural extension of the body. While guns are not a natural extension of the body but objects customized to feel that way, the Second Amendment’s priority above most constitutional rights does conflate an allegedly natural correlation, one overtly on display in superhero media.

Considering the Second Amendment’s primacy, Cap’s opinion in *Shards of Infinity* is perhaps even more unsettling for gun-rights advocates. But Cap does not plan an outright ban, instead wishing for a world in which such devices need not exist. In fact, Cap believes in the necessity of exceptional times, lest he would not condone any form of deadly force from himself and his allies. Now more superhero than soldier, Captain America is a vigilante whose actions are not sanctioned by a sovereign power. And when he uses a gun, as a private citizen, he enters a complicated state of exception, empowered by the Second Amendment. The fetish of his gun exposes the state of exception inherent in its use, regardless of the sentimentality that surrounds Cap as the less-violent ideal, which is addressed in a final example.

The gun is not “ideal”

Captain America, as an ideal, needs no gun. Only regular folks do. In his inaugural mission as Cap, Bucky quickly learns he cannot throw the shield at foes with Steve Rogers’ accuracy. To compensate, he shoots three attackers in the kneecaps, complimenting the shield with a sidearm (Brubaker et al., 2007). Bucky Cap’s exceptional gun use—a possible superpower in its own right, since Bucky is a skilled spy and assassin with more than 60 years of experience—compensates for imperfect reality, as does Rogers Cap’s continual association with others whom use guns and other weaponry. In essence, Cap’s ideals, especially the ability to subdue enemies without resorting to violence, are impossible for powerless folks. This perspective, applied beyond sequential art, ignores the work of nonviolent activists throughout history. Their life’s work—their agendas—made ideals practical in modest and

large ways, from Mahatma Gandhi to Alice Paul to Martin Luther King Jr. What is fascinating about Cap's gun use is growing concern about a symbol of the United States using a gun. As an American figure, Cap should not be conflicted. The Second Amendment permits him to form a militia and defend himself. But as a superhero who surpasses the ideals of one nation, protecting the pursuit of happiness for all, his moral obligation is to something higher. For gun-rights advocates, many gun restrictions lead lawmakers down a slippery slope. The reverse is true for superheroes like Rogers Cap and, especially, Batman. Using a gun, drifting nearer to a state of exception with no end, is the slippery slope.

If this is true, Captain America's minimal uses promote a beneficial discourse, at least for gun-control advocates. As Krips notes, fetishism does not always result in an unhealthy fixation on an object. Instead, "fetishism plays a subversive role in reversing the tendency to 'abstraction'" (Krips, 1999, p. 4). Constant, unfettered use of guns in Marvel Comics, and across popular culture, likely presents an unhealthy fetishizing of weapons that ignores critical engagement with their use. Conversely, Cap's limited use, fetishized in its token interest by media critics and fans, presents a fetish beyond *abstraction*. Its presence, made overt by its absence, encourages debate surrounding American ideals, guns, and their proximity to a nation and globe's greater good.

While fandom sites note Cap's use of guns during WWII, this remains one of the most exceptional moments in world history. *Captain America: Sam Wilson #7* features a unique perspective in response to WWII's historical exceptionalism. In a comics short written by Joss Whedon entitled "Presentation," which explores an untold wartime event, Steve Rogers meets with military public relations about rebranding Captain America. "We figure you might be tired of being on the defensive," they say, addressing the shield as a symbol. "So let's send a message of our own." At this, they unveil a new propaganda poster of Cap holding a large machine with the caption, "Get behind the Amerigun." After they say "the shield reads weak," Cap responds: "I think you boys need to bone up on your iconography. We're not conquerors. We didn't come here to take something. We came to protect something" (Whedon, 2016).

The Amerigun went unaddressed in all reviews from digital news sites, though one group of users noted it under the heading, "Why doesn't Captain America use guns as a Superhero?" Responses varied from a "grandfather clause" based on the character's Marvel Comics reemergence in the 1960s to "Cap doesn't kill people" (JonathanL73, 2017). The thematic point of "Presentation," however, would most assuredly disappoint the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, which already chastised Marvel for daring to explore the United States' unsavory history during WWII: "If the United States cannot feel proud about saving the world between 1941 and 1945, then there is no basis for pride in our past or gratitude for our present. Our country and our Armed Forces deserve better" (Medved and Lackner, 2003, p. 7).

The Defense of Democracies' perspective assumes Marvel Comics relies on a singular master plan, not the creative input of many creators. Rather than see the character and his connection to guns as solely liberal or conservative, Captain America is a unique kind of empty signifier, which Chandler defines as a symbol that is "vague, highly variable, unspecifiable" (Chandler, 2007, p. 90). Multiple iterations of Captain America, including Rogers Cap, Bucky Cap, Sam Wilson Cap, and even Hydra Cap, a villainous doppelgänger, imply an unstable symbol of "America" filled with myriad meanings as time passes. Bucky Cap occurred during heightened anxiety surrounding the war on terror, while Rogers Cap in *Shards of Infinity* arrived after mass shootings at an Orlando nightclub and in Las Vegas and alongside multiple

school shootings as well. Whether or not creators consciously consider these events when developing story arcs is less important than how those arcs are received.

In the late 2010s, however, Marvel has established clearer lines. Acclaimed cartoonist Art Spiegelman—who wrote Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel *Maus* (1991), which explores the story of his father as a Holocaust survivor—removed an intro planned to appear in a volume on golden age of Marvel, who served as a co-publisher for the volume. Spiegelman was told to revise an excerpt that called President Donald Trump "an Orange Skull," which did not comply with Marvel's "apolitical" position. Instead, the intro appeared in *The Guardian*, and Spiegelman added new paragraphs about Marvel's chairman and Trump supporter, Isaac "Ike" Perlmutter, concluding in the piece that "everything is political... just like Captain America socking Hitler on the jaw" (Spiegelman, 2019). As a Disney property, Marvel belongs to a long history of complicated politics, most recently resistance to overt displays of topics like LGBTQ+ representation, like Cap's aforementioned pro-gay stance, which occurs briefly, *Thor: Ragnarok's* (2017) removal of a bisexual scene for character Valkyrie (Nicholson, 2017), and the live-action *Beauty and the Beast's* (2017) "gay moment" that was actually a "blink-and-you'll-miss-it shot" (Lawler, 2017). Such omissions ignore a central truth across media: From political affiliations to depicting LGBTQ+ folks to portrayals of gun use, representation is always a political act, even in its absence.

Instead, Marvel's attempts at apolitical art prefer a more generic American exceptionalism that employs gun use without directly referencing it, which is not actually apolitical. As Shapiro notes, "many see gun ownership as an expression of American individualism, self-reliance, and a highly valued 'American exceptionalism'" (Shapiro, 2015, p. 431), and American exceptionalism is the superhero's primary currency. If the United States is exceptional—incomparably different or better, for some, than other countries—gun-control advocates face an uphill battle when comparing the United States's gun laws to those of other nations. Alas, American exceptionalism—easily seen in the popularity of superhero media—and the state of exception—on display in superhero vigilantism and actual laws created in support of the Second Amendment—abstract the law and can confuse criminality with heroism, superheroism as well.

Data availability

All data analyzed for this study are included on the body of the article and clearly cited in the references section.

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The author declares no competing interests.

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