

Wonder Woman and *Captain Marvel*: The (Dis)Continuity of Gender Politics

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THE RECENT *Wonder Woman* (2017) AND *Captain Marvel* (2019) films epitomize what is currently at stake in superhero gender politics. This, in turn, offers a snapshot of wider dynamics at play in popular culture, or what Tony Bennett called the “articulation” (95) of power and resistance that marks the fluid workings of hegemony. The films appeared at a contradictory time when movements like #MeToo and the Women’s March suggested the emergence of a possible fourth wave of feminism (Munro), although a decidedly white, middle-class postfeminism (Tasker and Negra 2) claims political, social, and economic disparities have been overcome.¹ Contradictions are also evident in a publisher like Marvel supporting the shift toward diversity—meaning greater representation of women, people of color, and members of the LGBTQ+ communities in both the stories and the creative teams—while its CEO, Isaac Perlmutter, donates money to support Donald Trump, whose politics run counter to every progressive advance being made within the industry.

Responding to such disorientating articulations, Rosalind Gill argues the present situation is “bewildering”:

Whilst some choose to offer linear stories of progress or backlash, with their associated affects of hope or despair, for most the situation seems too complicated for such singular narratives: for every uplifting account of feminist activism, there is another of misogyny; for every feminist “win,” an outpouring of hate, ranging from sexual harassment to death threats against those involved; for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling.

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Gill's summary perfectly encapsulates the events surrounding the launch of *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel*, where, prior to their release, optimism for the films was mired in misogynistic spite.

Given these tensions, contradictions, and inconsistencies, a much more complex understanding of hegemonic articulation is needed to capture the nonlinear, multilayered, and differentiated political context that informs the gender politics of the two films. In recent years, there have been attempts to develop complexity-based analyses of hegemony that address the relationship between power and cultural emergence (Gilbert 238); the convergence of "progressive and regressive hegemonic potentials" (Howson and Smith 10); and the metastability of social systems (Williams 148), but it is the earlier work of Theresa A. Martinez that offers the description most suited to the "different permutations" (Bennett xvi) articulated in current superhero gender politics. Speaking of hip-hop as a form of cultural resistance, Martinez wrote the following: "The relationship between dominant and subordinate groups encourages, enforces, fosters and even coerces a full continuum of moves, countermoves, negotiations, protests, submissions, struggles, neutralities, alliances, accommodations, and resistances" (269).

Rather than develop an understanding of hegemony that might be adequate to the true complexity of cultural politics (although such a theory is necessary), I show how the concurrent moves, countermoves, protests, and submissions currently at work in the superhero genre can be seen in the gender politics of the two films. In particular, the progressive and regressive potentialities of these films turn on two politically significant changes to the characters' origin stories that speak to the contested cultural terrain from which they appeared. Further, the change of origin adopted by *Wonder Woman* made it less able than *Captain Marvel* to resist the norms of "emphasized femininity" that reinforce "compliance to patriarchy" (Connell and Messerschmidt 848).

I will not presume to say what these films tell us about the current status of "emergent or ongoing feminist activism" (Gill 616), or, indeed, how feminist they are. I am more concerned with how important textual features emerging from the contest around gender within the superhero genre, as well as the "different modes of serialization" (Brinker 435) that are part of the contemporary transmedia environment—and should be an element in any complexity-based theory of

mediated cultural politics—enable or disable a challenge to patriarchy. To do this, it is necessary to give an overview of the current context in which the films were produced and consumed; a brief history of relevant aspects of the comics that inform them; and analyses of the films themselves.

Cultural Context and the Push for “Diversity”

Arriving in theaters in May 2017, *Wonder Woman*, directed by Patty Jenkins, was the first DC adapted movie to be directed by a woman. Including the film serials with theatrical releases, the list of DC-related films totaled thirty-one up to that point, stretching all the way back to 1941 with William Whitney and John English’s *The Adventures of Captain Marvel*—a character at that point owned by Fawcett and not to be confused with Marvel’s Captain Marvel.² *Wonder Woman* was also only the second to have a woman in the lead role, the first being thirteen years earlier with the release of *Catwoman*.

With regard to *Captain Marvel*, only one of the forty-eight Marvel-related films since Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* in 2000 had a woman lead (*Elektra* from 2005), and since Marvel Studios began the official Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2008 with Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man*, there have been no women-led films at all. With *Captain Marvel* being directed by Anna Boden, this was also only the second of these films to have a woman director, the other being *Punisher* directed by Lexi Alexander in 2008. So, taking what now totals fifty-four Marvel-related films from 2000 onwards and adding the more recent of the DC-related films that start with *Batman Begins* in 2005, but for the sake of generosity including *Catwoman* from 2004, only seven films from a total of seventy-one over the course of nineteen years have been directed by or featured a woman in the lead role. In this context, both films were seen to be clear but long overdue challenges to overt sexism and patriarchal bias within the industry.

The second contextual component is the “culture war” currently taking place in superhero comics, where increasingly diverse representations have been met with aggressive counter-demands by conservative fans targeting progressive readers and creators they refer to as “social justice warriors.” The high point in this diversity push was Marvel’s “All New, All Different” line of comics (2015–19). This line

featured positive representations of a range of subordinated and marginalized positions and included an increase in women creators, women characters in titular roles, the gender swapping of traditional heroes like Thor and the Hulk (Curtis and Cardo), and aesthetic challenges to the sexual objectification of women that had been rife within the genre (Cocca, “Broke Back Test”). Diversity then became a term of abuse as conservative fans sought to blame the new approach for a downturn in sales, a charge that was unfortunately and somewhat erroneously supported by the publisher (Griep). Eventually, the more aggressive trolling of creators came together under the #comicsgate banner—a manufactured scandal that emerged from the earlier misogyny-dressed-up-as-games-journalism known as #gamer-gate (Francisco)—which began in July 2017 as a response to *The Unbelievable Gwenpool* editor, Heather Antos, posting a photograph on Twitter showing women colleagues at Marvel drinking milkshakes together.

When *Wonder Woman* arrived in theaters, this culture was already in full swing. This was epitomized when the Alamo Drafthouse in Austin, Texas, announced two women-only screenings in early June 2017. Men already agitated by the potential feminist message of the film were outraged at what they saw to be blatant discrimination against them. This resulted in two formal legal complaints, with the owner issuing a letter of apology on July 18, 2017, but challenging the demands from one complainant to pay settlement as “deterrence” to the sum of \$8,892 (Winkle 2017). What also made gender politics especially acute at the time was the election of Trump as President of the United States. The Access Hollywood tapes, published in October 2016 by NBC and the *Washington Post*, revealed Trump’s very disturbing attitude to women. In addition, this was a man with a history of sexual assault allegations against him and someone who appeared to conveniently discover God while on the campaign trail. As a consequence, Trump committed himself to radically curtailing women’s reproductive rights in exchange for the votes of Evangelical Christians.

This remained the context for the launch of *Captain Marvel*, with the film receiving hostile attention as soon as the first trailer was released. The pettiness of the misogyny was contained in a tweet carrying an image of Captain Marvel looking serious that asked: “Would it kill this bitch to smile?” It was very satisfying, then, to see this

issue directly and knowingly addressed in the film. Early on, Captain Marvel is shown outside a shop reading a map when a man on a motorbike rides up, tries to engage her in conversation, and asks her to smile. He then calls her a “freak” because she doesn’t. Having ignored him, she steals his motorbike once he goes into the shop and rides off, thereby enacting a symbolic castration.

It is also worth noting the concerted attempt to preemptively undermine the film’s success by “vote-brigading” the review site Rotten Tomatoes with negative scores. Despite this, the quality of the film meant major box office success. This complex interplay of moves and countermoves—articulating dominant and subordinate creative, aesthetic, editorial, commercial, corporate, consumer, and fan values, coupled with their circulation and contest across different social sites, institutions, media forms, and platforms—informs the two films’ engagement with hegemonic patriarchy. To understand that engagement, it is necessary to briefly introduce the most relevant aspects of each character’s history.

The Origins of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel

Wonder Woman, aka the Amazonian princess, Diana, was not the first female superhero. That honor goes to Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle, created by Fletcher Hanks in 1940; but Wonder Woman’s longevity makes her unrivaled within superhero comics. First appearing in *Sensation Comics* #1 in 1942 (Marston and Peter), Wonder Woman was an advocate for women’s rights from the beginning. Created by William Moulton Marston, with significant input from his wife, Elizabeth Holloway Marston, she emerged out of the Marstons’ personal commitment to the suffrage movement, within which women regularly referred to each other as Amazons (Lepore 17).

Wonder Woman also spoke to Marston’s academic work in psychology that posited a link between sexuality and politics and that violence was directly connected to the rule of men whose sexual desire is governed by pleasure derived from domination (Saunders 46). Wonder Woman was therefore sent into the world to teach men about the pleasure of submission (Finn 10), a fact that explains the regular occurrence of bondage imagery in the comic, which many

people incorrectly interpret as nothing more than titillation. In the bondage imagery, Wonder Woman artist H. G. Peters was also referencing the symbolism of suffrage cartoons by artists such as Lou Roberts where women were regularly depicted breaking their chains.

Also, although Wonder Woman's feminism would have been limited at the time by cultural conventions of femininity (Finn 15), her bold displays of physical strength were at odds with the established conventions of women's behavior and would have been challenging even for some members of the suffrage movement. In this regard, Wonder Woman is shown carrying the stricken male pilot, Steve Trevor, three times in the first issue, and, no doubt to compensate and make her more readable as a contemporary female protagonist, she is also shown to delight in window shopping once she disposes of the bad guys. Even here, the convergence of progressive and regressive potentials was clearly visible.

Over the years, Wonder Woman has suffered many indignities. In 1942, she was made "secretary" of the Justice Society of America (Fox), she was depowered and exiled from Paradise Island in 1968 (O'Neil and Sekwosky), and married to Steve Trevor in 1986 (Conway and Heck),³ but in all this time she has been a constant and important presence in the DC universe. The same cannot be said for Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel. Marvel's first Captain Marvel appeared in 1967 (Lee and Colan). He was a member of the alien race known as the Kree, a warrior sent to observe Earth. His Kree name was Mar-Vell, and he learned to respect humans so much he became one of Earth's greatest protectors. Carol Danvers, a US Air Force pilot, was introduced to the comic in 1968 (Thomas and Colan) and was injured in 1969 in an accident with a piece of Kree technology called the Psyche-Magnatron, where her DNA was fused with Mar-Vell's (Thomas and Kane). She reappears in three comics in 1974–75 without powers before reemerging in 1977 as Ms. Marvel, now superpowered due to the earlier accident.

Ms. Marvel #1 was written by Gerry Conway with a credit to his wife Carla Conway. The "Ms." in her title was a clear nod to the second-wave feminism of the time. Indeed, the comic makes direct reference to one of the leading figures of that feminism, Kate Millett, whose seminal book *Sexual Politics* made a significant impact seven years earlier. In that book, Millett described patriarchy as "an ideology of male supremacy" (62) that is "so deeply embedded" it is "more

a habit of mind and a way of life than a political system" (63). In *Ms. Marvel* #1, Carol directly takes on that "habit of mind" by challenging conceptions of femininity in her job as a women's magazine editor, replacing sexist assumptions about domesticated women and their love of diets, fashions, and recipes with interviews with Kate Millett herself and advice on "women's lib" and careers—much to the disapproval of J. Jonah Jameson, the magazine's owner. She also advocates for equal pay and is shown easily out-negotiating Jameson on her salary. Throughout these brilliant early stories, she dramatically struggles to reconcile her "civilian" and superhero identities in a way that resonates with the experiences of many women in the 1970s who wrestled with the duties imposed by patriarchy and their own desire for empowerment and liberation.

The run lasted a couple of years, after which the character has a patchy biography that includes appearing in *The Avengers* from 1979–80. This run is, however, very important because of what happened to Ms. Marvel in *The Avengers* #200 from 1980, where she was impregnated without her consent while under mind control. Nothing was made of this in the issue itself, but it was met with criticism from fans who pointed out this was straightforward rape, a complaint carefully set out in Carol Strickland's essay, "The Rape of Ms. Marvel," written the same year. Strickland's essay clearly shows how specific and progressive moves against hegemonic masculinity come up against reactionary countermeasures that reassert it, and yet the essay can itself be seen as another progressive move that laid the foundations for the contemporary and belated shift in attitudes toward the particular type of violence women face in comics.⁴ After this, Carol Danvers made a few appearances in the *Uncanny X-Men* in the early 1980s, where she became Binary, then switching to Warbird in 1998, before finally reverting back to Ms. Marvel in 2006, all of which indicates that Marvel did not know what to do with her.

Consequently, when Kelly Sue DeConnick introduced her in 2012 as the new Captain Marvel, it was a chance to reestablish a strong character, signaling Marvel's commitment to better gender representation. Her previous biography meant the story was as much about a new hero as it was about a woman overcoming her doubts and a personal life that haunted her. Although the "self-as-project" at the core of the first arc of the story might be considered more postfeminist

than feminist, the idea of self-as-project does have an important place in third-wave feminism. Shelley Budgeon, for example, argues:

Since there is no “pure” definition of either the category woman or feminist there is no “real” feminist identity that transcends the culture within which it is produced. From this perspective identity projects have only the cultural resources within which they are embedded as tools for resistance. These projects of selfhood and the practices which constitute them are cast as a form of feminist activism.

(282–83)

In keeping with this, DeConnick does an excellent job linking Carol’s journey with that of her mentor, Helen Cobb, a woman celebrated for setting aviation records. This is representative of intergenerational solidarity between women and an identity born of a particular field of work in which that identity is embedded. Despite Carol’s self-doubt, Helen’s pioneering attitude encourages Carol to adopt the title offered to her, but rather than a humble acceptance she notably declares she is “taking the damn name” (DeConnick and Soy). These themes of solidarity and inspiration—as well as “the swagger, the humour, the heroism, the temper, the indignation” (Cocca, *Superwomen* 200)—came to define this version of Captain Marvel, who quickly developed the status and respect within the Marvel Universe normally reserved for a character like Captain America.

Gender Politics in the *Wonder Woman* and *Captain Marvel* Films

Bearing in mind the caveat that we are talking about blockbuster films funded by Warner Brothers and Disney, respectively, we need to accept that in the pursuit of box office success it is not realistic to expect the films to be cinematic versions of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*; however, both films were expected to deliver progressive representations of women. In many respects, the films are a model of what Christine Gledhill called “negotiation,” a term that sits especially well with Bennett’s discussion of hegemonic articulation. Gledhill argues negotiation helps us think about “relations between media products, ideologies and audiences—perhaps bridging the gap

between textual and social subject,” implying “the holding together of opposite sides in an ongoing process of give-and-take” (169).

In relation to *Wonder Woman*, this is evident from the fact that while following the generic conventions of a love story, the Amazons are shown to be technologically advanced, powerful warriors very much in charge of their own lives. The film also contains important elements of intersectionality (Crenshaw), hinted at in the prominence of women of color and the suggestion of the Amazons’ lesbianism—captured in one Amazon having an especially strong reaction to the death of Antiope in the beach battle scene and Wonder Woman’s musings on the superfluous nature of men when it comes to sexual pleasure. The film could have done more to highlight these themes without threatening its box office, but these certainly offer important points of negotiation.

The film also portrays Diana as a woman unapologetic about her powers and someone who really does not understand the limits placed on women when she returns to “Man’s world” with Steve Trevor: a journey that becomes necessary in response to German forces discovering Themyscira in the opening battle. The historical point of arrival in Man’s World also demonstrates the film’s clear intention about gender politics by introducing an interesting twist on the Wonder Woman myth. Originally, the comic and character appeared during World War II, but the film is set in World War I. According to Patty Jenkins, this served two purposes. Firstly, the “Great War” accentuated Wonder Woman’s opposition to war itself and therefore became the perfect backdrop for the exposition of Wonder Woman’s mission. In addition, it placed Wonder Woman in a time when women’s rights were central, an issue directly addressed through the character of Etta Candy.

In the scene where Steve Trevor takes Wonder Woman to find some attire more suitable for the time and place, she meets Etta, who introduces herself as Steve Trevor’s secretary. “What is a secretary?” asks Diana. “Well, I do everything. I go where he tells me to go, and I do what he tells me to do,” Etta replies. “Well, where I’m from that’s called slavery,” Diana responds. To which Etta replies “I really like her.” Once trying on the first dress, she then queries, “How can a woman possibly fight in this?” To which Etta replies: “Fight? We use our principles. I mean, that’s how we’re going to get the vote.”

Diana then leaves the shop dressed androgynously, carrying her sword and shield.

The heart of the film, however, is undoubtedly the “No Man’s Land” scene where much rests on a literalist interpretation of the phrase to set up the impotence of the men and the power of Wonder Woman. This is most clear when she walks across the battlefield deflecting bullets with a wave of her arm. Her traversing of this space culminates in the iconic image of her stopping machine gun fire with her shield. The semiotics of the pose is crucial here, because although she has taken momentary pause and is kneeling, the angle of her body remains directed forward, in control, defiant, and determined. It also becomes a wonderful visual metaphor for all the hate and vitriol sent the way of the director, the film, and women fans. Additionally, Steve Trevor poignantly shouts: “She’s taking all the fire” and calls the soldiers to follow behind her, allowing them to capture the enemy trench.

Importantly, the scene continues with Diana and company liberating a village held by Germans. This is significant because the “No Man’s Land” scene is prefaced by a discussion in which Diana says they have to help villagers trapped on the far side of the opposing trench. Steve Trevor is adamant this is a bad idea and tells Diana, “It’s not what we came here to do,” to which she replies, “No, but it’s what I’m going to do.” One of the stumbling blocks for the film in terms of representations of women’s agency, and one aspect where Diana succumbs to “emphasized femininity,” is Diana’s acceptance of Steve Trevor’s authority once she arrives in Man’s World, and yet Jenkins also subverts this by exaggerating the way Trevor has to continually shepherd her to keep her on track. Again, this is a fascinating example of the simultaneous accommodation and resistance that marks negotiations with hegemony. Likewise, Steve Trevor’s attentions can be read as unwarranted touching, but they can also signify a knowing critique of the regulation and monitoring of women’s agency that is always in excess of the constraints placed upon it. Consequently, moments of denial and refusal become even more meaningful, and it is this specific act of denial that sets up the “No Man’s Land” scene so well.

This culminates in Diana almost single-handedly liberating the village, but not before the men have leant their support. When one final sniper housed high up in a bell tower threatens the success of

Diana's spontaneously declared mission, Steve Trevor remembers a fighting technique he saw on Themyscira beach. He sees a large piece of metal that he encourages the men to place on their backs, and echoing the Amazonian call to Antiope on Themyscira, he calls out "Diana! Shield!" to which she responds by running toward them and using it as a launch pad to fly off into the tower to take out the sniper. From the perspective of a male viewer, this is a particularly meaningful part of the film as it brilliantly encapsulates men overcoming barriers (Drury and Kaiser) to become allies in the empowerment of women, as well as the idea that women's advancement is the advancement of everyone. Ultimately, the scenes go from male command, to female denial, through female empowerment, to men as allies, to woman as realizing agent, and to collective liberation.

Like *Wonder Woman*, the gender politics in *Captain Marvel* are also centered on an unapologetically powerful woman, but unlike *Wonder Woman* there is no point at which this power is constrained, as Diana's must be to pass in the world of early twentieth-century Britain. Even in the early part of the film, where Captain Marvel is under the belief that her power is not entirely hers, she still uses it in an uncompromised and independent way, as is evident from the question "Wanna fight?" which are almost the very first words she speaks in the film when visiting her male mentor Yon-Rogg.

On the subject of her mentor, however, where *Wonder Woman* might be said to acquiesce to male authority, *Captain Marvel* completely refuses the sexist and rather boring tropes of the male savior or the man who enables the woman to reach her full potential. In fact, the "Wanna fight?" scene, while seemingly suggesting the film might fall for this convention right from the start, is only there to step up the refusal of the trope at the end. The premise of Carol's empowerment is pretty much the same as the comic, in that she gains her power from an accident with Kree technology, which is then supposedly enabled and regulated by an implant she wears in her neck. When she finds out the truth about her former life and that the Kree were responsible for the accident, she turns against the Kree only to be brought before the Supreme Intelligence, bound in a manner very reminiscent of the early *Wonder Woman* comics.

It is in this scene, while under threat of losing her power, that she discovers it is solely within her, and that, if anything, the thing she wears in her neck is only inhibiting it. As she slowly uncovers her

full strength via flashbacks to the earlier life that had been wiped from her mind, she breaks free with no assistance and embraces the enormity of her power. Importantly, and much like the “No Man’s Land” scene in *Wonder Woman*, her resistance to the Supreme Intelligence is shown as a series of denials. We see a montage of shots from earlier in Carol’s life, where as a girl or young woman she was repeatedly told to slow down or not climb so high, but continues to do so, only to crash or fall to the ground.

What is important, though, is that she gets up every time, once in the face of her abusive father—a story written so well in *The Life of Captain Marvel* (Stohl)—until she has broken the ties that bind her and is free. Having discovered Yon-Rogg’s part in the accident and his defence of a Kree society that is the opposite of the terror-fighting defenders of freedom she has been told, she faces him one last time. As he sets off on the usual boast of the male mentor, challenging her by claiming she is too emotional to control her power and reaffirming only he can teach her how to use it, she blasts him, midsentence, sending him flying into a rock some way off in the distance. When she walks over to him, she simply says, “I have nothing to prove to you.”

Although Carol’s independence is paramount, it is important for the film’s gender politics that Carol saves the day only with significant help from her old friend and fellow pilot, Maria Rambeau. The significance of Maria is not simply to add an element of “sisterhood” to the film—a theme that really should have been explored a little more—but because Maria is the mother of Monica. In the comics, after the original Captain Marvel died, the first person to take up the title was an African-American woman called Monica Rambeau in 1982 (Stern and Romita Jr.). This is therefore a very important nod to the history of the comics and the representation of race.

However, in terms of the gender politics of the film, this is even more important because it accentuates the intergenerational “sisterhood” upon which Carol’s success depends. When Carol meets the Supreme Intelligence, who manifests in the form of the person Carol most admires, “she” appears as Wendy Lawson, who we later find out is a more senior pilot that both Carol and Maria look up to. The products of Lawson’s scientific research are also what motivate the actions of everyone in the film. However, at the point where Carol explains to Maria what needs to be done to find Lawson’s research, it is the young Monica that persuades her mother to do it by cheekily

asking her to think about what kind of role model she'd be if she refused.

Here, the film is in keeping with third-wave feminism in which "the ascent of the 'girl' [i]s a strong and distinct feminist identity" (Baumgardner and Richards 63). It also avoids the pitfalls of intergenerational conflict that is often seen as a problem with third-wave feminism. As Munford argues, "the domineering mother and the rebellious daughter are destructive caricatures. The danger in girl culture—and in the wave paradigm more generally—is that it reiterates the trope of mother-daughter conflict" (276). She goes on to warn that "reinforcing this intergenerational schism . . . opens up a space for patriarchal recuperation" (276). *Captain Marvel* completely refuses this and draws a line of profound solidarity and collective mission from Monika through Carol and Maria to Wendy Lawson; and while Wendy is the inspiration, it is the young Monika that provides the necessary encouragement to complete what they need to do.

One further important element of the gender politics is that the film effectively works as Nick Fury's MCU origin story. At this point, S.H.I.E.L.D. is a relatively small agency, so Fury's discovery of Captain Marvel and the two alien species of Kree and Skrull mark the moment when the agency itself comes of age. With its signature project being the launch of "The Avenger Initiative," we are shown that it is this event that acts as the rationale for it. Interestingly, though, we see Fury initially using the name "The Protector Initiative" before looking at a photograph of Carol climbing into a plane with the name "Carol 'Avenger' Danvers" written on the side of the cockpit. It is this that prompts him to retitle "The Protector Initiative" as "The Avenger Initiative." Not only is Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel the reason for the founding of the Initiative, she technically becomes "The First Avenger," a title previously carried by Captain America in both the MCU and the comics. Once again, "emphasized femininity" would demand she defer to the authority and primacy of the male hero, but the film does the opposite.

Conclusion: The Cultural Politics of Transformed Origins

This piece of retroactive continuity that places Captain Marvel as the first Avenger in the MCU is part of the retelling and reshaping of

origins that has been an integral part of the superhero genre since the idea of a multiverse was introduced in DC Comics in 1961 (Fox and Infantino), and continuity within series and across titles became more of a feature for both DC and Marvel in the 1970s. Today, the creative possibilities of such changes are even more pronounced in our trans-media environment, where characters and franchises move from comic books, to television, to cinema, to DVDs, and to computer games are regularly reimagined in the process. This is done especially well in *Captain Marvel*, where another example of retroactive continuity acts like a photon blast propelling the progressive gender politics forward, while the politics of *Wonder Woman* are unfortunately limited by an earlier change to Diana's origin in the comics that the film adopts.

Diana's origin is first told in *Wonder Woman* #1 (Marston and Peter), where she is created from clay by Hippolyte and brought to life with the help of Athena and Aphrodite. Her "birth" makes the traditional heterosexual coupling redundant even if Marston did introduce a heterosexual love interest for Diana in order to ensure the character was not too radical for the tastes and sensibilities of 1940s America. This love interest is, of course, Steve Trevor, a US Air Force pilot who crashes on Themyscira, then simply called Paradise Island. As in the film, his arrival brings news of the war and Marston shows Aphrodite, goddess of love, being mocked by Ares, who declares he is Earth's ruler. In an effort to defeat him, Aphrodite tells Hippolyte to send the strongest Amazon back to America to defeat Ares and end the war. As a consequence, Queen Hippolyte announces a competition to see who will return to Man's World with Steve Trevor; and despite being told she cannot enter the competition, Diana defies her mother and proves herself to be the strongest Amazon.

Diana's willful defiance is also present in the film and introduces a key feature of the character in terms of her bravery and determination, but it also speaks to an important feature of gender inequality where, as Julie D. O'Reilly has noted, Superman becomes "a hero simply because he chooses to" and whose choice "is neither questioned nor challenged" (273), while Wonder Woman has to fight to be seen as worthy. Again, the role of Diana as a girl here is also significant. Not only does it show her agency from an early age, but, as previously discussed in relation to Monica in *Captain Marvel*, Diana as a girl awakens her mother via the intervention of Hippolyte's sister, Antiope, to the continued threat of Ares's return. Here, the girl,

often connected to postfeminism (Negra), can be seen as an allegory for the call for renewed feminist activism in the face of a problem assumed to be in the past.

In 2012, this origin was completely changed in a story written by Brian Azzarello and drawn by Cliff Chiang.⁵ Here, Hippolyte is shown to have lied to Diana, who was in fact the accidental product of her having sex with Zeus. Not only was Zeus now her father, thereby breaking the matriarchal lineage that had stood strong for seventy years, it also erased another important aspect of Marston's politics (Curtis). His mistress, Olive Byrne, with whom he and Eliza-beth lived, was the niece of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood in the United States. Hippolyte's willful and independent creation of Diana from clay is therefore a very important statement about women's reproductive rights that has now been lost.

This is also a good example of the complex, often countervailing articulation between dominant and subordinate forces at play in popular culture. While DC was playing its part in increasing representation of women in their comics and creative teams, this taming of Wonder Woman shows how dominant patriarchal attitudes and hegemonic masculinity were reasserted. Although there were positive aspects of the Azzarello story that were in keeping with Marston's vision (Sadri), the incorporation of this change into the film is a problem. Not only is Hippolyte shown to be a deceiver, a liar to her daughter and her Amazonian sisters, when Diana defeats Ares at the end of the film, instead of using her own powers, she enacts a key feature of "emphasized femininity" by calling on the power of Zeus. It is therefore only with the assistance of the patriarch that she succeeds, undercutting everything in the film about women's empowerment that had gone before.

The opposite is the case in *Captain Marvel*. As noted above, Marvel has made especially good use of what Brinker calls the "transmedial and multi-linear serial narration" (451) that is a central feature of how Marvel now tells its stories and accesses different audiences and users across a variety of media. This is what Shane Denson calls "a non-linear form of 'concurrent' (compounding or cumulative) seriality" (532), where different versions of worlds and characters live together in a complex narrative mix. With regard to *Captain Marvel*, the most important change relates to the character of Wendy Lawson. So far, I have not mentioned that in the film her real identity is Mar-

Vell, the character who had been a male Kree warrior and the original Captain Marvel in the comics.

Remembering it was a combination of Kree technology and Mar-Vell's DNA that gave Carol Danvers her powers back in 1969, it is a male figure that lies at the root of her origin in the comics; but in the film, it is the female Mar-Vell that is present at Captain Marvel's creation. Here, Marvel uses retroactive continuity and multilinear narration in a way that furthers the gender politics in the rest of the film. Wendy Lawson effectively becomes the foundation and goal of Carol Danvers's empowerment and underscores the important message about women, autonomy, and authority that is the key to the film's politics.

Although *Wonder Woman* does make use of "multi-linear serial narration" to rewrite Wonder Woman's first appearance and thereby activates an important element of the film's gender politics, the fact that she needed the power of her father ultimately reinforces conventional assumptions about male authority typical of "emphasized femininity." By comparison, Captain Marvel is completely independent in her ability to win the day. When she gets support, it is primarily from a sisterhood of three generations of women. Overall, the two films stand as progressive interventions in a genre slow to challenge hegemonic masculinity. That challenge has also been irregular and uneven as progressive and regressive potentials conflict. This remains especially true of the context today, where a complex web of moves and countermoves contend over hegemonic gender norms. At a time when significant gains were being made by women, men in the Superman office at DC (the one with editorial control over *Wonder Woman* comics) decided to take the genre's icon of matriarchy and make her a daughter of the patriarch. The use of retroactive continuity has often been a way to reestablish canonical authority amidst this multilinear story telling, but this was a very particular regressive move at a time of major progress. So, let us hope our transmedia world of nonlinear narrative takes heed of *Captain Marvel* and continues to make positive use of the reimagining, retelling, and rebooting of stories and the significant opportunity that affords for challenging hegemonic attitudes and values.

Notes

1. In addition, as Elana Levine noted in relation to the remaking of *Charlie's Angels*, popular media regularly contributes to a situation "that *assumes* a 'pastness' for feminism" (376, author emphasis).
2. The first Captain Marvel was published by Fawcett in 1940, but National Periodicals, later to become DC, claimed he was a rip off of Superman. After years of litigation, Fawcett stopped publishing Captain Marvel in 1953. In 1972, DC took out a licence on the name but could only publish under the title "Shazam," because Marvel Comics had taken out copyright on the name and introduced their own Captain Marvel in 1967.
3. Amazons wear bracelets to mark the time they were enslaved by Ares as a reminder to never again submit to the rule of men, including a promise to never marry.
4. The website "Women in Refrigerators," created in 1999 by Gail Simone, is another example of resistance to violence against women in superhero comics. A narrative device now known as "fridging" was coined to describe such violence used as a plot point to motivate the male protagonist. The most egregious example coming in *Green Lantern* #54 from 1994, where Major Force murders Green Lantern's partner, Alex De Witt, chops her up, and stuffs her in his fridge (Marz and Aucoin).
5. Robert Kanigher attempted to change the origin story in 1959 as part of the post-Wertham move to make superheroes more representative of conservative "family values" (Ormrod), but he later claimed to be ignorant of this, saying that she never had a father (Hanley 105).

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