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Citation: Gibson, Mel (2018) Let's hear it for the girls! Representations of girlhood, feminism and activism in comics and graphic novels. MAI: Feminism and Visual Culture, 1 (1).

Published by: UNSPECIFIED

URL: <http://maifeminism.com/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls-...> <<http://maifeminism.com/lets-hear-it-for-the-girls-representations-of-diverse-girlhoods-feminism-intersectionality-and-activism-in-contemporary-graphic-novels-and-comics/>>

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Let's hear it for the girls! Representations of girlhood, feminism and activism in comics and graphic novels

Mel Gibson

Notions of agency and activism loom large of late in feminist debates; however, the relevance of such concepts to young women and girls in particular is often recuperated via the language of postfeminism, a manoeuvre which is pernicious in its deflation of a radical feminist politics. For this reason, I contend that the comics *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette* by Mary Talbot, Kate Charlesworth and Bryan Talbot (2014), *Lumberjanes* (2015-date) by Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, Brooke A. Allen, Noelle Stevenson and others, and *Ms Marvel* (2014-date) where the creative team is also flexible (but is predominantly led by G. Willow Wilson and Adrian Alphona, with Sana Amanat as editor) collectively represent a vital intervention in terms of young feminist politics. In short: these three titles foreground agentic, activist and feminist perspectives which are aimed at specifically a young female audience. In what follows, through close reading, I will outline why this is important: for as Berry Mayall states regarding childhood, agency is the way that children are now seen as people who can make a difference through their individual actions, 'to a relationship, a decision, to the workings of a set of social assumptions or constraints'. (Mayall 2002: 21)

Whilst *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette* employs a historical model to link contemporary individuals to a tradition of activism and feminism, the other titles operate in different genres, those being fantasy and superhero comics respectively. Further, all three come from different kinds of publisher, which makes a difference to the ethos informing them, and, to an extent, the girlhoods these narratives offer. Talbot publishes with Jonathan Cape, who have a strong graphic novel list, consisting of stand-alone volumes or series, but are mainly known as a mainstream and traditional publisher of novels and non-fiction. In contrast, the *Lumberjanes* series comes from BOOM Box! an independent comics publisher which makes a point of featuring experimental, creator-driven work by writers and artists from outside the mainstream. BOOM Box! also flags up that webcomics and manga, whilst they do not influence content, do influence their approach in seeking to engage readers using, 'joyful, gleeful comics that are targeted not just at folks that are looking to show up and get the same old things that they've always gotten' (Ching 2017: accessed 9/10/17). The *Lumberjanes* series embeds diversity and the notion of action implicitly and playfully, whilst *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette* is explicitly about political action and feminism. *Ms Marvel*, in contrast to both, is located within the superhero genre and produced by one of the Big Two in that field, Marvel Comics. It was published via All-New Marvel Now! which was specifically intended to attract new readers unfamiliar with comics and offer more diverse characters and narratives.

Although all three titles have attracted wider audiences, they were originally intended to have a core audience of girls and young women. Historically, narratives in mainstream comics for girls between the early 1950s and early 2000s, have as James Chapman (2011: 111) suggests in relation to Britain, been engaged with constructing a 'socially approved model of adolescent femininity'. However, other narratives from the same period feature what could be seen as 'proto-feminist politics' (Chapman 2011: 114) revealing an underlying tension about representations of girlhood throughout the history of comic publishing for girls and young women. The contemporary books discussed here, then, build on aspects of earlier titles, rather than representing a break with the history of girls' comics.

In the past, in Britain, there were a wide range of comics for younger girls, some of which were very popular, like *Bunty* (DC Thomson 1958-2001) which circulated over 800,000 copies a week at its peak. These comics were weekly anthology comics and incorporated narratives from a number of genres, including adventure stories and historical ones featuring active, often investigative, heroines. There is a clear link here with the narratives in the titles under discussion. For teenagers and young women, depending on the era, there was more of an emphasis on romance, as in *Jackie* (DC Thomson 1964-1993), although career was also central to that title given that many narratives featured urban settings and independent female workers. [1] These narratives, therefore, engaged with traditional femininities and could also offer images of the agentic girl. As I have discussed elsewhere (Gibson 2015) these titles were, as well as entertainment, attempting to guide and shape the girl reader, seemingly presupposing a dominant discourse of the girl as tabula rasa. However, as I argue (2015), the juggling act for publishers, in attempting to make sales whilst negotiating both girls' desires and the most conservative gatekeepers' views, whether parental or professional, results in this dominant discourse becoming inconsistent and ambiguous.

In America, in contrast, Trina Robbins (1999) talks about the historical dominance of romance in mainstream comics for girls and young women. The dominance of this genre in titles explicitly aimed at girls is suggestive both of assumptions about what appeals to girls, but also of a policing and bounding of girlhood, something which has implications for actual girls. Whilst romance appears in the contemporary titles, none of them treat the topic as central and it is often undermined, reflecting the ways traditional romance was reworked in later comics in both the USA and Britain. Traditional constructions of romance have had various responses from a number of creators, particularly female ones, as Robbins (1999) outlines with regard to the USA and Gibson (2010) regarding Britain. These responses include female centred independent comics, underground commix, riot grrrl publications and zines of all kinds, often explicitly feminist interventions. More mainstream texts of various kinds have also appeared that offer diverse constructions of girlhood, including the ongoing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* comic (Dark Horse Comics 2007-date) which picked up that narrative when the television series ended.

In these contemporary texts, like the historical ones, that multiple constructions of girlhood exist which are often in tension and may shift and change according to historical context, location and culture, is clear from textual analysis. These recent titles also reflect, at times quite explicitly, notions of intersectionality.

Recent comics and graphic novels work with this history and the wide range of models of girlhood within them, and, further, are often explicitly engaged with presenting diversity and activism, revealing an underlying ideology that differs from many of the earlier titles, although linked with some, and sharing a common DNA with all. In these contemporary texts, like the historical ones, that multiple constructions of girlhood exist which are often in tension and may shift and change according to historical context, location and culture, is clear from textual analysis. These recent titles also reflect, at times quite explicitly, notions of intersectionality, sharing with the reader, as Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge say, that 'When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other' (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016: 2). I would also add that these are pleasurable to read, balancing positive message with engaging narrative.

In a sense then, these recent comics might be seen as offering tools to the reader, for as Hill Collins and Bilge say 'Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves' (Hill Collins and Bilge 2016: 2). This suggests that these texts also act to guide and shape the girl reader, that they too have a didactic element, but do so from a different starting point to many older titles. Underlying the attempts to encourage girls to accept the bounded femininity suggested in some of the earlier texts was a discourse of the girl as able to be moulded. In contrast, the texts under discussion, whilst they vary, tend to reveal a dominant discourse of the girl as knowing and agentic, but in need of seeing texts supporting and reflecting their ideas and views.

The content of these titles suggests a continuation of Max Skidmore's (1983) assertion that the comic medium is both a mirror, or instigator, of social change. Both are potentially important here as these comics are not simply a reflection, but an intervention in their societies and with their readership. The engagement of the reader does not necessarily demand an overtly political engagement here, but at the very least does offer the radical possibility of seeing oneself in a text. This is seen in relation to children's novels and picture books as affirmative and empowering. In addition, these titles offer the possibility of seeing others as friends and allies. This can also be linked with recent developments in children's literature studies, as outlined by Maria Nikolajeva (2013), around cognitive psychology and reading, from which it is clear that fictional characters are as effective as real-life scenarios and people at increasing one's capacity for empathy.

The comics and graphic novels discussed are created by politically engaged authors. Mary Talbot, a senior academic before she became a full-time comic creator, was known for her work around linguistics and feminism. This engagement is reflected in her comics which explore the roles of radical European women and girls. The *Lumberjanesteam* outline their beliefs in their informal mission statement, of which Watters says 'We're approaching creators and doing the comics that we like, as queer women in 2017 ... Generally, they feature lady protagonists kicking ass in a variety of positive ways. ... It's hopeful to write stories that exist in that space, because it gives you strength. I think it's very valuable and very important' (Ching 2017: accessed 9/12/17). Finally, regarding *Ms Marvel*, in addition to the indicative use of 'Ms' in the title, Miriam Kent (2015: 525) argues that the comic's, 'achievements in bringing a female Muslim Pakistani-American subjectivity into the limelight should not be underestimated'. The team informs the content of the comic, as writer Wilson is a practising Muslim and editor Amanat is Pakistani-American, both adding their specific subjectivity to the creation of narratives.

To focus first on *Sally Heathcote: Suffragette*, whilst Talbot's work is predominantly non-fiction, here she uses a fictional titular character, a young working-class woman, as the main entry point to the narrative. This central figure's journey into political awareness is significant as a potential model for the reader, but it is not assumed that the reader is unaware of the need for social change and activism. Even the dedications suggest a knowing reader, with one element saying 'To our niece, Emma Atherton – stay radical' (Talbot 2014: unpaginated). This graphic novel shows the complexity of the suffragette movement and the escalating range of direct actions that were part of it, as Sally eventually becomes involved with one of the most radical elements.

Taking an approach which shows Sally as heroic, but also allows other suffragist voices to say 'must we celebrate these terrorists as heroes so?' (Talbot 2014: 7) allows Talbot to show the messy reality of that movement rather than the more sanitised and homogenised accounts that form the most dominant discourses of the movement, although like many other accounts it does focus on a key

political intervention, the *1913 Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act*, commonly known as the *Cat and Mouse Act*. This allowed for the early release of prisoners weakened by hunger striking. They were recalled to prison once they had recovered, where the process would begin again, including forced feeding.

Talbot also shows intersectionality in terms of Sally's understanding of class and gender, suggesting that although the word emerges long after the events depicted in the narrative, an understanding of how axes may intersect and influence each other is something that is not solely contemporary. There is a lot of time in the book, for instance, spent exploring how pacifism and socialism intersected with elements of the suffrage movement, and with how, and by whom, these links were rejected. For example, the book depicts Emmeline Pankhurst expelling her daughter Sylvia from the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) for being 'too close to the Labour Party' and additionally depicts Pankhurst's engagement with the white feather movement, rejecting pacifism and embracing jingoism (Talbot 2014: 158). Depicting the narrative from Sally's point-of-view and that of her friend, and later beau, Arthur, who is also working class, enables the reader to appreciate the limitations of the leaders of the suffragettes. This graphic novel, then, may also act as a critique of the way that the most dominant middle and upper class elements became, except for the issue of the vote, wholly attached to conservative discourses around class and civil liberties. Further, throughout the book, the way that Sally is perceived by many middle-class suffragettes as liminal, as stereotypically Northern, and by fellow members of the working classes as engaging with issues that are 'all right for gentlefolk' (Talbot 2014: 32) is also intended to make the reader aware of how class and location may have an impact upon, and limit, feminism.

Talbot also employs a framing device for the overall narrative featuring Sally as an older woman in late 1969, making the majority of the narrative a flashback. This specific time is chosen because it was when the voting age was lowered in Britain to 18, thus further explicitly linking girlhood and political activism across generations. Sally is surrounded by her suffragette memorabilia and her family, including her granddaughter, a young woman approaching her 18th birthday who states that she isn't sure if she will bother to vote. This is one of the more didactic aspects of the book, as the reader has followed Sally's journey, which the young relative is not particularly familiar with, and so is aware both of the events leading up to women's suffrage, and of the fact that ordinary peoples' political engagement is vital for social change. The probable response of the reader is to be annoyed with Sally's granddaughter as the reader's positioning with Sally throughout the narrative encourages this. This exchange also suggests that knowledge of personal and political histories counters apathy.

Moving on, in comparison to Talbot's historically situated narrative, the *Lumberjanesseries* offers a utopian fantasy set in a liminal space involving an organisation, the Lumberjane Scouts. The narratives depict a diverse group of friends of different ethnicities, body types and orientation. The series takes place at a scout summer camp, so depicting individuals outside their family circle and everyday life, whilst remaining a trope familiar to many readers. The motif of the summer camp is one which may be used in fiction to show a microcosm of wider society and may critique the same. The idea of camp is constantly satirised as well as celebrated, so, for instance, on a rainy day camp leaders say 'Everyone inside! This is mandatory indoor activity time! Macramé! Book binding! Indoor stealth training!' (Stevenson et al 2016b: 55). In the series, exploration is significant, as are recognising and celebrating difference and working together towards a common goal. Indeed, becoming aware of one's potential to make a difference is central.

The framing motif for each volume consists of the cover and first pages of the 'Lumberjanes Field Manual'. Another aspect of the framing is the use of badges, variants on those offered by traditional organisations, working with the assumed cultural capital of the readers. These are designed by Kelsey Dieterich across the series, so creating a consistent visual identity that acts as a counterpoint to the variety of artists illustrating the stories. The difference between the consistent frame and varied narrative imagery serves to emphasise that all creators are welcome, just as all readers are, linking the two groups and showing a shared engagement with the characters, irrespective of age, suggesting a Lumberjanes community outside, as well as within, the books.

The framing motif further emphasises the values of the series creators through inclusion of a pledge which has an element scribbled out and replaced. The original version is not visible, but the revision 'then there's a line about god, or whatever' is suggestive. Another revision changes the name of the camp by adding that it is the 'camp for hardcore lady-types', offering a more inclusive space than the terms 'young ladies' or 'girls' might allow. Engaging the reader still further is the opportunity to add one's own name, 'troop and date invested', further positioning the reader as a Lumberjane too. The term feminism is not directly mentioned, but the Lumberjanes are none-the-less positioned as contemporary feminists, personifying those who, as Nicola Rivers (2017) argues, focus on intergenerational and intersectional cooperation.

The ideology of the series is inclusive and broadly humanist, and the narratives are based around finding solutions to problems or puzzles. More importantly, even if those problems include mermaids, as is the case in volume five, the solution is predominantly about building relationships across difference. The group consistently demonstrate the power of team-work, friendship and engagement, amongst themselves, with older staff and volunteers, and with the various beings they meet at the camp (Stevenson et al 2016b). These values and ideologies are even shown in the names of the badges. One example is the 'All for Knot Badge' central to volume six 'an easy-going bonding activity', which is a team badge emphasising co-operation whether amongst humans or across species, including, in this case, selkies and werewolves (Watters et al 2016c).

The writers constantly play with language and naming practices. This appears in a politicized way, for instance, when Harlow insists that the term mermaid is inappropriate, stating, 'we prefer merwomyn' (Stevenson et al 2016b: p.38) and the narrative focus is a merwomyn riot grrrl band. Even the creators' approach to swearing is to take it as an opportunity for play and engagement. Instead of profanity, expletives are the names of historically significant women. An expletive, of course, draws the attention of the reader. The examples are diverse and international, including, in volume six, Admiral Malahayati, Krystyna Chojnowska-Liskiewicz and Annie Edson Taylor (Watters et al 2016c). The names flagged up often reflect the themes and settings in the books.

Special interests, particularly scientific ones, are seen as positive and presented as inherent to girlhood, not exceptional, as is also the case in *Ms Marvel*. For instance, Ripley, the youngest Lumberjane, is obsessed with natural history, natural phenomena and climate. An engagement with science is heavily emphasised throughout the books, even across generations, as Ripley's grandmother has such interests. Similarly, when Jo talks to her dads, explaining that she wants to be at camp, to enjoy being young, she ends by saying 'I'll be back at the end of the summer and THEN you can push me to pursue a rocket science internship with applicants twice my age, okay?' (Stevenson et al 2016b: 9). Jo emphasises her agency, but also her willingness to compromise given their shared interests.

Central to the narrative of the series is that the Lumberjaner camp faces that of the Scouting Lads camp across a lake. However, this seemingly gendered binary of childhood activity is continually undermined by the actions and choices of characters in, as it were, both camps. For example, when Ripley decides not to be a god in the first volume, her first and last act as a god, before dispersing the power she holds, is to create one thousand kittens. Ripley's decision is to be part of a collective rather than wield a power which is individualistic and potentially corrupting. However, the kittens are not intended as a self-indulgence, but a gift to friends. Gender expectations may be seen as undermined when the kittens are given to the Scouting Lads to keep at their camp, enhancing their summer experience. Further, when readers first meet the Scouting Lads, their cookie baking and tea-making skills are emphasised, in contrast to the focus on the analytical and scientific skills of the Lumberjaner. Both, of course, are celebrated in the books, although the boys are seen as compromised by the fact they are 'so ... orderly and obedient' (Stevenson et al 2015a: 83) in comparison to the girls.

A gently articulated notion of fluid identity is depicted when the Lumberjaner and the Scouting Lads show a desire for flexibility and movement across their organisations. In particular, this is shown in the narrative about the relationship between Barney the Scouting Lad and Lumberjaner Jo. Jo feels threatened by April and Barney's friendship and attempts to drive him away or exclude him, at one point saying of a sleeping remedy, 'No, it's ... it's a LUMBERJANES secret. You wouldn't understand' (Stevenson et al 2016a: 41). In addition, in a number of panels Jo is depicted as ignoring Barney, something which functions to exclude him. Underlying these exchanges between the two characters are tensions around identity, gender, belonging and privilege. However, as the narrative progresses, Jo and Barney have to work together to overcome a common foe, thus engaging in action together and working across difference.

The jealousy that Jo feels and her disagreement with Barney is also about deciding alignment, whether with Lumberjaner or Scouting Lads, a choice implicitly about gender. This becomes clear towards the end of the volume when Jo says to Barney, acknowledging how destabilised his involvement with the Lumberjaner made her feel, 'Nah, I'm sorry. I was being a jerk. I think ... you remind me too much of a younger me. A version of me I didn't like. The me I would've been if I'd had to become a Scouting Lad'. Barney's response is also an acknowledgement, when he replies, 'Do you ever feel like you belong somewhere else? Like everyone around you looks at you and THINKS they know who you are and what you want, but it's actually totally different?' Jo answers, 'I felt that way for a while. The Lumberjaner Scouts were the first place I ever felt like I could be who I actually was. I know exactly where I belong. And it was never across the lake with the Scouting Lads. Maybe it's the same for you' (Stevenson et al 2016a: 98). This is a mildly coded exchange, but the meaning is still clear. That one needs to be where one feels most like oneself, most comfortable and at home, reflects the fact that whilst Jo started life as a boy, her identity is that of a Lumberjaner. Barney is shown that knowing where to belong, and so to determine one's own identity, is more significant than one's original biology.

Finally, the series also offers a depiction of the loving relationship between two of the Lumberjaner. This becomes more apparent over a number of volumes and by the most recent, Molly and Mal are depicted as a fiercely mutually protective couple (Watters et al 2016c: 99-100). Again, in this utopian community, people are free to love and accept each other and are not pressured into being someone else.

Whilst *Lumberjanes* and *Ms Marvel* are both fantasies, they take rather different approaches. Where *Lumberjanes* retains a playful tone and an overall positivity, the 'real world' location of *Ms Marvel* is linked to narratives directly concerned with oppression, intersectionality and the operation of privilege, and activism is an important aspect of narratives throughout the series. In addition, *Ms Marvel*, like *Lumberjanes*, actually offers, despite the title, something of an ensemble piece, showing diverse girlhoods.

The character Ms Marvel is Kamala Khan, a sixteen-year-old high school student from Jersey City, who idolizes the original Ms Marvel, Carol Danvers. Adopting the name of her idol and so linking herself to a history of feminism in comics, when she develops her shape-shifting powers. Kamala is a complex character who is marked as multiply other through her girlhood, ethnicity (as she is Pakistani American), her Muslim faith, her powers, her STEM subject interest and her fandom. However, the other characters, whilst not as complex, are also intricately depicted, including Kamala's best friend Nakia. The comic works to overcome what Phil Jones describes in defining 'othering' with regard to childhood, saying that, 'othering has been described, at its simplest, as a separation of 'us' and 'them'' (Jones 2009: 36). Kamala and Nakia are both Muslim, but their families are of different nationalities, showing diversity, not a homogenous 'Muslim-ness' relating to girlhood. If the reader has no experience of anything other than the dominant white American culture, the comic offers an opportunity to look beyond the stereotyping and demonization of Muslims. It also, of course, offers a space for identification.

Nakia is first introduced to the reader as someone who is reflecting on and revisiting her girlhood identity. This is shown, for instance, in her rejection of her childhood nickname, Kiki, a change Kamala comments on, saying 'Proud Turkish Nakia doesn't need "Amreeki" nickname. I get it' (Wilson et al 2014: 2). Rejecting this nickname, one which suits the dominant culture, is a reclaiming of her family's culture. Other issues around girlhood and Muslim identity are also addressed. For instance, whilst Nakia wears a headscarf, Kamala does not. The wearing of a headscarf is picked up as a theme when Zoe, a white 'mean girl' from their school says of Nakia's headscarf 'But I mean... nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Nobody's going to honor kill you? I'm just concerned'. When Nakia responds by saying that her father thinks this is a just a phase, Zoe's response is 'Wow, cultures are so interesting' (Wilson et al 2014: 3-4). This exchange shows that Zoe insists on positioning Nakia as both different and oppressed and additionally fails to recognise that she too belongs to a culture.

The series also shows the potential evolution of the individual, especially through Zoe's story. Zoe begins by being described as a 'concern troll' (Wilson et al 2014: 1) and someone who is racist, predominantly because of her envy of Kamala. Her slow transformation centres on her recognition of her negative impact on others. She slowly changes across a number of volumes from casual racism to becoming an activist, vegetarian and, finally, identifying as a lesbian.

Engaging directly with political issues and identity the comic allows the creators to offer young readers potential sites for activity and self-reflection. For example, whilst Kamala may act as an agent of change, she also encourages those without powers, but with skills, to see themselves as capable of making a difference. This is exemplified in the narrative about 'The Collector', who has convinced teenagers that their primary use to society is as batteries and that they should volunteer to use this energy in the service of adults. Kamala has to remove the effects of cultural brainwashing from the young volunteers, who argue that they are worthless, one stating 'The planet is overpopulated. We're an extra generation—we shouldn't even be here. But we can do this – we can

give our lives to something good' (Wilson et al 2015a: 87). In attempting to help her peers think differently about their role in the world she makes both social justice and ecological claims, finally arguing that, 'maybe they do think of us as parasites, but they're not the ones who are gonna have to live with the mess' (Wilson et al 2015a: 88).

Whilst successful in encouraging young people to take an active role there are also points at which she becomes the focus of campaigners. This is most notable in a storyline where Hydra appropriates Ms Marvel's image in a series of posters acting as product endorsement for new housing in New Jersey. However, what is presented as a clean-up of Jersey City is actually urban 'regeneration' in the form of ethnic and class cleansing. Having been misrepresented, Kamala is forced to defend herself, to, amongst others, the increasingly activist Nakia and Zoe, who march and agitate against the changes. Nakia, for instance, says, 'This is so typical. Some up-and-coming hero parks herself in a majority-minority neighbourhood, makes it cool, & then sells out to the first bloodsucking developer who wants to tear it all down to make luxury condos' (Wilson et al 2016a: 12-13). The appropriation of her image is meant to ruin Ms Marvel's local standing and remove her as a threat. Hydra's intention is to establish New Jersey as a base (as well as making money) from which to attack New York based superheroes more easily. The ethnic cleansing is made more explicit by the eviction of local grocer Radislav, who Ms Marvel saves from weaponised drones, for, this being Hydra, they are not simply using bulldozers. Hydra also brainwash various community members to ensure acceptance of their scheme. Of course, if one reads past the superpowers, the narrative about urban regeneration still rings true.

The idea of activism is raised again when Kamala and Nakia are joined in class by Gabe, Kamala's brother-in-law, who has been 'redistricted', resulting in his family being in a new voting district and him in a new school. They immediately recognise this as gerrymandering (Wilson et al 2017: 8) and significant given the forthcoming mayoral elections, in which a Hydra operative, described as 'Chuck the Hydra Hipster', is running. Mike, another of the strong young female characters in the series, says that due to apathy, Hydra might even win, saying that they are 'counting on the fact that only 36% of registered voters actually turn up for local elections (Wilson et al 2017: 9-10). The narrative is didactic in saying, as in Talbot (2014), that engaging with politics is important.

This narrative becomes a model for community activism, social engagement and traditional political activity amongst young people. Nakia, in particular, willingly joins Ms Marvel in door-knocking in their area, meeting various disengaged individuals and countering 'myths' about voting (Wilson et al 2017: 10-14). That this is about young women as powerful and agentic is shown in a reworking of Delacroix's (1830) *Liberty Leading the People*, in which Ms Marvel, Nakia and Mike are central (Wilson et al 2017: 18). In the end, Hydra is defeated in a narrative in which the use of superpowers is superseded by community politics and collective action. The creative team are careful to offer solutions that can be transferred to the world beyond the comic, not simply ones in which the super-powered hero solves problems. This can be seen as an assertion that 'normal humans' can be agentic and effective makers of change.

Increasingly, as the series progresses, Kamala starts to move away from her idol, Carol Danvers, seeing aspects of her thinking as limited, for instance in her approval, in volume six, of a policy of stopping crimes before they happen using prediction. Initially excited about stopping crime in this way, comments made by Tyasha, Aamir's wife, make Kamala rethink her position. In particular, Tyasha (both a young woman of colour and a Muslim) says 'During the whole tough-on-crime thing? Boys could get picked up for standing on a street corner for too long. Probable cause, right? Know

what that got us? A whole generation of kids who went to jail instead of college?’ (Wilson et al 2016b: 36). She later adds ‘Did you ever think that maybe the people committing the crimes need saving too?’ (Wilson et al 2016b: 37). Kamala’s increasing disaffection regarding this policy, which has parallels in, for instance, New York’s ‘stop and frisk’ programme, may be linked to her increasing understanding that whilst they are both superheroes (and both marked as feminists through their title), they do not see issues (or feminism) in the same way. This marks Kamala as a different generation of feminist and also as taking an intersectional approach.

Thus, whilst superheroics are important to the title, in many ways the everyday life elements are more important, showing that one can be an activist without having powers and that anyone can use intersectionality as a tool. The comics frequently explore how different types of oppression may intersect and how working with others and reflecting on oneself, perhaps even checking one’s privilege, is a necessity. There are conversations acknowledging this, such as the following exchange. Mike begins by saying, ‘I feel like I need to be the happy, well-adjusted, straight -A- getting, all-American kid at all times, because if I’m not, people will blame it on my moms’ to which Nakia responds, ‘It’s like being an immigrant kid ... you have to be the best ‘cause if you’re not, it’s proof that your parents and their culture messed you up’. The next comment is, ‘Meanwhile, the nice apple-pie kid is in the corner sniffing glue, but nobody is asking what culture messed him up...’ (Wilson et al 2017: 46). This comic, then, is overtly politicised and aims to support the reader into a greater understanding of the issues they are engaged in, or to an understanding that they are not alone in their awareness.

In conclusion, these texts take radically different approaches to their female centred characters and narratives. They all engage with diverse girlhoods, and to varying extents, with activism and feminism. Each are aimed at slightly different age ranges, but all acknowledge that girls and young women have a stake in society, and flag up the importance of agency, knowledge, awareness, and strength. They offer characters with complex identities who reflect upon their actions and identity and encourage an understanding of privilege and intersectionality.

In addition, it may be argued that this increased variety in terms of representations of girlhood is in part due to changes in who creates comics. Historically creators of comics for girls have usually been male, as Gibson (2015) discusses. However, this shifted in the late twentieth century, partly due to the impact of shōjo manga, as it encouraged girls and young women to engage with the medium as creators. Finally, what the existence of these titles emphasises is, as Watters says, that ‘the books that people are reading are by women and marginalized creators, and telling stories that are not about straight white men ... Literally, the biggest contingent of people reading comics today are young women’ (Ching 2017). This means that it also makes economic sense to create comics for young women and girls, ensuring that they are represented, in all their diversity and activity, across a complex and diverse range of texts.

Notes

1. Referencing comics is complex. In several cases in this article, I mention British girls’ comics. I cite publisher and the overall dates for the life of the comic, as author and editor information was usually unavailable. When citing a series of comics, I have similarly cited publisher and length of run. With specific titles from a graphic novel series, I revert to Harvard. I would add that the *Ms Marvel* titles are not paginated, so I have counted the page numbers from the first after the title page.

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