CAVALIERI, ALYSSA. M.A. Three Female Superheroes? The Feminists are Taking Over!: Perceptions of Feminism and Rhetorical Failure in *The Marvels*. (2024)
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This thesis examines the complicated response to Marvel projects (comics, film, etc.) claiming to center women and feminism through an exploration of three heroines from *The Marvels* (2023), which is regarded as a box office failure. It considers how women are developed as characters within complex storylines typically centered around men, the aesthetics of comics as tied to the objectification and sexualization of their bodies, and the resilience of both heroines and audiences who challenge norms in comic spaces. Despite the complications surrounding *The Marvels* and the histories of the heroines it centers, persistent engagement from women as fans of the superhero genre evidences instances of women's empowerment within Marvel stories and reflects an insistence for women to be acknowledged as both heroes and as a valued audience.

THREE FEMALE SUPERHEROES? THE FEMINISTS ARE TAKING OVER!:

PERCEPTIONS OF FEMINISM AND RHETORICAL FAILURE

IN *THE MARVELS*

by

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In March 2019, a friend and I were waiting for the previews to start at an early showing of DC's *Shazam!* (2019) and were discussing Marvel's *Captain Marvel* (2019), which we had seen the week before. Although we were not speaking loudly by any means, a middle-aged man sitting a few spaces away from us proceeded to interrupt me and begin an argument about Carol Danvers' stealing the Captain Marvel name from DC's Captain Marvel. During this argument, he never addressed the male friend that I was with and only spoke condescendingly to me, a teenage girl who he thought liked Carol Danvers too much. Unfortunately, my experience at the theater was not unique then and is not unusual now.

At the time, fandom[1] spaces online were flooded with misogynistic comments and trolls[2] who were targeting the upcoming release of Marvel's first film with a solo female lead, *Captain Marvel* (2019). Misinformation about the film, its main character Carol Danvers, and her actress, Brie Larson, promoting misandry were spread across the internet. There have been very similar outbursts online with the release of every female-fronted MCU project, and lots of negative rhetoric about the so-called M-She-Universe[3] starting with alt-right podcasters and rippling throughout the comic community online. While *Captain Marvel* (2019) is now one of many Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) projects focused on female heroes, there is still a particular hatred online for the movie as it is blamed for ushering in a new era of "diversity" in comic-based films. *Captain Marvel*'s sequel, titled *The Marvels* (2023) and featuring the characters Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) and Photon (Monica Rambeau) in addition to Carol Danvers as Captain

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[1] Community of fans revolving around a particular show, movie, series, game, or other type of media
[2] Internet users who purposefully make provocative, incorrect, or inflammatory comments and posts across social media platforms, usually with the goal of sparking conflict
[3] Derogatory term referring to the introduction of multiple female superheroes into the MCU

Marvel, was also subject to the review-bombing[4] campaigns that attack any Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) project that focuses on heroes who are not white men. Within a week of the release of the first trailer, *The Marvels* (2023) broke the record for having the most disliked Marvel trailer ever, with more than 500,000 dislikes and over 17 million views (Freeman). This immediate negative reaction, despite the trailer containing a typical plot for an MCU movie and comic book story, has inspired me to look deeper into the culture of misogyny surrounding female-led superhero stories and perceptions of feminism in comics.

This thesis, then, explores three heroines from *The Marvels,* considering their development as characters and within storylines, their visual representation through costuming and bodily representation, and the complicated way they figure in this most recent film. My analysis centers the tension around the framing of *Captain Marvel* as a feminist film and Carol Danvers as a feminist character, both in academic circles and in fandom spaces online. Across my analysis–from comics to film–I trace how each character emerges in different time periods for heroines and offers unique perspectives on how readers responded to the perception of feminism in the MCU. Additionally, Marvel had already paired the three together in a combination that piqued my interest; Kamala Khan and Carol Danvers were an obvious duo since the former was inspired by the latter, but I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen Monica Rambeau interact with Carol Danvers in comics.

Ultimately, these three characters reflect the imagination about and fear related to what might be perceived as being feminist in comics and what this interaction reveals about audience reactions and the treatment of women in the superhero genre as a whole. In what follows, I make

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[4] The practice of leaving negative reviews for a film or show in an attempt to bring down its audience member rating, often with political motivations and without having seen it or prior to its release

visible the complex factors influencing characters and storylines that depart from traditional superhero expectations as well as the ramifications on the comic book page and film screen. . Through this analysis, I trace perceptions of feminism, how my three subjects are interpreted to be enacting or working against feminism as a whole, and how those perceived enactions of feminism within comics garner a range of responses from various authors and audiences.

While the three heroines are surrounded by paradoxes, the audience's perception of feminism in their stories has been taken up to imagine and work towards new futures born out of failure, and their resilience marks the inevitability of change when communities band together to challenge the norm.

Literature Review

The role of women in comics, including within the stories themselves, as creators, and as consumers, has a history of devaluation that has continued from the comics into the MCU. Women in comics is its own area of scholarly work within comic studies, and it is the body of work that most informs my project. Much of this scholarship relates to the mistreatment of women in the genre. For instance, Suzanne Scott's "Fangirls in refrigerators: The politics of (in)visibility in comic book culture (2013)," references a trope known as "fridging," a term derived from the Women in Refrigerators list, which was created by then fan, now popular author Gail Simone in 1999 as a response to the mistreatment of women in comics as exemplified by moment a Green Lantern's love interest was dismembered and shoved into a refrigerator for him to find. The list featured a multitude of women in comics who had been murdered, seriously injured, tormented, raped, or who faced untimely deaths - women who had been fridged, which was pretty much all of them. I remember my first introduction to fridging while watching *Legion of Superheroes* on a Saturday morning somewhere around age 6-8, when

Triplicate Girl, who had the power to split into three different versions of herself, became Duo Damsel after one of her selves was killed. She had made it onto Simone's list as well for the trauma that she faced in the comics, which was later deemed appropriate enough to be recreated in a children's show. The term "fridging" was picked up across multiple fandom and media spaces as audiences of women claimed the name and the visibility it brought to the trend of the excessive violence faced by women across multiple genres of stories.

Simone's list also includes entries on two of the women I focus on for this project, with Carol Danvers having one of the lengthiest entries under the monikers Ms. Marvel and Warbird and Monica Rambeau appearing under the monikers Captain Marvel II and Photon (Simone). Carol's entry, noted that she had been "mind-controlled, impregnated by rape, [had her] powers and memories stolen, [was] cosmic-powered and then depowered, [and became an] alcoholic" which Simone ended by writing "SHEESH!" (Simone). Despite being intended to be a progressive feminist character, the original Ms. Marvel still fell victim to many harmful tropes, as did Monica Rambeau, whose entry documents that she was also depowered and references an incident in which she ceded her name to the male hero Genis-Vell. The representation of women in comics is often centered around their trauma and their victimization under patriarchal oppression, which has been criticized by scholars as they examine subversions of this norm (Curtis and Cardo, Gámez Fuentes).

Anna F. Peppard points to the possibilities and the limitations of leading ladies in comics. "She opens her analysis with a quote from Marvel's *The Cat*, a comic that represented several milestones for the label as not only its first ongoing run with a solo heroine as the protagonist, but also as the first of Marvel's comics to be both authored and illustrated by women, as it featured Marie Severin as its artist and Linda Fite as its writer (Peppard 105). *The Cat* also

predated the introduction of Carol Danvers featuring as the titular hero of *Ms. Marvel* by five years. A letter to the editor *Ms. Marvel* from Ms. Adrienne Foster refers to the hero as "one of your best accomplishments since the Cat" but also comments that "I certainly hope she lasts more than four issues" in response to *The Cat*'s short lifespan (*Captain Marvel: The Ms. Marvel Days* 142). Unfortunately, *The Cat* would be the only ongoing Marvel comic to feature women in the position of both author and artist for four decades, until Carol Danvers reintroduction as Captain Marvel led to a collaboration between writer Kelly Sue DeConnick and artist Emma Rios, which took place for issues 5 and 6 of DeConnick's first *Captain Marvel* run (Peppard 105, 131). While Peppard brings forward many critical critiques of women's representation in superhero comics, her focus on the sheer lack of collaboration between women in the creation of comics featuring women as heroes reveals the importance of not only who comics are being created for, but who is creating them. She notes that the lack of women involved with the creation of superheroines and the production of their stories means that "even when female superheroes are intended to appeal to female readers, they often reveal more about how men view women than about how girls and women view themselves" (109). Peppard also offers a historically contextualized analysis of Carol Danvers introduction as Ms. Marvel, who she refers to as "Marvel's most focused effort since *The Cat* to appeal to readers by incorporating feminist themes," which I will be utilizing in chapter II (113).

In the introduction of *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*, Jeffrey A. Brown argues that despite action heroines becoming more common in popular culture, they are still scarce enough that the introduction of a new heroine triggers a press frenzy to treat her as "a harbinger of ass-kicking feminism" (10). He argues that this immediate induction into public debate is due to action heroines as being an "in-your-face

challenge to basic cultural assumptions about gender roles in real life and in fantasy" since she is a figure who simultaneously "problematizes and reinforces" stereotypes surrounding how women are portrayed (11). This creates the paradoxical issue of her portrayal as both "a heroic subject and as a sexual object" that sparks controversy among both feminists and more conservative audiences (11). However, Brown also brings up an issue in terms of framing superheroines as solely progressive and separate from the culture they are written in, arguing that despite their attitudes and the intentionality behind the heroes, they still work within an oppressive system (16). Despite this, Brown still believes and argues throughout the text that they still have potential to do good and hopes that action heroines will increasingly challenge sexist ideologies and influence their audiences to challenge them as well (130).

To sharpen my thinking about what perspectives are relevant to this study, I draw on comic scholar Scott T. Smith's lament that "the academy [is] running behind" as "much of what [he has] read from nonacademics [has been] more insightful, informed, and rhetorically effective" than the more academic articles he encountered (Smith 23). With Smith's critique in mind, I will be engaging with the comments of everyday fans and audiences as well as a wide variety of additional primary sources. These texts include the source material they appear in, which is inclusive of both comics and their live-action adaptations, and sources that are traditionally considered non-academic, including news articles, blog posts, and any other relevant form of audience engagement, such as Rotten Tomato reviews or social media comments. Although I therefore am working across genres, contexts, and time periods, this intentional cluster of source material enables me to take an "ecological" approach to considering the characters mentioned above–an analytical method I discuss in more detail in chapter II.

I also find rhetorical failure to be a useful term in understanding how Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau represent the history of women in comics. Sarah Hallenbeck defines rhetorical failure as "a failure to persuade others to adopt a particular course of action…despite the merits of that course of action" and draws from Stacey Sheriff to argue that rhetorical failure should be of particular relevance to feminist rhetoricians, "whose research subjects often 'encounter and negotiate' with failure 'whenever they challenge powerful mainstream discourses'" (Hallenbeck 70). While Hallenbeck notes that Sheriff's argument pertains specifically to women promoting social justice, she argues that it is also useful in terms of women in non-activist roles who "may not have sought explicitly to enact social change, but their presence in previously male-dominated environments…heralded social change" (Hallenbeck 70). This application of rhetorical failure is particularly useful for thinking about how women in comics who are either not "doing" feminism or are only superficially referred to as feminists or empowered women while not engaging with feminist principles could still be relevant to the progression of feminism just through their very presence in a male-dominated genre.

Hallenbeck also argues that analysis of rhetorical failure pertaining to women "complicates linear accounts of history, in which women gradually 'gain access' to new fields of work and study, rather than struggle consistently to legitimize their presence" (Hallenbeck 71). This challenge to narratives of progress is particularly useful when examining the history of women in comics and as superheroes, since many moments where heroines show autonomy are followed by violence or fridging following a change in writer. This thesis makes a case for understanding that in the context of comics, rhetorical failure showcases the complex response that arises alongside the portrayal of women as heroes from audiences' reactions, to the

intertwined choices of various creative teams, to the publishers seeking to determine the marketability of female empowerment.

Chapter Overview

Mapping the M-She-U

The first section of my thesis will focus on narrative conventions for heroines in comic stories, with a focus on Carol Danvers's and Monica Rambeau's portrayals from their creation onwards. Rather than focusing on a particular text, I will draw from both of their origins as well as a variety of what I see as key moments in each of their storylines that particularly exemplify the mistreatment of women in comics and the complications that come with deviating from genre conventions, which each character does simply by existing as heroines, as well as the ways each character is legitimized as a hero. The two characters each offer unique perspectives on the portrayal of women in comics, as Carol Danvers was introduced as a hero with the intention of appealing to the women's liberation movement, while Monica Rambeau was invented to fill a hole in the Avengers ensemble. Additionally, I examine the modern response to fridging via an examination of audience response to the most recent fridging of Kamala Khan.

This chapter also explores the unique relationship between the creative teams and audiences involved with comics, since the nature of their monthly releases mean that a story could be canceled at any given time due to controversy or lack of enthusiasm from readers, but also offers an outlet for the two to communicate and influence each other under the guidelines of the publisher. As such, there is a particular risk of failure that comes alongside deviating from conventions, but also a unique opportunity to create change.

Looking back at the history of women in comics, it becomes clear that Marvel is unwilling to do anything that could potentially alienate the male audience that they view as their

primary demographic, even while simultaneously claiming to be writing particular characters/series with women in mind. This manifests in the sexualization of female characters, as well as their frequent fridging in order to further the plotlines of male characters. Anna F. Peppard refers to this as a common "compromise" in which women are allowed to have powers and be heroes, but must be sexualized and objectified in exchange in order to conform to genre conventions. Despite many improvements, the nature of shifting creative teams in charge of particular comics and characters means that growth for these heroines is not necessarily straightforward, since the values going into any given run change alongside the creative team in charge of it. However, women and other readers have been consistently calling out Marvel and other creators of superhero comics for their treatment of heroines and refuse to be silenced.

Concepts of Normalcy in Comics

The next chapter focuses primarily on the visual aspect of comics and their representation of concepts of normalcy and ideals in terms of the female body, which is one of the most powerful instances of fan response enacting change, especially since the 2010s. It includes a history of how heroines are costumed and the implications of their objectification, how racial identity influences the portrayal of heroines in relation to stereotypes codified by their appearances, and how disability is utilized to set up superheroes as the idealized version of humans. I also examine various audience responses to heroines both conforming and breaking from norms of appearance and the implications for how women are valued within comics and as potential audiences for comics via Carol Danvers' costume changes. This section also includes a fan-built advocacy movement that criticize the objectification of women in comics, such as *The Hawkeye Initiative*, academic responses like comic scholar Carolyn Cocca's "Broke-Back Test,"

and complaints from audience members who argue that heroines need to be sexualized in order to draw in audiences.

As comics are a primarily visually based medium, the aesthetics of superhero stories, such as costumes, the portrayal of bodies, and stereotypes tied to appearances, are each a crucial part of investigating the construction of normalcy and who it benefits, which is also part of the investigation of who these stories are written for. Part of the way the expression of ideals and normalcy manifests is via the sexualization of heroines as part of the compromise for their holding the power that was typically relegated to male heroes. The consistent sexualization under the guise of empowerment is deeply tied to the devaluation of women as part of comic readership as well as the centering of male opinions, which is evident in the gender breakdown of responses to sexualized and unsexualized costumes. The formulation of what a hero looks like and the visualization of who has power is based on concepts of ideals built on constructions of normalcy opposite disability, racist stereotypes and exoticization, and objectification. Despite this, work from women and other audience members challenging these portrayals has begun to slowly change the standards for heroines, although backlash still often follows unsexualized depictions of women in comics.

Rhetorical Failure in the MCU

This chapter seeks to question the factors that led to *The Marvels* box office failure despite *Captain Marvel*'s critical success, including discussions of the difference in rhetorical landscape that the two films were released into, their main sites of controversy as allegedly feminist works, the complications brought on by the Marvel Universe[5] as a whole, and how the

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[5] Commonly used to refer to the main storyline within Marvel Comics centered around Earth-616

politics of Disney ultimately contributed to the film's failure. I also question how the debates

sparked by *Captain Marvel* (2019) around the audience's perception of the film's feminist

agenda influenced the reception of *The Marvels* (2023). Additionally, I am also engaging with

critiques of militarism and patriotic propaganda within both MCU films and superhero comics as

a whole and the illusion of empowerment that arises when women who are engaging with

structures that ultimately harm other women are framed as feminist and empowered.

Ultimately, while many MCU movies like *Captain Marvel* offer critiques of imperialism

or other oppressive structures like patriarchy, they always prioritize maintaining the status quo

and solutions focused on (superpowered) individualism over creating meaningful change

(Rangwala). The history of militarism in superhero comics and involvement of the Department

of Defense with Marvel movies also complicates feminist engagement with the MCU. Since

Marvel values marketability above all, the box office failure of *The Marvels* signifies that a

change must be made to the stories in the MCU going forward, whether Marvel chooses to

prioritize the DoD or its feminist fans. There is no easy solution to the conflicts between

feminism and the MCU, but learning to navigate paradox has always been necessary for women

who read comics. While *The Marvels* may not be the ultimate feminist film or offer up solutions

to every critique that women have raised about superhero comics, it is still a fun movie that

promotes women supporting women and challenges the benefits of imperialism. Perhaps most

importantly, *The Marvels* was unapologetically created by women, for women, in a genre where

female audiences are often ignored.

CHAPTER II: MAPPING THE M-SHE-U

Analysis of comics and related media is unique due to the often decades-long history of characters, the constant change in writers, the common occurrence of retconning[6] and continuity issues, as well as the influence of the audience on stories. Any given consumer of comic-based media pertaining to particular characters could be bringing any combination of information and opinions to the table based on what they have read, watched, or heard about the character from across the Marvel ecosystem. I have found that analysis of the characters in superhero comics, particularly in regard to characters who have been around for decades, is especially difficult because of the sheer amount of information that there is to focus on. For this project, I struggled when choosing my focus due to how closely connected each piece of media is when considering how these characters are formulated and perceived. On one hand, the extremely negative reaction to *Captain Marvel* (2019) served as the exigence for this project and remains relevant as *The Marvels* (2023) also faces a more negative response than many other MCU stories. However, the response itself is tied to the prevalence of harmful misogynistic tropes in superhero comics and the influence that changes in writers and artists have on the representation of women in comics and on the audience's expectation for them. In addition to this, there is also the world within the stories themselves and the struggles the characters grapple with, which are often particularly harsh for women. Real-world misogyny from audiences also plays a large role in how these characters are formulated and whether or not they are met with the approval needed to continue funding their titles. I have also found it impossible, and perhaps unwise, to separate all of these factors from how real-world violence and militarization have contributed to the development of

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[6] Retroactive revision of a story with new information or a new perspective on an event or character

the MCU and overall disenchantment with superhero movies as the genre becomes increasingly oversaturated.

To create a more thorough understanding of how these characters and stories are created and their effects based on audience responses, I will be drawing on Jenny Edbauer's concept of rhetorical ecologies to map the significance of these heroes as a reflection of cultural values and ideals at any given moment in their histories. It is easier to conceptualize these connections and the incomplete picture that separating art from audience creates by using Edbauer's language to explain the influence of the audience on the rhetoric of the stories as something that can both compromise and extend their intended message (Edbauer 19). Edbauer proposes "rhetorical ecologies" as a way of theorizing a rhetorical response (here, a comic) as something other than the traditionally understood outcome of a singular moment and a coherent exigence (a compelling contextual factor or situation that encourages a response). Edbauer's model accounts for public rhetorics, as she conceptualizes rhetorics as emerging from "a circulating ecology of effects, enactments, and events" that take place within an "open network" of affect (9, 13). Essentially, Edbauer views the construction of rhetoric as an act of sharing in which it is already influenced by current circulations within the social field prior to emerging and its production is not able to be separated from public life (14, 21). The model is particularly useful in shifting focus towards "the way we view counter-rhetorics, issues of cooptation, and strategies of rhetorical production and circulation" (20). I find this focus especially valuable in seeking to understand Marvel's need to balance their intentions in storytelling, audience appeal, and the marketability necessary to continue getting particular titles published and sold. However, it is also useful for mapping out the relationship between the changes (or lack thereof) made to comic stories following interactions between the creative team and the audience.

As an application of Edbauer's concept of rhetorical ecologies, I will be mapping out the timelines of Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau in terms of their solo titles, major appearances, and most controversial moments in order to map out how feminism has played out across their histories and Marvel comics from the late 1960s to now. The stories the heroes appear in, including characterization, content, and costuming, are all influenced by Marvel's perception of audience and cultural values and norms, as well as the viewpoints of the teams in charge of creating the issues. Part of the issue I am addressing with this mapping of Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau is the idea of being able to have an easy encounter with any of these stories and characters given the ever increasing complexity of the Marvel Universe as a shared universe[7] inside of a larger multiverse.[8] While each of these characters can stand alone in any given story, it is unusual for each audience member to have the same experience as impressions of characters vary wildly depending on which stories and timelines have been consumed, or even which authors did the writing. As such, a straightforward analysis of the progression of feminism in these stories and characters will not necessarily produce a linear timeline of increasingly positive or negative representation. Rather, it may afford the paradox that at any given moment, they could be perceived as both feminist[9] and not feminist at the same time, which leads to my question of how the complexity of ideals within Marvel's superhero narratives contributes to the problem of how women, particularly women who are intended to be progressive characters, are portrayed in comics and treated by both creative teams and audiences in a reflection of the cultural norms being challenged. Additionally, the medium of comics and their encouragement

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[7] Shared world in which multiple stories created by various writers take place that can stand alone or interact together

[8] Group of universes containing multiple distinct worlds and alternate timelines

[9] This also reflects the reality that there are multiple formulations of feminism in the real world

of audience interaction via letters to the editor creates a unique space in which readers have the potential to influence future storylines and characterizations through the responses and arguments sent to the creative team. If their letters are published, there is an opportunity to challenge the viewpoints of other readers as well.

I argue that these characters should not be separated from their histories for analysis despite the complexity it brings, since the changes they go through also create a crucial part of their stories and particularly, the development of what it means to be a hero in both comics and the culture they are written in. The progression of women's heroism in these stories reflects societal ideas about who can be a hero at any given time, concepts of respectability, and who deserves power. What it meant for Carol Danvers to be a hero as a white woman in the 1970s is not the same as what it meant for Monica Rambeau to be a hero as a black woman in the 1980s, or for Kamala Khan to be a hero as a Pakistani-American in the 2010s. Part of what I will explore in this section is how heroic characters are rendered, and more specifically, how women in comics are often made to fit into a very specific concept of acceptable heroism for female heroes and the exchanges being made in order to include women as heroes at all.

Carol Danvers

To begin chronologically, Carol Danvers was first introduced in December 1967 as a love interest for the Kree hero Mar-Vell, the original holder of Marvel's "Captain Marvel" mantle. At the time, the character, who had previously been in the air force, was working as the head of security at NASA, a job she later lost due to her involvement in an incident between Mar-Vell and the villainous Yon-Rogg. While fulfilling the role of Mar-Vell's damsel in distress, Carol was caught in the explosion of Yon-Rogg's psyche-magnetron weapon. Although she survived the incident, she was then written out of Mar-Vell's series following the end of issue #18 and his

love interest changed. In 1977, she returned to Marvel Comics in her own solo series as Ms. Marvel, where it was revealed that the exposure to radiation and Kree DNA had given her superpowers, including flight, enhanced strength, a Kree warrior mentality, and a seventh sense to warn her of danger. Her return took place under the authorship of Gerry Conway, who had found the feminist hero Marvel was looking to market in the form of Carol Danvers, the cast-aside love interest. This origin was later retconned multiple times, once with the purpose of giving Carol more autonomy by adding in that she had actively wished for the power to help Mar-Vell, and later to have the explosion merely be the activator of the powers she inherited from her Kree mother, rather than an infusion of her DNA with Mar-Vell's. The initial run of Ms. Marvel only lasted 23 issues before being canceled in 1979, but the character continued to appear fairly consistently in other titles before eventually getting a second Ms. Marvel solo series that ran from 2006-2010, and later several consecutive solo series as Captain Marvel starting with Kelly Sue DeConnick's run 2012 and ending with Alyssa Wong's current ongoing run.

The original iteration of Ms. Marvel was a weak character for a number of reasons, including a scandalous costume that made her look like a knock-off of Mar-Vell, questionable writing, and adherence to a number of tropes reinforcing the idea that women are too fragile to be superheroes. As a result of her many flaws, one of the biggest controversies surrounding the original Ms. Marvel run revolved around the issue of feminism and the audience debate of whether or not she promoted feminist values like Marvel claimed. The choice to give Carol Danvers powers and bring her back for another story was driven specifically by Marvel wanting to add another female hero to their roster in order to add more women to their audience during a time in which writer Gerry Conway later said "you'd have to be an unconscious sea slug not be aware that women were attempting to redefine their place in the culture" (*Captain Marvel: Ms.*

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Marvel 8). He created the Ms. Marvel comics as an attempted reflection of that cultural shift.

However, despite their intentions, the creative team behind the *Ms. Marvel* solo series was made

entirely of men, leading to a version of Carol Danvers that represented men's idea of feminism

and womanhood, and which many women recognized as questionable for some of the reasons

mentioned above.

To begin with, Ms. Marvel's story was originally conceived of and written by a man

utilizing feminism for his own purposes, Gerry Conway. Predicting challenges to his capability

to write a feminist heroine from female readers, Conway argued that the equality being sought by

the women's liberation movement meant a man was perfectly capable of writing a "convincing"

woman well if women were capable of writing "convincing" men well (*Captain Marvel: Ms.*

Marvel 28). While this is technically true, Conway also claimed in the same breath that there

were no women capable of writing the Ms. Marvel series (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 28). As a

result of this, the original iteration of Ms. Marvel is a great example of what a '70s man

witnessing second-wave feminism from the sidelines thinks a strong feminist woman looks and

acts like. To his credit, Conway was later quite embarrassed by his attitudes, which he described

as "well-meaning, but clueless" while referring to himself as the co-creator of "the ultimate male

fantasy 'feminist' super heroine of the 1970s" (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 9). Conway's

portrayal of Ms. Marvel as a liberated heroine at the time was not at all unique, with Anna F.

Peppard describing the character as "epitomizing" the "compromise" frequently made between

feminism and sexualization in the portrayal of female heroes (Peppard 113). Essentially, there

was an ongoing trend where sexualization of female heroes was simultaneously framed as being

empowering for the women by male authors, who were still ultimately centering male audiences,

while also rendering the inclusion of feminist ideals in their characters and stories more

acceptable due to their physical appearances. Peppard states that while "Ms. Marvel is not only more powerful and more sexualized than her predecessors," she is "also more explicitly aligned with feminism," which Marvel mostly accomplished via Carol Danvers' involvement in the publication of the in-universe *Woman* magazine (Peppard 114).

Ultimately, while this first iteration of Ms. Marvel attempted to tackle feminist issues, she was moreso used to excuse the involvement of both Marvel and the *Ms. Marvel* creative team in their own promotion of patriarchal values. Peppard notes that this utilization of feminism for Marvel's own means can be seen in Conway's claim to credibility as the series' author, and by how the in-series critique of J. Jonah Jameson and his outdated views on women's interests "allows Marvel to criticize a patriarchal publishing industry while privileging itself above such criticism – because, after all, it publishes the (purportedly) feminist *Ms. Marvel*" (Peppard 114). Even without these two explicit examples, Ms. Marvel's uniform also shows that even while claiming to want to appeal to women, Marvel was unwilling to sacrifice marketability to their typical audiences despite complaints from their new alleged target audience, which will be further discussed in chapter III. The letters to the editor from the early issues of *Ms. Marvel* reveal many instances of self-proclaimed feminist audiences and other readers calling out early topics of controversy surrounding the titular character, including challenges to the use of "Ms." rather than "Miss" or "Mrs." in her alias, her personality, her sexualized costume, her boyfriend, her debatably feminist principles, and the connection of her origin to Mar-Vell framing her as a spin-off character rather than her own hero (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 85, 104, 161). However, despite these letters showing that *Ms. Marvel* was evoking a response, both positive and negative, from the women reading the comic, Peppard notes that these letters also serve as part of Marvel's compromise surrounding the characterization of Carol Danvers as both a

powerful hero and a sexualized woman. She states that "based solely on its letter pages, *Ms. Marvel*'s self-image involved encouraging female and even feminist involvement while also demonstrating that this encouragement did not conflict with, or come at the expense of, Marvel's traditionally male fanbase (Peppard 116). Even in a title such as *Ms. Marvel*, which was specifically created to engage with women, preventing the alienation of male readers was prioritized over the "new" audience Marvel sought to win over.

Despite her rocky start, Ms. Marvel did become a more well-rounded character after Chris Claremont took over the series in issue 3 and began to resolve several of the problems that readers had with the first two issues of the run. For the first several issues of *Ms. Marvel*, the titular character had a split personality, with Carol Danvers representing herself, and Ms. Marvel representing a Kree warrior, or to be more specific, a male Kree warrior. At this point in the story, she suffered from blackouts, was unable to remember any of the acts of heroism performed by Ms. Marvel, and fainted every time she would transform back. Comic scholar Carolyn Cocca describes this as standard for female heroes at the time, since Marvel Girl from the X-Men and Sue Storm, the Invisible Woman, from the Fantastic Four would often also faint after overusing their powers and need to be rescued by their male teammates (Cocca 287). While this was an attempt on Conway's part to draw a parallel between Ms. Marvel's "quest for identity, and the modern woman's quest for raised consciousness, for self-liberation, for identity," the comparison falls short and Carol Danvers instead falls into the stereotype of a woman who can't handle all of her powers (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 28). In issue three, Claremont began a story to integrate the two from separate individuals sharing a body to one person, having her strive to save the day by reconciling the human and Kree personalities in order to use their combined knowledge from Carol's time in the Air Force and with NASA in conjunction with Ms. Marvel's

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memories of Mar-Vell's training as a Kree warrior. Additionally, he shifted the story from having Carol's powers being supplemented by the technology in her suit to being her own, solving another critique from readers. Claremont also put a bandaid on the indecency issue of Carol's uniform, which women had complained about in the letters to the editor,[10] by filling in the open back and stomach of her costume with the excuse that it was easier to illustrate before later creating an entirely new look for the heroine (Cocca 288).

Despite all of Claremont's changes salvaging Carol Danvers' character after her questionable beginning under Conway, the series was still canceled by Marvel, presumably due to lack of popularity. While Peppard points out that the letters to the editor included in the first Ms. Marvel run typically represented an even split in terms of gender, she also notes that it cannot be known if that ratio accurately represented the readership, since it also represented part of Marvel's "Mandate to make it seem as though girls and women were reading the title --- though not, importantly, in greater numbers than boys and men" (Peppard 116). Therefore, it is hard to know whether or not Marvel was successful in gathering an audience of women for the character, or if there were actually as many men reading the title as the letters suggested.

However, Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel continued to make appearances as part of the Avengers team, which led to perhaps her most unfortunate storyline beginning issue 200 of *The Avengers*, which was released in October 1980. In this story, Carol Danvers finds herself suddenly pregnant, which comes right on the heels of an interaction with the Scarlet Witch where Ms. Marvel refers to herowork as being more "fulfilling" than "any silly stereotype of having a baby" (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 607). To summarize the storyline, Carol was brainwashed,

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[10] As referenced in chapter III

kidnapped, brought to an alternate dimension, and impregnated by a character named Marcus. She carries the baby to term back on earth while staying with the Avengers, with no memory of what occurred until the baby rapidly aged into another version of Marcus. The new Marcus proceeded to take a brainwashed Carol Danvers back with him to the alternate dimension, which the Avengers allowed, believing the two were in love.

The American art historian Carol A. Strickland responded to this storyline in an essay called "The Rape of Ms. Marvel," in which she criticized the issue and its storyline by calling it "rape and obvious rape at that" due to the writer's inclusion of the use of Immortus' (mind-controlling) machines as part of how Marcus "wooed" Ms. Marvel. Strickland went on to describe her horror at the rape not being acknowledged and by how "some readers were so happy that Ms. M had finally found a good man" (Strickland). Her original response, written a few months after the issue's release, called out how "an all-male Marvel staff, presided by Jim Shooter and watched by the Comics Code, slaughtered Marvel's symbol of modern women" and "presented her as a victim of rape who enjoyed the process, and even wound up swooning over her rapist and joining him of her 'free' will" (Strickland). Strickland described the responses to her article, which was published in LOC (1980) #1, as being told "I needed to get laid to get my head on straight" and saw no response other than hers to the issue until the release of *The Avengers* Annual #10.

This treatment of Ms. Marvel, which Strickland argued that practically no one was perturbed by, leads to a disturbing reflection of the audience that Shooter was now writing Carol Danvers for. Strickland also commented on the shift in behavior that the character underwent, from being "mature, powerful, intense, and sure of herself" after Claremont started writing Ms. Marvel as "a person – a beautiful, female person, yes, but a super-hero above all!" rather than a

stereotype to Shooter's version of Ms. Marvel with a "pushy, intimidating quirk to her nature" and "the character trait of oversexed pushiness" (Strickland). This led to the character's intended message of feminist liberation shifting to one she demonstrated via her behavior to one she had to outright state via dialogue, something Claremont had stated he was avoiding in a response to a reader. "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" (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 161). Another reader, Suzanne P. Elliot, wrote a letter to the editor, claiming "You don't have to write in feminist precepts — just keep the sexism out!" in order to appeal to female readers, something that was clearly disregarded in Shooter's takeover of the character (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 180). I would argue that the attitude of Shooter towards both Ms. Marvel and feminism as a whole is revealed via Carol and Wanda's conversation about children taking place prior to the rape storyline. Carol's devaluation of Wanda's choices as falling into the "silly stereotype of having a baby" not only set her up as a "nasty woman" but also makes the following storyline a much more obvious punishment for a "feminist" character who has explicitly claimed she does not want to be a mother (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel* 607). While there are many moments in superhero comics that portray violence against female characters following a change in the creative team, this is one of the more obvious examples of a shift in writers directly leading to gynocentric violence against a heroine. While she certainly was not the perfect feminist hero, I argue that Chris Claremont's version of Ms. Marvel and his characterization of Carol Danvers still challenged the ideal for female heroes at the time. This portrayal was then met with the cancellation of her solo series, her quick return to a stereotype under Shooter's lead, and her eventual rape and removal from *The Avengers* storylines. While the implications of Marvel allowing such a change to the

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character are telling of the perceptions of feminists in the early 80s and their quick devaluation of that audience following the cancellation of the *Ms. Marvel* run, Shooter's treatment of the character utilizing Marcus exposes the risk that stepping outside of gender performativity brings, even for comic book characters like Carol Danvers who were designed to promote feminist rhetoric. As Strickland points out, this treatment was approved not only by both Marvel and the Comics Code,[11] but was also accepted as reasonable by the majority of the audience as evidenced by the response to Strickland's essay (Strickland).

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is exemplified both within male-dominated comics, in terms of both majority male creators and perceived male audiences, as well as in the harsh reactions to characters like Carol Danvers, from her first appearance in *Ms. Marvel* #1 in 1977 to her live-action iteration in *Captain Marvel* (2019) due to her deviation from the norm. Essentially, Butler argues that the concept of gender is based on the imitation of an ideal of what it means to be a particular gender, which is ingrained in personal consciousness and collective culture, and is recreated and perpetuated through compulsory acts that attempt to reproduce it (Butler 361). The presentation of heterosexuality as natural is undone by the importance of its performance, which proves that it is at risk of coming undone without the constant reiteration of itself as a norm (Butler 362). The effect of this repetition of norms through the performance of gender is that it appears to exist in an original way and the acts to be natural, as though gender existed prior to its creation and continuous recreation. The act of gender performance is then made compulsory through the response to acting in a way outside of the set norms, which Butler argues "brings with it ostracism, punishment, and violence" (363). Butler's

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[11] The Comics Code, which Marvel participated in at the time *The Avengers* #200 was released, was a set of guidelines that screened comics for depicting immoral content. Contents in compliance featured the Comics Code Authority seal on their covers

theory becomes especially evident in superhero comics where the heroic characters are presumably meant to represent idealized humans and are literally written to perform in that way, revealing the intentionality behind their behavior.

Within comics, the reactions to deviation from the norms in terms of gender is unique since the aforementioned violent response takes place both within the stories of the comics when female characters are often subjected to a different type of treatment than male characters, as exemplified by fridging, as well as occurring outside of the comic media as various real world reactions to their portrayal are spread. In the case of comic media, the act of imitation and repetition is made obvious from the observation of characters, their writers, those in positions of power over the writers, and the reaction of audiences to variations from what has been perceived to be the norm or correct way of performance based on the character's identity. These reactions have recently become more easily visible and wide-reaching outside of those circles as disgruntled fans have shifted their focus from writing letters to the editor to voicing their disapproval over social media online as comic book stories have become increasingly mainstream with the popularity of MCU. This shift to expressing displeasure on a more public platform allows for the debates around these characters to be taken up on a broader scale, since people who are not invested in comic stories are now able to share their disapproval for women's portrayal within the media that they are not otherwise engaging with or invested in as part of their political agenda.

Following the events of *the Avengers* #200, Carol Danvers returned in *Avengers Annual* #10 a few months later as part of one of Claremont's previously planned storylines for the character that had been discontinued after *Ms. Marvel* was canceled. Upon her return to earth,

she was attacked by the mutant Rogue[12] and lost her memories and powers before being rescued by Spider-Woman and brought to the X-Men. Although he could not bring back her powers, Professor X does more or less return her memories, which led to a confrontation between Carol and the Avengers where she calls them out for how they treated her during the pregnancy and letting her be taken by Marcus while under the influence of Immortus' machines. Claremont could have easily chosen not to acknowledge the events that took place in *The Avengers* run, especially since Carol loses her memories in the story, but instead chose to call back to that storyline and acknowledge how messed up it actually was. While Carol was supported by the X-Men, she ultimately was able to regain some lost autonomy by leaving the Avengers and refusing to let their actions slide. I argue that this confrontation between Carol and the Avengers under Claremont legitimizes the viewpoint expressed in Strickland's essay about Marvel's treatment of its heroines by not only including many of the same points within the issue, which in itself is a step forward in terms of in-comic responses to fridging, but also by having Carol be the one to express disgust about how she was treated, recentering her trauma around her own story instead of being further utilized for the sake of other characters or political arguments.

Throughout the rest of the 80s and 90s, she appeared as a side character across *X-Men* and *Avengers* titles, with the treatment of the character shifting based on the writer in charge of her appearances. Claremont continued to write the character as part of the ensemble in his *X-Men* run, with Carol eventually gaining new powers and taking on the moniker Binary after being tortured and experimented on by an alien race known as the Brood. Following a change in author, she loses most of her Binary powers and reverts to a modified version of her original

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[12] While most modern readers will be used to seeing Rogue as one of the X-Men, this story took place while she was still a villain

(weaker) powerset. At one point, she changes her name to Warbird and temporarily rejoins the Avengers, before getting taken off duty due to her alcoholism in a storyline written specifically to give Tony Stark someone to mentor as a display of his character development (Cocca 290). She returns to the Avengers again in the 2000s, eventually changing her name back to Ms. Marvel prior to the first Civil War storyline and features in her second solo series, written by Brian Reed, for 50 issues from 2006-2010.

While transitions between writers are often done successfully, since most of Marvel's comics revolve around successfully navigating the changes in creative teams, Carol Danvers shifting powerset, codenames, and personality evidence a problem with her valuation as a character. Her initial run and character development were built on the idea of being a liberated woman, and as not every author would have or should be expected to read every story involving the character, many of her appearances come across as different male author's takes on how a feminist character acts. Since not everyone has the same perceptions of feminism, or even positive attitudes towards feminism, writing Carol Danvers based off of these perceptions created a deeply inconsistent portrayal and sometimes to harmful storylines as well.

In 2012, things began to look up for Carol Danvers when she took on the Captain Marvel mantle and was given a costume redesign following feminist author Kelly Sue DeConnick taking over writing the character, writing a 17 issue run beginning in 2012 and a 15 issue run beginning in 2014. During her first year writing *Captain Marvel*, DeConnick proposed an addition to the Bechdel Test,[13] known as "The Sexy Lamp Test," which asks whether or not the plot of any given story would need to change if the female character in question was replaced by a sexy

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[13] The Bechdel Test, otherwise known as The Bechdel-Wallace Test, questions if a movie or other story meets the bare minimum requirements of having at least two women who speak to each other about something other than a man

lamp (Hudson). Following her time writing *Captain Marvel*, DeConnick would go on to co-author the feminist dystopian comic *Bitch Planet* alongside Valentine De Landro, which ran 2014-2017. Her first run of *Captain Marvel* brought many fans, especially women, together in support of Carol Danvers as the new holder of the Captain Marvel. Despite Carol Danvers having been advertised on and off as a feminist hero for decades, the validity of which being dependent on the author at any given time, DeConnick's takeover as an outspoken feminist and the lack of sexualization of the character as Captain Marvel attracted a large female audience. DeConnick cited the numbers and passion of the Carol Corps, the self-named fanbase that emerged after her takeover of the character, for her first Captain Marvel title as the reason Marvel gave her a second run with the character, and the letter columns even changed to address the fanbase by their chosen name (Edidin). The fanbase was also honored with their name being used as part of the title for a four issue mini-series called *Captain Marvel and the Carol Corps* written by Kelly Sue DeConnick and Kelly Thompson in 2015. During this time, Kamala Khan was inspired to take up the Ms. Marvel mantle after witnessing Carol's heroism, but the two were ultimately split apart following what has been referred to as the "character assassination of Carol Danvers" by the lead author of the 2016 *Civil War II* storyline, Brian Bendis (Shiach).

In perhaps her least popular story arc, *Civil War II* was described as "a backslide for Captain Marvel from what fans have seen from her in the past in terms of her heroism, turning her into a stalwart authoritarian who was literally depicted arresting civilians without evidence - someone intent on control over service" (Connolly). Century argues that Captain Marvel was used as opposition to Iron Man in the story "because she was available" for Marvel, rather than because of anything about her past stories or character arcs "that would imply the secret fascistic leanings she displays here," which led to long-term consequences for Carol's popularity despite

other heroes in the story like Captain America and Black Panther acting out of character as well (Century, Connolly). In a review of *Civil War II* #5 for Comics Alliance, Kieran Shiach questions why Marvel would do this to the character right after announcing her to be the star of the MCU's first solo female-led superhero film, commenting that "this one miniseries is single-handedly draining all the goodwill the character has accumulated since being rebranded as Captain Marvel" (Shiach). Essentially, Bendis' series took a character who was finally accepted by audiences as actually representing feminist values and with a large fanbase mostly consisting of women, and then set her up for failure by turning her into a raging fascist that even the Carol Corps could not defend in her worst story arc since her time in Shooter's *The Avengers*. However, Carol Danvers somehow managed to survive as Captain Marvel and has featured in several popular runs since then from authors such as Margaret Stohl, Kelly Thompson, Ann Nocenti, and Alyssa Wong.

Monica Rambeau

While Monica Rambeau, introduced in 1982, has been a hero for nearly as long as Carol Danvers, the character has faced significantly less controversy despite appearing in an explicitly political comic disavowing white supremacy. There is also little academic literature referencing the character, and searching online for information predating her MCU counterpart creates a picture of a hero hated by very few but severely underrated and underutilized by Marvel. Many of the times her name does come up, it is in opposition to the new Captain Marvel[14] due to Monica's position as one of the six Marvel characters to hold the title prior to Carol Danvers.

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[14] The Captain Marvel name, which originally belonged to the Kree Mar-Vell, has been used by Monica Rambeau, Genis-Vell, Phyla-Vell, the Skrull Khn'Nr, and very briefly by Noh-Varr. It is currently held by Carol Danvers.

Monica Rambeau was first introduced in 1982 in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 when

she is attacked by and defeats three thugs prior to accidentally knocking out Spider-man

(*Captain Marvel: Monica Rambeau* 8-9). After checking to make sure he is alright, she

transforms into her costume and flies away in a burst of energy. The reader then follows

Monica's origin story, beginning with an interaction between her and her commanding officer in

the New Orleans Harbor Patrol, who she calls out for giving a promotion to one of her less

qualified male colleagues instead of her, thus framing Monica as an empowered woman willing

to stand up for herself. She then finds a friend of her grandfather's, Professor Andre LeClare,

waiting in her office, and joins him to investigate Roxxon, who he suspects of building a

devastating weapon. Monica and LeClare sneak onto the oil rig after Monica convinces the

guards to let her suntan on the helicopter pad in her bikini, before being caught. She takes a

chance and destroys the machine with her fists to save Fort Benning from destruction and gains

energy powers in the resulting explosion. The mini-series *Monica Rambeau: Photon* (2022) later

retconned this origin, changing the story so Monica had energy powers as a child that she

suppressed from fear of discrimination, until they were eventually triggered by absorbing the

energy from Roxxon's machine. She puts together a uniform made from pieces of Mardi Gras

costumes, takes off to save LeClare and take out the bad guys, and is promptly named Captain

Marvel by a local newspaper.

After the flashback to her origin ends, Monica is shown to be in New York trying to find

help with her powers before her energy overloads and destroys the city. She seeks help from the

Fantastic Four and the Avengers and the problem is solved. Monica is then invited by Wasp to

join the Avengers in *The Avengers* #227 (1982) and later becomes a more prominent figure in the

series when she takes over as their chairwoman in *The Avengers* #279 (1987). As part of the

Avengers, Monica goes on many adventures throughout the 80s, and in *Marvel Fanfare* #42 (1989), she is featured in a solo-story where she travels back in time and battles Dracula.

Despite her five years appearing as a member of *the Avengers*, Monica only lasts as the leader of the team for a little over a year before leaving in *Avengers* #294 after losing her powers and nearly dying due to using too much energy in a battle. Monica's time as leader of the Avengers came to an end due to the series editor, Mark Gruenwald, wanting not only to replace her with Captain America as the leader, but also wanting to portray Monica as being inefficient to contrast with him (Cronin). The creator of the character, Roger Stern, who was the lead writer for *the Avengers* comics at the time, disagreed with Gruenwald's direction for the story and character, leaving the title after finishing *Avengers* #287 (1987). The trivia section of the character's page on the Marvel Database website states in regard to the incident that

> Tragically, the original allegory for the character explored how a black woman found herself unable to level her rank up as a Harbor Patrol Officer despite of her competence, but met recognition and equity with the Avengers. However, in the end, she turned out to be underestimated in the Avengers as well.

Ultimately, Monica's character, who had previously been written to be a competent leader, was sacrificed in the name of Gruenwald's vision for the plot and favoritism for Captain America, whose title he was writing at the time, and Monica began to appear in fewer stories as a result. CBR writer Brian Cronin commented that the "decision really took Captain Marvel, who at the time had become as mainstream as you could get, off the road of 'mainstream' basically for good."

Monica Rambeau's first solo comic appearance is the oneshot issue *Captain Marvel* #1 (1989), which takes place after she loses her powers from the battle in *Avengers* #293. During the story, she has gone back to working on the sea as the commander of a cargo ship after a long recovery. The ship is taken over by raiders who kill the rest of the crew but mistake Monica for a

passenger, despite her shirt clearly stating "harbor patrol" and her muscles, which were previously commented on by another crew member. While she defeats the villain Powderkeg and the rest of the raiders with her ingenuity, an explosion on the ship leads her to discover new powers during her attempt to save Powderkeg from drowning. Although she is stated to be much less powerful than before, similarly to Carol Danvers after the loss of her Binary powers, Monica returns to herowork and defeats two more villains by the issue's end. She then makes sporadic appearances in *Avengers* issues as a reserve member, but is no longer the leader of the team or a regular member, although her powers do eventually return to their original state.

Monica Rambeau appears in a second one-shot as Captain Marvel in 1994, which takes a much more unapologetically political tone in comparison to Marvel's other comics. The issue begins with Captain Marvel halting a racially motivated attack on two Chinese students by the Sons of the Serpent at Empire State University, who were being chased and called by anti-Japanese slurs. During the rescue, one of the attackers parrots racist rhetoric at Captain Marvel, questioning why she would rescue the students by claiming that "they hurt Black folks too" by "taking all the university spaces away from average students" (*Monica Rambeau: Captain Marvel* 218). When Monica fails to fall for his inciting rhetoric and becomes more angry, he then proceeds to also call her by a slur, which is censored, before being even more blatantly racist towards Black people. She ultimately defeats him, and then while flying away, states that "it's hard to believe this kind of ignorance exists on a college campus" (221). Upon returning to her hotel room, Captain Marvel is met by an FBI agent who reveals that the reason Monica Rambeau was invited to participate in a minority business seminar at ESU was to have an inside person keeping an eye on the seminar's host, a young black man named Ray Washington, who also happens to be a campus activist organizing a coalition between student minority organizations to

protect minority students. She refuses, stating "I don't like the idea of Blacks working for the FBI, and spying on other Blacks" before the FBI agent clarifies that he is asking her to protect Ray, who is his nephew, and resents the implications of her attitudes towards the FBI (224-225). He claims that while "violence motivated by race, sex, or sexual orientation is a steadily growing problem at colleges nationwide" it was not an FBI problem until the Sons of the Serpent became involved, at which point he states "that's a super hero level threat!" (225). Captain Marvel goes to Captain America for information on the Sons of the Serpent, who he refers to as "an indifferently organized terrorist group who would deny others their fair share of the American Dream" and offers his help to Monica, who refuses but says she'll give him a call if she needs it (228).

As Monica Rambeau, she meets with Ray Washington, and they soon encounter a white supremacist protest led by the Sons of the Serpents, who continue to spout racist rhetoric. When the Sons proceed to attack the students who are confronting them, Monica transforms into Captain Marvel and proceeds to begin taking down the group, although she ends up exhausted and kneeling on the ground after taking out the Serpent Prime before the police arrive to help. She is then attacked by the villain Skinhead, who ends up escaping. Ray then reveals that he is a hero known as Rocket Racer, who encountered the villain before and was accidentally involved in his origin. After Ray tells her Skinhead's identity, Captain Marvel heads to his home and is met by the villain's father, who regretfully tells her "I'm afraid my pride in our heritage made Eddie feel like an outcast," to which she disagrees and says

> "I strongly believe in the **importance** of each of the cultures that make up our country, and in the **pride** we should each have in them. *I speak without concern for the accusations that I am too much or too little woman, that I am too black or too white or too much myself, and through my lips come the voices of the ghosts of our ancestors living and moving among us*. That poem was written by an African-American lesbian – but in my opinion, the sentiment speaks to every American – no one should have to be

ashamed of their culture, of who they in large part are. Your son has done what we've all done to a lesser degree. At one time or another, he has felt the hatred from outside and lost himself within it. Let's see if we can help him find his way, can we work on this together?" (245).

Following the speech in which she references Audre Lorde, Captain Marvel returns to campus only to find that Ray has organized a counter-demonstration consisting of "almost every minority group on campus as well as support from the mostly all-white frats," much to Monica's dismay due to concerns for their safety (246). When the protestors meet with the Sons of the Serpent, many of the terrorist group's new members abandon their masks and switch sides, including Eddie, after a loving confrontation from his father. The evil goop that consumed him is then defeated by Captain Marvel. Ray's final statement at the end of the issue, during which his character faces out from the panel rather than towards his companions, says "We'll keep an eye on ourselves – face up to our own **inadequacies** and not blame our failures on others. Hate consumes the hater and the hated **equally**" (253). The comic ends with Captain Marvel flying away and a dialogue box that states "we've **all** got work to do" (253).

Monica's second one-shot appearance is chock full of quotes condemning racist violence on college campuses and encouraging community over hate, to the extent that many instances of dialogue in the issue appear to be much longer than is typical for the genre. The story itself condemns white supremacy by literally making the white supremacist group the villains, while also showing a way out of the hateful rhetoric by having several members change their minds to side with their fellow students. Captain Marvel may ultimately be forced to resort to violence, but the student protestors remain non-violent. While Monica and Ray are the ones voicing much of this rhetoric, I argue that Captain America's appearance and brief exchange with Monica also firmly demonstrates Marvel's stance on the issue by having their star hero, who is overtly associated with the U.S. and ideas of freedom, explicitly state his views on white supremacist

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groups like the Sons of the Serpent. With his inclusion, the argument can no longer be made that the issue of racism is one only being condemned by heroes of color, but is instead something condemned by Steve Rogers as Captain America, a popular white hero, who frames racism and discrimination as inherently un-American. However, this could also be cited as an instance of a white hero's appearance being needed to legitimize an issue brought up by people of color. During Monica's speech to a white supremacist's father, cultural pride is also associated with America and Audre Lorde's words are framed as something that should apply to every American, despite Marvel's failure to name her. The story also frames white supremacy as harmful to everyone, regardless of race, and includes anti-Asian violence as something to be condemned, rejecting the narrative that Black and Asian students are in competition.

While I would argue the issue still has a few questionable moments, such as stating that "hate consumes the hater and the hated **equally**" despite the two Chinese students at the beginning of the text very narrowly escaping murder, it is still unusually well-written for being Marvel's attempt at taking an unapologetically progressive stance, in that both the story and dialogue match the intended message. This is largely due to the dual writers for the issue, Dwayne McDuffie and Dwight Coye, who were also the first Black authors to have written a Monica Rambeau story, with McDuffie authoring Monica's first one-shot as well. While comic scholar and blogger Chris Gavaler claims out that "the character seems secondary to the multicultural message, which the Black hero and the White supremacist villains serve," the story was written specifically with Monica in mind, although Gavaler also points out that this was likely due to the need for another release featuring a Captain Marvel to keep their claim on the copyright (Gavaler). Additionally, the Sons of the Serpent were invented by McDuffie and Coye

specifically to be the villains of the story, although Marvel did reuse the villains later in other questionable storylines (Gavaler).

Despite Monica potentially being secondary in relation to the story's message, she is also likely the best character to be featured, partially due to her relative prominence. Her time on the Avengers team made her a well-known character among comic fans, and she is an American hero prepared to discuss politics from the perspective of someone who grew up influenced by them, unlike Black Panther, who hailed from Wakanda and was somewhat separated from American politics, or Storm, who was invested in mutant politics. While Captain America was more well-known and could have taken a more prominent role in the story, it was more impactful to have him defer to Monica's judgment and assessment that she could handle the Sons of Serpent herself.

Captain Marvel's appearance in the issue also moved Monica Rambeau away from promoting generic superhero ideology into showcasing a more complex viewpoint.. To draw from "'Black Skins' and White Masks: Comic Books and the Secret of Race," Marc Singer investigates the use of racial stereotypes in comics, particularly concerning Black superheroes and their connection to the ideology that most comics purport. He draws on Richard Reynolds' analysis from *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992) to examine the tensions that arise from how, according to Reynolds, minority heroes serve a dual role as "'both the exotic and the agent of order which brings the exotic to book'(83)" (qtd in Singer 109). I would argue that even though Monica Rambeau escapes much of the stereotyping as exotic that often characterized Black heroines during the time period she was written in, her character very much served as an agent of order due to her frequent and explicit collaboration with the police. Singer continues to build off of Reynolds' analysis, arguing that

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These tensions result in a sort of equilibrated stasis which, according to Reynolds, 'has made it difficult for black superheroes to inscribe any ideological values of their own' (77); instead they are absorbed into the generic ideology of the superhero, in which exotic outsiders – and few are so exotic in comics as black superheroes – work to preserve America's status quo (qtd in Singer 110).

This analysis becomes particularly relevant when considering Monica Rambeau's positionality in the comics as both a Black woman, a superhero, a person who refuses to back down in the face of discrimination, and someone who is incessantly pro-police. Her storyline, "Power and Duty" in *Marvel Fanfare #57* (1991) revolves around police; she recollects her past as a peace officer, with one panel showing Monica in uniform, holding a gun, and telling the smuggler threatening her partner that "my next shot separates your head from your shoulders." After assisting more police officers in a conflict, she risks her life by staying in her physical form to save a person addicted to drugs from jumping off a bridge while thinking back to her failure to do so as an officer. When an officer questions why Monica saved her, citing that he knew his own duties to protect as an officer but could not comprehend why she would bother while having special powers, Monica responds "maybe my reasons aren't so different from yours" and the issue ends on a close-up of his badge, which reads "to serve and protect" (*Captain Marvel: Monica Rambeau* np). While a superhero being pro-police is not unusual, as policing and militarization play a large role in superhero comics, I argue that the centralization of her time as an officer to Monica's character, as well as the multiple interactions with police throughout her storylines, as well as the language used to connect herself with them, serve as a shortcut to legitimize Monica Rambeau's role as a hero despite being a visibly nonnormative and breaking from genre conventions by virtue of being a relatively unsexualized Black heroine.

Unfortunately, the second Captain Marvel only gets two of her own issues before the mantle is taken over by Genis-Vell in 1996. Monica's last appearance as Captain Marvel is

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in *Avengers Unplugged* #5, in which she has been kidnapped by the villain Controller, who appears to be playing with her hair in the first few panels of the story, but is revealed to have implanted a control disc in her brain stem (255). The issue also contains several moments of violation and gender-based violence against Monica, from the Controller touching her hair to forcing her to kiss him as a test of his mind control device in a particularly disturbing panel that also shows Monica's despairing internal monologue (255-6). He sends her to kill the other Captain Marvel, Genis-Vell, who she captures via the Controller's programming to seduce him. During the ensuing conflict, Monica summons the Avengers in an attempt to be freed from the mind controller, which Starfox ultimately does by using his "pleasure stimulus" to override the programming before Vision removes the chip. Starfox and Genis-Vell take down the Controller, and while they offer the final blow to Monica, she refuses and spares him (274). Following this, Genis-Vell offers the Captain Marvel name back to Monica under the pretense that she deserves it more, but Monica instead claims that the name is his legacy, and states that she wants to "stop living in other people's shadows" (274). She takes on the name Photon, but does not make any more frequent appearances until 2006 during a mildly unfortunate and out of character storyline in which she joins the organization H.A.T.E,[15] which is as bad as it sounds. Genis-Vell also ends up taking the name Photon after his sister Phyla-Vell claims the Captain Marvel name, leaving Monica to contemplate going by Pulsar before ultimately taking the name Spectrum as a rebrand after leaving H.A.T.E. She also appears as part of the ensemble in the 2022 run of *Thunderbolts*, in which she and Hawkeye come into conflict over leadership of the team. Most recently, she appeared in a five issue mini-series beginning in December 2022, which marked her first solo

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[15] In-universe organization known as the Highest Anti-Terrorism Effort

series as well as her first solo appearance since 1989. Notably, this series only took place after the character had appeared as a child in *Captain Marvel* (2019) and had been introduced as a hero in the live-action *Wandavision* (2021) rather than in her own story like Carol Danvers or Kamala Khan, and was also released directly before *The Marvels* (2023) was initially intended to debut. Had *The Marvels* (2023) not been postponed, her first solo series would have been released concurrently with the film, which could imply a concern on Marvel's part about the series needing a boost to be successful and only promoting the character in ensemble roles. Ultimately, Monica Rambeau has continued to be underestimated and underutilized by Marvel since her loss of the Captain Marvel mantle.

Kamala Khan

For the most part, Kamala Khan's comics have been unproblematic in terms of her character's portrayals and storylines over the decade of her existence. As such, I will not be documenting the rise and fall of Kamala Khan as I did with Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau. Across her several runs and mini-series, she is continuously written as a complex character rather than a stereotype and stands up for her own ideals even when it leads to conflict with her heroes. However, there are still two instances of the character being fridged and both were relatively recent, with her first death taking place in 2019 during a run of the ensemble title *Champions*, and her more recent death taking place in 2023 in an issue of Zeb Wells' *Amazing Spider-Man* run. In the second issue of Jim Zub's *Champions* run, it was revealed that one of their missions had gone wrong, which led to the deaths of two of the team's heroines, Viv Vision and Ms. Marvel, alongside a slew of civilians. Following the destruction, Mephisto appears to offer two of the team's survivors, Miles Morales' Spiderman and Amadeus Cho's Brawn a deal

to get an allegedly free do-over of the crisis, which Miles accepts. In a review of the first volume of the series by Vishal Gullapalli, he calls out the plot's outdated reliance on fridging.

> The entire core premise of it is built on fridging — first Kamala and Viv die with very little agency in their story, which requires Miles and Amadeus to save them. Their corpses are shown as a way to drive home the horror of what has happened, but it is also a scene of two women who died to provide emotional angst for the men around them. On top of this, the girl who Miles saves the first time but dies the second time has zero agency in the story. She's a prop to make Miles feel bad, and it doesn't sit well on top of the issues with Viv and Kamala.

Despite his criticisms, Gullapalli later relents and claims that the story is saved by Kamala Khan having agency throughout the rest of the story (Gullapalli). However, Marvel's willingness to sacrifice the three women previously mentioned, although two of their deaths are undone, demonstrates that fridging as a tool to advance male storylines is still a very real issue despite all the criticisms and callouts about the treatment of women in comics.

While Kamala's death in *Champions* arguably makes sense plotwise, given that she is a core member of the Champions team, her death in Wells' *Amazing Spider-Man* #26 drew instant criticism for its treatment of her character. Following the leaked news that Kamala Khan would die in the series, one fan took to social media to tweet every appearance of the heroine in the run prior to *Amazing Spider-Man* #26, which ultimately amounted to a mere 12 pages. An article from Lia Williamson titled "'Amazing Spider-Man' #26 proves comics haven't come very far since Alex DeWitt's fridging" notes that "Kamala Khan is a solo character — she's the leader of the champions — and you could count every single one of her appearances in *Spider-Man* on one hand" (Williamson). Despite her lack of relevance to the run, as well as her lack of connection to Peter Parker, since the Spider-Man that Ms. Marvel fights usually fights alongside is Miles Morales as part of the Champions, Peter Parker was centered as the focus of the tragedy following Kamala's death, and Kamala was framed as his "Fallen Friend" in the issue about the

aftermath of her death. Williamson's scathing critique of the issue also noted that Spider-Man was centered in the issue's main cover, with only a variant cover centering Kamala in the issue about her own death (Williamson). The story arc also drew criticism for being incredibly rushed, with her death and revival taking over just a couple months. As Williamson points out, since *Amazing Spider-Man* #26 was released to stores on May 31st, Marvel participated in "killing off their most prominent South Asian hero just in time to wrap up AAPI month," which Marvel had acknowledged at the beginning of the month by publishing a tweet asking for readers to post their favorite Kamala Khan quotes (Williamson). The next issue in the arc, *Fallen Friend: The Death of Ms. Marvel* #1 was released mid-July, and was followed by *X-Men: Hellfire Gala 2023* #1's revival of the character at the end of the month. To many, this poor treatment of the character seemed like both a marketing tactic from Marvel to promote a notably lackluster run of *Spider-Man* and a way to create a connection between Kamala Khan and the X-Men in order to have her introduce mutants into the MCU (Donahue, Williamson).

Regardless of Marvel's reasoning in the story arc, their treatment of a beloved character like Kamala Khan was highly controversial among readers, and also signaled to women and POC audiences that the characters who represent them are still being treated as badly in the 2020s as they have been throughout the rest of comic history. Williamson expresses this frustration in her article, reflecting many of the comments circulating online at the time.

> Kamala is a woman of color, and her death and how it's been handled and advertised proved once again to so many fans of color and women that our stories will never matter to the people writing them. We will always be expendable… It's disheartening to see how many comics pros and comics fans decried the issue as being fans simply not knowing death isn't permanent — or believing that fridging is just the mere death of a woman and not *how* she or her story has been handled. We have been telling you the problem since 1999 and you tune us out. You assume we simply don't know comics when the truth is *you* don't know how comics are for *us.* But we know how comics are for you –these stories that celebrate and valorize the characters who look like you that we read then witness the ones who look like us treated as disposable.

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While this devaluation of Kamala Khan's character in favor of a male character's story is clearly

not unique given the similarities to Carol Danvers and Monica Rambeau's histories, it created a

flashpoint moment in which readers proved to Marvel that they would no longer accept those

sorts of stories. The backlash against *Amazing Spider-Man* #26 and the following two issues

focused on Kamala's death even led to Marvel's writers and executives attempting to pass the

blame for an issue that they had previously heavily promoted and bragged about (Donahue,

Lapin-Bertone, Williamson). Unfortunately for them, it is harder to retcon real life than it is a

bad story decision, and their enthusiasm for *Amazing Spider-Man* #26 prior to the audience

response is well documented.

Kamala Khan's deaths deeply frustrated me as a reader who wanted to believe that

superhero comics were improving in their treatment of women and POC, something that Kamala

Khan had seemed like proof of. I remember the shock of reading *Amazing Spider-Man* #26,

unable to believe the spoilers for the issue I had seen online and completely unaware of the

character's involvement in the run at all. At that point, the only things I had seen and heard about

the run both online and in person were complaints about Zeb Wells' writing missing the mark,

which the issue confirmed for me. I am a bonafide crybaby when it comes to stories that are even

mildly sad, and I did not cry for Kamala Khan's poorly written death. Instead, I sent a bitter

review video to some friends, and then went online to engage with the rest of the readers roasting

the issue. Even though it originally felt like another step back, another moment of a heroine

being knocked down and another instance where fans like me were devalued, Ms. Marvel's death

meant something more than just another act of fridging and demonstrated the power that

audiences have as claimed as part of the ecology of comics. The outraged response to her

treatment showed that readers are not willing to accept this sort of writing anymore, and it was

enough to scare Marvel into trying to deflect the blame for the decision. Looking back, it reminds me of my favorite quote from Kelly Sue DeConnick about Carol Danvers' appeal as a hero, which is from an interview with Susana Polo at *Polygon*, who was originally the founder of feminist comic website *The Mary Sue*.

> Carol falls down all the time, but she always gets back up – we say that about Captain America as well, but Captain America gets up because it's the right thing to do. Carol gets back up because 'Fuck you.' I think that quality in her attracts people who are the same; who are always kind of trying to get back up and do better, and who have something to prove.

Women in comics and their fans get knocked down all the time, by fridging, questionable writing and storylines, and illustrations or content designed to drive them away from comics. The entirety of this chapter has evidenced that women's complaints are often not valued as coming from the audience for comics, but Kamala Khan's second death has shown that there is a shift beginning to take place in the ecology. Despite many of their criticisms being ignored, there were women represented in the letters to the editor from the beginning of Conway's *Ms. Marvel*, and there have always been women consistently calling out the problems with superhero comics. They may not have been granted a place as part of the ecology between publishers, creative teams, and audiences, but they have still fought for their favorite characters despite intense resistance and smear campaigns. No matter what happened, they still showed up, demanded accountability, and told Marvel to do better by their heroines. The reaction to the death of Kamala Khan shows that women are still showing up, that they are not showing up alone, and that there will be no more compromises about the treatment of women in comics.

CHAPTER III: CONCEPTS OF NORMALCY IN SUPEHRHERO COMICS

One of the most hotly debated topics surrounding the representation of women in comics, as well as one of the most easily recognized sites of progress following decades of complaints and fan responses, is in terms of the aesthetics of their bodies. For women in comics, there has been an ongoing struggle in terms of realism versus fantasy in not only how they are costumed, but the representation of their bodies for consumption. In reference to Laura Mulvey's phrase that women in popular culture are meant to be valued for their "to-be-looked-at-ness," Jeffrey A. Brown theorizes that "gender dichotomy is taken to an extreme in comics, where men are crafted as hypermasculine heroic ideals and women as scantily clad and extremely curvaceous sexual objects, may not be surprising given the genre's target audience of young males, but it does perpetuate sexist beliefs and is indicative of the genre's reliance on stereotypes" (Brown 3). As mentioned from my reference to Anna F. Peppard's work in chapter II, this sexualization is often part of a "compromise" in which heroines are objectified to make their non-normativity as heroes due to their gender more acceptable within the superhero genre (Peppard 113). With both these articles and my own experiences in mind, it is unsurprising to step into any random comic book shop and be met by waves of hypersexualized and contorted costumed women lining the walls, to the extent that questioning this representation of women often seems like a losing game or that it is just the way things are. However, reducing heroines to how they are physically portrayed obscures their potential for challenging norms and complicating representations of women's empowerment.

Since comics are a visually based medium, costume design becomes a crucial part of a hero's personality, image, and is tied to what they represent for both readers and people inside of their stories. Superman's colorful costume represents hope, and Batman's dark costume is

intended to bring fear to villains. Spiderman's colorful red and blue suit is a stark contrast to his

pitch-black costume when bonded to the villainous Venom and visually signifies the change in

his personality for readers. To draw from Marc Singer, "Comics rely upon visually codified

representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances, and this

reductionism is especially prevalent in superhero comics, whose characters are wholly

externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases" (107). An undesirable, ugly, or otherwise

"bad" costume can turn readers away from a comic, especially if it appears on the story's cover.

While costumes and aesthetics are not necessarily the most important piece of a hero's story or

their marketability, they can make or break a comic depending on audience reception. Across

this chapter, I explore how representational choices–of costumes and bodies–reveal the

resistance to women as superheroes and the complications of varied bodies occupying a role of

the idealized hero. Even as evidence shows pushback to this resistance, this chapter's

examination of transformations in costuming suggests that the visual form of comics provides

unique insights into the uneven engagement with women's power in popular culture.

For Carol Danvers and many other heroines, the answer to the question of what a

costume represents was originally sex appeal under the guise of feminism. Women in comics are

frequently sexualized via unrealistic body standards, uncomfortable contorted posing, and

perhaps most notably through skimpy and skin-tight costumes. The sexualized ideals set for

female superheroes are quite evident in the original design for Carol Danver's hero costume in

1977. Carolyn Cocca summarizes the impression left by Carol Danvers' costume on the cover of

Ms. Marvel #1.

> *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977)'s cover showed an unknown white, blonde woman (Carol) wearing
> a much-reduced version of Captain Marvel's uniform. His has black underwear, gloves,
> and boots over a red full-body suit, with a black domino mask. Ms. Marvel wears the

same black underwear, gloves, boots, and black domino mask. But much of her remained uncovered" (Cocca 286).

Much of Carol's stomach was left exposed, as well her legs from the end of black underwear to knee-high boots. Her costume was eventually slightly altered when another author, Chris Claremont, took over the series to cover her stomach and back, which was excused by the pretense of being easier to illustrate (Cocca 288). It also made the illustrations much more consistent, as the amount of skin Carol had exposed vastly differed across panels. Despite the minor change, readers were still not satisfied and critiques of the costume continued to roll in. One reader, Jo Duffy, wrote in to acknowledge the controversy surrounding the costume by stating "Okay, so the uniform doesn't thrill me. It doesn't thrill any of us and I guess you've heard that one to death" before going on to comment that even so, "plenty of good characters have survived ugly costumes" (*Captain Marvel: The Ms. Marvel Days* 254). However, other readers argued that this iteration of Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel costume essentially set her up to be a sexy version of Mar-Vell, which ties into Suzanne Scott's critique that utilizing the same names and costumes reinforces to readers the idea that female heroes are just "spin-off franchise 'baggage'" rather than their own characters with their own stories and visuals (Scott). While the new costume was slightly less likely to drive away readers perturbed by the overt oversexualization of the character, it still failed to distinguish her from Mar-Vell, the hero she was derived from. Jane Hollingsworth wrote in with this critique, arguing that Carol was too much of a Captain Marvel spin-off.

> For the entire eleven years I've been a comics fan, I've been proud of how Marvel resisted the temptation to create male-based heroines *a la* Supergirl. It's been proudly proclaimed that Ms. Marvel is not Marvel Girl; well, maybe the early Marvel Girl did have weak powers and an insipid personality, but at least her powers were *her* powers and her personality was *her* personality. There's probably no way you can negate Conway's origin for Ms. Marvel, but I hope you can change her costume if it's at all

possible, and keep her on her own instead of associating her with Captain Marvel as Conway planned" (*Captain Marvel: The Ms. Marvel Days* 104).

Carol Danvers' uniform eventually went through a third change after Claremont requested artist Dave Cockrum to do a redesign with similarities to his popular *X-Men* characters, and this design was her most well-known prior to her appearance in *Avengers: End Game (2019)*. "Cockrum's revamp of Ms. Marvel's costume echoed his Storm, with its high-necked black bathing suit and black thigh-high boots, and his Jean Grey, with its red scarf around the waist" (Cocca 288). Claremont's comment in regards to the purpose behind the costume revamp was that "'We're trying to appeal to a female audience, trying to make her a hip, happening, 70s woman striking out on her own'" (Cocca 288). However, despite the claim that this costume was designed with women in mind, Marvel authority Stan Lee is quoted as saying "'That's what I like: Shiny leather and tits and ass'" in reference to Cockrum's redesign (Cocca 288). Additionally, the shape of the costume lent itself to inconsistencies in drawing, with some artists keeping it as conservative as possible for what was essentially a bathing suit, while others exposed much more of Carol's hips, cheeks, and the sides of her breasts. Although it was a fan favorite and was the go-to look for Ms. Marvel for decades, this iteration of Carol Danvers' costume still left much to be desired in terms of transitioning away from the objectification of the character. It also did not come quickly enough to save her solo series, since the new costume was introduced in #20 and the series was canceled after #23. Even so, its introduction was also an important moment for Ms. Marvel, since it served to separate her character and story from just being seen as a female spin-off of Mar-Vell by creating a color scheme and logo meant just for Carol Danvers, which was more than many other heroines were ever given.

In contrast to her original costume as Ms. Marvel in the comics, actress Brie Larson's Captain Marvel uniform, which was closely based on the iteration of the character written by

feminist author Kelly Sue DeConnick and designed by Jamie McKelvie, acknowledges the ties

of her origin to the Kree while also breaking from the outdated framework of how female

superheroes should be costumed within comics. As a result of this change, Carol Danver's

updated uniform in both the comics from 2012 onward and in her live-action appearances have

become the site of controversy due to their rejection of genre conventions for the presentation of

women in comics. The blue military-style suit fully covers Carol Danvers from the neck down

and features red accents, gloves, boots, and a sash to tie into her previous costumes while also

acknowledging her history with the U.S. Air Force. While the suit does call back to her first

costume via its color scheme and inclusion of the Hala star on her chest, and by extension, calls

back to Mar-Vell, the retcon to Carol's origin story and her own commitments create a change

that serves to separate her and her choice to be a hero from him. However, the redesign of her

costume led to a significant amount of the hatred directed by fans towards Carol Danvers

embracing the Captain Marvel name.

> "Letter writer Alan Brown wrote, 'I have always loved Carol Danvers [but] every time I see that new costume I want to vomit.' Eric Apfel elaborated, 'I hate it…. You've given her a hideous new costume… [You're] only attracting attention of one small group of readers—those who know nothing about Ms. Marvel… sales are going to be bad for this title.' A similar reaction was posted to *MarvelMasterworksFansite*, 'Might as well give her some more muscles, shorter legs, broad shoulders, some arm pit hair and some ugly tattoos…. Long sexy blonde hair with domino mask to butch hair cut with no mask. The naked thighs were just the wonderful icing on the sexcake" (Cocca 293).

These comments in response to her redesign were also reflected by disappointed fans who were

expecting to see actress Brie Larson appear in one of Carol Danver's more sexually explicit

outfits. Despite the costume change drawing a large female fanbase to Carol Danvers, as was

Marvel's original intention in making her a hero, the decrease in sexualization drew opposition

from groups who claimed to be the intended audience for superhero comics. To draw from

Carolyn Cocca's study of Carol Danvers, "such comments reflect the conventional wisdom of

the 1980s-2000s: female characters must fall within a narrow definition of 'sexy' or the title will not appear to the core direct market audience of older, heterosexual, white males. Fans outside of this group were neither 'real' fans nor numerous enough to sustain such a title" (Cocca 293-294).

Despite the common argument that the new, less sexualized look would lead to failure, Carol's new costume was a major aspect of why women were drawn to her run as Captain Marvel, with the fan group known as the Carol Corps, in addition to casual readers, bringing the character enough popularity that Kelly Sue DeConnick was brought back to write a second run of the title following her first run's cancellation at issue 17. Additionally, the character has appeared consistently in solo stories since the change in costume, versus her infrequent appearances and floundering runs prior to the revamp. Although Carol Danver's new uniform was not the only reason for the new Captain Marvel title's success or the only reasons that readers loved the character, as evidenced by some women's praise for her strong personality and flaws, it did prove to Marvel that women were a worthwhile audience to appeal to in terms of finances. Her revamped design appealed to many readers who were sick of the sexualization of women rampant in comics, with one member of the Carol Corps, Jennifer Deprey, stating

> "I've been reading comic books since I was eight, and I've always kind of avoided superhero comics. If I was looking for a superhero that I felt was like me, her costume was a bikini and thigh-high boots or had a boob window, or she wasn't ever on a cover by herself – she was always with a bunch of dudes that looked way cooler than she did. One issue in, I was like, 'this is my superhero. This is the character I wish I'd had when I was 12. I went back and read every *Ms. Marvel* that had been published and absolutely fell in love with this flawed, *real* character I could identify with" (Edidin)

While Carol Danvers had been around for decades as a more or less complex character depending on her author, her new look signaled to women that they were welcome into the comic community in the same way her original design told readers she was still meant to

primarily appeal to men despite the attempted integration of feminism into comics. As a result of this, the fanbase began promoting the perceived feminism of Captain Marvel in their interactions with and defense of Carol Danvers as a well-rounded and multifaceted character.

The redesign of Carol Danvers in 2012 came alongside the emergence of an organized movement in which comic audiences, more specifically female fans, came together to criticize and mock comics, particularly superhero comics, for their representation of women's bodies in terms of costuming, positioning, and their unrealistic physicality. At the same time, comics were becoming increasingly popular in the mainstream, as evidenced by the success of the first *Avengers* film in the same year. The movement, known as the Hawkeye Initiative, consisted of fans recreating panels and covers that originally featured female characters with one big change: the women were replaced by Hawkeye, a male hero, which were then shared on *The Hawkeye Initiative* website. The positioning of Hawkeye in the contorted poses that women are often drawn in, as well as the scandalous edits to his outfit, demonstrated exactly how ridiculous and problematic those representations were, despite being so normalized that for some audience members, it takes seeing a male hero in the same situation to recognize. The website's premise, which appears on its homepage, states "How to fix every Strong Female Character pose in superhero comics: replace the character with Hawkeye Doing the Same thing" (Scott 150).

Essentially, the website and the fans participating in the movement aimed to use the "humorous absurdity of accurately costuming men in superheroine garb" to combat the sexualization of women in comics (Scott 152). Scott argues that *The Hawkeye Initiative* serves as "a mode of transformative intervention" by driving the male gaze to examine itself in the context of superhero comics as well as forcing the acknowledgment of the lack of women involved in creating comics from mainstream titles (Scott 151). The male gaze, through either fans, creators,

or both, is then forced to confront its own effects via their visualization on the body of a male hero. Scott describes this as a method "to provoke male readers of comics to experience the realities of viewing comics as a female reader" while also commenting on the literal rendering of gender and its performance in comics as well as "the materiality of the superhero body" (Scott 152). Despite the humorous twist that *The Hawkeye Initiative* brings to its activism due to the absurdity of the fan art created, the issues it addresses surrounding sexualization and objectification, unrealistic body expectations, and identity are all crucial to address for the futures of women both in and reading comics.

Shortly after the emergence of *The Hawkeye Initiative*, comic scholar Carolyn Cocca released "The 'Broke Back Test': a quantitative and qualitative analysis of portrayals of women in mainstream superhero comics, 1993-2013," which sought to discover whether or not the reputation of mainstream superhero comics as objectifying women was deserved, and if the objectification of women in comics had decreased over the time period she examined. To begin with, Cocca outlines the differences in how men and women are typically portrayed in comics: male characters are drawn facing forward to emphasize their muscles, while women are drawn in whatever manner best emphasizes their curves, no matter how improbable the position. One particularly infamous position, referred to as "broke back," shows a woman drawn so that her breasts and buttocks are simultaneously on display, leaving her back "unnaturally twisted as well as arched" in a manner of contortion that could not be achieved without a broken back (Cocca 411). Cocca also acknowledges *The Hawkeye Initiative* and two other blogs with similar goals for their work in revealing either the necessary accustomization of readers to women in these positions to stay invested in the story, or the frustration of readers constantly taken out of the story due to the incessant objectification (411-2, 425). She cites their work not only for its value

of raising awareness, but also as evidence that "comic audiences are not merely passive consumers" and actively work to communicate with those creating comics to make their opinions known in ways other than just choosing which comics to buy (423). Additionally, Cocca draws attention to the issues the representation of male heroes as subject and female heroes as object could bring up for male readers as well, citing the reinforcement of stereotypes that men must be "active and heroic" (412). Her study, which focused on 144 issues from Marvel and DC, ultimately found that 136 of the issues examined included "sexually objectifying portrayals of female characters," and that women in "contorted and sexualized poses and/or with absurd t&a[16]" featured approximately half the time they were on covers for female-led titles and approximately one-fourth of the times in the panels of those issues, as well as two-thirds of the times they were on the cover for ensemble titles and for approximately one-third of their panel appearances (Cocca 420). Notably, both Marvel and DC refused Cocca's request to allow the images she analyzed to be printed alongside the article, so she once again pointed readers towards sources like *The Hawkeye Initiative* for examples (422).

While Cocca found that there was progress in terms of lessening objectification, there are still certainly more improvements that need to be made. The overall objectification of women in both the ensemble and female-led titles examined did decrease between the 1990s and 2010s, with the issues of *Captain Marvel* featuring the lowest percentage of objectification, closely followed by Wonder Woman (420). Despite the change in costume for Carol Danvers presumably lowering the t&a score in *Captain Marvel*, there are most certainly still instances within her comics, and even on the covers, where the titular character fails to pass the broke back

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[16] To quote Stan Lee, "tits and ass"

test. I distinctly remember choosing between covers to buy of Kelly Thompson's *Captain Marvel* #38, which was released in 2022, and being so dumbfounded by how blatantly ridiculous one of the variants was that I took a picture to send to my friends. Suzanne Scott draws from well-known American cartoonist Trina Robbins' observation of a shift that occurred in the late 1980s, at which point heroes transitioned into "exaggerated fantasies designed for the presumed male, adolescent comic-book reader" rather than "'physically flawless human beings'" (Scott 154). Robbins' adept description of women's designs inside comics describes them as "'bizarrely morphed' female bodies that featured 'balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they'd break in half'" in addition to their costuming in "'bottom-baring thong bikinis, with as little as possible on top'" (qtd. in Scott 154). No matter how feminist a character is claimed to be, it is very unlikely that they can completely escape the objectification that comes alongside existing in a mainstream superhero comic, especially as long as sexualization is part of the compromise around having women as heroes in exchange for being nonnormative. Exploitative representations of bodies are deeply entwined with the history of superhero comics, beginning with the harmful utilization of disabled bodies in the creation of the ideal human. As such, the aesthetics of women's bodies in comics cannot be addressed without also acknowledging the role of disability in formulating the superhero and the appearances of those who have power.

In the earliest days of comics, the civilian identities of heroes were sometimes disabled to further distinguish them from their physically idealized heroic counterparts. For example, Dr. Donald Blake, who served as the alter ego and human form of Thor Odinson, specifically designed by Odin to teach the arrogant god humility, had a limp and needed a cane to walk. When a hero was needed, the disabled Dr. Blake transformed into the hypermasculine and

godlike Thor to save the day. Rosemarie Garland Thomson argues in terms of literary

representation that the more a portrayal conforms to social stereotypes of a particular disability,

the more intense the rhetorical effect of that disability becomes in terms of highlighting the

difference between the disabled figure and the presumably normate reader (Thomson 11). She

claims that this flat representation creates "static encounters" rather than the "dynamic" social

relation that would develop from an encounter in the real world, instead leading the reader to

focus on preconceived notions of disability based in culture rather than the character themselves

(Thomson 11). Dr. Blake's disability in contrast to the idealized and hypermasculine Thor serves

to further emphasize the godliness and heroic tendencies of that character, sacrificing the story of

Dr. Blake in order to highlight the power of Thor, further reaffirming for a reader already

influenced by cultural notions of disability that the hero cannot be disabled via the contrast

between the two. At this point, the disconnect is created not just between the disabled character

and the reader, but also between Thor and the human extension of himself. While Dr. Blake was

a brilliant doctor and surgeon, he was not the hero who fought the villain, and he eventually

became irrelevant to Thor's stories, to the extent that he was referenced only as an easter egg[17] in

the live-action movie adaptation of the comics.

    If this particular dynamic between heroic and civilian identity seems familiar, that is

because it was also reflected in the creation of the original Ms. Marvel superhero persona as

separate from Carol Danvers' own personality. Rather than having a disabled civilian identity to

set Ms. Marvel apart as the ideal, Carol Danvers' status as a woman was formulated in the same

way that disability was frequently utilized to create the ideal hero from her alter-ego male Kree

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[17] Subtle references or jokes placed into media such as films or video games

warrior personality. Carol's blackouts and inability to remember her time as Ms. Marvel served

to further separate her from the masculine ideals intertwined in heroism, despite her comic

covers proudly declaring that "this female fights back!" (*Captain Marvel: Ms. Marvel*). As

previously mentioned, this formulation of womanhood was not unusual, as many other heroines

at the time were unable to use their powers fully without fainting afterwards and needing rescue.

This signals a temporary conflation between womanhood and disability in the context of

constructing the ideal heroic figure, one which seems to have lessened now as more women are

written as heroes and the number of disabled heroes remains small. Additionally, while many

characters with disabilities in their origin stories "overcome" or somehow leave their disability

behind once the origin story is complete to become normative heroes, such as Steve Rogers as

Captain America after taking the supersoldier serum, gender is more difficult for an author to

write out of a visually based genre with an emphasis on female objectification. Essentially, while

there was a way forward for women in comics, disabled characters were almost always left

behind or rewritten without their disabilities.

Although it may not seem particularly related to our (mostly) able-bodied heroines, the

creation of norms and the ideal human outside of comics fuels the representation of superheroes

within them, including portrayals of gender. To borrow from Lennard J. Davis' "Constructing

Normalcy" and its recollection of the historical formation of the idea of the norm, the concept of

a norm arises as "a feature of a certain kind of society" rather than being a symptom of

humankind as a whole, with Davis tracing the origin to industrialization and the development of

"late eighteenth and nineteenth-century notions of nationality, race, gender, criminality, sexual

orientation, and so on" (Davis 3). He cites the word "normal" as becoming part of the English

language in terms of its modern definition circa 1840, defined as "constituting, conforming to,

not deviating or different from, the common type or standard, regular, usual" and followed by the terms "norm", "normality", and "normalcy" within the next two decades (Davis 4). Davis then traces the concept of the ideal to the 17th century and to the idea of divine bodies, which are at their core unattainable due to their godlike status, which are embodied in art of goddesses that draw ideal features from various women and then puts them together as one mythically perfect image (Davis 4). The goddesses being constructed from the features of many women rather than one demonstrates an acknowledgement that the ideal is not feasible for a human and that perfection does not exist outside of myths, meaning that "all members of the population are below the ideal" (Davis 4). The ideal was never meant to be attainable, as it was never meant to be human, but has found a home in the superhero.

As concepts of normalcy emerged, the "grotesque" existed as the inverse to the concept of the ideal and was more representative of the common people but was neither equivalent to the disabled nor necessarily exclusive of them (Davis 4). At this point, disability was not singled out as nonnormative, since the ideal was acknowledged as unattainable. The problem surrounding the rhetorics of disability arose following the shift from the norm as representative of the average person to it becoming "paradoxically a kind of ideal" as deviations from the average became framed as bad and "physical beauty as an exceptional ideal becomes transformed into beauty as the average" (Davis 5-6). When Marx's theory comes into play, the norm also transforms from just being the idea of beauty as being average and therefore normative into also including the value of labor of an average person (Davis 6). This idealized and unachievable beauty becoming the norm, no matter its impossibility, is closely tied to the representation of female bodies in comics and the critiques behind fan advocacy for a change in how women are drawn. The Broke Back test particularly embodies the impossibility that has been created through the idealization

of superheroines, because while you may be able to argue that the perfect skinny woman with massive breasts and buttocks exists somewhere in the world, it is much harder to argue away human impossibility of her broken back. Negative portrayals of disability arise alongside the concept of the norm as well, with the creation of the idea of a "normal body" causing the disabled body to arise in contrast (Davis 7).

To return to the representation of disability in literature as a whole, Thomson draws on the work of Aristotle to argue that "literary representation depends more on probability - what people take to be accurate - than on reality" (Thomson 11). As such, the representation of disabled people relies more on what the majority culture expects of disabled people, including how they appear and act, rather than the representation being based on the actual experiences of disabled people. These representations of disabled people, based on the expectations set for disabled people by the majority culture, set more expectations for what disability means when the representations are consumed and fed into popular stereotypes. Essentially, the disabled character is crafted based on cultural stereotypes and expectations, which then create more cultural stereotypes and expectations, creating a cycle of how disability is both perceived by the majority and expected to be performed by disabled people. Rather than representing the complexity of the various experiences of disability in the real world, these stories rely on cultural stereotypes and may not be realistic at all. This cyclical process is similar as well to the construction and reproduction of stereotypes about race in comics.

Even when most superheroes were not necessarily mainstream, they were still created by those within a specific culture and expressive of their beliefs of who an idealized human would be, which is reflected in how race, gender, and disability are all portrayed in those stories. Jeffrey A. Brown argues in "Panthers and Vixens: Black Superheroines, Sexuality, and Stereotypes in

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Contemporary Comic Books" that "superheroes reveal some of our most basic beliefs about morality and justice, our conceptions of gender and sexuality, and our attitudes towards ethnicity and nationality" within Western culture due to their status as "omnipresent characters" since the introduction of Superman in 1938 and their subsequent rise to popularity (Brown 1). However, since men, particularly white men, were typically the ones writing superhero comics, their views of who an idealized human looks like were heavily prioritized. As such, the ideal for heroines was created in reflection of the male idea of what a perfect woman would look like as a hero, which led to the idealization of feminine strength also being deeply rooted in objectification and sexualization. Despite my reference to the ideal as the basis for how heroines were created, the response to the characters by women and other audiences demonstrate how the ideal was actually created by the dominant group within comics culture who had the power to write women any way they wanted. This biased ideal becoming the norm in comics ultimately leads to a slew of issues, including the fetishizing of white womanhood and exoticization of women of color.

While all female superheroes, or women in comics as a whole, are sexualized or fetishized in comics, since the majority of them are, race plays an indelible role in how that objectification takes place. Brown describes the double jeopardy that comes with being a superheroine of color as being "dictated by the twin burdens of racial and sexual stereotyping (Brown 4). Black superheroines are depicted as savage and animalistic, Latina heroines are fiery and seductive, and of course, Asian superheroines are stereotyped as dragon ladies,[18] all of which Brown argues serve "at least in part, as a means to sanctify White female sexuality by contrast" (Brown 4-5). With this history in mind, Brown moves to assess the potential of superhero stories

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[18] Stereotypical depiction of Asian women, usually East Asian women, as being "overbearing or tyrannical" and "glamourous often mysterious" women (Merriam-Webster)

to "reinforce racial and sexual stereotypes" while also providing "positive and heroic examples of Black women in popular culture" through his examination of two Black superheroines, Black Panther and Vixen (Brown 1). He argues that despite many improvements, Black superheroines are still plagued by stereotypes and presented as "exotic sexual spectacles, as erotic racial 'Others'" with most portrayals revolving around these characters as "hypersexual and metaphorically bestial" as expressed via their behavior, costumes, and storylines with other characters (1-2). Brown extends on this by arguing that several of the most popular Black comic heroines, such as Storm from the X-Men, Pantha from Teen Titans, and Black Panther are all "explicitly associated with exoticized notions of Africa, nature, noble savagery, and a variety of Dark Continent themes, including voodoo, mysticism, and animal totemism" (Brown 2).

While these characters resisted the dominant model of superheroes at the time, which Brown describes as "an adolescent fantasy of hegemonic masculinity," they were still "primarily depicted as scantily clad and erotically posed fetish objects" who served as "sexual spectacles" in contrast to the male heroes who were meant to serve "as a point of identification" for presumably young male readers and "embody masculine ideals" (Brown 2). However, Brown ultimately concludes that the most recent portrayals of Black Panther and Vixen still manage to "model new possibilities for the representation of Black women in popular culture" despite being their sexualization due to how their "heroic actions far outweigh the spectacle of eroticism" from their fetishization in their more modern storylines, escaping the one-dimensional caricatures that Black superheroines are often portrayed as (Brown 13).

Although Brown does name Monica Rambeau as Captain Marvel as one of the Black superheroines with "devoted followings among serious comic book fans" but who are not "popular enough to headline their own monthly series," he otherwise does not bring the character

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into his analysis of sexuality among Black female superheroes (Brown 6). While this is not

unusual given the lack of academic consideration towards Monica Rambeau as a character, it is

surprising given Brown's argument topic. As he pointed out, Monica Rambeau is a relatively

popular character, not particularly mainstream prior to her introduction in *Wandavision* and

subsequent appearance in *The Marvels*, but well-known and well-liked enough among more

invested comic book fans. Although her suit is still skin-tight to her curves, it has also been fully

covering in all its iterations, with some versions of Monica being even more covered via a boxy

trench coat. In comparison to many of Storm and Vixen's costumes, even Monica's brief time in

a bikini before covering up with a robe during her first appearance becomes relatively tame.

Monica is perhaps even less sexualized at points than her white female counterparts in the

Avengers, Wasp and She-Hulk. In *Avengers* #244, Wasp spends the entire issue in a bikini,

including during battle, and the Scarlet Witch starts the issue wearing only part of her regular

costume, while Monica remains at work in her hero uniform. The question then becomes, in a

genre where the physicality and objectification of female characters determines a good chunk of

their alleged value to readers, why isn't Monica Rambeau as sexualized as her compatriots?

I argue that Monica's lack of sexualization and relative progressiveness in terms of

objectification in comparison to other heroines from the same time period is at least in part due

to her status as part of the ensemble in a team already featuring two other sexualized female

characters. Monica was never meant to be the drawing point for *The Avengers* series, despite her

eventual role as its leader following years of being a team member. The run also featured the

Wasp, as well as the heavily sexualized She-Hulk, who were both filling the role of sexual

fantasy characters. As such, Monica as Captain Marvel was able to subvert expectations for

women in comics, embodying less of Peppard's compromise as her teammates were already

fulfilling it. Additionally, the powerset Stern chose for her did not fall into the same stereotyping that other Black superheroines were subjected to, which led to a relatively progressive portrayal of the character in terms of visuals at the time. Her costume had a couple of updates sometime after her departure from *The Avengers*, which removed the winged sleeves and later added in a trench coat, with some variations done to the black and white design on her costume. When Monica Rambeau was eventually given her own mini-series in late 2022, her costume was updated one more time to a modern-looking superhero suit that would adapt well to a live-action project, but none of her restylings have been dramatic changes to her original look.

In "Fearsome Possibilities", the afterword to *Uncanny Bodies: Superhero Comics and Disability*, Charles Hatfield claims that "superhero comics have always been about the spectacle of bodies on the page, and the spectacle of Othering: heightened and fantastical displays of difference - gendered, racialized, ethnocentrist, ableist - in the graphic clash of bodies both idealized and grotesque" (Hatfield 217). From their inception, superhero comics represented the heroes as the ideal, which becomes even more exaggerated when pitted against the villains or monsters of the stories. In the early origins of superhero stories, these idealized figures were generally hyper masculine, explicitly heterosexual, able-bodied and superpowered white men, who set the norm for what a comic book superhero would look and act like for decades to come. Despite criticism from women and other groups about how the ideal was represented, the norm for superheroes has managed to stay in place firmly enough that deviation from it is both newsworthy and met with opposition from readers who claim to be the most important audience. However, Hatfield argues that it is precisely because of the superhero genre's roots in the idealization and spectacle of the body that it can also be utilized to question the hegemonic norms and normate ideologies it perpetuates through the introduction of multiplicity and

differences, which will allow for "a capacity to see difference within ourselves and to recognize the social construction of difference as just that" (Hatfield 221-222).

I argue that Hatfield's aforementioned process of questioning and defiance of norms is exemplified through Kamala Khan's introduction and characterization as a hero. As a teenage Muslim Pakistani-American woman of color, Kamala Khan does not align with many of the aspects that create a normative hero in the comic genre. The character is not dressed in a sexualized costume, and instead wears a loose fitting and fully covering uniform, defying genre conventions of what a female superhero needs to look like in order to be marketable. Despite wearing a modest costume aligned with her beliefs, Kamala Khan's physical appearance as Ms. Marvel has posed no hindrance to her popularity as a hero, since the teen has featured in multiple monthly solo series, as well as becoming a part of various popular ensemble teams, such as the Avengers, the Champions, the X-Men, and now the Marvels. While there have still been a few mildly questionable covers featuring the teen after her introduction to the X-Men, the majority of her appearances have not shown her to be objectified.

However, Kamala's first appearance after gaining her powers was not in her own costume, but rather in the original Ms. Marvel's costume and body, which represented Kamala's idea of what a hero looked like. Her origin story is tied deeply to a crisis Wilson described as "the conflict in her life between her family and faith and being an American teen" and suddenly gaining the ability to become someone else entirely (Hudson). After sneaking out to attend a party and getting exposed to the terrigen mist that awakened her powers, Kamala hallucinated a visit from Carol Danvers, telling her "I want to be *you*. Except I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in *giant wedge heels*" (Wilson 17). Following this encounter, Kamala inadvertently shifted into the appearance of the original Ms. Marvel while

attempting to save partygoers from a crisis. The new Ms. Marvel's powerset breaks from genre

conventions just like her eventual costume, which was a purposeful choice on the part of her

creators. Rather than energy-based "sparkly" powers like Carol Danvers or Monica Rambeau

and instead of mental powers like Jean Grey or Emma Frost, Kamala Khan as a polymorph has a

skillset more akin to Mr. Fantastic. Creator G. Willow Wilson explained that from the get-go,

she was not going to give Kamala Khan "stereotypical girl powers," stating "nothing's going to

sparkle; she's not going to float. I wanted her to have something kinetic and physical that would

look fun on a page" (Hudson).

Even without the less aesthetic powerset than most superheroines get, Kamala Khan's

introduction was already a risk, since, as Wilson points out, audiences are "used to seeing

something else in the pages of a comic book" (The Columbus Dispatch). Even Kamala herself

thinks that to be a hero, she needs to look like and be Carol Danvers, which is a struggle that the

audience follows her through. Wilson remarked in an interview that "Captain Marvel represents

an ideal that Kamala pines for. She's strong, beautiful, and doesn't have any of the baggage of

being Pakistani and 'different'" (The Columbus Dispatch). Becoming who Carol Danvers

appeared to be as Ms. Marvel gave Kamala an escape from her own feelings of conflict and a

way to feel normal. Her transformation also reflects the legacy of heroism in superhero comics as

needing to be participated in only by those who have a certain idealized form. However,

Kamala's appearances as the original Ms. Marvel served to show both the character and her

audiences that it was not who she was, nor who she needed to be in order to help people, leading

to Kamala reclaiming her own identity with a new costume and her own appearance, as well as

introducing the audience to a nonnormative hero who refused to conform to genre conventions

any longer. By the end of the first volume of the new *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan was actively

subverting most of the expectations for women, and women of color, in comics.

In Thomson's words, "stereotypes in life become tropes in textual representation" and as

Cocca aptly puts it, "when women represent just over one-third of the characters overall, each

female character carries more pressure to represent women as a whole" (Thomson 11, Cocca

415). The portrayal of characters who are underrepresented in comics is especially important,

because it may be the only representation that somebody sees. In the case of *Captain Marvel*

representing Marvel's first attempt at a female-fronted solo film in a landscape where Black

Widow had been the token female member of the ensemble for years, the pressure for Carol

Danvers to perform well as a representation for all women was enormous, and much of the

controversy surrounding the film was rooted in that tension. Wilson addressed this as well with

her introduction of Kamala Khan as the first Muslim and Pakistani-American superhero,

discussing "the burden of representation" that exists when the identity being portrayed simply is

not represented enough in popular culture, leading to "increased scrutiny and pressure" for the

new characters "because they're expected to represent everybody," which simply isn't possible

(Hudson). The creative team went in expecting negativity to follow the creation of *Ms. Marvel*,

but refused to write Kamala as a watered down token character meant to represent everyone, and

did not market her as such (Hudson). This is about the exact opposite of what happened in the

original run of *Ms. Marvel* when Carol Danvers was the titular hero. To draw from Peppard,

> In the end, however, Ms. Marvel's commercial failure almost certainly says less about
> female consumers than it does about the ambivalence and confusion of male producers,
> who saddled themselves with the admittedly impossible task of devising one woman, and
> one version of female strength, to stand for appeal to, and represent all girls and women
> (118-199).

Designing heroines with the intent of having them be a token character or by following the same formula used for male counterparts in the case of spin-off designs leads to flat characters that ultimately represent no one. Ultimately, an idealized hero cannot be an eternally compelling character because they are not complex and have no flaws, and are as such detached from the readers who would identify with them, since the readers will grow while the heroes, who have already met the ideal, will not. Nobody can identify with perfection forever. Luckily for superhero comics, the ideal has proven not to be what many readers want, so there is still room for even token characters to grow. As such, particular attention needs to be paid to how stories are being told, and whether or not they resonate with intended audiences, and who those intended audiences are so that characters are both created and recreated without compromise. Despite the ongoing need to call out the sexualization and objectification of women in comics, there has been significant progress made in how heroines are portrayed, much of which is due to the sheer amount of effort put in by fans to challenge the norms and advocate for change. The work being done by fans and new creative teams alike has changed what a hero looks like and who gets to have power, regardless of the opposition to both new costumes and characters. Since the three lead characters of *The Marvels* (2023) are introduced in adaptations of their latest costumes, which reflect the work done by fans across decades to change the genre standards for heroines, it seems like the way forward for women in the MCU really could be higher, further, faster.

CHAPTER IV: RHETORICAL FAILURE IN THE MCU

If the previous study of comics has demonstrated gendered change as the basis for some

level of rhetorical failure, a shift to film reveals a complex ecology of factors leading to *The*

Marvels (2023) framing as an unsuccessful superhero film. *The Marvels* (2023) has been

heralded as a prime example of superhero fatigue due to its low performance at the box office in

juxtaposition to previous Marvel movies, with the *Captain Marvel* sequel becoming the

franchise's lowest earning film. Since the original *Captain Marvel* was successful despite the

misinformation campaign and boycott surrounding its release, *The Marvels* was expected to fare

similarly in the face of the familiar resistance to Marvel projects featuring mostly women.

However, *The Marvels* failed to draw an audience to theaters, despite being the film debut for

two new heroes, Ms. Marvel and Monica Rambeau, who had each only been featured in TV

series beforehand. The question then becomes, what led to the difference in reception between

Captain Marvel and *The Marvels*, especially with the latter's introduction of the popular

character Kamala Khan? To draw again on the concept of rhetorical failure, which calls for an

examination of "not only sweeping explanations, but local circumstances" that shape the realm

of judgment, I argue that an analysis of *The Marvels*' perceived failure requires an in-depth look

at the circumstances surrounding and leading up to its release, as well as its placement as part of

the larger MCU (Hallenbeck 71).

The landscape predating *Captain Marvel*'s release was quite different in comparison to

the space that *The Marvels* came out in. Firstly, *Captain Marvel* (2019) was being lauded as

Marvel's first solo female-fronted superhero film, which drew lots of attention from media

outlets and prospective audiences, despite the response being both positive and negative. In

addition to this, *Captain Marvel* (2019) was the last MCU film to be released before *Avengers:*

End Game (2019), and one of two MCU movies to be released between it and *Avengers: Infinity War*, which saw the heroes face a terrible defeat and the deaths of half of all living things in the universe. Needless to say, the suspense that was building between the releases of the two *Avengers* movies had fans desperate for any information about the conflict, and Captain Marvel was a hero with the potential to save the day, with the after credits scene for *Infinity War* showing that Nick Fury's last action before disintegrating was calling her home. Rangwala also argues that "*Captain Marvel* was also noteworthy before its release for the agitation it caused among some men online for deviating from the masculinity of the superhero genre," escalating the stakes surrounding the movie to being explicitly political (181). She comments that "the film was released in the second year of the presidency of a serial assaulter and his fundamental Christian patriarchal vice-president, in the wake of the pussy-hat wave of the Women's Marches and midterm elections that saw a record number of women running and elected," which may have also increased the audience of feminists invested in *Captain Marvel*'s success (Rangwala 180). Despite the boycotts and misinformation spread about the film, it was still able to bring in more than $1 billion at the box office. All of this together prevented the film's rhetorical failure despite the intense negative response of audiences to its release.

To begin with, the original *Captain Marvel* (2019) faced controversy from two main groups: conservative audiences who were angry at Marvel's choice to promote a hero seen as advocating for feminist propaganda, and from feminists who were angry that Marvel was representing an ill portrayal of feminism. To represent some of the common negative responses from self-proclaimed feminists, I turn to Natalie Le Clue and Janelle Vermaak-Griessel's "Artificial Feminism: Fan Reaction to the Representation of Captain Marvel." They refer to *Captain Marvel* (2019) as presenting a "reductionist concept of feminism" within the story and

also refer to it as a "rudimentary representation" of feminism (78). Later in the same paragraph,

they insert a specific reviewer's reference to the movie's portrayal of feminism as "'the very

definition of first world problems'" in reference to an incident where a man tells Carol Danvers

to smile and she steals his motorcycle in response (78). From these key descriptions, their

concept of artificial feminism can be roughly defined as a stereotypical and superficial

representation of the feminist cause.

Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel's inclusion of the smiling scene as an instance of artificial

feminism was particularly interesting in comparison to the criticisms and harassment that Brie

Larson faced in response to the release of the trailer and posters for the film. The aforementioned

scene was also a big part of the reason that *Captain Marvel* (2019) was villainized and labeled as

having a feminist agenda. In fact, Carol Danvers stealing the motorcycle after being told to smile

was an edited version of the original scene. The extended scene included a character referred to

as "The Don" approaching Carol, commenting on her outfit, and then asking for a smile. In

return, Carol offers him a handshake, and clenches her hand around his tightly enough that he

cannot pull free and gives him a minor zap with her powers, before asking for his keys and

jacket, and responding "What, no smile?" before riding away on his motorcycle. The eventual

release of the extended scene caused outrage online and led to Carol Danvers being labeled as

villainous for confronting the man who was harassing her (Blauvelt).

While Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel argue that the conflict within the scene is

representative of first world problems and therefore not "truly" feminist as it is a relatively minor

issue, the audience response to the scene demonstrates its value in promoting women's

empowerment. The scene renders the misogyny within it apparent both through Carol's conflict

with The Don, as catcalling is an issue that many women face, but also through the negative

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response online defending The Don's behavior and framing Carol as the villain in the situation. Even if the scene itself is a reductive representation of a feminist issue, the controversy that grew around it confirmed the need for that acknowledgement in the first place. It took an instance of misogyny often portrayed as part of life and revealed it to be problematic through Carol's response as a third party, since she was at the time a Kree soldier who did not remember her life on earth and was not desensitized to sexism, unlike the audience members that either praised or rejected her response in the scene. Additionally, it represented an issue that some audience members had already brought up in response to posters and trailers for the film, namely that Brie Larson's Captain Marvel doesn't smile enough, despite her behavior making sense within the movie's plot. However, Brie Larson pointed out the double standard of these comments in a response on her Instagram by reposting Twitter user HeyMermaid's rendition of past Marvel movie posters where the male heroes were photoshopped to be smiling (Alexander). The negative commentary in response to this scene and Brie Larson's photoshopped posters was also presumably referenced in the trailer for *The Marvels* with the inclusion of the lyric "don't you tell me to smile" from "Intergalactic" by the Beastie Boys, making evident that the movie acknowledged the sexist criticism against its predecessor but refused to cave for the sake of marketability.

Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel, alongside many other audience members, center their arguments around the idea that *Captain Marvel* (2019) promotes fake feminism and is in no way progressive for the MCU. The two claim that the negative fan reactions to the film that accuse Carol Danvers of being a Mary Sue,[19] feminazi,[20] social justice warrior, and downright

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[19] Derogatory term for female fictional characters that are deemed too perfect or powerful
[20] Derogatory term used to denote radical feminists

misogynistic, were all rooted in audience recognition that the movie was not portraying "real feminism" and claiming that the superhero film required a "suspension of intelligence" outside of the reasonable realm for a comic film, with the authors stating that Captain Marvel is "a stereotypical nasty woman who is unable to be defeated - both physically and emotionally" (Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel 76-77, 80, 81). This text was particularly unusual in that it validated the right-wing response to the movie by allying it with their own feminist cause, and blamed *Captain Marvel* and similar representations of (super)powerful women for increasing negative associations with the public's concept of feminism (78). Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel are not the only scholars to have questioned the popular association between *Captain Marvel* (2019) and feminism, with others having questioned its framing of women engaging in acts of violence as empowering and its promotion of militarism (Mirrlees, Rangwala, Cocca).

In "Breaking the Logic of Neoliberal Victimhood: Vulnerability, Interdependence and Memory in Captain Marvel (Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck, 2019)," María José Gámez Fuentes argues that the story of Carol Danvers, as told in *Captain Marvel* (2019), is disruptive to the normative portrayal of women subjected to violence by refusing the narrative of women either being victims without agency or empowered through the system that oppresses them (Gámez Fuentes 1).

> Ultimately, women are asked to find their means of empowerment within the structures that regulate to whom, and how much, power is given. Women's oppression, as well as their 'success' is the result of the structure's restricted set of roles and expectations, even in the face of violence and under its supposed protection (Gámez Fuentes 4).

She argues that Captain Marvel's circumvention of this stereotype, which was largely due to the support of the women around her, contributed to the harsh reception of the film as it openly rejected the need for women to conform to a particular system to be empowered, with the Kree serving as a thinly veiled metaphor for patriarchy (Gámez Fuentes 1, 9). When her ex-

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mentor, the villainous Yon-Rogg, attempts to goad Carol into fighting him hand to hand, with her having never beaten him before, she refuses and instead fires a photon blast at him, defeating him easily. Gámez Fuentes states, "As she herself says at the end of the final battle with her Kree mentor, she has nothing to prove to him; neither to the male authority he symbolizes. Instead, she embraces her supposedly uncontrolled emotions and rage and realizes that her vulnerability does not have to do with them but with a patriarchal culture that has limited her potential" (9). Through Gámez Fuentes' argument, Carol is shown to have broken out of the system that would have limited her, creating a positive representation of a female hero that rejects neoliberal feminism and approachable femininity (Gámez Fuentes 8). However, this description of Carol Danvers as subverting patriarchal standards through her response to Yon-Rogg, is exactly the sort of behavior that Le Clue and Vermaak-Griessel argue make Carol Danvers a nasty woman promoting artificial feminism, and that Ashfield would argue focuses too much on self-as-project, despite Carol's victory only being possible with the support of the women around her, specifically her best friend Maria Rambeau.

Other scholars argue that many of the tropes within *Captain Marvel* (2019) and the characterization of Carol Danvers are feminist in how they allow a female superhero to be written in a way that only male heroes were allowed to be previously. In "Superheroes and Third-Wave Feminism," Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo address similar but broader claims to the ones brought forward in "Artificial Feminism" with its rebuttal of an argument made by Charlotte Taylor Ashfield's that DeConnick's version of Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel promotes "faux feminism" due to the focus on "self-as-project" and her personal struggles within the run rather than challenging patriarchy as a whole. In response to this, Curtis and Cardo argue that self-as-project, working on oneself and one's personal identity, is rather a crucial trope

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within the superhero genre that has now become accessible to female heroes through its application to Carol Danvers, allowing female superheroes to "have flaws and embrace them without diminishing their power" in a way that was previously only applicable to male heroes (Curtis and Cardo 389).

Additionally, they argue that both DeConnick's original run and the four-issue collaboration *Captain Marvel and the Carol Corps* between DeConnick and the next Captain Marvel writer, Kelly Thompson, feature solidarity among women as a major theme in a genre often devoid of female friendships, focusing on the idea of being "part of something bigger" and exploring the community that Carol is a part of, developing beyond ideas of individual empowerment and towards collaboration (Curtis and Cardo 390). The article also works through themes of solidarity and feminism brought up within the new *Ms. Marvel* comics and how Kamala Khan brings forth tropes about empowerment as a young Muslim Pakistani-American woman taking on the Ms. Marvel mantle from her hero, the current Captain Marvel. G. Willow Wilson's introductory run of the character focuses on Kamala as she "negotiates relations with people and institutions" as she works out her own identity and wants in life while facing discrimination and gentrification in addition to traditional villains and comic book bad guys, taking the theme of solidarity and applying it to realistic situations (Curtis and Cardo 383). Since *The Marvels* (2023) was marketed as Marvel's first all-female team and its predecessor was marketed as promoting women's empowerment, whether or not the audience perceived that to be accurate, it was presumed that feminism and solidarity between women would be a main theme within the story, even if only on a superficial level. By greenlighting a sequel, Marvel clearly believed that another story focused on Captain Marvel and attempting to appeal more to women and feminists as an audience with its all-female team would be profitable once again, despite the

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many issues that fans have brought up regarding live-action projects post *Avengers: End Game* generally and with the portrayal of feminism within *Captain Marvel* specifically.

     The Marvels came out on the heels of several Marvel projects that fans claimed were disappointing, including Thor: Love and Thunder (2022), Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantomania (2023), Secret Invasion (2023), as well as after harsh responses to other female-fronted projects like *She-Hulk* and *Ms. Marvel*. Despite the record-breakingly negative response to *The Marvels'* trailer, *Captain Marvel*'s $1 billion success under similar duress left audiences with hope that its sequel would overcome the hate and reach comparative financial heights. One news article written after the trailer's release argued that the film would "most likely be one of the highest grossing films of the year" despite the MCU's recent struggles, claiming that "poor pre-reviews for a film that does not come out for another seven months are unlikely to convince anyone to skip it — unless they already hate women in comic book movies" (Wittmer). Initial predictions for the movie estimated its opening weekend generating $75-80 million, but ultimately *The Marvels* broke the record for lowest opening weekend for an MCU film ever by only reaching $45 million domestically (Whitten).

     Although many predicted that *The Marvels* (2023) would be a flop due to its focus on Captain Marvel and a team only made up of women, the reasons behind its low performance in comparison to previous Marvel films are fairly complex. To begin with, the filming, promotion, and eventual release of the film were all heavily impacted by outside events. Filming for *The Marvels* began while cast and crew were still under restrictions due to COVID-19, which Disney CEO Bob Iger blamed for the film's failure with the reasoning that there was not enough supervision via executives for the shoots (Brown). This narrative is reinforced by the reshoots later sanctioned by the president of Marvel, Kevin Feige, which took place after director Nia

DaCosta had already left to work on another project (Brown). Nia DaCosta, while talking about *The Marvels*, discussed making compromises regarding the direction of the film and ultimately referred to it as a "a Kevin Feige production" and as "his movie" (Rangel). With this in mind, it seems as though conflicts in terms of communication and control among the creative directors for the movie led to some of its issues in terms of shortened length and potentially overly quick pace.

Promotion of *The Marvels* was relatively minimal due to lacking support from its lead actresses as a result of bad timing. A press tour for the film did not take place due to the SAG-AFTRA strike, which lasted all of summer 2023 and ended on November 10th, the day of *The Marvels* release. In addition to this, *The Marvels* went to theaters while multiple boycotts of Disney were taking place. Similarly to the negative response that plagued the first *Captain Marvel* (2019), many conservative audience members called for a boycott of *The Marvels*. However, while the boycott of *Captain Marvel* (2019) centered around Brie Larson and the film's perceived feminist agenda, the conservative boycott of *The Marvels* (2023) focused mostly on displeasure with Disney's "Woke" agenda. These grievances included casting Halle Bailey, a Black woman as Ariel in the live-action adaptation of *The Little Mermaid* (2023), the upcoming replacement of the Splash Mountain attraction with one centered around *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), the announcement that Yara Shahidi, another woman of color, will play Tinkerbell in the live-action *Peter Pan and Wendy*, as well as controversy surrounding the upcoming live-action *Snow White* adaptation after its lead actresses commented that the titular princess will not need a prince to save her (Dunn). Rather than being the main focus of the boycott, it seems as though *The Marvels* (2023) was viewed more as a symptom of a problem with diversity in Disney more than as a herald to the end of the traditional values of the

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superhero genre. At the same time, Disney also faced a boycott from more leftist audiences as well due to their $2 million donation to organizations providing relief to Israel following the attack of Hamas on October 7th (The Walt Disney Company). This decision led to backlash from consumers who were outraged that Disney offered no support to Gaza and claims that Disney was supporting the genocide of Palestinian people via their donation to Israel (Body). These audiences were further alienated by Marvel's intent to introduce Sabra, a highly controversial hero from the comics intended to be the Israeli version of Captain America, in the upcoming film *Captain America: New World Order* (Lloyd).

These criticisms of Marvel, which were supported by many feminist audiences, reflect an ongoing feminist critique of militarism and violence in the MCU, as well as in superhero comics as a whole. While there were some critiques of military propaganda in Marvel's films prior to the release of *Captain Marvel* (2019), the inclusion of an advertisement calling for women to join the U.S. Air Force before the start of an allegedly feminist movie brought more attention to the issue via the juxtaposition of the ad and Carol's experience with the Kree Empire and the American military. Despite the promising comparisons made between the Kree Empire and patriarchal culture, there are more to be made between the film's villains and what Carolyn Cocca would refer to as "a militarized, imperial agenda," and as Mirrlees puts it, "the DoD-Hollywood Complex" (Cocca 53, Mirrlees 43). It also weakens Gámez Fuentes' interpretation of *Captain Marvel* (2019) as subverting the neoliberal agenda by having Carol Danvers break out of the system that oppressed her, since she was oppressed within the U.S. Air Force as well and ultimately found herself outside of that structure. The promotion of the U.S. Air Force as a feminist space where women can become empowered runs counter to the film's story about a woman breaking out of the militaristic spaces that sought to control her and utilize her for their

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gain, as well as running counter to the rhetoric used to frame the Air Force itself within the story.

Despite the acknowledgment of the sexism that women like Carol Danvers and Maria Rambeau would have faced via flashbacks of Carol's lost memories, the choice to have these instances of sexism only appear in the story's past feeds into a postfeminist theme that sexism and discrimination are a thing of the past and something that new recruits would not face. Even the new colors of Carol's uniform were chosen to match Monica's Air Force t-shirt, showing a certain level of comradery to the U.S. military despite her fragmented memory. After all–according to conservative logics, unlike Carol and Maria, women are now able to fly combat, so structural sexism must have been eradicated.

Despite the very careful and intentional framing of Carol's Air Force storyline to include its history of sexism while also absolving the current military of criticism, the combination of her story within the film and the advertisement before it drew feminist critique. Perhaps because *Captain Marvel* was specifically advertised to feminists, the inclusion of the military propaganda within and before the film received much more attention than previous MCU projects that had done the same, such as in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). Following *Captain Marvel* drawing particular attention to the connection between the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and superhero films, Tanner Mirrlees outlined exactly the ways in which Marvel and the DoD work together to create the carefully curated version of the American military that appears in MCU projects. Essentially, in exchange for the use of military vehicles, various other materials as props, and personnel assistance at a heavily discounted price, the DoD is allowed jurisdiction over a project's final script, which lets them control the portrayal of the U.S. military in the story via a system of collaboration with Hollywood that has been in place for more than a century (Mirrlees 44, 45). In *Captain Marvel*, this exchange leads to the softening of the history

of sexism and violence against women within the military, shifting the retelling of Carol's experiences to ultimately be in promotion of the U.S. Air Force and the violence it perpetuates. As Mirrlees points out "...wars often perpetuate patriarchy and sexual violence against women, in the military, in military families, and in the countries the US attacks" (Mirrlees 49).

The acceptance of more women into the military and increasing number of women in leadership positions is not a win for feminism, as it ultimately harms more women than it temporarily helps. An illusion of empowerment arises from the affordance that allows "...individual women the opportunity to show off their utility and prove their functionality to whatever ends these institutions serve whilst maintaining the social power relations they perpetuate without genuine intersectional solidarity with other women" (Mirrlees 49). As an expression of this false empowerment, Mirrlees ultimately frames *Captain Marvel* (2019) as a piece of imperialist propaganda designed to distract from conflicts the DoD is engaged in by "showcasing a militarized feminist superhero saving planet earth and a refugee minority species from a macho alien Empire without identifying or vilifying the real countries and peoples the US security state is actually at war with" (50). This criticism brings forth a very real contradiction that complicates *Captain Marvel*, which is that the capitalist and militaristic intentions behind the film ultimately undermine, and perhaps overwhelm, the feminist themes of patriarchal and imperialistic subversion within the story. To borrow from Rangwala, "*Captain Marvel* claims that women are just as good at imperialist violence as men" (182). Carol Danvers' story is one of a woman breaking free from the systems that limit her and refusing the perceptions of power being placed on her, but it has been used to reinforce those very same structures in the real world and encourage more women to participate in them in the name of empowerment.

While this collaboration between the DoD and Hollywood for live-action comic adaptations is relatively new, the inclusion of military ideals within superhero stories is not. Military origin stories are not unusual to encounter, working as shortcuts to establish potentially non-normative heroes like Carol Danvers or Monica Rambeau as all-American heroes. As with Carol Danvers and the Air Force propaganda in *Captain Marvel*, these heroes are legitimized and made less threatening through their connection to the military and participation in a system that ultimately oppresses them and other women. As Carolyn Cocca points out in her examination of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel as acclaimed symbols of feminism, "Whether in the name of defense, pre-emption, retribution, protection, democratization, justice, or imperialism, military women and superhero women almost by definition use violence and the threat of violence to force others to submit" (Cocca 24). Their perpetuation and performance of violence is no different than that of any male hero in these stories. Cocca remarks that despite the superhero genre having been "born in resistance to fascism in the 1930s", the genre as a whole continuously draws on "fascist aesthetics" when imagining heroes, which Gavaler connects to the use of "'anti-democratic authoritarian violence'" and the tendency for heroes to be "'violently patriotic'" (Cocca 24). These stories of good versus evil being told heavily lean into Western, and particularly American, formulations of right and wrong, without questioning what legitimizes the violence from heroes as justice and the violence from villains as criminal. Even without the boycotts and other issues faced by *The Marvels*, it is possible that the militarism present in the original *Captain Marvel*, as well as in most other MCU works, could have alienated not only the feminist audience that Marvel was attempting to appeal to, but other audiences tired of these American formulations of struggles for justice.

Rangwala frames Marvel movies as "reinforc[ing] the strict division between legitimate and illegitimate power" and as a place where "national survival is foregrounded" through the naturalization of American values both locally and globally via superhero movies in a time of high anxiety post 9/11 (171). Similarly to Cocca's critique of the superhero's ties to militarization, patriotism, and imperialism, Rangwala deconstructs the superhero as "a supernatural reimagining of dominance as hegemony, the power of persuasion through narrative and spectacle to manufacture consent, (super)naturalizing the ideologies put forth" (Rangwala 171). Essentially, the superhero via its representation in MCU films is utilized to promote American cultural ideals, which can range anywhere from representations of gender to issues of justice, but particularly concern notions of power and violence. Rangwala goes on to argue that "mere economic or military domination can be resisted on those terrains, but the legitimization of US hegemony domestically and internationally involves the additional dissemination of America fantasies of liberal democracy and freedom" utilizing the stories told within MCU movies (Rangwala 171). I argue that the replication of American violence via the portrayal of superheroes as just extensions of military or government ideals or as vessels of patriotism contributes towards the increasing disillusionment with comic projects, particularly MCU projects, which is popularly referred to as superhero fatigue.

Despite many Marvel movies bringing forth critiques of oppressive structures within America, such as *Captain Marvel*'s critique on both imperialism and patriarchy, Rangwala argues, similarly to Mirrlees, that the individualization of the solution to those issues via the superhero ultimately prevents seeking real solutions to those critiques. She argues that although "MCU films provide a recognition of the prevailing crises of our time," which she lists as including "racism, patriarchy, colonialism, militarism, class inequality, and climate" they also

promote "the fantasy that someone will come along to bring us back to the certainty of the imagined liberal status quo" as though the systems being critiqued are "broken rather than oppressive by design" (Rangwala 170, 172). This is accompanied by "a clear sense of good and evil and that good will prevail," with the patriotic heroes representing good regardless of the villain's arguments. Although MCU films may bring forth a critique of oppressive structures within America, the solution is always the superhero, and individualism is naturalized as the only solution. To draw from Cocca, "a punch to one white man's jaw from a glowing female fist doesn't dismantle multiple and overlapping systems of inequalities" (Cocca 87).

Chapters II and III of this thesis both grappled with the representation of women as heroes in comics across history, both in terms of their stories, their physicality, and the response that their presence inspired, whether it was positive or negative. In both cases, it became evident that readers have some influence over the state of comics, with their positionality determining whether they have always had that power or if it was something they had to fight, and are still fighting, for. While it was a decades long and complicated project to begin undoing the harmful idealization of women that permeates superhero stories, much of the authority to do so was in the hands of individual creative teams, who were likely easier to persuade than the entertainment giant that Marvel has become under Disney. It is hard to imagine a way forward from here, a way to untangle superhero stories from militarization and violence to be able to enjoy and engage with a film like *The Marvels* without being complicit in the harm that the MCU may be doing. Ultimately, marketability is at the heart of the changes Marvel has chosen to make during its history publishing comics. If the Carol Corps had not shown up in full force to advocate for *Captain Marvel*, a second run with DeConnick would never have happened, and neither would the film have followed. The failure of *The Marvels* at the box office is a symptom that something

is wrong with the MCU that audiences are demanding needs to be addressed, and the two loudest

voices are calls against Marvel's woke agenda, and calls against Marvel's promotion of

militarism. No matter who Marvel decides to cater to, a change must be made going forward.

However, potential for the future of women in comics may still lie within fan responses.

Rangwala, alongside her critique of militarism and the MCU's consistent return to

individualism and the status quo, comes to the conclusion that the audience has the ability to

make these films into something more.

> What could perhaps set the MCU apart from merely another commodity that reproduces hegemony is that its popularity during a time of mass communication via the Internet means that fans can poach, that it can provide a critique of patriarchy and imperialism that anyone can take up and circulate while ignoring the strategies of containment. These kinds of cultural shifts can matter: just as the culture industry is adapting old narrative, the Internet allows fans to connect and exercise agency in recombing and remixing various parts of these narratives and representations (Rangwala 186).

Earlier, I mentioned that debates concerning the portrayal of women in superhero stories

were largely brought into the public arena by the shift of fandoms online and the MCU making

comics mainstream. This shift fostered the political debates that followed, and continue to

follow, *Captain Marvel*'s release. To draw back to the arguments that I recounted concerning the

perceptions of feminism in the film, it would not be wrong to argue that *Captain Marvel*

promotes feminist causes due to its challenge to imperialism. It is not wrong to say that Carol's

circumvention of neoliberal victimhood with the support of her chosen family supports feminist

causes, or that *Captain Marvel* challenges norms within superhero stories by portraying an

unsexualized and complex heroine. However, it would be unproductive to ignore its promotion

of the military industrial complex or Marvel's co-optation of feminist precepts in an attempt to

market the film to women. It would not be wrong to call out *Captain Marvel* for using Carol's

experiences to market the U.S. Air Force to women and perpetuating an illusion of

empowerment that will ultimately harm more women than it helps. Both of these stories about *Captain Marvel* and what the film was doing are true at the same time, despite conflicting with each other, and navigating that paradox has always been the case for women in comics.

     Generations: Ms. Marvel & Ms. Marvel is a one-shot issue that takes place after Kamala Khan loses her faith in Carol Danvers as a hero, cutting ties with her after Carol's actions lead to her friend's arrest before he had even committed a crime during *Civil War II*. In the story, Kamala is sent into the past, soon after Carol had become Ms. Marvel, and their interactions throughout the comic demonstrate the difference between the kind of hero that Carol Danvers became, and the kind of hero that Ms. Marvel needs to be, as informed by her own identities as a young Muslim woman of color growing up in a complicated world. In a call back to the original *Ms. Marvel* run, Kamala ends up working at *Woman* magazine and witnesses one of Carol Danvers conflicts with its owner, J. Jonah Jameson. Carol recounts Jameson's argument to her editor, saying "He says pushing women's lib has ***damaged the brand.*** Let this be a lesson to us all…***progress*** will always take a backseat to ***profits.***" Her editor comforts her, stating "You did the best you could. We've published some ***very*** controversial ideas lately. Not everybody's ***ready*** for women to have the right to apply for a credit card without their husbands' permission. Or for a woman to keep working while she's –you know–in the family way!" (Wilson 28). In a moment of sadness, Carol responds "It's not progress if the people don't ***want*** it. Then it's just…dreams" (Wilson 28). To a comic fan who witnessed the rise of *Captain Marvel* against all odds only for it to be followed by the fall of *The Marvels*, it could seem like hoping for progress in terms of superhero comics and the representation of women is just a dream.

     Much of *Generations: Ms. Marvel & Ms. Marvel* revolves around Kamala Khan discovering what made Carol Danvers into a hero. Her first sighting of the previous Ms. Marvel

set up the stakes for women in the 1970s and the struggle women faced in the world that Carol

became a hero in and is bittersweet for the readers who miss their comradery.

> Carol Danvers. The Ms. Marvel. She doesn't recognize me or remember me – why would
> she, since there won't be anything to remember for quite a while – so it's sort of like
> starting over. She looks different. Happier. She doesn't have the world on her shoulders
> yet. Just this one intrepid little magazine. She gave up a career in the air force to run it,
> because that's what women did back then. Pushed the world forward inch by agonizing
> inch (Wilson 13).

In typical comic book fashion, a meeting discussing ways to save *Woman* magazine is

interrupted by a villain attack, which the two Ms. Marvels defeat together. The conflict leads

Kamala to understand her hero a little more, realizing that "some things never change - for Carol,

it's protecting the innocent first and foremost. For her, that means peace and order. For me, that

means asking who gets the peace and who takes the orders" (Wilson 25).

Kamala Khan's version of heroism, what she lives by and fights for in the comics,

emphasizes the importance of community and the relationality between people, and questions the

idea of justice as punitive and interrogates the systems she lives under. Despite the struggles that

comics featuring women or POC characters usually face, Kamala Khan rose to popularity

because her character and her way of heroism resonated with readers. Unlike Monica or Carol,

Kamala doesn't have a military background to "make up" for her nonnormativity, she doesn't

wear a sexy costume, and she refuses to conform to conventions for heroes even within her own

story. Even so, the response to her stories and the character's rise to fame, as evidenced by her

having been part of the Avengers, the X-Men, the Champions, and the Marvels within the first

10 years of her introduction show that she doesn't need to conform to any of those tropes or

genre conventions in order to appeal to readers. Her commitment to justice revolves around

community and questioning harmful systems and structures instead of following the rules set out

for her, both within the story and the superhero genre as a whole.

Although the issue cannot solve the rift that *Civil War II* created between Carol Danvers and Kamala Khan, the latter continues to ponder her role as the new Ms. Marvel.

> I've managed okay ***without*** Carol for a while now, done my own thing. In a lot of ways, I've ***stopped*** thinking of myself as her ***successor***. But watching her be Ms. Marvel, I think…What if there were a way to fix it? What if there's a way around the contradictions? A way to unify the mission? (Wilson 25).

Kamala's revelation, although it does not fix the conflict between her and Carol Danvers in the future, inspires her to save *Woman* magazine, and her proposition to Carol is unifying the mission between feminism and women's other interests.

> People want ***equal rights***, but they also want permission to have fun and be ***frivolous*** sometimes. Resisting the status quo 24/7 is ***exhausting***. Sometimes you need to give yourself permission to watch smoky eye tutorials and make DIY face masks from cucumber slices and stuff. Let people have their smoothie recipes and their beauty advice. Make that ***part*** of the struggle for women's rights. 'Cause getting your rights ***isn't*** about becoming someone else. It's about not having to ask ***permission*** to be who you ***already are***. (Wilson 29-30).

While unifying the feminist struggle with women's daily lives and joy saves the magazine in the story, Kamala's words also offer insight into the potential successes of *The Marvels*.

Sarah Hallenbeck argues that by examining both the broad and local circumstances of rhetorical failure, "We expose the materiality and temporality of rhetorical failure, the ways that a 'failed' outcome emerges not strictly from an individual who has somehow made poor rhetorical choices, but from a collective scene or network of which that individual is but one part" (Hallenbeck 71). Examining *The Marvels* shows that its failure at the box office in comparison to other MCU films cannot be distilled down to one cause, such as its primary focus on women, but had a variety of causes, including the timing of its release relevant to strikes and critiques towards the MCU and superheroes in general. Additionally, viewing *The Marvels* as part of the bigger picture also reveals its successes, and as Hallenbeck argues, "such a move offers one way to expose the mechanisms by which rhetorical performances by marginalized

individuals are often coded as failure" (71). *The Marvels* was the first MCU project to be directed by a Black woman, who happened to be the youngest director ever as well, and was also the highest grossing film ever directed by a Black woman (Ford, Jones).

Additionally, while *Captain Marvel* drew in significantly more cash at the box office, *The Marvels* actually has much better reviews in comparison to its predecessor on popular review site *Rotten Tomatoes*. *Captain Marvel* has a score of 79% from critics, but only 45% from audiences. In contrast, *The Marvels* has a 62% rating from critics, but the audience score rests at 82%. To draw again from Peppard, "The relevance of female superheroes for female readers and fans also continues to be undermined by voices with considerable institutional power" (Peppard 130). True, there is a conflict between those with power in the superhero comics industry and fanbases demanding more from how heroines are portrayed and plenty of reviews from top critics bashing *The Marvels*. At the same time, there are also a plethora of audience members who left reviews supporting the film in its entirety, for both its promotion of sisterhood and the sense of fun, frivolity, and downright weirdness it brings. Reviewer Marya E. Gates writes "This one has some truly weird sequences and the best use of 'Memory" from Cats maybe ever in film history" while Kristen Lopez, a top critic who writes for TheWrap, noted that while *The Marvels* may be "silly and makes little sense, but it's such a fun time at the movies" commenting "isn't that why we go to see movies in the first place?" (Rotten Tomatoes). Another reviewer, Tim Brennan from About Boulder, cuts through the nonsense presented in some of the film's more negative reviews, stating that "To spell things out for the cheap seats, The Marvels is not a cinematic abomination, an affront against almighty God, a blight on childhoods everywhere. In point of fact, it's pretty good!" Many others praise the movie's focus on women supporting women, with Kirsten Acuna from Insider commenting that *The Marvels* "satisfyingly gets its

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larger message across, that women should lean on each other, and know they're higher, further, faster – and stronger – together" and Kathia Woods from The Philadelphia Tribune describes the film as "a celebration of sisterhood, with three women of different generations and backgrounds coming together to save the universe" (Rotten Tomatoes). Several reviewers also recognize the film's success at appealing to women as part of its target audience. A top critic, Katie Walsh from the Tribune News Service remarks that "tonally, "The Marvels" embraces the goofy nature of a sci-fi superhero movie aimed at a female audience" while Louisa Moore from Screen Zealots describes director Nia DaCosta as "fully and unapologetically embrac[ing] the girliness of her movie. There's a musical number, a dreamboat prince, and oodles of cuddly kittens, all of which add a little tongue-in-cheek nod to the overall femininity that's present here" (Rotten Tomatoes). One of my favorite reviews, which was written by Bob Chipman from Moviebob Central, calls *The Marvels* "a superhero movie clearly made and produced by people who have read their Marvel comics and also maybe their Archies. It feels like it was made for actual comic fans, which has of course always included teen girls" (Rotten Tomatoes).

While I have come to the conclusion that asking a single movie to transform the conventions that have guided the superhero genre for decades is an excessive ask, especially when it is already taking so many risks by breaking from ideals in terms of gender and power, I think *The Marvels* did good work and was one of the best superhero stories I have seen. Despite taking place within a complicated system of militarization and violence, *The Marvels* offers critiques towards individualism through Carol's need for a team and a family to support her, as well as disavowing imperialism through the downfall of Hala. *The Marvels* did not single handedly solve every problem ailing superhero stories, but it still broke from conventions and acknowledged women as a valued audience, which would not have been possible in 2008, when

the first *Iron Man* film was released, or even much later than that. Every genre convention confining women in superhero stories that *The Marvels* broke through was a hard-fought victory built on the advocacy from comic fans for women's rights, even if it is not recognized as such.

When Anna F. Peppard wrote her history of feminism in Marvel comics, I have no idea if she ever thought that we would get a superhero movie by women, for women, and about women. Her article ends with an examination of the public response to the announcement of Kamala Khan's first run as Ms. Marvel and other female-focused series, discussing how "the newsworthiness of these publishing endeavors shows just how fashionable female strength is in art and entertainment today" and commenting that "the months and years ahead will determine whether what is fashionable is also marketable, and whether Marvel's increasing diversity is a momentary trend or part of a significant and potentially meaningful transformation" (Peppard 131). As of now, we have reached the aforementioned years ahead, and maybe *The Marvels* wasn't marketable, but it is meaningful. Peppard ends her article by noting that the current (at the time) "newsworthiness of female superheroes proves that it is still far too unusual to see superpowered girls and women doing what reals girls and women are doing every day: fighting back, and saving the world" (Peppard 131). *The Marvels* made plenty of headlines, so we are still on the way to normalizing heroines, but based on the reviews, it certainly made an impact.

To end with one last review of the film, Jenna Anderson from ComicBook.com notes that "Like Carol Danvers herself, and hopefully like many of the movie's viewers, The Marvels seems to understand on an unspoken level that it doesn't have to carry the weight of the world alone. The movie can just be silly, sweet, and imperfect." *The Marvels* may not have been the be-all and end-all of superhero films, but it did unify the mission.

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

By virtue of their monthly releases and ever-shifting creative teams, the creation of storylines and characters in comics can best be understood as taking place in an ecology of creative teams, readers, and publishers, all of which works alongside the cultural expectation of how power is represented. The resilience of heroes like Carol Danvers, Monica Rambeau, and Kamala Khan demonstrates audience commitment to challenging norms surrounding the portrayal of heroines. Despite the objectification and violence faced by women in comics throughout their history in the superhero genre, the commitment of women and other fans to holding Marvel accountable has begun to enact change in how women's stories are told.

Since comics are a visual medium, the appearance of bodies on the page is as crucial to the message conveyed as the stories being told. For the superheroine, this manifests in a normative ideal of female empowerment grounded in sexualization and objectification. However, there is still value to be found in the stories of women in comics despite the ongoing debates surrounding their physical portrayal as they continue to challenge norms within the superhero genre, largely due to work from fans and modern creative teams to complicate their representations. Ultimately, the possibility of the changes surrounding who gets to be a hero continues to be challenging and challenged, especially when it comes down to the visualization of bodies on a comics page. Framing the perceptions of feminism in comics as a lost cause due to the sexualization of heroines obscures a rich history of their challenges to cultural norms and the work of women to influence change.

Similarly, viewing *The Marvels* as a failure for any single reason, such as superhero fatigue or its cast of heroines, overlooks the possibility for complicating narratives perceived as feminist and imagining new futures. The MCU can illustrate less apparent manifestations of

women's empowerment if audiences are able to recognize and navigate the paradox the films present rather than getting stuck on the most apparent mis/uses of feminism. Despite the complex relationship between the MCU and military violence, dismissing its stories outright is as much a disservice as dismissing the complex role that heroines performed for decades in comics. Even with the paradoxes involved, it is still worthwhile to examine the intersections of oppressions brought forth by the superhero genre and how audiences take up those stories.

Although it may seem like the rhetorical potential comics have to be a space for feminism has largely been a failure given the ever-evolving complexities surrounding women in the superhero genre, the most important aspect of these stories are the responses they evoke. From the first issue of *Ms. Marvel* back in 1977, women's portrayal as heroes inspired active engagement from women who continued persisting in their fight to be acknowledged. Even though *Ms. Marvel* was flawed then, and *The Marvels* is flawed now, both demonstrated that women are to be valued both as heroes and an audience in a space that has historically been framed as only for men. From their failures, new stories were told about what went wrong, what felt right, and how to navigate forward without an easy solution.

While change may be slow and seem hopeless at times, it is happening, and it is largely due to the community of fans who have refused to be rendered invisible. It is due to the women in comics making change from the inside. It is the persistence of women and their supporters butting into the ecology of how comics are created, even after being devalued and ignored again and again. There is more to be seen from heroines like Carol Danvers, Monica Rambeau, and Kamala Khan, and there is more to be done by the people who have changed them. If there is anything to be learned from the stories of these women, it's that resilience and change can be found alongside failure. Higher, further, faster.

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