**Superhero Comics and Third Wave Feminism**

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**Abstract:**

Recent developments in superhero comics has seen positive changes to the representation of characters and storylines. In this article, we use examples of the increase in female characters and female-led titles, the swapping of gender from a male character to a female one and the increase in female writers and artists to investigate how the representation of female characters has evolved. We argue that these changes mark an intervention on behalf of female creators in keeping with the theory and practice of third wave feminism. We also argue that this evolution provides a good example of how third wave feminism remains indebted to and continues the important work of second wave feminism. The article explores the important role of intersectionality alongside themes relating to the body and sexuality, violence, solidarity and equality, and girlhood in comics such as *Birds of Prey*, *Harley Quinn*, *Ms Marvel*, *Captain Marvel* and *A-Force.*

**Keywords:**

Third wave feminism; gender; superheroes; comics; intersectionality; solidarity; girl

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There has been a noticeable change in superhero comics over the last five to ten years that has done a great deal to address their notoriously poor record on representation. Significant changes relating to race and ethnicity have included a black Captain America, the first Pakistani-American hero in Ms Marvel, a Chinese Superman and the founding members of the Justice League reimagined to include Cyborg, a black hero created twenty years after the Justice League first appeared. Sexuality is also given more visibility: gay marriage for instance (between Northstar and Kyle in *Astonishing X-Men* #51) and the first trans character (Gail Simone’s Alysia Yeoh, *Batgirl #1*) to name only a couple.

It is, however, changes made in the representation of gender that is the particular focus of this paper. The increase in female characters, a rise in the number of female-led titles (at the time of writing, that is 11 at Marvel, and 12 at DC), the gender-swapping of traditionally male characters to female and a significant increase in the number of women writing and drawing the comics have all been recent developments in this area. A non-exhaustive list would include Kelly Sue DeConnick, Gail Simone, G. Willow Wilson, Marguerite Bennett, Kelly Thompson, Chelsea Cain, Noelle Stephenson, Emma Rios, Ming Doyle, Margaret Stohl, Stephanie Hans, Marguerite Sauvage, Tula Lotay, Cecil Castellucci, Hope Larson, Kate Leth, Renae De Liz, Erica Henderson and others have been responsible for creating richly diverse work. Without wanting to deny the social and institutional hurdles that still exist within the industry, these women have found a space to challenge aesthetic and narrative conventions in superhero comics. We argue that this development is partly due to the centrality of intersectionality and pluralism to third wave feminism. In this article, we analyse representations of the body and sexuality, violence, equality and solidarity, and girlhood to address this specific instantiation of third wave activism and its shared heritage with earlier feminist engagements with popular culture.

**The female superhero and third wave feminism**

Historically under- and mis-represented, women superheroes became more prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, when more and more female-led titles (Robinson, 2004; D’Amore, 2008 and 2012) and powerful female characters appeared in a male-dominated world. However, feminist concerns remain around what Michelle R. Finn calls ‘a vision of female empowerment’ (2013: 7), which she argues has been missing since the Golden Age (1938-1956). Although Wonder Woman was not the first female superhero, she is seen as the founding female figure in the genre, if only for the simple fact she is one of only three superheroes (along with Superman and Batman) to have been written continuously since the genre began[[1]](#endnote-1). Her creator, William Moulton Marston, a strong believer of female empowerment, gave her strength, intelligence, athleticism and agency and made her a female (though perhaps not necessarily a feminist) role model[[2]](#endnote-2). Marston had in fact close personal ties to the suffrage movement via his wife, Elizabeth Holloway, and to the Planned Parenthood movement through his mistress, the niece of Margaret Sanger (Lepore 2014).

Wonder Woman’s own creation through an independent act by her mother, who made her from clay without any involvement from a man, echoes continuing feminist concerns about the importance of women’s freedom to make choices about their reproductive rights[[3]](#endnote-3). Indeed, reproductive rights have been a consistent concern of different feminist ‘waves’, which began with demands for universal suffrage and extended to violence, sexual identity and equality in the work place. According to Finn (2013), however, the lack of concern for these issues in early versions of Wonder Woman explained why she should not be seen as a feminist superhero: “for starters, Wonder Woman failed to challenge the long-standing prejudice that the feminine ideal was white. Not only were Wonder Woman and her sisters fair-skinned, the Wonder Woman comic books reinforced racism by debasing minority characters” (2013: 15).

While many second wave feminists[[4]](#endnote-4) were involved in black and Hispanic civil rights movements, as well as the emerging politics around gay and lesbian rights (somewhat problematizing the “wave” metaphor), it is the intersecting of a range of concerns including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age and class that came to be the defining element of the so-called third wave in the early 1990s, and is the key to understanding recent shifts in representations of gender in superhero comics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Defining the third wave, Budgeon (2011) argues that feminism has accommodated “a proliferation of feminine subjectivities and multiplying forms of feminist affiliation” (282), even seemingly incompatible ones. For Natalie Fixmer and Julia Wood (2005) intersectional feminism also meant that the movement could not solve the problem by ‘adding’ women with different experiences and from different cultures. For third wavers, identities are intersectional, they “co-mingle and overlap” and it is an error to think that women “can be defined by certain discrete categories” (238).

America Chavez, a young, gay Latina hero (and a new Marvel title that began as we were writing) epitomises these intersections of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity (with Issue 1 also highlighting that she is a migrant and an orphaned child of a same-sex couple). Not only, then, are numerous experiences now central to third wave feminism; the subjectivities of individual women are also understood to be multiple. For America Chavez these various aspects of her biography differently inform her agency and identity, enabling the development of a complex character. The constellation of power, strength, vulnerability, anxiety, determination, courage, care as well as problems with attachment that are all present in the first issue of the new title is also a good example of how intersectionality enables what Budgeon calls the “recoding” of femininities (2011, 283).

In superhero comics, this multiplicity is most evident in a character called, Kamala Kahn, the new Ms. Marvel, who was created in 2013 and has had her own title written by G. Willow Wilson since February 2014. Kamala Khan is Muslim, and the first Pakistani-American superhero in the Marvel universe. As Wilson writes her, these religious, ethnic and cultural components of the character are related, yet distinct. This is regularly played out in her family home in New Jersey in relation to her brother, who is more religiously orthodox than she is, but beautifully comes together in Issue 12 when Ms. Marvel visits extended family in Karachi. Recent events have meant she leaves Jersey feeling unsure about who she is and where she belongs, only to make the discovery that “the missing pieces” in her life “aren’t part of a place”, but things that she, as a young, super-powered, Pakistani-American woman has to work out for herself. She discovers there is no holiday for her, and no place of refuge. Once in Karachi, she discovers that her heroism is needed. Without her regular costume, which represents her newfound agency, she has to improvise, leaping into the fray in red leggings, blue dress and red scarf worn, in part, as both hijab and niqāb.

Wilson, sensitive to Ms. Marvel’s gender (as the honorific “Ms.” Suggests) uses her to express traditional feminist tropes about equality and empowerment, as she negotiates relations with people and institutions on the path to working out who she is and what she wants. Age and the particular forms of discrimination faced by her generation are other central themes in Wilson’s writing and Kamala’s story. Coming from New Jersey and living in a socio-economic group ordinarily referred to as working class, Wilson’s Ms. Marvel also fights gentrification by property speculators and exploitative rents. Ms. Marvel is, then, a young, Muslim woman, a Pakistani-American and a working-class millennial. In the words of Fixmer and Wood this represents the “kind of solidarity that incorporates difference while transcending identity politics” (240), or what R. Claire Snyder calls “a dynamic and welcoming politics of coalition” (2008, 176)[[6]](#endnote-6).

One of the main reasons for this recent intervention in superhero comics is precisely because third wave feminism is part of a broader engagement with the intersectional axes of class, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disability and complex gender politics, including support for transgender representation, which have come together in really innovative ways around the wider issue of representation. Although it is often believed that transformative politics requires a strong identity, it is precisely this diversity of seemingly contradictory positions in third wave feminism that has enabled the coalition of writers, artists and editors it brings together to have such a significant input into the current debates about the genre. For Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards, contradiction is precisely what leads to innovation: “contradictions found in third wave feminism”, they write, “are often designed to challenge traditional notions of identity and to create ambiguities, divergences, incompatibilities, and different ways of thinking” (2009, 6). They argue that contradictions enable women “to discover and experiment with the various dimensions of themselves” (8), which can consequently enable “new possibilities and options for everyday experiences and activism” (2). For Patricia Pender, writing about the exemplary third wave heroine, Buffy, this is of the upmost importance because the “primary goal of third wave feminism is to question our inherited models of feminist agency and political efficacy” (2007, 224).

**The body and sexuality**

As Shelley Budgeon has noted, another key feature of third wave feminism is seeing ‘popular culture simultaneously as a site of pleasure and an object of critique’ (2011, 280). This is also in keeping with Christine Gledhill’s ‘Pleasurable Negotiations’: a call for ‘rethinking relations between media products, ideologies and audiences’ (1999: 169) and a way to understand femininity and womanhood not as abstract “textual” positions, but as “lived” socio-cultural categories (169) from where women make varied use and interpretations of media products. Central to this were the so-called sex wars that focused on the opposition to pornography and the broader sex industry. Sex-positive feminists wanted to support and defend users and workers as part of the feminist project. As Melanie Waters notes, third wave feminists like Debbie Stoller advocated for “sexuality and its various expressive modes” (2007, 258) to become an integral component of feminist politics. Related to this were on-going debates about clothing and make-up that were often regarded as tools of patriarchal oppression. Yet, feminists argued, this alienated many women from the movement and forced too rigid definitions of pleasure, desire and sexuality on women, who ought to be allowed to present themselves and use their bodies as they wished.

The adoption of sex-positive attitudes by third wave feminists enabled them to make important negotiations (in Gledhill’s sense) with the representation of women’s bodies in superhero comics. The “Good Girl”/”Bad Girl” provides a pertinent example to illustrate this point. In 1947, in response to the popularity of comics with servicemen stationed abroad, a style known as “Good Girl” art that increasingly sexualized female characters in the manner of pin-up girls developed. The style appeared sporadically until it morphed into the “Bad Girl” art of the 1990s, defined by the use elongated bodies, huge breasts, wasp-like waists and minimal clothing[[7]](#endnote-7). It was a style that forced women’s bodies into impossible shapes and inexplicable poses with one, commonly known as the ‘broke back’ sadly becoming a regular feature in the genre. This particular pose has been the focus of much feminist commentary on superhero comics over the last ten years and, according to research done by Carolyn Cocca (2014), there has been some qualitative and quantitative improvements in this area.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Both a sex-positive approach and the adoption of “rhetorical strategies” (Renegar and Sowards 2009, 8) of patriarchy—such as the claim that “our desires aren't simply booby traps set by the patriarchy” (Baumgardner and Richards 2010, 136)—has meant that women writers have been able to use images of scantily clad heroines and do a “Good Girl”/”Bad Girl” makeover on characters that previously weren’t drawn that way, such as the transformation that Harley Quinn went through at the hands of Amanda Conner. Where Harley was previously covered head to foot in a harlequin outfit, she is now in revealing short pants and crop top. Originally brought into the comics via the DC animated universe as The Joker’s psychiatrist and later his girlfriend, and thereby positioned very clearly on the side of the villains, Harley Quinn has since undergone a period of significant transformation, most notably when DC rebooted their comics under the banner “The New 52” in 2011 when Conner rehabilitated her from villain to anti-hero.

This transformation also involved her independence from The Joker. So, while her sexuality has been accentuated by her new look she is totally in control of it, making an important contrast with the earlier, less-sexualised depictions when she was nevertheless in a deeply abusive relationship and very much controlled by The Joker. The message from Connor seems to be that autonomy and agency with regards to one’s sexuality is far more important than a “modest” costume in an abusive relationship. If anything, the most important figure in her life now is Poison Ivy, another female character undergoing a transformation from villain to anti-hero, and with whom Harley starts a relationship. Both Harley and Ivy are presented as independent women, in charge of their own bodies and their sexuality, and yet scenes between the two are also very stereotypically “feminine”. In bed together, they chat, almost like teenagers, with Harley wearing a pair of pink fluffy bunny slippers, a sign of childishness or innocence in stark contrast to her actual life. She is also regularly shown making herself up and choosing different costumes, because she couldn’t stand to be as boring as Superman and wear the same outfit every day. This appropriation of the supposed tools of patriarchy (make-up, high heels, etc.) fits very well with some of the aspects of third wave feminism, such as renegotiations of ideas of femininity and fluid sexuality.

The first volume of the new run opens with Harley Quinn’s arrival in Coney Island, where she has inherited a property. She rents out parts of the property to sitting tenants and she lives in another part. She uses the roof garden as sanctuary for the stray animals she liberates (illegally, of course) from a rescue centre rumoured to put down unwanted pets. This picture of Harley is highly complex: she is a psychiatrist, a vigilante, an animal rights activist and a landlord. She is also a bisexual woman who has had her skin bleached bone white and needs to put on make-up to pass as ‘white’ (and hence ‘normal’) when she returns to her professional engagements as a therapist. She arrives in Coney Island riding a motorbike, laden with all her belongings. The bike itself is a customized chopper and can be read as an appropriation of a traditionally male symbol of virility. She is at the same time exaggeratedly ‘female’ in her anatomical form and defies gender expectations through her ‘masculine’ performance and her dealings with the ‘bad guys’ that threaten her. While superheroes automatically lend themselves to intersectional theories of identity, given that they are split between a heroic and a secret identity, Harley’s identity is a complex constellation of related yet contradictory positions.

As the story develops, she puts together a ragtag group of friends that help her run the building and fight off the bounty hunters that are out to kill her. Again, this suggests a solidarity born out of emerging goals rather than a predefined identity, and very much fits with the post-foundational approach taken by third wave feminism. Harley therefore displays both fallibility and vulnerability, at least in her relationship with Ivy and her need for others to look out for her, and yet she is a seriously empowered figure living an independent life on her own terms. Her autonomy is quite literal, as she obeys no law but her own.

By the close of the first volume, there is a wonderful meta-fictional moment that brings many of these themes together. The large amount of faeces deposited in the animal sanctuary on the roof needs to be cleared out. Harley’s friend, Big Tony, builds a machine that enables her to fire sacks full of the faeces across the city, which she does dressed as a seventeenth century naval captain. A few of the sacks then hit the offices of DC comics during a planning meeting predominantly staffed by men. Here, the comic registers something of the contradiction and ambiguity of Harley’s fictional liberation within a male-dominated industry, and both the implicit critique and the proposed course of action are open to a feminist interpretation. On another level this can also be taken as a counter to Fixmer and Wood’s criticism of third wave feminism for its focus on a personal or “bottom-up” (2005, 236) view of power rather than an institutional one. This episode in Harley Quinn’s Coney Island life can clearly be read as a metaphor for the external, top-down constraints that still threaten to limit her personal empowerment.

**Violence**

Gail Simone’s run on *Birds of Prey*, which started in 2003, and is perhaps one of the earliest contributors to the phenomenon we are discussing here. It stars a team of female superheroes including Black Canary, Oracle, Huntress, Lady Blackhawk and the duo Hawk (the only man) and Dove, but is also indicative of the supposedly contradictory nature of third wave feminism. Simone worked with a male artist, Ed Benes, who continued many of the ‘Good Girl’ (some might even say ‘Bad Girl’) tropes that many feminists were critical of, but Simone still managed to use the book to problematize, if not actively challenge the scopic regimes of the “male gaze”, such as the time the heroes rescue Oswald Cobblepot (aka The Penguin) in Issue 3. Having lost a lot of blood in a fight, he has hallucinations of the women in soft porn poses offering themselves to him as sexual playthings. In reality, the women look on and wonder what is going on in his deluded mind.

This scene aside, Simone is keen to establish the feminist credentials of the group from the start. Issue 1 opens with Black Canary facing off a group of kidnappers, the first of whom she knows has a history of violence against women. Once she takes them down, she reminds the leader of the group not to call her “miss”. Yet, tapping into the appropriation of girl culture that is also central to third wave feminism, she is happy for her friends to call her “missy”. This is only a small feature of the relationship amongst the women, but it speaks to an important form of empowerment over language that they use on their own terms. They also refer to each other as “Sis” and significant periods of the story are given over to moments when the “girls” open up to each other about the troubled lives they have had and realize the benefits of sisterly support. In other words, the subtext of Simone’s *Bird of Prey* is how powerful, intelligent, independent and skilled women understand that they are more effective and gain a stronger sense of personal identity from the work they do as a group. Again, this reiterates the idea that “Third-wave feminism begins from the position that any understanding of the relationship between feminism and women’s lives must work consciously with women’s wide-ranging differences” (Budgeon 2011, 281). In *Birds of Prey*, solidarity is the key to the success of this group of women, who all have different abilities, biographies and grievances. Simone’s run, then, is as much about the defeat of the bad guys as it is about the moulding of these differences into a feminist consciousness.

Gail Simone is also noted for bringing back Barbara Gordon as Batgirl, which was another title in DC’s “New 52” line. To understand the significance of Barbara Gordon’s return we need to go back to a very important and controversial Batman story by Alan Moore called *The Killing Joke*. Here, The Joker shoots Barbara Gordon (Commissioner Gordon’s daughter) severing her spine and crippling her. The story also suggests there is subsequent sexual assault, recorded by The Joker and subsequently shown to the Commissioner in an attempt to drive him mad[[9]](#endnote-9). The story has now become infamous for this moment of “fridging” that women writers and readers of superhero comics have been trying to eradicate from story lines. For those unfamiliar with the term, “fridging” stands for any use of violence (and other forms of disempowerment) against women that is simply there to move the narrative along or provide motivation for the male hero. The word is derived from another infamous event in *Green Lantern* #54 from 1994, in which Major Force kills and dismembers Alex de Witt, the girlfriend of the then Green Lantern, Kyle Rayner, who comes home to find her remains stuffed into his refrigerator. In response to this and many more examples, in 1999 Gail Simone started the website Women in Refrigerators, which documents instances of this form of violence.

As the result of the violence suffered in *The Killing Joke*, Barbara Gordon later became Oracle in the Birds of Prey, working as a data operative supporting numerous heroes thanks to her photographic memory and genius level intelligence. The creation of Oracle a year after publication of *The Killing Joke* was, perhaps, the only positive thing to come from the story and was itself an important moment for the representation of diversity. Bringing back Barbara Gordon as Batgirl was therefore very significant due to intersectional concerns about the loss of DC Comics’ major disabled hero (Cocca, 2014). Despite this legitimate grievance, Simone wrote an important story, explicitly presenting Batgirl as a survivor of male violence and someone still profoundly affected by the post-traumatic stress of earlier events. She brought her back as a vulnerable, emotionally and psychologically scarred woman, deeply anxious about being exposed to the criminals she used to fight, but whose bravery and courage helped her work through her trauma.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Violence against women has been further addressed in various ways in recent comics. A particularly clever example was in issue 4 of *Angela: Queen of Hel*, when the Ur-Father of Asgaard, Bor, verbally abuses Angela and her lover Sera in the middle of a fight. He demands to know “What whorespawn splattern is this?”. But, as Bennett continues to write his abuse of the women, she decides to effectively *overwrite* it. “Depraved whelp that spluttered from the legs of”, Bor continues, before Bennett intercedes and, in a metafictional moment, completes the sentence with “[nope, too gross sorry]”, and then carries on this live editing of the Ur-Father’s voice with “[A lot of misogynist filth] [Red pill M.R.A. meninist casual racism] [Unsolicited opinions about Israel???]” (Bennett, Jacinto, Hans, 2016). Given that voice is such a powerful signifier of authority, this is a brilliantly subversive move.

Another very interesting take on male violence is the recent *Poison Ivy: Cycle of Life and Death* written by Amy Chu (Chu and Mann, 2016). In the story, Ivy works for a biochemical company interested in her research into plant genetics. Despite experiencing male colleagues inappropriately touching, groping and assaulting women, both at work and outside it, she uses the job to support her own experiments in human/plant hybrids. Through these experiments she creates two daughters, Rose and Hazel, echoing the reproductive powers that Hippolyte had used to create Wonder Woman. Early on, her research is stolen by her boss, Eric Grimley, who uses it to create another girl, Thorn, and to give himself monstrous plant-like superpowers. When Ivy discovers that Thorn is the victim of Grimley’s torture, she has to destroy him. There is a moment where another plant-based hero, Swamp Thing, seems to arrive just in time to save them, but it is only the collective work of the women that finally defeats Grimley. Most interestingly, the destruction of Grimley (or the monster, Grim) is shown through his dismemberment, starting with Thorn cutting off his hand. This is a repetition of an image in which men’s hands are continually transformed in the comic, often by being turned to wood, and is a stark statement about the hands that throughout the story have indiscriminately touched, groped, assaulted and tortured. In both the Angela and Poison Ivy stories, the sexuality of the heroes is an important marker of intersectionality and solidarity amongst women, with the Angela story directly referencing the kind the daily misogyny women who express such solidarity online encounter.

**Equality and solidarity**

Speaking of solidarity, there have been a number of important recent stories that address issues of equality and empowerment as a collective practice. There is some disagreement amongst scholars as to the exact time when comics started to readdress gender imbalance and even tackle feminist concerns over equality. Robinson (2004) argues that female empowerment in superhero comics did not take place until 1972, when Gloria Steinem put Wonder Woman on the front cover of *Ms* magazine[[11]](#endnote-11). For Mattoon D’Amore (2008), however, there had been an earlier stirring of feminist consciousness in 1964 when the Invisible Girl, Sue Storm, discovered new powers. D’Amore notes how the Invisible Girl, who first appeared in 1961, perfectly encapsulated the invisibility faced by women that Betty Friedan would address two years later in *The Feminine Mystique*. But, according to D’Amore, the Invisible Girl “finds a way to grapple with some of the early issues of feminism” (np), primarily around work, a public role, recognition and power and even more so through her later role as mother (D’Amore, 2012). In the 1964 story that D’Amore sees as pivotal, team leader, Reed Richards, unlocks her untapped powers that include the ability to project force fields and make other people or things invisible. Where her strength had previously been to disappear, she is now even stronger when she remains visible. For D’Amore, “her visibility is a classic feminist victory” (np), even allowing her to defeat the team’s strongest member, The Thing[[12]](#endnote-12).

As benevolent leaders/fathers/patriarchs, men will ordinarily only concede a small portion of that power to the deserving, but when Jason Aaron decided to make Thor Odinson unworthy and give the hammer and the title of Thor to Jane Foster, he was quite explicit about the comic’s pro-feminist intentions[[13]](#endnote-13). This is most evident in issue 5. Firstly, on discovering the fact that Thor is now a woman, super-villain Carl Creel, aka Absorbing Man, complains that “damn feminists are ruining everything” (Aaron and Dautermann 2005, np). Secondly, when Titania, Creel’s partner-in-crime, shows up, she also remarks on the name, saying she’s surprised she’s not called “She-Thor or Lady Thunderstrike”, referencing the rather staid habit of adding a gendered prefix to a female ‘version’ of a hero. According to Aaron, Thor is just Thor, irrespective of gender.[[14]](#endnote-14) Thirdly, Titania, backs down from the fight out of what she says is respect for what this new Thor represents, even if she refers to this solidarity as just a “one-time girl-power pass” (np) and threatens to rip her head off the next time they meet.

We will say more about this use of the term ‘girl’ in the next section. Suffice to say here that, while criticised, the term is used by third wave feminists as a “parodic recontextualisation of girlhood and [a] playful severing of signifier and signified” (Munford 2007, 271) in such a way that the expected activities of ‘girls’ are significantly deformed and transformed here. Fourthly, the issue starts with a direct comment on the role that men have as arbiters of worth and bestowers of power. On the first page, we see Odin complaining that Thor’s hammer has been stolen. In effect, Jane Foster has taken or assumed the title without it being bestowed on her by the All-Father, Odin, as is the norm. The opening rant by Odin is also a clever way for Aaron to echo and mock complaints from male readers about what they see as the illegitimacy of the usurper, Jane Foster.

Another character we would argue is crucial to the current intervention and is central to this theme of equality and solidarity is Carol Danvers, formerly Ms. Marvel (before Kamala Khan took the name), but who now carries the title Captain Marvel. Carol Danvers first appeared as Ms. Marvel in January 1977. She was then a major in the US Air Force who became super-powered in a 1968 story but was ignored until she reappeared in 1977 with the new name, where the honorific clearly highlights feminist awareness.[[15]](#endnote-15) In what is an extraordinary first issue written by Gerry Conway with a writing credit to his wife, Carla, Ms. Marvel is presented as a cross between Superman and Wonder Woman in her heroic guise. In her civilian role, she demands equal pay for running a women’s magazine that the male owner, J. Jonah Jameson, believes has lost direction, because it now publishes articles about the feminist writer Kate Millett, rather than offering dietary advice. After much early promise the character was given a generally shoddy treatment by later writers, including an infamous rape story in issue 200 of *The Avengers*. So, she was the perfect vehicle for a serious transformation when writing duties were given to Kelly Sue DeConnick.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Contrary to what we will argue, Charlotte Taylor Ashfield has claimed that the “‘faux feminism’” found in DeConnick’s *Captain Marvel* “will not pose a challenge to patriarchal hegemony [because] Captain Marvel’s rebuttal against sexism is reduced to overcoming personal adversary and her entire first run is exemplary of this postfeminist notion of ‘self-as-project’” (2015, 4). However, self-as-project is both a major trope within the superhero genre and a third wave understanding of what it means to be a feminist. The self in this view is an activist tool (Budgeon, 2011); it is what allows superheroines to have flaws and embrace them without diminishing their power. This used to apply to numerous male heroes, whose masculinity would never be threatened by their faults. But, with Carol Danvers, the self-as-project also becomes available to female heroes and, as such, it becomes a feminist act.

Captain Marvel’s feminism is in fact clear from the very first issue where Captain America bestows the title of Captain Marvel on Carol Danvers, who doesn’t feel deserving of it. As we have already noted, this is the traditional expression of male power, in which the authority figure confers legitimacy on the woman and her self-doubts. Yet DeConnick subverts this throughout when she shows Carol to be the most effective in their fight with Absorbing Man (again), finally using the sash from her uniform to overcome him—the only bit of Carol’s old uniform to survive the costume redesign that puts her in an aviator style jump suit rather than a leotard and thigh-length boots. During the banter, she also reminds the Absorbing Man, who has referred to her as Captain America’s secretary, that she outranks the Captain as she left the Air Force as Colonel Danvers.

The most important scenes come later in the issue, however, where Danvers decides that she is ‘taking the damn name’ (DeConnick and Soy 2012, np). The choice of words here is important, because we are supposed to read it as Danvers both accepting Captain America’s offer and *seizing* the opportunity herself. Here she recognizes the conferring of the title but simultaneously declares it irrelevant: she doesn’t need permission. This decision comes after reflecting on what her childhood hero, a pilot named Helen Cobb who held “fifteen speed records when she retired” (np), would have done. The point here is that she does what she does only because inspirational women have gone before her and broken the limits previously set for women. She takes the name not because Captain America conferred it upon her, but because her hero has shown her not to wait for permission from men. In the first issue of the next volume, this attitude is reaffirmed when she effectively ends her relationship with boyfriend James Rhodes (a.k.a. War Machine) to take up a new job as “boss of space” (DeConnick and Lopez, 2014).

In the earlier volume, there is a significant scene in which Cobb and Danvers meet and Cobb acknowledges their ‘failure’ to perform femininity in a way that would be expected of them. She reminisces: “Folks want to blame someone for gals like us. ‘Her daddy was unkind’ or ‘some fella broke her heart’ … Hogwash” (np). This relation between the two women is important because it clearly sets out a sense of solidarity that is essential in feminism. It also acknowledges the inter-generational debt that many critics claim is missing from the new wave, and perhaps further problematizes the wave metaphor. Snyder, for example, has noted how “third-wavers frequently overstate their distinctiveness while showing little knowledge of their own history” (182). But both the constant presence of Helen Cobb in DeConnick’s run and her befriending of a girl called Kit, for whom Danvers becomes the childhood hero, counter this charge.

This theme of solidarity comes to the fore in the short story that ended the run under the four-issue titled *Captain Marvel and the Carol Corps*[[17]](#endnote-17). The title was part of a giant crossover event called *Secret Wars* that reset the Marvel universe. The two previous Marvel universes had been smashed into each other and the fragments of what was left were held together by the will of a tyrannical Dr. Doom who had now become a God. Captain Marvel and the Carol Corps lived in a region of Doom’s Battleworld called Hala Field. They had no memories of whom they had previously been and their task was now to police the skies to ensure the integrity of Hala Field’s borders, as dictated by Doom. Referring to themselves as Banshees, their solidarity is exemplified in their definition of a Banshee as a woman, who ‘lives life on her own terms, by her own code, but with the knowledge that she’s part of something bigger than herself’ (DeConnick, Thompson, Braga and Pantalena 2015, np). What is especially interesting about these last few issues co-written by DeConnick and Thompson is the way in which the other women in the group initiate Danvers’s scepticism about the truth of the world they live in. This in turn leads to Danvers and the Corps making a significant contribution to toppling Doom’s tyranny. This is an important counter to the post-feminist ideology of individual empowerment, since it is women as a group (and the seemingly less important characters in the comic) that bring about consciousness.

**Girl, girlhood and girl-power**

Another important title that emerged from the Secret Wars event was *A-Force*, originally promoted as an all-female Avengers who protected the region of Battleworld called Arcadia[[18]](#endnote-18). One of the peculiarities of *Secret Wars* was that heroes could appear in several regions simultaneously, meaning that a slightly different version of Captain Marvel was also an important member of the team, along with the leader She-Hulk, and the other main members Dazzler, America Chavez, Nico Minoru, and Loki (the female version). In the first issue, some anomaly in the newly formed world deposits a giant shark in Arcadia, which America summarily throws beyond Arcadia’s wall, damaging the border in the process. Since Doom’s “first law” is that “borders are never to be crossed” (Bennett, Wilson and Molina 2015, np), America is taken away by Doom’s police and exiled. Immediately in the comic, the women, independent and dissenting, are placed in opposition to Doom. But as She-Hulk reluctantly supports America’s exile she is also put in conflict with the younger members of the group, especially America’s close friend, Nico Minoru.

She-Hulk had in earlier stories been used as a vehicle for both addressing and criticizing second wave feminism. In the 1992 ‘gender bomb’ story, for instance, she has to fight Machus who plans to eliminate women and the “female problem” (Robinson 2004, 103). Her conflict with the younger women in *A-Force* can therefore be viewed in terms of the generational issue that has supposedly alienated third from second wave feminists (Snyder 2008, 177), and she is certainly used here to draw out the mother-versus-daughter theme so central to the wave metaphor. She-Hulk, then, is very much the mother here and, although tensions remain between the older and younger generations, their solidarity is reasserted when She-Hulk declares that they must investigate the incursions “and we must defy Doom to do it” (Bennett, Wilson and Molina 2015, np). She-Hulk, as Baroness of Arcadia, is supposed to defend the “first law” of Doom: to not cross borders. But, in transgressing this edict she clearly places her sisters and their security first.

However, there is one element of the story that really makes this a significant third wave intervention: the introduction of an entirely new Marvel character. At the end of issue 1 an entity that becomes known as Singularity falls from the sky. She takes the form of a girl, but is in fact a pocket universe (she looks like a portion of the night sky). Commenting on Twitter, one of the co-writers, G. Willow Wilson, introduced the idea that Singularity’s gender is not inherent but something ‘she’ picks up in the company of women. In keeping with Judith Butler’s famous discussion of gender performance, this idea appears in issue 4, where Nico explains: “She was shapeless, she met us, and she took a form. She watched us. She learned” (Bennett, Wilson and Molina 2015, np). Although she has come from outside, she quickly becomes the women’s defender, she grows in size and invites the other women to escape Doom’s police by hiding inside her. Given that Battleworld is a set of territories created and regulated by Doom, this alternate, safe space and refuge offered by Singularity is very important for any political reading of the story. Also, while Singularity does represent the difference between the generations, the image of the women hiding inside her is also one of the ultimate mother, which in turn collapses this generational difference in favour of another presentation of solidarity.

In issue 5, Singularity finally sacrifices herself to save Arcadia by pulling all of its invaders into the void of space where she appears to explode. On the last page, however, we see Singularity, seemingly asleep, drifting in the infinite reaches of the cosmos. This last page is effectively a eulogy to what Baumgardner and Richards call “eternal girlhood” (2004, 60), which is “not a totem of infantilized culture but a nod to our joyous youth” (61). Over the pictures of Singularity, and in the narrative voice of She-Hulk, Bennett and Wilson conclude the series with the following: “In the endless tides of space, between galaxies that shine like diamonds and pearls … threaded with twisting nebulas, and sewn, bright and burning, with falling stars … there is a girl. She is sweetness and courage, defiance, giving and forgiving … *the little thing* on which all our lives once hinged. A *heroine* forever, and for always. And wherever, whenever, who and whatever she is, or was, or *chooses for herself to be* … in the heart of that girl … *there is an island*” (Bennett, Wilson and Molina 2015, np). That island is not only a physical space (Arcadia, home of A-Force); it is also a metaphor for the place in which women can make decisions and be self-determining.

Munford’s analysis of girl culture and third wave feminism stresses the importance of the “reclamation of girlhood as a space” (2007, 270) for marginalised female subjectivities. In its association of girl with different subjectivities and new forms of agency, it points out “possibilities of resignification” (271) that challenge the normative, patriarchal order. In the pages of *A-Force*, Singularity is effectively an empty signifier that takes on a positive form only in a particular situation or context. As an avatar for what girls might be and do, she is also resistant to the creation of a “hegemonic narrative of girlhood” (272), in the way that the white, middle class definition of woman became hegemonic and hence problematic for second wave feminists.

Girlhood is also shown in this story to be about collective action against patriarchy. As such, it connects second and third wave feminism by bridging the gap between culture and politics; superhero comics and activism. Consequently, while this story “reiterates the trope of mother-daughter conflict”, it doesn’t reinforce an “intergenerational schism” (Munford 2007, 276). It positions “girl as a strong and distinct identity” (Baumgardner and Richards 2004, 63), but uses girlhood as a new call for solidarity and collective action across generations. Hence the importance of She-Hulk narrating that last page. In the post-Secret Wars run, where all the characters now have no memory of their temporary lives on Battleworld, A-Force no longer exist as a team and Singularity, the universal and eternal girl, is running around desperately trying to get them to remember their former solidarity.

**The latest episode in a very long struggle**

In conclusion, it is possible to say that this inter-generational solidarity in feminism has been there from the very beginning. As Finn notes, “evidence that Wonder Woman was not just a temporary inspiration for a wartime change in women’s roles, but a prescription for a long-term redefinition of American womanhood was the fact that her intended audience consisted primarily of children” and was carried by “Wonder Woman’s ‘girl power’ message” (2014: 18). While the specific configuration of feminism known as the third wave has used intersectionality and sex positivity to very effective ends in a genre and an industry so heavily dominated by men, the wave metaphor here only signals the particular context in which feminism is operating at this moment, but one that is clearly dependent upon and thoroughly embraces its past. Nothing demonstrates this more perhaps than issue 17 of *Bombshells* (Bennett et al, 2016) in which a young Jewish girl called Miriam, soon to become the title’s Mary (Miri) Marvel, talks to Batwoman about the female ancestors that inspire her resistance to the oppressive regime they face. This is a female lineage of strength, defiance and rebellion stretching back millennia.

The great advances made by the women currently working in superhero comics is positive for both the genre and, one hopes, for the advancement of feminism. This being said, the challenge faced is still a very difficult one. Just recently *A-Force* was cancelled as was the brilliant *Mockingbird* in which Chelsea Cain virtually deconstructed the genre in the space of 8 issues. In spite of these setbacks, though, new female-led titles are emerging all the time. Most recently *The Unstoppable Wasp* #1 (Whitley and Charretier, 2017) presented one of the most uplifting messages about the power of women and girls as the new Wasp, Nadia (Pym), with the help of her hero Mockingbird, sets herself the mission of finding all the girl geniuses that should be on S.H.I.E.L.D.’s list of the most intelligent people on the planet, but aren’t because the list is run by men. We wish Nadia well in this latest example of a very long struggle.

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1. Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle, preceded Wonder Woman by almost two years, first appearing in *Jungle Comics* in February 1940. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Hanley (2014: 12) argues that Wonder Woman’s feminist-icon status began and finished in 1972, when Gloria Steinem put her on the front cover of *Ms* magazine. Hanley does, however, go on to say that, when she was created, Wonder Woman was a symbol of the power of women: an innate power that all women possessed and that made them ‘superior’ (not equal) to men and, in keeping with what we might understand as a feminist message today, Wonder Woman demonstrated that women can have different expectations and be the most powerful warriors (13). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Recently, Dennis Hopeless in *Spider-Woman* broke a taboo over the representation of pregnancy in superhero comics, with Jessica Drew being shown actively superheroing in the third trimester of her pregnancy. For a discussion of this taboo see Jeffrey A. Brown (2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The relationship between superhero comics and second wave feminism was a difficult one. According to Robinson, strong and independent female characters were often caricatured as ‘just being antimale’ (2004, 86). This is a limited view of the range of female characters and storylines during this period, but for her this was due to the threat of emasculation and castration that male creators saw in second wave feminism. A good example of this fear can be found as late as *Captain America* #391, from September 1991, and the battle between Captain America and Superia and her Femizons. When Superia captures Captain America and Paladin, she puts them in a chemical bath that will turn them both into women. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Responding to the charge of post-feminism, the publication of ‘Becoming the Third Wave’ by Rebecca Walker in *Ms* magazine in January 1992 is seen as an important moment is the adoption of the term. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This has also prompted the feminist theologian, Elizabeth Shussler Fiorenza (2001) to question whether it is better to think of intersectional feminism as a struggle against kyriarchy (from the Greek *kyrios* meaning master): a broader struggle against domination in various social realms. While we believe that the application of kyriarchy could be useful in this context we retain the term patriarchy because we believe the “Father” in patriarchy still takes a privileged position within these interlocking structures of oppression. We also believe that, while this coalition of concerns is crucial for the feminist intervention currently taking place in superhero comics, the focus of this paper is specifically on the structure of gendered domination. For an excellent discussion of applications and criticisms of kyriarchy see Osborne (2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. A different history would date this back to the creation of Vampirella in 1969. The original costume for Vampirella was actually created by Trina Robbins, a sort of red body thong covering crotch and nipples, but with a nice white collar. Vampirella has recently put her ‘mankini’ back in the wardrobe and is now dressed in a style reminiscent of Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. After Gledhill, Cocca also makes an important point about negotiation over these images where sexuality can both unsettle and reinforce traditional gender norms. “As meaning is made in reception”, she writes “how this particular type of sequential art is received will differ across audiences” (2014: 421). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The story was recently re-imagined as an animated film, which not only did not redress the problems of violence, but also made matters worse by suggesting that Batman cared about Batgirl only because he had had sex with her. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The title was handed over to a new creative team with *Batgirl* #35 in December 2014 and, although the comic was aimed at a younger readership and tapped into the spirit of girl power, Barbara Gordon remained haunted by the earlier act of violence. Yet, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of The Joker’s first appearance, DC commissioned a variant (alternative) cover for *Batgirl* #41, drawn by Rafael Albuquerque, that showed The Joker with his arm around a terrified Batgirl, threatening to shoot her. The cover seemed inappropriate for the new readership, but also paid no heed to the trauma that resulted from his earlier violence. In response to criticism from fans the artist apologized and withdrew the cover. The traumatic events suffered by Batgirl in *The Killing Joke* were also written out in *Batgirl* #49 as implanted memories. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. While we agree with Robinson that in a world so dominated by men, “the female superhero originates in an act of criticism” (2004, 7), the female superheroes that followed Wonder Woman lacked her explicitly feminist mission and, in some instances, where introduced for reactionary purposes. For example, after the moral panic surrounding violence and sex in comics in the 1940s and ‘50s, DC decided to ensure their characters were beyond reproach. One method was to introduce Batwoman, Kathy Kane, in 1956 to highlight Batman’s heterosexuality and deflect charges of homoeroticism in the stories of Batman and Robin. Like many female characters that can be disposed of once they have fulfilled their purpose, she was killed off in 1979. When she returned in 2006, however, Kathy, now Kate Kane, was introduced as a lesbian in what was a very knowing critique of her history (Petrovic 2011). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Just over twenty years later she also adopts the name Invisible Woman (Byrne, 1985) after escaping the clutches of a violent, mind-controlling villain called Psycho-Man. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Other male writers have written very positive female-lead comics. For instance, Tom Taylor wrote Laura Kinney, formerly known as X-23, as the *All-New Wolverine*. Another example is Ryan North’s use of a marginal character like Squirrel Girl to disrupt Marvel’s traditional hierarchies (Goodrum 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Having said that, we are not best pleased by the switch of She-Hulk to Hulk in *Hulk* #1 (Tamaki and Leon, 2017). The loss of the “She” prefix is accompanied by a loss of her transformative powers, which resulted from a deeply problematic piece of fridging in the *Civil War II* story. Perhaps the “She” will be turned, when her autonomy returns. We can hope. <https://multiframe.wordpress.com/2017/01/17/the-unstoppable-wasp-1-by-jeremy-whitley-and-elsa-charretier/> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Another example was a year earlier, in 1976, when Supergirl from Earth 2 (part of the DC multiverse) was introduced but took the name Power Girl, refusing to be defined in relation to her famous cousin. There were also occasional, direct attempts to include feminist themes such as the time Marvel introduced a unit of the security agency S.H.I.E.L.D. called ‘Femme Force’ in *Captain America* #144 in1971. This was a group of female agents who actively voiced demands for recognition and equality and leapt into battle shouting “Right on sisters”. When the fighting was done, however, the comics couldn’t be said to pass the Bechdel Test as the women spent most of their time talking about their boyfriends. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. On this topic of the rape story see the very important essay written by Carol Strickland <http://carolastrickland.com/comics/msmarvel/index.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The name Carol Corps acknowledges the real-life Carol Corps that emerged in response to DeConnick’s writing of the comic. These were a group of mostly female fans and cosplayers who used the story of the new Carol Danvers to inspire feminist activism in their everyday lives. We mention the group as an indication of the connection between the *fantasy* of the comics and the *reality* of women’s everyday experiences and the tension between the corporate commodification of feminism and the comics’ contribution to something wider and potentially transformational. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Another important comic for the current intervention is *Bombshells*, also written by Marguerite Bennett, in which the Golden Age is populated solely by female superheroes. Issue 11 introduces an all-female Justice League. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)