Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces

Edited by Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen (2022)

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Since Henry Jenkins's (2006) effective analysis of the components of transmedia storytelling, scholars continue to build on his work. Marvel Comics, and the Marvel brand in general, is one such site for scholars to further develop and understand transmedia entertainment. Indeed, Stan Lee, the face of Marvel from the 1960s through to his death in 2018, always envisioned superheroes flying out of comics pages and onto large and small screens (Howe 2012). In Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen's *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces*, the contributing authors each take one of Marvel's superheroines and consider her appearances across comics, live action and animated films, television, video games and, in the occasional chapter, as a cosplay character. According to the editors, the goal of this volume is "to ask what Marvel's superheroines can teach us about our culture (popular and otherwise) and how these teachings reflect the real, lived experiences of women" (10). This is pressing for the editors and contributors given that the Marvel "ecosystem encourag[es] fans to follow their favorite characters and stories from one media to another" (5).

With this transmedia thesis in mind, most contributing authors nevertheless skip a detailed analysis of the concept of transmedia storytelling—chapters 6 and 11 engage with Jenkins's peer-reviewed scholarship while chapters 1 and 8 cite the student handout on transmedia storytelling available on his blog (Jenkins 2007). To start with the book's subtitle, *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* does not advance

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theories of transmedia storytelling and aesthetics, recalling Jenkins's observation in 2006 that "we do not yet have very good aesthetic criteria for evaluating works that play themselves out across multiple media" (Jenkins 2006, 96–97). The volume could have attempted, however brief, to resolve this issue in the field. The authors instead turn to other theoretical frameworks, sometimes upwards of seven in a chapter, to investigate a transmedia superheroine.

The book is composed of four parts and thirteen chapters. Part 1 provides introductory analyses. To start with, Carr and Carstarphen explore the significance of superheroes in our culture and what these heroic myths mean to consumers and fans. The authors then define and redefine transmedia—the most sustained discussion in the book—and explain how Marvel's transmedia ecosystem works. In their overview of the book, Carr and Carstarphen refer backwards to their preceding remarks, an odd addition that they could have omitted. Carr's following chapter provides a historical overview of Marvel's relationship with its female fans and its reluctance to sell to them. In the concluding chapter of Part 1, Carstarphen develops the idea of "trans/linear feminism" (28), or the choice that female readers make to read Marvel superheroines in a distinctive way from male readers. He claims that the narratives of superheroines are emblematic of a larger narrative about the lived experiences of real women. The first part, then, succinctly introduces the central themes that will be discussed throughout the book.

In Part 2, the authors bring feminist theories to read Marvel superheroines. In chapter four, J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner trace the complex—and lengthy—history and evolution of Captain Marvel as a feminist icon. Through textual analyses that read a bit like plot summaries, they argue that the character of Captain Marvel is a site of constructed feminism, ever-changing to fit the feminist needs of the moment. Captain Marvel is explored again in chapter thirteen, where Annika Hagley observes how the character is presented as an individual with trauma in the 2019 film *Captain Marvel*.

Back in chapter five, Kathleen M. Turner-Ledgerwood uses standpoint theory to read Agent Carter as a transgenerational and transmedia feminist. Similar to the previous chapter, much space is devoted to tracing the history of the character. Chapter six, then, problematizes the costume of the superheroine as a form of gendered control. Amanda K. Kehrberg uses Judith Butler's theory of gendered performativity to identify Jessica Jones's rejection of the superhero costume as a rejection of the performance of both her gender as well as her superhero identity. Kehrberg's contribution is the standout chapter: it has a sustained discussion of a particular aspect of superhero identity and cleverly applies theory to focus on Jones's costume. In summary, although the above authors' engagement with feminist theories seems cursory at best, this section of the book does a decent job of tracing the feminist evolution of the superheroines.

As often happens with edited collections, some chapters could be slotted into other sections. MaryAnne A. Rhett's study of Islamic feminism and Ms. Marvel is better suited

to Part 2 on feminism instead of Part 3 on "otherness [and] the body." This would also eliminate the division of superheroines in the book by race—Parts 2 and 4 focus on white heroines while Part 3 focuses on superheroines of colour. As a historian, Rhett uses their strengths to locate the character's feminism "on the edges of Kamala Khan's narrative" (109). Rather than thinking alongside one of the waves of Western feminism, Rhett reads *Ms. Marvel* author G. Willow Wilson's conversion to Islam to situate Kamala within the long history of Islamic feminism, particularly in Egypt. Rhett provides close analyses of the comics to determine how history informs Kamala's Pakistani American Muslim feminist identity.

The other chapters of Part 3 are less successful. Rachel Grant assesses representations of Shuri, sister of T'Challa/Black Panther, in Ryan Coogler's film *Black Panther* (2018), Nnedi Okorafor's comic series *Shuri* (2018–2019), a couple of online news publications, and five tweets. Grant mobilizes in broad strokes feminist theory, intersectional theory, postcolonial theory, Afrofuturism, discourse analysis, and "technocultural analysis" (95), and all-too-brief explanations of these frameworks take up half the chapter, a pattern we note throughout the volume. Grant employs textual analyses of the film and comics and concludes that a few Twitter users like Shuri because she is a role model for girls, and/or has an anticolonial bent, and/or just like the character because she is "badass" (99). Next, in a baffling contribution, Stephanie L. Sanders considers Misty Knight, a police officer and later crimefighter with a bionic arm. While Sanders provides some googled remarks about the character and her origins, the focus is a story about Knight's stint as a diversity officer at New York Universe-City College of Liberal Arts (NY-UCLA). I believe Sanders conceived this story as a thought experiment, but this is unclear. Sanders first devotes time to under-developing Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of "spiritual activism," then reads her fan fiction through this theory.

Part 4 does not have a strong through line among the chapters but has some of the most consistent examinations of transmedia characters. Julie A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus examine Black Widow through two lenses. First, they assess how Black Widow conforms and deviates from Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's notion of the American monomyth. As the authors note, her outsider status—an important part of this monomyth—is emphasized by a moral compass different from superhero colleagues, the acquisition of her powers through training rather than luck or technology and, in some versions of Black Widow, she stands apart from humans because she had also taken the Russian supersoldier serum. These differences from male heroes does not alter Widow's sexualization, even in the G-Rated animated series *The Super Hero Squad Show*. Next, Mildred F. Perreault and Gregory P. Perreault inform readers in three separate sections about Potts's background in the MCU and the second half of the chapter provides a detailed list of Potts's transmedia appearances. The sections serve as quick summaries of where and how Potts fits into the plot of the media under discussion with few if any

arguments rooted in four or more theoretical frameworks that are detailed in the first half. The authors find that the character "often aligns with the story progression and cultural norms expected in the Marvel Universe" (167). CarrieLynn D. Reinhard's contribution follows a similar transmedia analysis with Squirrel Girl, devoting much space to listing where one could find the character and how she fits into those stories as reflection of "corporate feminism" (187): Squirrel Girl inspires but does not empower.

The editors and most of the contributors of *Gendered Defenders* are professors of communication studies and media studies but the chapters' lack of interest in scholarship from comics, film, and television studies limits what this volume can accomplish for transmedia studies. There are a few novel insights into superheroines, but the short length of the contributions—between 12 and 18 pages, including several pages worth of citations—, the chapters' often sloppy structure, the authors' poor summaries of theory, and their repetitions of points, plots, and quotations did not produce deep and sustained analyses. The scholarly style of the book is a barrier to this work and the volume may have been better with the general audiences' approach employed in *[Superhero] and Philosophy* books published by Wiley and Open Court.

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