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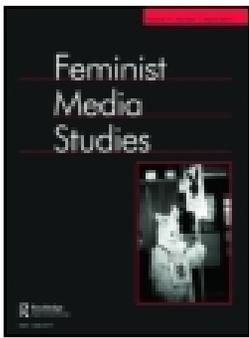
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# “Having it both ways: Containing the champions of feminism in female-led origin and solo superhero films”

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we consider the emerging trend of solo, female-led superhero films, and their repeated location in aesthetically distinct pasts or “closed moments.” This pastness, we contend, serves to distinguish the concerns of the protagonists, which are often read as feminist, as redundant for the contemporary audience. This framing is in keeping with a postfeminist cultural context, wherein feminist values and successes are celebrated, while simultaneously declared irrelevant.

We examine the historical or closed settings in *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020), *Captain Marvel* (2019) and *Black Widow* (2021), and consider how this collective investment in the past impacts and informs the films’ engagement with sexism. We also explore how the bodies of the protagonists become implicated in this process, via the repeated framing of particular body politics as historically resolved. Overall, we signal the birth of a new subgenre, and signpost the continued containment of female superheroes, even as they, and their politics, become more visible.

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## Introduction

In this article we explore the ways in which postfeminism’s simultaneous engagement with and ambivalence towards the feminist project can be read across an emergent trend of solo, female-led superhero films, following the 2017 release of *Wonder Woman*’s origin story. What makes these films noteworthy, beyond the fact that they privilege the stories of female superheroes through solo films (Carolyn Cocca 2020) and are thus often read as feminist, is their repeated location in aesthetically distinct pasts, or in what we call ‘closed moments.’ We use the term ‘aesthetically distinct pasts’ in this work to draw attention to the specific stylistic and narrative choices that are made within the films to clearly locate the protagonists in pasts that are distinctly ‘not now.’ We contend that this emerging trend of locking female superheroes and their stories into the past is a reflection of contemporary ambivalence towards feminism, wherein female empowerment is both championed and contained (Jessica Taylor 2016). This aligns with broader work on postfeminism. For instance, Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra call this condition the “inherently

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contradictory” nature of postfeminism that is “characterised by a double discourse that works to construct feminism as a phenomenon of the past” but the “traces of which can be found (and sometimes even valued) in the present” (Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra 2007, 8). What we critique in this paper is how these films, through the postfeminist sensibility, tend to write feminism as a closed historical moment, that is, as a condition that emerged as a response to a previously existing problem which has now been resolved, and therefore, should be put to rest in the past. In this way, feminism becomes an historical artefact. Paradoxically, the dialogic ways in which sexism is managed in the films does in fact gesture toward an ongoing need for liberal feminism in the contemporary space. Our thesis, therefore, contends that these films are imbued with this paradox.

We will argue this thesis in several main ways. First, we consider the impact of the films’ historical settings, arguing that they simultaneously create an important space for articulating and engaging with feminist concerns, while also locking these feminist concerns away in a specific time and place. We then consider how the films engage with sexism, suggesting that across these films, experiences of sexism are framed as collective issues that ultimately require individualised responses. Following Rosalind Gill (2007), we also unpack the ways in which the construction and representation of the female body stands in for its politics in the paradigm of postfeminism. Namely, we suggest that the female superhero body performs a locative function, with certain female body shapes signifying certain feminist eras and politics, which are again locked away in the past but also celebrated and memorialised. Throughout, and in line with our argument, we offer examples of the way that the postfeminist sensibility of these films illustrates *not just* a mitigation of the feminist project but its connection to and *engagement with* the feminist project. In many ways, these films champion and protect feminist concerns, of course, in conjunction with a far more complex and heterogenous political agenda.

We perform textual analysis of the following films: *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Wonder Woman 1984* (2020) (hereafter referred to as *WW84*), and *Black Widow* (2021). These four films characterise our definition of a sub-genre of female-led superhero films that focus exclusively on the development of one female protagonist. This focus on individual character development distinguishes these films from other recently released films such as *Dark Phoenix* (2019) and *Birds of Prey (And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020), which we argue function instead as ensemble films.

These films, and this emerging trend, are important to analyse as they look to remedy the underrepresentation of women in superhero films—a long-standing issue that has, until now, been resistant to change. Prior to the release of *Wonder Woman* in 2017, there had not been a female-led superhero film released since the poorly-received films *Elektra* (2005) and Razzie Award-winning *Catwoman* (2004). The poor box office takings of these films resulted in an industry “lore” that the audiences of superhero films were simply not interested in films helmed by female protagonists (Courtney Brannon Donoghue 2019; Carolyn Cocca 2016, 13). As a result, and despite the popularity of comic-book filmic adaptations, led in particular by the three-phase *Infinity Saga* narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there was a 9-year period (2008–2017) in which no female-led superhero films were released. Strikingly, in this period Marvel released 20 films—sometimes 2–

3 *per year*—while the DCEU released three films. The release of the four films analysed in this article thus represent a small but significant shift in the types of stories that are being told in the MCU and the DCEU, specifically.<sup>1</sup>

As female-led superhero films have now proven successful at the box office (*Captain Marvel* alone grossed over \$1 billion), and there will likely be more female-led films in the future, it is important to consider *how* female superheroes are represented when they are the focal point of a film.<sup>2</sup> As the first films released in this subgenre, we are interested in the emerging patterns that shape the films, specifically how they ‘do’ gender politics, particularly in an era characterised by #MeToo and the concomitant backlash against its ideals. As we are tracing the patterns we have identified in this emerging subgenre, we will not be considering each film within each of the below sections—rather, we have chosen the most striking examples of the four texts to exemplify each section. Furthermore, while this article focuses specifically on gender, there is certainly scope for further research on the depictions of race and sexuality within these films, particularly as Marvel extends its reach into television programming (which is beyond the scope of this article).

### The politics of staging the past

The repeated staging of female superheroes in aesthetically distinct pasts distinguishes solo female-led superhero films from those of their male counterparts, and thus justifies their grouping as a separate subgenre that performs different cultural work. Comparatively, solo male superhero films, forming the vast majority of the superhero films released since 2008 (the beginning of the *Infinity Saga*), tend to have a contemporaneity about them, often discussed in relation to their comic form as “mythic time” (Umberto Eco and Natalie Chilton 1972). Mythic time, as Eco et al. (1972, 17) explains in “The Myth of Superman”, is a fluid concept of time that is required by the serialised form of comic books—rather than each adventure building linearly towards Superman’s eventual death, the connection between past, present and future events is “extremely hazy.” This is challenged somewhat by the form of cinema—as Martyn Pedler (2020, 178) has argued, “real actors force real endings, as seen in ... the death of Tony Stark and retirement of Steve Rogers. There is a ‘before’ and an ‘after’.” In our work, this combination of narrative linearity and mythic time appears to be gendered, as the settings of male characters in solo films are predominantly based in a time identifiable as the present, or as some vague, non-distinct future. *Captain America’s* 2011 origin film is an exception here, set in World War II, but as a general trend, male-led solo films in the MCU and DCEU do not rely on a particular historical period for the narrative to make sense, and therefore, there does not seem to be the same investment in binding their male characters to a resolved historical frame.

To break this down further, solo male superhero films featuring Iron Man, Ant-Man and the Hulk are all set in non-fictional cities in a constant ‘present day’ and thus convey a general contemporaneity. Then there are those heroes whose films are set in fictional locations on Earth, such as *Black Panther* (Wakanda), *Aquaman* (Maine, and then Atlantis), *Batman* (Gotham City) or *Superman* (Metropolis). Lastly, there are the non-Earth-bound heroes, such as *Thor* (Asgard) or the *Guardians of the Galaxy* (focused mainly on Peter Quill/Starlord and set in futuristic ‘outer space’). In each respect, the

production of current or future technologies and settings serves to contemporise and/or 'future-proof' the films' narratives. The familiarity of the settings (skyscrapers, contemporary vehicles, mobile phones), and the familiar or advanced technology available (weapons, powered suits, spacecraft) works to give the impression that these stories could, as *Batman Begins* and *Man of Steel* screenwriter Richard Goyer explains, "happen in the same world in which we live" (cited in Terence McSweeney 2020, 4). In other words, the issues that the lead male characters face (institutional overreach, powerful corporations, wars still to come) and the values that they hold, are positioned as *our* issues and values. Contemporary or future settings open up the space of possibility rather than shutting down that possibility in the past. However if, as Neal Curtis (2019, 8) argues, "the stories we tell in superhero comics become a projection of the world we wish to live in", then these films culturally indicate that the world we wish to live in is male/male-led.

In contrast, the solo female superhero films are set in aesthetically distinct pasts that amplify the *differences* between the experiences of the protagonists and the audience as a function of historical fact. These films do not look forward in the ways that solo male or ensemble films do. Instead, we are positioned to look back, from a distance—to immerse ourselves in a world that is no longer, rather than a world that could be. This 'looking back' is significant in terms of the cultural work these films do, to both champion and contain feminist narratives. Indeed, we argue that these films repeatedly locate their heroines (and the issues they face) in the past thus marking feminism contemporarily irrelevant, while simultaneously (perhaps inadvertently) creating space for feminist characters, a kind of "feminist genealogy" (Sophie Mayer 2016, 98), in a genre and a medium where women have traditionally been underrepresented. Importantly, however, it is only certain kind of feminisms that are made visible.

For instance, *Wonder Woman*, with the oldest setting of the films, is set in World War I. The concerns of the characters—stopping the development of chemical weapons, ending a war that killed and injured millions, fighting for women's right to vote—can be understood to have a reduced resonance for contemporary Western audiences, as battles for each have already been fought and won, and the outcome already known. In other words, this is a world whose struggles have already passed, and that we are assumed to no longer be invested in. Significantly, however, the film's very location in World War I, as opposed to *Wonder Woman's* usual origin in World War II, indicates director Patty Jenkins' interest in articulating a stronger specifically feminist framing for *Wonder Woman's* origin. As Neal Curtis (2020, 934) explains, "the Great War . . . placed *Wonder Woman* in a time when women's rights were central." This historical setting thus enabled Jenkins to place Diana Prince *in dialogue* with, and thus amplify, a particular type of feminist conversation. This is expressed through Diana's relationship with Steve Trevor's secretary and suffragist Etta Candy, who explains that rather than "fighting" for the right to vote, the women of "Man's World" will "use their principles." As this conversation is located in the past, the audience already know that this fight has been won, and that Western women have the right to vote. Such an approach embodies a more moderate or 'common sense' approach to women's rights, wherein feminists prioritise reforming the system over revolution. This depiction of a liberal, popular kind of feminism can be understood as "one that consents . . . to dominant economic formations" (Sarah Banet-Weiser, Rosalind Gill and Catherine Rottenberg 2019, 19), rather than one that dissents.

This reimagining of Diana's origin thus makes clear that only certain kinds of feminism are championed as necessary in this past; their success ultimately indicating their irrelevance, and the irrelevance of other strands of feminist theorising and action, for the present.

This temporal distinction is also visible in *WW84*; we laugh at the 1980s because it is distinctly no longer 'our world.' The fashions and technologies of the time date the film and its concerns and values automatically. The fashion itself is incorporated as part of the storyline to emphasise this practice, particularly in the scene where the newly-returned-to-life Steve Trevor models a number of peak-cringe 80s outfits for Diana. We might read this moment as a kind of "memory play," in the words of Laura Glitsos, which refers the ways in which media practices borrow floating signifiers from the past, imbuing texts with a "faraway quality" (Laura Glitsos 2018, 105). Nostalgia is politicised in this sense; for Glitsos, memory becomes "only another commodifiable object, one that is endlessly generated and reproduced in varying iterations, which produces this sense of nostalgia for something that may or may not 'belong' to any particular past" (Laura Glitsos 2018, 106). In reading the situated-ness of the texts through the framework of memory play, the films reveal an investment in the act of distancing the audience from the politics of the text.

Such memory play is also visible in *Captain Marvel*, whose aesthetics are also distinctively 'not now.' Again, this is amplified throughout the film. Carol Danvers/Vers'<sup>3</sup> reintroduction to Earth is a crash-landing into a Blockbuster Video rental store, a scene that orients the viewer to its pastness immediately. Vers picks up a VHS copy of *The Right Stuff*, a now-defunct technology and an iconic *male*-led film from 1983, explained by Roger Ebert 2002 as "the story of America's first steps into space". The directorial choice of Vers picking up this film is quite tongue in cheek, as the film focuses on male test pilots who became astronauts, while Carol herself is later revealed as a US Air Force test pilot who also went to space, albeit under very different circumstances. The film also makes reference several times to the slowness of the internet, poor connectivity, and computer loading speeds. These moments are played for laughs, inviting the audience to look at how far we, collectively, have come since then, both in terms of technology *and* gender politics (Stina Attebery 2019, 369). No longer, the film seems to be saying, is space solely the domain of men, or are we at the mercy of dial-up internet speeds and connection quality—we as a society are beyond that.

However, this film also works to *reconnect* the past and the present, emphasising that wholeness in the present can only be achieved through ac/knowledge/ment of the past.<sup>4</sup> This can be read as a troubling of, as Annelot Prins (2021) describes, "the neoliberal tendency to dehistoricise," as the film makes clear that Vers' powers in the present are *because of* the decisions she has made in the past. For example, Carol's desire to protect lives is the reason she decides to pilot the flight with Lawson, and why she decides to destroy the light-speed engine rather than surrender it to Yon-Rogg, which is what led to her absorbing the engine's power and becoming one of the most powerful beings in the galaxy. The past is thus constructed as a foundation upon which one builds a stronger present and future—without this foundation, one might as well be, as Carol declares to the Supreme Intelligence, "fighting with one hand tied behind my back."

Furthermore, the film constructs a feminist mode of history, one predicated on women's solidarity and the valuing of women's histories. Carol's history is not only located within her own memories, but within the memories of the women who love her, and who

she remembers she loves in return. When Carol returns to the home of her friend Maria Rambeau, and Maria's daughter Monica, for answers about her past, Maria reminds Carol of their shared history as test pilots for the top-secret Pegasus project, their determination to do "something that mattered" when women were not allowed to fly combat, and their deep friendship in the face of structural discrimination. This is a producing of history that is, at least diegetically, "about connection" (Ariella Rotramel 2021, 301), and one which does "not necessarily depend on men for their agency" (Lynn Abrams 2019, 221). We can perhaps also read this as a broader suggestion about the importance of knowing a *feminist* kind of history—one in which the connections between women, and their oppressive *and* triumphant experiences are privileged—in order to be fully realised in the present. Simply put, Carol *needs* Maria in order to access her full potential.

As with *Wonder Woman*, this is a history that can be read through a liberal feminist framing, where participation in the public sphere, often in male-dominated areas such as the Air Force, is positioned as evidence of the achievement of equality (Rosemarie Tong 2013, 27–37). Importantly, however, this acknowledgment of the importance of history, knowing one's history and building on one's history *is itself* happening in the past—there is almost a double past-ness occurring within this film, wherein Carol's accessing of the past still occurs in an aesthetically distinct past, and is thus removed from the cultural context of the audience. Significantly, Carol's history is not just located in Maria; as Sam Langsdale (2020, 302) has argued, it is "young Monica [Rambeau] who is responsible for keeping all of Carol's possessions, and talking Carol through them ... to help her remember who she really is." In contrast to narratives about intergenerational conflict between feminists (Astrid Henry 2004), this relationship *affirms* the connections between the past, present, and future feminists (as represented by the young Monica).

Importantly, and in keeping with the 'both/and' nature of postfeminist texts, the radical potential of this feminist history is also contained, as it affirms a "white hegemonic feminism that privileges white women at the expense of others" (Carolyn Cocca 2020, 3). As Sam Langsdale (2020, 306) further explains, the film's focus on the white Carol Danvers, as opposed to the black Monica Rambeau (who in the comics was the first Captain Marvel) perpetuates the cultural "tendency to see Black female characters as nothing more than support for their white counterparts." This is an issue reflected across the films we consider, as well as the MCU and DCEU more broadly. None of the superheroines analysed in this article, even those displaying some form of "Otherness," are played by women of colour. While there are women of colour in recent films, such as Valkyrie, Gamora, Nebula, Black Canary, Renee Montoya and the women of Wakanda: Shuri, Nakia, Akoye, and Ayo, these women are *not* the central figures in their films and, most importantly, do not boast their own origin or solo breakout films—yet. These films, while ostensibly privileging women's power, replicate the ongoing problem of postfeminism in that it often seeks to conflate all experiences under the rubric of white logic—which ultimately suggests that white experience can stand in for all experience. Angela McRobbie calls this a process of "disarticulation" in which postfeminism "resurrects racial divisions by undoing any promise of multiculturalism through the exclusion of non-white femininities from this rigid repertoire of self-styling" (Angela McRobbie 2009, 70). This serves to conceal ongoing realities about the nuances and complexities of lived experience raised by intersectional feminists, especially in relation to blackness and its place in feminist discourse (see Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw 2017). While drawing out the

potentially feminist possibilities offered by connecting the past with the present, *Captain Marvel* thus still affirms a status quo in which Black women's histories, presents and futures are sidelined by white hegemony.

The tendency to look backwards is also what characterises the *Black Widow* film. While the film has a contemporaneity unmatched by the other films, as it is set between the events of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), it is simultaneously more held within the past than the other films, as the audience already know that Natasha dies during *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). This character development, long desired by fans, and having been in the works since 2004, is tempered by the knowledge that her history is all we can ever know. It is unlikely that Natasha's story, as performed by Scarlett Johansson at least, can evolve in a solo contemporary-based film (unless she is somehow brought back to life, thus undermining the power of her sacrifice in *Endgame*, or the cinematic franchise itself is rebooted)—she will always be locked in the past. We return to this discussion below in the section on the politics of embodiment.

These films, when put together, produce a pattern that is indicative of postfeminism's complex relationship with feminism. While the featuring of female superheroes in their own films is a significant step forward in terms of representation and enacts a kind of feminist female empowerment through this privileging of women's stories, the repeated presence of the female superhero (often read as feminist) in the past indicates that this is her, and thus feminism's, rightful setting.

### Neoliberal sexism in superhero films

Postfeminism contains both feminist and antifeminist sentiments, and these opposing strategies sit alongside each other, never fully resolved, such as in the pattern that emerges across these four films. One of the key ways in which a feminist sensibility can be read in these films is through the depiction of, and the characters' interactions with, sexism. Significantly, across these films sexism is framed as an active problem and barrier that prevents the protagonists from achieving their goals, and this is a hallmark of the progressive liberal feminist sensibility which manifests in these texts (Carolyn Cocca 2020). In *Captain Marvel*, for example, moments of sexism form the majority of Carol's/Ver's suppressed memories. At the beginning of the film, it is revealed that Vers has trouble sleeping and that her dreams are flashes of memories that she does not quite have access to. While this focus on the past and memory can serve to 'lock' a feminist sensibility into the past by way of associating it with irretrievability, it also positions the viewer to see sexism as a pattern of negative and even dangerous interactions with men that women and girls experience throughout their lives. From her first memory in which she is berated by her father for driving too fast in a go-kart race to a leering pilot in a bar asking, "You do know why they call it a cockpit, don't you?" we are privy to an accumulation of degradation and put downs. The montage makes clear that Carol is unable to move in and around male-dominated spaces without experiencing physical and verbal harassment—even as a child playing baseball the ball is pitched at her body, and she is pushed over at the beach. As an adult, an unwelcome or even hostile environment is enforced by her male peers to try and make her leave the masculine space of the Air Force. The scenes of Carol getting back up again and again in the face of this harassment and hostility functions as her feminist refusal to accept discrimination based on her gender,

and thus demonstrates her inner strength and determination. These scenes, we argue, signal to the audience that this is what overcoming sexism looks like—an individual repeatedly refusing to back down. Carol's/Vers' memories of repeated harassment are also significant to the argument of feminist project, as they make clear that it is not only by one man, or in one arena that she is treated as 'less than.' Rather, the pattern makes visible the systematic nature of gendered and discriminatory beliefs about women's capacities and where they belong.

Similarly, *WW84* also repeatedly makes clear the ways that sexism functions as a pattern in women's lives and incorporates a spectrum of behaviours, from threats of sexual assault by drunk strangers (such as that faced by Barbara Minerva) to more quotidian experiences of sexism. Diana's entry into the gala at the museum, for example, depicts the "sheer irritation factor that can be involved in ... low-level harassment" (Helen O'Hara as interviewed in Anna Smith 2020). Diana, looking for Maxwell Lord, is hit on by a number of named and unnamed male characters as she moves through the museum. To each she clearly communicates her disinterest, rejecting politely but firmly. The viewer is positioned see these interactions as unwanted, and even as barriers that, however briefly, prevent Diana from achieving her goal. This explicit acknowledgment of the ways that 'ordinary' men's entitlement to women's attention can impact our ability to move through public space, and its framing of this behaviour as *unwanted* and *problematic*, is one of the reasons that reviewer Anna Smith (2020) considers *WW84* to be the "first #MeToo superhero film." Such frustration is also shared by Barbara once her wish "to be like Diana" comes true. While initially Barbara is flattered by the compliments she receives at the gala, the repetition of these comments throughout the film soon wears thin, as she is propositioned while trying to work and called "mean" when not interested, and catcalled while running, resulting in her attacking the drunk man who attacked her earlier in the film. As argued above, this framing is also shared by *Captain Marvel*—both films thus function to reposition sexism as a significant and ongoing issue in women's lives, thus "engag[ing] with #MeToo as a cultural discourse" (Sarah Kornfield and Hannah Jones 2021, 3).

However, there are, as per our argument, mixed messages here. It is important to note that only one of the rebuffed men approaches Diana again—the man soon revealed as Steve Trevor, and whose persistence is thus read as desirable. That the other men do not persist indicates to the audience that a firm but polite no is the way to prevent harassment in public spaces and that, importantly, a 'no' will be easily respected—a framing that is out of place and out of time in a contemporary moment characterised by #MeToo challenges to sexism. It also matters that we already know that Diana is an Amazon and a demi-god, and we have seen her strength and power in action in multiple films. This is a woman who is under no threat (either physically, or in terms of her career) should the male characters take her refusals poorly. While acknowledging the systematic nature of sexism, the scene thus also repudiates it, as the stakes of these interactions are so low that they seem to occur *outside* of any meaningful structure of dominance. As a result, sexism is both named *and* individualised, becoming what Christina Scharff calls "neoliberal sexism" (Christina Scharff 2020, 4). Scharff explains the problematic nature of this individualising of managing sexism, in that it "places the burden on women to challenge sexist behaviours, practices and cultures [...] rather than calling for tangible, structural change that may be achieved through collective endeavours" (Christina Scharff 2020, 7). Critically,

the repeated identification of these behaviours as unacceptable in aesthetically distinct pasts serves to construct sexism as a practice no longer relevant to the contemporary audience.

In some ways, the historicised setting is what *enables* the films' depiction of sexism as a repeated problem that women deal with. This is in line with the postfeminist depiction of feminism as redundant in contemporary society—feminism was needed in the past to do its job (that is, as a strategy to deal with sexism, as depicted in the films), but its successes have rendered it unnecessary, as sexism is no longer an issue, or at least, no longer a structural, collective issue (see Angela McRobbie 2007; Jess Butler 2013). The historicising and individualising of sexism demonstrates the ways that postfeminist texts are constructed to “have it both ways.” In this case, sexism, while acknowledged as a problem in the past, is no longer relevant. However, if viewers do experience sexism, the films frame appropriate responses as individual rather than collective, signalling to the audience that they should emulate Diana Prince and Carol Danvers and take responsibility to manage the situation themselves, as an empowered, postfeminist woman.

### **Making it fit: the postfeminist body on film**

There is another pattern that emerges across these four films through which feminism is both championed but also contained by its situated-ness in the past. This pattern emerges through the way these mediated bodies become tied to place and time. Beauty, embodiment and feminist politics are bound in the most foundational of ways, with each constitutive of the other. Prevailing ideology ensures that the female body is read, “as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of ‘female attractiveness’” (Rosalind Gill 2007, 149). As such, women's bodies are physically acted upon by the cultural standards of any given time. For instance, the late 80s to early 90s rise of ‘action babes’ led to female actors building muscle and bulking up, which filtered down to the broader body trends of the time (Yvonne Tasker 1993). In turn, specific body shapes have become associated with certain eras and locations, either as a reflection of the real ambitions of women who moulded themselves on fashionable body trends at those times, or, as representations of those time periods as myths.

Further, and critical to this argument, these shapes are then accentuated by extra-bodily extensions which function to emphasise particular attributes, which can be read as just as much a part of the body as its ‘original parts.’ The ways in which material female bodies become manipulated, cut, stretch, cinched and refigured to suit the beauty ideals of specific contexts is well-theorised (Naomi Wolf 1991; Elayne Saltzberg and Joan Chrisler 1995). In particular, items such as ‘Spanx’, corsets (see Jessica Taylor 2016 for a detailed elucidation on this), and high heeled shoes can change both the appearance as well as physical functioning of the biological body in order to align with social trends (Allan Mazur 1986). This is critical to understanding the discussion of costuming and fashion choices we will discuss shortly.

In either case, what tends to occur is that a woman's body *stands in* for her non-physical attributes. By this we mean that the *stylised bodies* and *body shapes* of the actresses chosen to perform these roles matters, and can be read as “body-fied” (Mitra C. Emad 2006, 957) representations of specific eras of feminism. In some moments, this

champions certain ideals. Yet in other ways, the constant back-dating of the body to align with a feminist politics works to contain that politics in the past. In this section, we thus argue that Brie Larson's body can be read as literalising a kind of riot grrrl feminism, and Scarlett Johansson's as an empowered *femme fatale*. These bodies—and more importantly their associated politics—are memorialised but also come to be 'settled' through the resolution of the narrative and other filmic conventions.

The pattern of contextualising and containing feminist politics through the embodiment of the female physique is visible in Brie Larson's Captain Marvel. The Captain Marvel origin story is set in the 1990s and we argue that Carol is insistently rendered against the feminist politics of peak 90s "riot grrrl" (Catherine Strong 2011, 368), and the alt-music grunge scene, which sat in close proximity to the riot grrrl movement (398). In resonance with the grunge and riot grrrl aesthetic of the 90s, Larson's body is shaped to appear bulkier than any of the other superheroines, avoiding the traditional, sexualised hourglass silhouette associated with many female comic book characters, through the costume's hard, rounded and protruding shoulders, thicker middle section (by way of the suit's silhouette), and bulky combat boots. The film's other costuming choices—bulky leather jackets, bootleg jeans and flannel shirts tied around the waist—work to cover or protect, rather than reveal, the skin and thus complement this utilitarian approach. This exaggerated, bulkier appearance, especially the waist-tied flannel shirt, speaks directly to the overlapping 90s trend of grunge and riot grrrl, the latter of which, "focused on the support females can receive from one another, and problematized the female body by talking about female desires, body parts and more taboo subjects [...] in an up-front and confrontational manner" (Catherine Strong 2011, 404). The film's fashion choices, and riot grrrl's refusal to adhere to a normatively 'feminine' body, are briefly acknowledged in the film, as Nick Fury tells Vers her grunge outfit makes her "look like somebody's disaffected niece." Here, Fury gestures to both the outsider position of riot grrrl, "somebody's niece" as being one step removed from one's own social circle, while still acknowledging riot grrrl's, and thus feminism's, proximity to one's everyday (somebody's niece rather than a stranger).

Importantly, Larson's embodiment of these political and cultural artefacts ostensibly cultivates and celebrates the politics of riot grrrl feminisms—Vers/Carol is arguably more "up-front and confrontational" (Catherine Strong 2011, 404) than either Diana Prince or Natasha Romanoff, and female solidarity is centralised in this film (Langsdale 2020, 301) in ways that the other films canvassed in this article do not. This celebration of a kind of riot grrrl feminism and approach, we argue, matters, particularly due to the film's incredible commercial and mainstream success. That these values are staged in the past, and are thus anchored to fashions and soundtracks from the mid-1990s, however, simultaneously works to contain the radical potential of their depiction. In keeping with the pattern of 'locking' feminist sensibilities in the past that we have identified throughout this article, the riot grrrl aesthetic of the film seems to communicate that women and girls in the past *needed* this attitude due to rampant and institutionalised sexism, while women and girls in the present are the beneficiaries of changes that have since been made.

The other text we include as part of this sample is *Black Widow* (2021). The character of Black Widow, also known as Natasha Romanoff, is played by actor Scarlett Johansson. As we note above, the most important thing to keep in mind here is that this film has been produced and released to the public *after* we know that Natasha Romanoff dies in the

MCU. As such, this film ostensibly champions our feminist hero, but only once she is already dead. The point of the film, in the overall context of the MCU, is thus not to extend Natasha's story, but rather to introduce her sister, Yelena Belova, into the wider narrative structure. This point becomes especially significant in the discussion of embodiment. The audience is presented with what is essentially a ghosted body, because in the minds of the audience, no matter what Natasha does in this film, no matter how powerful her body is, we know she must die in the end, and that her body's potential is closed.

This technique also 'closes the moment' of the feminism that was put to rest with Cold War era politics, specifically, the politics of the *femme fatale*. Importantly, as Katherine Farrimond (2018, 1) has argued, the *femme fatale* can "offer some of the most potent images of power and agency available in mainstream cinema," which is particularly important in a genre that has traditionally underrepresented women. Black Widow's history is significant to this reading. While she lived in Ohio for part of her childhood, helping to provide cover for Russian undercover agents by posing as their child (and indeed experiencing their relationships as that of a family), she was mainly raised in and by the Red Room, a top-secret Soviet assassin-training program. Significantly, the graduation ceremony for this program included forcible sterilisation. This exposition serves to conjure up all the associated imagery of the Cold War aesthetic, including the mythology of 'Russian female spies' whose mix of sexiness and deadliness cast them as the ultimate *femmes fatales*. Significantly, Romanoff, unlike Prince and Danvers, is powerful without having additional powers. In this sense, the alluring shape of her body, and her deployment of her sexuality when required, is one of the weapons she is able to strategically use to her advantage over male characters (alongside her immense physical capabilities as a spy and assassin), and what marks her as dangerous.

It is no accident that Johansson was picked for this character. While Johansson has a long and impressive body of work, what we are interested in here is the shape of her body, and how it is used to communicate a particular gender politics as Black Widow. Indeed, in their edited collection exploring Johansson's constructions as a "star," Janice Loreck, Whitney Monaghan and Kirsten Stevens elaborate on a 2017 feature article about Johansson published in *Playboy Magazine*. In the article, the journalist writes that: "Johansson is compared often and aptly to Marilyn Monroe: The fact of her body seems to supersede everything else" (Amanda Petrusich as cited in Kirsten Stevens, Janice Loreck and Whitney Monaghan 2019, 10). Johansson's "noted physiology: green eyes, blonde hair, curvaceous body, distinctive lips, 'luminescent skin,' throaty voice; her retro-star appeal" (Stevens et al. 2019, 8) embodies the "combination of deadliness, sexuality and Russian 'otherness' that made Romanoff [sic] the quintessential, albeit reductive, archetype of the *femme fatale*" (Chris Davies 2019, 83). By exaggerating her hourglass physique and drawing her as "sexually dangerous," Johansson as Black Widow embodies a politics that encourages women to weaponise psycho-sexual manipulation.<sup>5</sup> This is a complicated category that speaks to the paradoxical nature of postfeminist body politics, where women's bodies are rendered both powerful and essentialised.

While the *femme fatale* has a long history, particularly in film noir, Katherine Farrimond (2018, 1) argues that the *femme fatale* has crossed generic boundaries in ways that enable us to think about "the inherent contradictions in the limited range of representations of female power available in contemporary cinema," and this is particularly the case in Black Widow's death in *Avengers: Endgame*. While cinematic *femme*

*fatales* are frequently punished or killed for the threat they pose to the patriarchal order (Chris Davies 2019, 87), Natasha's death is by her own hand—she chooses to sacrifice herself so that the Avengers are able to obtain the Soul Stone and defeat Thanos. This is the culmination of a long redemption arc, now including the freeing of her fellow Black Widows in the *Black Widow* film, wherein Natasha is able to 'even the ledger' of the lives she has taken as an assassin. In this sense, we can read the act as empowering, and perhaps as the ultimate act of bodily autonomy and agency. At the same time, however, it is again the figure of the *femme fatale* who dies and, perhaps more importantly, a *femme fatale* who is unable to bear children, and thus achieve 'normative' femininity. There is arguably a broader cultural uneasiness evident here, wherein it is difficult for us to imagine what a filmic future for Natasha might look like. Thus, it is perhaps culturally fitting that her solo story should only be told once her subversive power has been mitigated. Again, we can see that the feminist body is locked into the past—her actions necessary to move the larger franchise narrative forward, but without her. She is both championed and mitigated.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these films make visible the complex manifestation of feminism within contemporary postfeminist popular culture. On the one hand, the production of female-led solo superhero films is a significant step forward in terms of representation within a genre that has traditionally been understood as 'by men, for men,' and has been widely appreciated by female fans in particular (see, for example, emotional responses to *Wonder Woman's* release in 2017). Centring women's stories has enabled the potential for thoughtful engagement with experiences of sexism in the public sphere and has made visible the ways that women's bodies are contained, freed, and made meaningful. Such films also consider the ways that women might do heroism differently (Carolyn Cocca 2020).

On the other hand, in writing feminism into the past, these films construct feminism as an outdated project that is irrelevant in the current moment. Furthermore, the repeated location of these solo protagonists within aesthetically distinct pasts gestures to a cultural inability to imagine contemporary or future-based feminist figures, outside of their relationships with male counterparts (Jeffrey A. Brown 2015). This is yet another, but perhaps more complex way, of "erasing feminist politics from the popular" (Tasker et al. 2007, 5). As we have shown, postfeminism does not operate alone in this regard, it is bolstered by the logic of neoliberalism, which understands individuals as free from "pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves" (Rosalind Gill 2007, 163). The films analysed within this article reflect such cultural logics; women's collective issues and struggles, we are shown, have been resolved in the past, with the concomitant suggestion that any remnants persisting in the contemporary period are individualised, and thus require an individual response.

Within these films, the past is thus repackaged in complicated ways, enabling *both* the expression *and* containment of feminist rhetoric. While we acknowledge that the telling of origin films, in particular, necessitates turning to the past, the reliance on temporal markers with the above films that position each protagonist as decidedly not of 'our' time is a pattern that is worth noting.

## Notes

1. While we acknowledge that these films are adaptations of comic characters and series, and that comic characters have their own extensive histories (see for example, Jill Lepore 2014; Nathan Miczo 2014), we are interested in these films as cultural texts that have captured the imaginations (and money) of a wide audience, drawing in those who have not necessarily read the original source material.
2. While it is beyond the scope of this article to consider, we also acknowledge that female-led superhero films can also bring into focus gender disparities around the treatment of actresses, as evidenced through Scarlett Johansson's recent suit against Disney for loss of potential earnings.
3. In keeping with the film's approach, we refer to the character as "Vers" when she is living and fighting as a Kree warrior, and Carol when she is human.
4. As an interesting side note, *Captain Marvel* was the first film to be released after Stan Lee's death. To pay homage to his work in both Marvel comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the title credits (which usually feature the Avengers) were replaced with images and footage of Lee, both as himself and in his cameo characters, ending with a black screen and simple white text stating "Thank you Stan". Here, it is implied that without Stan Lee's work in the past, the MCU would not exist in the present. The intertwining of the past and the present is thus inter- and extradiegetic in *Captain Marvel*.
5. To be clear, this is a characterisation that has been deployed strategically and to a greater and lesser extent across each of the nine MCU films Johansson has appeared in—the scope of which is beyond this article. Her costuming when 'suited up' for action, however, tends to accentuate her curves, even when not in 'spy-mode'.

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