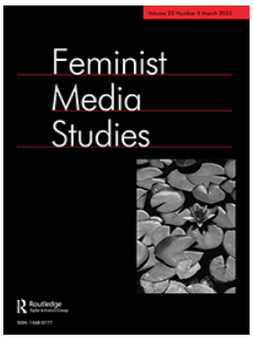

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# "Let's rewrite some history, shall we?": temporality and postfeminism in *Captain Marvel*'s comic book superhero(ine)ism

Miriam Kent

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# "Let's rewrite some history, shall we?": temporality and postfeminism in *Captain Marvel*'s comic book superhero(ine)ism

Miriam Kent

Lecturer in Film Studies, Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

**ABSTRACT**

Superhero comics books' reliance on revision has been discussed but the role of gender in relation to these concepts in such comics is yet to be explored. This paper examines the first story arc of Kelly Sue DeConnick's acclaimed comic book series *Captain Marvel* (2012) through the interrogative lens of postfeminist culture, considering how past and present collided within the relaunching of the popular Marvel comics superheroine Ms. Marvel (Carol Danvers) into Captain Marvel. Simultaneously a postmodern pastiche and a contemporary mediation of popular feminism, the story takes Danvers back, via time travel, to periods before the western second-wave feminist movement took hold. The article thus considers how this *Captain Marvel* storyline engages with contemporary feminist issues such as the proliferation of female superheroes in Marvel comics as well as the retroactive insertion of feminist discourses into an ostensibly prefeminist setting, questioning what, if any, radical interventions in dominant modes of women's representations in superhero narratives these stories might offer.

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## Introduction

2012's *Captain Marvel* comics series written by Kelly Sue DeConnick marked a radical relaunch of the Marvel Comics character formerly known as Ms. Marvel. Among ongoing debates around the marginalization of women in mainstream comics and multimedia superhero narratives, the title was both conventional in its reliance on the superhero comics custom of reinvention and revision and ambitious in its dedication to a projected progressive gender politics. This article focuses on the first arc of *Captain Marvel*,[1] written by DeConnick with art by Dexter Soy and Emma Rios, examining issues relating to superhero comics and temporality through detailed textual, discursive and contextual analysis, with a particular emphasis on how the superhero narrative provides a venue for redressing discourses of gender equality. Superheroine Captain Marvel, whose civilian persona is Carol Danvers, has undergone several revisions throughout her five-decade publication history, partly due to superhero comics' industrial reliance and relishing of

**CONTACT** Miriam Kent miriam.kent@outlook.com Lecturer in Film Studies, Department of Literature, Film and Theatre Studies, University of Essex, Colchester, UK

revisionist narratives, reboots and relaunches. However, when considered in relation to gender and (post)feminisms, in which popular feminisms are more widely circulated than ever, it is imperative to consider how these reinventions intersect with ongoing political, ideological and media shifts. This article highlights the potential of the comics medium, and the superhero genre specifically, to redress historical narratives through its formal capabilities. The genre remains central in maintaining a gendered status quo pertinent to mainstream visual cultures participating in the circulation of postfeminist discourses. The article therefore intervenes in ongoing research into superhero comics as (mainstream) feminist media. It likewise stresses the significance of the Captain Marvel character as a crucial contributor to understandings of gender and superheroes, entering the cultural consciousness as a response to second-wave feminism and undergoing significant developments, including mind control and rape, before being relaunched. This discussion foregrounds a relatively neglected character as these debates are often dominated by DC's Wonder Woman.

Simultaneously a postmodern pastiche and a contemporary mediation of popular feminism, the story follows Danvers' travels to the 1940s, a period before the onset of western second-wave feminism. Here, she joins forces with the Banshee Squadron, a team of female pilots, to fight Japanese foes. Speaking to issues of women's empowerment, the book also depicts women's involvement in the war effort to establish a discourse of feminist identity, solidarity and heroism. This could be taken to signal the comic book's status as a definitive feminist text concerned with the collective empowerment of women through heroic narratives. However, the gendered discourses of *Captain Marvel* hinge on conventions of reimaginings of an ostensibly prefeminist past consistent with a postfeminist culture in which feminism is often "taken into account" (Angela McRobbie 2007, 28). Claims towards the text's singular progressiveness should therefore be made with caution, bearing in mind the many contradictions present within postfeminism itself.

I focus here on the underexplored intersection of gender and temporality in superhero subjectivities. As time travel-based narratives can reveal ideologies of the present while attempting to make sense of the past, this analysis draws attention to how this *Captain Marvel* storyline engages with contemporary feminist issues through a retroactive insertion of feminist discourses into a setting that is made to feel—broadly and vaguely—prefeminist as, in the words of Katixa Agirre, readers are assumed to be on the "other side," looking back (2012, 157).[2] The article poses the question, then, of what developments "feminist" reinventions of established characters, and the narrative history they occupy, represent for Marvel, querying what, if any, gendered interventions in revisionist superhero conventions these stories might provide.

## Navigating superheroes and revision

Revision is considered a defining characteristic or "dominant narrative strategy" (David Hyman 2017, 5) of the superhero comics genre. Throughout their production and distribution histories across media, superheroes have been reinvented and repurposed in correspondence with industrial and socio-cultural shifts. Revisionism plays a role both diegetically in superheroes' fictional histories, and in the historical canonization of comics by scholars and industry professionals. This is exemplified in the "Ages of Comic Books"

model that organizes dominant thought regarding shifts in industry practices, publication content, distribution patterns and readership habits across the history of (predominantly US) comics, beginning with the Golden Age in the late-1930s and supposedly culminating in the Modern Age in the 1980s. Umberto Eco's conceptualization of the superhero's "oneiric" temporality (1972, 17) in which superhero narratives both continuously develop and situate characters "in a perpetual state of present" (1972, 16), have been complexified in scholarly discussions, but these issues remain pertinent. Superheroes occupy a position within a genre that spans decades, forming complex continuities through ongoing stories, alternate timelines and reboots.

Superhero revision developed to maintain reader interest, but was also caused by the increasing complexity of these storyworlds, which eventually became so unwieldy that reality-changing events were deployed to reset (or reboot) the in-story universe. Time travel succeeded as a narrative device in these instances, as exemplified in DC's "Flash of Two Worlds" storyline (Gardner Fox and Carmine Infantino 1961), which, crucially, introduced the concept of multiple, parallel universes to DC's superhero comics storyworld, providing limitless storytelling potential for its characters (Karin Kukkonen 2013, 48–49). Time travel was facilitated by the science fiction genre conventions stemming from a post-war fascination with (and fear of) technology, later associated with comics' Silver Age (broadly encompassing the mid-1950s to early-1970s), as was Marvel's emphasis on ongoing character arcs and personal issues explored through multiple secondary plotlines (Hyman 2017, 25). Eco's idea of "oneiric temporality" has thus developed alongside wider implications of superheroes relating to ideology, politics and representation.

A hyperreliance on pastiche and self-reflexivity has especially been associated with comics' Modern Age, the era of self-aware, so-called "adult" superheroes utilising darker aesthetics, morally ambiguous themes and "realistic" storyworlds (Kathryn M. Frank 2017, 138). Karin Kukkonen suggests that since the 1980s, the genre became interested in "scrutinizing its ideological involvements and escapism as well as reflecting on its nature as fiction" (2013, 87). Industrially, it signalled the arrival of the "graphic novel" as a legitimation of the supposedly mass-produced "comic book" aimed predominantly at children, enabling comics to reach wider audiences through this legitimating terminology. Landmark texts cited include *The Dark Knight Returns* (Frank Miller and Klaus Janson 1986) and *Watchmen* (Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons 1987), both of which can be considered revisionist texts based on established superheroes.[3] Through auteurist structures, the "maturing" of superhero comics during this era was enabled through both Moore and Miller's intertextual practices, in which "reinterpretation in the form of intertextual play becomes indispensable for the survival of the genre" (Annalisa Di Liddo 2009, 47).

The "Ageing" of superhero comics is not without ideological ramifications. There are gendered dynamics at work in pronouncements of "serious" and "artistic" texts, resembling the high and low art distinctions present in most genre fictions across media. Likewise, representations of women's bodies in certain revisionist texts remain a site of contestation, as despite representing the progressivism of a genre constantly in revision, many of these texts maintain patriarchal and heteronormative representations of women found in older comics (Erin M. Keating 2011; Lorna Piatti-Farnell 2017). Accounts of comics history are thus paternalistic in their prioritization of Anglo-American, masculine

perspectives, which is also epitomized by gatekeeping activities that have led to gendered distinctions in the possession of comics capital and the association of superhero comics with male readerships.

The Modern Age acts as a dominant reference point due to its reliance on revisionism and postmodern pastiche. However, as demonstrated by this brief exploration of how superhero comic book history is often narrativized, revision has become an in-built part of the genre, with superheroes being remodelled according to industrial and cultural demands as early as the 1960s. Captain America's comic book series folded at the end of the 1940s, following the end of World War II which, it seemed, negated the cultural need for an anti-Nazi superhero symbolising American patriotism. The character's short-lived, McCarthyite appearances in the 1940s and 1950s have since been retroactively changed (first they were removed entirely from continuity; then they were ascribed to a different character going by the title of Captain America). In the 1960s, Captain America was reinvented as a member of the Avengers, having apparently been frozen after World War II (Stan Lee and Jack Kirby 1964), a facet that defined the character for decades. The character's remodelling can be seen as a response to shifting definitions of American patriotism at these times, while utilizing comics' distinct temporality and (dis)continuity in its narrative elimination of two decades worth of stories. Captain Marvel's reinvention matches the trajectory of such remodellings.

The model also foregrounds superhero comics despite using a blanket terminology of "the Ages of Comic Books" (named after the—also gendered—mythological Ages of Man). Recent work has augmented the existing "Ages" model to accommodate the visibility of women, people of color and those underrepresented in mainstream media. Breaking from the Hesiod-inspired trajectory, Adrienne Resha (2020) has characterized the recent superhero comics moment as the Blue Age—named after the blue color schemes of the digital platforms on which the industry now relies to distribute and market comics while reaching wider reader communities. Importantly for feminist scholars, identity is a key factor in Resha's analysis, which spans production, representation and consumption practices. Resha marks the Blue Age as beginning with DeConnick and Soy's *Captain Marvel* relaunch although she also highlights the new version of Ms. Marvel, a Pakistani-American Muslim girl named Kamala Khan—a brand new character again assigned an established superhero's mantle (2020, 67). This represents an active, albeit profit-informed, embrace of representationally diverse practices and moves to include more women comics creators by Marvel.

The temporal positioning of characters, both within (i.e., the temporal space they occupy from the beginning to the end of an issue of a comic book) and outside their narratives (i.e., a character that has a publication history of several decades), affects their representation as revised, reinvented or otherwise rebooted. Terrence R. Wandtke notes that "it must be acknowledged that as long as the superhero has been in existence, the superhero has been 'in the making,' working through a series of revisions" (2007, 5). The outcome of superhero revision is not consistency but a "production of multiple versions that wear their inconsistencies openly, and reject the pressure to resolve their multiplicities into the synthetic continuity of a polished final text" (Hyman 2017, 5). These complex qualities make superhero narratives both enduring and compelling.

## Ms. Marvel, gender representation and popular feminisms

While there is insufficient scope to detail the history of women's representations in superhero comics here, valuable work has been carried out, especially regarding intersecting issues of representations of queer, non-white, disabled and neurodivergent subjectivities (Carolyn Cocca 2016; Deborah Elizabeth Whaley 2016; Fionnuala Doran 2020; Michelle Ann Abate, Karly Marie Grice and Christine N. Stamper 2018). While women have been represented in complex ways linking with and feeding into dominant cultural models of femininity circulating within American society, their portrayals, while varied, are often associated with stereotypes of victimization, sexualization and a limitation of power. The issue of sexualization has been a particularly rich site of feminist discussion because of the significance of the gendered body in superhero media and the presumed heterosexual male readership of superhero comics.

While the publication, narrative and fan histories of Captain Marvel have likewise been examined (Cocca 2016, 184–209; Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo 2018, 389; Anna F. Peppard 2017, 113–19; J. Richard Stevens 2020) a brief outline of the character contextualizes the significance of the ongoing gender debates her relaunch encompassed.

Carol Danvers debuted in comics in 1968 (Roy Thomas and Gene Colan 1968) and was initially portrayed as a blonde-bombshell officer and security chief in the United States Air Force. She later worked with alien Kree superhero Mar-Vell (the then-Captain Marvel). Her role in the USAF became pivotal to the character's 2012 rebrand through its ties to military femininities and the popular feminisms these subjectivities evoke. Danvers became the superpowered heroine Ms. Marvel in her own title (Gerry Conway and John Buscema 1977) and over the next three decades appeared in team titles across the Marvel comic universe alongside established heroes, such as the Avengers. Although the character was reinvented under different monikers throughout her publication history, she was returned to the Ms. Marvel name until her relaunch in 2012. Tying into the industrial shifts in which Marvel attempted to address new audiences attuned to representational equality outlined by Resha (2020), Zak Roman and Ryan Lizardi 2018 identify the 2012 relaunch as being among an industrial trend of female "recastings" carried out by Marvel around this time. Nonetheless, the authors note that these relaunches, which have resonance in terms of gender and race representation specifically, are yet another iteration of Eco's "oneiric climate" of superheroes, signifying an illusion of change driven by industrial imperatives resulting in "hegemonic reversion" and the subsequent co-existence of the male and female versions of these characters (Roman and Lizardi 2018, 21, 24–5).

According to Mel Gibson, Ms. Marvel, as well as DC's Supergirl, "offer a negotiation with, and a range of perspectives on, feminism" (2014, 135). Carolyn Cocca notes that the mediation of US feminist politics of the 1970s was a concrete purpose of Ms. Marvel, quoting writer Gerry Conway stating at the time that "Ms. Marvel, because of her name if nothing else, is influenced, to a great extent, by the move towards women's liberation" (Conway quoted in Cocca 2016, 184). Using "Ms." over "Miss" was here seen to signify an engagement with (an idea of) women's empowerment. However, the "Ms." title also highlights the power dynamics at work when female superheroes are created as derivative of established male counterparts, a common industrial trend—"Ms." connoting a subordinate position to the established "Captain" Marvel, the male superhero who

existed at the time (Peppard 2017, 114–15; Suzanne Scott 2015, 155). This mirrors the frequent use of the suffix "-girl" to denote female derivatives of existing male superheroes, who were invariably assigned the term "-man" (for instance, Supergirl and Superman).

While entrenched within the cultural context of second-wave feminism, Ms. Marvel's origins have concurrently been framed as sexual spectacle (J. Andrew Deman 2020, 4), although Gibson carefully notes the complexities of Danvers' early appearances, in which "There is a great deal of tension between gazing at Ms Marvel and sharing her view" (Mel Gibson 2014, 142). Nonetheless, much discussion has focused on the sexually objectifying qualities of the character's costume, which often resembled little more than a swimsuit (Cocca 2016, 190–91; Peppard 2017, 113; Matthew Freeman and Charlotte Taylor-Ashfield 2017, 321). Meanwhile, Danvers' powers (comprising superhuman strength, stamina and a degree of precognition) were initially complicated because she would blackout and forget having been Ms. Marvel, creating a split in her personality that Anna Peppard likens to a hysterical personality disorder (2017, 117), while Gibson suggests this represented an assumed cultural dichotomy between feminism and femininity that made transgressive aspects of the character more ideologically manageable (Gibson 2014, 143–4). Likewise, a storyline in which Danvers is kidnapped, blacks out and wakes up pregnant without having consented to any activity that would cause this, having thereby been raped, has been critiqued from feminist perspectives (Cocca 2016, 191–3; Deman 2020). The frequent depowering of superheroines through sexual violence has been well documented, especially through Gail Simone's "Women in Refrigerators" project (Tammy S. Garland, Kathryn A. Branch and Mackenzie Grimes 2016; Gail Simone 1999). The use of the rape storyline in Davers' narrative history is therefore symptomatic of wider representational issues to do with superhero femininities and their marginalization.

The character is a clear example of Marvel utilizing feminist discourses, as demonstrated by Danvers' positioning within early narratives as the editor for a women's magazine, references to equality in the workplace, and that the cover of the first issue declares that "This female fights back!" (Conway and Buscema 1977). The title can therefore be contextualized within the mass mediascape of the 1970s and the second wave of US feminism, in which feminism appeared in the media in differing forms, despite radical feminist activists' increasing opposition to mainstream and popular culture (Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley 2006, 6). In the case of Ms. Marvel, her name, daily struggles depicted in the series, allusions to work-life balance and equal pay and references to feminist activist Kate Millett were overt gestures towards the political feminist movement, although there are clear demonstrations of a hegemonic push-and-pull dynamic in which an embrace of feminist goals existed alongside sexist discourses and a depreciation of certain imagined forms of feminism. In a response to a fan letter, editor Archie Goodwin wrote that "We've been trying to eliminate as much of the blatant, preaching feminism as we can; and instead, striving to let Ms. Marvel's—and Carol Danvers'—words and actions and feelings speak for themselves" (quoted in Chris Claremont and Jim Mooney 1977). These depoliticizing discourses resurface frequently within later postfeminist media texts and signify the plurality of meanings at work in these constructions of feminisms and femininities. This is not to say that Danvers is, or is not, a "feminist superhero." Contradictions typified the character's cultural surroundings. To further complicate matters, creators who worked on the character throughout her history have provided accounts of their interpretations of feminism that informed their practice, entering

media discourse and confounding ideas around the production and consumption of "authentic" political feminisms. Thus, the malleability of Danvers draws attention to wider issues in both superhero revision and (post)feminisms.

## *Captain Marvel*: postfeminist inflections of a timeless superheroine

Carol Danvers became Ms. Marvel through convoluted events in early appearances as a supporting character in the 1960s *Captain Marvel* series, referred to and reworked in 2012's *Captain Marvel* as part of its time-travel storyline, continuing superhero comics' tradition of reflexive revisionism. A feminist lens critiquing the postfeminist culture in which the comic series can be positioned can effectively make sense of the gendered and ideological dimensions of such revisions.

Gaining traction in the 1990s, amid widespread discussions around women's empowerment and "girl power," postfeminist culture marks what Angela McRobbie refers to as a "double entanglement" of progressive feminist discourses with a reassertion of neoconservative politics concerning gender, sexuality, race and class (2009, 13). In this environment, feminist goals are increasingly embraced by the state and legislation, but the marginalization of women and minorities continues individually and institutionally. This is more complex than an anti-feminist backlash, due to postfeminist culture's simultaneous reliance on a commonsensical idea that feminism has achieved its purpose regarding women's equality (to white men), and denunciation of it, in that—because of these suppositions—political feminism is no longer necessary. As such, imagined feminist critiques are "taken into account" (McRobbie 2009, 12) in popular media discourses, resulting in a suppositional representation of "feminism" itself. Put briefly by Yvonne Tasker, postfeminist culture is "a set of discourses through which industrialized societies with complex mass media systems simultaneously acknowledge the importance of gender equality while perpetuating profoundly hierarchical gender cultures" (2020, 672).

Women who became most visible within postfeminist narratives of empowerment are most likely to be white, middle-class, heterosexual and adherent to Western beauty standards. *Captain Marvel*, while featuring peripheral women of color throughout, likewise (re)centers white femininity in its heroic narratives. Meanwhile, representations of women falling outside of these parameters continue to produce limited notions of difference, even as they capitalize on generalized diversity discourses, in ways that reaffirm normative institutional structures (Akane Kanai 2019, 3–6; 14; Claire Moran 2017, 8; Jess Butler 2013). The widespread commodification of feminist ideas and language also arguably depoliticizes feminist activism in its embrace of generalized discourses of women's empowerment (Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon 2009, 19). Postfeminism is thus characterized by Rosalind Rosalind Gill (2007) as a "sensibility" permeating cultural phenomena following wider social attitudes.

The usefulness of critiquing postfeminist culture's role within more recent media has been debated due to the increasing visibility of explicitly feminist discourses and a seeming decrease in notions of feminism's pastness. However, the postfeminist framework still productively makes sense of the complex machinations of contemporary media texts that make variations of feminism visible while functioning within mass production and consumption channels and highly neoliberal landscapes (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018, 19–21; Tasker 2020). Gill, for instance, notes "the persistence and tenacity of

a postfeminist sensibility—even in those media productions ostensibly claiming to celebrate a feminist 'revolution'" (2016, 625), a context within which 2012's *Captain Marvel* should invariably be placed. Likewise, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer argue that the more recent feminist turn in popular media, while often distinct from modes of postfeminist culture, still "ensures the reproduction of a specific iteration of feminist ideology that has a similar effect to postfeminism" (2017, 886), again highlighting the malleability of what might still usefully be referred to as postfeminist media sensibility.

Postfeminist culture is self-reflexive, ironic and temporally complex in its shifting approach to ideas of gender equality, highlighting its benefits for thinking about women's representations within a genre informed by revision. As Tasker summarizes, "both naïve and self-aware, postfeminist discourse looks backward and forward simultaneously, equally bound up with nostalgia and modernity" (2020, 673), making its relationship with the past ambivalent. Elsewhere, Tasker and Negra note that postfeminism "evidences a distinct preoccupation with the temporal" (2007, 10). Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, drawing from Derridean hauntology, note that postfeminist temporality results in feminist politics' haunting of postfeminist media as "ghost feminism" (2014, 17–36). In this, the "postfeminist mystique," working through anachronisms, temporal anomalies and disarticulations, simultaneously relegates feminism to the past, invokes a vague sense of its achievements in the present, and transplants its present-day politics into past settings, "serving a variety of political ends" (2014, 10–11, 12).

Munford and Waters cite Wonder Woman as a case study in ghost feminism, a noteworthy example in its relevance to both superheroes and postfeminist culture at different points in history. Wonder Woman, arguably the most famous superheroine in circulation, was broadly conceived of as a representation of women's empowerment in the 1940s, though—crucially—also in convoluted ways throughout her eighty-year history (Joan Ormrod 2020, 6–15). The appropriation of Wonder Woman's image on the cover of the first issue of Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pitman Hughes' feminist publication *Ms*. magazine (1972) to Munford and Waters represents "an attempt to mobilize the commercial marketplace for political ends," indicating shifts in discourses of femininity and women's empowerment (2014, 2). Wonder Woman functions here as a ghost of past feminist triumphs and illustrates the repeated "pattern of progress and regress," demonstrating the ongoing recurrence and revamping of feminism through time and media, although Munford and Waters do not note the significance of superheroes in their discussion.

Marvel's targeting of a shifting readership was reflected in *Captain Marvel*'s use of a female writer (and later editor and artist). Significantly, Cocca suggests that *Captain Marvel* "sought to subvert the status quo" (2016, 183), "while purposefully steering away from the more stereotypical parts of her characterization" (2016, 200). Tying into Danvers' previous storylines in which she adopted different codenames or appeared to experience an identity crisis, issues #1–6 are scattered with references to Danvers' reinvention, drawing attention to the postfeminist undertaking of self-crafting an "authentic" identity, or femininity as being in-the-making (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012, 55–8). In issue #1 (Kelly Sue DeConnick and Dexter Soy 2012a), Danvers is portrayed as conflicted with regards to taking the mantle of Captain Marvel but eventually honors the memory of her predecessor, with Captain America's blessing, by "taking the damn name." Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo highlight the conflict behind the framing of this narrative moment, "we

are supposed to read it as Danvers both accepting Captain America's offer and *seizing* the opportunity herself" (2018, 389, original emphasis), suggesting ambivalence as much as it signifies feminist agency.

In place of a recap page typical of Marvel's single comic books, each issue begins with a tongue-in-cheek front page of Marvel's in-universe newspaper, the *Daily Bugle*, commenting on Captain Marvel's enduring celebrity and impending reinvention. Striving for verisimilitude, the first of these is marked as a "SPECIAL COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE!" of the *Bugle* (alongside a reminder that the paper has, supposedly, been in print since 1897) (DeConnick et al. 2012a). The headline, "MS. MARVEL UNMASKED!" is beside the depiction of the new Captain Marvel posing heroically with arms akimbo and without a mask (a reproduction of the issue's cover illustration by Ed McGuiness reprinted in black-and-white in line with the newspaper aesthetic). Alongside this is text referring to "A NEW "DO & A NEW COSTUME," while in the lower-left corner of the page is an image of Danvers as Ms. Marvel in her "swimsuit" costume (a reproduced *Ms. Marvel* cover by Frank Cho) accompanied by the text "BID ON THE OLD MS. MARVEL COSTUME FOR A GOOD CAUSE!" inviting (fictional) readers to participate in a charity auction.

The juxtaposition of these images and text marks a passage of time: the continuing newspaper, the new "Ms." Marvel who no longer wears a mask, has a new short hairstyle and no use for a sexually revealing costume, the charity auction functioning as an ideological recuperation of a problematic attribute of the character. The focus on Danvers' image as constituting her reinvention is signalled as significant in-story, although this was also a major aspect of Marvel's rebranding of the character. Indicating the intersection of popular culture and popular feminisms, the costume signified "the character's career as an air force pilot, her autonomy or independence; it was full length and practical" (Freeman and Taylor-Ashfield 2017, 324)—this was reflexively built into the comic itself. Subsequent *Bugle* recap pages maintain the ironic, self-aware tone while also sitting firmly within existing revisionist superhero comic book traditions.

Simultaneously, the comic is contemporary in its digitally painted aesthetics and quick, sharp dialogue, while also featuring art and narratives more associated with superhero tradition, thereby straddling temporalities. The final page of issue #3 (Kelly Sue DeConnick, et al. 2012), takes the form of an in-story comic strip mocking the male hero/female sidekick dynamic through superheroine "Captain Marvelous" and her male spin-off, "Mister Marvel." Intentionally made to appear like an aged comic book with stained, yellowed pages held together with tape, it also bears a liberal use of exaggerated Ben-Day dots, a coloring technique associated with vintage superhero comics, to distinguish its placement out-of-time. The mark of the four-color printing process predominantly used in the earlier decades of comics production is also indicated by the prominent CMYK color code in the page's top-right corner. While the palette of the comic does not exactly match the strict limitations of previous eras' printing processes, an attempt is made to emulate, and question, these practices. The mock-vintage strip crucially depends on digital coloring technology to recreate the materiality of an aged comic in its parodic meditation of a gender-flipped Captain Marvel/Ms. Marvel dynamic, blending new and old formal qualities with gender parody.

The opening battle in issue #1 establishes the comic's investment in generalized discourses of women's empowerment. Danvers, supported by Captain America, is portrayed in a fight with the Absorbing Man, a masculine villain presented as a misogynistic,

macho brute who takes issue with Danvers' presence. When Captain America obeys Danvers' instructions, Absorbing Man comments "You lettin" the little missus give the orders now?!' and calls her a "broad" (DeConnick et al. 2012a). Danvers' answer to this asserts her superiority to Captain America in militaristic terms: "This 'broad' left the service a full colonel. So technically, I outrank him" (DeConnick et al. 2012a). The discourse underpinning Danvers' empowerment is tied to militarism, a narrative phenomenon that has been used to articulate feminist issues regarding gender roles in wider media (Yvonne Tasker 2011). The use of the military as a framing device here is likewise significant due to the arguably oppositional relationship between the goals of political feminism and a patriarchal state that manages military activity through wars, further contributing to the comic's internal contradictions.

Cocca positions *Captain Marvel* in opposition to previous iterations of the character through its foregrounding of Danvers' military context, including her humor, heroism and hot temper. In this poststructuralist approach to gender, typical of contemporary (post) feminisms, the superheroine's character is "tied to masculinity but … could be embodied by anyone" (Cocca 2016, 200). A similar conceptualization, drawing from constructionist gender theories in which gender (and sex) are performative and formed through social discourse rather than biological determinism, underscores Tasker's concept of "masculinity," a term she uses concerning masculinized action heroines of 1980s cinema and representations of military women in film, to indicate the potential for these heroines to utilize signifiers of masculinity while maintaining their identities as heroines (1993, 132–52). Crucially, postfeminist culture, in its positioning within postmodern understandings of identity, takes account of the idea of identity as being a constructed component of subjectivity, often achieved through irony, self-moderation and consumption practices (McRobbie 2009, 63).

*Captain Marvel* uses military themes as a vehicle to explore these issues. It is Danvers' ties to the US Air Force, specifically, that enable her travels through time through the acquisition of a T-6 Texan aircraft left to her by her idol, superstar pilot Helen Cobb, who passes away in issue #1. The plane is a time machine that transports Danvers to the past to collect a series of artefacts belonging to the machine that gave her superpowers (the Psyche-Magnitron), referring to her 1969 origin story (Roy Thomas and Gil Kane 1969). This, it seems, was a plan established by Cobb to alter history, taking Danvers to the time and place where she gained her powers. Danvers must therefore decide whether to intervene and change the course of history so that she may live life as an ordinary pilot without superpowers (seemingly resolving a conflict central to the character). While Danvers initially intervenes (thereby giving Cobb her superpowers), she ultimately restores the timeline and, indeed, the status quo, while lending credence to postfeminist themes of self-actualization and authenticity.

The fictional collides with the factual in *Captain Marvel* through its repurposing of materials from both comics history and World War II. McGuiness' cover illustration for issue #2, for instance, recreates J. Howard Miller's "We Can Do It!" (1943) wartime poster depicting a Rosie-the-Riveter-like worker as Captain Marvel. The reading of the character's feminism here depends on the vital cultural significance the poster and Rosie the Riveter possess and their place within transnational mediated feminisms and remix cultures that intersect with feminist activisms, with the image having been appropriated for various causes (Red Chidgey 2019, 119–64). The image functions on aesthetic, narrative and

ideological levels through Danvers' positioning in the World War II setting in-story, again signifying the combination of historical and temporal qualities evoking shifts in discourses of feminist empowerment.

Having activated the time machine, Danvers discovers she has landed on an island off the coast of Peru near a Japanese war camp in 1943 in issue #2 (DeConnick et al. 2012a). Danvers is captured by Japanese soldiers but escapes, encountering the Banshee Squadron, a group of women pilots. The Banshees are clearly an articulation of the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS)—women who dedicated their skills to the war effort on short-term contracts, unaffiliated with specific military branches (Christina M. Knopf 2017, 32). Interestingly, the WAFS appeared in propaganda comics during the war in portrayals attending to similar issues relating to womanhood and soldiering, "two concepts that were culturally at odds with each other" (Knopf 2017, 33), thereby doubling up the gendered intertextual reflexivity here. In this instance, *Captain Marvel* draws from both comics and women's history to redress gender imbalances in the retelling of both. When Danvers is presented on a splash page destroying the machines of their foes in a full-body action pose, her statement of "Let's rewrite some history, shall we?" (DeConnick and Soy 2012b) equally functions as such. However, this rewriting of history retroactively inserts the feminist subject into prefeminist settings in ways that also diffuse the goals of political feminisms.

When Danvers must leave the Banshees behind to continue her travels through time, she tells the Banshees "Whether you know it or not, whether it's official or not……You're soldiers. And some of the best I've ever fought beside, to boot" (DeConnick, Soy and Al Barrionuevo 2012). Because WAFS were considered civilians rather than military, they were not officially recognized for their services until 1977. Danvers' crediting the value of these women's contributions to the war operates on both a narrative and extra-diegetic level. However, it represents Danvers as retroactively declaring these women as valuable through her fictional travels to the past, rewriting history. In this, the scenario also makes use of individualist sentiments of women knowing their own worth and being fulfilled by this knowledge rather than through institutional recognition, leaving oppressive structures in place.

In issue #6 (DeConnick and Emma Rios 2012b), Danvers travels to the point at which she gained her powers via the Psyche-Magnitron with a past version of Cobb, whom she has met in the meantime. This moment recreates villain Yonn-Rogg's fight with Mar-Vell from *Captain Marvel* #18 from a contemporary perspective. The issue featured a change of artist to Emma Rios, whose style is more aligned with traditional comic art that includes pencil, ink and color components (unlike Soy's digital paintings with no visible inked elements) and is reminiscent of Silver Age styles.

The framing of this moment is humorous but critically reflexive as the women are portrayed secretly gazing upon Yon-Rogg, engaging in a monologue in the underground setting where the Psyche-Magnitron is located, a past-Danvers in a victimized position in the background. Over two panels, Danvers explains at whom they are looking and how this occurred through time travel: "You just have to go with it" (DeConnick et al. 2012b). Cobb replies in the same panel that she has faced more complicated situations as a woman pilot: "that jackass at NASA won't give me my damn rocket on account of I'm a gal" (DeConnick et al. 2012b). The following panel is a medium shot of past-Danvers in front of the Psyche-Magnitro, bruised and lying low but looking determined,

accompanied by the rest of Cobb's reply, "time travel don't sound so bad to me" (DeConnick et al. 2012b). Cobb's response links both time travel and feminist issues as it sits across these panels connecting generations of (different versions) of female characters while retelling a crucial origin story.

The reflexive lens through which the scene is portrayed occurs particularly at moments during which the women mock Yon-Rogg's hyperbolic monologue (Cobb asks Danvers, "Who's the turkey?"), which directly quotes him from *Captain Marvel* #18. Shown in a dramatic headshot in a square panel, the first on the page, Yon-Rogg declares "There is no power which equals that of one who stands in the glow of ……the Psyche-Magnitron!" (DeConnick et al. 2012b). In the next panel, Cobb is depicted as having difficulty containing her laughter while Danvers sternly observes Yon-Rogg. Her response, "It was a different time" (DeConnick et al. 2012b), draws attention to how feminist revisions of superheroes tie into both wider issues of popular feminisms and superhero revisionist conventions. While "it was a different time" explains the discrepancies in the stylistic changes to dialogue that have taken place since earlier superhero comics eras, "it was a different time" is also frequently used in popular discourse to excuse abusive behavior of institutionally privileged people.[4] In its recreation, the scene imbues Danvers' origin with a double-meaning that lands on both feminist and superhero genre terms.

The use of time travel in *Captain Marvel* is thus consistent with postfeminist reworkings of past feminisms, real or imagined, presenting anachronistic revisions of the past to offer a "dialogue between feminism and postfeminism that takes place in a pre-feminist world" (Munford and Waters 2014, 55), as in television period dramas such as *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007–15) and, importantly, Marvel properties including *Captain America: The First Avenger* (*Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011) and *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015–16), as well as media narratives that present superheroes in recent-past histories, such as the *Captain Marvel* film (*Captain Marvel*, 2019), set in the 1990s.

The narrative mechanism of time travel has critical implications in postfeminist media. Michele Schreiber, for instance, examines the use of this narrative device in postfeminist romance films, suggesting that "time travel raises timely questions about gender dynamics and the stakes at issue when characters, and spectators, invite the collapse of boundaries between past and present" (2014, 84). Schreiber ultimately asks whether these narrative turns limit or expand the options presented to women. She emphasizes the significance of nostalgia in such texts, which "functions as a sort of therapeutic discourse through which women, individually and collectively, negotiate their ambivalence about their role in contemporary culture" (Schreiber 2014, 85).

Meanwhile, regarding televisual texts such as *Call the Midwife* (BBC 2012–), Moya Luckett suggests that postfeminist period dramas

> position femininity as particularly dependent on history and time, helping account for its myriad variations… [T]he feminine is upheld as historically variable and contingent, making period drama a rich site for exploring popular understandings of womanhood while effectively parsing its relationship to the present (Moya Luckett 2017, 17).

This understanding stresses how portrayals of history, framed by feminist discourses, mediate contemporary issues. By revisiting previous narrative occurrences in Danvers' fictional biography through the time travel story arc, *Captain Marvel* articulates and reasserts feminist questions around gender and heroism, women and the military and

women and power. Within postfeminist media, this is significant due to widespread discourses on the meaning of feminism, as well as ongoing discussions regarding Marvel's shifting readership and impending "Blue Age."

## Conclusion

Regarding the importance of World War II in contemporary postfeminist television, Cat Cat Mahoney (2019) argues that the insertion of ostensibly feminist women characters into such settings results in a distinctive dehistoricization of political feminism. Mahoney suggests that this has "led to postfeminist norms and constructions of gender becoming an accepted aspect of the historical imaginary and form[s] a distinct and identifiable historical postfeminist sensibility" (2019, 15). The implications of such settings for superhero comics, which themselves depend on temporally convoluted generic conventions, take on further connotations in *Captain Marvel*.

Relying on and reworking enduring superhero conventions and histories to query their underlying gender boundaries while, at times, reifying them within the limitations of a postfeminist cultural vocabulary, *Captain Marvel* intentionally reaches through a genre steeped in self-reflexivity. Revision, and its related parallel, nostalgia involve a revisiting of the past arguably more indicative of contemporary concerns than what the past was "actually" like. It also remains a distinctive characteristic of superhero comics, but the shape this takes becomes more dynamic when considering issues of gender. A feminist critique of postfeminist culture, then, brings to light *Captain Marvel*'s use of comics' reinvention conventions in its mediation of feminist issues, occurring through what Munford and Waters refer to as "temporal slippages," in which "images or ideas from the past might return to haunt us" while helping to shape new feminisms, "the ghostly projection of a feminist future" (2014, 8).

In highlighting the possibilities and limitations offered by superhero comics, this article has emphasized the significance of a character often side-lined in feminist comics histories. However, in a popular media landscape in which superheroines are often heralded as marking a "new era" of gender equality, the genre's ongoing preoccupation with temporality, and critical reframing of it, must also be taken into account when considering new representational practices.

## Notes

1. Encompassing *Captain Marvel* #1–6, (DeConnick et al. 2012a, 2012b, 2012, 2012; Kelly Sue DeConnick and Emma Rios 2012a; DeConnick et al. 2012b).
2. The use of "prefeminist" is not to downplay the valuable history of political feminisms dating to the first wave. Within scholarly writing on postfeminist media (see, for instance, Lynn Spigel 2013; Munford and Waters 2014; Mahoney 2019), "prefeminist" is shorthand for "pre-second wave," signifying the obscuring of political feminisms at work in postfeminist culture. While DeConnick's contributions to superhero comics, informed by her own generational status, are influenced by and address third- and fourth-wave feminisms, the use of "prefeminist" here is illustrative of the pre-second wave setting of this storyline and its relationship to depoliticized and dehistoricized postfeminist media.

3. While Miller's work focuses on an old-aged Batman who inhabits a paradoxical setting that is both dystopian future and 1980s conservative America; *Watchmen* can be considered an appropriation of existing characters formerly owned by Charlton Comics, which had been acquired by DC in the early 1980s.
4. This has more recently been discussed within "post-Weinstein" media, in which men who sexually harass women are discursively presented as being "out-of-touch" with contemporary norms (Karen Boyle 2019, 67), marking a continuation of postfeminist, neoliberal emphasis on the individual who, in such cases, is the source of misogyny or prejudice, rather than the society or institution (see Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2018, 8).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

***Miriam Kent*** is a Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Essex and has a PhD in Film Studies with a focus on Marvel superheroes. Her research focuses on superhero media and the intersection of media form, ideology and politics. She has taught a wide range of Film, Media and Gender Studies courses. She is the author of *Women in Marvel Films* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021) and has published widely on representation, identity and the media, with an emphasis on Marvel superhero adaptations.

## ORCID

Miriam Kent http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0756-9860

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