

Marvel Women: Femininity, Representation and Postfeminism in Films Based on Marvel Comics

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed an influx of superhero films, particularly those based on Marvel comics. From *X-Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* (2002) to team-up mega-blockbuster *The Avengers* (2012) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), the stream of Marvel superhero adaptations is ongoing and relentless. These films have received modest academic attention; however, close examination of the specific portrayals of women in superhero films has remained sporadic.

This thesis is the first work to cohesively consider representations of women in films based on Marvel comics, from *The Punisher* (1989) to more recent films such as *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). Through textual analysis which accounts for discursive, contextual and ideological issues surrounding these films, I discuss how representations of women in Marvel adaptations are informed by discourses of anxiety and struggle regarding gender issues in wider Western culture.

The superhero boom occurred at a time which can be considered “postfeminist,” in which discourses of women’s “empowerment” are actively incorporated into media texts, while specific references to political feminism are shunned. Tracing historical and cultural contexts from the characters’ comic book forms, this thesis provides an exhaustive account of issues of women’s empowerment in Marvel films with particular emphasis on the ways in which postfeminist culture has shaped such portrayals. The films are considered within a wider action genre framework, drawing from existing scholarship in the field of feminist film studies. However, attention is also drawn to the role of sexuality and race within these largely white, heterosexual portrayals of feminine empowerment. Overall I consider the questions: How is power negotiated within female Marvel characters? How does an emphasis on sex appeal relate to feminist and postfeminist culture? How do these representations intersect with greater issues involving sexuality and race? And, importantly, in what ways do these representations tie in to modes of women’s empowerment in the time periods during which these films were released?

INTRODUCING... **THE MIGHTY WOMEN OF MARVEL!**

February 5th 2014, a Wednesday—known to comics readers as “new comic book day.” Every collector of comic books eagerly awaits new comic book day. Gracing the stands this week are Marvel titles featuring characters such as Captain America, the Punisher, Wolverine and the X-Men. Amongst these familiar names, one is believed to be exceptional. On the cover of this particular issue is a girl. The frame cuts off the top half of her face and the bottom half of her body but enough of her is visible to make an impression: her mouth contorted to a snarl, one hand in a fist, the other clutching a stack of books. Around her neck is a decorative shawl, her hands accented with silver and gold rings. Her dark hair is long. Her skin is brown. Emblazoned on her black t-shirt is a familiar lightning bolt—the symbol of Ms. Marvel. Kamala Khan has arrived.

The release of *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson and Alphonso 2014; figure 1) was arguably a watershed moment for Marvel Comics. The introduction of a new incarnation of the Ms. Marvel superheroine as a young, Pakistani-American Muslim girl made headlines on both comic book news and in the mainstream press (Aran 2013; Gustines 2013; W. Robinson 2013; Bricken 2013; Ching 2013). The fact that Marvel had recast the previously blonde bombshell heroine as a racial and religious minority, and a *girl*, was, apparently, staggering.

Far be it from my intentions to characterize *Ms. Marvel* as the epitome of contemporary gender/race representation, the comic book, and its reception, perfectly sums up the issues that exist in representations of female superheroes in mainstream media. The book focuses on issues of identity—of growing up “different,” a difference not only marked by Kamala’s eventual possession of superpowers, but by the fact that she, as a Muslim, as an Asian, as a girl, is *different* to what Western media has promoted as “heroic” since the dawn of the superhero. What does it mean for a woman or girl to be heroic? What sorts of women have been portrayed as heroes, villains or sidekicks? And what does this say about the culture of which they are a product?

These questions are at the heart of this project. While comic books remain a niche medium, the superhero narrative is well and truly cemented within Western cultural consciousness due to the booming popularity of superhero movie adaptations. At the forefront of this trend have been films based on Marvel comic books (Burke 2015, 59), with Marvel Studios churning out two or three films a year in addition to those produced by other studios. These films, and the women presented within them, are the focus of this thesis.

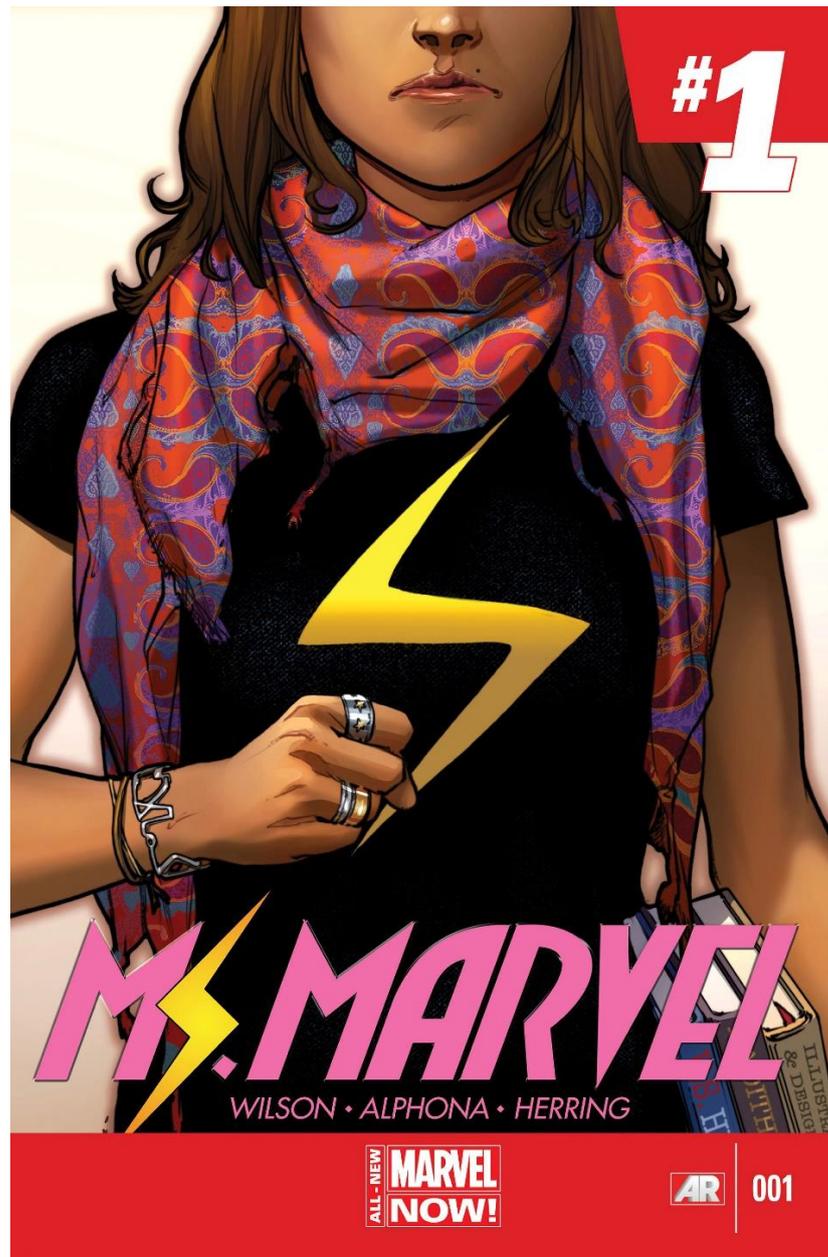


Figure 1 Kamala Khan on the cover of *Ms. Marvel* #1 (Wilson and Alphona 2014)

Marvel Comics has showcased myriad super-powered heroines and villainesses alongside its more well-known male characters. The company is most famous for introducing to the world the likes of Spider-Man, Iron Man and Captain America. The white, heterosexual, masculine hero has been a staple of Marvel superhero narratives, as well as those of Marvel competitor DC Comics. But one should not undermine the role of women in these stories. From heroines such as the matriarchal Invisible Woman or super spy Black Widow, to morally ambiguous characters such as Elektra and Mystique, and civilian women such as Pepper Potts and Gwen Stacy, this thesis acknowledges the mark such figures have left upon popular culture. In the early 2000s, Marvel recognized the commercial potential of superhero adaptations, and along with Spider-Man went Mary Jane.

Marvel films currently have the upper hand over films based on DC comics. While there exist over thirty films based on Marvel characters, there are fewer based on DC properties over a wider timespan. Given the cultural significance of films based on Marvel comics—they have made over \$4 billion domestically in the US since 2010 alone¹—they are a rich object of analysis of which a limited number of scholars have made use. The issues raised in my brief discussion of *Ms. Marvel* are undoubtedly feminist— notions of identity, gender, sexuality and race are foregrounded. Yet the cultural moment in which these narratives have formed can be characterized as postfeminist. This evokes a complex set of discourses concerning contemporary feminine subjectivities which incorporate feminist goals, while simultaneously positioning these goals as no longer necessary.

Furthermore, feminist issues in superhero texts have become an increasingly hot topic in recent years. 2010 was the year of “Marvel Women,” a programme through which female creators and characters were showcased in individual comic book issues and series under the “Women of Marvel” brand (Doran 2013). Comic book conventions increasingly host “women in comics” panels, many of which particularly focus on Marvel comics, giving fans the opportunity to discuss with female creators the challenges women in comics continue to face (Reed 2013; Means-Shannon 2013). In other news, issues of women’s representation in Hollywood

¹ See *Box Office Mojo* 2010; 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015

cinema resurface in the popular press at a clockwork frequency (usually peaking around Oscar season) (E. Gray 2015; Bacle 2015; Ogilvie 2015; Dowd 2015). Meanwhile female actors have been quoted speaking out against Hollywood's gender pay gap (Setoodeh 2015).

The parallels between the pervasiveness of feminist issues in both film and comics are significant and perhaps indicative of both media's place within popular culture. Likewise, the lack of female-led superhero films has been the topic of much discussion (White 2015; Dockterman 2015), with a film focusing on Captain Marvel—the superheroic Air Force pilot previously known as Ms. Marvel—having been announced by Marvel, but repeatedly postponed (Denham 2015). Now is a crucial time in the discussion of feminine representations both in comics and in film, prompting this theoretical intervention in which representations of women in Marvel superhero films are fully examined in one place for the first time.

The purpose of this project is thus to address such questions as: how is power negotiated in female Marvel characters? How does an emphasis on sex appeal relate to feminist and postfeminist culture? How do these representations intersect with greater issues involving sexuality and race? And, importantly, in what ways do these representations tie in to modes of female empowerment and women's roles in society at the time periods during which these films were released? This thesis thus incorporates multiple theoretical approaches including film studies, feminist film theory, cultural studies, comics studies, queer theory and postcolonial studies.

My analysis of the films is textual and discursive, drawing in ideological and contextual elements, and highlighting assumptions regarding femininity present in these films. The project accounts for how women of different backgrounds are “realized” through superheroic narratives and questions how “womanhood” is discursively constructed within these texts. Annette Kuhn identifies a textual approach as beneficial for feminist film criticism as it highlights ‘the ways in which woman has been constituted as a set of meanings through processes of cinematic signification’ (Kuhn 1994, 67). ‘Cinematic signification’ can refer to both visual signifiers, narrative signifiers—identifying narrative occurrences and suggesting how they signify the broader cultural issues at stake—and discursive elements, such as language and themes. Hence I examine the

films with regards to the characters, narratives and cinematic elements such as music and *mise-en-scène*, questioning how these elements collectively engage with gendered discourses.

This is not to say that texts external to the films will not be utilized, although this is not a reception study. It does not suggest what audiences do with the texts since this is beyond the scope of the project. To paraphrase Angela McRobbie, there has been a marked interest in reception studies based on the apparent ability of audiences to “subvert” dominant readings of media texts (McRobbie 2009, 3). While McRobbie’s stance is more severe than my own, I want to stress the possibility that a focus on audience studies draws attention away from popular texts and essentially removes responsibility for representational inclusion from those who create them (e.g. Western, global-reaching media corporations run predominantly by men). The focus on audience activity could have the unintended side-effect of limiting the significance of media representations: for if the power to subvert lies with the audience, why even attend to issues of representation at all? Likewise, the focus on subversion does not address the fact that the very need to “subvert” stems from the notion that representations can be limiting, that they are created with a particular target audience in mind, and that those outside of that audience must, in McRobbie’s terms, “make do.” This is not to say that audiences are irrelevant, or that audience studies are completely valueless. However, it is my intention throughout this thesis to maintain the focus on the text and to highlight the importance of heterogeneous media representations of feminine subjectivities.

As I discuss in the next section, comic books form a crucial contextual backdrop to my analysis. Likewise, texts such as interviews from filmmakers and comic book creators are included to provide insight into some of the representational decisions made in the production of these texts. These texts offer some indication of several aspects of film production informing representations of gender, including choices regarding the selection of source material and representations of female physicality. Since it is my aim to maintain a relationship to industry practices while prioritizing the film texts, such peripheral insights provide support for my analysis, but should not be considered the main focus of the project. This remains a film study guided by the multiple disciplines described above. My

approach enables the tracing of a film's journey from comic to film production to the end product of the film itself. This provides enough cultural context to offer an overview of the gendered issues informing Marvel superhero film production, but also allows a focused and rigorous study into the specificities of the films. Indeed, popular discourses around superhero films, even before their release, have become more prominent with the rise of online arenas such as blogging and movie discussion sites. As such, there has been more material in terms of paratexts surrounding a film such as *Deadpool* (Tim Miller, 2016) than there was for *X-Men*. Likewise, popular discussions of *Deadpool* and their highlighting of sexuality issues prior to the film's release would make excellent material for a future study, but I have opted to focus this study on a detailed textual rather than paratextual analysis.

The interpretation of Marvel films is thus fostered by approaches which allow the connections between film and culture to be recognized, considering films as constructs which are the result of complex industrial, social and cultural mechanisms. Such an approach has similarly been put forward as beneficial from a *feminist-criticism-of-postfeminism* viewpoint by Morgan Blue, who characterizes her method as a 'discursive and ideological approach to textual analysis' (Blue 2012, 662). Her approach highlights how media texts generate discourse which 'allows for the dissemination of socially constructed concepts and ideals, which wield cultural power and knowledge' (Blue 2012, 662). Hence a text-based approach which accounts for discourse, ideology and cultural context is still a useful means of interrogation.

The theory adopted for the use of my discussions largely stems from scholars based in the United States, with fewer from the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, much academic debate of the issues raised in this project focuses on US media. With Marvel films being a product of Hollywood and its conventions, these texts were the most useful. However, due to the correspondence between US and UK politics—particularly with regards to postfeminist discourses—this does not rule out the benefit of UK-centric works (the work of McRobbie in particular has focused on postfeminist culture in the UK but forms much of the foundation of academic feminist criticism towards postfeminism).

The films analyzed span from 1989—the year of Marvel’s first theatrical adaptation—through to the present day. This allows sufficient focus on Marvel’s more formative years, which featured the likes of *The Punisher* (Mark Goldblatt, 1989), *Captain America* (Albert Pyun, 1990) and *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998). This said, there is not enough space in this thesis to exhaustively discuss every single film. Thus, particular films have been selected as being emblematic of specific issues related to women’s representation. Likewise, it is often difficult to offer considerations of developing trends. For instance, the popular media announce that we are entering a “new era” of gender inclusivity as evidenced by the multiple opportunities offered to women in superhero narratives on a regular basis (Andersen 2014; Tremeer 2015; Landsbaum 2015; Gould 2015; Schkloven 2015). While I would take such a statement with a grain of salt (or a truckload, given that according to these accounts we seem to be perpetually *on the verge* of the new era rather than *in* it), it is useful to consider the notion that political and economic developments have moved us towards a time which may be something *beyond* postfeminism (see Negra and Tasker 2014). Since a study of postfeminism forms the backbone of this thesis, it might be hasty to include very recent releases within the postfeminist bracket, and it may be more beneficial to closely assess such films retrospectively in the future. Additionally, because it seems that the studios are churning out Marvel films at increasingly rapid rates, it is at times difficult for scholars such as myself to keep up. Thus, much of the discussion is focused on films released between 2000 and 2013, years which can be situated within postfeminist modes of representation.

Throughout I refer interchangeably to the films analyzed as “films based on Marvel comics,” “Marvel films” or “Marvel adaptations.” This project takes as its focus all live-action theatrical films based on Marvel comic books which partake of the Marvel Universe, not merely the recent films produced by Marvel Studios comprising the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). MCU films begin with *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and move on to the ultimate superhero team-up, *Marvel’s The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), and continue to *Captain America: Civil War* (Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2016) and beyond. These films form the basis of Marvel’s multi-media franchise-based approach, essentially establishing one

big narrative and remaining encapsulated within its own continuity, in contrast to films featuring the X-Men, Fantastic Four and Hulk. This is because Marvel had previously sold the rights to these characters to other studios (20th Century Fox; Universal; Sony).

However, it would be highly ignorant for a study of women in Marvel properties to only consider MCU films merely because they appear to come “straight from Marvel.” A flexible approach is taken by the editors of the recent volume *Marvel Comics into Film* (M. J. McEniry, Peaslee, and Weiner 2016), who suggest that even obscure productions based on Marvel properties released before the MCU era are historically significant in having shaped recent output by Marvel Studios and thus must have a cultural relationship to it which should not be downplayed (R. J. Weiner, Peaslee, and McEniry 2016). Much like the dialogue I hope to create between the comics and the films, there must also be a discursive continuity between films based on Marvel characters, regardless of which Hollywood studio produced them.

What follows is an outline of key issues and debates which form the theoretical background to much of the discussion in this thesis, as well as some necessary qualifications regarding why these approaches were adopted.

WHY COMICS, WHY FILM? ADAPTATION AND BEYOND

As noted, Marvel comic books play a contextual role in this discussion, though the films on which they are based are the central focus. Comics have increasingly become an object of academic interest, forming the burgeoning field of comics studies. Works such as those by Paul Lopes (2009), Jean-Paul Gabillet (2010) and Sean Howe (2013) chronicling the history of comic books interrogate the formal specificity of the medium, as well as its role in (American) society. Amongst these works is Scott McCloud’s seminal text, *Understanding Comics* (1994), which itself takes the form of a comic book. While some scholars have been reluctant to embrace “representation of” studies within the field, Ellen Kirkpatrick and Suzanne Scott argue that such endeavors are vital to the study of comics (Kirkpatrick and Scott 2015, 120–21). Most relevant to this project have been text-based works examining the

ideological constructs to be found within comic book narratives. These include the work of Alex Romagnoli and Gian Pagniucci (2013), which focuses on how comics relate to socio-cultural issues in different time periods, Bradford Wright's study of comics as youth culture (2003), Jason Dittmer's in-depth exploration of Captain America as national hero (2012) and Ramzi Fawa's recent work addressing the monstrous fantasy figure in comics (2016).

Amongst such discussions, examination of women in comics has remained limited to the figure of the superheroine (Lavin 1998; Ricca 2008; L. S. Robinson 2004; DiPaolo 2011; J. A. Brown 2011a; Stuller 2013; Gibson 2014). Being the most exposed superheroine, Wonder Woman is the most popular subject of academic interest.² Since this project focuses on Marvel women, I have opted to draw less from existing studies of DC character Wonder Woman. While this may surprise some (superheroes are superheroes, right?), I believe that the inclusion of discourses about Wonder Woman would over-complicate the discussion. Wonder Woman has become an institution in her own right—to the degree that it would not surprise me if a discipline called “Wonder Woman Studies” were to emerge.

It would be foolish to suggest that all superhero comics are the same and for this reason I have opted not to include DC properties in my analysis. Marvel and DC follow very different historical and cultural trajectories. Marvel has traditionally been marked by a focus on the ‘psychological complexity of its characters’ and the ‘realism of its problem-ridden characters,’ while DC followed an approach based on archetypal mythology (Wainer 2014, 8). Marvel's stories have often been likened to soap opera (Daniels 1991, 208; Raphael and Spurgeon 2004; Dittmer 2009, 137), an ironic twist given that these comics and their adaptations have been culturally positioned as masculine (discussed later) despite the feminine connotations of the soap. Entrenched in continuity and multi-issue

² See for instance Julie O'Reilly's (2005) article regarding specific connections which can be drawn between Wonder Woman and female heroic narrative; Joseph Darowski's (2013) edited volume exploring representations of Wonder Woman through seven decades; Tim Hanley's (2014) analysis considering the character's discursive construction at various historical milestones through a feminist lens; Jill Lepore's (2014) historical perspective examining the creation of Wonder Woman and her creator; a queer-inflected reading of the 1940s comics regarding their themes of bondage, sexuality, lesbianism and taboo subjects by Noah Berlatsky (2015); and Annessa Babic's (2015) discussion of Wonder Woman as a cultural phenomenon through which issues of nationality and femininity can be explored.

storytelling, Marvel paved the way for narratives highlighting the development of character and the showcasing of impassioned issues. Charles Hatfield notes the significance of this approach in prioritizing the development of characters over time (Hatfield 2013, 139). This temporality of Marvel characters is particularly relevant to this project, since it more explicitly draws attention to the implications of history and cultural contexts. This is not to argue that DC characters have no relation to cultural contexts, rather that Marvel's publishing and storytelling habits more obviously speak to an academic approach which focuses on historical and cultural contexts, noting the development of representations.

It is likewise significant that Marvel pioneered a comics production method which is characterized as specific to the company. The so-called 'Marvel Method' (Harvey 1996, 44; Duncan and Smith 2009, 114; Romagnoli and Pagnucci 2013, 102) of making comics was the result of time constraints placed upon Stan Lee in the 1960s. Writing several titles at a time meant that Lee was unable to produce complete scripts within the limited time there was to publish them. Lee instead provided the comic artist with a general overview of an issues' plot and narrative. The artist (frequently Jack Kirby) would then storyboard the comic according to Lee's overview and the dialogue and captions were added afterwards. That what become the dominant mode of superhero comics storytelling is termed the 'Marvel Method' indicates Marvel's centrality in the development of the superhero genre.

This centrality has been replicated with the rise of Marvel films to both a position of dominance over those based on DC comics and setting a standard in terms of world-building and intertextuality. Of the two, Marvel was the first to experiment with the idea of a superhero "universe" inhabited by characters spanning multiple film and television properties. Only recently have heavyweight DC characters appeared in films together, such as *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016) and the upcoming *Justice League* (Zack Snyder, 2017). Similarly, and following on from this, Marvel and DC superhero films differ both structurally and tonally (Massey and Cogan 2016). DC films have adopted a "darker" approach to their characters and visuals, while Marvel films maintain an approach characterized by comedy and sympathetic heroes which can be

considered “family-friendly.” Incorporating films based on DC comics would enrich the current study but would also, given the marked differences noted above, shift the emphasis away from detailed textual work and towards a more comparative analysis.

Moreover, given the privileging of Wonder Woman and DC texts within scholarly studies, it is worth drawing the focus specifically to Marvel, whose superheroines have had comparatively low exposure, both in academia and popular culture. Whenever I have described my research to anyone who would listen, be they academics or regular civilian folk, their first response would usually invoke Wonder Woman in some way. This thesis thus seeks to rectify this imbalance.

In *The Supergirls* (2009) Mike Madrid provides a detailed analysis of the cultural factors influencing representations of superheroines in comics since the 1940s. Madrid describes the rationale behind his analysis as such:

Superhero comic books are about maximizing human potential for the betterment of all society. One of the things that I noticed is that female superheroes are often not allowed to reach their potential; they are given powers that are weaker than their male compatriots, and positions of lesser importance.

(Madrid 2009, vi)

Indeed, much of Madrid’s discussion centers on the idea of feminine power and the ways in which it has been discursively limited within superhero texts, while also noting the cultural resonance of these portrayals with their historical contexts. A similar sentiment is echoed by Jennifer Stuller:

Because stories about superheroes can teach us about our socially appropriate roles ..., how we fit into communities, and about our human potential, both terrible and great, it is the overwhelming focus on the male experience of heroism—and mostly white, heterosexual male heroism at that—that inspires my investigation of the female hero.

(Stuller 2013, 20)

The overarching sentiment behind these statements echoes my own as expressed at the beginning of this Introduction. The addition of Kamala Khan to Marvel’s roster of heroes has been a welcome contrast to the white masculinity usually offered by the company, and due critical attention must be given to the heroines of comics (including those who create comics).

However, the singular focus on superheroines in comics studies (as well as film studies) is unsurprising but disappointing. Though the superheroine is doubtless culturally significant for her occupation of a position traditionally reserved for men, there is much more at stake in discussions of women in superhero narratives. The presence of non-heroic characters such as Spider-Man's girlfriend Mary Jane Watson or villainesses such as snake-woman Viper should not be neglected. Examinations of such characters have remained almost completely absent from comics studies, apart from references to the "women in refrigerators" phenomenon, a narrative trope whereby superhero girlfriends become victimized in order to propel the hero's action narrative (the focus of Chapter 1).

Given that this project is not immediately a comics study, why bother including comics at all? Relevant here are the increasingly acute issues of adaptation and transmedia properties. Marvel's films as we know them today are emblematic of what Henry Jenkins characterizes as 'convergence culture' (Jenkins 2008), with filmmakers creating cinematic worlds for established characters to occupy, which in turn reach back into comic books and other media. James Gilmore and Matthias Stork, editors of the volume *Superhero Synergies*, note that Jenkin's model of 'convergence aesthetics ... has rightfully gained major currency in the critical and academic discourse,' not least due to Marvel's *The Avengers* (Gilmore and Stork 2014, 1). Such modes of Hollywood production are symptomatic of filmmaking of the early 2000s (Rehak 2012, 102–3), with the trend having been expanded in recent years.

Marvel superhero films are primarily adaptations of comic books, but Marvel itself is a multi-media entertainment enterprise. As such, the films discussed here contribute to the 'palimpsestic' web of texts that is formed when non-filmic texts are adapted to screen (Hutcheon 2006, 9). Therefore, the role of comic books in shaping the representations of women found on film must be considered. Within this web (presumably spun by Spider-Man) are, of course, also issues of brand identity, such as those argued by Derek Johnson, who suggests that Marvel faces struggles to present coherent images of its characters (Johnson 2007). Characters are frequently altered in the comics in order to account for the more widely familiar cinematic versions, for instance. But what exactly does "coherent" constitute? Do the

characters and narratives of Marvel adaptations precisely “match” those of the comics? If so, how can contemporary adaptations of Marvel comics be reconciled with the historical contexts attached to the characters (which often date back to the 1960s and 1970s)?

This is where ideological and discursive issues collide with adaptation issues. Adaptation studies can provide insight into how these issues might be negotiated. The notion of “fidelity,” or how “faithful” a film is towards its source as a marker of its quality or cultural value, crops up frequently in the field. In his foundational introduction to poststructuralist adaptation studies, Robert Stam outlines a number of fallacies which have classically accompanied discussions of adaptation, and subsequently offers ideas towards a more open adaptation approach (Stam 2005). Noting that film adaptations of literature are culturally devalued due to a number of factors including the authority lent to “original” literary works and their authors, reverence for the written word, the supposed superiority of literature over “mass produced” film and the idea that films require less intellect to watch, Stam argues in favor of moving away from fidelity arguments. He notes that highlighting intertextuality is a more fruitful approach in order to ‘account for the mutation of forms across media’ (Stam 2005, 41). Therefore, he heralds an approach less concerned with making value judgements based on whether or not a film is faithful to the source material. He concludes that adaptations are ‘hypertexts derived from pre-existing hypotexts which have been transformed by operations of selection, amplification, concretization, and actualization’ (Stam 2005, 31), and also suggests that formal aspects of film adaptations should not necessarily take center stage in such discussions (Stam 2005, 41).

And yet, recent examinations of comic book adaptations remain focused both on fidelity and on formal elements. Thomas Leitch, for instance, devotes the majority of his chapter “Streaming Pictures” in *Film Adaptation and its Discontents* to the adaptation of the formal element of comic book visuals to screen, maintaining that privileging visuals in such a discussion is most useful (Leitch 2009, 194–201). While Leitch agrees with Stam that an emphasis on fidelity in adaptation studies is not worthwhile, Liam Burke takes a contrasting stance in his reception study of comic book adaptations. Burke argues that criticisms aimed at fidelity discourses are ‘at

odds with the field's wider calls for audience-centric research,' ultimately arguing that fidelity is a marker of quality *for audiences* (Burke 2015, 18). Granted that Burke's field of research is reception studies, his approach may be merited as addressing a gap in the literature. However, this does indicate the somewhat tense relationship comics have to adaptation studies in general.

Since comic books and adaptation have a patchy, and at times uncharted, history in terms of academic inquiry, a wholly adaptational approach to this thesis is not particularly useful and is beyond the scope of the issues at hand. Indeed, it has not been possible to consider every single comic book incarnation of every single Marvel film character discussed (additionally, Marvel adaptations quite often focus on content *not* previously found in comics). One problem with applying many of the adaptation approaches in use today (including but not limited to that of Stam) regards questions of whether or not comics should be considered through the same methods as literary adaptation, not to mention that comic books might not speak to notions of authorial authority due to the fact that so many creators work on them (writers, pencillers, inkers, editors, publishers, etc.).

Many of these issues have been more thoroughly addressed in Kathryn Frank's recent thesis, in which she discusses race representation from an industrial perspective in order to deduce the creative and economic processes involved in adapting comic books which feature people of color (K. M. Frank 2015). Her analysis, which incorporates industrial, historical and cultural studies approaches, illuminates how these mechanisms can lead to biases in race representation. Frank's focus on industry and the creative process of making films, television shows and comic books thus differentiates her work from my own, which nonetheless accounts for industry trends and practices, but these elements remain in the background of the discussion.

Nonetheless, thinking of comics in terms of their status as hypotext which have been re-assembled in correspondence with cultural factors is beneficial. Indeed, Stam notes that 'many of the changes between novelistic sources have to do with ideology and social discourses,' noting, for example, the ways in which an adaptation's politics can be made more or

less radical than the text on which it is based (Stam 2005, 42–43). This directly relates to the representations I discuss here, since gender representation ultimately ties into politics. Francesco Casetti's characterization of both (literary) source text and film adaptation as '*sites of production and the circulation of discourses*' (Casetti 2004, 80, original emphasis) is particularly relevant here. In Casetti's terms, film adaptations constitute '*the reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere*' (Casetti 2004, 82, original emphasis), a '*recontextualization of the text*' (Casetti 2004, 83, original emphasis). Casetti's approach therefore foregrounds the contextual surroundings of both source and adaptation.

Marvel comics and their filmic adaptations are therefore positioned here as twin sites of discourse, both of which are inextricably linked to the culture in which they were created and both of which feed into each other while remaining separate. This allows for an approach which is not merely making comparisons between different media iterations of the same character, story or theme, and does not make value judgements over which "version" is of more merit. In Casetti's terms, the Marvel adaptation and Marvel comics are 'social discourses to be connected to a broader network of other discourses' (Casetti 2004, 89).

To add to these discussions is Marvel's frequent return in media discourse to the comics. Comic writer Jeph Loeb, who also acts as Vice President of Television and Animation of Marvel Entertainment, stated that despite Marvel's investment in multi-media, it is in the company's interest for 'everyone to realize that it all starts with publishing. It all starts with comic books' (Loeb in Phegley 2013). Clearly this does speak to the notion of the supposed authority of the original over the "copy," but it is also significant that comics are being pushed forward within these discourses, especially considering their niche positioning within the Marvel enterprise. It attests to the idea that comics themselves, despite being the "originator," should also be considered intertexts, 'designed ... to be looked *into* and *through* as well as *at*' (Leitch 2009, 17, original emphasis). Such an approach is also supported by Karen Hollinger, who argues in her discussion of gender in adaptations of nineteenth century literature that 'a literary adaptation's relationship to its source is an essential issue, but we

[should] consider it only in terms of what it tells us about the remarkable attraction of these films' (Hollinger 2012, 152–53). In order to address these issues there must be a continuity between these media in discussions of gender representation.

Remarkably, few scholarly investigations of women in superhero films account for the historical discourses at work in these representations which carry with them what might be characterized as the “textual baggage” of comics. One study which does bear in mind comics but should perhaps be considered an example which demonstrates the limits of an approach that assumes the superiority of one text over another is a recent investigation of the transference of female X-Men characters to film. Using a comparative approach, Carolyn Cocca discusses ‘the ways in which these female characters are “normalized” and in some way sidelined for the core films of the franchise’ (Cocca 2016, 79). Though it may appear useful at first to carry out a straightforward comparison between the comics and the films, Cocca’s study is overwhelmingly unbalanced and informed by what appears to be her general preference of comics. Indeed, the very discourse of comic book characters having been “normalized” for the screen itself implies that comics are inherently more radical than film, a problematic suggestion. Cocca’s overarching argument is that the women appearing in the comics were somehow *just better* than those in the films, which does not account for how representations have been adapted in synchronicity with contemporary, specifically postfeminist, discourses. For instance, though I generally agree with Cocca’s notion that Mystique has been shaped in the films by heteronormative discourses (as I discuss in Chapter 4), my characterization of Mystique as “(un)queer” rather than ‘de-queered’ allows for a larger degree of flexibility which addresses issues in wider culture regarding sexuality in the popular media. It is not my intention to cast value judgments upon either media, nor is it to suggest that representations of women in comics are more “progressive” and therefore better. Further, if it is the case that the X-Women’s roles in the films are “reduced,” the discussion should not stop there, nor should it conclude that therefore comics are more culturally valuable.

At this point I must stress that further analysis of different media such as television would be far too ambitious to achieve within this project.

Undoubtedly, Marvel has been making significant advances in terms of women's representation in television, with notable characters appearing in *Agent Carter* (ABC, 2015-2016), and Netflix's *Daredevil* (2015-) and *Jessica Jones* (2015-). For the purposes of this thesis, an examination of these texts is not warranted due to the need for limitation (though I do offer some remarks about these series in the Conclusion). In including these media there would be considerable danger in veering too far from my central focus: a thorough examination of the women of Marvel in film throughout almost thirty years. It would also raise the question of where to stop: would I be obliged to examine women in videogames based on Marvel comics? What about peripheral merchandise such as toys, bed linen or lunchboxes? I therefore maintain the specific focus of (mostly) theatrical live-action films based on Marvel characters, with comic books acting as a necessary backdrop to the discussion.

The discursive and cultural moments in which representations of women occur, in comics as well as in the films on which they are based, are highly significant, and, as I argue throughout, contemporary representations of Marvel women often maintain the sentiments present in their comic book counterparts. However, I consider representations of women in both media as sites of struggle, symptomatic of anxieties regarding women's empowerment, as well as racial and sexual identity. As such, Marvel women in contemporary film have accompanied postfeminist discourses, discussed later in this Introduction.

THE ROLE OF FEMINIST FILM THEORY

As mentioned, there is a marked duality between debates about women in film and those about women in comics. Indeed, comic books have been characterized as male-dominated in terms of content as well as creators. Matthew Pustz argues that 'many female readers feel marginalised by an industry they see as generally sexist' (Pustz 2000, 101). Scholars have been combatting this perception more recently, suggesting that the reality of women's comic book reading habits is somewhat more complex (Healey 2009; S. Scott 2013), however I would argue that the cultural perception that superheroes are for boys is ingrained into Western cultural

consciousness. There is no denying, for instance, that male superheroes have much more exposure in the media. These sentiments are also taken for granted by industry professionals, many of whom continuously choose to adhere to them (Healey 2009, 145). Writers have drawn attention not only to the lack of representation of women in comics, but also to the often oppressive storylines that accompanied them. Karen Healey, for instance, notes that ‘Glorified violence ... is central to the power fantasies of the superhero comic’ (Healey 2009, 145). Glorified violence is, of course, frequently afflicted upon female characters by male characters in texts most often created by men, as has been discussed by Marc DiPaolo (2011, 119), Trina Robbins (2010, 216) and Anita McDaniel (2008, 88). For these reasons, comics continue to be considered “male-dominated.”

As I discussed earlier, the trajectory of mainstream comic books in relation to feminist issues often directly mirrors that of the Hollywood film industry. Hollywood’s relation to women is complex: it is actually thought that pre-1960s Hollywood cinema actively catered to female audiences, in contrast to the period since the late-1960s, which has been dominated by films aimed at young men, the most valuable Hollywood demographic (King 2002, 138; Chapman 2004, 190–91). How the industry decides what counts as a men’s or women’s film is based on the narrative and thematic content of the film. Industry research determined that men prefer films containing action and violence, whereas women seek those that focus more on character and emotion (i.e. romance) (Krämer 1998). Additionally, Hollywood’s approach since the late-1970s has taken for granted that women are more likely to compromise, settling more easily for men’s films than men do for women’s films (Krämer 1999, 104). These trends are self-perpetuating since women are forced to adapt their tastes due to the lack of films made for them.

It is clear that Hollywood employs a generalistic logic. To clarify, a constructionist approach to gender, such as that which I employ throughout this thesis, would take issue with the notion that there is such thing as “men’s films” and “women’s films” based on arbitrary markers of gender such as “action” or “romance.” However, noting that these gendered phenomena are social constructs perpetuated by discourse does not lessen their cultural significance. Of course, there is nothing inherently masculine

about action films, but such is the way in which these films have become associated with men in Western culture. The association of action and violence with masculinity is precisely what has made the action heroine in film such a fascinating topic (see for instance the works of Tasker [1993], Neroni [2005] and Brown [2011], all of whom at some point remark on the significance of the female action hero as based on the cultural assumption that action heroes are traditionally thought of as masculine).

Considering the yearly lists of popular films in the United States then (all of which feature Marvel adaptations since 2008), we can see this kind of logic at work since the presence of what we might characterize as women's films is markedly lacking (though this may be in the process of changing, as I discuss later). These trends are accompanied by production factors, such as there being fewer lead roles available to women (Lang 2015), women receiving fewer speaking parts in films (Smith 2015), there being fewer women directing films than men (Krischer 2014), and a reluctance to put women's stories onto film (Ogilvie 2015).

As with Marvel Comics, which before the superhero as a narrative figure had even been conceived of made its profits by producing romance comics for girls (written by Marvel figurehead Stan Lee himself) (Robbins 1999, 67), there was a time when Hollywood took seriously the power of female audiences. Contemporary trends, however tell a different story and appear comparatively bleak in terms of women-centric content. This is in part due to modes of filmmaking pertaining to the "Millennial Hollywood" style. Thomas Schatz notes that since the new millennium, a number of industrial trends have developed which enforce on films certain requirements to aid in their financial success:

the film industry's development in the early twenty-first century has been fundamentally wed to a new breed of blockbusters whose narrative, stylistic, technological, and industrial conventions have coalesced into a veritable set of rules governing the creation and marketing of Hollywood's "major motion pictures."

(Schatz 2009, 32)

These rules largely involve encouraging studios to produce works which function within a transmedia environment—the convergence culture mentioned earlier—as well as exploit or expand established franchises, take advantage of intellectual properties, and incorporate a serial quality (Schatz

2009, 32). These conventions clearly resonate with Marvel films. But it is also conspicuous that, as Schatz suggests is the case, the protagonist of these films 'should be male' (Schatz 2009, 32), rendering women within these narratives peripheral at best and, as I argue in Chapter 1, disposable at worst.

Indeed, Marvel superhero films can be seen as emblematic of these issues. As will be clear from my discussions in the proceeding chapter, Marvel superhero films do incorporate romance as a 'way to integrate women into action narratives' (Gallagher 2006, 77), but this carries with it its own drawbacks in terms of women's representation. As big, action-based blockbusters, they remain firmly within the male-centric trends outlined above. Again, this is ironic given the reliance of Marvel texts on soap opera dynamics, a trait which would be interesting to investigate further, but for now, it is most useful for us to frame Marvel films within these practices.

Referring to the generic properties of the superhero film, Eric Lichtenfeld suggests that the superhero narrative has been 'co-opted by the fantastical form of the action genre' (Lichtenfeld 2004, 254). He essentially argues that the action format is conveniently matched to contemporary comic book aesthetics (Lichtenfeld 2004, 254). A similar approach has recently been taken by Yvonne Tasker (2015). The action genre is thus a useful framework through which to view female characters with a feminist lens. The genre is most prominently used as a framework for the first two chapters which assess specific character types associated with the superhero-action genre whereas subsequent chapters address more generalized themes (gender and morality, sexuality and race). Nonetheless, the films can all be positioned within this overarching framework.

Feminist critics have taken issue with dominant modes of representation in Hollywood since at least the 1970s. During this time, North American writers such as Marjorie Rosen (1973), Joan Mellen (1974) and Molly Haskell (1975) began interrogating the role of women in mainstream cinema utilizing quasi-sociological approaches which may appear simplistic by today's standards in academic practice (Hollinger 2012, 8). Meanwhile in Britain, feminist approaches to film based on structuralism, semiotics and psychoanalysis gained momentum (Kuhn 1994, 77). Claire Johnston's edited *Notes on Women's Cinema* (1973) and Laura

Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) became key texts assessing how films provide a construction of women as signs informed by patriarchal ideology. Alongside this developed a theoretical framework which united the twin strands of critique and practice, a 'dual composition' which remains a defining characteristic of feminist film theory (Hollinger 2012, 8). Subsequent thinkers became interested in the specificities of female spectators, as well as women's genres (Mary Ann Doane 1984; Mary Ann Doane 1987; Gledhill 1987; Thornham 1997, xiv).

It would be nigh impossible to conduct a study of feminine representation in blockbuster action movies without reference to the work of Mulvey. Indeed, Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" remains the starting point for much contemporary feminist film criticism. I draw from and develop Mulvey's theories throughout the study, but specific focus on them occurs in the first chapter. It is worth briefly outlining Mulvey's ideas here to provide some idea of the key concepts which have arisen from feminist film studies. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mulvey holds that Hollywood films act in accordance to a binary logic of active/male and passive/female in their gender representations (Mulvey 1975, 841). This is motivated by scopophilia, or the pleasure of looking. For Mulvey, women in mainstream films enact 'to-be-looked-at-ness,' an expression of the male gaze and fetishization of the female body (Mulvey 1975, 841). As such, the male character is the active figure within the film's narrative, while the woman remains a passive object to be looked at (Mulvey 1975, 842). Mulvey's sentiments are in line with second wave feminist thought of the time, in which the popular was not considered a viable vehicle for feminist representation, giving rise to alternative modes of production such as *avant garde* feminist filmmaking (Hollows and Moseley 2006, 4).

During later decades, feminist film theory underwent a number of developments, experimenting with various methods of analysis, all of which have strengths and weaknesses. Sue Thornham notes that the psychoanalytic approach fell out of favor with many feminist film theorists as it was concluded to be in many ways limiting (Thornham 1997, xv). Indeed, many scholars note the limitations of the theories of Mulvey herself, which, they argue, rely too heavily on an absolute binary between genders (Tasker 1993,

114–15; Hills 1999, 39; J. A. Brown 2011a, 21). Similarly, many authors expressed concern over the lack of attention devoted to the issues of race, sexuality and class, all of which should be considered relevant in discussions of gender (Gaines 1986; Thornham 1997, xvi). These discussions have developed exponentially throughout the 1990s and 2000s (E. A. Kaplan 2000, 10; Hollinger 2012, 17). As the field expanded, so did theorists' interests. As such, genre-specific criticism moved on from examining women's roles in women's genres to discussions of feminine representations in genres considered more masculine. Amongst these are scholars interested in gender and the action genre—in which I situate Marvel adaptations. Writers such as Tasker (1993; 1998; 2004), Sherrie Inness (1998; 2004), Elizabeth Hills (1999), Lisa Purse (2011a; 2011b), Jeffrey Brown (2011a; 2015a) and many others provide useful points of discussion, which I broadly outline later in this Introduction.

At the risk of emulating the “new era” rhetoric I lambasted earlier, it is worth highlighting that the issues facing women in Hollywood (as well as comics) are developing. While it is true that the key trends identified by Hollywood insiders were firmly in place during the early years of the Marvel boom, recent trends do suggest that there is some malleability. That said, suggesting that change is on the horizon would be remarkably similar to the predictions made by Peter Krämer shortly after *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997) dominated the box office eighteen years ago. *Titanic*, Krämer suggested, marked a possible shift in Hollywood box office trends by ‘returning female characters and romantic love to the centre of the industry’s big releases and also by returning female audiences to the central place in Hollywood’s thinking that they had once occupied in its golden age’ (Krämer 1998, 600). However, Krämer’s predictions did not come to fruition as the box office has remained decidedly male-dominated.

However, profits made by recent films and franchises centering on women have been increasingly competitive with those featuring men, in part thanks to the *Twilight* series (2008-2012) and *The Hunger Games* (2012-2015). The recent re-emergence of the Bechdel test may also be some indication of an increased cultural awareness of issues regarding the representation of women in Hollywood blockbusters. Created in 1985 by cartoonist Alison Bechdel in her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1987-

2008) (collected in Bechel 2008), it is used to quantitatively produce some measure of gender bias in films. In order to discern whether a film passes this test, the viewer asks the following: (1) does the film contain two or more named female characters? (2) Do these characters talk to each other? (3) Do they discuss topics other than men? (Kukkonen 2013, 184). Films that do not satisfy these criteria fail the test, and illustrate that the lack of female characters and storylines in films is a problem that functions on an industrial, as well as cultural, level. Not surprisingly, the majority of Hollywood films, including those discussed here, do not pass the test. Despite the simplistic nature of the Bechdel test, it has gained traction within popular media (Ulaby 2008; Cantrell 2013; McGuinness 2013; Child 2014), indicating a rejection of the standards set by the Hollywood film industry which has not yet been fully taken into account on the production side. Indeed, it has been argued that films passing the Bechdel test make more money than those that do not (Vagianos 2014). But, as with most of these trends, it is impossible to see into the future.

Catherine Driscoll has recently stressed the danger for feminist media critics to prioritize sentiments which downplay the progress which has been made in favor of discussing the many ways in which gender oppression still exists (Driscoll 2015). Doubtless, it is important not to lose track of the history of patriarchal representations of women in film and other media, but it is also important to note the changes which are in the process of occurring, and how they can illuminate new issues surrounding feminine subjectivities in film.

As will become clear, it is not my intention to draw from one singular theoretical approach. Feminist film theory, and the sub-theories that arose from it, are the most relevant to this project. However, as I discuss in the next section, perspectives from scholars working in the social sciences have been of exponential use, particularly with regards to postfeminist culture. Nonetheless, this brief discussion of Hollywood trends and feminist film theory has offered insight into how this project can be situated amongst existing film-based texts.

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER NOW: MEDIATING "WOMANHOOD" THROUGH POSTFEMINIST CULTURE

Of the many theoretical discussions referred to in this thesis, the most recurring involves feminist engagement with the postfeminist culture. An elusive and polysemic concept, there is little unity within academia over the precise meaning of "postfeminist" (Genz and Brabon 2009, 2; Vered and Humphreys 2014, 156). It is thus essential that my use of the term is clarified here.

The "post-" of postfeminism potentially signifies a movement "after" feminism in a chronological sense. In the words of Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, when used in this sense, it might mark an '*epistemological break within feminism*' which 'implies transformation and change within feminism that challenges "hegemonic" Anglo-American feminism' (Gill and Scharff 2011, 3, original emphasis). When considered in such a way, a postfeminist approach might address the theoretical gaps of second wave feminism, which has often been criticized for its white, middle-class, Anglo-American stance towards women's oppression (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 9).

Postfeminism has also been made sense of as a backlash towards ideas or goals which are thought to be feminist. As such, postfeminism can be seen to mark a cultural moment characterized by a nostalgia for gender traditionalism, or a time before "political correctness" (Gill and Scharff 2011, 3). Use of the term can be seen to date back as far as the 1980s and beyond, when popular media searched for a "milder" form of feminism away from the "angry" feminist voices who gained traction with the second wave (McRobbie 2009, 31). However, the idea of postfeminism as purely a backlash has been complexified, due to the fact that postfeminism relies on feminism in order to function as a series of discourses (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1; Gill and Scharff 2011, 4).

McRobbie remains the pioneering commentator on the complex relationship between feminism and postfeminism. Her oft-cited comment regarding this relationship is as follows:

postfeminism [refers to] an active process by which
feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s come to be

undermined. It proposes that, through an array of machinations, elements of contemporary popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to “feminism.”

(McRobbie 2007, 27)

Thus, postfeminist culture promotes a sentiment in which feminism is regarded as no longer needed because (all) women have achieved gender equality. At the same time, though, a celebration of “empowered” womanhood is often present. Therefore, the “post-” of postfeminism frequently connotes the “pastness” of feminism which may be interchangeably ‘noted, mourned, or celebrated’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 1), but postfeminism (and the femininities it celebrates) is positioned as a markedly contemporary phenomenon (Gill and Scharff 2011, 4). McRobbie describes postfeminism as invoking ‘feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings’ (McRobbie 2007, 28). Women, it is suggested, live in an era of freedom—sexual, professional, personal—and no longer need to attend to the politics of institutionalized gender oppression. And yet McRobbie notes the prevalence of cultural narratives focusing on the ‘coming forward’ of women in terms of personal and professional empowerment (McRobbie 2009, 9), a move which would suggest some sort of embrace of feminism.

Gill makes the case for positioning postfeminism as a ‘*sensibility* that characterizes ... media products’ (Gill 2007, 148, emphasis added), rather than a physical timeframe or simple backlash movement. This sensibility rests on the endorsement of dominant themes—which have been characterized as ‘master narratives’ by Diane Negra (Negra 2009a, 5)—pertaining to an idealized feminine subjectivity. Gill summarizes these key themes as including:

the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference.

(Gill 2007, 147)

Thinking of postfeminist culture in such a way is useful as it allows a textual approach interested in the discursive construction of contemporary femininities in film.

As noted, postfeminist culture is positioned as a contemporary phenomenon, even while it relies on notions of the pastness of feminism. This modernity of postfeminism is linked to neoliberal culture. Diane Richardson and Victoria Robinson describe how neoliberalism is most often thought of as a policy framework privileging a free market economy and the withdrawal of the state in issues such as social welfare (Richardson and Robinson 2015, xxi). They also argue that it is useful to think of neoliberalism ‘as a form of regulation or governmentality and an ideological framework of ideas and values that emphasise commodification and consumerism, professionalization and managerialism, and individualism and freedom of “choice”’ (Richardson and Robinson 2015, xxi). The neoliberal focus on consumerism and individualism corresponds with postfeminist culture, in which every empowered woman is responsible for her own individual choices—choices which usually boil down to the consumption of products. Indeed, choice rhetoric is one of the main focuses of feminist criticism of postfeminist culture. As Tasker and Negra outline,

postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment. Assuming full economic freedom for women, postfeminist culture also (even insistently) enacts the possibility that women might *choose* to retreat from the public world of work.

(Tasker and Negra 2007, 2, original emphasis)

Women’s “choices” then become divorced from political implications which might accompany them. A woman is empowered because she *can* choose, postfeminist rhetoric would suggest, as opposed to a time in the very distant past where she may have been *forced* to live a certain life (as a mother, as a wife, as a housewife, etc.).

The choices the postfeminist woman makes aid in the ‘production of the self,’ with special attention paid to notions of the “authentic” self (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2). As will become clear from subsequent chapters, the sentiment that “things aren’t like that anymore”—with “that” signifying gender inequality—possesses considerable currency in

postfeminist culture. In the light of individualized womanhood, collective political activism becomes decentralized just as instances of sexism become the responsibility of careless individuals rather than hierarchical institutions which function to limit opportunities for certain marginalized people. In the words of Joel Gwynne and Nadine Muller, ‘this celebration of the power of the individual is part of a more insidious process whereby the social constraints placed upon contemporary girls and women are deemed inconsequential’ (Gwynne and Muller 2013, 2).

But precisely who are these “women” which postfeminism addresses? The idealized postfeminist subject may have all the choices in the world available to her, but she still pertains to specific criteria. Tasker and Negra continue, ‘postfeminism is white and middle class by default’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 2), but the racial element of postfeminist culture digs deeper into the history of the marginalization of women of color.³ The woman of color in postfeminist culture occupies her own place within discourses which are reluctant to scrutinize the privilege granted whiteness. While women of color do appear in postfeminist media texts, focus is overwhelmingly on assimilation as well as respectability (Springer 2001; McRobbie 2009, 43; Springer 2008, 88; Jess Butler 2013, 50). Still, postfeminist rhetoric endorses a notion of universalized empowered “womanhood” whereby all women have access to the same opportunities (C. Kaplan 1995; Banet-Weiser 2007; Hua 2009). The specificity of racial feminine identity is therefore disregarded within postfeminist discourses, while women of color (particularly in the US) are still disproportionately affected by social issues such as rape (Projansky 2001, 156), incarceration (Stoller 2009, 67–68) and access to education (Evans 2007).

Likewise, the idealized postfeminist subject embodies a heterosexuality which reinforces gender difference. As Gill argues, postfeminist media culture heralds a sexualization of femininity both through ‘an extraordinary proliferation of discourses about sex and sexuality’ and ‘the increasingly frequent erotic presentation of girls’, women’s and (to a lesser extent) men’s bodies in public spaces’ (Gill 2007, 150). This serves the purpose of reinforcing traditional notions of

³ Amerian spelling has been used throughout for consistency.

heterosexuality based on binaristic ideals of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, women are encouraged to engage in self-objectification, and are in this sense empowered through their (hetero)sexuality. As I discuss in subsequent chapters, there is little room for non-normative sexuality within postfeminist narratives despite the increased liberalization of state attitudes towards LGBT people (McRobbie 2009, 6). This is part of the ‘double entanglement’ described by McRobbie, in which neoconservative and liberal sentiments appear to coexist in increasingly contradictory ways (McRobbie 2007, 28). Nonetheless, women’s quest for heterosexual love is centered within postfeminist discourses and remains a crucial element in maintaining rigid structures of gender (Negra 2009b, 173).

While I have discussed the key sentiments behind postfeminist culture, this account should in no way be taken as exhaustive. Postfeminist culture continues to shift with regards to its projection of empowered femininities. For example, academic literature is increasingly addressing the role of the recent Great Recession in accounts of postfeminist subjectivities, which so often rely on the ideal of the financially empowered woman (DeCarvalho 2013; Bose and Lyons 2013; Negra and Tasker 2014). Likewise, the burgeoning so-called “alt-right” movement, which gained momentum during Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign and involves a mobilization of poor, white masculinities perceived to have been left behind by neoliberalism, is sure to have prompted a further shift in the manifestations of acceptable femininities in contemporary US culture which is yet to be discussed.

Although, the “post-” of postfeminism may well be thought of as signifying the chronological order of what comes “after” feminism, the actual culture shaped by postfeminist sensibility takes on a much more complicated relationship to feminism. As a result, media representations framed by postfeminist culture are difficult to make sense of. Above all, Gill argues that ‘Arguments about postfeminism are debates about nothing less than the transformations in feminisms and transformations in media culture—and their mutual relationship’ (Gill 2007, 147).

To be sure, all films discussed within this thesis fall within the postfeminist moment. Dan Hassler-Forest has already examined the ways in which superheroes are emblematic of the age of neoliberalism in the US

(Hassler-Forest 2012). However, interestingly, the superheroine also has undeniable ties to postfeminism dating back to the 1970s, when feminist activists Gloria Steinem and Dorothy Pittman Hughes put Wonder Woman on the cover of their new popular feminist publication *Ms.* (Munford and Waters 2014, 2). Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters discuss the use of Wonder Woman in this context, which they characterize as ‘an attempt to mobilize the commercial marketplace for political ends’ (Munford and Waters 2014, 2), signifying the popularization—or *taking into account*—of feminism in the media. They nonetheless argue that Wonder Woman can be seen as symptomatic of shifts in discourses of femininity and women’s empowerment (Munford and Waters 2014, 3). Here we can see the inextricable link between the superheroine, feminism and postfeminism.

The empowered women in films based on Marvel comics are largely alike: white, slim, middle-class, heterosexual, youthful, as well as often professionally and economically empowered. As noted earlier, some films may fall more into this mode of discourse than others, but on the whole Marvel adaptations can be seen to engage in some way with postfeminist rhetoric, and indeed feminist issues. Many of the films, for instance, contain representations of women who are suggested to be “empowered,” be this physically, sexually or professionally. This is not to say that my analysis is a simple task of weeding out the postfeminism in the texts: as Tasker and Negra argue, postfeminism is ‘inherently contradictory’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 8).

As will be made clear, Marvel films’ relationship to feminism is as complex as postfeminism itself. As films which in many ways attempt to present women as strong, capable and independent, they are, for all intents and purposes, “feminist.” And yet the meaning of “strong,” “independent” and “capable” is not a straightforward definition. Rather, these concepts are negotiated through these characters, who remain sites of discursive struggle. To follow Tasker and Negra, it is in my interests to create a discussion with, rather than a rejection of, postfeminism in these films. The authors support a feminist approach towards postfeminism which is ‘not engaged in interrogating or understanding postfeminist culture simply as a forerunner to rejecting it,’ continuing that ‘The images and icons of postfeminism *are* compelling’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 21, original emphasis). Further, the

authors highlight that ‘Postfeminist culture does not allow us to make straightforward distinctions between progressive and regressive texts’ (Tasker and Negra 2007, 22), a sentiment which remains crucial to my characterization of Marvel women as complex. Noting the paradoxes of postfeminist culture offers the opportunity for pluralistic meanings which are nonetheless still anchored to a feminist critique of patriarchal structures.

The approach utilized within this project draws from and builds upon a vast expanse of existing knowledge which is interdisciplinary. It is not my aim to claim one approach as superior to another; I seek to utilize elements of different disciplines which are demonstrably most useful, inspired by the sociological accounts of postfeminism, while remaining under the umbrella of film studies.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

Having outlined key debates informing this thesis, it should be said that I do not put forward a literature review as its own chapter. Due to the multiplicitous nature of the issues I address in the representation of women in Marvel films, I instead offer concise reviews of the existing work pertaining to the topics of individual chapters within the chapters themselves to allow for a more streamlined read. To reiterate, all films analyzed in this thesis are situated within cultural discourses of postfeminist culture. The thesis is divided into chapters by theme of inquiry. While the first three chapters are broadly concerned with the discussion of different character “types” (the superhero girlfriend, the superheroine, and the villainess), the proceeding two chapters address the broader issues of race and sexuality in these films respectively.

In Chapter 1, the topic of heroic women is set aside in favor of a frequently neglected subject matter in existing discussions of women in superhero films—the figure of the superhero girlfriend. I discuss the work of Mulvey with regards to feminine characters who are positioned as the girlfriends of central masculine heroes. Tracing the contextual history of these characters to the comics on which they are based, I argue that superhero girlfriends are highly complex in their own right. Analyzing texts such as *The Punisher* and Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-2007), I

examine the representations of these characters as reaching back to established comic book conventions, such as the “women in refrigerators” narrative, as well as their parallels in the history of action cinema. I argue that they enact “active passivity” in terms of their narrative positioning as passive subjects on which the films nonetheless rely in order for their narratives to be shaped. I subsequently discuss the figures of Pepper Potts in the *Iron Man* films (2008-2013) and Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012) as figures who complicate notions of empowered femininity within a narrative framework which has heavily drawn from images of feminine victimization, particularly in terms of their status as quirky, loveable postfeminist subjects.

Moving to a topic which *is* frequently discussed—to the point that it has been described as ‘critically saturated’ by some (Gwynne and Muller 2013, 7)—Chapter 2 offers a discussion of the superheroines represented in Marvel films, again positioning them within action cinema. Discussions of the postfeminist action heroine have flourished in recent years (see for instance Inness 2004; Stasia 2007; Waites 2008; Purse 2011a and many others), and this chapter takes note of these contributions while also proposing new approaches to these characters and the narratives that accompany them. I discuss how power is negotiated within these highly contested characters who have so often been characterized as ‘figurative males’ (Hills 1999). The contradictory nature of postfeminist culture ultimately produces an image of empowered superheroic femininity which is undeniably limited, often by the very machinations of postfeminist discourse itself.

Continuing from the work of Purse (2011a), I propose a number of “frustration tactics” which limit the abilities of Marvel heroines while simultaneously positioning them as empowered in postfeminist terms. Moving on, I examine briefly the seldom portrayed teen heroine in Marvel films, drawing from some scholarship regarding the popular figure of feminist inquiry, the teen girl hero. However, most of my discussion focuses on how the Marvel teen heroine offers a mediation of “womanhood” and inter-generational women’s solidarity. I also offer some thoughts on the superheroic (postfeminist) masquerade, a mode of representation which has proliferated within these texts. Here I revisit the notion of the superheroine

undercover, previously assessed by Inness (1998), amongst others, and question the implications of such a figure with regards to contemporary feminine identity. Finally, I engage with another often discussed character, Jean Grey of the *X-Men* franchise (2000-) and consider her role as a self-sacrificing heroine.

Chapter 3 considers the role of the female villain in Marvel films. I note how comic book notions of feminine villainy are appropriated and exaggerated in order to shape an image of the villainess as aberrant and abject. Drawing from the work of sociologists and philosophers concerned with meanings around the notion of evil women, I trace such portrayals back to traditional discourses which associate women with evil. On the other hand, I draw attention to the jarring nature of such characters in a postfeminist culture which encourages the sexualization of women. The villainesses discussed in this chapter—evil Jean Grey, returned from the dead; Typhoid in *Elektra* (Rob Bowman, 2005); Viper in *The Wolverine* (James Mangold, 2013)—are all presented as markedly sexual, and yet this emphasis on sexuality is not celebrated, but in many ways punished, signalling that postfeminist culture’s relationship with empowered sexuality is not straightforward.

Chapter 4 considers more broadly issues touched upon in previous chapters—the need in Marvel films for a rigid gender binary and heterosexuality. I first discuss the ways in which these films function within discourses which take for granted a binaristic, essentialist “nature” of gender. This I link to postfeminist culture’s investment in maintaining gender difference, which leads into an examination of the kinds of heterosexualities presented in Marvel films, and the roles which women play within this dynamic. Drawing from the work of Lee Heller (1997) and others, I note the ways in which Marvel films portray an idealized form of heterosexual union which is nonetheless characterized as dysfunctional. However, going beyond this, I discuss how the Marvel superhero narrative specifically is intertwined with the endeavor of heterosexuality. The chapter closes with an assessment of one of Marvel’s most queer-coded characters, Mystique of the *X-Men* series. Using Judith Butler’s influential theories of gender performativity (1990), I determine the ways in which Mystique complexifies essentialist notions of gender while in many ways also playing

into the binaristic sentiments of heterosexuality, becoming what I describe as “(un)queer.”

In the final chapter I tackle the issue of race representation in Marvel films. In contrast to some contemporary accounts which focus on the centering of whiteness in the media (Dyer 1997; Negra 2001), I limit my discussion to representations of women of color in these films. I realize that this is in many ways problematic: providing such characters with their own section can further marginalize such subjectivities. However, as I discuss in the chapter, the very process by academics of analyzing race has become increasingly colonized in the sense that either whiteness is centered within these discussions, or it is simply stated that postfeminism privileges white femininity with no further address of the issue (Springer 2008, 57). The chapter therefore questions such practices and brings the focus to feminine subjectivities which have been neglected both within the media and within academia. Reaching to the work of Kimberly Springer (2001; 2008), Sarah Banet-Weiser (2007), Jess Butler (2013) and others, I situate Marvel films within a globalized, postfeminist and postracial media culture which encourages a universal “womanhood” based on the ‘common oppression’ of all women (hooks 2000, 43–44). I assess the subjectivities within Marvel characters who are women of color, for instance Storm in the *X-Men* films and Dr Karen Jenson in the rarely examined *Blade*. The positioning of this chapter at the end of the thesis marks the culmination of postfeminist issues discussed throughout. Likewise, in outlining these chapters I have hopefully drawn more attention to the interdisciplinary nature of this research.

FINAL REMARKS

To address Gwynne and Muller’s point regarding the ‘critically saturated’ status of academic inquiry into women in action films, this can be said: feminist discussions of these texts are not slowing down because superheroines are continuously being produced and reproduced by major studios. That said, like any generic film cycle, the bubble is likely to burst at some point. Even so, the characters in these texts will remain culturally significant, just as they have been since their inception.

Nowhere is postfeminist culture more clearly summoned than in recent statements from Marvel Studio's president, Kevin Feige. When questioned why Marvel is yet to release a superhero film led by a woman, he responded:

There have been strong, powerful, intelligent women in the comics for decades ... And if you go back to look at our movies—whether it's Natalie Portman in the *Thor* films, Gwyneth Paltrow in *Iron Man* or Scarlett Johansson in *The Avengers*—our films have been full of smart, intelligent, powerful women.

(Feige in de Souza 2015)

We can see here how feminist sentiments are taken into account in Feige's noting the history of women in the comics, in his insistence on the inspirational qualities offered by the characters he mentions. He continues that Marvel has always 'gone for the powerful woman versus the damsel in distress' (Feige in de Souza 2015), invoking a feminist critique of characters who are victimized, positioned as damsels and assuring readers that Marvel *just isn't like that*, despite the fact that he does not actually address the issue of why there have been no female-led films from Marvel Studios. However, the issue of feminine empowerment may not be as simple as Feige suggests, as many factors contribute to the representation of women in such films, for instance race and sexuality.

In the light of my findings, it should also be noted that there is still much work to be done. Since I only consider representations of women in Marvel adaptations, I must also draw attention to the crucial work that is being carried out in both film and comics studies regarding masculinity and superheroes (Adamou 2011; J. A. Brown 2013a; J. A. Brown 2015b; Stevens 2015; McGrath 2016). Since feminine subjectivities are marginalized in a genre which has been characterized as male-dominated both in filmic and comic book terms, the representation of women in these films took priority in this particular project.

Above all I hope that this thesis speaks to some of the issues of women's representation which have been circulating for years both in the media and in less visible terms. When I presented a poster of my research at a public engagement event hosted by the University of East Anglia at the Forum in Norwich, I met many people of different ages and educational backgrounds who responded personally to my research. I spoke to comic

book fans who were frustrated because they felt that the filmic representations of superheroines were less empowering to them than the heroines they knew and loved from the comics. I chatted to one elderly couple who told me that their grandson so heavily identified with feminine superheroes that they dreaded the day when more of them appear on screen—because they would be forced to buy him more action figures—implicitly drawing attention to the lack of exposure and “marketability” of superheroines as well as the (in Hollywood terms unfathomable) notion of cross-gender identification between audiences and characters. What this draws attention to is that I, as a researcher and a critic (as well as a fan), do not get to tell people what they should feel “empowered” by. Indeed, this sort of fan activity would certainly be worth investigating in the future. Nevertheless, I believe that a rigorous discussion of the Marvel film texts should come first because change has to start somewhere, so why not Marvel superhero films?

1.

'YOU HAVE A KNACK FOR SAVING MY LIFE!' GIRLFRIEND SUBJECTIVITIES IN MARVEL FILMS

At the time of *Spider-Man 3*'s (2007) release, director Sam Raimi was asked whether he considered women to be 'the real Achilles' heel for superheroes,' to which he answered 'absolutely' (Raimi in Germain 2007). Raimi's sentiment is indicative of the crucial role which superhero girlfriends play within the narratives of many Marvel comics and films. Simultaneously, the question, as well as Raimi's answer, draws the focus from these women back onto the male heroes, a phenomenon which is repeated time and again when regarding narratives involving superhero girlfriends. It draws on the idea that women in superhero narratives need to be saved, and that the saving of these characters by the male hero provides the substance that furthers his story and develops his character. The women in question are invariably love interests of the male heroes, who, as part of the heteronormative standards of Hollywood cinema, enact a heterosexual protectiveness over these women. As I discuss in this chapter, these gendered traits of heroism vs. victimhood are enabled through postfeminist culture.

The superhero girlfriend has been a consistent presence in Marvel comic books and their filmic counterparts. Often, she provides the motivation for the hero's actions through her victimization by a villain. Occasionally, she fights back, though usually unsuccessfully, and will often appear unexpectedly at a time when the hero is overwhelmed by the villain, providing a momentary distraction during which the hero can recover. Following this, she reclaims her place as victim. At other times, as in *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013) and *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013) superhero girlfriend characters are infected by some powerful substance, allowing them to cross over into the heroic zone. However, the narratives ensure that the substance is presented as an enormous threat to the character. It is then the hero's job to "fix" the girlfriend and remove the substance.

The part which the superhero girlfriend plays within these narratives and the series of complex discourses regarding gender roles she embodies have not, thus far, been considered in a critical context. These women, whilst being an integral cog within the mechanics of the superhero narrative, are often pushed aside, with films privileging the stories of the central male heroes. This chapter considers the complex and often nuanced ways in which the superhero girlfriend is emblematic of gendered discourses regarding the empowerment of women in popular culture and broader society.

Raimi's signature move within the *Spider-Man* films has been defined as 'putting a sexy girl in a tight-fitting outfit, hanging from something' (Ziskin in Germain 2007), whilst the filmmakers behind *Iron Man 3* supposedly went for more subversive modes of representation (Feige in Bryson 2013). Throughout the course of this chapter, I therefore consider these characters as multifaceted subjectivities who nonetheless have restricted roles within the films. They carry with them a fascinating history and offer rich points of discussion which for too long have been ignored. Thus, I consider the superhero girlfriend to be a worthy recipient of analysis.

I hence discern how these characters and their narratives are constructed cinematically, as well as how they reach back to the comic books, and how industry circumstances may play a role in their prevalence, ultimately interrogating the cultural implications of the proliferation of these characters. The first part of the chapter offers the historical background to these characters within comic books as well as within action cinema. I then discuss a number of films which position superhero girlfriends as damsels who are in need of saving, a subjectivity which I refer to as incorporating "active passivity," before moving on to a discussion of the *Iron Man* franchise, using Pepper Potts as a case study to illustrate multidimensional subjectivity. An analysis of *The Amazing Spider-Man* then showcases the ways in which a superhero girlfriend can be incorporated into the narrative without necessarily encapsulating the above tropes while still reaching somewhat to discourses of female vulnerability and helplessness.

DAMSELS IN DISTRESS AND WOMEN IN REFRIGERATORS

The notion that a female character in a narrative focusing on a male protagonist acts as a 'sought-for-person' (A. A. Berger 2005, 22) who consequently enters into a heterosexual union with the hero (Taylor and Willis 1999, 75) was identified by formalists such as Vladimir Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* (Propp 2010). The presence of such characters has therefore persevered in a vast number of texts not limited to comics.

However, the persistent use of the female character in comic books whose kidnap, murder, rape or any other tragic life event serves the purpose of rousing the hero into action against the villain has become a particularly acute narrative device of which some scholars, as well as comic writers, have become increasingly aware. These authors express their frustration with the continuing violence against women in comic books and the misogynistic implications of such narrative turns. In 1999, comic book writer Gail Simone coined the term 'women in refrigerators' after a particularly gruesome occurrence in an issue of DC Comics' Green Lantern series in which the titular hero discovers that his enemy has killed his girlfriend and stuffed her body in his refrigerator (Robbins 2010, 216) (figure 2). Simone subsequently created a list chronicling female comic book characters who had been 'killed, raped, depowered, crippled, turned evil, maimed, tortured, contracted a disease or had other life-derailing tragedies befall her' (Simone 1999). 'Women in refrigerators' has since been used to refer to tragedies that occur to women in comics 'in service of male superhero narratives' (Mandville 2014, 206); for example, deaths or injuries that serve 'as a plot device to stir the male hero into action' (Robbins 2010, 216).



Figure 2 Green Lantern discovers his dead girlfriend stuffed into his refrigerator in *Green Lantern* #54 (Marz et al. 1994)

Perhaps the quintessential woman in the refrigerator is Peter Parker's girlfriend Gwen Stacy, whose death by the Green Goblin in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (Conway and Kane 1973a) marked a turning point in comics (Blumberg 2003). The event heralded darker, "adult" storylines, symbolizing the 'shifting tide of history' in America (Blumberg 2003). In the comic, Peter's best friend Harry is undergoing treatment for drug addiction. Because of the trauma of his son's drug use and other issues, Harry's father Norman Osborn, who had previously been the villain Green Goblin, undergoes a breakdown and takes up his Goblin persona again. He

seeks out Gwen Stacy as a way to taunt Spider-Man and abducts her. Spider-Man tracks down Osborn in a dramatic scene which takes place on the George Washington Bridge. Just as Spider-Man reaches to save Gwen, Osborn pushes her over the ledge. Though he manages to catch Gwen with his web shooter, it is revealed that Gwen has died.

The story was made doubly tragic by the revelation that the force caused by Spider-Man's web shooter broke Gwen's neck (Blumberg 2003). Enraged at Osborn's actions and his ensuing taunts, Spider-Man declares

I'm going to get you, Goblin! I'm going to destroy you
slowly -- and when you start begging for me to end it --
I'm going to remind you of one thing -- you killed the
woman I love -- and for that you're going to die!

(Conway and Kane 1973a)

Thus, Gwen's death propels Spider-Man's narrative, causing him to seek revenge on Osborn. Spider-Man realizes the error of his ways towards the end of the following issue, deciding that he does not want to be a murderer like Osborn. However, justice is served when Osborn is impaled by his own flying device, the Goblin Glider (Conway and Kane 1973b).

Gwen's death may not have appeared particularly significant as an isolated case of one superhero girlfriend's tragedy furthering the narrative of the central hero. However, as time passed, more superhero girlfriends would be limited to the role of victim at the hands of the heroes' enemies, reaching the point where their only purpose was to propel the narratives of the central male heroes. These occurrences became emblematic of a style of writing which 'devalues female characters but also sexualizes their existence and demise' (McDaniel 2008, 88). Additionally, *The Amazing Spider-Man's* editorial team at the time of Gwen's death later indicated that the only alternative to Gwen's tragedy would have been marriage, for which Peter was not ready (Blumberg 2003). The limited scope of the options apparently available to Gwen's narrative showcase the gendered restrictions in comic books at the time.

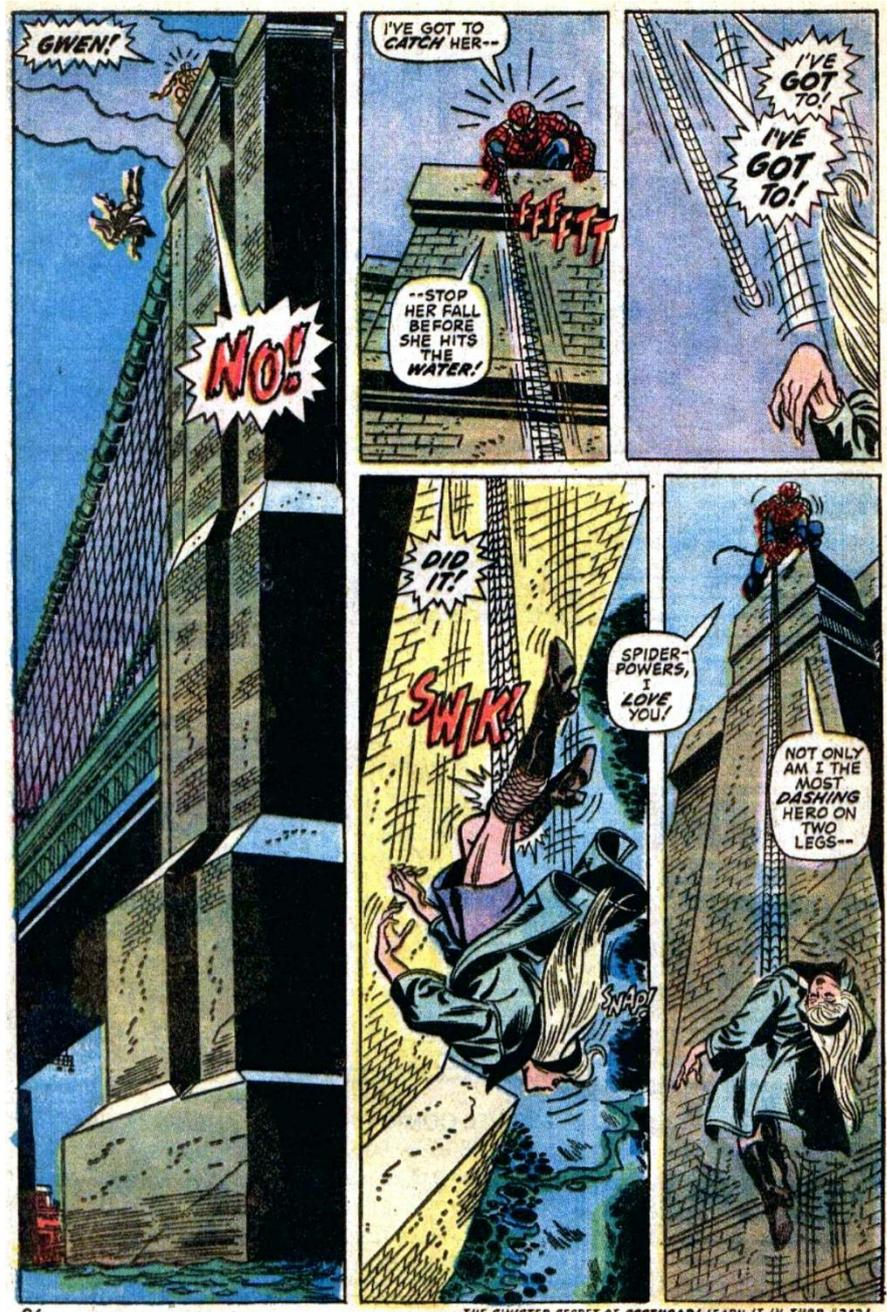


Figure 3 Gwen’s death is the result of Spider-Man’s actions (note the “snap” sound effect in the bottom-center panel) (Conway and Kane 1973a)

Evidently, “women in refrigerators” was not conceived of as applying solely to the wives and girlfriends of the central male heroes. Simone’s list contains superpowered heroines as well as civilian women who fall victim to the crimes of villains. However, in the context of the films considered here, it is worth contemplating the ways in which the “women in refrigerators” narrative has been inflicted upon superhero girlfriends. As will be discussed in later chapters, superheroines cause myriad anxieties on an ideological level which are dealt with through

cinematic means. However, non-powered women are approached in similar ways.

Superhero adaptations carry the dual burden of being based on material which has been, as discussed in the Introduction, often limiting towards women, as well as being positioned within the mainstream Hollywood film industry, which is similarly geared more towards young male audiences. Thus, a number of obstructions stand in the way of dynamic gender representation, factors which make these films a challenging environment in which to arrange female characters. Furthermore, Marvel superhero films participate in the fantasy category of the action genre as identified by Tasker (Tasker 1993, 5), which can be considered masculine. As mentioned in the Introduction, Marvel films fall within the practices of Millennial Hollywood, incorporating transmedia narratives, exploiting pre-existing properties and, indeed, centering on a male protagonist. Schatz also notes that another rule requires the films to ‘include a “love story” as a secondary plot line’ (Schatz 2009, 33). This gives some indication as to the limited options available for the inclusion of female characters in these films.

These qualifications also bear parallels to Joseph Campbell’s Hero’s Journey in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (J. Campbell 2012). Originally published in 1949, Campbell’s work interrogates the fundamental structures within mythology and storytelling, chronicling the steps of the journey undertaken by the central hero throughout a narrative. Such narratives are present within a vast number of Hollywood films and the Hero’s Journey is ultimately male-centric, so much so that Campbell claimed that women do not need to make the journey because ‘in the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she’s the place that people are trying to get to’ (Campbell in Murdock 1990, 1, original emphasis). This denial of women’s development towards self-actualization (disguised as a compliment) prompted Maureen Murdock to produce *The Heroine’s Journey* (1990), although Campbell’s work remains the most commonly referred to template for popular narratives.

It is noteworthy that the sort of “masculine” film outlined above and in the Introduction is often accompanied by a filmic equivalent of the “women in refrigerators” narrative. The lack of academic inquiry into this

phenomenon is significant. Authors who have observed the widespread presence of these characters have devoted little more than passing reference to them. Still, these interpretations are of use in locating these films within wider cultural contexts. In her discussion of the place of the female character within the male-focused action film, Tasker writes,

An hysterical figure who needs to be rescued or protected, the heroine is often played for comedy. Sometimes she is simply written out of the more intense action narrative altogether ... More often female characters are either raped or killed, or both, in order to provide a motivation for the hero's revenge.

(Tasker 1993, 16)

Tasker subsequently cites films such as *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) and *Lethal Weapon* (Richard Donner, 1987) as exemplifying such narratives. To this can be added *Mad Max* (George Miller, 1979) as well as *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) and many others.

The parallels between Tasker's observations and the established use of women as similar plot devices in comic books are evident. Moreover, Tasker suggests, it is due to the fact that the action film is perceived as such an exclusively male space that there is little room for women to be heroic. She continues,

the heroines of the Hollywood action cinema have not tended to be action heroines. They tend to be fought over rather than fighting, avenged rather than avenging. In the role of threatened object *they are significant, if passive, narrative figures.*

(Tasker 1993, 16, emphasis added)

This notion of significant passivity on the part of the female character in the action film is striking, as I discuss later in this chapter. As Tasker suggests, these narratives evoke the sentiments expressed by Mulvey regarding the active/passive divide between men and women on screen (Tasker 1993, 17). Whilst this may be the case, I argue that the superhero girlfriend complicates Mulvey's claims, since her presence propels that of the central male hero.

Another way in which such victimized female characters have been imagined is as part of the revenge narrative. In his investigation of the cultural significance of revenge, Thane Rosenbaum draws attention to the propagation of revenge narratives in popular culture, as well as in wider social contexts. He refers to *Gladiator* (Ridley Scott, 2000), *The Godfather*

(Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and *A Time to Kill* (Joel Schumacher, 1996) as offering audiences the satisfaction of witnessing just deserts inflicted on morally reprehensible individuals (Rosenbaum 2013, 71). Rosenbaum maintains that the presence of such texts within a particular cultural context can be traced to ‘the human longing for revenge that has been found wanting in the actual delivery of justice’ (Rosenbaum 2013, 68).

Rosenbaum refers to ‘a subgenre of revenge narratives about men whose wives and daughters have been murdered, raped, or both, whose families have been taken away or their children killed’ (Rosenbaum 2013, 72), stating that

the death of a child or the rape and murder of a spouse supplies the avenger with his marching orders, especially if justice cannot be found any other way ... The avenger must do what is morally necessary because tolerating an injustice is viscerally unbearable. It is not only the avenger who won’t be able to sleep until justice is obtained. The same is true of the audience.

(Rosenbaum 2013, 73)

Thus, he claims, there is a cultural need to witness villains being punished within these narratives. In this context, it is clear that the “women in refrigerators” narrative may feed into this social desire for revenge (though I would approach Rosenbaum’s analysis of audiences with caution since he does not actually carry out an audience study). Though the heroes in many Marvel stories eventually see the error of their ways and take the moral high ground, this is usually followed by an unlucky chain of events in which the villain is killed by accident, just as the Green Goblin was in *The Amazing Spider-Man #122*. Ideologically, many of these films have their cake and eat it too, with the heroes having grown emotionally and morally, whilst their loved ones have still been avenged somehow.

The significance of Rosenbaum’s discussion notwithstanding, it does draw the attention back to the male heroes. Rosenbaum likewise does not consider the gendered implications of such narratives with regards to women’s roles in Western culture. The connotations of who carries out the revenge, on whom and why should play a larger role in such discussions, and it is thus my intention to bring the focus back onto the characters who ultimately make these narratives possible—the superhero girlfriends.

As noted earlier, both comic books and action films have incorporated “women in refrigerators” narratives in which the female character becomes a mere plot device to motivate the central hero. Still, as this chapter shows, it is possible for these female characters to transgress boundaries while still functioning as superhero girlfriends. My intention is thus to recognise the gendered discourses at work within these repetitive, yet somewhat varied, portrayals.

WOMEN IN REFRIGERATORS IN MOVIES

Gwen Stacy’s comic book death is seen as marking the beginning of an age which signalled the arrival of ‘a darker hero’ (Blumberg 2003). One such hero is Frank Castle, known as the Punisher, who seeks revenge on the mobsters who killed his wife and children while they were out for a picnic (Conway and DeZuniga 1975). The needless act of killing motivates Frank, a war veteran, to first kill the perpetrators, then becoming a vigilante, utilizing brutal military methods to seek revenge. The “women in refrigerators” narrative is evident, even if it is an origin story which bears parallels between Uncle Ben’s death in Spider-Man’s story, or Daredevil’s father in his origin story. The differences between these stories are undoubtedly of a gendered kind; the additions of a female child as well as the wife are noteworthy. The elimination of the two female entities as well as his son leaves Frank as a last man standing, binding him to a lone heroic masculine sensibility not present in Spider-Man and Daredevil’s stories. Given the significance of the revenge narrative, as outlined by Rosenbaum, it is no surprise that the Punisher’s origin has been shown in film not once but twice, in 1989 and 2004 respectively.



Figure 4 Frank Castle discovers his family has not survived the mob shooting (Conway and DeZuniga 1975)

1989's *The Punisher* devotes a single flashback to the deaths of Frank's loved ones. During one scene, in which Frank (Dolph Lundgren) prays in the nude in the sewers where he dwells, the scene flashes back to the suburbs, where his wife and two daughters are walking towards their car. The scene cuts back to Frank in the sewers before flashing back to the suburbs. The car explodes and Frank runs towards it, shouting. He is unable to break into the car in which his family is now located and the car goes up in even more flames. The addition of another daughter heightens the sense of masculine heroism present in the comics and the use of intercut scenes in which Frank is naked and praying draws attention to his muscular, masculine frame. The brevity of the death scene in the film showcases the ephemeral nature of the "women in refrigerators" trope. The wife and child were present for those scenes, but the rest of the action focuses on Frank. The importance of the wife and daughters is fleeting: these characters have carried out the task of providing the hero's motivation.

2004's *The Punisher* (Jonathan Hensleigh) adopts a more saccharine approach, where the focus is nonetheless the tragedy of the deaths and their effect on Frank. In this film, Frank (Thomas Jane) only has a son,

contributing to scenes of male bonding. Frank is shown going home to his wife, Maria, and son, Will, and comforts Will, who is upset that they are moving to another city. These scenes are accompanied by soft music, emphasizing Frank's romanticized family life. The family theme is extended when Frank, Maria and Will attend a family reunion on the Puerto Rico coast. The following scenes feature Frank and his wife romantically gazing into each other's eyes, as well as an exchange between the two on the beach where his wife declares 'you and I—we're not lucky, we're blessed.' Frank's family man position is again showcased in another scene where he expresses his wish to have another child, which is followed by a father-son bonding scene in which his son shows him his new skull-emblazoned t-shirt (which becomes the Punisher's famous "uniform"). The emphasis on family in the film links to the resurgence of what Sarah Godfrey and Hannah Hamad refer to as 'protective paternalism' in films situated within a post-9/11 culture (Godfrey and Hamad 2011). Such discourses also invariably stem from and speak to a postfeminist culture, as I discuss later.

Frank barely survives the attack by mobsters at the family reunion, during which Will and Maria are killed. When he returns to the house, sentimental music accompanies a close-up of this hand holding a picture of Maria and Will. His other hand is a fist, indicating that his wife and son's deaths are his call to action (figure 5). He then finds his son's t-shirt (figure 6), emblazoned with a skull, which he takes with him. Here, even Frank's t-shirt's origin has been sentimentalized alongside the heightened emotional aspect of Maria and Will's deaths. The real victims in this story are the members of Frank's family but attention is focused on Frank, privileging male suffering from the fallout of the tragedy rather than honoring the subjectivities of the women involved.



Figure 5 Frank's fist alongside the photograph of his wife and son signifies his call to action.



Figure 6 Frank's famous skull t-shirt receives an origin story attached to the death of his son.

The “women in refrigerators” narrative also features in the first three *Spider-Man* films, which focus on Peter Parker's (Tobey Maguire) struggles to balance his superhero life with his personal life. A major feature of his personal life is Mary Jane “MJ” Watson (Kirsten Dunst), with whom he is in love, but the relationship is unstable. The Mary Jane of the comics did not become Peter's girlfriend until after Gwen's death, but she maintained a presence throughout the comics nonetheless. Indeed, even before her first on-panel appearance, the repeated references to MJ became a running gag in which readers would never see her face. This was taken to extremes, for instance when MJ's face is conveniently obscured by a comically large flower (Lee and Ditko 1965). In doing so, emphasis is clearly placed on Mary Jane's appearance, even if it is in reference to what we *don't* see. When MJ is finally revealed in the final panel of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #42 (Lee and Ditko 1966), she is stunning, voluptuous and sassy. Early issues of the comic had been noticeably devoid of female characters, save

Peter's frail Aunt May and *Daily Bugle* secretary Betty Brant. The women in Peter's life largely provided complications, often through their obsessive behavior. In one issue, Peter declares that 'females must have originally been intended for another planet!!' (Lee and Ditko 1964).



Figure 7 'Face it tiger... You just hit the jackpot!' Mary Jane Watson's first appearance (Lee and Ditko 1966).

Despite featuring in each of the Raimi *Spider-Man* films, MJ's presence overwhelmingly complicates Peter's narrative and forces him to take action. In fact, Mary Jane is the first character to be introduced in *Spider-Man* (2002), which tells the origin story of how Peter acquired his spider powers. The first shot of the film is MJ's face in close-up when she is riding in the school bus, but it is not MJ's story that is posited as significant. While Peter's voice over tells us that 'This, like any story worth telling, is all about a girl—*that* girl' (original emphasis), this is not MJ's story but Peter's. The scene additionally provides the crucial first impression of the character, immediately positioning her as object of desire.

There are moments in *Spider-Man* that confirm the assertion made by Mulvey that men in films are active, while women are passive. Peter acquires his spider powers after he is bitten by a spider during a field trip to a genetics laboratory whilst taking pictures of Mary Jane (allegedly for the school paper). During the scene, attention is drawn to MJ's appearance, for example when she tells him not to make her 'look ugly.' Additionally, much of the scene is presented through Peter's camera's point of view, with the

crosshairs of the camera's viewfinder overlaid on top of the shots, begging identification with the male protagonist marvelling at the beauty of the passive woman. Indeed, these scenes are reminiscent of the use of point-of-view shots in *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), a film Mulvey herself defines as working within the confines of the gendered active/passive dichotomy, and features a male protagonist who views women through his telephoto lens camera (Mulvey 1975, 845). Notably, it is MJ's passivity while being photographed which causes Peter to become distracted and fail to notice the spider biting his hand, foreshadowing future events in which MJ causes the action in Peter's life without actually doing anything.

In his psychoanalytic analysis of *Spider-Man*, Richard Kaplan suggests that the film presents a narrative that negotiates acceptable forms of masculinity (R. L. Kaplan 2011, 291). Kaplan characterizes Peter as a feminized hero—he is 'soft spoken, provides a low-key understated persona, and offers a childlike vulnerability' (R. L. Kaplan 2011, 309). While this may be the case, the film still engages with traditional gender boundaries, especially since Spider-Man, as opposed to Peter, remains masculinized, for example speaking with a much lower voice than Peter.

Mary Jane becomes infatuated with Spider-Man after he rescues her from the villain, Norman Osborn (Willem Dafoe), who suffers from a split personality and terrorizes New York as the Green Goblin. The rescue scene features MJ helpless on a crumbling balcony while Spider-Man fights Osborn, who is much stronger than Spider-Man. After he saves her, Spider-Man carries her in his arms, swinging on a web through the streets of New York. The scene incorporates close-ups of Mary Jane clinging to him and gasping in wonder. Mary Jane is later saved by Spider-Man from thugs in a dark alley. A shot of one thug mime-kissing at her indicates MJ's sexual vulnerability, which is inextricably gendered. When the men touch her, she attempts to fight but is unable to until, from off-camera, webs are slung at the men, pulling them back. A medium close-up shows MJ looking with reverence at Spider-Man fighting the thugs. Due to the rain, her dress is soaking wet, sticking and drawing attention to her body. The objectified Mary Jane thus propels the narrative with her inactivity. Spider-Man tells her 'you have a knack for getting in trouble' and she replies 'you have a knack for saving my life.' The discourse here naturalizes the

dominant/submissive dynamic between the two, characterizing both characters' actions as 'a knack,' something which occurs naturally.

The most explicit moment in which Mary Jane's trauma propels Spider-Man's narrative results in the climactic final battle between Spider-Man and Osborn. Prior to the scene, Osborn is enraged after he discovers Peter is Spider-Man and converses with his alter-ego over what action to take. The Goblin mask "speaks" to him, telling him that Peter must suffer, and in order to do that he must 'attack his heart.' Peter then discovers that Osborn has taken Mary Jane. An out-of-focus close-up of MJ sideways comes gradually into focus as the camera turns and zooms out, revealing that she is all alone in the dark on an elevated space. After she nearly falls off the ledge, the camera zooms out above her, revealing that she is standing on a bridge; a tiny, vulnerable figure. Spider-Man approaches and Osborn holds MJ screaming by the scruff, echoing the build up to Gwen's death in the comics. MJ is wearing pink pyjamas, infantilizing her, and her pink fluffy slippers are shown in one aerial shot to fall from her feet, drawing attention to the height (figure 8). Spider-Man is able to save MJ, alongside a tramcar full of innocent children, but Osborn overpowers him and takes him to the ruins of an abandoned building, where the final fight ensues.



Figure 8 Mary Jane is tormented by the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man*.

Osborn proves to be too strong for Spider-Man, with Spider-Man's mask ripping and revealing his bloodied face in a way that fosters an understanding of him as a masculine hero. As outlined by Purse, the male

body in action films signals the extent of physical exertion that heroes undergo through sweat, blood, grunting and facial contortion, whilst female bodies are less likely to do so (Purse 2011a, 81; Purse 2011b). As slow-motion shots show Osborn punching Spider-Man, blood and saliva emanate from his body. Osborn tells Spider-Man that ‘I’m going to finish her nice and slow ... MJ and I, we’re gonna have a hell of a time.’ Importantly, it is this declaration which prompts Spider-Man to put all of his effort into defeating Osborn, as he grabs hold of Osborn’s trident which is pointed at him, slowly rising upwards through the shot as the music becomes more rousing, his face contorting. Osborn’s eyes widen and Spider-Man finally overpowers him (though Osborn accidentally impales himself on his Glider, leading to his final demise). Crucially, the threat to Mary Jane prompted Spider-Man’s ultimate physical exertion, which he needed to defeat Osborn, a narrative turn which is replicated in *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004).

Despite MJ finally declaring her love for Peter at the end of *Spider-Man*, Peter walks away from the relationship because of the danger it would supposedly pose Mary Jane. MJ causes anxiety for Peter as he notices that her presence causes him to lose his powers, which results in an identity crisis. After quitting being Spider-Man, Peter starts wearing glasses again (which he hadn’t needed due to his spider powers), succeeds at his studies and works his way back into MJ’s good books. However, he reaches an epiphany after Aunt May tells him about the importance of heroic acts.

Peter and MJ meet in a café, where MJ apologizes to Peter and suggests that she does want to pursue a relationship with him, which Peter must reject because he has decided that he must be Spider-Man. However, the fact that Peter is still wearing his glasses signifies that he has not entirely committed to being Spider-Man once again, as the following scenes also suggest. Just as MJ moves in to kiss Peter (so that she can decide whether he is lying about not loving her), the *mise-en-scène* indicates that Peter’s spider sense is tingling. MJ puckers her lips in close-up towards the camera, then the camera zooms out of Peter’s eye to reveal a car smashing through the window behind him. The juxtaposition of MJ’s kiss with the destruction of the car externalizes Peter’s idea that she cannot be with him for her own safety.

The two are attacked by Otto Octavius (Alfred Molina), whose mind has been taken over by sentient robotic arms he fused to his back, causing him to become Doctor Octopus. Octavius has targeted Peter because he wants Peter to tell Spider-Man to meet him. A close-up of Octavius saying ‘find him...’ is followed by a shot of MJ, screaming, with Octavius’ mechanical arms flailing behind her as he states ‘or I’ll peel the flesh from her bones’ (figure 9). Octavius throws Peter into a wall and he grabs MJ and carries her away, screaming. Peter then bursts out of the rubble, a close-up of his face showing us he is angry and determined. When he runs out, he can’t see through his glasses. He takes them off and can see clearly. MJ’s kidnap, and the need for him to come to her rescue, have caused his powers to return. This event is marked by a close-up of his glasses hitting the ground after he purposefully drops them and the lens falling out, followed by a close-up of his fist aggressively clenching (which is mirrored in 2004’s *The Punisher*; figure 10). Here, MJ is again the force that drives Peter’s narrative of self-actualization. Significantly, it was MJ’s actions that caused Peter to lose his powers in the first place (through her engagement to another man). Meanwhile, it is her lack of action, or her passivity as Octavius’ victim, that stimulates his return to being Spider-Man.



Figure 9 Mary Jane is terrorized by Doctor Octopus.



Figure 10 Peter's clenched fist signifies his commitment to being Spider-Man after MJ is kidnapped.

At the end of *Spider-Man 2*, MJ is granted some autonomy when she points out that she has as much choice in whether the two have a relationship as Peter does. She angrily asks him, 'Can't you respect me enough to make my own decisions?' and Peter complies, swinging on his web out of the window as MJ mildly looks on. The rhetoric of choice resonates with contemporary postfeminist sentiment and resurfaces in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), discussed later. However, the autonomy that MJ gains throughout this scene and in the next film proves to be yet another source of problems for Peter.

Spider-Man 3 focuses on Peter's exploits as he attempts to marry MJ, as well as introducing the villains Sandman and Venom. Additionally, Norman Osborn's son and Peter's former best friend, Harry (James Franco), has taken up the Goblin mantle to avenge his father. MJ's new found autonomy from the previous film increases to the extent that she is portrayed as needy and unreasonable, snapping at Peter when the play in which she acted receives a bad review. MJ's autonomy is an obstacle to Peter—she has become too emotionally demanding, even jealous of Spider-Man's popularity and when he neglects her in favor of crime fighting. These anxieties are quelled in the narrative when MJ is replaced with a new woman in the refrigerator: Gwen Stacy.

In a key scene Gwen (Bryce Dallas Howard) is shown modelling for a photographer in an office building. Much like when Peter shot photos of MJ in the first film, Gwen is shot through the point of view of the photographer's camera, marking her again as an object of male desire. Sandman then wreaks havoc on the city, destroying the building in which

Gwen is modelling and pushing her out of the skyscraper. Spider-Man swings to the rescue, dodging some debris that flies towards him in a great feat of action before it cuts to Gwen falling, echoing shots of MJ falling in the first film (see figures 11 and 12). He catches her before she is crushed by the wreckage and she clings to him. Evidently, Mary Jane is being replaced in her play, but she is also being replaced as Spider-Man's damsel, a narrative turn which is supported by Peter's insistence on re-enacting with Gwen the famous upside-down kiss he shared with MJ in the first film.

Peter is then infected by the alien symbiote, Venom, which makes him stronger but also increases aggression. Likewise, Spider-Man's suit turns from red and blue to black, signifying that his morals have darkened. Peter is shown actively pursuing Gwen in a way that he never was able to with MJ. Simultaneously, Peter also becomes more overtly feminized, appearing to wear eyeliner and having a longer haircut. In this way, the film vilifies femininity by associating Peter's bad attitude with his transgression of gender boundaries through his feminized appearance, conflating the two. Similarly, he performs a number of strutting dances in the street in a take on *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977), a film which has been identified as portraying a complex vision of feminized masculinity (Neale 1993, 18). He only snaps out of this phase after he accidentally hits MJ in a bar fight, by which point Gwen has lost interest and MJ is back to being his damsel, renewing the status quo.



Figure 11 MJ falls in *Spider-Man*.



Figure 12 Gwen falls in *Spider-Man 3*.

Thus, MJ is kidnapped by the villains in the final confrontation. Disgraced photographer Eddie Brock (Topher Grace), who has now been infected by Venom, has taken MJ and suspended her in a taxi above the city with Sandman helping. Peter sees the news report on television and MJ's need of saving is what prompts him to get out his old red and blue suit once again, which is marked as a momentous occasion by triumphant music and a camera shot which lingers on him removing the suit from its case. Once again, it is MJ's need for help that brings about his restoration as a hero.

Spider-Man goes to MJ's aid with Brock arriving soon after, knocking him down. Brock gloats 'ooh, my spider sense is tingling...' and he grabs MJ with his black web, continuing 'if you know what I'm talking about,' waving a finger at MJ. His clear sexual insinuations mark her as sexually vulnerable. Brock then pushes Spider-Man over the ledge and places MJ back into a roofless taxi suspended from his web. MJ's position

as Peter's girlfriend motivates not only Spider-Man's actions, but Brock's as well, as he tells Peter 'you made me lose my girl, now I'm gonna make you lose yours.'

This confrontation is intercut with MJ picking up a cinderblock which has fallen out of a suspended truck above her, shots of her determinedly lifting it over her head and throwing it at Brock. The cinderblock hits him, unlike her unsuccessful attempts to hit Octavius over the head with a pole in *Spider-Man 2*. As I note later, such scenes in which the girlfriend aids the hero in a moment of particularly strong peril occur frequently in Marvel films, usually acting to buy the hero some time before returning the girlfriend back to a position in which she needs rescuing. For instance, MJ subsequently needs rescuing from the truck which later dangles by a thread above her. In addition, it is not one man who comes to her rescue, but two, as Harry give up his Goblin persona and aids Spider-Man. Harry carries Spider-Man on his Glider so that Spider-Man can heroically leap through the air and catch MJ. MJ's victimization therefore furthers Harry's plot of redemptive sacrifice (he purposefully allows Brock to kill him so that Spider-Man can live): her kidnap was necessary so that Harry could show that he is not evil, while Spider-Man defeats the villains.

The films mentioned here heavily rely on the "women in refrigerators" trope as a source of narrative action, but there is more happening here than merely the active/passive gender divide being reinforced, particularly in the *Spider-Man* films. For while the Punisher's wife and children, Mary Jane, and Gwen remain relatively passive in their own narratives, the role they play in driving the hero's narrative is substantial. In Mulvey's terms, the woman's 'visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action' (Mulvey 1975, 841). Contrary to this, the woman in the refrigerator does not freeze the narrative, but rather propels the hero's story forward whilst remaining passive in her own.

These female characters embody a kind of active passivity which is returned to time and again in the superhero narrative. Some Marvel films are remarkably self-aware when carrying out this narrative. For example, in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (Gavin Hood, 2009), central hero Logan's (Hugh Jackman) girlfriend Kayla Silverfox (Lynn Collins) is apparently killed by

Logan's rival Victor Creed (Liev Schreiber), who is working for the main villain Colonel Stryker (Danny Huston). Logan agrees to undergo Stryker's treatment to bond the unbreakable metal adamantium to his bones so that he can seek revenge on Creed, becoming the Wolverine. However, Creed was working for Stryker all along. Upon realizing this, Logan laments that 'They killed her so I'd let them put adamantium in me. They killed her for a goddamn experiment,' thus indicating Kayla's use as a narrative mechanism. However, it turns out that Kayla had made a deal with Stryker to release her sister from captivity provided she manipulate Logan into agreeing to the treatment by allowing Creed to pretend to kill her, making Kayla's sister a narrative device herself. As such, *Origins* presents a chain of women in refrigerators who each play an integral role in propelling the narrative via passive means. *Origins* does not question such narratives, but acknowledges them while reinforcing them.

Whilst "women in refrigerator" narratives have existed since before the boom in comic book adaptations, the frequent return to these narratives is indicative of more pressing matters referring to gender roles. Strikingly, these narratives mark a favoring of chivalry as a trait of masculine heroism, as well as presenting women who actively receive these acts of chivalry. Dating back to medieval conceptions of knighthood, chivalry is an ethical system enforcing the correct behavior of the knightly class (Wollock 2011, 93). Further, the concept of chivalry is linked with that of courtly love (Wollock 2011, 1), which sheds some light on the emphasis of both of these elements in many superhero narratives. Coupled with the frequent use of anti-feminist rhetoric in statements in mainstream media that "chivalry is dead" (Jones; Picciuto; De Lacey; York) it becomes clear that media that engage with "women in refrigerator" narratives propagate a nostalgia for a lost time when men were required (or permitted) to carry out chivalrous acts of heroism for women.

In 1970's *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millett describes the patriarchal nature of chivalry, suggesting that 'while a palliative to the injustice of woman's social position, chivalry is also a technique for disguising it' (Millett 2000, 37). She continues that chivalry combined with romantic notions of love 'in their general tendency to attribute impossible virtues to women, have ended by confining them in a narrow and often remarkably

conscribing sphere of behavior' (Millett 2000, 38). In films such as those discussed in this chapter, that 'conscribing sphere of behavior' becomes manifest when superhero girlfriends play the role of the villain's victim, stirring the hero into action. The uncritical stance that many of these films possess towards such ideals indicates their functioning within postfeminist discourses, for if women are now empowered, or even if feminism has "gone too far" in its rejection of chivalry, as popular discourses might suggest (Jones 2011; Picciuto 2013; De Lacey 2013; York 2013), then it is acceptable for characters to enact these traditional gender roles. Kristin Anderson characterizes acts such as chivalry as 'benevolent sexism,' acts which seem to be of a positive nature but in fact reinscribe gender inequality (Anderson 2014, 108). Chivalry is then an admirable trait of the masculine hero, since postfeminist culture functions to reinforce binaristic notions of gender, a topic I discuss in more detail in later chapters. Likewise, as Godfrey and Hamad note, discourses of protective paternalism proliferate in postfeminist culture, which 'simultaneously privileges and celebrates the return of formerly outmoded masculine traits of protectionism and violent vigilantism,' and in cases such as *The Punisher* (2004), in which family themes are foregrounded, 'negotiat[e] this return through recourse to the disingenuously ideological neutral filter of fatherhood' (Godfrey and Hamad 2011, 158).

As my analysis has shown, there are many ways in which the superhero girlfriend may embody active passivity in relation to the male hero in these films. It is difficult to make concrete distinctions between activity and passivity in these films. Similarly, there is room within the superhero girlfriend subjectivity for nuanced actions. In the next sections, I examine films in which superhero girlfriends are portrayed as fighting back, suggesting that the word "girlfriend" does not have to be synonymous with "active passivity," whilst also determining the complexities in how power is negotiated within the characters.

IRON (WO)MAN

Pepper Potts of the *Iron Man* franchise offers a useful example of the ways in which the "women in refrigerators" narrative is not necessarily always a

straightforward plot mechanism. Indeed, the representation of this character may offer insight into the ways in which the films make attempts to account for possible feminist critique, whilst simultaneously restoring the status quo. Virginia “Pepper” Potts first appeared in *Tales of Suspense* #45 as a secretary of Tony Stark, the playboy billionaire and owner of weapon’s manufacturer Stark Industries who masquerades as the hero Iron Man (Lee and Heck 1963). Pepper’s temperament is introduced before Pepper even appears on panel, as Tony tells his new chauffeur, Happy Hogan, ‘you can fight all you want to with her! I do regularly!’ (Lee and Heck 1963). Pepper is subsequently shown as whiny and demanding; the first panel in which she appears features her vocally complaining about the appearance of Happy Hogan. With her hand almost completely covering her face, save for the horrified look in her eye, she exclaims ‘With eligible bachelors as scarce around here as dinosaur, you hire a battle-scarred ex-pug! It couldn’t be a Rock Hudson! No, he has to look like Bela Lugosi!’ before Happy jokingly makes a sexual pass at her (Lee and Heck 1963; see figure 12). Pepper’s introduction paints her as shallow and irritating, not to mention a viable candidate for the male characters’ affections.

Throughout the years, Pepper played a larger role in Tony and Happy’s lives, eventually marrying Happy despite having previously been interested in Tony (Lee and Colan 1967), whilst occasionally being kidnapped by a villain (O’Neil and Trimpe 1985). More recently, though, Pepper has become more powerful, both professionally and heroically, having been made CEO of Stark Industries (Fraction and Larroca 2009), as well as donning her own version of the Iron Man armor and becoming the heroine of her own one-shot comic (DeConnick and Mutti 2010), and once more becoming romantically invested in Tony. These developments in Pepper’s storylines correspond with the release of the first *Iron Man* film in 2008 and were perhaps designed to anticipate the vital, yet often impeded, role which Pepper occupies in the films.

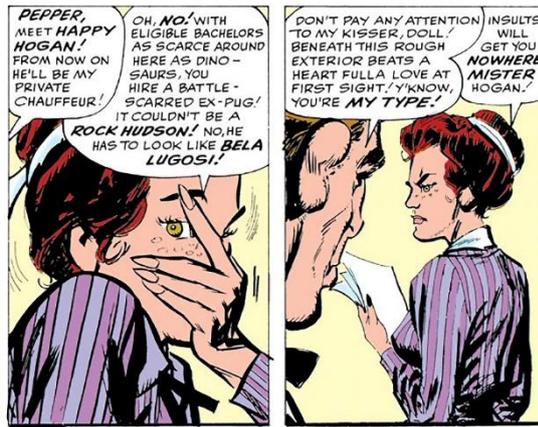


Figure 13 Pepper's introduction in *Tales of Suspense* #45 (Lee and Heck 1963).

Iron Man chronicles the origin story of the hero as the head of Stark Industries who has a change of heart regarding weapons manufacture after he is kidnapped by terrorists in Afghanistan. Due to an injury sustained during his escape, Tony installs an arc reactor in his chest to prevent shrapnel from piercing his heart. Pepper (Gwyneth Paltrow) is introduced as Tony Stark's (Robert Downey Jr.) personal assistant. Even though Pepper and Tony are not in a romantic relationship in the film, Pepper is clearly devoted to Tony. Indeed, in *Iron Man*, Pepper's role is largely to assist Tony and follow his orders. Even when she disagrees with Tony's actions regarding his Iron Man activities, Tony's story arc requires her to sway her opinion.

Emphasis in one scene is placed on the fact that Tony has changed from being an irresponsible, shallow bachelor to a caring individual. After asking Pepper for help in his mission to stop the villain, Stark Industries' manager Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), Pepper immediately refuses. But she then discovers that Tony has changed when he tells her 'I just finally know what I have to do. And I know in my heart that it's right.' He has become a good man—a hero—and she agrees to retrieve the information from his office at Stark Industries. This situation differs from others discussed thus far, as Pepper is obviously stepping into a dangerous situation, with Stane potentially catching her stealing the information needed to stop him. However, interestingly, it is Tony who sends her into this situation.

The scene in which Pepper retrieves the information (and discovers that Stane paid to have Tony killed) is constructed so as to accentuate the threat to Pepper, however Pepper uses her cunning to escape unscathed.

Stane walks in on Pepper sitting in front of the computer. As he pours a drink, she moves a nearby newspaper to cover her USB drive plugged into the computer. Stane sits on the desk at which she is seated, positioned above her within the frame, looking down on her. He states ‘You are a very rare woman’ in a predatory fashion, ‘Tony doesn’t know how lucky he is.’ She replies, ‘Thank you. Thanks,’ smiling at him in a way reminiscent of that which is culturally expected of women who are verbally harassed by sexually predatory men (Clair 1998, 58). In this way, Pepper is marked as vulnerable while she is attempting to prevent Stane from discovering what she is really doing. Pepper ultimately outwits Stane as she picks up the paper and the USB drive in one fell swoop and heads out before Stane stops her and asks if he can read that paper. Luckily Pepper has already put the drive in her pocket and is able to escape. As she walks down the stairs she seeks refuge in the company of Phil Coulson, an agent for the espionage law-enforcement agency S.H.I.E.L.D., to prevent Stane from following her, seeking the safety of male accompaniment, again evoking connotations of sexual harassment.

The scene illustrates the ways in which Pepper is established as a character who at times is able to carry out acts of considerable bravery, whilst concurrently reaching back to notions of female vulnerability. Moreover, after paralyzing Tony and removing the arc reactor out of his chest, Stane tells him, ‘Too bad that you involved Pepper in this. I would’ve preferred that she lived,’ again invoking “women in refrigerators” narrative. It is later revealed that Stane has built his own Iron Man suit, the Iron Monger, which is located in the building to which Pepper is making her way, accompanied by five S.H.I.E.L.D. agents who turn out to be rather useless.

After entering the building, Pepper explores by herself. The halls are darkened as she enters an area surrounded by chains hanging from the ceiling. She looks up into the camera above her, making her appear small in the shot. A medium close-up of her looking through the chains is followed by a view from behind her as a mechanic sound emits alongside the Iron Monger’s glowing eyes on the other side of the chains (figure 14). They rise as the camera pulls out and it switches to a point-of-view shot from Stane in the suit looking through its interface at Pepper’s horrified face, which is

marked with a target as she runs out of the shot, screaming. She runs into the corridor where the agents are; the action continues in the background as the camera follows Pepper fleeing. Here, Pepper is once again coded as victimized, calling for Tony to rescue her, which he then does in a subsequent scene.



Figure 14 Pepper encounters the Iron Monger.

The previous scene in which Pepper must carry out a dangerous action for Tony is replicated on a larger scale as Tony tells her she must overload the arc reactor inside the building in order to stop Stane. While Stane is busy attacking Tony outside, Pepper prepares the machine. Tony then orders her to push the button that will cause Stane's suit to break down and a large explosion ensues. As noted, it is Pepper's role to carry out Tony's wishes and this is extended to any acts of heroism which she may perform. Thus, while Pepper may have been the one to push the button during the final battle, she was acting under Tony's instructions. This is reminiscent of the first scene in which Pepper is introduced, when she tells Tony's one-night-stand 'I do anything and everything that Mr Stark requires ... including, occasionally, taking out the trash' while showing her the door. The following scene potentially negates the dominance enclosed in Pepper's sassy remark, as it is revealed that she was working under Tony's instructions to show his date the door.

Indeed, Pepper's actions, though they seem to offer her a considerable level of authority, are usually only carried out because Tony asked her to, rendering Pepper maid-like, particularly in the domestic setting in which we first encounter her. The fact that these actions can be traced

back to Tony has the potential to undermine Pepper's autonomy, but even so, there is a distinct contrast between her character and the other superhero girlfriends referred to in this chapter. Whilst Mary Jane, for example, was quite often portrayed as a nuisance to Peter Parker, causing disruptions in his personal life as well as his superhero life, Pepper is needed by Tony for assistance. This in itself may not appear particularly problematic, but coupled with Pepper's job as his designated personal assistant, and the way in which she is introduced as servile, it carries with it connotations of female subservience.

In *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) Pepper's narrative is mainly localized on the stress she experiences after Tony appoints her CEO of Stark Industries. The bickering which is characteristic of the couple is extended in a number of scenes, and Pepper's nagging, which was present for some of *Iron Man*, is amplified. Additionally, Pepper is portrayed as always being prepared for when things go wrong for Tony, or he behaves irresponsibly, for example when he decides to take part in a race at the Circuit de Monaco but is attacked by the villain Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke). Here, Pepper must rush to fetch Tony's briefcase (which conceals a compacted version of his Iron Man armour), and she and Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau) drive Tony's car onto the racecourse to do so, knocking out Vanko in the process. In this scene, Pepper's nagging reaches its peak as she screams at Tony, 'ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR MIND?!' while the shot confines her to the frame of the car window, 'GET IN THE CAR RIGHT NOW!'

Pepper's nagging is a constant in *Iron Man 2*, and, importantly, the more recklessly Tony behaves, the stronger the nagging becomes, peaking in the aforementioned scene, in which Pepper for the first time raises her voice at him. Unlike the demands that MJ makes of Peter in *Spider-Man 3*, Pepper's pestering is not necessarily portrayed as irrational, but is rather an externalization of Tony's story arc in which he becomes unhinged and out-of-control. Though this brings the focus back to Tony, the sympathy which the narrative grants Pepper's outbursts is a relative rarity in mainstream films, as well as in broader cultural contexts. This is the point at which Pepper's irritation with Tony's antics bubbles over into anger, an emotion which has inextricable links to masculinity. As Dana Crowley Jack notes, 'following the hierarchy of gender in our society, men have much more

permission than women to show anger,' rendering the expression of such anger as challenging and socially discouraged (Jack 2001, 141). That Pepper is portrayed as unabashedly emotional during this scene could potentially disrupt such a hierarchy.

Unfortunately, the stress pushes Pepper too far after she is nearly killed by an armored drone which villain Vanko detonates after his final fight with Tony. Notably, Vanko did not target Pepper; rather, the fact that Pepper was standing near the drone when it was set to explode was a handy coincidence which allowed the narrative to position Pepper as needing rescuing while having discarded of the traditional "women in refrigerators" mechanism. Tony obviously arrives just in time to save Pepper and carries her to a nearby rooftop where she once again assertively expresses her feelings regarding the current situation. She exclaims,

Oh my God! I can't take this anymore ... I can't take this
... My body literally cannot handle the stress. I never
know if you're gonna kill yourself or wreck the whole
company ... I quit. I'm resigning.

However, the two then bicker in between kissing, symbolically restoring the status quo, and ultimately granting Tony the absolute authority when he jokingly remarks, 'How are you gonna resign if I don't accept?' The scene thus renders Pepper once again under the power of Tony. It also positions Pepper as a character who must bear the burden of what life as a superhero girlfriend/CEO of her boyfriend's company throws at her, which is neatly packaged within unthreatening postfeminist rhetoric, a subject to which I return in Chapter 4.

Furthermore, when considering Pepper Potts, a number of gendered discourses involving the subject of working women surface. Pepper's representation as a working woman differs from many contemporary representations of similar characters. In Joanna Brewis' terms, Pepper is indeed coded as a 'corporate being' (Brewis 1998, 91), purely through the act of omission, as Pepper is never shown doing anything privately, by herself or with friends, and never refers to wider family ties. But unlike other working woman characters discussed by Brewis, who are vilified both narratively and cinematically, Pepper's devotion to and professionalism at her job do not morally align her with malevolence. She is neither a power-

hungry “career bitch” nor a manipulative competitor to the men who work at Stark Industries.

However, there are elements of this representation which tie in to postfeminist discourses. The fact that Pepper is never shown having a private life and is only ever concerned with work immediately evokes discourses surrounding the choice that women must, according to the media, make between having a job and having a family (supposedly “having it all”). This is a dilemma which, according to Miriam Peskowitz, has been articulated in the media so many times that ‘these phrases seem passé, yesterday’s news’ (Peskowitz 2005, 67). Indeed, the topic is circumnavigated in the films by the fact that Tony becomes both Pepper’s lover *and* her work. Pepper doesn’t need to make a choice because the options are one and the same. In this sense, Pepper embodies the postfeminist endeavor of “having it all” (Negra 2009:29)—a job, financial security *and* a man—whilst also presenting a situation in which a working woman has literally nothing apart from her job/boss/lover.

When Pepper returns in *Iron Man 3*, she no longer nags Tony about the company and seems to have adjusted to life as a CEO, a change which is marked in her clothing as she now wears a bright white “power suit” with shoulder pads, as opposed to the black or grey suits she used to wear as an employee (figure 15). Before the release of the film, Pepper’s role was highlighted by President of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, as offering a subversion of traditional representations of women in superhero films. He stated that in *Iron Man 3*

We play with the convention of the damsel in distress.
We are bored by the damsel in distress. But, sometimes
we need our hero to be desperate enough in fighting for
something other than just his own life. So, there is fun to
be had with “Is Pepper in danger or is Pepper the savior?”
over the course of this movie.

(Feige in Bryson 2013)

Feige’s comments draw attention to a number of issues, most obviously of which is the seeming embrace of an anticipated feminist critique of damsel roles, which is emblematic of postfeminist rhetoric. Further, his reference to the supposed “role reversal” dynamics in the film is simplistic, ignoring the subtleties and myriad discourses surrounding the topic of women in superhero films. There is the danger that, when engaging with narratives

that simply reverse the traditional roles of men and women, gender norms are reinforced rather than transgressed. Furthermore, as my discussion of *Iron Man 3* suggests, there is much more at stake than merely the question ‘Is Pepper in danger or is Pepper the savior?’



Figure 15 Pepper embraces her role as CEO, as signified through her dress.

In *Iron Man 3*, Pepper is once again positioned as needing protecting, a claim that is explicitly made by Tony when he states ‘Threat is imminent and I have to protect the one thing that I can’t live without ... That’s you.’ Tony, who is having a crisis brought on by the traumatic events he experienced in *The Avengers*, neglects Pepper in favor of experimenting with his Iron Man suits throughout the film, to the frustration of Pepper.

This is indicated by a number of scenes, for example when Tony sets his remote controlled suit up to greet her when she returns home from work, and when he purchases a tasteless twelve-foot plush rabbit as a Christmas present for her. Tony’s crisis is localized onto Pepper, and his sense of protectiveness is illustrated by a scene in which Tony’s mansion is attacked by a terrorist, the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley), who was working under instruction of Killian Aldrich (Guy Peirce), a scientist who wants to use Tony for his knowledge to perfect his flawed regenerative treatment procedure Extremis.

As the house explodes, there is a slow motion shot of Tony being blown through the air, gesturing for the remote armor to come forth, followed by slow motion shots of Pepper as the armor envelops her body. The slow motion here highlights the quick reflex response that Tony has to protect Pepper from harm. On the other hand, Tony here provides Pepper

the tools to protect herself, as well as Tony. The following scene features Tony on the ground as the ceiling above him crumbles. A medium long-shot shows Pepper leaning over Tony, protecting him from the falling debris. Pepper's mask slides up and she says 'I got you,' to which he responds 'I got you first,' again drawing the focus back to Tony.

The brief scene in which Pepper wears the Iron Man armor enacts the role-reversal referred to by Feige. The brevity of the scene indicates that this was a temporary fix for a drastic situation, a phenomenon that returns in the final act of the film. The following shots are of the armor returning to Tony, a momentous occasion similar to Peter Parker's reclaiming of the Spider-Man suit in *Spider-Man 3*. An ostentatious show is made of the various parts of the suit attaching themselves to Tony, for example a close-up of his arm receiving the armor followed by a close-up of his face looking directly into the camera as the face plate glides into place, all accompanied by heroic music. A medium long-shot of the suit from below shows him rising up through the dust and rubble, his eyes and the reactor on his chest glowing. These shots, juxtaposed with Pepper's haphazard exit from the suit moments before, suggest that Pepper was borrowing the suit, that it was forced upon her by Tony so that she could use it as a defensive tool, rather than in its intended way—the way in which Tony uses it in the following shots.

When Pepper is kidnapped by Aldrich, the film seems to be playing the "women in refrigerators" narrative again, with Aldrich portrayed as a sadist who wants to harm Tony via Pepper. With Tony shackled in a makeshift laboratory to an upturned bedframe, Aldrich states, 'I wanted to repay you the self-same gift that you so graciously imparted to me ... desperation.' This is accompanied by his conjuring of a hologram showing Pepper being forced to receive the Extremis treatment, which, as Aldrich notes, could cause her to spontaneously combust. Then, during the climactic battle scene, which takes place at a dockyard, Pepper, much like MJ, is suspended from a moving platform upside-down, while Tony chases after her without any armor. Unable to reach Pepper, Tony shouts 'You gotta let go! I'll catch you, I promise!' but the platform jerks forward and Pepper is pushed off, falling into the burning structure below. Again, like MJ and Gwen previously (and, as will be discussed, the *other* Gwen in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*) Pepper is shot from above, falling backwards into the flames,

screaming (figure 16). But unlike Spider-Man, Tony is unable to catch her without his armor.



Figure 16 Pepper falls to her “death.”

After Tony seemingly defeats Aldrich by summoning a number of Iron Man suits, Aldrich re-emerges out of the flames. He is then knocked out of the shot by a long object, the camera panning to the left to reveal Pepper, glowing from the Extremis treatment and holding a metal beam in her arms, another instance of the superhero girlfriend appearing with an improvised weapon in a nick of time to help the hero out of a tight spot. As Killian gets up, another Iron Man suit approaches, which has been programmed to target people infected with Extremis, including Pepper. Pepper is shown jumping in the air and elaborately kicking the suit to pieces, landing in a crouching stance similar to that used by Tony when using the Iron Man suit (for example when he lands at a weapons exhibition in *Iron Man 2*; figures 17 and 18). The dutch angle indicates that the situation is off-balance; her arm impales the suit and she looks fiercely, almost inhumanly, at Tony off-camera, who is then shown speechless in close-up. Pepper then forcefully removes her arm from the suit, places the suit’s glove on her hand, spins around and kicks Killian, finally defeating him by using the glove’s repulsor ray.



Figure 17 Iron Man’s “signature” landing stance as demonstrated in *Iron Man 2*.



Figure 18 Pepper emulating the Iron Man landing while infected by Extremis in *Iron Man 3*.

Further gendered issues are at stake during this dramatic confrontation. Still wearing the black sports bra and pants she wore during the treatment, as well as being drenched in sweat, Pepper appears to be objectified during these scenes. However, the vulnerability that her lack of clothing may signify corresponds with Tony’s powerlessness without his Iron Man suit. Like Pepper, Tony is “naked” without the armor, and once again the film presents Tony’s problems as localized onto Pepper. Whilst this evidently has its drawbacks, for example that Pepper merely serves as a vessel through which Tony’s narrative is externalized, it does offer a reading of Pepper’s semi-dressed state as more than showcasing the female body.

Additionally, the narrative of the film offered a concrete, personal reason as to why Pepper defeated Aldrich. During an earlier scene, Aldrich speaks to Pepper about his motivations, telling her that her kidnap was not merely to entice Tony to agree to work with him. Pepper is strapped into the machine as Aldrich steps closer to her in a long-shot, encroaching on her

space. He laughs in close-up, ‘You’re here as my, um...’ It cuts to a close-up of Pepper finishing his sentence, ‘Trophy.’ He grins and nods while Pepper bites her lip and turns her head away from him, signalling the threat of the situation. Aldrich is a different kind of villain who, instead of merely using the superhero girlfriend as bait for the hero, gains pleasure out of “owning” her. This works in conjunction with the final showdown of the film, in which Pepper is the one to defeat Aldrich. Rather than fighting him on behalf of Tony, Aldrich’s twisted behavior makes Pepper’s fight personal.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Pepper is never shown actually using her new Extremis powers, unlike the Extremis soldiers that Aldrich employs, who have heat- and fire-based abilities. Instead, Pepper uses an implement such as the metal beam or, crucially, Tony’s glove, once again borrowing *his* weapons instead of using her own, acts which, when used as consistently as they are, limit Pepper’s power. Nonetheless, Pepper’s depiction stands out as offering a complexified superhero girlfriend. Despite this, it is implied that Pepper is depowered by the end of the film, with Tony’s voice-over narration informing us that he ‘got Pepper sorted out, took some tinkering.’⁴

With regards to Pepper’s characterization and the relationship depicted between the character and Tony Stark, postfeminist sentiments again resurface. Both Pepper and Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone) in *The Amazing Spider-Man* possess a quick wit and make sassy comments that resonate with postfeminist models of hip, snappy, confident feminine subjectivities present in popular culture texts such as *Veronica Mars* (2004-2006, UPN; 2006-2007, The CW) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2001, The WB; 2001-2003, UPN) (Berridge 2013, 479). Gill suggests that contemporary constructions of women in the media favor ‘a modernized version of heterosexual femininity as feisty, sassy and sexually agentic’ (Gill 2008, 438), and indeed both Pepper and Gwen fit this mould. Similarly, the casting of these characters feeds into discourses of desirable contemporary womanhood. Gwyneth Paltrow is defined as a ‘twenty-first century “It Girl”’ who combines elements of traditional Hollywood glamor

⁴ Tony’s indication that he had Pepper ‘sorted out’ is not an explicit reference to her powers being removed and it is possible that Pepper may return with powers in subsequent Marvel Cinematic Universe films.

with dedication to honing her acting skill (Hollinger 2013, 218), whilst Emma Stone is loved by many for her relatable, down-to-earth image, wit and more classical physical appeal (Beck 2013; Young 2013; Sinyard 2013; Haslett 2014).

Paradoxically, though, this type of sharp-minded female character also harks back to the screwball and romantic comedies of the 1930s and 1940s, a subject which has been extensively researched by Maria DiBattista (2001). DiBattista defines the ‘fast-talking dame’ as an American phenomenon which existed as a result of the introduction of sound to cinema (DiBattista 2001, 6–7). She continues that these romantic and screwball comedies ‘rejoice in the giddy energy of human speech, in invective, in repartee, in drop-dead one-liners, and reserve their highest delights—and kudos—for those most adept at verbal sparring’ (DiBattista 2001, 16). The on-screen display of Pepper and Tony’s relationship relies heavily on comical bickering, reaching back to these classical representations of heterosexual union. Pepper is therefore at once vintage and undeniably modern, which is symptomatic of the very inconsistency of postfeminist culture itself.

As discussed, Pepper Potts’ subjectivity has remained complex throughout the three *Iron Man* films, indicating the multiplicity of the subjectivities which these characters can possibly embody. Similarly, as my discussion of *Iron Man 3* suggests, there are many intricate discourses at work in films which supposedly enforce “role-reversal” upon their male and female characters. Indeed, superhero girlfriends and heroics are thematically at odds with each other, as is also the case in the *Spider-Man* films discussed, whilst there is also the contentious issue of whether or not such characters should have to *either* be girlfriends *or* have powers. As mentioned, Feige’s allusions to role-reversal in *Iron Man 3* still function within discourses that dictate that it is impossible for a non-powered girlfriend character to be particularly “powerful.” In the next section of this chapter, I examine the character of Gwen Stacy in the film *The Amazing Spider-Man* as another example of a complexified superhero girlfriend, albeit one who remains non-powered and functions outside of role-reversal discourses.

THE AMAZING GWEN STACY

The Amazing Spider-Man rebooted the Spider-Man franchise, retelling the origin of the titular hero, and drawing from a series of books taking place in an alternate Marvel universe (the “Ultimate Universe”) whilst maintaining the core elements of the much-loved character. The film focuses on Peter’s teenage angst and feelings of paternal abandonment while he deals with the acquisition of spider powers, the death of Uncle Ben (caused by his own irresponsible actions), stopping Dr Curt Connors (a scientist who turns into a giant lizard) and his feelings for Gwen Stacy. I argue that this version of Gwen offers a unique subjectivity that unites elements of the superhero girlfriend and the female character who is active within the narrative in a way that does not solely victimize her.

During the film, Gwen is portrayed as smart and resourceful, while her status as Peter’s girlfriend is in no way shown to diminish these qualities, a phenomenon that contradicts representations of some of the other superhero girlfriends examined in this chapter. Similarly, Gwen’s cunning and cleverness is in no way influenced by Peter giving her orders, nor does she work for him, as is the case of Pepper Potts in *Iron Man*. Most importantly, the torment of Peter’s romantic struggle is not the core focus of the film, as is the case in the previous *Spider-Man* films, in which Peter’s romantic conquests were the source of a great deal of trouble, both personally and heroically. Rather, Gwen becomes a sort of confidante to Peter after he awkwardly tells her that he is Spider-Man and she becomes the backbone of the film itself.

Gwen is introduced in a remarkably similar way to MJ’s early scenes in *Spider-Man*. Peter (Andrew Garfield) sees Gwen from afar outside school, sitting on a bench and reading Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (Vonnegut 1998). The cut to Peter’s camera’s point-of-view shot gazing at her is instantly recognizable from the earlier films (see figures 19 to 22), with subtle differences that help to distinguish the characters. In *Spider-Man*, MJ embodied the ultimate passive object of the heterosexual male gaze through offering herself as a model, posing for the camera. Gwen, on the other hand, is oblivious to Peter’s (ethically questionable) photoshoot and the inclusion of the Vonnegut science fiction novel marks her out as

somewhat intellectual. Thus, while Gwen may be as physically attractive as MJ, the shot arguably focuses more on the character as a whole, as opposed to merely positioning her as an object of desire. The scene therefore simultaneously draws attention to Gwen and MJ's similarities in being Peter Parker's girlfriends, whilst also highlighting their differences in characterization and representation. Exactly how canny about this dynamic the filmmakers were is not clear, however it is also noteworthy that Peter Parker has a *Rear Window* poster hanging in his room.

Furthermore, Gwen's intelligence is a central feature of the character—it is quite often mentioned that she is the top of her class at Midtown Science High School and head intern for esteemed genetic biologist Dr Connors—and provides her the ability to play a large role in helping defeat the Lizard without superpowers or, indeed, supervision. Gwen is also never personally targeted by the Lizard, instead involving herself in the action of her own accord when she is able to help. On a related note, Gwen is in no way reliant on Peter/Spider-Man, and any sense of awe and wonder she may express towards him is not dwelled on for particularly long moments; for instance, a scene in which Peter and Gwen are shown swinging on a web through the city at night barely even focuses on the couple, let alone offers a close-up of Gwen's face filled with wonder, as occurs with MJ and the previous incarnation of Gwen. Instead, the camera simply stops following the tiny figures swinging through the shot as they exit it, rendering it a less ostentatious representation of both Peter's abilities and Gwen's feelings for him. This is not to say that Gwen's feelings for Peter are never shown on screen. Indeed, when the couple share a number of tender moments, the film signifies tender emotions, utilizing close-ups of facial expressions and soft classical non-diegetic music.



Figure 19 James Stewart's character in *Rear Window* spies on his neighbor through a telephoto lens, as indicated by a point-of-view shot.



Figure 20 Mary Jane poses for Peter's camera's point-of-view in *Spider-Man*.



Figure 21 Gwen Stacy is photographed in *Spider-Man 3*.



Figure 22 Peter secretly photographs Gwen from afar in *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

Regarding Gwen's doomed fate, the film often hints that Gwen will die but instead offers a number of "fake out" moments. Thus, the film is misleading when showing Gwen telling herself 'I'm in trouble' after having discovered that Peter is Spider-Man, and bidding him farewell as he jumps off her apartment block on his way to fight crime.

The most relevant scene in the film for this discussion is the big showdown between Spider-Man and the Lizard, which also features a number of self-reflexive moments. When the Lizard searches for Spider-Man at the high school, Peter must take him on whilst ensuring that Gwen is safe. The process of this is, however, more balanced than in previous representations. Spider-Man is at one point made powerless when the Lizard, who is more than double the size of Peter, smashes him against a window and begins squeezing his head in his hand. The shot cuts to Gwen, who was previously told by Peter to leave the school, swinging a large trophy, then cuts to the trophy hitting the Lizard over the head. This is followed by a medium long-shot of Gwen holding the trophy up, almost as a token of victory, as the Lizard turns around to face her. She walks backwards and the camera rises to the height of the Lizard, stooping over her, showcasing the Lizard's size and highlighting the bravery which Gwen must have possessed in order to intervene as she did. Spider-Man then has the opportunity to cocoon the Lizard in his web.

The scene incorporates the by now familiar motif of the unexpected physical aid of the superhero girlfriend in a moment when the hero has become incapacitated. These can range from useless, as in MJ's attempt to attack Dr Octopus in *Spider-Man 2*, to moderately successful, as in MJ's

assault on Eddie Brock in *Spider-Man 3* or Roxanne Simpson's (Eva Mendes) unanticipated use of a shotgun to disable the villain in *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007), to surprising, as in Pepper's defeat of Killian in *Iron Man 3*.

The scene is also coupled with a misleading moment which seems to forecast her death as Peter takes her in his arms and warns her that he is going to throw her out of the window. An exterior shot shows Gwen flying backwards through the air before a shot of web is slung at her, preventing her from falling and causing her to spring back forcefully. An aerial shot shows her terrified face but confirms that Peter's web-slinging antics did not, in fact, kill her (at least for now). She swings back and forth underneath the suspended part of the building (reminiscent of a bridge), smiling (figure 23). Had the film featured Gwen's death in the web-slinging scene instead of a light-hearted moment in which Peter gets her to safety through rather ruthless means, it could well have been read as a narrative punishment for her agency. However, the web-slinging scene defies such expectations and the juxtaposition of one much used narrative moment (girlfriend arrives in a nick of time to momentarily aid the hero) with another, which is then subverted (Gwen's death-by-webbing) makes for a unique dynamic which is perhaps symptomatic of Gwen's distinctiveness as a whole.



Figure 23 Gwen's rescue by Spider-Man's webbing does not, in this case, result in her death.

After the Lizard escapes the school through the sewers, Spider-Man follows him whilst phoning Gwen for aid, asking whether she could go to Connors' workplace and produce a serum that will cure Connors. As Connors' intern, Gwen is able to carry out this task and agrees to help

Spider-Man. Due to the fact that Gwen's intelligence had been highlighted throughout the film, she is portrayed as making a valuable contribution with her skills and intellect. Following a scene in which the Lizard releases a gas which also turns innocent bystanders into lizards, the scene cuts to Gwen in Connor's laboratory, privileging her action over any further scenes involving Spider-Man and the Lizard. Peter, having discovered that the Lizard is on his way to the building to retrieve a machine which he will use to release a cloud of lizard chemical above the city, phones Gwen in the lab and warns her that the Lizard is on his way. Gwen tells Peter that the antidote is not yet finished, but Peter tells her to get out of the building anyway. A shot of the antidote timer tells us that there are eight minutes remaining as the sense of tension and danger for Gwen mounts. Peter even says to her, 'You leave right now. That's an order, okay?' but Gwen denies his request, deciding to help the people left in the building, taking the initiative even though she has no powers of her own.

The Lizard breaks through the emergency barriers Gwen had put into motion. Following this, the film offers another "fake out," as Gwen hides in a storage cupboard when the Lizard is approaching, protectively holding the canister that contains the lizard chemical. A close-up of Gwen's scared face as she hides in the dark indicates what a moment of peril this is. She can see him through the blinds in front of a window that looks out onto the lab, as he plods through the room. It cuts to the Lizard, who sniffs the air with his mouth open, indicating Gwen's impending doom when he finds her. The camera tilts up Gwen's frozen body, still clutching the canister, the blinds creating a striped shadow effect, adding a gothic horror atmosphere to the scene. Her head is raised and her eyes closed in fear, a shot accompanied by the sounds of the Lizard's frenzied efforts to find her. The camera zooms into her face, her lips quivering. It cuts to a shot of the Lizard appearing behind the blind, and Gwen screaming in close-up as he rips through the blind with his hand. By all means, this could be the end for Gwen, whose horror is illustrated throughout the scene. But Gwen is next shown using a spray can filled with a flammable liquid combined with a lighter as a blow torch, firing towards him. The reverse shot shows the lizard shielding himself from the flame with this hand, and with the other, reaching over to Gwen and merely grabbing the canister before backing off. Gwen emits a

sigh of relief before edging out of the cupboard as the antidote machine signals that the antidote is complete. Once again, the narrative appeared to be moving towards Gwen's death, but eventually presenting Gwen successfully fending off the Lizard.

Gwen's character history calls for an analysis framed by discourses of death and the imperilment of victimized women. Indeed, throughout this discussion, it has been difficult to make sense of the character through any other terms. In *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Gwen's character effectively combines heroic traits such as resourcefulness and intelligence with the character type of the superhero girlfriend in a way which provides the character significantly more flexibility than do previous iterations. Whilst the film does incorporate frequently used elements which are associated with the superhero girlfriend, such as the unexpected battle intervention, the film refers to and then subverts Gwen's famous death storyline. Despite not being able to personally hand the antidote to Spider-Man because her police chief father intercepts her journey and takes on the task himself, Gwen's role in the film is more than merely a helper or instrument used by the hero.

Though Gwen does not occupy as much screen space as Peter, her presence in the film is arguably vital and, importantly, the scenes in which she appears go beyond emotional moments with Peter and scenes of victimization. The heightened sense of tenderness in emotional scenes may suggest that the film was more geared towards women. Indeed, Sony Picture's chairman of marketing and distribution, Jeff Blake, has stated that the promotions tied to the film were targeted at men and boys, as well as 'younger women and moms' (Graser 2012), while Rory Bruer, president of worldwide distribution for Sony claimed that 'this is a film that has something for women' (Grover and Richwine 2012). Though one may feel inclined to correlate these developments with Gwen's transgressive representation, it must be noted that the actual manifestation of this increased awareness of the female audience by distribution and marketing staff is a film which does not favor the romance as much as these sources suggest. Indeed, *Variety* reporter Marc Graser concluded that the film's 'core audience is still men,' despite the various "feminine" product tie-ins such as make-up (Graser 2012). In fact, there is little difference in terms of the sheer volume of romance scenes between *The Amazing Spider-Man* and

Raimi's Spider-Man films. What is different is not the amount of emotional content present in the film, but the way in which the film utilizes that emotional content: namely, Raimi's *Spider-Man* films take the route of using the hero's romantic interest as a plot device, while *The Amazing Spider-Man* presents the relationship as its own subplot. Thus, *The Amazing Spider-Man* is not necessarily particularly ground-breaking in its audience address or consideration of female audiences (although it is noteworthy that it was characterized in the popular media as such); it does, however offer a more malleable understanding of what a superhero girlfriend can do within a narrative, whilst still including a character who is a staple of the genre.

Gwen Stacy's death was included in *The Amazing Spider-Man's* sequel, *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*. The scene is initiated after a showdown between the new Green Goblin, Harry Osborn (Dane DeHaan), and Spider-Man on the rooftop of Oscorp, the company owned by Harry's father. As Harry levitates on his Glider, he faces Spider-Man, then turns to look at Gwen, who had been at the scene due to her involvement in dealing with the film's other villain, Electro (Jamie Foxx), by once again utilizing her scientific expertise. Her death is foreshadowed through costuming—she is wearing a nigh-exact replica of the clothing drawn for the character in the comic books. Harry cackles and says to Spider-Man, 'You don't give people hope—you take it away. I'm gonna take away yours,' as he turns on his Glider and swoops over to Gwen, carrying her into the night. The scene is predictable in its adherence to the "women in refrigerators" narrative, and in particular through its characterization of Gwen as being symbolic of more than merely a character—she is symbolic of hope. The forceful removal of this symbol thus has ideological ramifications for the film.

Spider-Man pursues Harry to a clock tower, in which a dramatic fight and Gwen's ultimate death occur. Gwen, having temporarily reached safety, is pushed from her perch on a large cog and suspended by one arm with a strand of Spider-Man's web. The tension of the scene is marked by the complex configuration of characters within the inner workings of the clock: Spider-Man is lying on one cog on his back, with one fist clenched around the web suspending Gwen, while Harry is over Spider-Man, though he has been bound around the neck by webbing. All the while, Spider-Man must prevent the cogs from turning or else the strand of web on which

Gwen is hanging will snap. This he is unable to do, as the intercut shots of the individual parts of the clock moving—cogs and the minute hand—indicate, followed by the snapping of the web in slow motion, and Gwen gasping as she begins to fall (figure 24). Harry is knocked over by the collapse of the cogs, while Spider-Man jumps after Gwen.



Figure 24 Gwen falls to her death.

The slow motion of the scene showcases the workings of Spider-Man's web fluid, which he shoots towards Gwen. In a close-up the strands of web expand, reaching out like a hand. The film reverts back to normal speed and cuts to the web hitting Gwen's abdomen, followed by a shot of Spider-Man clinging to a beam, then by a shot of the web strand becoming taut, and finally a shot of Gwen forcefully recoiling. Her head appears to hit the ground, an action supported by a loud, diegetic thump, suggesting that she died from the impact. This is interesting since it lessens Peter's role in causing her death with his web; instead he is more indirectly responsible through not responding quickly enough and shooting the web earlier.

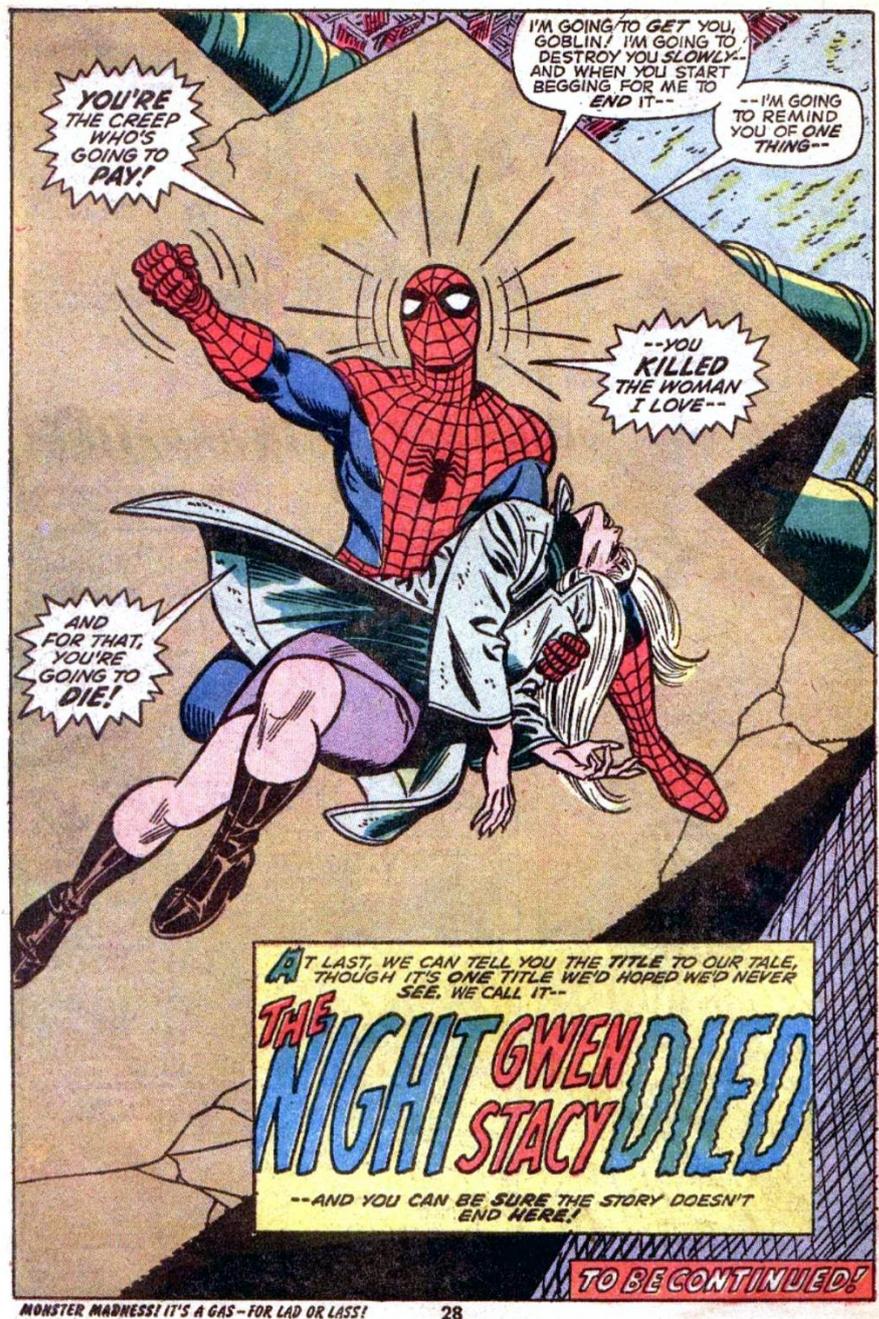


Figure 25 Gwen dies in Spider-Man's arms in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (Conway and Kane 1973a).



Figure 26 Gwen's death in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

Indeed, Marvel Studios founder, Avi Arad, is quoted stating that

The cause of death here is love, commitment, personal choice. It wouldn't be fair to put it all on him and for a lifetime have him think "If I didn't try to save her, maybe she would have survived?"

(Arad in Madison 2014)

This statement is revealing in the light of scenes occurring before Gwen's death, in which Gwen, much like MJ at the end of *Spider-Man 2*, asserts her personal freedom regarding her involvement in Peter's heroics. Prior to the battle with Electro (and her subsequent kidnapping by Harry), Gwen had aided Peter by again offering her scientific expertise when he realized that his web shooters were useless against Electro, who has the power to control electricity. Gwen created a magnetized web shooter for Peter and was ready to join him in battle, but Peter disallows this and sticks her hand to a nearby car with his web. Gwen appears before the battle, having driven in a police car to the power station where Peter located Electro, and again helping the hero by crashing the car into Electro, buying Peter some time. Incensed that Gwen would have the audacity to follow him, Peter, as Spider-Man, yells at Gwen while Gwen laments to him that she can be of help. This culminates in Gwen stating, 'Okay, guess what? Nobody makes my decisions for me! Alright? Nobody! This is *my* choice, okay? *My* choice. Mine' (original emphasis). Spider-Man groans as Gwen asks how they could stop Electro, finally giving in to Gwen's "choice."

Taking into consideration Arad's statement, as well as the scene's foregrounding of Gwen's "choice," alongside issues of postfeminist culture's "choice" rhetoric outlined in the Introduction, the film's inclusion of the famous death is further problematized. *The Amazing Spider-Man* appears to celebrate the rhetoric of choice that allows Gwen to actively place herself in narrative danger (in turn overcoming it while complexifying the existing tropes which place women in such roles). *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, however, indicates how notions of choice, though celebrated, carry with them the burden of essentially *choosing to die*. Postfeminist individualism therefore places responsibility of Gwen's death on *Gwen herself*, particularly when considering Arad's insistence that the notion of 'personal choice' is the cause of death. In a sense then, the very machinations of "women in refrigerators" become ensconced by the discourses of "choice" present in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, which stress

the individual decision made by the superhero girlfriend to become involved in the fight, rather than having her be kidnapped or held against her will. Reference is made to notions of agency, while gender hierarchies remain in place. As such, Gwen's death can be read as punishment for her previous "transgressions," while also having a complex relationship with postfeminist discourses of choice and women's self-fulfilment.

Equally of note is the scene's discursive framing as "inevitable." The film's executive producer Matt Tomalch stated that Gwen's victimization was necessary in order to raise the stakes for Peter's character, claiming, 'that's what makes for a great story ... What's real tragedy? It's not when something happens to somebody you don't care about. So you have to step up to the challenge and be comfortable with the risk' (Tomalch in Wigler 2014). He continues that

When you decide that you're going to tell the Gwen Stacy story, you know you're going to end up there. You just try to put it off for a little while, because you don't want to lose Emma [Stone]. You don't want to lose Gwen. You don't want to lose that dynamic ... *But these movies are all about Peter Parker and his journey in life and as Spider-Man.*

(Tomalch in Wigler 2014, emphasis added)

Spider-Man actor Andrew Garfield similarly claimed that it 'would have been strange' not to include Gwen's death within her narrative (Garfield in Wigler 2014). As discussed earlier in the chapter, focus is brought back onto the tragedy of the male hero in these discourses, while the cultural implications of these women's narrative deaths are not invoked. There is nothing about Gwen's death which is intrinsically "necessary" or "unavoidable" within this narrative—it is, of course, a cultural construct, written and created by people (predominantly men) who make creative choices with regards to how the film should play out. And yet, Gwen's death was included in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*'s as a narrative "necessity" in order to bolster the hero's journey of self-actualization.

RECUPERATING THE SUPERHERO GIRLFRIEND

The purpose of this chapter has been to draw attention to the multiplicities present in a character type which has been neglected from critical accounts

of superhero narratives. My initial discussion of women featured in the *Punisher* and *Spider-Man* films, as well as, briefly, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* showed the ways in which the “women in refrigerators” narrative trope has been, and continues to be, applied to on-screen reimaginings of Marvel girlfriends. The films doubly function within comic book traditions and action cinema traditions, featuring women whose peril acts as the motivator for the male hero’s action. These characters are therefore shaped by modes of “active passivity.”

Pepper Potts of the *Iron Man* films and Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man* are amongst the more multifaceted of these superhero girlfriend characters. My discussion of the *Iron Man* films illustrates how character mobility can function across films within franchises, and shows that the superhero girlfriend character can embody a number of multifaceted and paradoxical feminine subjectivities, each linked to the culture that produces them. Similarly, *The Amazing Spider-Man* promotes Gwen’s intelligence, resourcefulness and bravery, whilst simultaneously valuing her role as a superhero girlfriend. However, these films also engage with postfeminist discourses, projecting a paradoxical and elusive image of feminine subjectivity and actively drawing from feminist notions of agency within the postfeminist rhetoric of choice.

Interestingly, numerous superhero girlfriends on film have undergone changes in terms of profession when compared to the comics, usually becoming scientifically inclined in their on-screen forms. Jane Foster went from being a nurse to being an astrophysicist, while Betty Ross, who was merely an army general’s daughter, became a scientist both in *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) and the rebooted *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008). Gwen Stacy similarly went from being a high school student to being top of the class at a science school, while Susan Storm (who is both a girlfriend and a heroine) of the *Fantastic Four* is similarly presented as a scientist in 2015’s rebooted *Fantastic Four* (Josh Trank, 2015).⁵ Even Pepper Potts became Tony’s personal assistant (then CEO), rather than being a secretary. Further, those girlfriends who are scientifically inclined are more likely to feature in the action of the final showdowns

⁵ The film’s title was stylized as *FANTASTIC* and I henceforth refer to it as such in order to differentiate the film from 2005’s *Fantastic Four*.

between the heroes and the villains as their scientific skills and intelligence can be of use (others are permitted to help whilst under strict order of the hero). The change of professions may be some attempt by filmmakers to integrate these traditionally helpless characters into the action of the central narrative. The coming forward of scientifically-minded characters is interesting during a time in which women are still underrepresented in STEM fields (Usdansky and Gordon 2016). This is a symptom of the ‘luminosity’ or visibility of women in high-ranking professional positions in the popular media which McRobbie describes in her discussion of postfeminist culture (McRobbie 2009). This visibility of young, successful women is part of the theatrics of postfeminist culture which, in McRobbie’s terms, further serves to regulate feminine subjects *through* their increased luminosity, which is ‘created by the light itself’: ‘They are clouds of light which give young women a shimmering presence, and in so doing they also mark out the terrain of the consummately and reassuringly feminine’ (McRobbie 2009, 60).

I have thus far offered an account of the ways in which representations of superhero girlfriends are bargained with. As noted, there is no single way of conceptualizing superhero girlfriend characters, although there are obvious trends and themes running through all of them. Evidently, all of the films discussed portray a brand of white, middle-class, heterosexual femininity which ultimately skews portrayals of gender, sexuality, class and race. These aspects of female representation are considered in more detail in Chapter 5. Despite this, it is imperative not to write these characters off as “poor representation.” While many of these representations are indeed limiting, an interrogation into their cultural history and deeper analysis of their cinematic construction can provide valuable insights into notions of gender within a cultural consciousness. Whether the superhero girlfriend will ever be able to move away from limited portrayals remains unknown. She should be considered more than just a pretty face, or a valuable object which is in need of rescuing, since she generates as much discussion as do heroic characters, whose representation I next interrogate.

2.

'WHO'S HIDING? DICKHEAD!'

CONFIGURATIONS OF FEMININE STRENGTH AND HERO(INE)ISM IN MARVEL FILMS

The previous chapter considered the variable representations of Marvel women who do *not* possess superpowers or martial arts skills honed by training. Though this does not mean that these women are absent from action scenes, it does mean that they are rarely presented as being in a position to physically fend off villains. This chapter examines the other side of the proverbial coin of Marvel women—female characters who are superheroes—assessing the ways in which power is negotiated within the characters, and how this is ultimately tied to postfeminist culture.

When initially considered, the heroines in these films could be perceived as standing on equal footing to any male heroes. However, a closer analysis reveals the complex negotiation of physical power that is often at work in these films. A major element in the representation of tough female characters in contemporary action cinema in general is the incorporation of postfeminist discourses. Likewise, a number of theorists have made note of the confining nature of representations of female action heroism, claiming that these films frequently work to limit the power of these heroines as compensation for their toughness (Tasker 1993, 19; Inness 1998; Purse 2011a, 79–82). There has been a widespread increase in the inclusion of female heroes in contemporary Hollywood films, due in part to the coming forward of “empowered” women in media representations (as mentioned in the previous chapter), as well as ‘the economic advances of women and a revised view of “womanhood” in recent decades’ (Waites 2008, 207). But these characters do not exist in a vacuum, and postfeminist culture has implications when considering this particular view of “womanhood.”

This chapter incorporates an analysis of a range of female superheroic characters who incorporate postfeminist sentiments whilst also being limited by what I refer to as “frustration tactics” brought on by anxieties regarding female empowerment in a patriarchal culture. I

categorize the representations in terms of narrative, visual and comedic frustration, drawing attention to the postfeminist discourses that run alongside these mechanisms before focusing on the relatively rare, yet potentially disruptive, phenomenon of the Marvel teen heroine. I end this chapter with a discussion of the role of postfeminist masquerade, particularly with regards to Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow in *The Avengers*. Alongside Jean Grey in *X2* (Bryan Singer, 2003), these characters are offered as specific case studies emblematic of the multifaceted nature of heroines in Marvel films.

Postfeminist discourses are markedly present throughout the representations of women discussed. Notably, Marvel films offer a vision of feminine heroism infused with sexualization, frustration and irony, which takes the shape of a distinctively white, heterosexual female subjectivity apparently liberated from political struggles or the need to consider the social ramifications of her actions.

SUPERHEROINES AND THE COMIC BOOK "TRADITION"

As illustrated in the previous chapter, Marvel adaptations have a complex relationship to their publication histories. However, with a history that spans over fifty years, challenges arise when considering which aspects of the characters are adaptable in the postfeminist era. Madrid notes that in the past, superheroines were portrayed as weaker than their male counterparts, and were often more devoted to finding true love than fighting crime (Madrid 2009, 57). This is demonstrated, for example, by the cover of *X-Men* #1, published in 1963 (figure 27), which features four superpowered mutants facing off against Magneto, ‘earth’s most powerful super villain!!’ (Lee and Kirby 1963) who has powers of magnetism. The only character not actively joining in the fight is a lone young woman lingering in the background. Jean Grey was the only female character on the team of X-“Men” and her introduction on this cover is indicative of the limitations faced by women in a patriarchal society—men did the hard work while women lingered in the background. Madrid notes similar visuals on the first

issue of *Fantastic Four*, on which Susan Storm, the Invisible Girl, appears helpless (Madrid 2009, 107).



Figure 27 Jean Grey lingers in the background of the cover to *X-Men* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1963)

Another heavily relied on characteristic of superheroines in comics is the notion that they cannot adequately control their powers (Madrid 2009, 232) and that they could at any given point go mad with power and become evil

(Madrid 2009, 231–32). These themes are discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

Both comic book superheroes and superheroines wear skin-tight costumes and bear enhanced gendered signifiers (muscles for men; bodily “curves” for women). Indeed, comic books are no strangers to unapologetic objectification, as Scott Bukatman maintains (Bukatman 2003, 65). The crucial distinction lies in the differences between the sexualization of male and female bodies. As Richard Dyer notes in his assessment of the male pin-up, the emphasis on muscles on the objectified male body draws attention to ‘the body’s potential for action’ (Dyer 2002, 129), which is not necessarily present in female pin-ups. This could be another incarnation of Mulvey’s active/passive divide, with masculine signifiers negating any possibility of feminizing objectification in the sexualized male.

Dyer’s findings regarding the male pin-up effectively apply to the representation of superheroes in comics. The cover of *Wolverine* #13, for example, features the central character shirtless, his bulging muscles on display, his body in motion and apparently on fire as his oversized enemy approaches him from behind (David and Buscema 1989). Meanwhile, the cover of *Spider-Woman* #26 shows the eponymous heroine cornered against a cracking wall, spread-eagled, while a large circular saw makes its way towards her between her legs, and a villainous man watches her from the safety of his own panel in the bottom corner (Fleisher and Leialoha 1980). Considering these respective covers, though both characters are in threatening situations, it is *Wolverine*’s portrayal which dwells on his muscles as signifiers of masculine power, while *Spider-Woman*’s body appears soft and vulnerable to the saw (figures 28 and 29). The differences in the representation of male and female characters in comic books is undeniable—so undeniable that the online project “The Hawkeye Initiative”⁶ seeks to draw attention to these differences by encouraging users to submit their own drawings of Marvel hero Clint Barton, a.k.a. Hawkeye, in poses which are usually used to represent female characters, with jolting results (Melrose 2012).

⁶ thehawkeyeinitiative.com

That comic books have been aimed at heterosexual men can explain the prevalence of objectified women within these texts (Pustz 2000, 101), another parallel between comics and mainstream film. Indeed, the sexualization of women in comics reached its peak with the so-called “Bad Girl” art style which was hugely popular in the 1990s and took the already exaggerated comic book art styles to ridiculous extremes (figure 30). Brown recalls that ‘in a blatant attempt to attract the attention of the mostly male adolescent comics consumer, publishers flooded the shelves with titles featuring leggy and buxom superheroines in revealing, skin-tight costumes’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 53).



Figure 28 Cover of *Wolverine* #13 (David and Buscema 1989)



Figure 29 Cover of *Spider-Woman* #26 (Fleisher and Leialoha 1980)



Figure 30 Cover of *Avengelyne Armageddon* #2 , an example of the bad girl art of the 1990s (Liefeld, Napton, and Clark 1997)

However, with the above points in mind, it is worth noting that postfeminist discourses have penetrated comic books just as they have other media. As Madrid puts it ‘compared to men, comic book superheroines may have been shortchanged in the power department, but these women had a secret weapon that has kept them in the game for the past sixty years—sex appeal’ (Madrid 2009, 299). What Madrid fails to note is that this focus on sex appeal as “powerful” makes use of postfeminist sentiments which take for granted that women *are* empowered, ignoring the struggles of women who are yet to reach that level, especially those rendered invisible by postfeminist culture (queer women, women of color, women with disabilities, poor women, etc.). Thus, the celebration of sex appeal as a source of power can be read as removed from political implications regarding the objectification of women in Western culture and the power dynamics thereof. Indeed, the focus on sex appeal is present in both comics and film, and is a topic which has been addressed by numerous authors, as I discuss next.

POSTFEMINIST CULTURE AND FEMALE HEROISM IN MARVEL FILMS

The issue of the sexualized action heroine has been a topic of discussion for decades, but in order to set the scene I begin here with an outline of existing debates about the supposed “cross-dressing” of such characters. Since at least the debut of the masculinized action heroine Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) and its sequel *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986) (figure 31), scholarly (and popular) discourse has framed the character in terms of the ways in which she is supposedly presented as being “like a man.” This is in part due to her very presence at the center of a narrative which calls for action heroism, but also because of her gender-neutral name, and overwhelmingly, because of her muscular appearance in the latter film. This is summarized by Harvey Greenberg in his 1988 article:

Aliens infers that to become a competent woman one must learn to manipulate the tangible or verbal instruments of aggression, which patriarchal society formerly reserved for men alone. One must never “take shit” from anyone, of any stripe. One must practice

eternal vigilance against the threat of the alien “other,” whether to one’s prestige, possessions, or progeny. One must be ready to “get it on,” anywhere, anytime, against the despicable enemy.

(Greenberg 1988, 171)



Figure 31 Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley, the masculinized action heroine of *Aliens*

For critics such as Greenberg, figures such as Ripley are semiotically coded as masculine, which, in essence makes them men, or “figurative males” (Hills 1999). Similar sentiments have been put forward by Richard Reynolds in his brief consideration of superheroines in comics. This time, however, he imagines a hypothetical feminist criticism of these characters, which he suggests would go something like this:

any feminist critic could demonstrate that most of these characters fail to inscribe specifically female qualities: they behave in battle like male heroes with thin waists and silicone breasts, and in repose are either smugly domestic ... or brooding and remote—a slightly threatening male fantasy.

(Reynolds 1992, 79–80)

Given that Reynolds is not necessarily presenting his own argument but rather that of some imaginary feminist, this statement potentially reveals more about the ways in which *feminists* are thought about rather than action women. However, it still invokes the same ideas as those of Greenberg—that action women aren’t “really” women. This approach has subsequently been criticized by Tasker (1993, 149–50), Hills (1999) and others. Indeed,

Tasker proposes the notion of “musculinity” as a way of making sense of these characters. She argues,

“Musculinity” indicates the way in which the signifiers of strength are not limited to male characters. These action heroines though, are still marked as women, despite the arguments advanced by some critics that figures like Ripley are merely men in drag.

(Tasker 1993, 150)

I will return to the issue of gendered signifiers in Chapter 4, but for the moment it is useful to consider this retort to the men-in-drag argument. A similar idea is supported by Hills, who notes that arguments which suggest that action women are “figurative males” are testament to the binaristic notions of gender through which they are analyzed (these, Hills notes, are of a largely psychoanalytic nature). She continues, ‘From this perspective, active and aggressive women in the cinema can only be seen as phallic, unnatural or ‘figuratively male’ (Hills 1999, 45). Hills ultimately draws attention to the ways in which Ripley adapts to her surroundings, often using technology to modify her body, essentially questioning binaristic notions of gender. She concludes that

active heroines such as Ripley are becoming something other than the essentialized concept of Woman held in a mutually exclusive relation to Man. Furthermore, if action heroines become empowered and even violent through their use of technology, this is not to say that they are somehow no longer “really” women, but that they are intelligent and necessarily aggressive females in the context of their role as the central figures of action genre films.

(Hills 1999, 46)

Thus, it is not in my interests to make deductions over whether action women are simply “men in drag.” Indeed, from a constructionist perspective, it should not be the critic’s business to declare whether anyone is “really” a woman or man. Further, in framing these representations in terms of drag, these authors do a disservice to drag studies themselves, in which general arguments over the transgressiveness of cross-dressing are discouraged in favor of an approach which contextualizes every individual instance of drag (Halberstam 2005, 404). Likewise, as Tasker suggests, cross-dressing women are discursively constructed (and socially positioned) in differing ways to cross-dressing men. Whereas women are often considered to dress like men in order to obtain equal status, men’s dressing

as women is considered more transformational and transgressive (Tasker 1998, 35). As a result of these tensions, one wonders what critics might have thought of Ripley if she were a male character coded as feminized (a “figurative woman,” so to speak?).

And yet, as I mentioned in the Introduction, the figure of the action heroine remains fascinating *because* she is positioned within texts so heavily associated with masculinity. However, rather than arguing for the notion that these women are “figuratively male,” I suggest that these debates indicate the complex relationship they have with their cultural contexts, and the frustrations scholars face when considering these figures. As such, I advocate an approach which steers away from making assertions about whether or not these women can “really” be women, instead focusing on the ways in which postfeminist culture informs and shapes the ways in which action woman are represented. Furthermore, issues of gender performativity are more explicitly discussed in Chapter 4.

As noted, a large element of presenting contemporary female heroes is the apparent necessity that they look sexy whilst fighting crime, a phenomenon which has interested many. In his article, Gray argues that for female superheroes, power (specifically control over it) is directly correlated to their levels of “hotness” (R. J. Gray 2011, 83). The more control that Jean Grey wields over her powers in the *X-Men* films, for example, the “hotter” and more sexually alluring she becomes (R. J. Gray 2011, 83). With regards to postfeminist culture, it could be said that the women that are presented in such a way in these films are empowered through their sex appeal, since “natural” sexual differences between men and women are eroticized and sexualized in postfeminist culture, while women are encouraged to monitor their own adherence to these ideals of sexualized femininity (Gill 2007). There is a huge difference, for instance, between the slender-bodied X-women and the muscular, masculine action women of earlier decades (Ripley in *Aliens* or Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* [James Cameron, 1991]) (J. A. Brown 2011a, 146). This approach has been suggested by Inness and Brown respectively as being more likely to position women as sexual objects, thereby potentially negating much of the power they wield (Inness 1998, 40; J. A. Brown 2011a, 16, 43). However, the representation of women as being powerfully sexy is part and parcel of

postfeminist culture. In the words of Gray, these films offer male viewers ‘a “best of both worlds” scenario: they possess both the physical ass-kicking strength and strong sex appeal that men need in order to satisfy their “scopophilic drive”’ (R. J. Gray 2011, 81).

Likewise, Marc O’Day coined the term ‘action babes’ referring to heroines in action films who offer a ‘simultaneous re-inscription and questioning of the binary oppositions which structure common-sense understandings of gender in patriarchal consumer culture’ (O’Day 2004, 202). He further states that action cinema ‘doubles up’ Mulvey’s concept of to-be-looked-at-ness, that the action heroine ‘can be seen to function simultaneously as the action subject of narrative and the erotic object of visual spectacle’ (O’Day 2004, 203). O’Day’s article is at times uncritical of these sentiments, at others contradictory when he claims that masculinity is ‘not particularly significant in the action babe movies’ (O’Day 2004, 203), but also that ‘these heroines are undoubtedly coded as masculine’ (O’Day 2004, 205). What is clear from his analysis are the ways in which representations which highlight feminine beauty in superheroines incorporate feminist discourses of women’s empowerment whilst only privileging specific configurations of that empowerment (e.g. slim, white, feminine beauty).

Importantly, neither O’Day nor Gray mention the implications of this incorporation of white feminine beauty, sex appeal and physical power in the context of contemporary postfeminist discourses. While it may be true that these heroines are portrayed as empowered, an emphasis on sex appeal as constituting power is a factor that I argue is currently specific to female characters. Due to the differences in the ways in which men and women are sexualized in Western culture, it is difficult to imagine, for example, Wolverine using his sexuality in an “empowering” way. Further, it is rare for a heroic woman to actually be shown as *actively* sexual in conjunction with being heroic. As I discuss in the following chapter, women in these films who actively pursue a sexual partner or are presented as sexual aggressors tend to be evil.

The sex appeal discussed by Gray and O’Day is thus actually *sexualization* applied to the characters, rather than an unabashed display of women who are indulging in their sexuality. Thus, while postfeminist

culture is interested in encouraging the self-objectification of women (Gill 2007, 158), it can actually be seen to have a somewhat awkward relationship with these images. Additionally, Gray shifts the focus back to what ‘men need,’ a statement which recenters men (but does not specify which men) within debates about feminine subjectivities on screen. Rather, I would suggest, the feminine characters are caught in an awkward bind between being the passive bearers of the look, and being active within the narrative, as is pointed out by O’Day. Still, as Gill points out, in a culture in which ‘sexual violence is endemic’ and representations of female empowerment are so exclusionary these portrayals should be approached with care (Gill 2007, 152).

The contradictions inherent in postfeminist texts in many cases result in the systematic limitation of superheroines, often through the very mechanisms which inform postfeminist culture. Tasker has, for example, suggested that ‘images of women seem to need to compensate for the figure of the active heroine by emphasising her sexuality, her availability within traditional feminine terms’ (Tasker 1993, 19). Similarly, Inness is concerned with the subtle ways in which media representations of tough women function to limit that toughness (Inness 1998). Inness traces the action women of a range of media throughout several decades, from the ‘pseudo-tough’ women of *Charlie’s Angels* (1976-1981, ABC) to the paradoxically tough characters such as Ripley of the *Alien* film series (1979-2007), who despite bearing signifiers of masculinity are also narratively and visually feminized (Inness 1998, 31–49, 102–19). Inness’ overarching argument is that women in these roles are never portrayed as being simply heroic, and that traditional configurations of femininity must be reinscribed within the characters. This bears suspicious resemblance to the idea that action women are just pretending to be men—in the sense that they are being too much “like men,” and so need to be made “like women” again. However, the reliance of popular representations on these mechanisms should not be underestimated.

Importantly, these claims are not intended to devalue femininity itself, but rather indicate the gendered imbalance within Hollywood traditions. In Western cultural terms, masculinity encapsulates physical strength and a lack of femininity; thus, femininity incorporates physical

weakness and a lack of masculinity, reinforcing the rigid gender binary (this point is returned to in Chapter 4). Indeed, this reinforcing of the traditionally feminine is itself a symptom of postfeminist discourses, as Negra suggests that

postfeminism entails an aggressive (re)codification of female types. In gestures that often tout the “freedom” from political correctness, postfeminist culture revives the “truths” about femininity that circulated in earlier eras ... The postfeminist twist here is that women are to apply these characterizations to others and sometimes to themselves in a display of their political and rhetorical “freedom.”

(Negra 2009a, 10)

Furthermore, Purse, in her study of contemporary action cinema, posits that films such as those discussed here enforce ‘containment strategies’ on their female characters which are used to limit the power of action heroines and ‘work to contain the threat embodied by the presence of the physically powerful women’ (Purse 2011a, 81). As evidenced in this chapter, films based on Marvel comics contain cinematic, narrative and visual mechanisms which prevent these characters from carrying out heroic actions. Purse borrowed the term ‘containment strategies’ from theorist Ed Guerrero, who applied it to the representation of black subjectivities in Hollywood buddy movies (Guerrero 1993). Due to the potentially problematic nature of applying a term which refers to a specific mode of representing black subjectivities to the representation of mostly white women, I prefer to use the term “frustration tactics,” though this is not to discredit Purse’s revealing analysis.

The term “frustration tactics” speaks to the specificities of the postfeminist mode of female superheroic representation. The word “frustration” is particularly fitting. Frustration implies the prevention of a progression (in this case, female empowerment as shaped by feminist politics). However, for a progression to be prevented in the first place, “frustration” connotes, then the progression must be embraced. Like postfeminist culture, then, frustration tactics involve an embrace of feminist politics before quashing them, preventing them from being fulfilled or casting them off as unnecessary. This can be further differentiated from the term “containment strategies” since “containment,” here, is suggestive of restriction or limitation. However, this alone does not fully express

postfeminist culture's reliance on the *simultaneous embrace of that which it holds back*. The particular postfeminist mode of gender representation is therefore more usefully made sense of through the metaphor of frustration.

Though I divide frustration tactics into three categories, it is important to recognize that they are not disparate modes of representation and that they can and do work in conjunction with one another, forming an intricate network of gendered discursive constructs. It must also be noted that such frustrated portrayals do not necessarily deem these films as offering "poor representations" of women; rather they exemplify the ways in which power is not a "straightforward" feature of female superheroes, and that quite often the films utilize postfeminist discourses as a way to conveniently displace the difficulties that accompany portraying such characters.

1) Narrative Frustration

Blade: Trinity (David Goyer, 2004), the third instalment of the *Blade* series—which follows the human-vampire hybrid vampire hunter Blade (Wesley Snipes)—features a sassy female vampire hunter named Abby Whistler (Jessica Biel). Abby fights alongside Hannibal King (Ryan Reynolds) and the Nightstalkers, flushing out vampires in the city. The team joins forces with Blade to stop a contemporary re-imagining of Dracula called Drake (Dominic Purcell).

After being introduced within a conventionally postfeminist framework of masquerade (discussed in detail later), Abby's role in the film is downplayed throughout the rest of the film, limiting the threat she may pose towards binaristic notions of female weakness and male power. This is further problematized by the marginalization of Blade's character in comparison to the previous *Blade* films. In narrative terms, Blade, a black action hero, is jettisoned in favor of two white characters, Abby and Hannibal; and Abby, a white woman, is in turn narratively frustrated. Indeed, Rikke Schubart suggests Abby's function within the film is to rework notions of femininity against the respective constructions of masculinity offered by Blade and Hannibal—"proper" masculinity and contemporary, metrosexual masculinity which incorporates "feminine"

sensitivity (though, I would add, Hannibal's representation additionally involves misogynistic and homophobic discourses) (Schubart 2007, 236).

Abby Whistler, according to Schubart, represents "proper," "natural" femininity in contrast to the villainess, Danica Talos, an aggressive vampire business woman (Schubart 2007, 236). These valid points notwithstanding, there is much more to say about Abby in terms of narrative and the ways in which she is cinematically constructed, as I note in the next section. Whilst engaging in comparatively fewer action sequences, the most striking instance of Abby's narrative frustration takes place in the final few scenes of the film, in which Drake is finally killed. Abby, having overpowered one of Drake's vampire henchman at Drake's headquarters, looks down from a mezzanine area at Drake and Blade's final confrontation. Abby's task had been to shoot Drake with a lethal poisonous arrow, but, despite her apparent skills evidenced in the rest of the film, missed. She eventually manages to hit Drake with an ordinary arrow, but it is Blade who has to finish the job by killing him with the discarded poisonous arrow. In the context of the scene, Abby's moment of failure is a denial of her completing the narrative arc which ended with Drake's death.

Another means of narrative frustration occurs in *Elektra*, a spin-off of *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), which centers on the eponymous assassin-turned-antiheroine (Jennifer Garner). As mentioned earlier, writers such as O'Day posit that action texts such as this one take for granted the fantastical skills and abilities that these heroines possess: '*they assume that women are powerful*' (O'Day 2004, 216, original emphasis). This is mostly true, especially when powers come from uncontrollable sources or, as with the X-Men, they are born with them.

However, Purse puts forth the notion that this is not always the case, and that a point is made of Elektra having learned how to fight through her 'fatherly mentor' (Purse 2011a, 83). In this sense, postfeminist action films enact a tension between the supposed natural, commonsensical quality of these heroines' abilities and the need to qualify them. Taking this a step further, *Elektra* contains an almost obsessive need to justify not only Elektra's abilities but also her character. Having died at the end of *Daredevil*, Elektra is revived and trains in the ancient martial art that offers her precognitive abilities alongside her physical prowess. However, Elektra

chooses to continue her immoral activities as an assassin. Great emphasis is placed on the ruthlessness of Elektra's character, though we only ever see her carrying out one of her jobs (which takes place in the dark, a matter I expand on in the next section). Verbal emphasis is placed on Elektra's lack of morality by her agent, McCabe (Colin Cunningham), who points out the futility of her killing all of her target's associates when she only gets paid for killing the target.

After Elektra is asked to kill a young girl and her father, she decides that she will help them instead. However, Elektra occupies the space of an antihero, an archetypal character type dating back to the classical era (Santas 2008, 158). Antiheroes lack qualities traditionally valued as heroic. They appear 'apathetic, angry, and indifferent to social, political, and moral concerns' (Beaver 2006, 15). With examples such as the central male characters appearing in *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987) and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), as well as figures such as Rambo, Hannibal Lecter, and Marvel's Wolverine and the Punisher, it becomes clear that the antihero is an unmistakably masculine phenomenon. On *Total Film*'s "50 Greatest Movie Antiheroes" list, there appeared but two women (one of whom was coupled with a man) (Wales 2011).

Because she is a woman, Elektra is a culturally marginalized and rarely portrayed variety of antihero. Therefore, anxiety regarding her power occur, potentially due to a lack of an established cultural language referring to how female antiheroes could be presented. A means of thwarting this anxiety involves the relentless use of flashback in order to justify her complex, often cynical existence. Indeed, the film contains no fewer than five flashback sequences, all concerned with Elektra's childhood: her father cruelly forcing her to swim in a pool too deep for her (shown twice), and the instance where she discovers her dead mother lying on her bed (shown three times). These flashback sequences offer a constant reminder that Elektra is troubled because of her childhood, in a way that is not present to this extent in Wolverine's or the Punisher's films. They narratively justify Elektra's character, frustrating her abilities to function within the narrative without being hampered by perpetual flashbacks.

Another scene in *Elektra* which demonstrates the discrepancies in representations between female and male antiheroes directly parallels a scene in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (figures 32 and 33). In *Origins*, Logan, who is yet to become known as Wolverine, is driving through the Canadian countryside with his girlfriend Kayla, describing his encounter with the villainous Colonel Stryker, who wants to recruit Logan. With Logan sharing a history with Stryker, Kayla asks him why he appears agitated and Logan tells her of his meeting with Stryker. Kayla asks, 'Why is he bothering you after all these years?' to which Logan quotes the famous phrase used repeatedly in the Wolverine comics (Claremont and Miller 1982), 'Because I'm the best there is at what I do, but what I do best isn't very nice.' Kayla responds to this by pointing out that his powers are a 'gift,' which Logan refutes and the scene cuts at this point.

Knowing that Stryker is probably up to no good, Kayla's question serves to explain why he would find Logan appealing for a morally questionable task. But Logan's answer is curt and simple, requiring no further explanation—he is simply good at doing not 'very nice' things. This is in contrast to the scene in *Elektra*, which bears striking resemblance to that in *Origins*, despite having been made some years earlier. Fleeing from the predatory ninja outfit the Hand, Elektra drives Abby Miller (Kristen Prout), the teenage girl who was originally her target, to safety while Abby sits on the backseat popping bubble-gum. Elektra irately turns around and glares at Abby for her annoying behavior while Abby snarkily smiles back at her. The next shot shows Elektra unimpressed, sarcastically stating 'I'm a soccer mom.' Herein the film acknowledges that the chaperoning of a young girl is a foreign experience for Elektra, the irony of which is driven home when Abby asks 'So you really kill people for a living?' When Abby asks why, Elektra answers 'It's what I'm good at,' echoing Logan's famous line. However, this is undercut when Abby states 'That's messed up,' asserting once again that Elektra is a troubled individual. Elektra can never embrace this existence without a struggle, whilst Wolverine's being good at not 'very nice' things is never really called into question, and is never referred to as 'messed up.'



Figure 32 ‘That’s messed up.’
Elektra discusses her job as an assassin with Abby.



Figure 33 ‘I’m the best there is at what I do, but what I do best isn’t very nice.’
Logan explains himself to Kayla.

Elektra demonstrates the strained relationship these films can have to their comic book incarnations. As evidenced in comics such as the 1980s series *Elektra: Assassin* (F. Miller and Sienkiewicz 2012), Elektra often embodies a brand of hyperviolence absent from Marvel film adaptations, due to the fact that these films are created with PG or PG-13 ratings in mind (Dupont 2012, 5). Thus, though much is spoken about the bloodshed caused by Elektra and her ruthless attitude, such occasions are never shown. Further, Elektra’s violent nature is rarely, if ever, explained or justified within these comic book narratives.



Figure 34 Cover of *Elektra: Assassin* #1 (F. Miller and Sienkiewicz 2012)

It is in such ways that feminine strength is qualified in these films, frustrating the heroines in their narrative development by stunting it through flashback. However, perhaps the most glaring narrative frustration comes in the form of superheroines who are unable to control their power. This frustration tactic bears the strongest relation to those present in comic books, as Madrid discusses, and is particularly acute in the cinematic representations of X-Men Rogue and Jean Grey. Indeed, the *X-Men* films have been described by Betty Kaklamanidou as enforcing a ‘mythos of patriarchy’ in which female characters are subordinate despite appearing empowered (Kaklamanidou 2011). Despite featuring a team of

superpowered mutants comprising male and female characters, the *X-Men* films are male-centric and focus largely on the exploits of Logan/Wolverine. This factor has been noted by Mark Gallagher, who states that the films ‘showcase physically powerful male heroes, renegotiating but continuing patriarchal tradition’ (Gallagher 2006, 195). Part of this reinforcement of patriarchal tradition takes the form of frustrating the power of female heroes.

X-Men (Bryan Singer, 2000) introduces a young girl, Marie (Anna Paquin), experiencing the manifestation of her powers for the first time. Marie, who adopts the codename Rogue, is in her bedroom with her boyfriend when her ability to absorb people’s energy through touch occurs. However, Rogue’s powers surface when she kisses her boyfriend, putting him into a three month coma. This conflation of sexual activity and threat indicates the strenuous nature of female power in these films, as Rogue’s power not only makes her dangerous—it makes her dangerous specifically to men. Furthermore, throughout the films Rogue’s powers are shown to limit her ability to have romantic relationships, rather than having an effect on friendship. In *X2* she is unable to kiss her new boyfriend Bobby (Shawn Ashmore), as she might hurt him, which leads to feelings of jealousy in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Brett Rattner, 2006), when Bobby spends more time with another young female mutant.

It is perhaps because of the threat that Rogue poses to masculine ideals that she is frustrated, despite being in possession of such awesome power. Rogue in the comics became one of the strongest characters after absorbing the Superman-like powers of Ms. Marvel in the 1980s (Claremont and Byrne 1980a). The cinematic Rogue is led through the narrative by male characters. Having run away from home, Rogue encounters Logan and is taken to Xavier’s school for mutants, where she is led by Professor X (Patrick Stewart), and then misled by the villain Magneto (Ian McKellen) and his Brotherhood of Mutants. Rogue also has no control over her powers, for accidentally touching someone could mean ending their life. Forever unable to use her powers productively, Rogue must keep her skin covered at all times. Her power is literally contained by gloves and other garments, a cocooning of the character which also functions on a visual level.

The most notable aspect of Rogue's characterization is its incorporation of the "women in refrigerators" trope discussed in the previous chapter within a heroic subjectivity. Despite possessing superpowers, Rogue is constantly in need of saving by the other (mostly male) heroes, but this only occurs *because* of the power she possesses. This is because Magneto seeks to use her as a tool in his plan to turn humans into mutants using a machine that requires Rogue's unique abilities to operate. The film's discourses signal anxieties over a young girl possessing this much power as she cannot possibly control it, but also because it inevitably leads to her capture and exploitation by Magneto. Her power is frustrated before she even has a chance to use it heroically.

Throughout *X2*, Rogue becomes more assertive, for instance using her powers actively to stop a classmate causing mass-destruction with his pyrokinetic powers, and rebelling against the mutant teachers' orders by hijacking the team's jet. However, Rogue's assertiveness is short-lived, as *The Last Stand* film introduces a readily-available mutant cure. Rogue is instantly attracted to the idea of getting rid of her powers because Bobby begins flirting with Kitty Pryde (Ellen Page). Despite Logan's concerns, Rogue decides the cure is what she wants, again evoking the postfeminist element of "choice," and is ultimately depowered, once again frustrating her powers and narrative.

Similarly, Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) has great difficulty controlling her powers in *X-Men* and *X2*. A powerful telepathic and telekinetic mutant, Jean is introduced as a doctor giving a speech to the senate to vote against the ominous Mutant Registration Act, again having been reimagined as a scientist like so many Marvel women. Still, despite the authority Jean clearly possesses in issues of mutant rights, the character's role in the narrative is primarily as a love interest to Logan and Scott Summers, a.k.a. Cyclops (James Marsden), in the central love triangle. After noticing Logan's advances, Scott warns him to 'stay away from my girl!' positioning her as Scott's possession. Further, the frustration tactic enforced upon Jean is similar to Rogue's in that Jean is unable to control her power; indeed this is stated time and again in *X-Men*. For instance, Jean states that she cannot operate Xavier's mutant tracking device, Cerebro, because 'it takes a degree of control to use it' and that it would be 'dangerous' for her to do so.

Despite this, Jean eventually uses Cerebro with little difficulty, reinforcing the notion that the narrative functions to lessen her power, even if by simply stating that she cannot control her power. At the end of the film, the *X-Men* work together to save Rogue, but Jean is left with permanent damage to her powers. In *X2*, Jean is even less able to control her powers, at times hearing everybody's thoughts at once. In spite of this, Jean effectively prevents a missile from hitting the X-Men's jet, but is unable to prevent a second missile from exploding, again indicating the contradictions present in the character. However, by the end of the film she takes steps to save her friends whilst sacrificing herself (this is discussed later).

Likewise, Susan Storm of the *Fantastic Four* was portrayed as physically weak from the beginning. In the *Fantastic Four* comic books, which like *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* debuted in the 1960s, four ordinary people are imbued with superpowers after being exposed to cosmic rays during a space mission, becoming the superhero team the *Fantastic Four*. Sue was positioned as the girlfriend of the leader, Reed Richards, a hyper-intelligent scientist who gained the ability to stretch his body almost infinitely. She gained the powers of invisibility as the Invisible Girl which, in a fight, did little other than hide her away from the action. Any plans she had to make productive use of her powers are thwarted. For example when attempting to alert her teammates to the presence of the villainous Miracle Man, a dog appears from nowhere, catching her scent and allowing the Miracle Man to locate her (Lee and Kirby 1962a; figure 35).

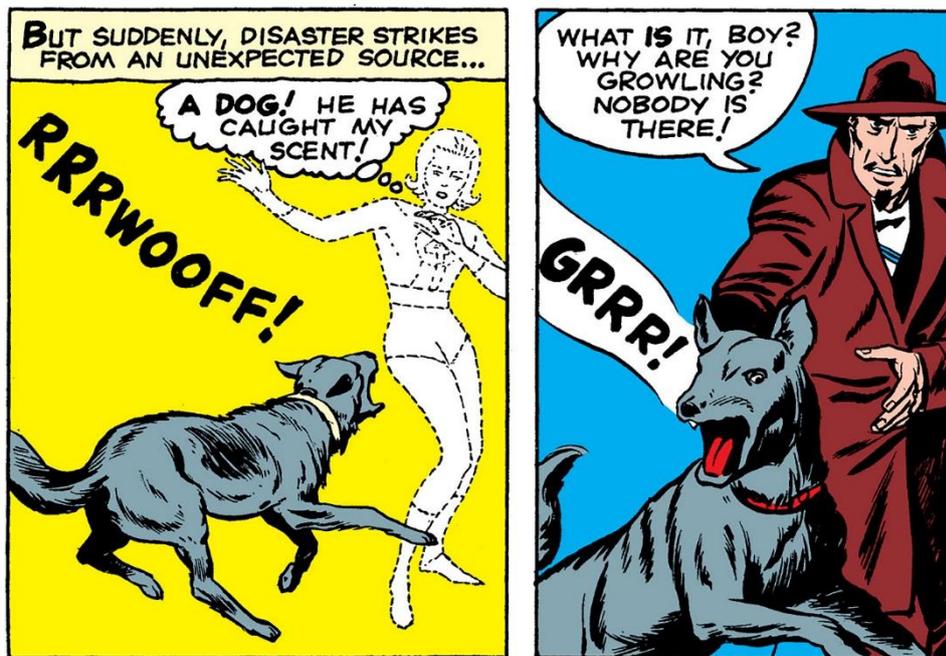


Figure 35 Susan Storm's presence is revealed by a dog (Lee and Kirby 1962a)

In the 1980s, Sue was a central character, becoming the Invisible Woman, as well as gaining the formidable power of creating force fields (Byrne 1985a). With this, Sue arguably became the physically strongest member of the team (DiPaolo 2011, 212). However, the two *Fantastic Four* films of the 2000s clearly position Sue (Jessica Alba) as weak, frustrating her powers and limiting her availability in action sequences within the films' respective narratives. In *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005), unlike her male teammates, who are able to control their powers after the initial surprise of discovering them, Sue has problems controlling her powers. When Reed (Ioan Gruffudd) does some tests, he determines that Sue's emotions prevent her from controlling them. This automatically functions within discourses regarding the supposed destructive nature of "emotional" women (see previous chapter)—and Sue's "emotion" is specifically characterized as anger—whilst also positioning emotions as a (feminine) weakness. Reed questions her about what emotions she felt whilst she lost control of her powers in a previous scene, and she replies, 'Anger. Rage. Frustration.' These are all emotions that male superheroes surely experience quite frequently but any struggles with their powers that they may have are rarely (Hulk notwithstanding) localized onto their emotions, instead existing

independently. The scene here also contains an ironic element which further reinforces the film's influence under postfeminist sentiments.

When Sue finally manages to control her powers, they prove useless against the villain Victor von Doom (Julian McMahon) and he easily overpowers her, throwing her across the room at the flick of his wrist. It is Ben, the rock-skinned Thing (Michael Chiklis), who ultimately has the strength to fight Doom, and they end up on the street where the team works together to stop him. Her brother Johnny (Chris Evans), who has fire powers, engulfs Doom in a supernova-like ball of fire, and Sue makes a great effort to contain the fire—so great that she receives a nosebleed. In Purse's terms, the use of blood and other bodily fluids signifies an expression of physical effort and marks the limits of a (male) hero's strength, as discussed previously. Here, however, the nosebleed is unprecedented, considering that Sue requires a disproportionate amount of effort to engage in essentially the same levels of activity as Johnny.



Figure 36 Sue Storm's nose bleeds as she asserts her power

Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (Tim Story, 2007) offers more overt narrative frustration, as evidenced by the inclusion of Sue and Reed's wedding. Indeed, Purse suggests that a relentless focus on a heroine's marriage can act as a 'strategy that gives the lie to the independence these powerful women appear to embody' (Purse 2011a, 84). Further, the aggressive centring of the heterosexual couple is also informed by postfeminist rhetoric, a theme I return to in Chapter 4. Throughout *Rise of the Silver Surfer*, Sue's obsession with the marriage is unwavering, causing her to become demanding and unreasonable towards Reed,

preventing him from helping the US military from studying the alien invader the Silver Surfer. During the climactic final battle with Doom, who has stolen the Silver Surfer's powerful surf board, Sue is rendered useless. A shot shows Doom aiming his spear at the Surfer, who is vulnerable without his board. A close-up of the Surfer is followed by a medium long-shot of Sue in front of the Surfer, conjuring a force field. In close-up, Sue gasps and is knocked backwards. She looks down and the camera tilts to show the spear in her chest, her force field having been useless against the power granted by the Surfer's board. She collapses and apparently dies in Reed's arms.

With the Surfer's master, Galactus, the devourer of worlds, arriving shortly, the remaining members of the team transfer all of their powers to Johnny and he defeats Doom so that the Surfer can regain control of his board and deal with Galactus. Throughout the action, Sue is absent, having died. And yet, after the Surfer regains his powers, he is able to revive Sue and she and Reed are able to marry after all. Sue's power is once again frustrated as she cannot possibly be strong enough to prevent Doom's spear from impaling her. In turn, she is narratively frustrated and rendered incapacitated (through the occurrence of death) during the final battle. Such a portrayal has been pointed out by Brown as being symptomatic of action films of the 1980s, in which 'women were often removed from the narrative entirely ... or at least from the bulk of the screen time' (J. A. Brown 2011a, 26). Susan Storm would later be revamped in *FANTASTIC* as a scientist (played by Kate Mara) alongside Reed (Miles Teller), though her role in the film is even smaller than in previous iterations of the property.

As discussed, these Marvel adaptations exploit storylines that frustrate the superheroines' agency over the narrative, whilst playing down the power that characters such as Rogue might possess. Furthermore, these frustration tactics often encroach on cinematic and visual elements of these films, simultaneously expressing and attempting to allay anxieties generated by threatening female physicality.

2) *Visual Frustration*

Visual frustration functions through cinematography and *mise-en-scène*, as well as costuming and appearance. For example, as noted above, Rogue is narratively contained because she is unable to control her powers and cannot touch anyone, therefore having to wear gloves and cover her skin, which also functions on the parallel level of visual frustration as an externalization of the dangers inherent in her power. Visual frustration can thus occur as part of a pairing with other frustrators. Such a phenomenon is present in *Rise of the Silver Surfer*, for instance, when Sue must prevent a rogue helicopter from killing the guests at the first attempt at the wedding; she is unable to support it using her force field and Ben must step in to complete the job. This denial of agency functions on a narrative level, but a long-shot is sure to include Sue using her powers while wearing her lavish wedding dress. The display of the undeniably feminine dress coupled with her inability to save her wedding guests from a falling helicopter, and Ben's saving the day, marks her as weak, reinforcing the notion of feminine physical weakness.

Decorporialization can also function as a visual frustration tactic. This effectively depersonalizes a female character through that which is *not* shown, namely her face and body—everything that makes her visually recognizable as a person. Most obviously, this is the nature of Sue Storm's powers in the comics and films, as she literally becomes invisible (Madrid 2009, 111; Stuller 2010). However, *Elektra* also utilizes such tactics in its representation of the central heroine. Although this could be narratively justified by Elektra's status as a skilled assassin who creeps around unseen (as is argued by Daniel Binns [2016, 46]), in a film in which she is the lead character—and thus the face of the film—this is problematic.

In the first sequence in the film, Elektra makes her way towards her target, DeMarco, taking out his associates as she goes. The sequence is set at night, and so she is invisible in the scenes outdoors. This is narrated by DeMarco in his dimly-lit office, telling his associate, Bauer, of the deadly Elektra, whom he is expecting. Shown first is merely a poorly lit shot of a man falling off a roof, presumably having been thrown off by Elektra. This is indicated by DeMarco's declaration that 'her name is Elektra.' And yet, there is no Elektra to speak of. While DeMarco speaks of Elektra's skill, she

is shown (but not shown) climbing the stairs, still invisible, then making her way across beams under a ceiling. Finally DeMarco says ‘they say Elektra whispers in your ear before she kills you.’ At that moment Elektra speaks to them over Bauer’s radio, though she still is not shown. At this point Bauer enters the dark corridor. A medium close-up of Bauer is followed by a shot of Elektra’s *sai*, her traditional fork-like weapon, on the back of his neck.

The film thus shows Elektra’s weapon before it shows Elektra. She then says, off-camera, ‘you can’t fight a ghost, Bauer,’ a statement which again decorporializes her by characterizing her as a ghostly spirit. Elektra counter strikes Bauer’s blow. In the next shot, Bauer is in focus at the front, while Elektra is out of focus behind him, again blurring her physicality. The fight continues and all that is shown is Elektra’s blacked-out silhouette and billowing hair, plus the odd flash of red from her costume. When her face is finally revealed, it is half in shadow, emerging from strands of hair blowing in the wind (see figure 37). As such, Elektra is visually frustrated through decorporialization and depersonalization. This tactic is repeated on numerous occasions throughout the film, for instance when Elektra takes out a rival assassin in a forest by sending a tree falling on him, her victory is obscured by the green fog his body transforms into when he dies. Similarly, Elektra is visually obscured by wafting sheets which are sent flying around the room by the assassin Kirigi in the final battle of the film.



Figure 37 Elektra emerges from the shadows

Such decorporialization indicates an anxiety in portraying active female physicality in these films. Furthermore, cinematography can also function to limit the space which a superheroine occupies during a fight,

such as that between Natasha Romanoff (Scarlett Johansson) and a security guard in *Iron Man 2*. After infiltrating the factory where villain Ivan Vanko is located, Natasha, accompanied by Happy Hogan (who form a sort of comedy duo discussed in the next section), takes on a guard by leaping over a cart and flipping over in the air in order to kick the guard in the face. This ostentatious fighting style takes place within the confines of a narrow corridor, which is nonetheless brightly lit with a white floor and walls, unlike the fight scenes in *Elektra* (see figure 38). Still, the filming is claustrophobic, boxing in on Natasha while she performs these stunts, with her body and that of her target filling the shots. The use of an aerial shot also draws attention to the presence of yet another narrowly-placed wall which was unnoticeable in other shots. In comparison to films such as *The Avengers* and *The Wolverine*, which allow their fighting heroines space through the frequent use of long-shots, it becomes apparent that Natasha is spatially frustrated through the scene's cinematography. Such cinematographic visual frustration also occurs when Abby Whistler fights a vampire during the final scenes of *Blade: Trinity*.



Figure 38 Natasha Romanoff's fighting is boxed in by the setting and cinematography

As mentioned, both comic books and contemporary action cinema have been focused on women's appearance as it is symptomatic of postfeminist culture. Specifically, a focus on women's sex appeal runs throughout such texts. This is also the case in adaptations of Marvel comics. For instance, in the first two *Fantastic Four* films, an emphasis is placed on Sue's physical beauty. In *Fantastic Four* (2005), before embarking on their experiments in space, Ben contemplates the uniforms provided for them

and, disappointed, questions ‘who the hell came up with these?’ Sue’s disembodied voice is heard (‘Victor did.’) and she is shown strutting through the doorway, a long-shot revealing her half-opened suit showing off her pushed up cleavage.

Her objectification is further enhanced on an extra-diegetic level. After Sue explains that ‘the synthetics act as a second skin,’ Reed remarks, ‘wow, fantastic...’ supposedly at the brilliance of the science behind the suits, though he is clearly also referring to what lurks beneath Sue’s ‘second skin.’ In another shot later on in the film, all members of the team are shown in the living room area, wearing their suits. However, both Johnny and Reed’s suits are zipped to the top, while Sue’s is still half open (Ben, whose skin has turned to rock, goes shirtless). Sue is thus marked as sexually other through the focus on her cleavage, while Reed and Johnny remain unobjectified.

Elektra is similarly presented in *Elektra*: the final shot of the initial assassination sequence outlined above is a close-up of her backside. *Daredevil*, which also features Elektra as a supporting character, likewise focuses on her appearance to an almost obsessive level. Given that Matt Murdock (Ben Affleck), who masquerades as Daredevil, is blind, this is notable. However, when almost every scene in which the two characters appear together makes a reference to her appearance and beauty, particularly in an emotional scene in which Matt uses his radar sense, which functions similarly to echolocation, to “see” her during a rain shower, Elektra becomes reduced to an image.

Abby Whistler in *Blade: Trinity* likewise inhabits a postfeminist mode of visual representation as the portrayal of her fighting skills draws from fitness and sport culture. In Western society, the unequal access to sport is, as defined by Katharina Lindner in her analysis of contemporary sport films, ‘an important aspect of larger socio-cultural gender inequalities’ (Lindner 2013, 240). The increase in exposure of female athletes in Western culture offers the possibility for the disruption of traditional gender relations in sport, which has been constructed as a masculine domain (Lindner 2013, 239). However, it has simultaneously led to the marginalization, stigmatization and sexualization of such women in cultural discourses

(Lindner 2013, 239), and has been co-opted and commodified as part of postfeminist culture (Lafrance 1998).

Femininity can thus function within sport culture as ‘a bodily property that needs to be continually “worked on”, monitored and controlled’ (Lindner 2013, 244). Additionally, these markers of “fit femininity” become ingrained with the exclusionary rhetoric of the postfeminist culture. Negra further elaborates that ‘as the achievement of health/fitness becomes a marker of middle-class femininity and a sign of virtue, inequalities are magnified’ (Negra 2009a, 127). Throughout the film, Abby Whistler is the only character who is shown to engage with vampire hunting as a means of fitness. A point is, for example, made of the fact that she listens to music through her iPod while fighting, an impracticality which should technically disrupt the vital sense of hearing that is needed in a fight. Indeed, in one scene which takes place before an elaborate fighting montage in which the trio pursues a number of evil henchmen, Abby is shown meticulously crafting a music playlist using her Apple laptop and iPod. Abby’s use of music in her fighting/fitness regime thus reaches to the contemporary commodification of “Power Music” in the fitness industry (Hentges 2014, 227). This trait is shown as an idiosyncrasy which marks the character as distinct from the others, and Abby thus embodies a contemporary mode of female fitness, which is expressed visually and also reaches to discourses of consumerism by showcasing the distinctive white iPod headphones throughout the film (see figure 39).



Figure 39 Fitness/power music/consumerist discourses in Abby’s use of Apple products

The inclusion of the postfeminist rhetoric that an attention to sex appeal brings forth is particularly noteworthy in *X-Men: First Class* (Matthew Vaughn, 2011). Set in the 1960s, but containing little of the institutional gender inequality of the decade, the world portrayed in the film is postfeminist while showcasing a pre-feminist environment. As is discussed in Chapter 5, this world is also presented as postracial. In fact, the only oppression ever experienced by any of the characters is caused by the fact that they are mutants, naturally born with incredible, but often unsightly, powers. The film, just as the other *X-Men* films, thus takes for granted that the female characters are empowered, and have no use for feminist action.

On one level, this suggests that factors such as gender should have no influence over a person's capabilities. On the contrary, though, *X-Men* is perceived as a franchise which allegorizes the disempowerment of marginalized peoples, 'a parable of the alienation of any minority' (Reynolds 1992, 79). Purse similarly characterizes the films as commentaries regarding gay rights and homosexual subjectivities (Purse 2011, 144), while Joseph Darowski likewise discusses the *X-Men* as 'mutant metaphor' (Darowski 2014). For a narrative that is so ingrained in social issues (a point I additionally problematize in Chapter 4), the lack of engagement with feminist concerns is noteworthy.

It also allows for one character, Moira McTaggart (Rose Byrne), to be a CIA agent in a time when women in the CIA were largely limited to secretarial jobs (L. T. Frank 2013, 155). Certainly, this may not be a huge stretch of imagination considering the film centers on superpowered mutants; but, again, the links that have been forged between *X-Men* and a real world in which people are systematically oppressed for factors that are outside of their control draw attention to the ways in which the films elaborate such a stance. This is amplified by a scene in which Moira uses her sex appeal to infiltrate a meeting held by the evil Hellfire Club, which is portrayed as taking place in a strip club. Moira must pose as a stripper to infiltrate the club, again speaking to issues of feminine masquerade discussed later on in this chapter. The film contains merely two overt references of sexism aimed at a female character, which serve more to differentiate the attitudes of that era from those of today in a way that

celebrates that “things aren’t like that anymore.” This offers a win-win situation in that blatant sexism is narratively justified, whilst a depoliticized vision of powerfully sexy women is promoted, thus avoiding overt engagement with feminist discourses. A similar scenario occurs in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), which takes place in the 1940s (discussed in Chapter 4).

In Inness’ terms, ‘the media make women ... sexually alluring to men by weakening their toughness, emphasizing their sexuality, and transforming them into sex objects for the male gaze’ (Inness 1998, 40). Though in the age of postfeminist culture, this may be an oversimplification, I include such representations of the heroine’s sex appeal under the banner of visual frustration. However, a common postfeminist-inflected detraction of such a statement would be that these texts are merely a celebration or “reclamation” of femininity (Stasia 2007, 234) . This takes for granted that femininity is in a position to be “reclaimed” in the first place (begging the question “reclaimed from whom?” to which the answer may or may not be “the feminists”).

Suggesting that an emphasis on sex appeal and appearance functions as a frustration tactic could thus infer a devaluing or discrediting of femininity itself. This is not the aim of this analysis. On one hand, popular films have provided images of heroic women who are distanced from characteristics generally considered to constitute femininity in order to appear strong, at least on a visual level (e.g. Ripley and Connor). On the other hand, films informed by postfeminist ideals offer a portrayal of women who are strong while embracing a sexualized femininity, a line of argument similar to that of Madrid when he refers to comic books. With this in mind, it should be pointed out that one neither hears a call for men who are powerful because of their sex appeal, as I argued earlier, nor men who are weak yet still considered particularly “masculine.” Both configurations of feminine strength function within the gender binary on account of their policing of women’s appearance, as well as adopting an either/or approach to gender presentation. This is coupled with a general lack of variety in terms of femininities presented in mainstream cinema, and especially the films analyzed here, which privilege white, slim, heterosexual, able bodied femininity. These postfeminist representations are thus the result of

frustration—not only the visual frustration as discussed here, but cultural frustration that this is, more times than not, the only type of representation that is offered.

3) Comedic Frustration

The final frustration tactic involves comedy derived from or aimed at the female hero. Herein, as Purse elaborates, the ‘display of female super-powers is contained within situations that also manage to subject the action heroines to varying levels of humiliation’ (Purse 2011a, 80). Such moments include Sue Storm’s “funny naked moments” in both of the 2000s *Fantastic Four* films. In the first instance, Sue uses her new powers to attempt to make her way through a crowd of people during a disturbance caused by Ben on Brooklyn Bridge. Because Sue’s clothes remain visible when she is not, she undresses. However, due to her inability to control her powers (caused by narrative frustration), she exposes herself in her underwear to the on-looking crowd, embarrassed and desperately attempting to cover herself. She is further objectified (diegetically as well as extra-diegetically), when Reed remarks ‘You’ve been working out!’

During the funny naked moment in *Rise of the Silver Surfer*, Sue’s nudity is the result of her being unable to control Johnny’s fire powers after he accidentally transfers them to her. After being extinguished, Sue lies on her stomach on the pavement in her underwear, as her clothes have been burned off by fire. A shot of a man and a woman, both taking pictures of her while a disembodied male voice remarks ‘Nice!’ is reminiscent of such voyeuristic objectification as that enforced upon Mary Jane and Gwen Stacy, as noted in the previous chapter.

Purse suggests that these films are motivated by ‘a desire to set the potentially culturally disturbing possibility of female agency and physical power at a distance from our everyday contemporary reality’ (Purse 2011a, 81). But, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, these films also engage in a postfeminist style of ironic humor intended to offset any discomfort caused by these portrayals. Irony is a prominent feature of postfeminist discourses. Here, traditional femininities characterized as existing in opposition to the demands of second-wave feminism are adopted playfully

(Gill 2007, 160). Postfeminist irony taken to extremes results in phenomena such as “ironic sexism” or “hipster sexism” which evokes sexist discourses in order to highlight the supposed notion that “real” sexism is a thing of the past (Richardson and Robinson 2015, xxv). Whatever context, though, postfeminist irony ensures a socially sanctioned form of gender relations is maintained, as I further discuss in Chapter 4.

One such instance is the comedy duo posed by Natasha Romanoff and Happy Hogan in *Iron Man 2*. Natasha is introduced as Tony’s new notary while he is working out, boxing with Happy. While Tony deals with the paperwork Natasha brought, he tells Happy to ‘give her a lesson.’ With Natasha secretly being the super-spy Black Widow, this does not bode well for Happy. The encounter is framed within comedic and ironic discourses. After telling him that she has boxed before, Happy asks Natasha, ‘What, like, the Tae Bo? Booty Boot Camp? Crunch?’ listing a variety of “feminine” sporting activities which he does not take seriously. The irony is that Natasha’s exercise regimes extend far further than Booty Boot Camp—she is highly skilled at martial arts. When Natasha turns around, Happy warns her, ‘Never take your eye off your opponent,’ and prepares to punch her. However, Natasha catches his wrist and swings it downwards in a long-shot, spinning over and throttling him with her legs. When Tony and Pepper rush over, Happy tells them that he slipped and Natasha coolly steps out of the ring, her big secret, and integrity, intact. Within this context it is acceptable for Happy to be presented as behaving in condescending ways towards Natasha, since it is known that *really* she is a highly skilled fighter, and this knowledge enables the comedy within the scene. In a similar way, postfeminist irony relies on the knowledge taken for granted that *really* women are empowered.

This postfeminist irony is extended when Happy and Natasha team up to infiltrate the villain’s factory. It is clear that Natasha is displeased with Happy’s presence, the two embodying a binary opposition of a serious super-spy versus the goofy wannabe. Upon arriving at the facility, Happy, still unaware of Natasha’s power, tells her, ‘Look, I’m not letting you go in there alone,’ while she casually breaks in. Happy’s obliviousness to Natasha’s skill is comical. When they enter, both Natasha and Happy combat different guards, with Happy clumsily struggling despite his boxing

training. Natasha meanwhile fights numerous guards in the corridor, which is intercut with Happy still struggling with the first guard. After having defeated all the guards using her fighting skills and gadgets such as Tasers and smoke pellets, she walks past another guard while looking squarely into the camera and spraying pepper spray in his eyes. The act of looking at the camera creates a bond of knowing between Natasha and viewers, again highlighting ironic elements of the scene: the casual nature of this endeavor is accompanied by irony. But the comedic payoff occurs when it cuts back to Happy finally knocking out his one guard in a medium close-up, exclaiming ‘I got him!’ The shot cuts back to the other guards Natasha incapacitated, some on the floor, one hanging from a cord on the ceiling. Here, Natasha’s skill and power are used as a device for comedy, with ironic sentiments included. Happy Hogan may be the target of the joke, but the scene incorporates a tongue-in-cheek approach which reaches to postfeminist notions of playful feminine toughness.

Similar sentiments are present in *Daredevil*, when Matt meets Elektra for the first time. After he follows her from the café where they met, she stops in a playground where children are playing. She tells him, ‘I don’t like being followed’ and attempts to walk away. Persistently, Matt grabs her hand, to which she defensively responds, ‘I don’t like being touched.’ He asks, ‘Why don’t you tell me what you do like and we’ll start there?’ Excusing Matt’s harassing behavior, the scene is light-hearted. This is solidified when Elektra yanks away Matt’s cane and tries to kick him. The ridiculous nature of the situation, in which a woman takes away a blind man’s cane and tries to assault him, offers a comedic element through which Elektra must enact her skills.

Unfortunately, her kick misses and Matt moves out of the way. Elektra asks ‘Are you sure you’re blind?’ adding an additional humorous component. He answers ‘Sure you don’t want to tell me your name?’ and throws away his cane. The medium shot now switches to a long-shot in which they are both visible, taking off their jackets, drawing attention to the binaristic differences between their costuming—Matt’s suit and Elektra’s vest—and the cane drops back into his hand. A shot shows her in a defensive position, and a reverse shot shows him gesturing for her to “bring it on.” She then runs up the see-saw, jumps, and lands in his arms, the use of

the children's playground adding another playful element. Matt tells her not to hold back and she smiles.

The confrontation is portrayed as a sort of dance, or comedy sparring, not to be taken seriously, and is a wasteful showcasing of Elektra's ability. Matt jokes, 'Does every guy have to go through this just to find out your name?' and she jokes back, 'Try asking for my number!' while the children in the background start chanting for them to fight. After more attempts at hitting each other, Elektra ends up the victor, aiming her foot at his neck. She calmly smiles in close-up, stating 'My name's Elektra Natchios... hmmp!' and smiling again. The suffixed 'hmmp!' indicates a reinforcement of her playful victory over Matt, a "Girl Power" moment which is none too serious in the context of the scene. The overarching irony serves the postfeminist sentiment of playfulness and configurations of toughness which are essentially a joke, comedically frustrating their potential. Thus comedic frustration works on a level which often prioritizes the joking humiliation of heroines, while also working at a deeper, ironic level in line with postfeminist discourses.

TEEN GIRL HEROISM IN MARVEL FILMS

Though the women featured in adaptations of Marvel comics are largely adult, the few occasions where teenage girls are also heroic are worth examining. I briefly referred to the teen heroine in the previous chapter as a character who embodies a certain kind of witty sass while being intelligent and self-sufficient. This is informed by postfeminist sensibilities, as has also been described by Brown. As he suggests, these characters possess 'exceptional abilities at fighting, intelligence, beauty—and a sense of humor' (J. A. Brown 2011a, 142) and such characters have become widespread, especially in the domain of children's cartoons. Sarah Projansky suggests that 'the current proliferation of discourse about girls literally coincides chronologically with the proliferation of discourse about postfeminism' (Projansky 2007, 42). Brown similarly suggests that these heroines function particularly fruitfully in a postfeminist culture, as they present feminine strength and agency, while the threat to masculine power could be cancelled out by the simple fact that these characters are children

(J. A. Brown 2011a, 166). They also function as part of discourses that posit that young girls are already empowered, discourses that were commercialized as part of the “Girl Power” trend of the 1990s (J. A. Brown 2011a, 147–48). Indeed, Driscoll argues that postfeminism in relation to the girl hero is ‘an historically determined conceptual apparatus that brings the girl into view in particular ways, and is now inseparable from her’ (Driscoll 2015).

Nonetheless, such characters, rare as they are in Marvel films, offer a unique insight into feminine subjectivity in popular culture and should be carefully assessed. Television series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Veronica Mars* suggest that the teen girl heroine may have been more widely accepted on the small screen. However, fantasy franchises such as the *Twilight* saga, *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent* (2014-) indicate the profitability of films focusing on teenage heroines and aimed at female audiences, although this is yet to transfer into the superhero genre. Notably, the teen heroines discussed here, Abby Miller in *Elektra* and Kitty Pryde in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, are not the central characters of their respective films. The inclusion of Abby in *Elektra* as a kind of daughter figure to Elektra offers a particularly rare portrayal of feminine bonding, which is also examined.

1) Interconnected Womanhood in Elektra

The teenage girl subjectivity offered in the form of Abby Miller in *Elektra* incorporates a number of elements pertaining to discourses of (postfeminist) femininity. Abby is presented as a character who is attempting to navigate the adult world of superheroics while also maintaining her integrity as a teenage girl, learning who she is. “Authenticity” and “the self” are concepts which resonate within postfeminist culture (Banet-Weiser 2012). Regarding postfeminism’s relationship to the notion of identity crisis, Negra asserts that ‘Popular culture insistently asserts that if women productively manage time, home, work, and their commodity choices, they will be rewarded with a more authentic, intact and, achieved self’ (Negra 2009a, 5). But further to this are such discourses deployed by postfeminist culture in relation to the teenage girl. Femininity is here marked as an essential truth of

“womanhood.” As a result, Driscoll argues, ‘the difficulties with which girls negotiate adolescence have mostly been interpreted as the struggle for proper femininity, or the struggle to retain a sense of self in the face of expected femininity’ (Driscoll 2002, 58). However, in the case of Abby Miller, who is positioned within *Elektra* as a combined surrogate daughter/mirror image of the central heroine, issues of the self and authentic femininity are intertwined with the issue of feminine heroism which, as I discuss in this chapter, carries with it its own burdens. Abby’s negotiation of “authentic” femininity thus takes on many conflicting meanings.

Introduced as Elektra’s target, alongside her father Mark, Abby Miller follows in the footsteps of women who are initially presented as something other than a superhero. She is merely Elektra’s neighbor after Elektra is asked to move to a secluded island and await further instructions about her next assassination job. After Abby breaks into Elektra’s house, the two form a familial bond, engaging in banter. Indeed, Elektra is positioned as a mother figure throughout the film, taking a seat at the family dining table when Abby invites her over for Christmas. This narrative turn could be seen as shoehorning the character back into traditionally feminine, maternal terms. Inness, for example, suggests that both Sarah Connor and Ripley’s positioning as mothers in their respective films limits those characters (Inness 1998, 111, 125).

Further to this reading, though, is the notion that Elektra’s engagement with the family offers the opportunity for female bonding which is not present in most, if any, of the other Marvel films. *Ghost Rider*, for instance, features a scene in which the main character, Johnny Blaze bonds with his male friend, who expresses concern for his recent reckless behavior, using terms such as ‘man,’ to emphasise the friendship (‘I mean, what’s going on, man?’). Johnny’s friend addresses him as ‘JB,’ clearly indicating that they are friends. Such scenes of friendship featuring women sharing a bond are virtually non-existent in other Marvel films. Hence, Elektra’s embodiment of maternal protectiveness towards Abby might actually offer a kind of meditation on inter-generational feminine bonding, which is nonetheless shaped by postfeminist culture’s centering of white, affluent femininity.

Indeed, much of the discourse in *Elektra* focuses on the notion of the self in terms of womanhood and women who are “like” other women. Not only is the film the first adaptation of a Marvel comic to privilege a woman’s point of view (indicated throughout the film through the persistent use of point-of-view shots), it also engages in a dialogue referring to womanhood: what it means for (white) women to be “like” each other. After Elektra decides she must protect Abby and Mark, she and Abby are frequently shown in terms of their similarities. It is implied that Elektra takes Abby under her wing because she sees herself in Abby. Both Abby and Elektra’s mothers died as a result of their embroilment with unsavory forces and so Elektra identifies with the motherless child. When Abby dyes her hair brown in an effort to disguise herself, Elektra hallucinates herself as a child when Abby approaches.

Abby later wants Elektra to show her how to use her weapons. ‘I wanna learn to defend myself,’ Abby says. Elektra responds that they are ‘offensive weapons. For killing,’ exemplifying the complexities of the bond which is the result of Elektra’s (masculine-coded) antiheroism and status as a warrior, but culminates in the union of two feminine subjectivities. Further, Abby justifies herself by pointing out that Elektra uses the sais, to which Elektra answers, ‘I don’t want you to be like me,’ again articulating questions over the nature of female subjectivity as separate from, yet bound to, other women. Instead, Elektra leads Abby to the dining room, makes her sit on the floor, and shows her how to meditate. The two sit opposite each other in a medium long-shot, a mirror image, signifying that the two characters are linked rather than unified. This meditation exercise culminates in Elektra surprising Abby when she closes her eyes, resulting in laughing and giggling as Mark watches from the doorway, suggesting his separateness from the two women.

An action sequence in which Abby and Mark are chased through a forest by the Hand, reveals that Abby actually possesses great power. In the sequence, Mark and Abby are captured by a member of the Hand, his arm around Abby’s throat with a knife held out. Elektra runs to Abby but stops upon seeing the knife, a close-up of her worried face showcasing the danger of the moment. Abby is positioned as helpless, but a close-up shows her looking down, followed by a close-up of the warrior beads she wears (over

which she and Elektra had previously bonded) tumbling out of her hand. They fall down and begin to glow as she holds on to them by one strand. Elektra's shock is shown in a slow zoom, after which an aerial shot shows Abby wrapping the beads around her captor's neck, and a medium long-shot shows her flipping him over her shoulders. Abby fights the assassin—the utilization of slow-motion indicates the force of her kicks—while Mark throws a knife at another. Abby then uses her beads to kill the remaining assassin. The revelation of Abby's hidden power plays into the scenes in which she expresses interest in Elektra, signalling that her innate abilities offer her a link to Elektra, whom she recognizes as being “like” herself. The power thus offers a gateway to further their bonding practices, which thus far has been denied by Elektra, though this changes after she discovers that Abby is ‘the treasure,’ a child prodigy with extraordinary abilities who is sought by the Hand.

Abby is taken to Elektra's mentor, Stick (Terence Stamp), who will continue her training. Here, Abby and Elektra finally engage in an impromptu sparring session. As the two fight, it becomes apparent that Elektra is too strong for Abby. While advising her, Elektra notices that Abby is crying. Elektra tells Abby, ‘you'll be better than I am very soon,’ as Abby sits on the bed in front of the crouching Elektra. Abby cries, ‘I'm just a kid. I don't want to stay here.’ Elektra strokes Abby's hair and the two bond again. This time, Abby's status as the treasure gets in the way of her being ‘just a kid,’ despite her identification with Elektra's character. However, Elektra still identifies with Abby as a motherless child with an abnormal upbringing.

The subjectivities of action heroine and teenage girl that the two characters respectively encompass coalesce in the final confrontation with Hand member Kirigi. The two characters' arcs culminate into a personification of female bonding through physical activity and strength. After Elektra is overpowered by Kirigi and his flying sheets, Abby enters the scene, which takes place in Elektra's childhood home. Abby approaches Kirigi, whirling her beads, but he dodges them. This is intercut with shots of Elektra moving under the sheets and suddenly breaking free of them, running towards the camera. Instead of attacking Kirigi, she runs up the stairs next to him, holding out her hand for Abby. Elektra pulls Abby up and

the two women escape, Elektra bantering, 'You're a pain in the ass!' to which Abby answers, 'So are you!' They both count to three and simultaneously jump out of the window together, completely synchronized at last. The identities expressed by both characters have been reconciled in this unifying moment. Both women hit the ground at the same time. A medium long-shot shows them both crouching next to each other. The shot switches to one behind them on the floor as they both get up and run at the same time (figure 40).



Figure 40 Elektra and Abby Miller presented in synchronicity

Unfortunately, Elektra is unable to stop another hand member from killing Abby. After defeating the remaining assassins, Elektra carries Abby to the room in which Elektra discovered her dead mother as a child, laying her on the bed, again driving home the likenesses between the characters. A flashback reminds Elektra of Stick telling her that her heart is pure, meaning that she has gained the ability to reawaken the dead through her training. She attempts to use her powers on Abby, stating, 'Hey, warrior girl...' After her attempt seemingly fails, Elektra rests her head on Abby, just as she rested her head on her mother as a child. Finally, Abby awakens and the two are united once more.

At the end of the film, Elektra leaves Mark and Abby, although she tells Abby, 'we'll find each other.' Outside, she mutters to herself, 'Please don't let her be like me,' and Stick answers from behind her, 'Why not? You didn't turn out so bad,' signalling a narrative of self-acceptance which runs parallel to Abby's narrative of self-actualization. Importantly, Abby undergoes the process of self-actualization through her interactions with

Elektra. However, it is not only her potential as a heroine which is realized, but that of being a young girl. At the end of the film these subjectivities have been reconciled, and the characters unite in a manner that plays into a notion of interconnected womanhood, as opposed to masculine, “lone ranger” ideals.

This narrative is an anomaly amongst Marvel films, and while the film also engages with frustration tactics such as those outlined above, it offers a distinct imagination of feminine solidarity which is informed by postfeminist discourses of authenticity, acceptance and universal “womanhood.” As Projansky notes,

many of the ways in which contemporary popular culture represents girls can be understood to be working through questions about the effects of postfeminism—on mothers, daughters, and the gendered organization of society—just as representations of postfeminist women can be understood to be working through questions about the effects of feminism

(Projansky 2007, 46)

Projansky’s description of the anxieties postfeminist culture negotiates regarding the inter-generational effects of feminism can be seen within Elektra. Though it offers no concrete answers, the film engages in discourses involving the effects of the empowerment of teenage girls. How do teen heroines maintain their teenagedom? How can they express themselves? What is the role of the mother in a teen heroine’s life? What is the function of female role models to these young women? And how do they fit into established notions of “womanhood”? Like other postfeminist texts, the film uses the figure of the teen girl hero to mediate issues of “authenticity” with regards to femininity.

2) Kitty Pryde: Sassy/Strong

Another prominent teen girl heroine is Kitty Pryde, the teen X-Man with the ability to “phase” her body through solid objects. Introduced to the comics in 1980s as a spunky, headstrong fourteen-year-old enrolled at Xavier’s school (Claremont and Byrne 1980a), Kitty later becomes a full-fledged X-Man, at one point single-handedly defending the school from a terrifying demon while the other X-Men are away (Claremont and Byrne 1981). Kitty

has remained a consistent presence throughout a number of X-Men comic titles and in *The Last Stand* received a substantial role in the narrative.

Like Abby in *Elektra*, as well as Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Kitty enacts a sassy, witty persona in line with postfeminist configurations of the teen heroine. Whilst Kitty's characterization has been described by Gray as reaching 'a delicate balance between sex appeal and physical strength,' and thus performs the ideal amalgamation of "hotness" and power (R. J. Gray 2011, 86), this is a deeply problematic statement. Though her age is not disclosed, Kitty's brief cameo in *X2* shows her as twelve or thirteen years old, indicating that she would be in her mid-to-late teens in *The Last Stand*. In any case, Gray's sexualization of the young character is inappropriate, and I would suggest that Kitty's representation functions outside of discourses of sexual appeal (though still within the realm of postfeminism). More important is the role Kitty plays during the final confrontation between the X-Men and Magneto's Brotherhood in *The Last Stand*.

Her ability to phase through solid objects makes Kitty the only one capable of rescuing a mutant child whose powers are being used to create a mutant cure. Her power is noteworthy for its discorporeality, linking to the frustration tactics outlined earlier: Kitty's distinctive physicality is actually a lack thereof. During the battle at a facility on Alcatraz Island, Kitty encounters the unstoppable Juggernaut (Vinnie Jones), a colossal mutant with superhuman strength. In this narrative situation, Kitty must use her powers strategically to defeat him. Embodying pure masculine brawn, the Juggernaut towers over Kitty but she uses her defensive phasing powers offensively by pulling him halfway through the floor and sealing him there. The shot cuts to a camera angle located behind the Juggernaut's head, showing the nimble Kitty towering above him, indicating her superiority (figure 41). This shot is a reversal of a type of shot used frequently in Marvel films to signify the victimization of a character faced by an immense threat, for instance in *Iron Man*, when Pepper encounters the Iron Monger (figure 42) and when Mariko is faced with the giant robot Silver Samurai in *The Wolverine* (figure 43). Shots such as this usually involve the attacker being placed above the female victim, showcasing her vulnerability. This

shot of Kitty, though, reverses the situation, being positioned at the height of the male victim, with Kitty victoriously looking down at him.



Figure 41 Kitty stands above the immobilized Juggernaut



Figure 42 The Iron Monger towers above Pepper in *Iron Man*



Figure 43 The Silver Samurai towers above Mariko in *The Wolverine*

Kitty then smiles and runs through the wall as the Juggernaut yells after her, 'I'm the Juggernaut, bitch!' breaking free and smashing through the walls as a chase ensues. Kitty is subsequently trapped inside the child mutant's holding cell as his ability causes nearby mutants to lose their

powers. The Juggernaut tells her, 'I'm the wrong guy to play hide and seek with,' but Kitty responds 'Who's hiding? Dickhead!' luring the now depowered Juggernaut to the wall and causing him to knock himself out. During this sequence, Kitty is resourceful, using the means available to her to defeat the Juggernaut. Her status as an intelligent, sassy and strong teenage girl fits into modes of young female heroism outlined by Brown. Doubtlessly, any threat that Kitty may pose towards masculine power is displaced by her age and small stature, and even the nature of her powers is not particularly threatening.

However, Kitty's representation offers different possibilities to those present in the portrayal of adult heroines. Further, there is no ironic humor present in Kitty's interactions, although calling the Juggernaut 'dickhead' relates to the sassy humor associated with postfeminist heroines. As such, Kitty Pryde in the comics offered an ideal specimen for film adaptation in a postfeminist culture, allowing the character to maintain her sassy sense of humor, whilst also fitting into images of idealized teen girlhood. An older Kitty Pryde is seen in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Bryan Singer, 2014), although the role she plays within the narrative is lessened. Instead, the character enables Logan to travel through time to the 1970s by using her powers, becoming an appendage to the central male protagonist of the film, and allowing him to realize his potential of being a savior-like figure to the mutants.

SUPERHEROIC (POSTFEMINIST) MASQUERADE

In *Blade: Trinity* Abby Whistler is introduced in a way not uncommon for Marvel superhero films: when she is undercover. Disguised as a woman with a child in the subway, she is pursued by a group of vampires making predatory comments ('Hey, pretty lady!'). As with Natasha Romanoff in *The Avengers* (discussed later), Abby's male enemies pay attention to her appearance. Abby is coded as a vulnerable woman, alone, with child, at night, carrying groceries. However, Abby Whistler, like Natasha, defies expectations when she physically confronts the vampires. She removes her coat and reveals that she carries a compound bow mounted with a glowing strip of UV light to which the vampires are vulnerable. When there is only

one vampire left, she aggressively tells him to ‘Scream if it hurts, *chica!*’ flipping the situation back on itself, and ironically feminizing her target.

The situation functions within postfeminist discourses, through irony and toying with established notions of feminine weakness. Like Natasha in *Iron Man 2*, who is originally introduced as Tony’s new notary, Abby’s introduction involves her undercover as an ordinary civilian. This also occurs in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Anthony Russo & Joe Russo, 2014), when S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Sharon Carter at first appears to be a nurse who is Steve Roger’s neighbor. Even *Elektra*’s Abby Miller is introduced as an ordinary girl before being revealed as the Treasure. These narrative phenomena have the effect of gradually introducing female action characters, whilst drawing from ironic postfeminist discourses as well as notions of female masquerade.

The concept of feminine masquerade has been discussed for many decades and was first developed by psychoanalyst Joan Riviere (1929). In her study, Riviere argues that ‘womanliness’ is indistinguishable from masquerade which is adopted by women who desire masculinity in order to allay the cultural anxiety brought on when women supposedly encroach upon masculine roles. She writes,

Womanliness ... could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it ... The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the “masquerade.” My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing.

(Riviere 1929, 306)

Like the paradoxically tough heroines discussed by Inness, overt femininity is employed here to offset anxieties around the adoption of masculine traits by women. Since femininity is masquerade, there is thus no essential feminine essence to be found beneath the mask.

The theme of femininity as a mask has been expanded on by writers such as Doane (1982; 1991), Stephen Heath (1986) and Judith Butler (1990), whose seminal theories of gender performativity I return to in Chapter Four. For now, it is worth considering feminine masquerade within the superhero context in terms of postfeminist conceptions of femininity.

Indeed, McRobbie argues that a pivotal element of postfeminist culture is the ‘postfeminist masquerade’ (McRobbie 2009, 59–83).

Drawing from the work of Doane, McRobbie suggests that postfeminist culture’s indulgence in traditional modes of femininity stems from the ways in which the patriarchal symbolic has become reconfigured as part of the fashion-beauty complex (McRobbie 2009, 61). The reduced dependence contemporary women have towards men with regards to financial stability, as well as their increased visibility in the workforce, means that the need for traditional male approval is now void (McRobbie 2009, 63). Instead, this authority has been transferred to the fashion-beauty complex, which encourages women to self-monitor and sculpt their femininity under its guidance, activities which are framed by “choice” rhetoric (McRobbie 2009, 63).

Femininity, characterized as a literal, rigid embodiment of “womanhood” is here considered as occupying ‘unbearable proximity’ to women, and thus distance towards this is achieved through overemphasis and ironic reclamation (McRobbie 2009, 64). It is a ‘licensed, ironic, quasi-feminist inhabiting of femininity as excess, which is now openly acknowledged as fictive’ (McRobbie 2009, 64). Postfeminist masquerade takes into account Butlerian constructionist accounts of gender, which hold that notions of the “true” essence of gender are social constructs (outlined in more detail in Chapter 4), drawing attention to femininity’s artifice, only to reframe these activities within a consumerist/capitalist system, ultimately reinstating the patriarchal symbolic (McRobbie 2009, 64).

Such ironic femininity in Marvel films has already been discussed in previous sections of this chapter, however a closer examination of the literal disguises of superheroines offers another point of intrigue. That Abby Whistler, Natasha Romanoff and Sharon Carter are all introduced as “ordinary women” before being revealed as heroines is significant. These characters are eased into the narratives through a mechanism based on disguise, or, indeed, masks of femininity. While Wendy Sterba argues that it is a lack of literal masking which sets many superheroines apart from their male counterparts and offers the potential for disruption and subversion (Sterba 2015), there is more at work here regarding postfeminist masquerade.

It would be simplistic to suggest that these heroines are maskless, since their introductory scenes always involve disguise. These women are instead shown to partake of empowered femininity through postfeminist masquerade. These characters demonstrably present various configurations of “empowered” contemporary femininity—the caring mother, the professional notary, the humble nurse. The films therefore present feminine subjectivities which hinge on the notion of femininities which can be readily exchanged for one another, but which are all encompassed by the criteria of the idealized postfeminist subject. Thus, these heroines are required to move between different versions of culturally sanctioned femininity enabled by postfeminist discourses in order to be integrated into the heroic narrative. They are portrayed as such that they monitor their own femininity, being presented via a play on variations of a postfeminist theme.

The casual disguises adopted by these heroines are not without further implications. Arguably, these women are presented as engaging with feminine masquerade in the classic Rivieran sense—in order to allay the anxiety which tough women produce in a culture where toughness is considered masculine. The topic of feminine masquerade in popular depictions of action heroines has likewise been discussed by Inness in her analysis of the *Charlie’s Angels* television series. Noting the frequent use of storylines in which the Angels must go “undercover” in order to solve a crime, Inness argues that these narratives illustrate ‘the constructed nature of identity’ (Inness 2004, 43). However, this has an unfortunate side effect:

The constructed nature of the Angels’ identities is highlighted; they are not what they seem to be. Their toughness is brought into question because masquerade forces its audience to question the nature of identity ... Toughness, the show hints, is perhaps as artificial as the Angels’ roles as hookers, nurses, or roller derby queens.

(Inness 1998, 43)

Similar issues surface in the portrayal of Black Widow in *The Avengers*, a case study I argue is emblematic of the highly complex presentations of feminine heroism in Marvel films.

When Natasha Romanoff is re-introduced in *The Avengers*, she appears to be a classically feminine victim of violence. The first shot in which she features is a close-up of Natasha being hit in the face. She is shown in an industrial warehouse, bound to a chair, wearing a little black

dress and no shoes, looking up at her captors, two Russian mobsters and their boss. One mobster threatens her in Russian and tips the chair back, suspending her over the edge of the platform on which the scene takes place; a close-up dwells on her black nylon-sheathed foot. The boss tells her ‘The famous Black Widow... And she turns out to be simply another pretty face,’ to which she replies in close-up, ‘You think I’m pretty?’ Natasha’s sass angers the Russians, and one restrains her head, holding her mouth open, while the leader contemplates his collection of pliers.

In that moment a phone rings and Natasha is informed that it is for her. The phone is wedged on her shoulder, and Agent Coulson tells her she is needed by S.H.I.E.L.D. to be a member of the Avengers. Her irate reply is ‘Are you kidding? I’m working ... I’m in the middle of the interrogation. This moron is giving me everything.’ For Black Widow, this is just another day on the job. Her sass allows her to take control of a highly threatening situation. In a potential reversal of the “women in refrigerators” narrative, Coulson informs her that her previous work partner and friend, Clint Barton (Jeremy Renner), has been ‘compromised’ by the villain, Loki (Tom Hiddleston). This prompts Natasha to singlehandedly overpower the Russians (while tied to the chair) in a dramatic feat of heroism. This is interspersed with shots of Coulson humorously waiting on the other end of the phone, listening to the sounds of Natasha fighting the Russians. Then a close-up of her black high-heels shows her picking them up off the floor and she walks out of the building.

The scene arguably defies expectations in that Natasha is shown as a physically capable super spy who can escape from threatening situations. However, it also incorporates postfeminist sentiments in that her apparent victimization is merely another ironic postfeminist feminine persona (or mask) applied to the character. As mentioned, irony plays a large role in this scene, as Natasha is cinematically coded as feminine (i.e. weak) through her dress and victimized position, but as it turns out, these factors have no impact on her ability because this is merely her job. She picks up the heels whilst asking Coulson where Clint is, combining a postfeminist focus on fashion with classically masculine heroism. Cristina Stasia notes the importance of fashion in postfeminist discourses, stating that

images of girls “kicking ass” proliferate in magazines and marketers have exploited the market potential of postfeminist girls who think it is cool that girls can kick ass—but are more interested in purchasing the designer stiletto the girl is kicking ass in.

(Stasia 2007, 237)

Whether wearing heels or her Avengers uniform, rest assured that Natasha “kicks ass,” a sentiment which clearly speaks to notions of masquerade, as does the villain’s focus on her ‘pretty face.’ Both configurations of Natasha are different sides of the same postfeminist mask.

This particular portrayal of Natasha originates from writer/director Joss Whedon, whose works, particularly *Buffy* and *Firefly* (Fox, 2002), have been discussed extensively in terms of their occupation within postfeminist frameworks (Owen 1999; Amy-Chinn 2006; Genz and Brabon 2009, 162–65). Having been established as an action heroine at the beginning of the film, Natasha becomes a member of the Avengers, whose task it is to stop the villainous Norse trickster god, Loki from wreaking havoc on the world. With the team unaware of the specificities of his plan, Loki is locked in a glass prison, which Natasha approaches in one scene.

During this scene, Natasha exploits Loki’s expectations of her femininity. Loki suspected that Natasha would go to him, stating, ‘after whatever tortures [Nick] Fury can concoct, you would appear as a friend, as a balm. And I would cooperate,’ perceiving her as the caring member of the team because of her gender. Natasha subsequently describes how she, in the past, worked for morally reprehensible employers and that Clint had been sent to kill her, but spared her life instead. She concludes, ‘I got red in my ledger, and I’d like to wipe it out,’ walking towards him defensively with her arms folded. The statement appears to please Loki, and he embarks on a speech with the aim of emotionally unsettling Natasha, standing up and stepping towards the glass. His reflection in the glass is juxtaposed with her horrified expression as he continues, ‘This is the basest sentimentality. This is a child at prayer. Pathetic!’ later slamming his fist on the glass, causing Natasha to jump back in fright. A close-up of Natasha’s terrified face follows his statement that he will make Clint kill her and then awaken him to witness what he has done.

At this point Natasha turns away, and he derogatorily shouts ‘This is my bargain, you mewling quim!’⁷ A shot of her from behind follows, the sound of her sniffing audible. She states, ‘You’re a monster,’ and there is a shot of Loki evilly laughing, answering, ‘Oh no, you brought the monster.’ In the reverse shot, Natasha’s head pops up with a dramatic crescendo of music which is abruptly silenced. She turns, not a tear in her eye, and reveals to the baffled Loki that she worked out his plan to unleash the Hulk on the Avengers. During this scene, Natasha effectively deduces that Loki planned to set the Hulk loose to cause destruction and break up the team. She is portrayed doing this through playing with Loki’s schema of “appropriate” femininity, pretending to be terrified when she is actually in control of the situation. Just as the opening scene presented Natasha through the mask of victimization, a mask of sentimentality is employed.

Natasha’s greatest asset is portrayed as dominant notions of femininity which she uses to her advantage. Indeed, Whedon is known for his utilization of this sort of role-reversal tactic in his portrayal of action heroines, for instance conceiving of *Buffy* as a subversive take on the “blonde bimbo” characters of popular horror films (Genz and Brabon 2009, 163). However, the role-reversal plot point resulting in victory over the antagonist heavily relies on the projection of a particular femininity upon the character, which in Inness’ view would suggest a deconstruction of rigid identity. This includes the “tough” identities of these heroines, which according to Inness is simultaneously questioned as a result of this deconstruction.

This is in contrast to Sterba’s argument that both Natasha and Buffy are able to present as “themselves” due to their unmasked status. She argues that with these characters, ‘what you see is what you get’ (Sterba 2015, 4). Such a claim should be scrutinized in light of postfeminist masquerade. As discussed, such heroines are shown to embody different modes of postfeminist femininity. Echoing Riviere, there is no genuine womanliness to speak of underneath the mask. This results in a sort of feminine identity crisis in which the heroic persona may just be another mask of femininity.

⁷ ‘Mewling quim’ roughly means “whiney cunt.” Use of the word “quim” dates back to the seventeenth century (Hughes 2006, 113), corresponding to Marvel’s portrayal of Norse god-inspired characters speaking with old-fashioned English affectations.

Heroic feminine subjectivity thus becomes elusive and intangible, begging the question of where and who these heroines “actually” are (which is further complicated by their status as constructed fictional beings).

The benefits of such an approach to “subversive” representation thus remain questionable since it continues to rely on the very notion of a gender binary and expectations of how men and women behave. That Natasha’s portrayal is transgressive is dependent on a conception of femininity which is unchanging in its association with weakness and sentimentality, arguably reinforcing the binary it deconstructs. In this sense, representations such as that of Natasha Romanoff indicate the further complexities present in gendered discourses of power and heroism and how they relate to wider conceptions of gender. Likewise, the postfeminist masquerade ensures that only sanctioned forms of acceptable femininity come to the fore. While Brown notes that ‘The conscious manipulation of traditional perceptions of female characters as weak has become a standard convention in action heroine films’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 36), he does not develop this notion to account for the role of a specifically *postfeminist* masquerade (Brown’s ideas are more helpful when making sense of the gender presentations enacted by *X-Men* character Mystique, discussed in Chapter 4).

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015), Natasha’s role is seemingly limited to that of love interest to Bruce Banner, potentially another mask of femininity applied to the character. Gender essentialism surfaces in the film as Natasha describes herself as a ‘monster’ due to her inability to have children, having been forcibly sterilized as part of her super spy training. Such an approach to gender, in which men and women are defined in terms of body parts and gender roles (such as motherhood), acts in accordance with postfeminist interests in maintaining a binaristic gender order, a topic I also discuss in Chapter 4.

With an ensemble cast such as that of *The Avengers*, Natasha receives inadequate screen time for the film to further mediate these issues. It is also noteworthy that her moment of heroism during the final battle with aliens in New York, in which she closes the portal that allows evil aliens to pass into this dimension, is followed and potentially upstaged by Tony Stark’s self-sacrifice when he must fly a nuclear bomb into the portal with minutes to spare before it closes. Natasha similarly receives a good portion

of screen time in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, although the focus in the film is still on the central male hero. Indeed, Feige has suggested that it would be unwise to ever ‘pluck’ Natasha out of a team dynamic and that a solo Black Widow film is not on the horizon (Feige in Faraci 2014), a statement which relies on the assumption that female superheroes require a different approach to male heroes; the same does not seem to apply to male heroes who existed on teams prior to starring in solo films (for example, Wolverine).

JEAN GREY: TRANSCENDENTAL HEROINE?

Jean Grey in *X2* also poses interesting questions regarding the representation of heroic women in Marvel films. At the beginning of the film, her powers are almost impossible for her to control, at times causing her to hear everybody’s thoughts at once. The inconsistencies within the character present in the first film are again apparent in this sequel after she is only able to prevent one out of two missiles from hitting the X-Men’s jet while on a mission. However, at the end of the film, Jean is presented as a self-sacrificial hero. The team unite with the Brotherhood to save mutants being held by Colonel Stryker (Brian Cox), who plans to kill all the mutants. They are held captive in a facility within a dam. After rescuing the mutants, the X-Men discover that the jet is no longer functioning and Jean uses her powers to help them escape. However, with the dam having been destroyed, Jean must choose whether to save her teammates or herself from the flood. She ultimately saves her teammates by using all of her concentration to manoeuvre the jet from outside, while Scott and Logan protest inside. Here, the camera focuses on her strained face in a medium close-up, showing the physical effort she must undergo before being swept away by the flood and apparently dying.

The self-sacrifice of a central heroine has been examined by Sara Crosby, who characterizes ‘deaths of tough females as a patriarchal reaction to political threat’ (Crosby 2004, 153). Such deaths serve to eradicate the threat posed by women who have gained more power than it is desirable for them to have by patriarchal standards. Crosby describes a narrative pattern in which heroines enact a ‘rubber band effect’ whereby they reach a

‘snapping point.’ At this point they must become sacrificial heroines (Crosby 2004, 155).

According to Crosby, these heroines experience ‘guilt, abject self-hatred, and regressive sacrifice to the needs of a patriarchal community’ (Crosby 2004, 153–54). This in effect undercuts ‘the rhetorical posture of feminist transcendence’ (Crosby 2004, 154). However, a deeper understanding of Jean’s self-sacrifice is necessary, as she does not display any of the symptoms of guilt and self-hatred outlined by Crosby. Rather, Jean is presented as choosing to rescue her teammates and does not allow them to opt out, much like Tony does at the end of *The Avengers*. Whilst drawing from postfeminist articulations of “choice,” from a purely generic perspective, this narrative occurrence is reserved for male heroes in action film, as noted by Kaklamanidou (Kaklamanidou 2011, 66). Additionally, self-sacrifice is frequently embodied by ‘respectable men’ in the media (Holt and Thompson 2004, 427), and is a trait that is highly revered more generally in Western society, for example by Christians who hold that Jesus sacrificed himself for the sins of humanity (Mosse 1999, 112). Interestingly, in the final shots of the sacrifice sequence, Jean is surrounded by a heavenly golden light, with sounds of church choirs on the soundtrack, further indicating this connection (figure 44).



Figure 44 Jean’s power is signified by heavenly light and church choirs

Jean’s portrayal is compelling because she, like many other action heroines occupies a position usually reserved for men. Despite this, I would argue that Jean in *X2* offers a mode of feminine heroism which denies a traditionalist reading, but which nonetheless reaches towards postfeminist

notions of female sacrifice as a (passive) feminine attribute (Tasker 2011, 69). Indeed, such is the multiplicity of superhero(ine)ism in these films. Nevertheless, this is not the end of Jean's narrative, as she returns from the grave in *The Last Stand*, but takes on the evil form of Dark Phoenix, as is examined in the following chapter.

CONTEXTUALIZING MARVEL'S SUPERHEROINES

As discussed in this chapter, the Marvel superheroine on screen is a complex amalgamation of contemporary action discourses, comic book conventions and postfeminist sensibilities. The chapter has provided an overview of the variety of superheroines who have thus far been presented cinematically, a variety which is often bound by limitations in the form of frustration tactics.

Representations of female superheroism are still accompanied by limiting factors. Postfeminism resurfaces around every corner, dictating that female physicality be veiled in irony, that strong women be humiliated or confined by the power of the image. These portrayals provide limited portrayals of women wielding power over situations, but suggest that such occurrences can still be empowering if they reach to notions of "choice" and physical appeal.

Escaping such modes of representations is an improbably large task due to the subtle nature of these tactics and the way in which they subtly engage with postfeminist discourses. As mentioned throughout the chapter, these tactics reflect back to and draw from one another, creating a seamless mode of representation which implicitly functions to support patriarchal standards of femininity, while offering a depoliticized presentation of empowered white, heterosexual femininity. Throughout the chapter I have considered these valuable characters as a whole and recognized that frustrated superheroines nonetheless deserve recognition in the male-dominated comic book and Hollywood industries. Similarly complex in her cinematic construction, the teen heroine rarely features in the Marvel film, though the few instances of her inclusion have been quite curious, posing questions regarding the very nature of female superheroism.

The films mentioned here are notable for the complex nature of feminine heroics that they put forth. They frequently incorporate postfeminist attitudes whilst also reaching back to helpless heroines of the early comic books. Additionally, the frequent sexualization of women in comics has led to an association of such imagery with superheroines. Marvel adaptations thus draw from the comics, while conveniently feeding into established discourses of postfeminism and female empowerment through sex appeal. The films also perpetuate restrictive notions of feminine power as white, slim, heterosexual and able-bodied, and reach to limiting notions of feminine empowerment. The characters referred to in this chapter have been (portrayed as) exclusively white. They also form the majority of race representation. As such, representations of women of color within Marvel's postfeminist rhetoric are discussed in Chapter 5.

Missing from the corpus of Marvel films analyzed throughout this project are films featuring solo superheroines, save *Elektra*. As noted above, producers and executives at Marvel Studios are reluctant to produce a Black Widow film for the perplexing reason that they would not get 'credit' since the character has appeared in films previously (Feige in Faraci 2014). Nevertheless, the Marvel superheroine has received more exposure in contemporary comics, with Marvel releasing a slew of books featuring central female characters, such as Captain Marvel (Fazekas, Butters, and Anka 2016), Squirrel Girl (North and Henderson 2015), Elektra (Blackman and Del Mundo 2014), Black Widow (Waid and Samnee 2016), Mockingbird (Cain and Niemczyk 2016) and an all-female team of Avengers (Wilson and Molina 2016). These books have sold relatively well, though not as well as the top-selling books containing the Avengers and Spider-Man (J. J. Miller 2014).

The break out star of this new wave of female-centered books has been Kamala Khan, as I outlined in the Introduction. However, there is yet to be a teen heroine-centric film, the presence of which could potentially break down dominant notions of the maleness of superhero texts. Given the recent popularity of teen action heroines in fantasy cinema, it is surprising that Marvel films have thus far been less inclined to center on such subjectivities. Largely informed by the Young Adult literature genre, Brown dubs the heroines of films such as those in the *Hunger Games* and *Divergent*

series ‘girl revolutionaries’ and notes the ways in which these characters potentially confound a typical feminist critique of them as being indicative of postfeminist sentiments due to their politicized nature and stance against oppressive establishments within their narratives (J. A. Brown 2015a, 167–98). Though I would complicate Brown’s arguments, which in this case occasionally oversimplifies the complex mechanics of postfeminist culture, it is still noteworthy that neither Marvel nor other film studios have taken the opportunity to capitalize on the wide range of ‘girl revolutionaries’ available in Marvel’s back catalogue, though Jean Grey’s role in the recent *X-Men: Apocalypse* (Bryan Singer, 2016) reaches towards notions of revolutionary feminine teendom which is nonetheless framed by discourses of uncontrollable power.

The following chapters delve into more detail regarding specific elements of feminine subjectivities presented in these films. I next assess the nature of feminine evil displayed in numerous Marvel films, further outlining the ways in which postfeminist culture perpetuates a state in which women’s bodies and sexuality are controlled, as well as reaching back to traditionalist sentiments associating women and evil.

3.

MAD WITH POWER: FEMALE VILLAINY IN MARVEL FILMS

That evil features prominently in films featuring Marvel heroes goes without saying; how else would heroism be gauged other than against some darker force? As Schatz points out, blockbusters of the 2000s present a Manichean universe in which good fights evil (Schatz 2009, 32), and while the hero must in some way mirror his enemy and enact an external battle with his own “dark side” (Schatz 2009, 32), every Marvel hero needs a worthy opponent.

In most Marvel films, the villain, like the hero, is usually male. Magneto, the Red Skull, the Green Goblin, Kingpin and the Lizard all exemplify the antithesis to the masculine hero in masculine terms. But what happens when the villain is a woman? This chapter attempts to answer this question, looking at the ways in which villainesses have been portrayed in these films. The villainess is somewhat of a rarity in the Marvel film adaptation, however this does not diminish her significance in cultural terms. Each villainess discussed here represents a case study into the ways in which the discourses regarding women and evil within these films endorse traditional patriarchal notions of gendered morality. These notions ultimately serve to reaffirm control upon women, a noteworthy occurrence in a postfeminist age.

As outlined previously, feminine strength and power are highly complex in Marvel films. Drawing from the work of Purse and others, I suggested that heroine’s power can be frustrated in a number of ways, as well as being framed by postfeminist discourses. Moving on from this discussion, I now interrogate a different kind of female power which carries a distinctive set of cultural meanings. When a woman is positioned as evil within these narratives, they ensure that she is the worst of all evils. The villainesses examined within this chapter all pose a considerable threat to their opposing heroes.

The association between women and evil has been discussed by a number of writers with different theoretical backgrounds which provide useful context to this chapter. I first outline the ways in which this association has been used historically as a means to control and oppress women before discussing feminine evil in Marvel texts. Several key themes are presented in this chapter: the perpetuation of a tradition that connects women and evil, the discourses regarding “acceptable” femininity which are in the process evoked, the varying manifestations of this tradition in film and comic books, and the place of this tradition within postfeminist culture.

Evil is hard to define, as noted by Hannah Priest, and yet cultural representations of evil are frequently presented (Priest 2013a, vii). Social psychologist Philip Zimbardo similarly notes that ‘we fear evil, but are fascinated by it’ (Zimbardo 2007, 4). In Zimbardo’s terms, evil is characterized as Other; it is rejected because it is ‘different and dangerous’ (Zimbardo 2007, 4). Such a statement is particularly interesting when considered in a feminist context. It has long been suggested that woman stands as the Other in a male-dominated culture, as famously exemplified by Simone de Beauvoir (Beauvoir 1953). This aids the formation of the feminine myth, which is, as Janet McCabe notes, ‘nothing more than a patriarchal construction, representing both everything and nothing, ideal and monstrous’ (McCabe 2005, 4).

Thus, the positioning of evil in Western culture bears parallels to the positioning of women. Zimbardo continues that the process through which certain people are coded as evil

begins with creating stereotyped conceptions of the other, dehumanized perceptions of the other, the other as worthless, the other as all-powerful, the other as demonic, the other as an abstract monster, the other as a fundamental threat to our cherished values and beliefs.

(Zimbardo 2007, 11)

Indeed, these qualifications apply equally to the ways in which women are othered in patriarchal society. A criticism of Zimbardo’s approach, then, could be that he does not take into account the gendered dimensions of evil. There forms a cyclical pattern in which evil is othered, women are othered, and women are perceived as evil. Maria Barrett similarly maintains that the connection between the feminine and evil is a manifestation of women

being positioned as Other (Barrett 2010a, vii). This chapter therefore interrogates the question: through what means is the Other othered?

An association between women and evil has permeated various cultures. As mentioned, there is no unanimous approach used to examine the association between women and evil. However, several writers have offered valuable insights from their respective disciplines which aid my discussion of evil women in Marvel films. Philosopher Nel Noddings offers the most detailed account of feminine evil with the aim of describing evil from the perspective of women's experiences (Noddings 1989). Noddings concludes that the dichotomy of the "good" woman and the "evil" woman has been used as a means of controlling women (Noddings 1989, 3). She, much like McCabe, remarks upon the paradox that accompanies such a dichotomy: whilst being 'branded as evil,' women are also 'exalted as possessing a special and natural form of goodness' (Noddings 1989, 3).

Noddings outlines the ways in which women have been associated with evil as a form of social oppression. Reaching back to religious discourses, women have been defined as *bodies* above all else, a belief with religious sentiments, and that an 'age-old hatred of body and physical functions' traditionally rendered women morally suspect (Noddings 1989, 43). Furthermore, it has been claimed that demonic forces are present in the feminine unconscious, that women are 'fundamentally deprived of moral sense' (Noddings 1989, 50) and also 'more sensitive to the supernatural' (Noddings 1989, 45). Noddings continues, 'this sensitivity, coupled with materiality and sensuality, made it likely that more women than men would receive and entertain devils and demons' (Noddings 1989, 45). Combined with women's fundamental lack of moral sense, women would be inherently receptive to evil voices (Noddings 1989, 45).

This assignment of evil to the female body and mind has had significant ramifications. Noddings for example characterizes the Christian myth of the Fall of Man as an expression of these sentiments. In the account of the Fall, God creates Adam and Eve, only for them to be exiled from paradise when Eve is tempted to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, in turn leading Adam astray (Noddings 1989, 65). Humanity's exile from paradise and the Fall of Man were therefore caused by the weak spirit of a woman. Noddings likewise notes that 'the aspect of the Fall story

that attributes the introduction of evil into the world to women resounds in the myths of many cultures' (Noddings 1989, 56), indicating the proliferation of such discourses.

As I discuss later, women continue to be characterized as evil in ways which perpetuate the traditions outlined above. Jean Grey, for example, is explicitly coded as a witch, while the portrayal of Viper in *The Wolverine* draws from images of woman as snake. These representations have a complex relationship to postfeminist discourses in contemporary culture.

EVIL WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

Recently, academic interest in media representations of evil women has increased, particularly in the ways in which different media construct such subjectivities (Barrett 2010b; Priest 2013b; Ruthven and Mádlo 2012). Barrett suggests that evil women are given so much attention in the media because of their social deviance, while also stating that media are quick to exploit the spectacle of such deviance (Barrett 2010a, vii). Similarly, Priest points out that 'the construction of evil relies on particular modes of language and (re)presentation,' highlighting the importance of deconstructing media portrayals of feminine evil (Priest 2013a, ix).

The sexually assertive woman is thus deemed evil. Another sign of the cultural malaise that has traditionally accommodated the sexually assertive woman is the virgin/whore dichotomy. Though sexually active women had been excluded and marginalized in earlier time periods, this dichotomy was a significant element of Victorian culture (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 459). As Harry Benshoff and Sean Griffin suggest, Victorian culture divided women into categories of "good" and "bad," partaking of a 'cultural construct defining women on the basis of their sexuality' (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 459). Likewise, the virgin/whore dichotomy has been discussed in relation to early cinema by E. Ann Kaplan (E. A. Kaplan 1983).

Benshoff and Griffin subsequently state that the dichotomy 'continues to linger within the representational codes of classical and even contemporary Hollywood cinema' (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 459–60). The semiotic coding of women as "good" or "bad" is particularly acute in a

medium such as film. Color coding allows for such characters to be easily recognizable. An example of this is in *Captain America* (1990), when Sharon, Captain America's civilian sidekick, is predictably captured by the Nazi villains. These villains work under the command of Captain America's nemesis, Italian fascist the Red Skull, and largely comprise dark-haired women (though there are some men). The women are more or less interchangeable in terms of appearance, with their dark hair and similarly dark clothing, and all stand in stark contrast to Sharon, the fresh-faced blonde. These women are thus pitted against each other semiotically as well as narratively to ensure the villains are indeed coded as villainous. *Captain America's* relatively amateurish production values boil down these characters to their basest features through visuals, although, as I discuss later, such means are usually used in conjunction with subtler signifiers of narrative and image.

Even outside narrative cinema, women who transgress the boundaries of acceptable "good" femininity are subjected to media discourses in which they are constructed as irredeemably evil. Female serial killers such as Myra Hindley, Rosemary West and Aileen Wuornos have been characterized as "evil" or "monstrous" in the press, often scrutinized for their "deviant" sexualities (Birch 1994; Storrs 2004; Rogers 2012; S. Campbell 2013). These scapegoated women serve as a 'warning to all women' (S. Campbell 2013, 146), 'a valuable lesson for the rest of femininity' (Rogers 2012, 109) about what happens when "good" women turn "bad."

A quintessential "bad" woman is the *femme fatale* in 1940s film noir, a dangerously sensual woman. Far from tangible, Elizabeth Cowie suggests that the term 'is simply a catchphrase for the danger of sexual difference and the demands and risks desire poses for men' (Cowie 1997, 125). In any case, Hilary Neroni notes consistencies present in *femme fatale* characters: 'a self-centred nature, an overt sexuality, and an ability to seduce and control almost any man who crosses her path' (Neroni 2005, 22). This highly sexual trait combined with her violent nature offers an explanation of 'why she is so unacceptable to society' (Neroni 2005, 22), and the *femme fatale*, like so many other evil women, is often eradicated through a violent death (Neroni 2005, 22).

Indeed, death is more often than not the only viable narrative outcome for villainesses. Sherrie Inness, in her discussion of “killer women” films such as *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), examines the ways in which violent, “evil” women are narratively punished for their transgressions. She notes that such films perpetuate a convention which dictates that ‘if women insist on being too tough and aggressive ... the transgressors will be punished. This emphasis on punishment is one way that killer-women films help perpetuate gender norms’ (Inness 1998, 81). Much like the aforementioned authors, Inness also maintains that sexual allure plays a large role in establishing the lack of morals possessed by villainesses. She elaborates that ‘by making women sexually desirable and stressing that they are attracted to men, the films assure viewers that women are sexual objects’ (Inness 1998, 69). These characters were also often portrayed as insane, further elevating the notion that a powerful woman couldn’t possibly cope with the psychological pressures that accompany such power (Inness 1998, 69).

In a sense, the emphasis on the sexualized female body bears resemblance to the visual frustration tactics put forward in the previous chapter. The key difference, though, between sexual evil women and sexualized heroines is the agency which they are presented as enacting. As I discuss below, the evil women in many of these narratives are shown to actively present themselves as sexual—they are the sexual aggressors. Attention is drawn to the sexualized heroine, on the other hand, through her “natural” beauty, which may just be a side-effect of her current activities, such as when Moira MacTaggart infiltrates the strip club in *X-Men: First Class*. These characteristics appear to be in a “safe zone” of sexual assertion—the heroines may be sexualized but are not overtly sexual. The sexualization is a process which is done *to* them (extra-diegetically), rather than *by* them (diegetically).

Villainesses, on the other hand, actively pursue any men they desire (or women, if the villainess is particularly evil), as motivated by manipulative intents or just a sexual appetite. Further, their powers may be shown as dangerous while they are engaging in a sexual encounter—a poison kiss, for example—which draws attention to the damage that is caused by powerful, sexually assertive women and directly correlates evil,

femininity and power. Images and narratives of the sexualized “bad girl” are driven by social discourses that forbid women from being sexually assertive in the same way that men are (Ott and Mack 2010, 186). However, in a postfeminist culture that trades on discourses of sexual liberation, and female empowerment through expressive (hetero)sexuality, these sexually evil women present a paradox. Here, the notion of postfeminist culture as an inconsistent phenomenon which is constantly in flux resurfaces.

Much like her incarnations in film, the evil woman has held a steady presence in Marvel comic books. Danny Fingeroth writes of powerful comic book women: ‘if a woman was powerful—really powerful—she was either evil, or made evil by the power’ (Fingeroth 2004, 80). In his guide to writing comics, author Peter David outlines the ways in which a hero’s internal conflicts can be externalized in a narrative: ‘in order to fulfill his destiny, the hero can find himself struggling against seductive evil, seductive women, or—worst of all—seductive evil women’ (David 2006, 72). David does not elaborate more on these ‘seductive evil women,’ perhaps indicating how such characters are taken for granted within superhero narratives, but needless to say one rarely hears of any “seductive good women.” Sexual appetite, evil and femininity seem to go hand-in-hand. Madrid likewise notes that

the message in comic books about women and sex was this: powerful and intriguing women might be sexual, but it also meant they were bad. Once a woman began to behave herself, it meant a suppression of her sexual identity.

(Madrid 2009, 249)

It is not unusual for the heroines in comic books to turn evil for a number of different reasons. Even wholesome matriarch Sue Storm was driven to the dark side when she became corrupted by the evil Psycho-Man after her second child was stillborn, becoming the villainess Malice (Byrne 1984; 1985b). At this point Sue’s powers were amplified and she began using them in much more aggressive ways, indicating that a truly powerful woman can only be evil. This also reinforces the notion of frustration tactics, for a heroine whose powers are frustrated avoids the risk of being evil, or at least associated with evil. Sue’s contravention is also indicated by her costume, which becomes considerably more revealing—a tiny black

dress with exposed cleavage, midriff and thighs, and a spiked collar and mask reminiscent of BDSM styles (see figure 45).



Figure 45 Susan Storm becomes the evil Malice after suffering an emotional trauma (J. Byrne 1985b)

Madrid likewise refers to heroines who turn evil in Marvel comics, stating that

power intoxicated these women and made them cruel, maniacal menaces who cast aside loyalties to friends and lovers. Even when possessed by an evil entity, the implication was that a suppressed part of the heroine's soul was reveling in the rush of devilry.

(Madrid 2009, 231)

This corresponds with the belief described by Noddings, wherein the female unconscious is inherently corrupt and that women are more vulnerable to possession from evil spirits. Madrid continues,

these heroines-turned-villainesses represented the ultimate fear that men have about female power—the secret betrayer, the dormant evil waiting to awaken, the weak creature who can’t handle power. These stories suggested that there was something tragic, yet expected, about a woman’s inability to control her power.

(Madrid 2009, 232)

Thus, despite the evil woman appearing in various media, it is clear that she is the result of a culture that is uncomfortable with the notion of powerful women. The powerful evil woman constitutes a set of impenetrable and immovable cultural discourses. Her presence is at once shocking and predictable. Further, the systematic elimination of such characters through narrative punishment is yet another frustration tactic.

To summarize, the evil woman can bear a number of characteristics. She is invariably insane (Inness 1998, 72; Madrid 2009, 231), is perceived to be encroaching on masculine territory in terms of physical strength and other aspects (Inness 1998, 68; Aguiar 2001, 5), and is also presented as highly sexual (Inness 1998, 69; Aguiar 2001, 5). Concurrently, it is important to note that it is not my intention to box these characters into any one category, rather to draw attention to the ways in which these specific representations draw from existing cultural discourses linking women and evil.

A number of strands thus run alongside discourses of evil women: women as abject, women as toxic, women as sexually assertive and women as fundamentally flawed. These factors all resurface in the representations of villainesses in Marvel adaptations. They are defined as evil within their narratives; my focus is thus how that subjectivity is elaborated. The fact that the feminine is so frequently combined with evil in popular culture illustrates how the “evil woman” carries negative connotations that go beyond those carried by male villains.

WICKED WITCHES AND POISONOUS WOMEN

The idea of women being physically repulsive and highly toxic (and therefore evil) resonates with notions of the abject, a theory elaborated by Julia Kristeva (1982) and specifically used with regards to feminine evil by Barbara Creed (1993). A psychoanalytical concept, the abject represents that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ and ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’ (Kristeva 1982, 4). It is that which is cast off, expelled; that which threatens to break down the border between subject and object, though it nonetheless maintains a link between the two (Kristeva 1982:1-2). Examples of the abject could be ‘decay, filth, and excrement’ (Kutzbach and Mueller 2007, 9).

However, the abject extends to more cultural and societal levels, wherein marginalized members of society are cast off, defined as ‘ugly or fearsome’ (Kutzbach and Mueller 2007, 9). This likewise resonates with Zimbardo’s consideration of accused witches, whom he suggests were usually marginalized or considered threatening in some way: ‘widowed, poor, ugly, deformed, or in some cases considered too proud and powerful’ (Zimbardo 2007, 9). In this sense it is possible to conceive of women as society’s abject. In her psychoanalytic analysis, Creed effectively applies Kristeva’s notion of the abject to the feminine monster in the horror film. She offers the term ‘monstrous-feminine’ as an insight to the ways in which women are portrayed as ‘shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject’ (Creed 1993, 1), noting the importance of recognizing ‘gendered monsters’ (Creed 1993, 2).

Creed subsequently deduces that in horror films, woman is represented as monstrous ‘in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions’ (Creed 1993:7), cementing the connection between the female body and evil. These discourses of the feminine abject resurface when considering the vilification of women in Marvel films. Here, issues of genre hybridity come to the fore, as the films appear to actively draw from body horror traditions associated with monstrous femininity. That these genre issues are elaborated through the vessel of feminine subjectivity is noteworthy and indicates the extensive nature of the monstrous feminine, which is not necessarily confined to one medium or mode of storytelling.

1) *Jean Grey as Witch in X-Men: The Last Stand*

One of the most ruthless vilifications of a woman in both comics and films is found in the representation of Jean Grey in *X-Men: The Last Stand*. I previously discussed how, despite her powers often being frustrated due to her inability to control them, Jean's final scenes in *X2* are in many ways destabilizing: agency is highlighted in her choice to save her teammates, while also appropriating the traditionally masculine act of self-sacrifice, while at the same time speaking to postfeminist notions of "choice."

However, Jean's narrative takes a turn for the worse in the film's sequel when she returns with an evil persona, the Dark Phoenix. Jean's portrayal in *The Last Stand* largely epitomizes the ultimate embodiment of feminine evil, a conflation of corrupt morality, aberrant sexuality, mental instability, physical defect and, of course, femininity.

The Last Stand takes as its inspiration the "Dark Phoenix Saga" storyline from 1980. In the comic, Jean becomes exposed to radiation whilst rescuing her team in space, causing her powers to reach their ultimate potential. Jean rebrands herself as Phoenix, becoming far more powerful and dressing in more provocative costumes, much like Sue Storm while she was possessed by Malice. Jean soon falls victim to the Hellfire Club, who recruit her via mind control. She eventually regains control over her thoughts, and seeks revenge over the mutant who took over her mind. In the process she becomes power-crazed and devours a star, killing all of the inhabitants of a nearby planet. With the X-Men in pursuit, the story culminates in Jean making the choice to end her own life for the good of humanity in a brief moment of clarity (Claremont and Byrne 1980b).

Madrid interprets this story as being emblematic of the time of publishing, indicating a sense of punishment for the hedonism of the 1970s which ultimately led to addiction and death (Madrid 2009, 174), and its repetition in cinematic form in 2006 continues the traditions set out by the comics, and in many ways exaggerates them.

The Last Stand begins with a flashback of Professor Xavier and Magneto as friends visiting a teenage Jean at her parents' house. They explain to her that she has extremely potent mutant powers. The central

theme of power, control and responsibility is introduced when Xavier asks her, ‘Will you control that power or let it control you?’ Significantly, this theme is localized on the single character of Jean Grey, rather than being explored via other characters. It is noteworthy, for example that Scott/Cyclops is unable to control his optic force blasts—red beams of energy that burst out of his eyes—but this rarely, if ever, poses a problem in the narrative; he simply wears a special visor which allows him to control his power, or, as in *X-Men: Apocalypse*, he is actively encouraged by his teammates to unleash his power in a battle. This is a crucial indicator of the ways in which power is constructed as a gendered phenomenon in the film. It suggests that when a woman wields considerable power, she may not be able to control it, becoming a hazard to those around her, or even the whole world. The film thus offers a continuation of the tropes outlined by Madrid in comic books, but it also feeds into stereotypes of evil women present in other areas of society.



Figure 46 A crazed Jean Grey on the cover of *Uncanny X-Men* #135 (Claremont and Byrne 1980c)

Jean’s resurrection scene offers some insight into this situation. Scott visits the lake where she died in *X2* and hears a voice whispering his name. A whirlwind occurs in the lake and he falls. When he turns around, Jean is

before him, still wearing her *X-Men* uniform and surrounded in the heavenly light that was present during her death. The light, however, is misleading, as this is not the heroic Jean from the previous films, but an entirely different, malevolent Jean. When they unite, Jean demonstrates how she now has absolute control over her powers by removing Scott's glasses and preventing the use of his optic blasts. However, the scene becomes tragic as Jean changes during their kiss—her eyes turning black—and cuts to Xavier telepathically witnessing Jean murdering Scott. That her evil tendencies are first demonstrated while she kisses Scott is significant, and is a plot point that occurs frequently throughout representations of villainesses. Much like when Rogue accidentally sucks the life out of her unsuspecting boyfriend through kissing him, these scenes reinforce the sexual undertones present in narratives of out-of-control women, who, in these heteronormative narratives, are constructed as being dangerous to men (with one exception, discussed later, in the *Elektra* villain Typhoid). The correspondence between evil, femininity, and sexuality is ever present.

Such sentiments have been the fuel for femicidal activities such as the witch hunting craze, which reached its peak in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. An obsession with the female body persisted, as it was implied that witches 'give themselves to the devil' (Muchembled 2003, 79), even having intercourse with him (Gardenour 2012, 178). In the undercurrents of the witch craze were discourses involving women's bodies, "correct" sexual conduct and appearance. According to Robert Muchembled, witches were said to be ugly due to their devotion to the devil (Muchembled 2003, 79). However, in her discussion of the construction of the feminine evil in the later middle ages, Brenda Gardenour traces the stereotype of the witch as an old, green hag to pseudo-scientific reasoning propagated by European universities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Gardenour 2012, 181). Due to the "natural" toxicity of women's bodies, the theory went, witches had an ugly appearance. Gardenour notes,

the witch body was a sickly green, its skin having a yellowish hue, perhaps from its occasional overheating and the rising of choleric yellow bile ... A further sign of the bubbling toxins within, she was covered with blemishes such as warts and moles.

(Gardenour 2012, 181)

Appearance, therefore, plays a crucial role in the identification of feminine evil. Jean's appearance during the reunion scene and others in the film seems innocuous, but on closer inspection she bears significant similarities to the stereotypical witch of Western thought. The connection between Jean's telepathic/telekinetic powers and witchcraft is obvious, especially coupled with the gesticulation when using these powers. She has the tendency to float upright through the shot, as if she were, like a witch, 'hoisted aloft by demons' (Gardenour 2012, 181).

This demonic element is further present in the blackening of her eyes whenever she is performing particular acts of evil (see figure 47). This darkening of the eyes has been a signifier for evil supernatural abilities in a range of media texts such as the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Charmed* (1998-2006, The WB). Additionally, Jean's hair is unkempt and sprawling, having grown to below her hips, her complexion is veiny and pallid, reminiscent of the witch as old hag who gives insufficient attention to bodily hygiene. Most telling is Jean's attire, which changes throughout the course of the film from her X-Men uniform to various red ensembles. When she reaches her power's full capacity, she wears a long, black, cloak-like coat, underneath which is a floating red dress which often billows in the wind, especially when she engages in evil acts while using her powers (figure 48). This choice of attire both indicates Jean's positioning as an evil witch-like entity and utilizes the color red to signify a sensual kind of danger (which is directly reminiscent of her Dark Phoenix costume in the comics).

The film's adherence to archaic notions of feminine evil is thus exposed in the characterization of Jean as witch. After becoming evil, Jean is essentially a lifeless, nigh catatonic vessel who is then used by Magneto in his fight against humans and their mutant cure. During the film, Xavier exposit that Jean's personality has split in two, and that she is being controlled by her instinctual (sensual) side: 'a purely instinctual creature, all desire and joy, and rage.' This clearly endorses Nodding's outlines of beliefs held about women being more receptive to 'evil voices' because 'women's bodies propelled them to an interest in the sensual' (Noddings 1989, 45). Jean is a carnal creature, bolstering the association between women's physical bodies alongside their amoral minds with evil. She is

further unable to be a moral agent because her moral sense (or lack thereof) is presented as entirely unconscious. It is therefore impossible for her to even *try* to be good as, much like what was traditionally thought about women, she has no conscious control over her actions.



Figure 47 The darkening of Jean's eyes and her veiny complexion marks her as subject



Figure 48 Evil Jean's billowing clothes are reminiscent of witches as she telepathically destroys her surroundings

Witches were likewise thought of as dangerously sexual. As discussed, a common theme in examinations of feminine evil is that of the sexually assertive woman. Muchembled articulates that the witch craze 'formed a tightly structured theory, focused on the demonic Sabbath and with an increasing emphasis on women and on an unnatural sexuality which was imputed to them in particular' (Muchembled 2003, 60). As mentioned, numerous authors have pointed out the representation of evil women in the media as sexual aggressors. So, too, is Jean marked as overtly sexual, for instance in a scene in which she is examined at Xavier's school after being found by Logan. At this point it is unclear whether she is enacting her good or evil persona; she is merely lying unconscious on an examination table

with electrodes monitoring her body. Jean is instantly positioned as an object of desire, both diegetically and extra-diegetically. Logan stands above her as she removes the electrodes from her exposed chest. This cuts to a shot of Logan looking, followed by a close-up of her chest as she removes the electrodes, the outline of her breasts clearly visible. This is acknowledged within the scene when she jokingly states, 'Logan, you're making me blush.' Jean then aggressively initiates a kiss, which escalates to her removing his belt telekinetically and sensually scraping his back with her fingernails. The scene specifies that something is wrong with Jean as she engages in a sexually assertive act. Sexual assertion is therefore emblematic of female evil and power, which must be punished.

The factor of mental instability also plays a significant role in the portrayal of Jean's evil persona. As noted above, it is not unusual for evil women in the media to be presented as insane. Inness also agrees that this kind of representation is problematic, stating that the films depict 'women who are clearly insane or over the edge because they have become too aggressive, too masculine, or too tough' (Inness 1998, 67). She continues that such a character is 'shown to be insane, suggesting that her tough attributes are not "normal" for women but signs of a pathological condition' (Inness 1998, 72). Jean's mental instability is evident not only when she kills Scott, but also during her sexual encounter with Logan, in which, after Logan tells her Xavier will be able to 'fix' her condition, she screams, crazed and in close-up, 'I don't wanna fix it!' Here, her eyes have again turned black, signifying that she is indeed evil and has become mentally unhinged.

Still, Jean's most shocking act happens during a showdown with the X-Men and Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants when she visits her childhood home. Both Xavier and Magneto attempt to reason with Jean. But she snaps when Xavier tells her that her uncontrollable power resulted in Scott's death. This sends Jean into a raging fury, where she hysterically cries and screams, causing the house and everything inside it—including the other mutants—to levitate. The climax of the sequence features Jean disintegrating Xavier with her powers. Here, Jean is shown as having been corrupted by her power, driven insane, and ultimately harming her loved ones.

Typically, Jean is punished by death. After a dramatic stand-off between the mutants and the human military (armed with plastic guns and the mutant cure), Jean completely loses control, destroying buildings around her and evaporating humans and mutants alike. Logan is the only one who can stop Jean, it is implied, because of his stamina, but also because of his romantic devotion to Jean, framing the sequence in heterosexual terms. Jean's power is visually marked by her position on a mound of debris far above Logan, who attempts to talk some sense into Jean as he struggles against her telekinetic forces. Jean is so strong, that her powers remove most of Logan's clothes, as well as some of his skin, exposing his bulging muscles. Logan, here, has been constructed as an essential image of strong, white, heterosexual masculinity, the only one who can stop Jean. Her good side finally resurfaces when Logan tells her he would die for her, and Jean frantically begs him to kill her. Logan carries out the act with his retractable metal claws, professing his love for her. Referring to this sort of narrative death, Katy Gilpatric comments that 'the woman gives up the most she can give up—her life—to this dominant male hero' (Gilpatric in Guevara-Flanagan 2012). Thus, the cinematic Jean is eliminated by a patriarchal figure, her final punishment.

A number of editorial conflicts led to Jean's death in the comics which prove insightful to this matter. Writer Chris Claremont intended to depower Jean as punishment for essentially carrying out the genocide of an entire planet. This would have removed her powers, frustrating them. However, Marvel's editor at the time was unhappy with this decision, and decided that Jean deserved a more severe punishment. Although it remains unclear exactly who ruled the death sentence for Jean (see Daniels 1991, 90–91; Madrid 2009, 174–75; Ryall and Tipton 2010, 30 for contradictory accounts), the story caused a fan furore and became one of Marvel's most controversial stories as Jean was portrayed taking her own life (Fingerroth 2004, 90–91). The film amplifies the patriarchal mechanisms which put Jean back in her "rightful" place—dominated, powerless, and dead. It was not enough for Jean to be punished by a depowering in the comics; death was deemed a more suitable punishment. Similarly, Jean's death at her own hands was insufficient in the film adaptation; she had to be killed by a patriarchal figure. Here we see Jean's narrative outcome go through three

incarnations, with each one seeking to oppress Jean's power more than the last.

Jean's death clearly acts as a frustration tactic to limit her power, but there is one more factor that complicates Jean's agency. During her examination at Xavier's school, it is revealed by Xavier that he has been limiting her power since her childhood. He tells Logan

Jean Grey is the only class-five mutant I've ever encountered, the potential practically limitless. Her mutation is seated in the unconscious part of her mind and therein lay the danger. When she was a girl, I created a series of psychic barriers to isolate her powers from her conscious mind and as a result Jean developed a dual personality.

Thus, Jean's power had been literally contained by Xavier throughout all of the films. Indeed, it is unclear whether Jean's heroics were ever truly of her doing, or whether Xavier was behind them the entire time. As outlined in this analysis, *The Last Stand* characterizes Jean as an insane witch-like murderess who clearly has no control over her powers or her actions and the ethical implications thereof. The film then establishes that it is possible that Jean may not even be held accountable for the good acts she carried out in the past, as she was under the influence of the X-Men's resident patriarch the entire time.

2) Discourses of Disease, Toxicity and Poison in Marvel's Evil Women

Ideas of women being toxic or poisonous frequently resurface. These notions coincide with those of dangerous feminine sexuality and also informed the medieval thinking behind the witch hunts. As Gardenour notes 'the witch's unique anatomy and physiology, with its fundamental humoral imbalance, drove her sexual rapacity which, in turn, intensified the toxicity of her flesh, breath, and very glance' (Gardenour 2012, 179). The idea of the poison woman is persistent in Western cultures, a phenomenon which Dominique Mainon and James Ursini refer to as 'a throwback from the fifties when scare tactics were utilized to discourage sexual contact between teenagers' (Mainon and Ursini 2006, 67). However, it is clear that the association between women and poison goes back much further. By the

sixteenth century it was suggested that women corroded the innate warmth of men and transmitted a ‘malevolent moistness’ during sex (Muchembled 2003, 77). This belief was later extended to the air exhaled by women, which was deemed poisonous (Muchembled 2003, 77). Later on, in the nineteenth century, women were similarly typified as toxic due to their sexual appetites. Here, prostitutes were blamed for the spread of venereal disease such as syphilis (Ehrlich 2013). The sexualized female body was considered inherently diseased, prompting US physicians to call for a system of regulating prostitutes, policing their bodies and further controlling feminine sexuality (Ehrlich 2013, 121, 127).

This association dates back at least to ancient Greek times, in which, as discussed by Alison Innes, women were not trusted to be healers due to the idea that they lacked the self-control needed to administer medicine (Innes 2013, 3). It was therefore perceived as a real danger that a man could be poisoned by a female healer (Innes 2013, 7). Innes notes that ‘the repeated telling of these myths reinforced the association of women with poisonous *pharmaka* [drugs, medicines] in the minds of Greek listeners’ (Innes 2013, 14), and so, too, do contemporary representations of poisonous women reinforce the notion of the woman as toxic. Equally of note is the sexual element of this association, which resulted in the scapegoating of women during epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases (Ehrlich 2013). As I discuss, the infections spread by such poison women in Marvel films bear remarkable similarity to sexually transmitted infections, especially when considering that these women use their powers against men during sexual acts.

Typhoid Mary is a Marvel comic book character named after an Irish immigrant cook living in America in the early- to mid-1900s, “Typhoid Mary” Mallon. Mallon was a carrier of typhoid fever, bearing no symptoms herself, and infected dozens of other people (Wald 2008, 68). Typhoid Mary of the comics acquired a split-personality after Daredevil caused an accident in the brothel in which she worked, again imbuing her tragic narrative with sexual undertones (Kelly and Chang 1997). Her “original” Mary persona constantly ran a fever while her Typhoid persona gained telekinetic and telepathic powers, becoming a foe of Daredevil. In her introductory comic, Typhoid is accompanied by discourses pertaining to poison: ‘Invisible

poisons. They walk among us. Poison lives, all it touches... dies. Poison doesn't know it's poison. It simply has to do what it has to to survive' (Nocenti and Romita Jr. 1988). Interestingly, there are no further references to poison in the issue.



Figure 49 Typhoid Mary is framed by poison discourses in *Daredevil* #254 (Nocenti and Romita Jr. 1988)

Typhoid Mary appears in the film *Elektra*, credited simply as “Typhoid.” Only her name serves as inspiration for the character’s poison powers. Typhoid (Natassia Malthe) appears heavily made up with distinctive long, electric blue talon-like fingernails which are the focus of a number of close-up shots. She is coded as villainous through her black clothing, but also through her powers, which she uses in a sexually

predatory manner. Typhoid is introduced early in the film as a member of the Hand organization which seeks to end Elektra's life. During a Council of the Hand meeting, which is conducted by Japanese Master Roshi and his business-wear clad associates, she is shown slowly and sensually blowing a kiss to one of the council members. In a medium close-up, the man's face becomes pallid, with darkened veins indicating blood poisoning on his cheeks, his eyes bloodshot, as he raises his arm towards his nose in a bid to shield himself from Typhoid's breath (see figure 50). He coughs, and the shot cuts to Roshi carelessly glancing down at him and then at Typhoid as she turns and leaves. Like the toxic witches described by Gardenour, Typhoid's very breath is diseased and she is capable of killing people with a mere kiss. Additionally, like Jean's, Typhoid's eyes frequently turn black when she is perpetrating a particularly malicious act, again cementing her evil status.



Figure 50 A member of the Hand is infected by Typhoid's poison

Elektra herself faces Typhoid during the same forest showdown in which Abby Miller reveals her powers. While tracking Elektra, Mark and Abby with her fellow Hand member, Tattoo, an aerial shot shows Typhoid walking through grass and shrubbery. As she walks, she leaves a trail of blackened, dead leaves she caused to die while brushing her outstretched hands over them. After defeating the villain Stone, the three stand in a clearing. A flare of dramatic music marks the peril in which they now find themselves, as Elektra turns in surprise and the camera zooms into her astonished face. Her point-of-view shot shows Typhoid approaching,

looking into the camera with her hands outstretched. This immediately cuts to a shot of Typhoid kissing Elektra, wrapping her face in her hands.

Clearly, this kiss, the only same-sex kiss in the entire Marvel corpus, aligns this sexually-infused act with evil. Not only is she using her powers while kissing someone, but that that someone is a woman doubles up the deviance of the already transgressive, sexually assertive act. In the shot, Elektra's skin begins to appear burned from Typhoid's powers. In a long shot from behind Typhoid, dead leaves fall around the pair. The kiss is lengthy and shot in slow motion, exploiting the sexual connotations of the scene. Typhoid then lowers herself and Elektra to the ground so that she is lying on top of Elektra (figure 51). The falling leaves turn black, externalizing the poisoning effect that Typhoid's powers are having on Elektra. When Typhoid lets go of her, Elektra's face is blue and black leaves surround her. Though Elektra obviously recovers from Typhoid's attack—and later kills her by throwing her sai at her face, causing Typhoid to explode in a puff of smoke—the classic characteristics of the evil, poisonous woman have clearly been taken advantage of within this scene. Further, in using an established character such as Typhoid Mary, the character's name aids in the construction of a villainess who matches existing conceptions of women as poisonous.



Figure 51 Typhoid poisons Elektra in a lengthy kiss sequence

The Wolverine also makes use of the notion of the poisonous woman in its representation of the central female villain Viper (Svetlana Khodchenkova). Viper is a snake-like mutant who excels in the creation of toxins with her mutant powers. Like Typhoid, she is capable of poisoning

people with a mere breath, but is also immune to toxins herself. Viper is based on the character also known as Madame Hydra in the comics. A lethal assassin, Viper's connection to snakes goes as far as immunity to certain poisons in the comics, though she has been known to utilize snakes as weapons, for example when she contaminated Washington, D.C.'s water supply with a snake mutagen, turning President Reagan into a snake (Gruenwald and Dwyer 1988). Nonetheless, Viper's snake-like attributes have been heightened in the film as she causes disruption with her poison powers. Her portrayal conveniently combines the aforementioned discourses of toxic witches with classical representations of snake-women, such as Medusa, who had snakes for hair and could turn men to stone with her gaze, and the half-woman, half-snake Echidna.

Viper is introduced as Dr Green, the oncologist of Yashida (Hiroyuki Sanada), the ailing Japanese businessman whose life was saved by Logan in World War II. Yashida has called on Logan so that he may repay him for saving his life, although his motives go much deeper than this. Dr Green is revealed to be evil through a scene in which she kisses Logan. As Logan dreams of kissing Jean, a medium close-up shows Logan in bed. Suddenly, Jean is revealed to be Viper, and her kiss is gagging him, her eyes glowing green and her pupils slits. She pulls back and flees, and a close-up lingers on the green mist escaping from Logan's mouth as he gags (this kiss serves the purpose of Viper implanting a device inside Logan which disables his healing powers, a part of Yashida's master plan). As with both Typhoid and Jean (and, to a lesser extent, Rogue), Viper's powers are established as being particularly dangerous in conjunction with a sexual act, which itself is crossing the boundary of "proper" femininity. The emphasis on Viper's sexuality is further drawn when, in the streets of Tokyo at night, she is pursuing a now powerless Logan and his sidekick, Yukio (Rila Fukushima). Viper is approached by a man, who, mistaking her for a sex worker, asks 'how much?' Without hesitating, Viper kisses him and he drops dead to the ground as she walks away. The effects of her powers on her victims are syphilitic, being visible on the skin as a kind of infection, rash or boils, in addition to the veiny blood poisoning that was also present in Typhoid's victims (figure 52). Viper's representation thereby draws on discourses regarding women as the toxic transmitters of venereal disease.



Figure 52 Viper's poison powers are signified by an infection of the victim's skin

Throughout the film, Viper is almost exclusively dressed in green, but this is often emphasized through outfits which entirely consist of leather and other slippery, shiny fabrics reminiscent of snakeskin. As the film progresses, Viper uses her poison powers in increasingly imaginative ways, such as licking a pen or her fingernails with her poison, shots which showcase her forked snake tongue and the hissing sound which accompanies it, and using them to stab people (figure 53). Whilst the evil women mentioned thus far have maintained relatively mainstream appearances in accordance with Western conceptions of feminine beauty (long hair, white or white-passing skin, conventional make-up, slim build, feminine attire), with the odd aberrations in certain features (e.g. blackened eyes, unhealthy complexion), *The Wolverine* does not shy away from visually signifying the abject as manifest in the character of Viper. Her appearance becomes more inflected with repulsive qualities, characterizing her as that which must be cast off, eradicated.

Notably, the association of women with poisonous snakes has been established and repurposed depending on historical context. Noddings suggests that snakes came to be associated with women due to their connotations of wisdom, immortality and fertility (Noddings 1989, 53). This changed since the myth of the Fall in which the serpent instigated Eve's temptation (Noddings 1989, 53). However, women have been associated with snakes despite this, perhaps precisely because the devious, slithering snake matches the notion of the evil, toxic woman. In any case, Viper's

status as a snake-woman reifies this association, especially when considering the film's visual portrayal of the character.



Figure 53 Viper's aberrant femininity is indicated by her snake-like features

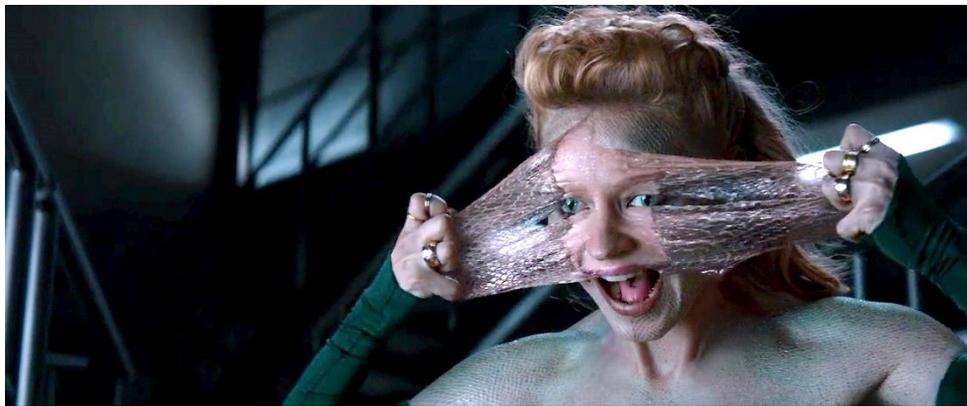


Figure 54 Viper as abject when carrying out the act of skin shedding

The most notable instance of the abjection of Viper is during the film's climactic scenes in a facility in which Yashida's associates are creating a giant weaponized "Silver Samurai" robot. Viper is once again positioned as antithetical and dangerous to men when she tells Logan the reasons why she was employed by Yashida: 'Of course, it helps to be genetically immune to every poison known to man, as I am. And immune to the toxin that is man himself... as I am.' Like the *femme fatales* of the 1940s, Viper will stop at nothing to manipulate men in order to get what she wants. But Viper's previously palatable appearance is corroded in the scenes that follow, matching her external appearance to her internal, evil sentiments. After being shot with a poison, Viper demonstrates how her powers of immunity function. When she awakens on the floor in the facility, her skin has become green-tinted scales, matching her scaly leather outfit. Her eyes are once again green, her pupils snake-like. She rips off her halter-neck top

in a medium close-up, and in a moment of body horror, she lifts a fingernail to the center of her forehead and pulls it across her face to the bottom of her neck, cutting the flesh. The camera slowly zooms in as she points her head upwards, places her hands upon it and, lowering her head again, peels the skin away from her face with a maniacal grin (see figure 54). In this moment, Viper becomes truly repulsive, an embodiment of the abject, evil woman.

In a later scene, Logan comes across the skin she has shed whilst crawling on the ground. In a medium shot, Viper aggressively spits acid at him. She now appears bald, a marker of un-femininity (though remarkably her make-up withstood the shedding of skin). The final fight between Viper and Yukio once again highlights Viper's snake-features, her tongue flicking out between punches and kicks, spitting acid and hissing. Finally, Yukio wraps a chord around Viper's neck and pulls her into a lift shaft, hanging her, a death not quite the beheading of Medusa, but still focusing on separating head from body.

MARVEL VILLAINESSES: TRADITIONAL/CONTEMPORARY/POSTFEMINIST

As discussed, portrayals of villainous women frequently draw from patriarchal discourses which subjugate women. While Jean's representation more broadly draws on discourses of women as evil witches, as well as perpetuating notions of powerful women becoming mentally unhinged and literally insane, Typhoid and Viper's portrayals draw more directly from rhetoric associating women with poison and toxicity. All three of these women are killed at the end of their respective narratives, a punishment for women who overstep the boundaries of traditional femininity.

Additionally, the narratives amplify the oppressive tendencies of such discourses when considering the comics on which they are based. In the case of Jean, the narrative punishment was altered to showcase masculine power as the ultimate force of moral goodness which defeats feminine evil. Meanwhile, Typhoid Mary continues to draw from discourses of feminine evil which align with the portrayals outlined here. That the character's name served as inspiration for an evil feminine subjectivity

which exaggerated elements of toxic femininity is significant. This is also the case for Viper, whose comic book history as a woman associated with snakes also conveniently matches the rhetoric of evil womanhood.

However, the common denominator for all of these women is sexuality. Each villainess is shown utilizing her powers in an aggressive way while engaging in sexual behavior. The sexual acts in which these villainesses engage are literally aggressive—they are using their powers aggressively while being sexually assertive, causing physical harm to the receiver. In behaving in this kind of sexually aggressive manner combined with an exhibition of their powers—which is specific to the fantastical nature of the genre—they effectively act out ‘an appropriation of the male sphere’ (Aguilar 2001, 5), whilst simultaneously drawing attention to the fact they are physically powerful beings, thereby fortifying the association between powerful women and evil. At the same time, the emphasis on the sexual villainess runs parallel to the sexualized heroine—both are defined through a moral gauge of sex. While heroines are sexualized—they wear revealing costumes, make suggestive comments, are objectified and so on—villainesses are *themselves* sexual. The evil woman is presented as acting in sexually assertive ways because she can, but she is also marked as evil because of this sexually assertive behavior. The heroine, on the other hand, can be erotically contemplated, both from within and outside of the narrative, but she rarely, if ever initiates a sexual encounter.

In such ways the virgin/whore dichotomy is perpetuated in these contemporary films. In postfeminist culture, the virgin is made an object of sexual desire whilst remaining chaste and wholesome—such are the discrepancies within postfeminist rhetoric. However, whilst the policing of women’s bodies and sexuality has been occurring for centuries, postfeminist culture also contributes to social narratives which disgrace women based on their sexual behavior. Contemporary narratives continue the devaluing of the “whore” half of the virgin/whore dichotomy. As previously discussed, postfeminist culture is concerned with empowering women with narratives of (self-)objectification and sexual difference (Gill 2007; 2008). The sexualized body becomes the powerful body, whilst also being confined to certain modes of Western femininity standards.

On the other hand, postfeminist rhetoric also only fosters very specific manifestations of sexual liberation. Emily Bazelon clarifies that the frequent use of the word “slut” within postfeminist cultures is emblematic of the tension between what Gill refers to as the sexualized subject and the ways in which “sexual liberation” is actually implemented in women’s lives. She notes, ‘calling a girl a slut warns her that there’s a line: she can be sexual, but not *too* sexual’ (Bazelon 2013, 95, original emphasis). Like the virgin/whore dichotomy, these postfeminist discourses therefore signify the cultural devaluing of women based on the factor of their sexual practices.

Further, Alison Winch similarly typifies “slut-shaming” as an element of postfeminist culture that functions to harness envy and competition between women and girls. Winch’s analysis is specific to what she refers to as ‘girlfriend culture,’ which exploits notions of female friendship whilst imbuing them with politics of ‘mutual body regulation,’ in which women’s bodies are monitored, even by other women (Winch 2013, 2). Such practices ensure that illusions of sexual liberation are maintained, while condemning women who overstep boundaries of acceptable femininity.

The idea that ‘a girlfriend must know how to correctly regulate her libido’ (Winch 2013, 12) in postfeminist culture further illustrates the importance which is placed on women’s sexuality in terms of her moral and social worth. While Winch’s analysis refers to the monitoring of so-called ‘girlfriends,’ the same sentiments apply to the representations of sexual women as socially deviant, even evil. It is likewise notable that the evil women discussed here are completely isolated from other women—be they good or evil. This again singles them out as cultural aberrations, anomalies in terms of who traditionally wields power, again signifying that women are in some way unworthy of such power.

The representations discussed also leave little room for readings such as that carried out by Deborah Jermyn upon the so-called ‘women from hell’ subgenre (Jermyn 1996). Jermyn reappropriates psychopathic female characters such as those that appear in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (Curtis Hanson, 1992) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Shroeder, 1992), concluding that such portrayals offer a ‘symbiotic representation of the conflicts of womanhood’ through its

inclusion of an evil woman and her direct counterpart (Jermyn 1996, 253, 258). Similar readings have been carried out, such as Per Faxneld's use of Satanic feminism in making sense of nineteenth century literature that focuses on the female vampire (Faxneld 2012). Sarah Appleton Aguiar similarly describes the reappropriation of the stock character of "the bitch" in contemporary literature (Aguiar 2001). It is thus demonstrable that representations of evil women can be shaped by interpretation. However, I would also argue that the women in Marvel films are portrayed as more abberant than the psychopaths of the films analysed by Jermyn, and that their isolation means that there is no counterpart to their characters which could balance the portrayal. Further, these women are physically marked as grotesque, abject and evil, rendering a reconciliation challenging. That these representations draw from patriarchal discourses of feminine evil similarly results in women who are constructed as the ultimate, irredeemable evil who must be eradicated.

These villainesses discussed here all exemplify the gendered dynamics at work when considering notions of power—their status as women make them prone to corruption, a danger to humanity. The status quo is restored when these women die. Meanwhile, the inconsistent quality of postfeminist rhetoric once again appears as these women are marked as dangerously sexual. In the next chapter I continue the interrogation of feminine sexualities in Marvel films, assessing how they mediate dominant structures of heterosexuality, as well as examining the gendered representation of the *X-Men* films' mutant shapeshifter, Mystique.

4.

SUPERQUEER?

GENDER RIGIDITY AND HETEROSEXUAL FEMININITY IN MARVEL FILMS

Thus far, my discussions have covered the varying portrayals of the different female character types presented in Marvel films. Undoubtedly, ideals of heterosexuality and femininity play into these representations, as, for example, evidenced in the previous chapter concerning villainous women. However, it is necessary to call into question the very institutions which inform these representations: the parallel threads of the gender binary and heteronormativity; in other words the relationship between culturally sanctioned femininity and heterosexuality. This chapter questions how women in Marvel films are overwhelmingly represented as heterosexual, the role of heterosexuality within the film narratives, and how female characters are drawn into the narrative through their statuses as heterosexual women. Subsequently, a case study of potentially fluid gender identity is offered. The overarching implications of this discussion regard the films' contributions to what Judith Butler refers to as the 'heterosexual matrix' (Judith Butler 1990, 9), to be discussed in detail later.

In this chapter, "heterosexuality" is considered an institution which shapes media discourses, affecting the representation of both gender and sexuality. This has largely been driven by a notable lack of queer⁸ characters in films based on Marvel comics. Likewise, queer characters in the comic books themselves are a minority, though they have gained increasing visibility in recent years. That said, parallels between the superhero narrative and queer narratives have been made. Purse, for example, notes that 'the dynamics of superhero narratives, the fact that the heroes must hide a part of who they are or "come out" to those around them ... correlates their experiences closely with key milestones of homosexual experience' (Purse 2011a, 144).

⁸ Following Michael Warner, I use the term "queer" here 'in a deliberately capacious way' to signify non-normative sexualities which are 'at odds with straight culture' (Warner 2000, 38).

Contemporary narratives in Marvel comics have made express reference to these discourses. For example, a storyline in *Young Avengers* (which follows a team of teen wannabe Avengers) involves a central character, Billy Kaplan (who possesses magical powers) and his conflict to “come out” to his parents as a superhero (Heinberg and DiVito 2005). Billy is also gay, so when he approaches his parents about wanting to tell them “something,” they assume he wants to come out as gay and offer their unconditional support for his relationship with his boyfriend (who is an alien-shapeshifter). This leaves Billy frustrated over their obliviousness towards his “other” secret identity, on the other hand offering a portrayal of a gay teen who is comfortable with his sexuality but is nonetheless subjected to the milestones described by Purse. I discuss instances of queer metaphor in Marvel films, including their potential drawbacks, in more detail in the final section of this chapter.

With this chapter, I intend to determine specifically the configurations of heterosexual femininity presented within these films, how they relate to the institution of heterosexuality in a patriarchal society and how they elaborate the relationship between gender and sexuality. Issues of postfeminism resurface through these representations as a reaffirmation of gender roles and an emphasis on the compromises made by the women in order to make heterosexual relationships “work.”

Evidently, it would be unfair to assume all characters in Marvel films are heterosexual. As Alexander Doty notes, ‘assuming that all characters in a film are straight unless labelled, coded, or otherwise obviously proven to be queer’ is a mistake (Doty 2000, 3). However, sexuality in many cases must be made visible to be read as such—hence the phenomenon of bisexual erasure, whereby bisexuals are read as either homosexual or heterosexual depending on their sexual partners (Hartman 2013). As such, these characters are coded as heterosexual purely because they are never shown having queer romantic interests. If a character isn’t heterosexual, the films suggest, they are nothing at all.

Of course, it is possible that a character could be bisexual, for example, despite only ever being shown with members of a different gender to their own. However, the lack of acknowledgement towards this possibility within the films, coupled with their showcasing of a specific,

dominant mode of heterosexuality make such a reading challenging. As such, the first part of the chapter interrogates Marvel films' insistence on binaristic notions of gender, and subsequently moves on to their portrayals of heterosexuality. Building on the work of Heller (1997) and other critics of postfeminist constructions of essentialized gender and sexuality, heterosexual romance is discussed as being dually utopian and dysfunctional.

The second part of the chapter is dedicated to a queer reading of the *X-Men* character Mystique, who in many ways poses a fluid subjectivity with regards to the notion of gender, but nonetheless remains a conflicted character. Mystique is especially significant since she is the only canonically queer Marvel character who has been adapted to film, an adaptation which brings forth serious implications regarding the state of heteronormativity in Hollywood films.

NAVIGATING GENDER, SEXUALITY AND HETERONORMATIVITY

The phenomena of gender and sexuality in cultures around the world have been discussed from a multitude of viewpoints and disciplines. There is therefore no single way from which to tackle the issue of heterosexual femininity in film. Before delving into these arguments, it is important to establish why gender and sexuality are often considered together. Disputes over the relationship between gender—that is, a ‘system of social practices’ shaping individuals’ identification as man or woman (as opposed to biological sex) (Wharton 2012, 8)—and sexuality—which refers ‘to all erotically significant aspects of social life and social being’ (S. Jackson 2005, 17)—have been expressed throughout the last several decades and are challenging to navigate. Nonetheless, I provide here a brief summary of the contextual discourses involving sexuality and gender, and why it is beneficial to consider them as twinned occurrences.

As Chris Beasley notes, the majority of gender theorists ‘continue to perceive gender and sexuality as strongly linked’ but ‘queer theorists, in particular, dismiss any assertions that gender and sexuality are inevitably joined’ (Beasley 2005, 4). Further, Richardson has identified at least five

different ways of conceiving of the linkage between gender and sexuality, from naturalist approaches in which the dual binaries of male/female, heterosexual/homosexual and masculine/feminine are considered part of a 'natural order' (Richardson 2007, 460) to sociological perspectives which, for example, see gender as an effect of sexuality (Richardson 2007, 462). Richardson stresses the importance of considering historical context in seeking the interconnections between gender and sexuality (Richardson 2007, 465). Her opinion is that at the current time and in the current climate of gender and queer studies, two qualifying questions must be asked: 'can we think about gender without invoking sexuality?' and 'is sexuality intelligible to us outside of a gendered discourse or subject?' (Richardson 2007, 466). For instance, when invoking the notion of a heterosexual man, it may seem impossible to conceive of him as anything outside the definition of a gendered person, who is a man, who is sexually attracted to the "opposite" gender, namely women. However, it is queer theory's role to aid in the deconstruction of such questions. Thus, Richardson argues that 'gender's link to sexuality is not determinate or unidirectional, but complex, dynamic, contingent, fluid and unstable' (Richardson 2007, 464).

Stevi Jackson offers equally enlightening theories which shape much of how this chapter is structured. Importantly, Jackson argues that

sexuality and gender are empirically interrelated, but analytically distinct. Without an analytical distinction between them, we cannot effectively explore the ways in which they intersect; if we conflate them, we are in danger of deciding the form of their interrelationship in advance.

(S. Jackson 2005, 17)

It is thus preferable to consider the interrelations of sexuality and gender, for example the question of why, when we refer to one, we also think of the other, whilst also maintaining the analytical differences between them. Thus, in this chapter, femininity and heterosexuality are considered separately, but the potential links between them are stressed.

Like Richardson and other theorists such as Beasley (2010), Calvin Thomas (2003), Nancy Fischer (2013) and others, Jackson is interested in heterosexuality as a social institution which shapes individuals' lives and behavior as well as social hierarchies. Indeed, she states that 'heterosexuality is the key site of intersection between gender and sexuality,

and one that reveals the interconnections between sexual and nonsexual aspects of social life' (S. Jackson 2005, 17). Jackson traces the varying accounts of gender and sexuality throughout history, leading to the resurfacing of attitudes inflected by "New Darwinism" in recent times (S. Jackson 2005, 15). Such rhetoric privileges the idea that heterosexuality is most "useful" in evolutionary terms as it is driven by 'the "need" to find a mate and pass on our genes to the next generation' (S. Jackson 2005, 15). Much like in the naturalist approaches outlined by Richardson, heterosexuality thus becomes part of "human nature." In light of this, Jackson stresses that it is 'crucial to reassert the political relevance of social constructionist analyses of gender and sexuality and to challenge the taken-for-granted view of heterosexuality as a natural, uncontested fact of human nature' (S. Jackson 2005, 16). Views of heterosexuality as "natural" drive heteronormative discourses in Western culture. Following this, Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner define heteronormativity as 'the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged' (Berlant and Warner 1998, 548). Therefore, heteronormativity, as a dominant discourse, crops up in all areas of Western culture. Berlant and Warner continue that

contexts that have little visible relation to sex practice, such as life narrative and generational identity, can be heteronormative in this sense, while in other contexts forms of sex between men and women might not be heteronormative. Heteronormativity is thus a concept distinct from heterosexuality.

(Berlant and Warner 1998, 548)

It is also important to note that heteronormativity serves the purpose of marginalizing and stigmatizing any sexualities which are not heterosexual (S. Jackson 2005, 18). Furthermore, 'heteronormativity extends beyond the normalization of heterosexuality to encompass the normalization of a certain type of heterosexuality that involves marriage and monogamy while single, nonmonogamous, or voluntarily celibate individuals are viewed as deviant' (Charlebois 2011, 15).

Thus, though gender may not *cause* an individual's sexuality, or vice versa, heteronormativity dictates that certain genders are aligned to certain sexualities, as I discuss in this chapter. Heteronormative sentiments are

expressed and reinforced by media representations, particularly mainstream Hollywood films (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 643), including Marvel adaptations. It would be careless to presuppose that there is absolutely no connection between gender and sexuality, and even if there is not one, these texts make sure that there is a message that there *is* a connection. The institution of heterosexuality has been evident in the previous chapters, for example in my discussion of villainesses, who embody the “wrong sort” of heterosexual femininity (too sexual; too strong) to be ideologically stable. It therefore is desirable for the “good” woman to embody socially desirable aspects of heterofemininity, such as fear and victimization (Yavorsky and Sayer 2013), so as to allow for no sexual/gender (and hence moral) ambiguity. Such sentiments also fuel the aforementioned “women in refrigerator” narratives, although the purpose of this chapter is to navigate the arena of heterosexuality and its relationship to femininity in a more general way. Marvel films display an insistence on heterosexual displays of romance, and this is partly achieved through their reliance on the gender binary and its supposed rigidity. That said, a discussion of gender requires a discussion of sexuality, even if we cannot decide on their exact relationship.

A number of issues surface when considering existing analyses of heterosexuality and gender, particularly in the area of queer studies and feminist film theory. First, many feminist writers have assessed what it means for women to be sexual in films (Mellen 1974; E. A. Kaplan 1983; Kuhn 1994), but few have actively investigated the role of *heterosexuality* within the films and the female characters’ narratives in great detail. Whilst such texts prove enlightening to the issue of women’s representations in films, they do not specify what it means for these women to be heterosexual. In this chapter, I argue that Marvel films present gender in ways which can encompass notions of what it means to be a heterosexual woman in a superhero narrative.

The second issue involves the lack of studies about heteronormative and hegemonic representations of heterosexuality. Theorists have tackled heteronormativity from an angle which does not speak directly to the purpose of this chapter but still offers some contextual background. Importantly, they have been interested in “queering” the notion of heterosexuality. That is, in Beasley’s terms, they intend to break away from

notions of heterosexuality as the antithesis of queer, and rather offer readings of heterosexuality against the grain of heteronormativity, to ‘upset accounts of heterosexuality as uninteresting’ (Beasley 2010, 204). Such contemplations have brought about new configurations of what heterosexuality incorporates, such as that of the “queer straight” or “queer heterosexual” (Mock 2003; Schlichter 2004), which open up new opportunities for how individuals consider their own sexual identities.

Further, writers have applied this perspective to Western mainstream cultural products such as film, thereby “queering” representations of heterosexuality on screen. Wheeler Winston Dixon, in his work *Straight* (2003), is thus only interested in films which he perceives as offering “eccentric” representations of heterosexuality, while Sean Griffin’s edited collection *Hetero* (2009a) offers “queered” readings of mainstream representations of heterosexuality which defy the notion that heterosexuality is ‘bland, white bread, vanilla, missionary position, monogamous, married, patriarchal’ (Griffin 2009b, 4).

An issue with these readings is not that they are not useful, but rather that they do not address the issues raised by representations which *are* very much in the mainstream. Further, they do not account for the merging of the “queer” and “hetero” categories which, I argue, has occurred in recent decades. While I agree that representations of heterosexuality should be read as incorporating dysfunction, I also argue that this dysfunction is presented as a crucial component of normative heterosexual relationships in Marvel texts, complicating the notion of a “queered” reading of heterosexuality. When a reading that is “against the grain” is already contained *within* the grain, these kinds of analyses become less insightful.

Finally, there has also been a notable compartmentalization of much queer theory in relation to its actual application, for example writers such as Berlant and Warner have been more invested in cultivating a queer counterculture than they have been with analyzing the existing structures of power found within mainstream cultural spaces. Application of queer criticism upon cultural texts such as Marvel films has therefore not taken center stage in these respects.

GENDER RIGIDITY AND THE MAINTENANCE OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN MARVEL FILMS

As noted, there have been certain theoretical approaches which have maintained that gender occurs as part of a natural order based on binaristic frameworks. The idea of gender being fixed at birth has been contested by theorists such as Judith Lorber, who claims that

gender is so pervasive that in our society we assume it is bred into our genes. Most people find it hard to believe that gender is constantly created and re-created out of human interaction, out of social life, and is the texture and order of that social life.

(Lorber 2000, 54)

Lorber and many others including Judith Butler (to whom I return in the following sections) believe that gender is ‘socially constructed’ and not inscribed through biological sex (Lorber 2000, 56). Nonetheless, in Western cultures, “men” must remain distinct from “women” and difference between them must be harnessed (Lorber 2000, 54). Lorber continues that the gender binary is one of the foundational elements of society, in which biological sex and other factors such as race are used as ‘crude markers’ of ‘ascribed social statuses’ (Lorber 2000, 56). The gender binary thus functions within political hierarchical terms, maintaining the gender order.

Attitudes which preserve essentialist notions of gender are present in cultural products. Michael Kimmel notes that an ‘interplanetary’ approach to gender is widespread in the media and other parts of everyday life (Kimmel 2000, 1). This interplanetary point of view, which became increasingly popular with the release of pop psychology self-help guides such as John Grey’s *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus* (1995), perpetuates the notion that men and women are so inherently different that they may as well be from different planets (Kimmel 2000, 1). The theory reinforces not only gender difference but gender inequality, offering an essentialized, rigid portrayal of gender (Kimmel 2000, 1). That is to say that this approach ‘assumes, whether through biology or socialization, that women act like women, no matter where they are, and that men act like men, no matter where they are’ (Kimmel 2000, 12). This perspective, as Kimmel notes, is limiting and ignores the myriad similarities between genders, only privileging the perceived differences.

Such discourses stand in contrast to the social constructionist arguments outlined above. Nonetheless, the idea that women are women and men are men has developed alongside and within postfeminist culture, for instance within its insistence on traditional modes of femininity. Negra, for example, notes that the portrayal of women's life stages in the media still focus predominantly on the quest for finding heterosexual love and a family. She argues that such portrayals

consistently and insistently display and perform femininity as heterosexual, white, affluent, and family-focused, and those women who cannot be recuperated into one of these life stage paradigms generally lose representability within a landscape dominated by these categories.

(Negra 2009b, 173)

Thus, despite the advances made in terms of gender equality fostered by feminist activity throughout the previous decades, there has been a significant call for traditional femininity within contemporary media. Evidently this also ties into notions of heteronormativity, as 'the distinct overvaluing of female heterosexuality and maternity' can be seen as a reaction to rare but increasing instances of 'alternative concepts of sexual identity and family' in the media (Negra 2009b, 175), including but not limited to the foregrounding of "same-sex" marriage as being the crux of LGBT human rights in recent years.

Marvel films often function to maintain a sense of gender rigidity and difference, which in turn feeds into representations of heterosexual femininity. This is often done through the use of discourse and, in particular, through gender essentialist humor, which, as Julie Woodzicka and Thomas Ford note can 'trivialize sexism and foster a normative climate of tolerance of sex discrimination from the ambiguity of society's attitudes towards women' (Woodzicka and Ford 2010, 186). Hence gendered humor which functions to reinforce binaristic, essentialist notions of gender, is utilized within these films, contributing further to limiting portrayals of gender identity.

In Chapter 2, I outlined the ways in which Sue Storm's "funny naked moments" in both *Fantastic Four* films of the 2000s function as comedic frustration tactics to limit Sue's power in the films. These moments also assert gender rigidity, and this comes to light when considered in

conjunction with Sue's brother Johnny's "funny naked moment," which he suffers in the first film. Johnny's powers surface for the first time while he is on a snowboarding excursion with a female companion, a nurse who examined him after he was exposed to cosmic rays. The nurse is marked as unabashedly feminine through her costume of bright pink thermal clothing and a pink leopard print hat. This later becomes a crucial component of maintaining the gender order. As Johnny's fire powers ignite, his clothes burn off and he begins to levitate, eventually flying into a pile of snow and melting it into an impromptu hot tub. With Johnny now nude, the nurse approaches, and he asks 'Care to join me?' in the 'sexually powerful and pursuant' manner that is encouraged in men in Western culture (Ott and Mack 2010, 186).

In a later scene, Johnny runs into the facility where the four are being observed, where Reed and Sue had been having a discussion. Upon his arrival the medium long-shot clearly shows that Johnny has wrapped the nurse's pink jacket around his waist, though is still completely naked otherwise. He holds his hand out before him, the other hand securing the jacket in place, and lights the tip of his thumb on fire. The shot briefly switches to Reed's and Sue's dismayed faces, before switching back to Johnny, who is thrilled with his new powers. A comparison to Sue's "funny naked moments" is telling. While Sue is portrayed as deeply embarrassed and frantically tries to cover herself after losing her clothing, Johnny takes control of the situation by shamelessly exposing his body, even actively flirting with the nurse. Furthermore, humor is derived from Johnny's situation by the presence of the pink jacket, a color so associated with femininity, it becomes laughable in combination with an assertive, masculine character such as Johnny.

Gender rigidity can also be maintained through discourses not necessarily of a humorous nature. The use of feminine labels to refer to men, for example, draws attention to the apparent necessity in the films to keep the categories of "men" and "women" separate as well as the apparent offence that doing so causes towards the male characters. In *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), this is the catalyst that causes much of the narrative action in the rest of the film. Having gone on an excursion to Jotenheim, another dimension and one of the magical Nine Realms, which is inhabited by the

villainous Frost Giants, to start a fight, Thor (Chris Hemsworth) initially decides to leave after encountering the leader of the Frost Giants, Laufey. In the cold, wet, dark environment, Thor turns around to leave in a medium shot, facing the camera. Laufey, towering above him from behind, says ‘run back home, little princess.’ This cuts to a medium close-up of Loki, who mutters ‘damn,’ followed by a shot of one of Thor’s accompanying warriors, and then back to Thor, who smiles deviously. A close-up of his hand grasping the handle of his almighty hammer, Mjolnir, indicates that this does not bode well for the Frost Giants. He then swings the hammer at Laufey, causing a battle which is only ended after Odin (Anthony Hopkins) himself appears at the scene. Following this, Odin expels Thor from the realm of Asgard, sending him to earth, and causing the rest of the film’s narrative, in which Thor must once again prove he is worthy of wielding Mjolnir and returning to Asgard, to fall into place. Here, the use of femininity as an insult is what causes Thor to lose his temper and fight with Laufey. The discourse makes use of the rhetoric of female weakness as an insult applied to men, even if the rest of the film is concerned with Thor’s character redemption.

However, it is not always men who assign feminine labels as insults towards other men in these films. On some occasions, as in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, they can be used by women towards men. Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) is a British agent working for the US Army during World War II, in which the film is set. Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), the scrawny weakling with poor health, has finally been allowed to enlist under the supervision of Dr Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), who has developed the Super Soldier Serum that would eventually allow Steve to become Captain America. Peggy is introduced during a training exercise with the all-male group of soldiers that results in her punching a disobedient soldier in the face after he makes inappropriate sexual comments towards her.

Later on, Peggy’s supervisor, Colonel Phillips (Tommy Lee Jones), arrives while the soldiers are doing exercises and refers to them as ‘ladies.’ This incident is repeated when this time Peggy shouts orders at the exercising soldiers: ‘Faster, ladies, come on. My grandmother has more life in her, god rest her soul,’ and later ‘Come, girls!’ while the soldiers are

doing star jumps. Peggy's appearance in the film as a high-ranking military woman seems unexpected in a film set in the 1940s, however it was not entirely unlikely for women to have had such roles in the army, though officially it was deemed unacceptable in the US for women to have combat roles (Pierce 2006, 208). Of more interest is Peggy's use of femininity as a motivating insult for the training soldiers, which also feeds into postfeminist discourse as well as reinforcing the gender order, with feminine labels being deemed weak and thus offensive towards men.

The period in which *The First Avenger* is set is particularly convenient for postfeminist culture, as it functions as a distancing mechanism against what once was. Peggy's use of the term 'ladies' and 'girls' could be an accurate representation of attitudes towards women of the time, but it also serves as a reminder of the inaccurate notion that "things aren't like that anymore," much like the discourses in *X-Men: First Class* discussed in Chapter 2. Similarly, Peggy's internalized misogyny speaks to the sense of competition between women which is fostered by postfeminist culture in place today (Negra 2009a, 97). That these scenes are also framed by the "Girl Power" sentiment fostered by Peggy's introduction as a tough girl who doesn't allow unruly men to harass her is also significant. As a postfeminist period piece, *The First Avenger* speaks to the notion of 'temporal slippages' which Munford and Waters suggest is a defining trait of postfeminist culture (Munford and Waters 2014, 8). Within these modes of representation, the past, future and present collide as 'images or ideas from the past might return to haunt us' while helping to shape new feminisms, 'the ghostly projection of a feminist future' (Munford and Waters 2014, 8).

Blade: Trinity also presents gender in rigid terms through its use of discourse and humor, which largely occurs through the character Hannibal King, for instance when he enters a fight with a group of vampires by jumping through a transparent mirror, shouting 'Evening, ladies!' The film's main antagonist is the contemporary Dracula called Drake but it also includes a vampire villainess, Danica Talos (Parker Posey). Danica appears as a typical evil business woman, a "career bitch," not unlike those described by Brewis (Brewis 1998), discussed in more detail in Chapter 1. Frequently dressed in pencil skirts and blazers, combined, at times, with

fantastically tall hairstyles, Danica is positioned as the head of a vampiric board of directors, particularly during a scene in which all the vampires sit around a table, listening to Danica's ranting.

The frequency of penis-based humor in the film is coupled with Danica's outbursts, indicating her possession of what Stephen Ducat characterizes as the 'wandering phallus' (Ducat 2004, 9). This is explicitly expressed by Danica in a scene in which she has taken Hannibal prisoner. In his dank cell he is awoken by a vampire Pomeranian, owned by Danica's henchman Grimwood. Hannibal says to him 'Clearly, this dog has a bigger dick than you,' which prompts Grimwood to kick Hannibal in the face. His response, though, is 'Ow! I was talking to her!' and the shot cuts to his hand gesturing at Danica. The joke is multi-leveled in its maintenance of gender rigidity. First, Danica is further vilified when she is referred to as a dog. Second, it makes use of discourses whereby the size of a man's penis is indicative of his power. Finally, humor is derived from assigning this penis (either metaphorical or physical) to a woman (where it does not belong). Danica appears in the next shot and after some exchanges, Hannibal finally suggests 'How about you taking a sugar-frosted fuck off the end of my dick?' Her response to this is borderline absurd, as she demands 'How about everyone here not saying the word "dick" anymore? It provokes my envy!' Thus, Danica is made to seem improper due to her gender, the idea that she doesn't belong in this masculine space, and that all she really desires is the wandering phallus, which does not belong to her because she is a woman. This sort of humor in the film, coupled with its relentless jokes about Hannibal possibly being homosexual, add to its reinforcement of the gender order.

Finally, it is important to recognize that images of female terrorization and victimization by men actively contribute to maintaining the gender order. This can, for example, take the form of the "women in refrigerator" narratives I interrogated in the first chapter. Jill Yavorsky and Liana Sayer note that 'the performance of heterosexual femininity deploys gendered fear as a resource through which women indicate they are "natural women" who expect and deserve male chivalry and protection' (Yavorsky and Sayer 2013, 514). Likewise, Marvel films actively display images of victimized women (such as those mentioned in Chapter 1), suggesting that

there is a need to include such images in order to maintain the gender order and binaristic notions of gender. As I next discuss, gender rigidity contributes to the maintenance of heteronormative and hegemonic representations of gender due to the intersection of gender and sexuality in dominant discourses.

DISRUPTING THE RAINBOW BRIDGE: DYSFUNCTIONAL HETEROSEXUALITY

The maintenance of the gender order, the essentialized notion that men always act like men and that women always act like women, informs what Judith Butler terms the 'heterosexual matrix' (Judith Butler 1990, 9). To summarize Butler's dense theories, she notes the gender hierarchy, by which men are dominant in a society and women submissive, as a political instrument. Drawing from the work of Monique Wittig, she states 'gender not only designates persons, "qualifies" them, as it were, but constitutes a conceptual episteme by which binary gender is universalized' (Judith Butler 1990, 29).

Much like Adrienne Rich, an early theorizer of heterosexuality as a "compulsory" sexuality to which all people must adhere (A. Rich 1980), Butler maintains that dominance is fostered through 'the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality' (Judith Butler 1990, 185). This grid is the heterosexual matrix, which thus creates meaning out of the combined efforts of sex, gender and sexuality. Here, we can see the interlocking notions of sexuality and gender culminating to maintain the gender order. Furthermore, Butler argues that it is crucial for heterosexuality to be constantly repeated and emphasized in order to perpetuate the heterosexual matrix. Heteronormative structures present heterosexuality as the "original" sexuality, whilst homosexuality is merely a copy (Judith Butler 1993). However, Butler argues, this only occurs as a result of heterosexuality's compulsory nature, and that heterosexuality will only ever be a copy of itself (Judith Butler 1993, 313). This is because heterosexuality is constantly reproducing copies of itself to allay the anxiety that it could be questioned and rendered optional instead of compulsory (Judith Butler 1993). Butler argues,

heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself—and failing. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself.

(Judith Butler 1993, 313)

It is thus clear that media representations often actively contribute to this heterosexual matrix. Indeed, Griffin has noted the importance of analysing heterosexuality in film, and other texts, but stresses that heterosexuality occupies an ‘unspoken invisible centrality’ (Griffin 2009b, 13). Further, Berlant and Warner argue for an inclusive perspective of the ways in which heteronormativity informs individuals’ daily lives in ways which are not solely related to sexual acts:

this utopia of social belonging is also supported and extended by acts less commonly recognized as part of sexual culture: paying taxes, being disgusted, philandering, bequeathing, celebrating a holiday, investing for the future, teaching, disposing of a corpse, carrying wallet photos, buying economy size, being nepotistic, running for president, divorcing, or owning anything “His” and “Hers.”

(Berlant and Warner 1998, 555)

These factors make heterosexuality hard to “see” as it is merely the default or norm against which other sexualities are measured. As outlined by Negra, heterosexual marriage has prominently resurfaced in postfeminist media products as a highlight of a woman’s life cycle (Negra 2009b, 175). This may in part, according to both Negra and J. Jack Halberstam (2007) respectively, be caused by the increasing visibility of women who live outside of these conventions.

The furore over marriage can be seen in Marvel comic books when beloved characters get married. In *Fantastic Four Annual #3*, ‘possibly the greatest annual of all time!’ (Lee and Kirby 1965), deemed as ‘the most sensational super-spectacular ever witnessed by human eyes!!’ (Lee and Kirby 1965), Reed Richards and Susan Storm finally tie the knot after having been together since the first issue of *Fantastic Four*. In the issue, the wedding is such a phenomenon that it occupies the front page of the newspaper which is being begrudgingly read by a furious Doctor Doom, who aims to seek revenge on Reed for defeating him previously (figure 55). Similarly, Spider-Man’s wedding to Mary Jane in *The Amazing Spider-Man*

Annual #21 is prominently displayed on the cover of the issue, with the happy couple beaming in front of the heart-shaped Spider-Man emblem and the wedding attendees (an alternate cover shows Peter in his Spider-Man costume and replaces the wedding guests with an assortment of Marvel heroes and villains in confrontational poses) (Michelinie, Shooter, and Ryan 1987; figure 56).

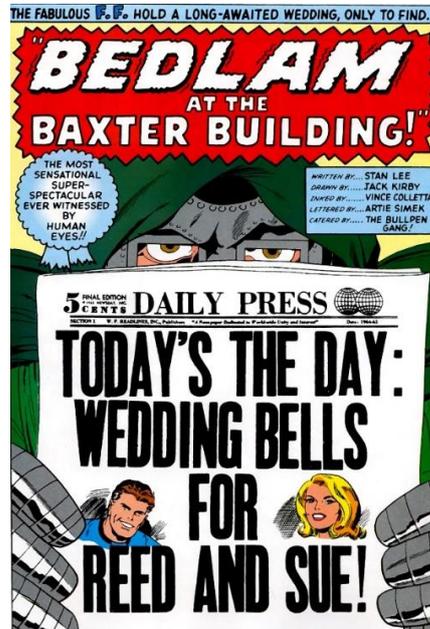


Figure 55 Doctor Doom is furious to discover that his arch nemesis Reed Richards is getting married to Susan Storm (Lee and Kirby 1965)



Figure 56 Alternate covers for Spider-Man's wedding issue. The cover on the right shows how superheroics and heterosexual union collide (Michelinie, Shooter, and Ryan 1987)

However, all is not as it seems in representations of heterosexuality. In her analysis of heterosexuality in the sci-fi television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994, Paramount), Heller argues that heterosexuality is presented as both utopic and unfulfilling. She suggests that the series ‘tries to imagine utopian romantic configurations and ideal sexual others, only to tell us, first, that such relationships are necessarily heterosexual, and second, that heterosexuality is inherently unable to fulfill the desire it is supposed to serve’ (Heller 1997, 226). This paradox is based dually on the idea that men and women are complimentary (Hunter 2011, 311), but also draws from the interplanetary perspective described by Kimmel. In this sense, Heller notes, postfeminist texts offer a view of men and women as “made for each other” because they are different, and yet totally incompatible—also because they are different. She continues that ‘in popular media accounts of heterosexual gender trouble, the key term is not just difference, but difference that divides’ (Heller 1997, 227). This dividing difference is a foundational element of Marvel’s representations of heterosexual romance and is interestingly intertwined with the superheroic narratives.

Numerous Marvel films draw on the idea that the central characters—the romantic couple—are “meant to be together.” In *Thor*, this occurs as part of Jane Foster’s (Natalie Portman) main narrative arc. Throughout the film, Jane, an astrophysicist who discovers Thor in the desert after he is expelled from Asgard, undergoes a change in how she perceives Thor. To begin with, Jane views Thor as an interesting object that can support her scientific research, since he seemingly fell from space. This is evidenced by her outrage when her research is confiscated by S.H.I.E.L.D.—she states ‘I just lost my most important piece of evidence. Typical!’ This cold and clinical attitude towards Thor is remedied during her narrative arc. A major turning point for Jane is an outdoor scene by a campfire in which Thor describes the machinations of his magical world to her. The close-up of the burning fire zooms out to show them sitting behind it, accompanied by soft, romantic music (occurring extra-diegetically). Thor then takes some of Jane’s notes (which he heroically retrieved from the S.H.I.E.L.D. facility) and draws the planets. A medium close-up shows how he looks at her and says ‘Your ancestors called it magic, and you call it

science. Well, I come from a place where they're one and the same thing' and Jane is shown smiling at him in the reverse shot. The scene is framed by romance through the music, the warm glow of the fire at night and camerawork. After he has finished explaining, it cuts to a shot of the moon and the music becomes even softer, further contributing to the scene's heartfelt romance. This is followed by a shot of Thor looking up at the sky, panning round to show Jane has fallen asleep. He says 'Thank you, Jane'—he thanks her for finally accepting him as an individual, rather than a science project.

Thus, Jane and Thor are shown as destined to be together since Jane has undergone this dramatic transformation in her attitude. Meanwhile, Thor is shown after a dramatic battle with a giant fire-breathing robot (the Destroyer) to be relieved that Jane is unscathed when he says to her 'It's over... I mean, *you're safe*, it's over' (emphasis added). In this sense, the heterosexual union was imperiled through the threat of the Destroyer. Once the Destroyer is defeated, the two can finally be together. The Destroyer thus is a contradictory figure which both reinforces the institution of heterosexual romance at the same time as poses a threat towards it. In such ways, Thor entangles the film's heterosexuality with its superheroic narrative.



Figure 57 Character development in *Thor* is marked by a scene of heterosexual romance.

After Thor departs to stop his brother Loki, who has allowed the evil Frost Giants access to Asgard, Jane utters 'Oh. My. God,' a line that finally acknowledges Thor's place as "her" man, while also playing with the fact that he is a Norse god. However, this bliss is momentary. Since

heterosexuality must also imply dysfunction, it therefore follows that Thor and Jane can, in fact, never be together. The final confrontation between Loki and Thor takes place in Asgard, on the Bifrost, the rainbow bridge that connects Asgard to the other realms. Since Loki wants to annihilate humankind, Thor opts to destroy the Bifrost on which Loki is lying after the fight. When Thor reaches for his magical hammer Loki tells him, ‘if you destroy the bridge you’ll never see her again.’ Again, the main heroic narrative is conceived of in terms of the heterosexual union. Before Thor swings the hammer, he says ‘Forgive me, Jane,’ cementing this point, as the bridge explodes. Thus, Jane and Thor, seemingly meant for each other, can never be together. The end lines of the film accentuate this, as they reinforce the distance between the characters alongside the sense of yearning, as Thor asks Heimdall (Idris Elba), the omniscient guardian of the Bifrost, what Jane is up to, and he responds ‘She searches for you.’

What Heller describes as dysfunctional-utopic nature of heterosexuality is similarly highlighted in both *The Incredible Hulk* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*, which similarly intermingle heterosexuality with the superheroic narratives. Bob Rehak has noted that in *The Incredible Hulk*’s predecessor, *Hulk* (2003), the authoritarian father figure is a source of threat to the happy union of the central romantic couple (Rehak 2012, 95–98). However, I would argue that both films wrestle with the need to include a heterosexual union while one half of the couple is also a raging green monster. *The Incredible Hulk* (a remake more than a sequel) incorporates this as an element of dysfunction within its utopian heterosexuality. Bruce Banner (Edward Norton), who turns into the Hulk when he gets angry after being infected by gamma radiation, lives in Brazil, desperately trying to find a cure for his condition: a rage so great that it causes him to “Hulk out.” The film indicates that Bruce is so eager to find a cure because he is in love with his former associate, Betty Ross (Liv Tyler), in the opening of the film during which Bruce is concocting a potential cure. This is intercut with frequent shots of a newspaper clipping Bruce keeps that includes a picture of Betty. Bruce is therefore depicted as devoted to Betty. Meanwhile, Betty is also unconditionally devoted to Bruce, as during their unexpected reunion, while Bruce is on the run from the US Army (led by Betty’s father, General Ross), Betty invites Bruce to stay with her, even

though he is a wanted man. This reunion scene takes place at night, outside in the rain, with long-shots showcasing the couple as they embrace.

The characters' yearning for each other is highlighted in a following scene, in which both characters lie in their beds in separate rooms. An aerial shot of Betty gradually zooms in as she is lying in her bed, looking concerned. It cuts to a similar shot of Bruce, then back to Betty, who is close to crying, then back to Bruce. The next shot is of Betty, touching her face and closing her eyes. The concern, here, is presented as the dilemma of the great danger which they face—Betty harbors a known fugitive; Bruce is on the run—but it is framed within the heterosexual conundrum, asking “however will their love survive?” This is achieved by the juxtaposition of both characters lying awake in bed, but separately. Thus, Betty and Bruce are destined to be together as complimentary soul mates, but ultimately cannot be together because he is the Hulk. Bruce's status as the Hulk also contributes to this heterosexuality's dysfunction, which is explicitly expressed during a would-be sex scene: Bruce and Betty are unable to have sex because it would increase his heart rate, which is essentially what causes him to Hulk out.

At the end of the film, Bruce must bid farewell to Betty in order to defeat the film's villain, Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth), who has turned himself into a sort of mega-Hulk. This takes place in a helicopter which is transporting the two to safety while Blonsky goes on a rampage in the city. Bruce tells Betty he has to stop Blonsky, while Betty begs him not to go. The night sky with violent clouds is representative of both the peril in which the heterosexual union is placed and the danger that Bruce is putting himself into as they finally kiss goodbye in close-up. This is followed by a medium shot of Bruce allowing himself to drop to the ground so that he can fight Blonsky. Again, the heterosexual union and danger of the narrative coagulate and become inseparable.



Figure 58 Bruce and Betty briefly unite in *The Incredible Hulk* only to be separated moments later because of Bruce's heroics

Captain America: The First Avenger is also a notable example of the way in which heterosexuality's dysfunction is intertwined with the narrative alongside its utopic principles. The film's romance narrative focuses on the potential love between Peggy and Steve. Significantly, they are portrayed as made for each other because they both, on separate occasions, explicitly state that they are looking for the 'right partner' to dance with. This first happens when Peggy and Steve discuss Steve's love life, or lack thereof (a scene I further examine later) and how Peggy is going to go dancing with him, and then again in a subsequent scene in which Steve's friend Bucky makes a pass at Peggy in a bar, only for him to be rejected because Peggy is interested in Steve.

However, predictably, Steve and Peggy will never be united as Steve, after becoming Captain America and defeating the evil Nazi, the Red Skull (Hugo Weaving), finds himself alone on an aircraft carrying weapons of mass destruction over which he has lost control. With the plane heading to New York, he calls Peggy over the radio and explains that he must land the plane in the sea, leaving slim chance of his survival. Soft, romantic music is in the background of these shots, which cut between Peggy at the army headquarters and Steve in the plane. Steve looks out of the plane in a medium shot, telling her 'Peggy, this is my choice.' This cuts to Peggy, sad, with tears in her eyes. In the next shot, Steve takes out a photograph of Peggy and places it on the dashboard. Again, this showcases the intermingling of what Heller terms heterosexual dysfunctionality with the heroic narrative. Following this is an exchange which again refers to Peggy and Steve's doomed dance that will never be. Steve tells her 'Peggy, I'm

going to need a rain check on that dance.’ After Peggy tells him where and when they will meet to dance, Steve tells her he still doesn’t know how, and the final tragic exchange takes place. The scene stays with Peggy, showing her in medium close up with her eyes closed and face strained, after Steve has told her they will ask the band to play something slow, his voice on the radio says ‘I’d hate to step on your--’ before being cut off. Peggy repeats Steve’s name before being shown in a long-shot, hunched over her desk, with sad diegetic music. These final scenes are a culmination of the inseparability of heterosexuality and the heroic narrative. Further, Peggy and Steve’s complementarity is again coupled with the unfulfilled union—this time, Peggy and Steve will never be together as Peggy will be an old woman by the time Steve is thawed out of the ice which preserves his body after he crashes in the sea.

In these films, heterosexuality is intertwined within every aspect of the film’s fibres, rather than being an isolated plot or sub-plot. Simultaneously, this functions both to showcase the utopic (“they were meant for each other”) yet dysfunctional (“they can never be together”) quality of heterosexuality and to make it appear natural and invisible. Whereas the “women in refrigerators” narratives explicitly implicate the superhero girlfriends within the action by utilizing them as plot points, the intermeshing of heterosexuality and narrative peril undertaken is a more covert formation of dominant ideologies, drawing the women in as part of the overall representation of heterosexuality. The heterosexual matrix can thus be seen to function on the tangible level of the “women in refrigerators” narrative, but becomes even more naturalized when the perils of heroism and the dysfunction of heterosexuality are presented as one naturally occurring, commonsensical phenomenon.

This bond between the heroic narrative and heterosexuality is so strong, that when male characters enter the world of superheroics (i.e. they acquire their powers), they actually enter the world of heterosexual dysfunction. The most notable example of this occurs in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. When Steve is introduced in the film, he is portrayed as small, weak and sickly, and unable to join the army. This is framed by heterosexual discourses in the aforementioned scene with Peggy. Peggy escorts Steve to the secret lab where he will receive the Super Soldier Serum

that turns him into Captain America. In the car on the way there, Steve and Peggy talk about women. At one point, Steve tells Peggy ‘I guess I just don’t know why you’d want to join the army if you were a beautiful dame. Or a... A Woman.’ Steve is flustered by Peggy’s facial expression, shown as a frown in the following medium shot, and further stumbles over his words: ‘An agent. Not a dame. You are beautiful, but...’ At that moment, Peggy interjects, ‘You have no idea how to talk to a woman, do you?’ to which he replies, ‘I think this is the longest conversation I’ve had with one. Women aren’t exactly lining up to dance with a guy they might step on,’ which leads to the exchange about dancing.

Importantly, Steve’s status as a puny, weak, powerless man is also presented as what makes him unattractive to women. He thus exists outside of heterosexual dysfunction, or even any sort of sexuality. It therefore follows that, after Steve receives the Super Soldier treatment, he immediately becomes attractive to women, which is signaled by Peggy quite clearly eyeing up his newly muscular body, touching his chest after he is removed from the machine that grants him his powers (figure 59). Now taller, stronger and more conventionally attractive, Steve has entered the world of superheroics, but he has simultaneously entered the world of heterosexual dysfunction. The women around him thus serve to reinforce his heterosexuality.



Figure 59 Peggy appreciates Steve’s new, more masculine physique

The parallel introduction of male characters to the realm of heroism and heterosexuality has been present in Marvel comic book narratives. Joseph Willis, for example, notes that in Spider-Man’s origin story in

Amazing Fantasy #15 (Lee and Kirby 1962b), pre-spider-bite Peter Parker is shown as being specifically unattractive towards women, with his female classmates shown making unkind comments towards him (Willis 2014). In this sense, he has been barred from partaking of heterosexuality (and hence from any sexuality since heteronormativity negates the possibility of alternatives). After he acquires his powers, however, he becomes more integrated into the group of teens, and is admired by women while in his Spider-Man persona. Willis thus argues that after Peter acquires his powers and becomes a hero, he also realizes his heterosexual potential. Willis argues, ‘with powers, comes a superhero identity, and a sexual identity. However, in the superhero narrative, this development of a sexual identity is framed in a specifically hetero-normative construct and subject to patriarchal power structures of strict gendered performances’ (Willis 2014).

This twinning of superheroic narratives with heterosexuality has thus been a staple of the superhero narrative throughout both film and comic book media. However, I would take this argument a step further by suggesting that these heroes not only enter the world of heterosexuality on receiving their powers, but that it is a world in which heterosexuality is dually utopic and dysfunctional, thus indicating an adaptation of these discourses to contemporary postfeminist rhetoric, in accordance with the sentiments expressed by Heller.

Such sentiments are further evident in contemporary Marvel comics, particularly a recent storyline centering on Peter Parker’s marriage to Mary Jane. After the couple got married in 1987, Marvel subsequently decided to erase the story from existence in the late 2000’s storyline *One More Day*. In this, Peter makes a deal with the demon Mephisto in order to save Aunt May’s life. In return, Mephisto removes the marriage from living memory (Straczynski and Quesada 2008). *One More Day* can be seen as disrupting the utopic constitution of Peter and MJ’s marriage. Further, statements leading up to the story’s publishing by Marvel’s then-editor-in-chief and artist of the storyline, Joe Quesada, are illuminating. Chronicling his loathing for the wedding since the story was told in the 1980s, Quesada expresses a duty towards the character to undo the marriage, stating ‘are Peter and MJ okay as is, sure, but a lot of the drama and soap opera that was an integral part of the Spider-Man mythos is gone’ (Quesada in *Newsarama*

2006). Hence, Quesada's reasoning with regards to the marriage is that a married couple is too utopic, which results in a lack of drama, which he perceives as a main attraction of Peter's storylines. On the other hand, Quesada continues

I always hated the portrayal of the marriage, and by that I mean that for years after they were married they were never really portrayed as truly happy, I don't understand in a way why that was done. I believe it was an attempt by the creators back then to bring back a much-needed tension to the relationship side of Peter's world that was now missing because he was no longer single. It was an attempt to bring back the soap opera.

(Quesada in *Newsarama* 2006)

Here, Quesada expresses what he perceives as an inconsistency in Peter's marriage—that marriages should be perfect, that there is no room for “soap opera” in representations of a marriage. Here, incongruities of heterosexual romance resurface. Marriage, which is perceived as the ultimate, perfect heterosexual union, was considered inappropriate for Peter Parker. It was preferred that he partake of the combined dysfunctional-utopic heterosexuality that accompanies single/dating life. The heterosexual utopia must be fulfilled, but at the same time, it cannot flourish.

Heller's overarching argument is that the characters in *The Next Generation* are prevented from fulfilling their heterosexual desires because men and women, despite being complimentary, are presented as being *just too different*. Subsequently Heller extends this argument in terms of postfeminist discourses, arguing that postfeminist rhetoric has resulted in a call for a return to traditional gender roles (Heller 1997, 229). On the other hand, it has also resulted in a resurgence of a demand for women to be accommodating of men's flaws, and not prevent men from embodying their true “nature” (Heller 1997, 230). Only then can heterosexual relationship be made to “work.” Thus, she states, women are encouraged to “tolerate, rather than challenge, difference as an essential component of heterosexual relationships” (Heller 1997, 228).

Significantly, it is the different-yet-made-for-each-other qualities of heterosexuality which are stressed as being crucial elements of heterosexual romance. Thus, this reading of heterosexuality in Marvel films is not necessarily performing a “queering” function of banal romance; rather, it is in postfeminist culture's interest to present such relationships as desirable.

Indeed, Heller determines that it is women who are left to deal with any challenging behavior men may present in relationships, to ‘persuade women to preserve difference as an expression of male desire’ (Heller 1997, 229). Such discourses can also be seen in Marvel films as women are the ones who bear the brunt of the drama; all three of the women discussed in this section are left behind by their respective heroic lovers.

In *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, Sue Storm is presented as needy and demanding towards Reed, who is more interested in his job than their wedding. Rather than accommodating Reed’s needs, Sue effectively forces Reed to give up superheroing in favor of a family life. However, at the end of the film, Sue is clearly shown to make the compromise for Reed, and they decide to remain superheroes after their wedding. Here, Sue accommodates Reed’s quirks without stifling his masculine nature in accordance with postfeminist discourses. Likewise, at the end of *Iron Man 2*, Pepper Potts is shown to make the compromise for Tony. Even though she makes it perfectly clear that she cannot accommodate either Tony’s erratic actions or her highly demanding job as CEO of Stark Industries, Tony overrides her concerns and essentially forces her to remain in this position (which is portrayed in a light hearted manner). The film ends on this note, indicating the ultimate narrative closure for this heterosexual relationship—the woman accommodates the man.

Heller is not the only writer to have made this link between heterosexual dysfunction and postfeminism. Debbie Epstein and Deborah Steinberg found similar themes in their analysis of the talkshow *The Oprah Winfrey Show* (1986-2011, Harpo Productions), which often features real-life stories of dysfunctional heterosexual relationships. They argue that these narratives promote ‘the idea that you have to work on your relationships and the idea that heterosexuality works if you work on it’ (Epstein and Steinberg 2003, 99). Typically, it is not men who are encouraged to carry out this work: ‘it is women who are expected to undertake the labour of making heterosexuality work, a conventional gender role if ever there was one’ (Epstein and Steinberg 2003, 99).

As my discussion of heterosexuality in Marvel films suggests, dominant representations of heterosexuality are not necessarily idealized “vanilla” images of romance “done right.” While representations of

heterosexuality persist, they combine utopic-dysfunctional elements in accordance with postfeminist culture and a nostalgia for traditional gender roles, which call for women to respond in compromising ways towards men's needs. This in turn contributes to the rigidity of the heterosexual matrix outlined earlier.

FEMININITY UNFIXED: GENDER FLUIDITY AND MYSTIQUE AS (UN)QUEER

As discussed throughout this thesis, femininity, while following certain notable patterns shaped by dominant cultural discourses, takes on varying negotiated and re-negotiated forms throughout Marvel film adaptations. Though the films often display a need to maintain gender rigidity, an interesting case is the mutant shapeshifter Mystique, who appears in the *X-Men*. In this section, I offer a potential queer reading of Mystique, a character who appears to have no fixed gender, while also examining how she is placed within the boundaries of the heterosexual matrix, thereby making her what I refer to as (un)queer. The simultaneous queering and de-queering (as Cocca 2016 puts it) that occurs throughout the films is a notable paradox and another possible symptom of inconsistent postfeminist discourses at work. Here, I again draw from the work of Judith Butler, as well as revisiting the work of Tasker and Brown.

In the comics Mystique appears as a blue woman with yellow eyes and flaming red hair, though her mutant powers allow her to change into any shape, and is usually a villain. The character appears to be at least tenuously related to conceptualizations of femininity, as her name calls forth Betty Friedan's notion of the 'feminine mystique,' the idea that women's place in Western society is within domestic and caregiving contexts (Friedan 1979, 37). Friedan's seminal text of the same title interrogated the dominant essentialist notions of the 1950s and 1960s that women's fulfilment is reached when they submit to their "natural," feminine roles as wives and caregivers (Friedan 1979), and is often credited as sparking the second wave of Western feminism (Horowitz 2000, 4). As Mystique is a character who has the potential to question essentialist ideas of gender and sexuality, this link is significant.



Figure 60 An early appearance of Mystique in *Ms. Marvel* #18 (Claremont and Mooney 1978)

Mystique's presence in any *X-Men* text is notable. Mystique is canonically queer (specifically bisexual) in the *X-Men* comics. Her relationship with her lover, a precognitive blind mutant named Destiny was hinted at throughout the comics with increasing visibility, largely in the 1980s. In an issue of *Uncanny X-Men*, Destiny addresses Mystique as 'my Raven' (Raven being Mystique's given name) (Claremont and Romita Jr. 1984). In a later issue, Mystique and Destiny dance after a heartfelt exchange in which Mystique refers to Destiny as 'my love,' although Mystique's shapeshifting powers conveniently allow her to appear as a man during this scene (figure 61), further adding to the illusive quality of her sexuality (Claremont and Hamilton 1988).

The most obvious reference, though, occurs in *Uncanny X-Men* #265, in which Destiny is referred to as Mystique's 'leman' by the story's antagonist (Claremont and Jaaska 1990). 'Leman' is an archaic term that refers to 'a person beloved by one of the opposite sex; a lover or sweetheart' (*OED Online* 2014). Such representations, though small, are noteworthy. Furthermore, it is worth noting that it was writer Chris Claremont's intention to have Mystique, by temporarily changing herself into a man, "father" a child (the demon-like X-Man, Nightcrawler) with Destiny, however this was deemed too controversial by Marvel (Cronin 2005; Ingro 2006).



Figure 61 Mystique, as a man, dances with Destiny in *Marvel Fanfare* #40 (Claremont and Hamilton 1988)

However, there is also a risk of assigning too much significance to Mystique’s relationships with women, considering her frequent relationships with men. This mistake has been made by Ross Murray, who reads Mystique as a lesbian, utilizing the work of literary scholar Terry Castle (Murray 2011). Murray infers that through her relationship with Destiny, Mystique is marked ‘*meaningfully as lesbian*’ (Murray 2011, 57, original emphasis). He then uses this “meaningful” lesbianism in support of his overarching argument that Mystique thereby refuses to take a place in the ‘heterosexual hierarchy’ (Murray 2011, 60). This however ignores the oppositional potential of bisexuality, namely that ‘it is precisely bisexuality’s epistemological and textual polysemy that generates its subversive potential to lay bare the mutability, contingency, and inherent transgressiveness of desire’ (Filippo 2013, 16).

Additionally, Mystique’s inclusion in the *X-Men* universe runs parallel to the property’s use of metaphor to refer to the oppression of marginalized peoples, as mentioned briefly in Chapter 2 and at the beginning of this chapter. This “mutant metaphor” in the *X-Men* comics has

been examined from a historical point of view by Joseph Darowski, who argues that ‘the X-Men are mutants, people who develop special powers because they were born different from normal humans. Besides the expected comic book supervillains, the X-Men battle prejudice and are hated and feared by normal humans’ (Darowski 2014, 2). Darowski notes that the metaphor has shifted somewhat from being symbolic of race to referring more to sexuality (Darowski 2014, 26, 120). Still, it is also possible to interpret the metaphor as being about people who are generally “different”: ‘The power of the metaphor is in the ability of any reader to find some way to relate to it’ (Darowski 2014, 7). While the use of a metaphor as an argument for minority rights may be beneficial, it also offers opportunity for audiences to *not* interpret it as such due to its flexible and unspecified nature. Jason Zingsheim for example proposes that ‘this interpretation erases marginalized subject positions in favor of a neoliberal homogenization’ (Zingsheim 2011, 244). It is also noteworthy, as Darowski mentions, that despite X-Men’s concern with minority rights, the actual shape which these politics take within the series has been interesting, with the majority of the central cast being white, heterosexual men throughout its publication (Darowski 2014, 140). I would further add that the emphasis on the mutant metaphor implies a *necessity* for a metaphor, an inability to directly address these varying human rights issues. Likewise, it is striking that the only prejudice that seems to exist within the X-Men film universe (and to some extent, the comics) is that targeted at mutants. Thus, rather than claiming that the films do not “match up” to their proposed politics, it might be more useful to consider the ways in which these politics have taken shape within the films. How does a franchise culturally positioned as standing for “liberal” politics of inclusion and diversity actualize these politics?

It should also be said that a dominant reading of the metaphor has been related to sexuality issues. The film adaptations have similarly been framed as gay allegory in the press, in combination with openly gay director Bryan Singer and cast members Ian McKellen and Ellen Page (Boucher 2010; A. Rosenberg 2011; Schrodtt 2011). Purse also notes *X2*’s inclusion of a “coming out” scene in the form of Bobby Drake/Iceman telling his parents he has mutant powers, to which they respond ‘have you tried not being a

mutant?’ (Purse 2011a, 144–46). These readings signal an expectation that the film in some way engages with issues related to sexuality and gender, and thus Mystique’s inclusion in the films is thought-provoking, considering her representation.

In the films, Mystique appears blue as in the comic books, but the filmmakers also opted to make her appear completely nude, with reptilian scales conveniently placed to obscure the character’s breasts and genitalia. There has been no unified reason that explains Mystique’s lack of clothing. Rebecca Romijn, who plays Mystique in *X-Men*, *X2* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*, suggested that it would be impractical for her to wear clothes because they would ‘get in the way if you’re trying to morph’ (Romijn in Giltz 2003, 54). On the other hand, Jennifer Lawrence, who took over the role for *X-Men: First Class*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* and *X-Men: Apocalypse* reads Mystique’s nudity as being representative of her being ‘mutant and proud,’ relating the character directly to the mutant metaphor (Lawrence in Tyley 2013). From an academic perspective, Betty Kaklamanidou reads Mystique’s nudity as limiting, focusing on the objectifying effect that she believes it has:

Mystique’s extraordinary shape-shifting may help her change into every male or female form she wishes, but nothing can deter the audience from understanding that the curvaceous and luscious creature they see on the screen is definitely a woman, no matter how easily she can change into a man.

(Kaklamanidou 2011, 70)



Figure 62 Rebecca Romijn as Mystique in *X2*



Figure 63 Jennifer Lawrence as Mystique in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*

I would contest this perspective as it oversimplifies Mystique's portrayal, adopting a binaristic approach to a character who is at the very least multiplicitous. A kneejerk reaction may lead to the conclusion that Mystique's portrayal is the product of a discourse which empowers the character by overtly sexualizing her. This may be the case, and postfeminist discourses should be accounted for, but Kaklamanidou's statement also suggests that there is something inherently limiting with the fact that Mystique is frequently coded as female, ignoring the character's potential for gender fluidity. I suggest that Mystique's nudity plays a direct role in the representation of a potentially queered, although complex, gender identity. The character as a whole offers considerable insight into the notion of gender identity. This likewise contrasts the postfeminist masquerade embodied by the heroines discussed in chapter two, since the masks of femininity they enact function on a more symbolic level. Rather, Mystique's transformations of gender involve a literal seizing of gendered signifiers which are unfixed and fluid.

Returning again to Judith Butler's theories of gender, it is possible to read Mystique as embodying gender fluidity through the notion of gender performativity. Butler, like Lorber, rejects the notion that gender is determined by biological sex, even arguing that biological sex is socially constructed. Butler elaborates that there is no 'interior "truth" to gender identity' (Judith Butler 1990, 44), but rather that gender is a process which 'congeals' over time (Judith Butler 1990, 43). This has the effect of making gender seem like a naturally-occurring, commonsensical phenomenon, but Butler maintains that gender is actually a "doing" and not a "being" (Judith

Butler 1990, 33). Gender is thus independent of biological sex, a ‘free-floating artifice’ (Judith Butler 1990, 10). Thus, the terms “masculine” and “feminine” do not constitute the respective identities of “man” and “woman,” but rather these categories are constructed through discourse and language within the heterosexual matrix (Judith Butler 1990, 9). Following this, Butler argues, bodies are automatically gendered from the moment in which they come into being, as it is impossible to exist outside of discourse (Judith Butler 1990, 9).

Butler subsequently makes a case for gender as being ‘performative,’ ‘a stylized repetition of acts’ (Judith Butler 1990, 179). Like heterosexuality, gender must be repeated in order to maintain itself. Gender is not, however, a performance as there is no “actor” who is theatrically performing gender. Rather, certain behaviors make up particular genders—one may be a woman because one exerts “feminine” behaviors; one does not carry out “feminine” behaviors because one is a woman. Further, gender is not an “expression” of an underlying, pre-existing gender because ‘there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (Judith Butler 1990, 33).

Butler’s theories do leave room for subversion, and this, Butler suggests, is achieved by drawing attention to the constructed nature of gender, for example through parody such as drag (Judith Butler 1990, 44, 174). Nonetheless, the subject is always limited by the system itself and is only ever able to act within the discourse. Butler continues, ‘there is only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very “taking up” is enabled by the tool lying there’ (Judith Butler 1990, 185). As will become apparent, Butler’s ideas of parody and gender performativity are especially useful when considering Mystique’s representation.

Viewing the *X-Men* film series in their narrative order, *First Class* is the first to feature Mystique, telling the story of how the X-Men formed in the 1960s. Mystique, who is revealed to be Charles Xavier’s (James McAvoy) adoptive sister, is referred to as Raven in the film and is portrayed as considerably weaker, both in terms of character and physical strength, than in the three core films of the franchise. She also opts to use her powers to appear “normal” in her everyday life and is cynical of Charles’ belief that

they should be ‘mutant and proud.’ This discrepancy most likely has much to do with Mystique’s moral alignment in the film.

The film complicates the rivalry between Xavier and Magneto (Michael Fassbender), initially portraying them as friends before Magneto forms his own group of mutants, adopting a more aggressive stance towards the fight for mutant rights. Mystique breaks off from Xavier’s group and joins Magneto’s morally questionable team. Before this, though, she is clearly coded as one of the “good guys,” albeit physically weak. This changes when Magneto encourages her to stop using up all her power just to appear normal, and instead let her “true” blue self show. The scene in which this takes place is revealing: whilst the other mutants undertake all sorts of training exercises to help them manage their powers, Mystique is in her room lifting weights. Magneto approaches and lifts the weight with his magnetic powers, telling her that she would be much stronger if she allowed herself to appear in her “true” form.⁹ He then drops the weight over Mystique, causing her to lose concentration and invest her power into catching the weight, turning into her blue self. In this sense, Mystique’s “normal” appearance functions as a visual and narrative frustration tactic such as those discussed in chapter two, limiting her overall power—she can only be truly strong if she is blue due to the effort exerted when she maintains an acceptable feminine appearance. However, she can only be blue, if she is morally aligned with evil.

In *Days of Future Past*, which is set in 1973, Mystique’s morality takes center stage as the driving force which is at stake in the main narrative. After the events of *First Class*, the mutants have all gone their own way: Xavier is depressed and paralyzed after Magneto accidentally sends a bullet into his spine at the end of the previous film, Magneto is imprisoned after being accused of assassinating President Kennedy, and Mystique has become a lone freedom fighter for mutant liberation. In the film, Logan is sent from the future to prevent Mystique from shooting Bolivar Trask, a weapons designer who creates the Sentinels (giant robots programmed to target mutants). Following the assassination, Mystique’s

⁹ It is not clear whether Mystique’s blue form is shaped by Mystique’s will or whether the films posit the notion that her blue form is static and fixed, evoking discourses of essentialism.

DNA is used to make the Sentinels adaptable and nigh invincible. It is therefore imperative that the X-Men of the 1970s band together to stop Mystique, although this is coded in the film as a reluctance to allow Mystique to become irreversibly corrupted from the act of taking a man's life, for example through the repeated stressing of the fact that 'it was the first time she killed.' The policing of Mystique's morality occurs alongside her newly naked appearance, again indicating a link between sexual allure and corrupt morality. Overall, Mystique's portrayal in the film is more akin to that in the first three *X-Men* films, in which Mystique appears as a villain.

Hence, in *X-Men*, *X2* and *The Last Stand* Mystique again appears naked and blue as her moral alliance is entirely with Magneto (who is also positioned against Xavier and his mutants). Likewise, Mystique is at her strongest, intellectually and physically. Her corrupted persona thus functions as a "safe space" in which she is permitted to be powerful, but it also offers itself up to fostering a queered representation of gender.

Turning attention back to the role of her nudity, the work of both Brown and Butler can shed some light onto what is occurring in the undercurrents of this representation. In *Dangerous Curves*, Brown discusses Pamela Anderson's character in the action/sci-fi film *Barb Wire* (David Hogan, 1996), based on the comic of the same name. Anderson plays Barb Wire, the bounty hunter in a dystopian future. Barb is represented as physically strong, clever and extremely sexy. Brown dismisses the idea that Wire is merely an object of heterosexual male desire. Instead, he argues that that the 'over-fetishization of her sexuality and violent abilities ... facilitates an understanding of all modern action heroines as questioning the naturalness of gender roles by enacting both femininity and masculinity simultaneously' (J. A. Brown 2011a, 51). Brown continues that the overtly sexualized feminine signifiers within such characters 'amount to an almost hysterical mask of femininity' and that at the same time, the characters also enact signifiers of traditionally masculine toughness (J. A. Brown 2011a, 55). This results in a combination of both 'hysterical' masculinity *and* femininity, thereby 'ridiculing the notion of a stable gender' (J. A. Brown 2011a, 51). To Brown, these gendered bodies are arbitrary symbols, suggesting that toughness does not necessarily equal male (J. A. Brown 2011a, 55). Most notably, Brown's notions of the 'hysterical mask of

femininity' speak to Butler's theories regarding the subversion of gender through parody. Parody, according to Butler, draws attention to the constructedness of gender—the exact point that Brown makes.

Thus, I argue that Mystique's nudity functions in a similar way, as it is ridiculous, impractical (contrary to Romijn's beliefs) and unabashedly blatant. The fact that, for example, Mystique walks naked and barefoot through a snowy mountain in *X2* is ludicrous. Further, Mystique is often seen enacting "cutesy" caricatures of femininity in a parodic way whilst taking the form of a man, which happens on two separate occasions. In *X-Men*, when Mystique adopts the form of Wolverine, she blows the real Wolverine a kiss. This scene draws on notions of gender rigidity outlined at the start of the chapter by comedically assigning feminine behavior to a masculine body as a source of humor. However, despite this, it showcases the constructed nature of gender by drawing from Mystique's embodiment Wolverine, who behaves in ways outside of the masculine codes the real Wolverine embodies. A similar scene occurs in *X2*, when Mystique becomes the villain Colonel Stryker and blows him a kiss, again an uncharacteristic act for that character. Both of these situations point toward the idea that gendered actions are socially constructed. However, Mystique's entire identity is completely fluid; she is presented as fashioning herself in whatever way the situation calls for, thereby Mystique complicates the concept of gender stability.

Mystique's gender fluidity can also be made sense of through Tasker's concept of 'musculinity' (Tasker 1993). In her work, Tasker suggests that strong heroines of the 1980s and 1990s transgressed traditional gendered signifiers through their muscular physiques. In these films, she argues, muscles are not merely signifiers of male strength, but are arbitrary, available to be utilized by anyone, regardless of gender (Tasker 1993, 149). In this sense, Mystique picks and chooses which form she takes, which signifiers she adopts, but importantly, her skills and intellect remain throughout. For example, in *X-Men* Mystique fights with Wolverine while in the form of Wolverine. She is clearly shown to be a match for Wolverine, carrying out impressive fighting moves and is resourceful in using objects from her surroundings as weapons (a chain; a metal gate). However, the film does not suggest that she is only capable of these feats because she has

taken on the form of Wolverine, as she transforms back into her blue, feminine form mid-kick and continues fighting.

Furthermore, Brown describes how characters are able to adopt gendered signifiers to fulfil their own purposes. He uses the French film *La Femme Nikita* (Luc Besson, 1990) and its English-language remake *Point of No Return* (John Badham, 1993) as examples of films in which the central action heroine ‘reemploys feminine masquerade to further emphasize the performative nature of gender roles’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 22). Brown elaborates that, much like *Barb Wire*, these heroines embody masculinized personae through, for example, being excellent fighters, whilst simultaneously ‘remaining garbed in obvious signifiers of femininity’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 33). Maggie possesses a vast amount of physical (coded as masculine) power, but there are times in which she also adopts the signifiers of a weak woman. Brown continues:

Maggie refigures gender-appropriate behavior by demonstrating that masculinity and femininity are not mutually exclusive identities. At the same time, Maggie destroys the audience’s perceptions of biologically determined identity and role as determining biology. In other words—just because she looks like a woman does not mean she is one, and just because she acts like a man does not mean she is one.

(J. A. Brown 2011a, 36)

Like Maggie, Mystique often “masquerades” as people of different genders and ages—more accurately, she *becomes* those people—and also uses people’s perceptions of gender to manipulate them, in ways not unlike those adopted by *Black Widow*. However, Mystique’s embodiment of gender functions on a different level to the masks of femininity utilized by the heroines discussed in Chapter 2, who narratively adopt these masks as a means of enabling their heroism, while these machinations potentially eclipse the identities of these characters. Significantly, Mystique is shown to appropriate signifiers of varying genders, not just feminine ones, and the process is entirely immersive since she can physically alter her form. Referring to Mystique’s representation as incorporating masquerade is not necessarily appropriate here. Indeed, I would suggest that Brown’s analysis implicitly conflates performativity and performance, which Butler states are different occurrences. Mystique’s gender play does not constitute acting or

playing a role because she physically becomes the people she shifts into, further complicating notions of gender rigidity in the process.

During a key scene in *X2*, Mystique goes to a bar to seduce a security guard who works for Stryker. In an elaborate plan to free Magneto from Stryker's plastic prison, Mystique appears at the bar in the "natural" form of Romijn. She is provocatively dressed in a short blue snakeskin PVC dress reminiscent of her true blue skin and a leather jacket. Introducing herself with a fake name, she buys the guard a drink and sits down. Mystique drugs the guard and the scene cuts to the characters stumbling into the bathroom while kissing. The guard remarks that she is aggressive and she replies 'Yes, I am,' the irony again reinforcing the constructedness of her current persona, whilst also drawing from postfeminist discourses of playful irony.

As the guard becomes unconscious, Mystique injects him with liquid iron, allowing Magneto to later extract the metal through his pores and escape his prison. Mystique thus grasps these signifiers to reach her own ends. Through such a scene, the character questions the nature of gender and what it means to act in a gendered way. These instances involve more than simple role reversals, since the focus here is on the interaction of the gendered body and behavior in an action context, how the character manipulates her body in order to adapt to a situation, not unlike the way in which Hills describes Ripley functions within the *Aliens* narrative (Hills 1999). Additionally, whereas the heroic forms of postfeminist masquerade discussed previously allow for varying modes of feminine subjectivity, I argue that these modes are ultimately limiting due to their dependence on discourses of gender promoted and encouraged by the patriarchal symbolic (which now takes the form of the fashion-beauty complex) noted by McRobbie. While the postfeminist masquerade outlined in Chapter 2 envisioned "types" of femininity sanctioned by postfeminist culture (and ultimately relying on white, heterosexual empowered femininity), the approach to gender which is encompassed in Mystique's representation can be conceptualized as broadly queer, or at least non-normative, in its fluidity and physical manipulation of the body.

Another instance in which transgressive gender irony is adopted to showcase Mystique's gender fluidity is in *Days of Future Past*. In the scene, Mystique yet again seduces a man in order to meet her ends. This time it is a

North Vietnamese general whom she aims to appear as during the Paris Peace Accords. Dressed in glamorous 1970s clothing and once again adopting a “normal” appearance, she allows the General to take her back to his hotel room. Once there, he walks around her, speaking in heavily-accented English, ‘Show me more, baby. Clothes off.’ A medium shot shows Mystique looking down at herself. The camera tilts down as she opens her coat and her black hotpant bodysuit starts transforming into her blue skin. This is followed by a shot of the General’s face changing to terror before reverting back to the shot of Mystique’s transforming body and a medium shot of her head: ‘What’s the matter, baby? You don’t think I look pretty like this?’ The knowing irony that she is playing into male fantasy while appearing as her blue self further adds to the constructedness of her seductress persona, while she additionally employs the “cutesy” feminine signifiers referred to earlier in her use of the words ‘baby’ and ‘pretty.’

Mystique’s parodic gender fluidity is likewise highlighted in an earlier scene in *Days of Future Past* when she infiltrates an army base in order to liberate the drafted mutants, who were about to be sent off to a medical facility. Halfway through the scene, it is revealed that Mystique has been the (male) army official who wants to send the mutants home the whole time. She comes into conflict with a young Major Stryker who wants the mutants to stay. Eventually, Mystique’s transformation takes place as a fight breaks loose. The other mutants join in, causing mayhem. In the scene, the masculine environment of the army is juxtaposed with Mystique’s very nakedness. The army, carrying connotations of masculine protection and defence, has been infiltrated by a naked blue woman, who in turn is the protectress of the mutants. Her vulnerability, signified by her feminine nudity, becomes parodic in that it is actually meaningless or irrelevant in the context of the scene. Unlike the ironic sexism discussed in previous chapters, the irony deployed as part of Mystique’s character takes on a parodic form, ridiculing the very notion of fixed gender.

Despite Mystique’s performances in *X-Men* and *X2*, Mystique is subjected to a depowerment in *The Last Stand*, as she takes a dart laced with the mutant cure in order to save Magneto from it. She then reverts back to her human form before his eyes. Magneto then abandons Mystique as she is no longer of use to him, remarking ‘She was so beautiful.’ Kaklamanidou

reads this as drawing the focus back onto her feminine beauty (Kaklamanidou 2011, 70). I would, however, argue that it refers back to Mystique's complex subjectivity and questioning of gender norms, as to Magneto, she was beautiful when she was blue and thus embodied non-normative notions of feminine beauty and strength. Nonetheless, Mystique's depowering clearly functions to frustrate her strength and removes her from the core of the film's narrative.

Throughout, I have referred to Mystique as "she," even though, technically, she may be neither male nor female, or indeed both. If gender 'congeals' over time, how can we conceive of the gender of someone who is constantly shifting genders? Mystique is in many ways one of the most subversive characters that Marvel has to offer, but she must still be portrayed in terms of the gender binary. As Butler describes, it is possible to subvert gender identities, but subjects will always be limited to the system as it is impossible to exist outside of language and discourse (which is what shapes gender). Similarly, Mystique is only ever portrayed as enacting either maleness or femaleness, rather than a combination of both (or, indeed, neither).

Likewise, Zingsheim argues that Mystique's gender performative characterization privileges the need for gender to be recognized by others in order to be "successful" (Zingsheim 2016). Zingsheim's argument follows similar reasoning to my own in that he suggests that Mystique's gender identity functions within symbolic systems which remain static (Zingsheim 2016, 94–95). Whereas Zingsheim's take on the character is guided by notions of agency and identity, my argument has relied more on issues within queer theory and performativity. Nonetheless, Zingsheim ultimately argues that the occasions in which Mystique's disguise is uncovered by her opponents illustrate how 'in terms of identity, to occupy a subject position requires that one be recognized by others as said subject' (a point also made by Butler) (Zingsheim 2016, 101). Some confusion may arise here from Zingsheim's characterization of Mystique as *imitating* other people, whereas I have argued that she effectively *becomes* them. When framed within the discourse of imitation, or, indeed, "passing," it is quite reasonable that Zingsheim's discussion would focus on whether or not Mystique's performance is successful or a failure (from which he then makes the

argument that Mystique's agency is limited). However, a more flexible approach such as that which I have employed in this chapter foregrounds gender over notions of "agency," the use of which automatically discredits any representation which does not correspond with a pre-existing framework of what might be considered "agentic." In this particular case, such an approach might be limiting. Still, Zingsheim's study might be considered complementary to my own argument.

Another noteworthy aspect of the films' representations of Mystique is the omission of her bisexuality, which is never referred to in any way, instead exclusively positioning the character in relationships with men. While Todd Ramlow argues *X2* presents Magneto and Mystique's relationship as a queer comradeship 'between a queer man and his best straight girl pal' (Ramlow 2003, 141), the films severely lack in joining the dots between Mystique's queered representation of gender and her sexuality. Due to the 'wide array of forms' that the linkage between sexual identity and gender identity can take (Diamond and Butterworth 2008), alongside the complex relationship between gender and sexuality outlined at the beginning of this chapter, Mystique's fluid sexuality seems to go hand in hand with her fluid gender. Given that Mystique's representation falls beyond the rigid portrayals of heterosexual femininity, the erasure of her bisexuality is significant.

As such, Mystique becomes an (un)queer female character through the process representation which, while offering a fluid portrayal of gender which questions dominant norms, still insists on the character's assumed compulsory heterosexuality. Such a paradox hinges on postfeminism in its inconsistency. Mystique's disavowal of traditional elements of heterosexual femininity in terms of romantic and sexual desire speaks to the necessity for postfeminist culture to renegotiate these components in media texts, while the films also present a character who embodies a fluid gender identity that complicates the gender binary and draws attention to its constructedness.

THE STRANGEST SUPERHEROES OF ALL: NEGOTIATING QUEERNESS IN THE MARVEL UNIVERSE

This chapter has illuminated the constructions of both gender and sexuality in Marvel films. Significantly, it is important to remember that feminine subjectivities are varied and multifaceted despite often following dominant trends. Thus, female characters, in terms of gender and sexuality representation, fall onto a spectrum from the rigidly maintained, binaristic portrayals in films such as *Fantastic Four* to the gender fluid subjectivity found in the *X-Men* character Mystique.

Marvel films have not made use of the full scope of this spectrum, though this does not negate its existence. New and transgressive subjectivities may gradually surface throughout future Marvel releases. Already, noteworthy roles have been creeping into these films, such as the character Nebula (Karen Gillen) in *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014). Nebula, who works for the film's villain Ronin (Lee Pace) and is the daughter of the evil Thanos (voiced by Josh Brolin), has a striking appearance. Her blue skin seems to comprise segments which have been fused together; metal plates are attached to her bald head and her left arm is entirely mechanical. When Nebula speaks, her voice is low with a tinny clang to it. Thus Nebula, has left behind the necessity for organic substance in her physicality (for example hair, which is itself a gendered marker). She is positioned opposite her adoptive sister, the green-skinned Gamora (Zoe Saldana), whose organicness is emphasized: for example when Nebula zaps her with an electric weapon in a fight at the end of the film, Gamora's skeleton is ostentatiously visible for a short time, drawing attention to the fact that she consists of flesh and bone. In one instance, Nebula is on the receiving end of a blast from an explosive weapon, seemingly defeated. However, when Nebula next appears, lingering shots show her crumpled tin-can body unfolding, accompanied by suitable metallic crunches, as she rectifies her physicality, her dislocated jaw relocating itself (figure 64).



Figure 64 Nebula's distorted body reconfigures itself after she has been in an explosion in *Guardians of the Galaxy*

Like Mystique, Nebula adapts her body to whatever the situation requires (at one point she even cuts off her own mechanical hand in order to escape from the heroes). These characters elaborate the flexibility of transgressive subjectivities. This resonates with Hills' arguments regarding Ripley in *Aliens*, who defies gender rigidity by producing a new "body" through the use of tools and other external resources (for example the famous exosuit she uses to defeat the Alien queen) (Hills 1999). Through her immortality and cyborgian presence, Nebula embodies the malleability of a post-human/post-woman subjectivity. This opens up filmic dialogues which offer flexibility in terms of gendered characters. In the words of J. Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingston, 'the posthuman does not necessitate the obsolescence of the human: it does not represent an evolution or devolution of the human. Rather it participates in re-distribution of difference and identity' (Halberstam and Livingston 1995, 10). Though Nebula's role in the film is small, her presence is significant in the ways in which she enables feminine subjectivity to become a dynamic, fluid concept.

Meanwhile, heterosexuality, though a challenging subject of analysis, takes on a form that is tied to the complexities of the superhero narrative. In this, the female characters play a crucial role in upholding an image of idealized sexuality which nonetheless incorporates significant dysfunction. These representations heavily relate to postfeminist discourses. Likewise, the interrelations between gender and sexuality must be acknowledged as it is currently difficult to conceive of one without the other. Following this, the prevalence of gender rigidity combined with an

emphasis on a dominant mode of heterosexuality leads to largely limiting representations.

This is not to say that there have been no flexibilities in the films. Ironically, considering *The First Avenger*'s insistence on dysfunctional-utopic heterosexuality, Steve is left without a romantic partner in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, opening up a potential opportunity for queer readings. To add to this, Natasha Romanoff, who teams up with Steve throughout the film, constantly attempts to set Steve up with women, offering suggestions to him during critical fight scenes ('Kristen from statistics,' 'the nurse who lives across the hall from you,' 'that girl from accounting'). Steve's answers to these suggestions are conspicuously vague; for instance that he's 'too busy' or 'I'm not ready for that,' opening a fissure in the institution of heterosexuality which has been promoted in Marvel films thus far.

In early 2013, Marvel released the second volume of *Young Avengers* (Gillen and McKelvie 2013), featuring what is implied to be an all-queer team. The series success demonstrated the demand for inclusivity in comic books; the first issue quickly sold out and received a second printing (R. Johnston 2013). Likewise, the series won an award from the LGBT media monitoring group GLAAD for its portrayal of queer sexualities (Kane 2014). Marvel officials have yet to comment on the possibility of adapting a queer character to film, though, as with all Marvel adaptations, the potential for subversion remains.

5.

BLACK SKIN, BLUE SKIN: RACE AND FEMININITY IN MARVEL FILMS

Throughout this project, I have argued that representations of women in Marvel films are in many ways multiplicitous while often drawing from established tropes. However, the fact remains that these representations of women have been distinctly white. As is discussed in this chapter, this is partly facilitated by the machinations of both mainstream Hollywood and the postfeminist landscape within which it is situated. However, it is not enough to merely draw attention to the prevalence of whiteness within these films. This chapter thus interrogates issues of race within a postfeminist culture, specifically assessing the roles played by women of color in these films.

As is clear by the discussions offered in the previous chapters, the majority of characters featured in films based on Marvel comics are white. The particular characters and narratives examined here are mostly limited to those with black or Asian (particularly Japanese) identities. That racialized representations are limited to these two ethnicities is itself indicative of the dearth of women of color in Marvel films. My focus on black and Asian women in Marvel films is not due to a lack of interest in other women of color portrayed, but rather because there simply is not a wide range of races represented. Thus, while I do refer to the Latina and Native American women who appear in minor roles in these films, I focus largely on the black and Asian women. I begin by laying out the theoretical foundations informing my analyses, which situate these films within a cultural moment which is both postfeminist and postracial. I ultimately discuss portrayals of black women in *Blade* and the *X-Men* series, and Asian women in *The Punisher* (1989) and *The Wolverine*.

Though I build on the work of theorists who have interrogated classic portrayals of black and Asian femininity in popular media texts, it is not the purpose of this chapter to merely disclose that portrayals of women of color in Marvel films offer a continuation of previous representations. Rather, I suggest how established racial discourses have adapted to and shifted within

postfeminist culture. In order to do justice to this analysis, I do not dwell on previous examinations, but rather offer a brief summary of these insightful discussions.

Race representation has been a topical issue within disciplines invested in unpacking how the systemic oppression of marginalized peoples extends to popular media. Benshoff and Griffin, for instance, provide a detailed overview of the ways in which racial minorities have been portrayed in oppressive ways in Hollywood film (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 127–324). Further, while the initial purveyors of feminist film criticism focused on gender as the locus of oppression for women, theorists moved on to consider the intersection between gendered and racial oppression (Gaines 1986). In her quali-quantitative study surveying representations of both women and racial minorities (as well as overlapping identities), Maryann Erigha concludes that women and racial minorities have been consistently underrepresented both in front of and behind the camera (Erigha 2015). This contributes to the dominant power structures which foster racial and gender stereotypes within Western culture (Erigha 2015, 85).

However, looking beyond this, it is necessary to discern further implications of these deductions with regards to how these images link to postfeminist culture, which, as I discussed in previous chapters, has been characterized as privileging an idealized white, heterosexual, affluent feminine subjectivity. While race has been a rich point of scholarly interest in film studies (and, to a certain degree, comics studies), scholars have not yet fully examined portrayals of women of color in superhero narratives in a postfeminist context.

Nevertheless, much of the discussion in this chapter builds on the work of theorists who have discussed the role of race in Western culture. Many contemporary portrayals of women of color, particularly Asian and African women, still draw from the Orientalist discourses discussed by Edward Said (Said 1988). Orientalist discourses promote the West's supposed superiority over the East, 'dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, "different" one called the Orient, the other, also known as "our" world, called the Occident or the West' (Said 1981, 4). Within Orientalist representations, then, the East is positioned as "Other" to the

West, as a ‘monolithic thing’ (Said 1988, 4). This othering of the East often involves both sexualizing and feminizing discourses, again bringing to light the intersection of race and gender. As I discuss throughout this chapter, Orientalist rhetoric, though it has shifted and adapted to postfeminist culture, still informs many portrayals of women of color as exotic, mysterious, sensual and dangerous. Despite Said’s silence on feminism itself (Boehmer 2009), his theories have remained valuable within postcolonial feminist theory.

Nonetheless, when surveying recent literature regarding race representation, it is clear that there has, in the past few decades, been an increased focus on the importance of whiteness as a social construct and the representation of white people in the media (Dyer 1988; 1997; Bernardi 1996; Negra 2001; Foster 2003; M. A. Berger 2005; Vera and Gordon 2006; Bernardi 2007). Benshoff and Griffin’s discussion of race representations in Hollywood films, for instance, begins with an examination of whiteness (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 127–64). While the study of the social construction of whiteness is a valuable theoretical, I would argue that there is a danger that the marginalization of people of color in Western society has been replicated within academic enquiries due to the privileging of whiteness as an object of interrogation. Dyer, both in his article “White” (1988) and his full-length follow-up (1997), illustrates the tensions he observed when researching whiteness. He notes that ‘putting whiteness on the agenda now might permit a sigh of relief that we white people don’t after all any longer have to take on all this non-white stuff’ (Dyer 1997, 10). On the other hand, he notes prior to this that the frequent examinations of media representations of marginalized peoples ‘has had the effect of reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm’ (Dyer 1997, 44).

In this chapter, I am aware of the dangers of enclosing portrayals of women of color further within the sphere of “representations of Others.” However, at this point it is also evident that, to a certain extent, there has been a collective ‘sigh of relief’ within scholarly writing in that feminist authors critiquing postfeminist culture opt merely to state that postfeminism privileges whiteness. This point has been made by some, though not many, feminist scholars. Springer, for example, states that ‘studies of postfeminism

have studiously noted that many of its icons are white and cited the absence of women of color, but the analysis seems to stop there' (Springer 2008, 72), a point also addressed by Jess Butler (2013). Considering that postfeminism is known for its privileging of the white, affluent, heterosexual female subject, and that analyses 'stop there,' an interrogation of specific representations of women of color is not only necessary but crucial in understanding postfeminist culture more fully.

As discussed, women of color occupy a unique space in postfeminist culture which has not yet been examined in great depth, with many theorists focusing on whiteness. This results in a white academic landscape which implicitly recentralizes whiteness even in its attempts to point out that whiteness is what is centralized in Western culture. While these examinations of whiteness are significant and necessary, this focus on whiteness—particularly that which concerns postfeminism—has led to an imbalance in scholarly discourses regarding race representation.

Even so, there have been some forays into the topic of race and postfeminism. McRobbie, for example, applies her concept of disarticulation in postfeminist culture to issues of race, in which solidarity between women across races is obstructed and familiar Orientalist discourses of the oppressed East vs. the liberated West resurface (McRobbie 2009, 41–43). Feminist and anti-racist discourses thus become disarticulated, and considered unnecessary, a thing of the past, resulting in 'a norm of nostalgic whiteness' (McRobbie 2009, 43). Meanwhile, Projansky similarly notes postfeminism's centralizing of white women, but holds that the occasional appearance of women of color in some postfeminist texts results in the erasure of politicized racial identities and active discussion of race and gender since these women of color are shown to have had the same opportunities as white women (Projansky 2001, 87). As such, women of color often appear within postfeminist texts when they have successfully assimilated to dominant postfeminist discourses of idealized white femininity, and racialized identity is disowned (McRobbie 2007, 43; Springer 2008, 88; Jess Butler 2013, 50). Other authors have more specifically examined the representations of (predominantly black) women of color in postfeminist media (Springer 2008; Joseph 2009; Hua 2009), illustrating the tricky terrain which these women navigate in contemporary

Western society (C. Brown 2012), and how postfeminist discourses reproduce racial, gendered and sexual inequalities (Hua 2009).

POSTFEMINISM: RACIAL DIMENSIONS

The situation described by Dyer has changed in the era of multiculturalism, postracialism and globalization. While he argues that ‘the colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard ... to “see” whiteness’ (Dyer 1988, 46), multiculturalism and the “colorblind” attitudes promoted within has made it difficult to “see” people of color, since doing so is considered taboo, or even racist, in itself (Lentin and Titley 2011, 3–4). As such, whiteness has become so “visible” that it has effectively colonized discussions of race within academia, while overt reference to racial inequality is considered inappropriate in popular media.

Colorblindness, described by Tyrone Forman and Amanda Lewis as ‘racial apathy’ (Forman and Lewis 2006), is a form of racism which has proliferated in a supposed postracial society in which racial inequalities are considered non-existent.¹⁰ Individuals are encouraged not to “see” race, or even acknowledge its existence, because of a predominant message which claims that “we are all the same.” It thus also becomes impossible to “see” racial discrimination and prevent it from occurring. Any racial inequality, much like sexism, is perceived to be caused by individual prejudices, rather than systemic oppression on an institutional level, and thus race and gender are characterized as ‘personal, individual, and mutable traits and not structural, institutional, and historic forces’ (Joseph 2009, 237)..

This is the era in which the Marvel movie boom fully took hold. These films, as I discuss here, actively enforce postracial discourses alongside (or as part of) their postfeminism. Indeed, as noted by Ralina

¹⁰ Following the concept of colorblindness, some recent discourses have focused on the notion of “color-muteness,” which takes account of increased representations of people of color in media texts which nonetheless still deny explicit discussion of racial issues (K. M. Frank 2015, 19). Like colorblindness, color-muteness relies on postracial discourses of inclusion and capitalization of marginalized identities for consumption by white audiences. However, I have opted to use the concept of colorblindness to more clearly draw attention to the act of “seeing” race and the taboo nature of such in relation to racial issues and representations since my own analysis overtly carries out this act of “seeing” or illuminating the issues at hand.

Joseph, ‘twenty-first-century U.S. culture is replete with the idea that we are beyond, past, or “post-” notions of race-, gender-, and sexuality-based discrimination’ (Joseph 2009, 238). As Joseph illustrates, both postfeminism and postracialism—as well as emerging post-gay discourses (Ng 2013; Walters 2014; Hilton-Morrow and Battles 2015)—interlock within a multicultural, neoliberal, globalized society. Indeed, Julietta Hua suggests that multiculturalism, which seeks to reduce racial difference in favor of an assimilative postracial subjectivity, ‘makes possible post-feminism’ (Hua 2009, 64). This is in part caused by the increasing commodification of racialized feminine subjectivities (Kim and Chung 2005; Braidotti 2006, 55; Banet-Weiser 2007; Hua 2009, 65; Joseph 2009, 241–44), as well as the marketability of what Caren Kaplan describes as ‘global feminism’ (C. Kaplan 1995, 48).

In a postfeminist/postracial culture, as Banet-Weiser suggests, race can be a viable commodity (sold largely to white audiences) because ‘racial difference and gender discrimination are no longer salient’ (Banet-Weiser 2007, 204). However, she continues, ‘these particular representations and narratives of race and ethnicity are marketed by media corporations as cool, authentic, and urban’ (Banet-Weiser 2007, 204). Identities of people of color in a postfeminist culture are therefore considered unique curios, features which make a text more interesting, while the real-life implications of racial identity with regards to racial/gendered/sexual discrimination are rendered meaningless. This marks a contemporary continuation of bell hooks’ notion of ‘eating the Other’ in which ‘there is a pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference,’ where ‘ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture’ (hooks 1992, 21). As such, racial difference is consumed by largely white audiences such as those discussed by Banet-Weiser.

Most significantly for this chapter, though, is the postfeminist goal of “universal womanhood” which is promoted in texts which incorporate women of color. This false notion of ‘common oppression’ (hooks 2000, 43–44) leads to the erasure of the specificity of an oppression which is both gendered and racial, eliminating the complexity of racial identities. As noted, global feminism has been a profitable neoliberal endeavor. Caren

Kaplan argues that such a brand of global feminism (which functions as part of postfeminist rhetoric) ‘homogenizes economic and cultural difference in favor of a universalizable female identity or set of sexual practices while simultaneously stressing cultural “difference” as a marker of value in an increasingly homogeneous world’ (C. Kaplan 1995, 50). Thus, postfeminist culture is interested in promoting a universal model of womanhood through which all women, everywhere, are united due to their experiences as women, whilst other identity factors such as race are disregarded. This ‘universality of racially or gender-specific images’ harnesses an ambiguous media landscape which is markedly “diverse,” yet does not actively address issues of racial and gendered oppression (Banet-Weiser 2007, 217). Indeed, on an industrial level Rosi Braidotti argues that diversity is a highly valuable commodity in a neoliberal era in which ‘globalization functions through the incorporation of otherness’ (Braidotti 2006, 55). Racial and gender identity thus become depoliticized, since ‘corporations are able to disassociate everyday Americans from the structural context of oppression and the historical context of struggle that define the post-industrial world by laying claim to the bodies and cultures of the “Other”’ (Kim and Chung 2005, 73).

Hence, multiculturalism, postracialism and postfeminism are complicit in each other’s agendas. It thus follows that an analysis of women of color in popular media texts such as Marvel films is called for. The points raised above provide the foundations of this chapter, which focuses less on general stereotypes present in portrayals of women of color in popular media texts, but rather questions how these representations contribute to postracial and postfeminist discourses. Racial identities perform a unique function within these texts. Rather than being used as a tool against which the norm of whiteness is measured, the racial identity of the postfeminist woman of color is disregarded as an achievement of multicultural notions of empowerment. The woman of color who is fully immersed in the postfeminist ideal is not distracted from her performance within capitalistic notions of economic and social empowerment by racial issues. She is presented as having had the same opportunities as any successful white woman. This disregard of racial identity directly corresponds to

postfeminism's call for assimilation under the guise of a holistic conception of "women's empowerment."

THE POLITICS OF "DIVERSITY" IN MARVEL PROPERTIES

Comic books have been the focus of increasing academic inquiry with regards to race representation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, representation of socially marginalized identities becomes an acute point in superhero stories featuring characters such as the X-Men due to the allegorical potential of these storylines. However, as I also noted previously, these texts have the tendency to engage with these issues of identity metaphorically while rarely referring to them in an overt manner, in that homophobia, racism and sexism are never experienced by these characters diegetically despite the fact that they occupy a world in which gender and racial politics crystallize in a way that is at least tangentially related to the cultural contexts in which these films are made. As Darowski deduces,

The X-Men were created at the time when race and prejudice were among the most pressing issues in America. The mutants who made up the X-Men were literally a separate race in this narrative, and the issue of prejudice has long been the prevalent theme in the series. (Darowski 2014, 30)

Yet race representation has been far on the side of whiteness. Further to this, that racial elements of the mutant metaphor have been abandoned in favor of a discourse of LGBT rights speaks further to the notion that these texts function within a postracial context. Here, attention to the political and social oppression of one group has been shunted in favor of another "opposing" group, a dichotomy which does not consider the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. Indeed, the only kind of oppression featured in the X-Men films which is not the direct result of the characters' being mutants is in the sub-plot referring to Magneto's experiences as a Jewish person in World War II. This is depicted as being distinctly in the past, although the danger of this oppression being replicated (through the mutant metaphor) in the present day is acute for Magneto.

However, the X-Men are not the only relevant characters when considering Marvel's track record with race. Interestingly, most academic texts examining race representation in comics focus more on properties

released by DC comics, with an overwhelming focus on black male superheroes (J. A. Brown 1999; Singer 2002; Nama 2011; Lackaff and Sales 2013; Gateward and Jennings 2015), although some consider wider racial issues (see contributions to Aldama 2010 for example). Still, the conclusions made by these writers are not valueless. Ronald Jackson and Sheena Howard, for instance, note that superhero comic books have classically promoted an ideal of ‘White patriarchal universalism’ which ‘leaves a concealed residue of minority inferiority’ (R. L. Jackson and Howard 2013, 2). Meanwhile, Derek Lackaff and Michael Sales argue that ‘comic books are a symbolic playground where we let our idealized versions romp; yet relatively few characters of color take part in the fun’ (Lackaff and Sales 2013, 67). That people of color have been marginalized in mainstream comics almost goes without saying, they suggest, since ‘comics compete in an economic as well as cultural marketplace, and alignment with majority, mainstream perspectives might be expected’ (Lackaff and Sales 2013, 67).

In *Superblack*, Adilifu Nama carries out a detailed analysis of black superheroes as being representative of ‘America’s shifting political ethos and racial landscape’ (Nama 2011, 2). However, as mentioned, Nama mostly limits his discussion to DC comics and, disconcertingly, barely considers the importance of black female superheroes in comic books. While he does briefly refer to X-Man Storm as fostering an idealized narrative of a poor third-world girl realizing the American dream, she is positioned within his analysis against DC’s Nubia, the black Wonder Woman, a character Nama clearly prefers and whose lack of mainstream success he blames on Storm’s popularity.

More insightful is the discussion offered by Marc Singer (2002). While I would contest his argument that superhero comics are particularly culpable of promoting racist stereotypes (Singer 2002, 107)—I would not argue that they are any more guilty of racism than other cultural media—Singer draws attention to the many ways in which comic books have promoted colorblind multiculturalism. He notes that the mainstream superhero comic is subject to championing the concept of “diversity,” ‘while actually obscuring any signs of racial difference’ (Singer 2002, 107). Singer discusses a particular issue of the DC series *Legion of Super-Heroes*

in which its multi-colored cast exclaims to a black character ‘we’re color-blind! Blue skin, yellow skin, green skin ... we’re brothers and sisters ... united in the name of justice everywhere!’ (Singer 2002, 110). Indeed, Brown claims that ‘the presence of purple-, orange-, and green-skinned characters allowed the comics industry to delude itself for decades that superheroes were beyond the real-world concerns about skin color’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 172). Singer ultimately concludes that a book such as *Legion* ‘perfectly illustrates the contradictory treatment of race in many superhero comics: Torn between sci-fi fantasy and cultural reality, *Legion* ultimately erases all racial and sexual differences with the very same characters that it claims analogize our world’s diversity’ (Singer 2002, 112).

Alongside these comic book narratives in which race is analogized only to be erased are narratives which include the appropriation of race in order to, as hooks would have it, spice things up. Psylocke is an Asian X-Woman who gained much attention in the 1990s due to her transformation from a white, British heroine into a deadly Japanese ninja (Claremont and Lee 1989). Due to a convoluted string of events, white Betsy’s mind is transferred to that of the Japanese assassin Revanche, where she takes on Revanche’s fighting abilities alongside her Asian body. Psylocke ultimately retains this body even after the storyline has been resolved. Madrid notes that the inclusion of Asian Psylocke added some racial diversity to Marvel comics on a visual level, however this was limited to appearances since ‘she only looked Asian on the outside’ (Madrid 2009, 275). Indeed, Madrid links this to a more general trend in comics in the 1990s: ‘Psylocke’s transformation from intellectual English lady to sexy ninja seductress represented the basic belief of the 90’s [*sic*] that image was all that mattered’ (Madrid 2009, 275). Psylocke’s Asianness therefore takes the form of a racial costume.

Likewise, Psylocke’s transformation was also accommodated by Orientalist discourses. As well as becoming a ninja, Asian Psylocke was portrayed as much more alluring and sexual than she ever had been in her white body, wearing scanty swimsuit costumes typical of that era. The Orientalist image of the mysteriously sexual, but deadly Asian woman was

thus incorporated.¹¹ Indeed, in a rare discussion of women of color in superhero comics, Jeffrey Brown remarks that Orientalism has consistently played a large part in the representation of such characters, noting the frequent exoticization of the racialized female Other (J. A. Brown 2011a, 168–69). He draws attention to the intersection of race and gender within such portrayals in that ‘within superhero comics women of color are doubly fetishized as both female and Other’ (J. A. Brown 2011a, 176). Brown continues elsewhere, ‘nearly all comic book superheroines who are identified as ethnic minorities are treated as erotic spectacles, as hypersexual “Others”’ (J. A. Brown 2013b, 137). Doubtless, these themes likewise occur in Marvel film adaptations. As noted earlier, I draw connections between these portrayals and the postfeminist culture in which they are situated.



Figure 65 Psylocke’s first appearance in her Asian persona (Claremont and Lee 1989)

Thus, comic books, while not necessarily more susceptible to the promotion of racist discourses than other media, have provided ample material for adaptation in the contemporary postracial era of the Marvel boom, in which racialized identities are both commodified and framed by colorblind discourses. Indeed, Zingsheim argues that the *X-Men* film series ‘capitalizes on shifting identity discourses to reconstruct White masculinity

¹¹ Psylocke subsequently appeared in a minor role in *X-Men: Apocalypse* as a scantily clad villain (Olivia Munn) who works for the evil Apocalypse (Oscar Isaac).

as the superior subject position' (Zingsheim 2011, 225). Zingsheim, for example, points out that in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, 'the winners and heroes are constructed as largely White while the ranks of the villains are constructed as predominantly racially marginalized' (Zingsheim 2011, 232), again presenting an imbalance in portrayals of people of color.

In *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, Logan's girlfriend, Kayla Silverfox is suggested to be an Aboriginal Canadian (descending from the indigenous peoples of Canada) who is portrayed as spiritual. She tells Logan a romantic tale about 'why the Moon is lonely,' referring to the character Kuekuatsheu, the wolverine. However, this story is completely fabricated, for while there exists a figure called Kuekuatsheu in Canadian Innu legend referred to as "the wolverine" or "trickster" (E. Rich 2002, 57), the film's legend contains conflicting accounts of various legendary characters. As such, indigenous folklore is co-opted by the film in order to enhance its central romance. It should also be noted that Kayla's Aboriginal identity is completely incidental, existing merely to serve within that scene. This becomes particularly obvious when Kayla's sister, whom Logan must rescue from Stryker's prison, is revealed to be a blonde, white young woman (credited as 'Emma' and bearing some resemblance to *X-Men: First Class*' Emma Frost).

The inconsistency of Kayla's and her sister's race illustrates the ways in which these films eschew the implications of racial identity. As a result, Marvel films often reach to stereotypical images—such as the portrayal of Romani people as thieving criminals in *Ghost Rider: Spirit of Vengeance* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2012)—or erase characters' of color by casting white actors—such as Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders) in *The Avengers*, who appears dark-skinned in the comics; and the Maximoff Twins (Elizabeth Olsen and Aaron Taylor-Johnson) in *Age of Ultron*, who have appeared in the comics as the children of Romani parents. Postracialism brought to its logical conclusion, though, has allowed for the casting of Jessica Alba (who is of Hispanic descent), in a blonde wig, as Susan Storm in the *Fantastic Four* films (J. A. Brown 2015a, 109). At this point, it seems, race is so irrelevant that women of color receive the same casting opportunities as white women do, but this is only enabled through assimilation. Similarly, Zoe Saldana's inclusion as a prominent character,

Gamora, in *Guardians of the Galaxy* is noteworthy; however, Gamora has completely green skin. Saldana is visually coded as a woman of *a* color, but not as a woman of color who resonates with real racial identities.

Indeed, some theorists have argued that a defining feature of the superhero genre is its conflicted presentation of political issues (Singer 2002, 110), with Brown suggesting that ‘it is not a medium or a genre that lends itself well to mature and nuanced storytelling’ (J. A. Brown 2013b), a radical, if reductionist, statement in its own right. William Svitavsky similarly argues that

ironically ... the imaginative freedom of the superhero genre has often enabled readers to empathize with the position of “the other” without needing to consider genuine cultural differences or the actual experiences of real social minorities ... [C]omic book readers can empathize with a feeling of “otherness” wholly abstracted from genuine experience.

(Svitavsky 2013, 160)

It is this abstracted Otherness which occurs repeatedly in Marvel films. As this discussion illustrates, it is this abstracted Otherness which also resonates with multicultural, postracial and postfeminist discourses which have thrived in contemporary Western culture.

REPRESENTATIONS OF BLACK WOMEN IN MARVEL FILMS

Blade is one of the few films based on Marvel comics released before the boom of the 2000s. It is also notable for its gritty, bloodthirsty content and its focus on black central characters, namely the half-vampire hero Blade and his female companion Karen (N’Bushe Wright). As part of Marvel’s potentially experimental pre-boom output, it is the first and only Marvel film to be led by a black superhero.¹²

The character Blade first appeared in Marvel comics as a product of 1970s Blaxploitation discourses (Later 2016, 206). Blaxploitation films were exploitation films which gained popularity in the States in the 1970s, catering to urban black audiences, focusing on black action heroes and undeniably linked to the politics of race relations of the time (Walker 2009).

¹² A Black Panther film with a ‘90% black cast’ has been announced for release in 2018 (Melrose 2016).

In the comics, Blade was born in 1929 to a prostitute who was bitten by a vampire while in labor, killing her but bestowing upon Blade semi-vampiric abilities (Wolfman and Colan 1973). Bringing his character's origin up to 1967, the film trades on the comic's Blaxploitation atmosphere. According to Nama, the marriage of superheroes and Blaxploitation themes comes naturally, since they share 'the same signifiers of a superhuman status and often comment on the tensions expressed between black self-determination, racial authenticity, political fantasy, and economic independence' (Nama 2011, 6).

Blade deals with similar themes, although its inclusion of vampirism is significant. In the film, Blade rescues Dr Karen Jenson, a haematologist, from a vampire who is mistakenly brought to her hospital after being burned in an attack by Blade. Having been bitten, Karen is determined to find a cure before she turns into a vampire herself, but subsequent to her encounter with Blade, she is thrust into the world of vampires and horror and helps Blade defeat the film's villain Deacon Frost (Stephen Dorff), who wants to resurrect a vampire god and dominate the world. The relationship between vampire and victim is, of course, 'irreducibly sexual,' having often formed an analogy for sexuality (and the dangers thereof) (Tudor 1989, 163). Nama likewise argues for the analogous qualities of the film:

The linkage in the film between blood, vampires, and world political power suggested that vampirism is a politically destabilizing pandemic and biological affliction more than it is a supernatural curse. In this sense, *Blade* is easily read as a film that reflects multiple anxieties concerning eugenics, HIV infection, genetics, and racial purity.

(Nama 2011, 139,141)

However, there is more to *Blade*'s themes than this. While there is merit to Nama's claims, I would suggest that *Blade*'s conceptualization of black sexuality is one that hinges almost entirely on rape. A vampire attack is presented as a physical violation of the (feminine) body by a (male) aggressor. Blaxploitation has been theorized as actively incorporating sex and violence (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 204–5) and as such *Blade* relies on rape discourses for much of its dramatic effect. With this in mind, it should also be noted that Blaxploitation has been considered to have offered black women alternative roles in a time in which black female heroism was

virtually non-existent in mainstream cinema (Sims 2006). Thus, *Blade* also attempts to highlight Karen as a character who undergoes a transformation from a weak, sheltered woman to a heroic, aggressive vampire huntress. These factors carry with them further cultural implications regarding the portrayal of black femininity in relation to postfeminism, which I discuss later.

The rape discourses of the film are expressed largely through the character of Karen, who effectively moves from the safe zone of economically empowered postfeminist security to one in which vampirism, or rape, is a real and current danger. When she gets to know Blade, her eyes are opened to the true horrors of the “real world.” Blade lectures Karen about the harsh reality she now occupies: ‘You better wake up. The world you live in is just a sugar coated topping. There is another world beneath it—the real world. And if you want to survive it, you better learn to pull the trigger.’ Through this scene, Blade effectively forces Karen to toughen up. This is a world where the danger of being bitten by a vampire—which is by extension an act of gendered violence—is very real indeed.

Prior to this scene, Karen occupied a safe space that was free from (sexual) violence and thus free from gendered oppression. This is largely achieved through her presentation as a ‘success story’ of black femininity, a term utilized by Springer to address how financially independent black women are presented as evidence that women of color make use of the same professional opportunities as do white women (Springer 2008, 88). Karen’s life as a successful scientist is part of a veneer which is stripped away when she discovers that vampires exist. Her life is turned upside-down—she is no longer a member of the empowered middle-class; her medical education is valueless on the streets when she has to physically combat vampires (which she does partially through carrying a Mace-like garlic spray similar to those marketed towards women to aid self-defence).

One scene in which rape discourses are particularly prevalent is Karen’s encounter with Frost. Having been taken prisoner by Frost, she is seated in a living-room area in his lair. Karen is the focal point of the initial tracking shot, in which she occupies an arm chair, to the left of which sits a blonde female vampire, and to the right, Frost, smoking a cigarette. The shot

cuts to alternating reverse medium shots between Frost and Karen. Frost tells her,

You seem a bit... tense. A bit pent-up maybe, like you need to release something. You know? Blade not givin' it to you maybe. I dunno, I just... I see such a beautiful woman. Great skin. I'd like to see you happy, that's all.

This predatory language is framed by Karen's reverse shots in which she remains stony-faced. Still, the power dynamic presented is that of the white predatory male making lecherous comments to a victimized black woman. She asks him whether he will offer to turn her into a vampire, to which he answers in a similarly predatory way, 'Well it's either that or a body bag.' Karen replies, 'Go ahead. Bite me. I'll just cure myself. I did it before and I can do it again.' This answer is significant, particularly in the ways it questions the rape discourses of the scene. In essence, she gives him permission to violate her body, questioning the power dynamic.

The nature of her consent is ambiguous, though, and this resurfaces in the climactic final scenes of the film. With Frost having drained Blade's blood as part of his ritual to summon the vampire god, Karen offers herself to him to relieve his thirst and strengthen him. This is portrayed as an entirely sexual act, featuring a shirtless Blade panting and moaning throughout (figure 66). Indeed, Jonathan Gayles wholly characterizes this scene as a rape scene:

Blade uses his physical strength to aggressively hold Jensen in place as he forces himself on her. While the fact that she initially offers herself to Blade introduces some ambiguity, Blade's growling, snatching treatment of Jensen in combination with her subdued cries of "stop, please stop" make it clear that the exchange that she initiates has culminated in an act over which she has no control.

(Gayles 2012, 291)

While I agree that there are distinct rape elements in the scene (as there are throughout the film), I would complicate Gayle's statement and argue that there is far more ambiguity in the scene than Gayles implies. For instance, it is unclear whether Karen is moaning 'stop' or 'don't stop.' However, the result, ultimately, is that Karen sacrifices herself so that the masculine hero may continue his narrative, which Gayle suggests is emblematic of the oppressive, rather than transformative, gender and racial politics within the film (Gayles 2012, 297).



Figure 66 The rape discourses in the “sex” scene during which Blade bites Karen are ambiguous

Such ambiguities, though, are significant when considering the film in terms of broader discourses of race and gender, particularly with regards to rape. First, the ways in which Karen is propelled into the sexually violent world of vampires speaks to established discourses in the representation of black femininity. There is an overwhelming consensus that black femininity has been associated with overt sexuality (hooks 1992, 62, 73–74; Springer 2001, 175; Manatu 2003, 10). The association of black femininity with sexuality stems from the white supremacist notion that black people possess an animality which white people do not, also rendering them inherently violent. As Springer notes, ‘African Americans are thought to be always already violent due to their “savage” ancestry’ (Springer 2001, 174). Further, Dyer suggests that such representations of savage blackness stem from the notion that white people are distinguished by “white spirit,” that they transcend bodies and have intellectual qualities (Dyer 1997, 23). This is in opposition to black people, who remain bodily, carnal and sexual.

Blade’s reliance on violence and rape discourses therefore reaches back to such phenomena. It is, for instance, interesting that Karen slips so easily into the role of female aggressor in a way not dissimilar to the black heroines portrayed in Blaxploitation cinema. This is evidenced when she tells Blade ‘I’m damn sure I’ll learn quickly’ when he asks her if she knows how to use a gun. In a scene in which she and Blade interrogate the vampiric record-keeper Pearl, it is even suggested that Karen has gone too far in her ruthlessness when she needlessly tortures Pearl with UV light. When Blade gives her a stern look, she merely answers, ‘He moved.’ As

such, Karen quickly realizes her potential for violence to make her way in this violent world.

And yet, Karen's status as fair game to the vampires also renders her a victim, or even, as Projansky would have it, a 'hypervictim' (Projansky 2001, 169). This is especially acute when considered in conjunction with the film's rape discourses. In *Watching Rape* (2001), Projansky outlines the role of rape narratives in postfeminist media and pays particular attention to the absence of black women from such rape discourses. Projansky theorizes the concept of displacement, through which black women's experiences of rape become erased or otherwise overlooked (Projansky 2001, 154–95). In part this occurs due to the centering of black men in such discourses (Projansky 2001, 166). In *Blade*, it is the actual engagement with the rape of black women which becomes displaced due to its reliance on metaphor and the fact that the film speaks *around* the topic of rape rather than to it. It consistently characterizes vampirism as sexual, for instance through referring to vampirism as a sexually transmitted disease or virus, but despite the obvious physical violations which seem to be focused on female victims, it is never referred to as rape. Since black women are in much more danger of being raped than are white women (Projansky 2001, 156), this displacement is discordant, particularly since the film projects these discourses through a black woman. The film's ambiguity thus contributes to postfeminism's displacement of black femininity in such rape discourses, providing a convoluted picture of empowered black femininity.

Blade thus offers an ambiguous portrait of black postfeminist femininity, often reaching to established but reworked visual and narrative conventions to offer a version of black femininity that leaves existing structures of racial hierarchy undisturbed. These complex images of contemporary black femininity are likewise present in the *X-Men* films. As mentioned earlier, the franchise's seeming engagement with minority metaphor is often characterized as inconsistent, since the films ultimately focus on heterosexual white masculinity, marginalizing "Other" subjectivities. Notably, the only black superheroines who appear in the *X-Men* films are Storm (Halle Berry) and Angel Salvadore (Zoë Kravitz). Storm has consistently been a popular character of Marvel comics and likewise occupies a fairly prominent role in the first three films of the

franchise, in particular *X2*. In the film, Storm showcases her weather-controlling powers when she successfully conjures tornadoes to prevent missiles from hitting the X-Men's jet, as well as rescuing the imprisoned Xavier. However, Storm is effectively removed from combat in *The Last Stand* in order to take on the role of headmistress to Xavier's school after his death.

Notably, throughout the series, Storm is consistently portrayed as being concerned for the mutant students of the school (whom she refers to as 'the children') in a way which, according to Zingsheim, harks back to stereotypical "mammy" figures of black femininity, through which black women are portrayed as nannies or housekeepers. He notes that 'her identity is performed in service to White males and caretaking White children—evoking a history of Black women specifically ... forced into caring for privileged children of White masters' (Zingsheim 2011, 235). The mammy, or Aunt Jemima, role has been discussed by writers such as hooks (1982, 83–84; 1992, 74), Benshoff and Griffin (2009, 184) and Springer (2001, 174) as idealizing black, asexual submissiveness.

Indeed, Zingsheim also notes that Storm is portrayed as distinctly asexual, in contrast to the films' white characters who are frequently shown expressing their romantic desire for one another (Zingsheim 2011, 235). This asexual blackness is also pointed out by Gayles with reference to *Blade*, in which Karen and Blade are never portrayed as being romantic or sexual (Gayles 2012, 289) (save the paradoxical rape discourses which run throughout the film). The fact that Storm is presented as asexual speaks to the need for popular texts to quell anxieties stemming from empowered black womanhood, according to Tasker. Tasker also notes the tendency to present black action heroines as fundamentally aggressive and sexually assertive (Tasker 1993, 21). However, this too is accompanied by a paradox, in that

the "macho" aspects of the black action heroine—her ability to fight, her self-confidence, even arrogance—are bound up in an aggressive assertion of her sexuality. Simultaneously it is the same stereotypical attribution of sexuality to the black woman which generates anxiety around her representation.

(Tasker 1993, 21–22)

The anxieties stemming from these portrayals are alleviated either by fetishizing (sexualizing) the black female body and, through this, exerting control over it, or through making it harmless and asexual (Tasker 1993, 33).

In the 1980s comics, Storm underwent a dramatic makeover which incorporated a punk aesthetic with leather clothing and a partially shaved head (figure 67). The so-called ‘Mohawk Storm’ (Tramountanas 2011) was not included in the films until the prequel *X-Men: Apocalypse*, in which the character appears as a teenager (Alexandra Shipp) who is recruited by the film’s villain to carry out acts of evil, suggesting emphasis placed on the character with regards to her outward appearance as oppositional in relation to her moral positioning in the films.

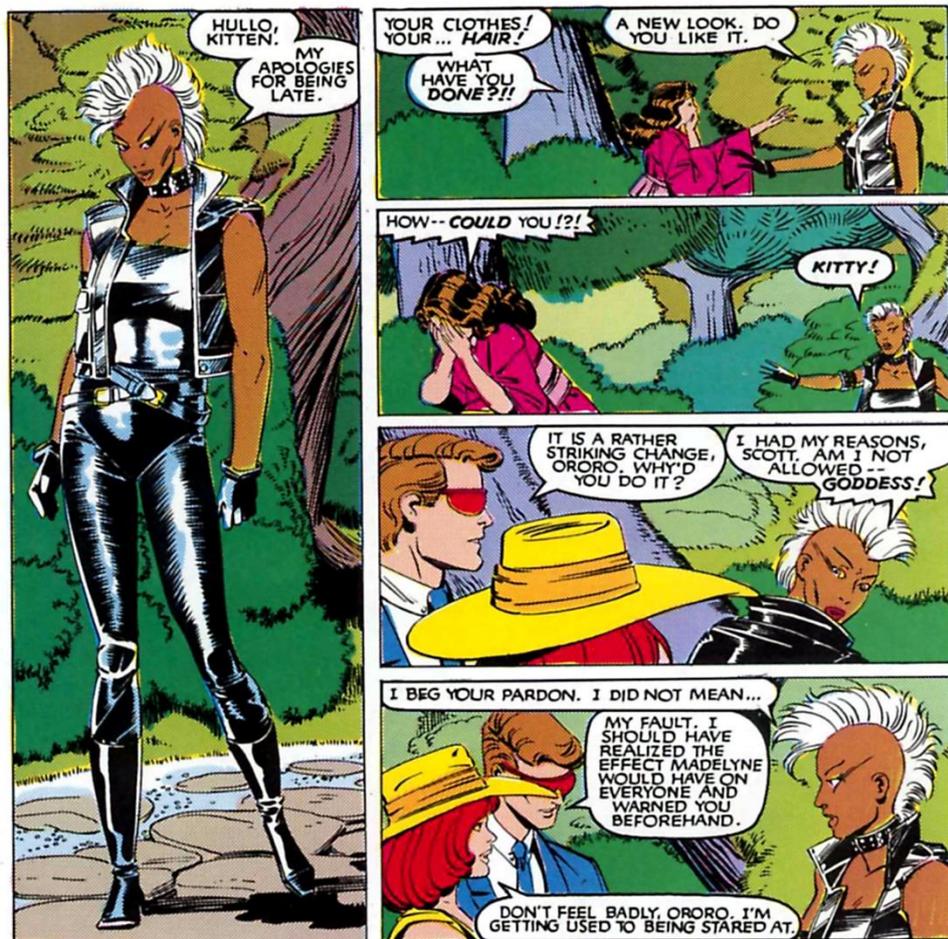


Figure 67 Kitty Pryde reacts negatively to Storm’s new look (Claremont and Smith 1983)

Equally noteworthy is the character of Angel Salvadore, who features as a secondary character in *X-Men: First Class*. Angel is introduced

as a mutant who works as an exotic dancer and is tracked down by a young Xavier and Magneto while assembling their team of mutant superheroes. Angel is young, slim and of indiscernible racial heritage. The setting, and her position as a dancer, thus reach to fetishizing Orientalist discourses which present her as exotic and mysterious. In her introductory scene at the club where she works, she is positioned at the front of the shot alongside other young women dancing, wearing black fringed underwear and knee-high boots marking her out visually as sexualized. Xavier and Magneto purchase a private room with Angel in order to speak to her and she reveals that the dragonfly wing tattoos on her shoulders are real wings, allowing her to fly (figure 69). She demonstrates her powers for the (white) men, as shot from behind, but to do so she removes her bra (which magically reappears in the subsequent shot). Angel's powers are thus sexualized in ways which those of the other young mutants recruited are not. Here, Angel is narratively and visually positioned in a way which marks her as an exoticized, fetishized object who is racially Other.



Figure 68 Angel Salvadore demonstrates her powers to Xavier and Magneto

However, the implications of Angel's representation go further than this. Being an exotic dancer, Angel occupies a space of postfeminist professional empowerment. Displaying her racialized body allows her to earn money through commodified sexuality. Thus, following postfeminism's logic of empowered sexuality, Angel has grasped the same commercial and sexual opportunities as white women. Bearing in mind that the film is set in the 1960s, in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, this

is significant. In this way, the films' postfeminism, alongside its postracialism, functions retrospectively, as discussed in previous chapters.

This is especially expressed in a subsequent scene in which Angel and the other mutants are harassed at the training facility. Here, CIA agents make leering taunts at the young mutants through a window. These taunts are clearly meant to analogize sexual harassment, meanwhile the film's postfeminism suggests that this kind of harassment can be simply shrugged off. One agent shouts at Angel, 'Hey, come on honey! Give us a little...' and gestures flapping wings. Mystique tells Angel not to allow the agents to bother her because 'they're just guys being stupid.' This "boys will be boys" disregard of harassment is another factor which plays into the postfeminist goal of maintaining gender difference (as outlined in the previous chapter). Angel's reply solidifies this goal when she says 'Guys being stupid, I can handle, okay? I've handled that my whole life. But I'd rather a bunch of guys stare at me with my clothes off than the way these guys stare at me.' Once again the mutant struggle takes precedence.

In this way the film evokes feminist issues by presenting men harassing women through "mutantphobic" acts clearly coded as sexual, and yet engagement with these issues is written off, since men are expected to behave in such ways. Crucially, though, Angel's status as a woman of color makes these discourses more complex due to the complicated relationship of black female sexuality with postfeminist notions of empowerment. As mentioned, the portrayal of the black woman as 'oversexed Jezebel' (Manatu 2003, 10) is well established within Western cultural discourses. However, since the idealized (white) postfeminist subject plays an active role in self-monitoring and self-objectification (Gill 2007, 151), Angel's retort marks her seizing of postfeminist empowerment. The nuances of this occurrence, however, are lost. The (self-)sexualized black feminine body in postfeminist culture occupies a distinctly different space than that of the idealized white feminine body, as has been noted by Aisha Durham (2012), Dayna Chatman (2015) and Jess Butler (2013). The celebration of sexualized black femininity is thus not as straightforward as the film suggests, and Angel's positioning within postfeminist empowerment is overly simplified.

As mentioned earlier, postfeminist texts, functioning within a multicultural and postracial landscape, seek to present racial ambiguity in order to appeal to broader audiences (Banet-Weiser 2007, 214). It should therefore be noted that both Storm and Angel are portrayed by distinctly light-skinned black actresses, appearing racially ambiguous, while still retaining “exotic” traits. Storm’s clothing, for instance, is unspecifically “ethnic” (for instance featuring decorative beadwork and necklaces), allowing her to appear “exotic” but not enough to be “foreign.” Zingsheim similarly remarks that Storm loses her Kenyan accent throughout the film series, becoming more Americanized (Zingsheim 2011, 230). Both Storm and Angel thus fulfil the postfeminist task of occupying an ambiguous racial identity, which can be successfully commercialized as part of postfeminist/postracial culture.

Norma Manatu also notes the significance of skin color in portrayals of black women. She argues that colorism, as distinct from racism, has had the effect of higher value being placed on light-skinned black women in Hollywood films (Manatu 2003, 89–94). This is a practice which dates back as far as *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), which featured “‘cinnamon-colored gals’ with Caucasian features’ as being preferable to dark-skinned black women (Bogle 2010, 15). Mia Mask similarly taps into the commercial implications of these casting decisions, discussing Halle Berry’s success as being symptomatic of multiculturalism (Mask 2009, 185–232). Actresses with mixed racial heritage are thus seen as more desirable in Hollywood films which ‘utilize bifurcated subjectivities to reach growing multiethnic populations’ (Mask 2009, 185). Benshoff and Griffin likewise focus on the commercial appeal of mixed-race actors (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 178). Regarding contemporary action cinema and using actresses Halle Berry, Zoe Saldana and Jessica Alba as case studies, Brown likewise argues that action cinema

both challenges and reinforces genre conventions about ethnicity and sexuality, ultimately using racial indeterminacy as a means to capitalize on the shifting racial identities of viewers and to literally spice up the heroine’s image without sacrificing white womanhood as a cultural ideal.

(J. A. Brown 2015a, 81)

Ultimately, these subjectivities feed into a “melting pot” myth, where the US is presented as ‘a place where people of different backgrounds can co-exist peacefully’ (Purse 2011a, 112). However, there is still the issue that, according to Purse, ‘African American women emerge as the most marginalised group’ presented in mainstream Hollywood action cinema (Purse 2011a, 116). This, along with the disengagement from issues faced by women of color, as well as the depoliticized and commodified postracial subjectivities promoted within such films highlight the delicate concerns that these portrayals negotiate.

REPRESENTATIONS OF JAPANESE WOMEN IN MARVEL FILMS

Portrayals of Asians in Marvel films have been similarly shaped by the discourses outlined above, though these manifest in slightly different ways. 1989’s *The Punisher* exists on the cusp of the postfeminist era and is thus more prone to portraying Asian women in more “traditional” ways. These portrayals do not necessarily seek to capitalize on the commercial potential of racialized feminine identities in the same way as do later postfeminist films. Rather, *The Punisher* vilifies the Asian woman through the twin strands of gendered and racial oppression, reaching back to the discourses of feminine evil outlined in previous chapters, but adding to it the additional dimension of “othered” race. Later, I discuss *The Wolverine* as a text which is fully situated within postfeminist culture. Hence, while *The Wolverine* draws out similar discourses to *The Punisher*, the consecutive analyses of these two films sheds light on how these discourses have adapted in a multicultural, postfeminist age. It is noteworthy that Japanese women have received the most exposure in terms of representations of Asian subjectivities and, as such, my discussion here is largely limited to these representations.

The central villains of *The Punisher* are the Yakuza, the Japanese mob. Importantly, they are positioned as villains to the equally villainous Italian Mafia. With Frank Castle having weakened the Mafia due to his activities as the Punisher, the Yakuza seek to take the Mafia’s place as the prime crime syndicate. To do this, the Yakuza kidnap the children of the

Italian Mafia bosses and hold them for ransom. Frank therefore begrudgingly saves the Mafia children. In the film, the Japanese are positioned as more villainous than the Italians. This is interesting and illustrates how Italians, despite having been marginalized as immigrants in the States previously, were portrayed in increasingly sympathetic ways (despite still relying on mobster stereotypes) (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 145–54). As such, the Italians are portrayed as more integrated into American culture than are the Japanese.

Most significantly, the leader of the Yakuza is a woman named Lady Tanaka (Kim Miyori) and introduced to us as the ‘first female ever to head the Yakuza.’ Immediately, then, Tanaka’s gender is foregrounded, alongside her race. Tanaka is portrayed as overtly feminine with a slight build. She is considered powerful due to the resources being the leader of the Yakuza grants her. As such, Tanaka’s portrayal draws on the existing figure of the Dragon Lady, which characterizes the Asian woman as ‘belligerent, cunning, and untrustworthy’ (Kim and Chung 2005, 79) and ‘a diabolical wielder of power’ (Hyde and Else-Quest 2013, 100). Importantly, such women are also portrayed as ‘dangerously and exotically sexual’ (Holtzman and Sharpe 2014, 321), illustrating again how Orientalist discourses penetrate such portrayals, but also how discourses of evil feminine sexuality adapt when considered in conjunction with race.

Indeed, Tanaka’s ruthlessness paints her as particularly evil. Both her Asianness and her femininity act as counterpoint to Frank’s European-American white masculinity. This is further demonstrated in two contrasting scenes involving the Mafia children. Tanaka’s diabolical nature is best expressed by the fact that she plans to sell the children to the slave trade. Her relationship to the children is therefore framed by this heinous act. She is shown at one point comforting a little girl who cries. However, with the knowledge that Tanaka plans to sell the children, the trust she buys from the child through this act is presented as an abuse of her position as a supposedly nurturing feminine subject. Frank also shares a similar scene with the children, though the effect is quite different, since his comforting of the girl softens his character, making him more sympathetic. Tanaka’s race and gender thus function in tandem to position the character as evil.

Another noteworthy figure in the film is a character credited as ‘Tanaka’s daughter’ (Zoshka Mizak) though she is never referred to as such on screen. Indeed, the character never even speaks, she merely accompanies Tanaka in a number of scenes, also drawing from the Dragon Lady image due to her impressive fighting skills. Though she is dressed in a traditional Japanese sailor fuku schoolgirl uniform, Tanaka’s daughter does not appear to be Japanese at all. Despite this, she is presented as the silent, subservient Asian assistant, in a role similar to that of Lady Deathstrike (Kelly Hu) in *X2*. Deathstrike is an Asian mutant who is being mind-controlled by Stryker to do his bidding. Such a portrayal, Zingsheim argues, ‘retains the silence and dutiful obedience required to performatively (re)construct the model minority myth’ (Zingsheim 2011, 232). And yet, Tanaka’s daughter appears to be a continuation of the classical Hollywood tradition of yellowface, in which white actors portrayed Asian characters (Benshoff and Griffin 2009, 274–75).



Figure 69 Lady Tanaka, her daughter and bodyguards

Portrayals of Asian women between the release of *The Punisher* and the present day have been scarce. However, *The Wolverine* offered a counterpoint to this trend as a film set almost entirely in Japan and featuring an Asian supporting cast. Key figures in the film are the Japanese women, Logan’s spunky sidekick Yukio (Rila Fukushima), and his love-interest Mariko (Tao Okamoto). While Mariko follows in the vein of the submissive, delicate Asian woman, Yukio’s portrayal draws from much

more complex multicultural and postfeminist discourses, particularly since the film offers a Western interpretation of empowered Asian femininity. *The Wolverine*'s uniqueness thus stems from the fact that it does not offer a representation of women of color in the US; rather, the white male protagonist is inserted into the foreign environment of Japan, which is nonetheless a construct informed by Western notions of Asia. In the film, Logan is called by Yukio on behalf of Ichirō Yashida, whose life Logan saved during the US bombing of Nagasaki. Yashida is dying of cancer and seeks to repay the debt he owes Logan for his life. Along the way, Yashida appears to die, making his granddaughter Mariko head of his successful business conglomerate. This, in turn, leaves Mariko vulnerable and she is attacked by the Yakuza at Yashida's funeral. Logan must therefore protect Mariko, the film's resident woman in the refrigerator, with the aid of Yukio.

The Wolverine functions as a white savior film, a genre discussed by Matthew Hughey in which people of color are rescued by a 'white messianic character' (Hughey 2014, 1). Such films have gained success in a postracial era, in which blatant white supremacist discourses are avoided, but in which texts still 'rely on an implicit message of white paternalism' (Hughey 2014, 8). Hughey concludes that in these films, 'Whiteness emerges as an iron fist in a velvet glove, the knightly savior of the dysfunctional "others" who are redeemable as long as they consent to assimilation and obedience to their white benefactors of class, capital, and compassion' (Hughey 2014, 8). Such sentiments are evidenced in *The Wolverine* through the narrative in which Logan effectively learns the art of "being Japanese," and through this is able to save Mariko from her grandfather (who it turns out planned to exploit Logan's healing factor and build a Silver Samurai robot out of adamantium). The film's portrayal of Japan uses distancing techniques to highlight the setting's "exotic" or "foreign" qualities, for instance through the showcasing of Yashida's funeral or the inclusion of "wacky" themed hotel suites which Logan and Mariko flee to. And yet, it is imperative for Logan to learn the secrets of the Japanese way of life in order for him to become a better fighter and realize his potential for heroism. At first he fails miserably, for instance when Mariko must teach him Japanese table manners. When she reveals to Logan that her father has arranged a marriage for her, she refers to notions of

'honor'. In this way, Mariko is positioned within the "backwards" Eastern discourses which McRobbie argues function to disarticulate feminist solidarity between women across cultures (McRobbie 2009, 41–43). Mariko's status as an "oppressed" Japanese woman is solidified when she tells Logan, 'I don't expect you to understand ... You're not Japanese.'

However, Mariko is juxtaposed against the role of Yukio in the film. Where Mariko is soft and delicate, Yukio is tough and fierce. In the scene introducing Yukio, she is shown to partake of the same fighting practices as white superheroines such as Black Widow. She goes to a seedy bar to locate Logan, who has become a recluse after having killed Jean Grey in *The Last Stand*. Point-of-view shots show Yukio watching Logan as he confronts some men in the bar for needlessly shooting a bear in the wilderness with an arrow. Yukio arrives and tells him not to concern himself with these men when it looks like a fight will break out. This is because Yukio foresaw their deaths through her powers of precognition. However, the fight seems inevitable as one man draws his gun. This is followed by a slow zoom of Yukio's fierce face, shaking her head solemnly. She looks to her right and smiles in a medium close-up. A sword handle enters the shot, while the focus remains on her, and she tells them of the significance of the sword in Japanese culture: 'the ideal weapon for separating head and limb from body.' This again functions to highlight the specificity of the Japanese setting. Shots of the men show them looking at her suspiciously, while Logan appears intrigued. She smiles as she speaks, and a man points his gun at her. In a split second, Yukio knocks the gun out of his hand and draws the sword. Her skill with the sword is showcased in shots of the sword slicing through bar stool legs, followed by long-shots of her swinging it around, and a medium shot of her casually sheathing it again as the men fall off their severed stools. She is shown smiling; the exercise was effortless. She finishes her demonstration, simply stating 'Like so.' Her actions convince Logan to accompany her.

There are other scenes in which Yukio is demonstrated to possess ample fighting skills, being capable of fending off villains, and, as mentioned in Chapter 3, ultimately killing the evil Viper. Unlike Black Widow's fight scenes in *Iron Man 2*, Yukio's physicality in fights is framed by the cinematography in a way which showcases movement and space.

Rather than boxing the heroine in and effectively stranding her within shots, the shots focus on Yukio as functioning within each setting: for instance in her fight with Mariko's father Shingen, the room in which they fight is almost fully visible in each shot. Notably, there has been an increased interest in Asian fighting styles within Hollywood cinema in recent decades, a further symptom of globalization (Funnell 2010). Further, *The Wolverine* continues the tradition of Hollywood's 'Asian invasion,' a phenomenon noted by Minh-Ha Pham. Situating the increasing visibility of Asian actors in Hollywood film within a postracial moment, Pham argues that

In the Asian invasion [of Hollywood], multiculturalism functions to abate the paranoia that has traditionally accompanied the other Asian invasion scares and, at the same time, to re-present and reactivate a particularly American drama of assimilation and socialization at both the national and international levels.

(Pham 2004, 122)

The film is also an example of the contemporary Orientalist buddy film, a trend identified by Brian Locke (2010). These films rework familiar pairings in which the white protagonist teams up with nonwhite buddies. Locke traces the inclusion of the Japanese buddy to the shifting relationship of the US to the world in a post-9/11 global culture. Unlike in previous decades in which the Japanese were vilified in Hollywood films, due largely to the role the country played in World War II and Pearl Harbor, Japan became an ally of the US in the war on terror (Locke 2010, 155). Locke remarks that the 9/11 attacks 'rendered it politically unfeasible for popular films to vilify Japan' (Locke 2010, 157). Hence, though Yashida is a villain of the film, it is established at the beginning that their relationship began with a mutual trust when Logan saved his life in Nagasaki. The unity between the cultures is further enhanced by Logan's teaming up with Yukio. However, David Oh characterizes the film's central villain as 'techno-Orientalist,' elaborating Western fears of Asian practices and technologies, which are similarly shown through a mystified lens (Oh 2016, 153). He notes that the film is ambivalent in its portrayal of Japan and ultimately normalizes white male heroism while disguising this behind postracial discourses (Oh 2016, 152).

The film's portrayal of empowered Japanese femininity is framed by discourses of multiculturalism, with Yukio demonstrating the same fighting

proWess as any white superheroine. Regarding postfeminist discourses, her representation is particularly significant. As has been described by Hua, postfeminism is a distinctly Western phenomenon (Hua 2009, 69), but the multicultural notion of “universal womanhood” has the effect that postfeminism is frequently inserted into non-Western contexts, thereby universalizing the postfeminist ideal (Hua 2009, 68). Hua focuses on the figure of the geisha in Western popular culture as a Japanese cultural phenomenon which has frequently been framed by postfeminist discourses of women’s empowerment, noting that popular texts ‘write the geisha through post-feminist understandings of femininity and feminist liberation works to write post-feminism back into history’ (Hua 2009, 69). As such, the geisha is fetishized and exoticized, but not made to seem *too* distant from the Western ideal of empowered femininity. The geisha is familiarized through postfeminist sensibilities, but is not rendered *too* familiar (Hua 2009, 78). In a similar way, Yukio’s empowerment is considered universal; she is seen to partake of the same discourses of empowerment as the white postfeminist superheroine. She is tough, sassy, and physically attractive. Thus, Western postfeminism is injected into this Japanese setting, becoming universal, while Yukio is presented as familiarized through postfeminist notions of empowerment. However, these representations are still complicit in upholding structural inequalities of race and gender, since the white male hero saves the day.

Another mechanism through which Yukio’s portrayal is familiarized but exoticized is through her appearance. In the comics, Yukio appears as a stern, highly skilled martial artist, with cropped hair and practical (usually black) attire (Claremont and Miller 1982). In *The Wolverine*, Yukio has been revamped to incorporate an air of feisty youthfulness which resonates with existing Japanese texts which have gained global popularity. Yukio’s representation clearly draws on established tropes of Japanese manga and anime, such as those of *shōjo*. *Shōjo* is manga which is aimed at a young female audience and offers portrayals of heroic girlhood (Gwynne 2013, 331). Oh likewise suggests that Yukio’s style draws from Harajuku, a rebellious teen fashion (Oh 2016, 160). Anne Alison notes that the popularity of *shōjo* texts stems from their negotiation of gender roles. She claims that the character Sailor Moon, a magical girl who fights evil by

transforming into fighting warrior princesses, ‘is something of a hybrid, embodying conventions both of boys’ culture—fighting, warriorship, superheroes—and *shōjo* (girls’) culture—romance, friendship, and appearance’ (Allison 2000, 260). Yukio follows such trends which have been established as popular: she has a punk-rock look, for instance wearing short culottes and striped socks, and having flaming red dyed hair. Her appearance is simultaneously cute and ferocious, much like that of Sailor Moon.



Figure 70 Yukio in *The Wolverine*

As noted by Susan Napier, ‘*shōjo* seems to signify the girl who never grows up’ (Napier 2003, 94), it therefore follows that Yukio is ambiguously aged (her appearance seems to suggest she could be anywhere between sixteen and thirty-five years old). She is also notably referred to in the film by Shingen as a ‘toy doll,’ further infantilizing her. Thus, since Yukio’s portrayal draws from already familiar generic conventions of Japanese popular culture, the exoticism of the narrative is contained within Japan while cultural signifiers which resonate with “universal” notions of feminine empowerment are effectively commodified. Both Gwynne (2013, 331) and Allison (2000, 260), for instance, note the global appeal of characters such as Sailor Moon, who has received much popularity around the world. Indeed, Gwynne argues that *shōjo* texts such as Sailor Moon illustrate ‘shifts in the global representation of girlhood’ (Gwynne 2013, 331). The potentially sexual appeal of the girls of *shōjo* is also worth noting. Napier argues that, as girls constitute the ‘liminal identity between child and adult,’ there is an ‘innocent eroticism’ which accompanies such representations (Napier 2005, 148). As such, Yukio in *The Wolverine*, lacks

the overt sexuality of the Dragon Lady, but is still able to partake of the indulgence in physical attractiveness demanded by Western postfeminist culture.

In these ways *The Wolverine* offers an image of exoticized, yet familiar, empowered Asian femininity which is commodified as part of the “Japanese experience” sold within the film. As part of a global, multicultural media landscape, Japanese culture is, as Antonia Levi describes, ‘deodorized’ (Levi 2013, 9). Through this, distinctly Japanese characteristics are integrated into North American cultural products, such as Hollywood films, becoming naturalized, although the intrigue of consuming the Other still remains. Regarding gender and race, this becomes increasingly problematic as the “universal womanhood” promoted by globalized postfeminist discourses ultimately erases individual experiences of racial difference. In *The Wolverine*, Yukio’s portrayal addresses the Western cultural need for her to be “Other” enough to be understood as Japanese, but she also has to speak to the “inclusive” qualities of postfeminism and postracialism in order to capitalize on the notion of “diversity.”

DEVELOPING RACE REPRESENTATION IN MARVEL MOVIES

Marvel films rely on marginalizing discourses with regards to race even though the majority of these films exist within an era which has been declared *beyond* racial difference. The lack of visibility for women of color in these films supports the notion that Hollywood films are still dominated by white men. Indeed, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, presents a problematic image of race, continuing the tradition of the previous *X-Men* films. As mentioned, the film focuses on a team of future X-Men in their attempt to prevent a dystopian future where mutants are systematically exterminated by invincible killer robots known as Sentinels. Logan is sent to the 1970s in order to stop Mystique from assassinating Bolivar Trask, the action which sets in motion the series of events leading to the Sentinels’ creation. The opening scenes of the film showcase a cast which is more racially diverse

than that of the average Marvel film, featuring Storm alongside black energy-absorbing mutant Bishop (Omar Sy), Asian teleporter Blink (Fan Bingbing), solar-powered Latino Sunspot (Adan Canto) and Native American superhuman Warpath (Booboo Stewart), as well as the central (largely white) cast of familiar X-Men.

However, throughout the film it becomes clear that the future the X-Men are fighting for is one which is distinctly white, as is evident through the climactic final moment in which scenes with the 1970s X-Men are intercut with scenes with the future X-Men in their respective battles. One after another, the future X-Men are killed. Blink, in particular, is shown to undergo an especially gruesome death, being impaled by two Sentinels, as shown in an aerial shot, falling to her knees and crying towards the camera in following shots (see figure 71). However, at the end of the film, the X-Men have successfully “fixed” the future, with Logan waking up safely at the Xavier school surrounded by his friends. Conspicuously absent from these new future scenes are any people of color whatsoever, implicating that the “bad” future which needed to be eradicated was a markedly racialized one. The result is a similar vilification of racial subjectivities that has been present throughout the *X-Men* series. Equally noteworthy is director Bryan Singer’s descriptions of the future mutants as ‘refugees that are living day to day in this hideously ruined world’ (B. Singer in Hewitt 2013), implicitly touching on contemporary issues of immigration and multiculturalism. According to *Days of Future Past*, such ‘refugees’ have no place in a good, clean future.



Figure 71 Blink dies in *Days of Future Past*

Further, as the discussion of this chapter shows, contemporary women of color represented in Marvel films must negotiate very particular discourses, adhering to the demands of both postfeminism and postracialism. Women of color appear rarely in Marvel films, and their inclusion within these discourses renders them, in hooks' terms, spice. Their racial identity is commodified in order to capitalize on notions of "diversity." In this sense, the explicit racial identities of characters such as Storm and Angel Salvadore are eclipsed in favor of a more ambiguous "ethnic" presence. On the other hand, *The Wolverine* presents a contemporary, globalized portrayal of the empowered Asian woman, who simultaneously resonates with modern postfeminist culture. In these portrayals, all women are equally capable of being empowered, while multiculturalist sensibilities eliminate the need for explicitly feminist and anti-racist discourses. These films thus inject a version of postfeminist femininity into cultures which may have had very different historical trajectories regarding women's rights, offering an illusion of universal female empowerment which nonetheless remains otherized and exotic, a spice or flavoring of the Orient. As Braidotti argues, 'post-feminist liberal individualism is simultaneously multicultural and profoundly ethnocentric. It celebrates differences, even in the racialized sense of the term, so long as they confirm to and uphold the logic of Sameness' (Braidotti 2006, 46). Through a consideration of postfeminist discourses, we can thus make sense of the limited inclusion of women of color in Marvel films, which tend to support the notion of "diversity," for instance through the use of the mutant metaphor, but remain noticeably homogenous when examined closely.

However, it is also clear that there has been a push for racial "diversity" in Marvel comics in recent years. In 2015 it was announced that Miles Morales, the black/Latino Spider-Man of Marvel's Ultimate universe, would enter the mainstream Marvel universe and replace Peter Parker in the Spider-Man comics (Wyatt 2015). Writer Brian Bendis expressed that the decision was made in order for the comics to better reflect their varied audiences, stating, 'our message has to be it's not Spider-Man with an asterisk, it's the real-Spider-Man for kids of color, for adults of color and everybody else' (Bendis in Wyatt 2015). The introduction of Kamala Khan discussed previously also speaks to the perceived need for "diversity." Such

sentiments (and the use of “diversity” discourses in popular media more generally) similarly resonate with the commodification of difference, a dominant trait of the globalized, postfeminist, postracial context in which these texts exist. However, their presence is still noteworthy in a time in which the cinematic Spider-Man is specifically not permitted to be a person of color (or gay) as a contractual obligation (Biddle 2015). Indeed, the success of books such as *Ms. Marvel* and *Silk* (Thompson and Lee 2015), a book which focuses on an Asian-American Spider-Woman, suggests that Marvel films have more than enough potential to broaden their racial representations.

THE FINAL CHAPTER! SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS ON MARVEL'S SUPERHEROINES... THUS FAR!

Throughout this thesis I have determined the ways in which postfeminist culture shapes understandings of women's empowerment through the women portrayed in Marvel superhero films. Women in Marvel films are ultimately sites of discursive struggle which deal with the postfeminist enterprise of "women's empowerment" in varying ways. From the renewed traditionalism of the victimized superhero girlfriend, to the homogenously thin, white, heterosexual images of beautiful superheroines who "kick butt," to the marginalized women of color who are symptomatic of postracial media culture which rests on racial ambiguity, postfeminism adapts and sticks to the myriad feminine subjectivities portrayed. Meanwhile, postfeminist culture also demonstrably acts in conflict with itself, for instance when considering the figure of the Marvel villainess, who indicates postfeminism's strained relationship to the sexual freedom of contemporary womanhood and traditional notions of woman as sexually abject.

Above all, I have noted that representations of women in these texts are heterogeneous while all being in some way linked to a postfeminist culture which strives for a unifying approach to "womanhood," erasing individual experiences which are influenced by factors such as sexuality, class, age and race. Meanwhile, I have kept a close eye on the comics on which these representations are based, tracing an historical trajectory between these media, and drawing attention to the ways in which feminine subjectivities have developed as a result of postfeminist culture. Importantly, I consider these texts as worthwhile objects of interrogation, and hope that this work might draw attention to the important issues of gender representation which are still prevalent in Western media culture.

Since superhero films have been such a fruitful topic of analytic interrogation, I have specifically attempted to address issues which have not yet been covered in previous discussions. I have offered analysis of the overwhelmingly underappreciated figure of the superhero girlfriend and also considered the roles of heterosexuality and racial discourses in these films from angles which have not yet been considered in academia. Likewise, my

discussion of Marvel superheroines assesses such characters specifically through the lens of postfeminist culture. All the while, I want to stress that this work remains interlinked with existing academic inquiries regarding women in both superhero and action cinema.

With this in mind, there is still room for expansion—for instance, I neglected to analyse the role of Aunt May in both *Spider-Man* film series because she simply did not fit into any of the themes around which the chapters were built. An old, frail woman in the comics as well as in Raimi's film series (as played by Rosemary Harris), Aunt May embodies a particularly marginalized feminine demographic in postfeminist media culture. Meanwhile, the character was updated for the *Amazing Spider-Man* films (played by Sally Field) but maintains her maternal presence. The character appears briefly in *Captain America: Civil War* (played by Marisa Tomei). Notably, the character has gradually become younger throughout her filmic incarnations, having been portrayed by the then-seventy-four-year-old Harris in 2002, the sixty-five-year-old Field in 2012 and the fifty-one-year-old Tomei in 2016. Moreover, the relationship between superheroes and maternal figures has not been focused on a great deal by scholars, save Brown's article relating superpowered motherhood to the monstrous feminine (J. A. Brown 2011b). On the other hand, there has been interest in the role of paternity with regards to superheroism (Rehak 2012; Hamad 2013, 50–54; J. A. Brown 2015b), which is significant in its own right.

While I have paid considerable attention to positioning Marvel films as intertexts which bear relation to the comics on which they are based, there is still much work to be done. Marvel's recent success with television series such as *Agent Carter* and *Jessica Jones* are sure to stimulate discussions regarding the configurations of feminine strength presented therein. *Agent Carter* is particularly interesting in the light of my discussions of postfeminist rhetoric in period settings, as well as further engaging with the superheroic postfeminist masquerade of Chapter 2. *Agent Carter* takes place in the 1940s after the events of *Captain America: The First Avenger*. Having been given a job with the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR), a covert enterprise of crime fighting, and then employed as a secretary, Peggy must solve crimes on the sly, and indeed, much of the first

season of the series is a meditation on the theme of Peggy's work being underappreciated by her male colleagues. A scene which stands out occurs in the final episode of the series, moments after Peggy saves the day. In this scene, Peggy's boss Jack Thompson (Chad Michael Murray) is informed that he may be offered a Medal of Honor for the work which Peggy ultimately carried out. Peggy's colleague Daniel Sousa (Enver Gjokaj), who, as someone who has had his leg amputated due to injuries sustained in the war is a notable example of a mainstream Marvel character with a disability, expresses his disappointment with the situation, telling Peggy he must go and inform his superiors of her hard work. To this, Peggy responds, 'I don't need a congressional honor. I don't need Agent Thompson's approval, or the President's. *I know my value, anyone else's opinion doesn't really matter*' (emphasis added). This scene speaks to the individualism of neoliberal, postfeminist culture due to its emphasis on Peggy's "I." Here, every woman knows her own value, as an individual, even in the face of blatant workplace sexism, which was a very real issue in the 1940s and continues to be today. It also abandons the need for collective actions against such misogyny, for if every woman knows her own value, individually, then surely instances of sexism are the responsibility of select individuals and not institutional inequalities. Hence, postfeminism's 'temporal slippages,' as they are defined by Munford and Waters and mentioned in my discussion of *The First Avenger*, are pronounced further in this instance.

Jessica Jones likewise demands a great deal of inquiry. Helmed by Melissa Rosenberg, the screenwriter known for her work writing the *Twilight* films, *Jessica Jones* follows the exploits of the eponymous superheroine-turned-hard-drinking-private-investigator (Krysten Ritter) as she recovers from an abusive relationship with central villain Kilgrave (David Tennant), a despicable superhuman with the power to control people's minds. The series explicitly engages with themes of coercion, rape and abuse—themes which undeniably conjure up feminist issues.

Both series have notably been framed within the popular media as "feminist" and lauded for their handling of feminist issues. These texts are likewise significant due to their status as television series. Television has

long been characterized as a more hospitable medium for women's representation. As Inness argues,

Television is willing to take more risks with female gender roles than mainstream films. With television, it is easier for producers to experiment with different roles for women, although these roles are still limited. It is less costly to experiment with one episode of a series rather than experiment with a major film. Also, because of television's omnipresence, its tough women have a major impact on the American cultural imagination.

(Inness 2004, 10)

Future research may thus question the specificity of the televisual Marvel heroine, who joins the similarly lauded *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015; The CW 2016-), based on the DC character. While *Agent Carter* is a mainstream network product, both *Jessica Jones* and its predecessor *Daredevil* (a reinvigorated retelling of the character who appears in the identically-titled film) are offered by online streaming service Netflix. One must ask, then, what opportunities are offered by digital platforms with regards to feminine representation? Does this indicate an embrace of complex heroines by popular culture, or does it further relegate them to a medium which has so often been positioned as domestic or "feminized"?

As in discussions of *Jessica Jones* and *Agent Carter*, much popular discourse has surrounded the topic of women in superhero films. There was not ample space in this thesis to fully unpack the many discourses of feminine empowerment and feminisms present in such discussions. Indeed, this would not have addressed the research questions I aimed to answer when I set out to investigate the topic of representations of women within Marvel films. I have the same feeling towards analyzing the critical reception of Marvel films. While reviews of early Marvel films such as *X-Men* paid little attention to gender issues in these films, critical reception today appears much different, particularly with the popularity of online feminist blogs and newsites such as *Jezebel* (jezebel.com) and *The Mary Sue* (themarysue.com). I have outlined elsewhere some benefits of assessing the critical reception of Marvel women (Kent 2015; 2016). One of the limitations of a text-based methodology such as that utilized in this thesis is that it cannot account for public opinion about the representations of women discussed. That is to say, an examination of the critical reception of Marvel films can shed light on the ways in which such characters are positioned as

“feminist” or not, and what that tells us about the ways in which feminism is conceived of. Since this research was primarily not interested in whether or not one might consider these films to be “feminist” (I mentioned in the Introduction that I, in many ways, take for granted that they *do* in some way engage with feminist issues, although this is complex), I have not taken public discourses about the films into much consideration beyond statements from producers and creators which illustrate my findings.

Further, I should also note that it has not been my intention throughout to tell viewers whether or not they are “allowed” to find Marvel women “empowering.” This thesis was not intended to determine how audiences negotiate the issues of gender and power, but rather how gender and power (combined with postfeminist sentiments related to sexuality and race) are discursively constructed. Indeed, at this point it would be very useful to carry out an audience study of some of these films with regards to how viewers received the feminine characters. This has been partially addressed by Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Hilary Pennell in their study of the effects of superheroes on male and female audiences (2013). The study, however, is more of an effects-based discussion of the ways in which the authors suggest audiences might hypothetically be affected by aspects of superheroes such as body type utilizing existing media effects research. The authors do not appear to engage with real consumers of superhero texts in terms of interviews or focus groups, making the study extremely limiting. They later revisited the topic focusing on the effects of superhero texts on the self-esteem and body image of female undergraduate students (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 2015). Again, Behm-Morawitz and Pennell’s focus is on ‘positive and negative influences of the gendered depictions of women in superhero films’ (Pennell and Behm-Morawitz 2015, 211) and remains largely effects-based, rather than addressing how audiences negotiate such representations and what they “do” with them. On the other hand, Scott’s examination of fan activity within the Hawkeye Initiative illuminates the ways in which superhero fans address gender issues in often resourceful ways (S. Scott 2015). Meanwhile Burke’s audience reception study mentioned in the Introduction makes a strong attempt to address comic book fans’ engagement with superhero films, but is only interested in issues of adaptation.

Steering clear of Wonder Woman was in hindsight a wise decision in the light of the recent DC film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Zack Snyder, 2016), which features the character in a peripheral role played by Gal Gadot. The character's role in the film has been the subject of much public discussion and is sure to foster many more academic debates about the character. Nonetheless, a rigorous investigation of DC adaptations would also advance lively discussion of women in superhero films and is also an option for future research. Likewise, further interrogation regarding the specificity of both companies' outputs in terms of gender representation would be equally fascinating.

In the Introduction, I stressed the need to consider both postfeminism and Hollywood cinema as sites of development. Given that I have very cautiously suggested that a modicum of change might be on the horizon for women's visibility in Hollywood cinema, I must also note that there is still room for more, particularly regarding the representation of queer women and women of color. As mentioned in previous chapters, there is ample opportunity for the studios to produce filmic and televisual texts based on existing Marvel women who fall outside the white, heterosexual, middle-class bracket, such as America Chavez of the Young Avengers. As it stands, a television series featuring Kamala Khan is rumored to be in the pipeline (Fitzpatrick 2015), but much like with Marvel's announced *Captain Marvel*, reports on developments are slow. In terms of Marvel's comic book output, the company has had considerable success with new women-centric titles, as mentioned in the Introduction and throughout. I further hope that a dialogue between both media can be maintained in terms of both representation and academic study.

Recent Marvel films not discussed here in great detail due to the reasons outlined in the Introduction also demand further interrogation. Both *Ant-Man* (2015) and *Deadpool* mark a generic break from what has come to be widely recognized as traditional Marvel superhero fare. While both films broadly maintain their action/adventure/superhero status, *Ant-Man* displays the added element of the heist genre alongside slightly more tongue-in-cheek humor regarding the central hero's rather unorthodox powers (the ability to shrink in size and communicate with ants). The gendered dimensions of the film remain in line with previous Marvel films, offering

the character of Hope van Dyne (Evangeline Lilly), daughter of Hank Pym, the original Ant-Man. Like Pepper Potts, Hope's character has been adapted to modern postfeminist sensibilities through her portrayal as a businesswoman who holds a high-ranking job at her father's company. Pym had previously invented a suit which enabled the wearer to shrink and communicate with ants. Meanwhile, Hope's mother, Janet Van Dyne (the Wasp) remains nowhere to be seen due to her untimely death before the events of the film. Nonetheless, Pym recruits thief Scott Lang (Paul Rudd) to be the new Ant-Man to combat the threat of Darren Cross, who is engineering a new shrinking suit. Drawing from contemporary issues of fatherhood and broken families (Scott has a strained relationship with his ex-wife, to the detriment of their daughter Cassie), the film centers on Scott rising to the task of being the hero who can stop Cross and also reconcile his broken relationship with his wife and daughter. Interestingly, Cassie ends up with two fathers at the end of the film, which closes with a scene of Scott, his ex-wife and new husband, and Cassie contently having dinner at the dining room table, enabling a complexified vision of the nuclear family. In this way the film reworks existing structures of the superhero film in offering a commentary on specific contemporary issues while feminine characters such as Hope van Dyne reach back to recently established character types. Notably, at the end of the film Pym shows Hope a new suit which he will bestow upon her to become the new Wasp, foreshadowing the upcoming sequel *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018) (Perry 2016). It remains a mystery why Scott was chosen to be the next Ant-Man if the possibility existed for Hope to take up the mantle all along.

Deadpool, on the other hand, is one of few R-rated films based on Marvel comics. Based on the self-reflexive eponymous character who debuted in the guns-and-pouches comics era of the 1990s, the film relishes its hyperviolence and seeming disruption of the superhero genre. Nevertheless, the film is conventional in almost every way but wears a mask of revolutionary intervention. Wade Wilson (Ryan Reynolds), known as Deadpool, is notable for his self-awareness as a superhero as well as the unconventional style in which the film portrays him, for instance when he breaks the fourth wall and addresses viewers of the film. The unserious tone of the film is marked even in its opening credits, which do not name the cast

and crew members but instead assign colorful markers of character to them ('Some douchebag's film,' 'Starring God's perfect idiot,' 'A hot chick,' 'A British villain,' etc.)

Indeed, *Deadpool* makes use of the superhero genre for comic effect (Wade's healing factor is utilized for this on numerous occasions, such as when he receives a gunshot wound to his backside or when he severs his own hand to release himself from handcuffs, leaving behind his hand with a raised middle finger) and presents itself in many ways as reactionary through its use of irreverent humor and reference to "taboo" subjects. However, exactly what it is reacting against becomes obscured by the film's ultimate reinforcement of the very (gendered) cinematic mechanisms discussed in this thesis. For example, the film's dramatic climax involves the kidnap by the central villain of Wade's love interest Vanessa (Morena Baccarin).

Still, the character of *Deadpool* offers itself to critical interrogation for a number of reasons, the most compelling to this project being his sexuality and gender presentation. Throughout the release schedule of *Deadpool* and beyond, the character has been referred to as pansexual¹³ at every opportunity (Myers 2015; O'Toole 2015; Setoodeh 2016). Deadpool is thus presented as non-normative in paratexts, although his pansexuality is merely hinted at within the film itself. Further, the ways in which his non-normativity is connoted in the film hinge on gender markers, again indicating the ways in which gender and sexuality are conflated within Western culture. Throughout the film, Deadpool is shown enacting "feminine" behaviors, such as skipping along after having carried out brutal killings, carrying a Hello Kitty backpack or having an affinity for Wham!'s music. Such cutesy behaviors are not unlike those carried out by Mystique when she is a man, as discussed in previous chapters, and draw attention to the constructedness of gender in a similar way. However, the function of these gender markers is somewhat different, since the film utilizes these markers to indicate Deadpool's sexual non-normativity—the film suggests Deadpool is pansexual because he occasionally likes girly things. Further, the film uses these signifiers to illicit humor which itself mocks the very

¹³ Pansexuality denotes an attraction to all genders and sexualities, rejecting the supposedly binaristic notions of gender offered by the term "bisexuality" (Elizabeth 2016).

notion of gender-nonconformity. As such, *Deadpool*'s gender and sexuality remain entrenched in dominant modes of femininity and masculinity. Likewise, the film hints at the character's potential queerness while recentering the relationship between male hero and female damsel (who, in a way which takes account of feminist criticisms of her being a damsel, is nonetheless suggested to be, literally, "ball-busting," strong and capable). This again begs the question asking against what precisely the film is reacting.

Deadpool is perhaps one of the strongest examples of a film which is the product of a "post-"culture. The character's queerness, as it is framed in the popular discourses, still makes way for traditionalist modes of gender. In such a way, LGBTQ politics are made use of, only for them to be ultimately cast off. This is evident in the numerous occasions when *Deadpool* jokes that strong women present in the film actually have penises and are thus men. For instance, while being forcefully strapped to a stretcher by the super strong Angel Dust (Gina Carrano) before undergoing treatment, Wade says 'Aren't you a little strong for a lady? I'm calling wang,' a gag whose humor rests on the notion of the "biological" weakness of the female body, the transgression of which must stem from the possession of a penis, rendering the woman a man. The film therefore incorporates LGB notions of sexual equality (although with limitations), while the T(ransgender) issues invoked remain one of the cultural taboos which are made fun of for the sake of irreverence, reifying binaristic and essentialist notions of gender.

Other "taboo" topics made fun of in the film include, on multiple occasions, "indecent" sex acts, child abuse and, indeed, feminism. In one scene in which *Deadpool* goes on a rampage trying to track down the film's villain, he is shown fretting over the moral conundrum of whether or not it is acceptable for him to beat women. Confronted by the two women, one of whom initially pretends to have been innocently injured, *Deadpool* apologizes before the other woman jumps him from behind. Freeing himself from the woman, with the other on the ground in front of him, he laments, 'This is confusing! Is it sexist to hit you? Is it more sexist to not hit you? I mean the line gets more blurry!' During the final sentence he draws his gun and points it at the woman on the ground, though the scene cuts before he shoots. This scene, and the moral bind stated by *Deadpool*, is further

indicative of the incorporation of the imaginary feminist on which postfeminist culture relies. Derailing discussions of violence against women to focus on what actions by men are considered “sexist” or “not sexist,” the scene presumably aims to relinquish any moral responsibility for the central (anti-)hero shooting a woman in the face precisely because it has demonstrated an awareness of the implications of such a scene. Rather than criticizing the patriarchal mechanisms which facilitate such instances of violence against women, though, the scene essentially casts these (imagined) feminist criticisms aside in order to (a) derive humor from the situation, and (b) leave the status quo intact. More than any other film within the corpus considered in this project, *Deadpool* incorporates the sentiments of political movements in order to reconfigure them within a masculinist humor framework which ultimately bolsters traditional cultural hierarchies, potentially indicating the shape of things to come given the film’s recent release.

Since I began working on this thesis, Kamala Khan became a symbol for political activism against racism and Islamophobia on the sides of San Francisco city buses (Letamendi 2015). *Captain Marvel* was announced; then it was postponed before a date of March 2019 was tentatively chosen (Baker-Whitelaw 2016). A *Black Panther* film was announced with a largely black cast (Melrose 2016). Feminist academic Roxane Gay will be writing a Marvel comic featuring black queer women (Collins 2016). These events mark the shifting definitions of what it means to be heroic and feminine in a contemporary Western culture. In looking forward, though, we should not lose track of the representations which have been, which will doubtless shape forthcoming portrayals in one way or another, and continue to discuss the very complexities which make superheroes so compelling.

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