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GENDERED DEFENDERS: MARVEL'S HEROINES IN TRANSMEDIA SPACES (2022) **EDITED BY BRYAN J. CARR AND META G. CARSTARPHEN**

Review by Maria K. Alberto

Carr, Bryan J., and Meta G. Carstarphen, eds. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces*. Ohio State University Press, 2022. 214 pp.

In the edited collection *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* (2022), editors Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen set out to establish a complex core claim: that “the evolution of Marvel’s female characters mirrors the development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world” (7). Looking at characters from both Marvel comics and the transmedia colossus that is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), the collection’s editors and contributors consider how Marvel’s prominence in the cultural zeitgeist has both empowered and hindered the portrayal of women as heroes.

While superheroes at large may offer audiences “a means of reconstructing and redeveloping cultural and mythological languages,” Carr and Carstarphen maintain, these characters are also “the product of human creators influenced by the cultural contexts in which they operate” (7). With this important distinction between utopic purpose and actual reality, *Gendered Defenders* sets out to provide multiple examples from Marvel’s extensive catalog, offering chapters that draw from multiple disciplines and examine characters from Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel) and Agent Peggy Carter to Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), Shuri, and many more.

The collection opens with three chapters, one co-authored and then one apiece, from Carr and Carstarphen. Together these three pieces constitute Part I, “Introduction: Framing Our Starting Places and Conceptual Origins.” The co-authored first chapter here serves in the place of a traditional introduction and works to situate American superheroes within the bounds of what Joseph Campbell has called the monomyth, or the hero’s journey; this initial chapter also discusses connections between media and individual identity-making, then lays out the larger project of this collection. One of the book’s most compelling arguments is made here, almost as a throwaway point: Carr and Carstarphen propose that our thinking about transmedia “must evolve from simply being one consistent fiction across multiple channels toward multiple channels of adaptation that influence the larger *cultural sense* of the fiction and the place it inhabits in the popular zeitgeist” (6, original emphasis). While it is not novel to consider audience reception of media texts, the argument that transmedia franchises are characterised by reception and place in the cultural zeitgeist as much as by modes of adaptation is novel, and it would offer a rich new way of thinking about how people ‘know’ about mega-franchises like the MCU without actively following them. Consequently, this idea would have benefited from further reflection and theorisation here.

Following that, Chapter Two is by Carr and considers Marvel heroines in the context of the “superhero industrial complex,” as focalized through an infamous scene in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) where most of the franchise’s female characters band together for a significant charge across a battlefield (11). Here Carr considers how women heroes have been depicted across decades of Marvel comics and transmedia properties – a history that includes sexist and tokenistic portrayals which often misunderstand what women audiences enjoy, or fumble how they could have depicted women’s agency in interesting, nuanced ways. Rounding out Part I, Chapter Three by Carstarphen theorises the concept of trans/linear feminism, which she maintains “[breaks] the hegemony of a master, linear narrative,” “allows for narratives of female agency to go above, beyond, and even through traditional constraints,” and provides “identities that not only allow us to cross the boundaries of fact and fiction comfortably [but also allow] us to move through past, present, and future sensibility adeptly” (28, 29). Oddly, this chapter was also the shortest by far in the entire volume, even though Carstarphen is theorising quite a complex conceptualisation of feminism. This work could have used much more space to trace out relationships between trans/linear feminism and other feminist traditions, and to consider how trans/linear feminism adds to ongoing conversations about what contemporary feminism should be if it really is to support all women.

Following this, Part II “Phenomenal Women: Gender and Feminism,” begins with a strong chapter from J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner, considering how Carol Danvers is made to undergo multiple memory erasures that reset her character and thus “erase previous narrative choices [...] [and] allow Danvers to serve as a long-standing feminist symbol” (33), who can embody the ideals of differing waves of feminism while – ostensibly – being the same person all along (Chapter Four). Next, Kathleen M. Turner-Ledgerwood turns to standpoint theory – a feminist lens that contends knowledge and power stem from one’s social positioning – to argue that Agent Peggy Carter is a feminist character, even when she is often located in time periods that may not be typified by how the term would be used today (Chapter Five). Finally, Amanda K. Kehrberg closes with the strongest chapter of the collection, wherein she argues that Jessica Jones “refuses to *do* gender as a necessary part of *doing* heroism” (67, original emphasis). Using examples of costuming and performance, Kehrberg makes a persuasive argument for how gender becomes entangled with heroism, particularly for women superheroes, and highlights Jessica Jones as a hero whose complicated relationship to heroism can be located in her clothing, language, personal choices, and complex backstory alike (Chapter Six).

Part III “Embodied Power: Otherness, the Body, and the Superheroine” opens with Rachel Grant considering Shuri from *Black Panther*, demonstrating how this character subverts many default (white) expectations of superheroines and instead draws from the broader possibilities of Afrofuturism and postcolonial feminism (Chapter Seven). Next, Maryanne A. Rhett situates the creation, ongoing authorship, and overarching storylines of Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) in the context of global dialogues regarding feminism, particularly the contested notion of Islamic feminism (Chapter Eight). Rhett admirably balances summaries of complex topics and storylines that may be new to many readers, while also making her own argument tying them together. Then, Stephanie L. Sanders draws together strands from Anzalduan spiritual activism and self-knowledge to offer a reading of Misty Knight’s combined diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and superhero activities

at the university where she works (Chapter Nine), though precisely which of Knight's storylines this chapter draws from can quickly become opaque to unfamiliar readers.

Regretfully, Part IV "Answering the Call: Marvel Superheroines as Responses to Cultural Change" features some of the weakest chapters in the collection. Julie A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus investigate how Russian superhero Natasha Romanoff, or Black Widow, is depicted in multiple animated and live-action Marvel properties, often as a sexy prop to the male heroes; however, this reading is framed oddly, taking the industry to task for its tokenistic depiction of Slavic ethnic identity, but almost as if this is the only identity thus mishandled (Chapter Ten). Following this, Mildred F. Perreault and Gregory P. Perreault offer a confusing chapter on Pepper Potts, attempting to address far too many sub-topics and making essentialising claims about how Potts exemplifies "women's stories" and "the nature of women" in them (159; Chapter Eleven). Making a stronger start, Carrielynn D. Reinhard's chapter on Squirrel Girl, initially a satirical character, offers a compelling argument for how this particular superhero "reflects the fractured state of feminism from the 1990s to today" whose continuance "can be read as both undermining feminism and normalizing its fractured state" (173), but often does so by separating Squirrel Girl's capacities into masculine and feminine traits (Chapter Twelve). Finally, the collection closes with Annika Hagley applying a feminist trauma theory framework to the 2019 *Captain Marvel* film and its titular character Carol Danvers, wherein Hagley contends that this movie depicts the aftermath of gendered violence, breaking the mold of post 9/11 superhero movies that recreate hypermasculine identity (Chapter Thirteen).

As these chapter summaries demonstrate, one of the greatest strengths of *Gendered Defenders* is the range of topics, perspectives, and disciplinary approaches that its contributors utilise. While most draw upon narrative analysis without naming it, various chapters also incorporate approaches such as standpoint theory (51), ethics of care and relational ontologies (77), postcolonial theory (89), critical technocultural discourse analysis that investigates internet and digital artifacts and culture (94), or feminist trauma theory (191-192). In one light, this interdisciplinary range adds a much-appreciated depth to the collection. In another light, though, it would have helped to have more consensus across the collection of how each chapter should introduce and explain its theoretical lens, such as through dedicated methodological sections.

One high point of this collection was its ongoing engagement with questions regarding feminism and not just with feminism itself. Multiple chapters here push back against overt celebrations of feminist progress, or identify critical shortcomings in postfeminist texts and thought to advocate for more nuanced lines of criticism. For example, as Grant draws from postcolonial scholarship to point out in her chapter on Shuri from *Black Panther*, contemporary (white, Western) feminism still "suppresses a broad understanding of gendered experiences" (91). It is to be expected that an entire collection about representations of heroic women, performed gender, and chosen identity would probably be a feminist text, but it was heartening to see that most chapters here continued to question and push for moving beyond that basic framework. In particular, I was struck by Carstarphen's trans/linear feminism (though I also definitely would have liked to see more of it), Kehrberg's consideration of postmodern feminism for Jessica Jones, Grant's aforementioned engagement with postcolonial feminism for Shuri, and Rhett's discussion of how Islamic feminism is

a complex, multifaceted topic negotiating its own identity, much like Kamala Khan.

In other areas of the collection, though, this balancing of multiple complex elements proves a major weakness. One common pitfall is the juggling of a tremendous amount of fictional material whose publication spans decades, and often media or platforms too, as contributors attempt to give readers a comprehensive yet nuanced sense of who the focal character is and usually what changes she has undergone by the time she gets to the live-action MCU films. Given the collection's explicit transmedia focus, the attempt to establish such lineages for each character makes sense but some chapters, such as Stevens and Turner's Chapter Four on Carol Danvers's evolution across different waves of feminism, were able to avoid the pitfalls of overwhelming detail better than others. Meanwhile Perreault and Perreault went a step further in the opposite direction with Chapter Eleven, wherein they cover so many different tangents regarding the character of Pepper Potts that readers do not reach their argument until seven pages in, which is a further weakness on top of the strangely essentializing argument here.

All things considered, I would characterise *Gendered Defenders* as a largely commendable addition to the ongoing constellation of scholarship developing around what Carr and Carstarphen accurately term Marvel's "transmedia experiment" with the MCU (3). While not quite a text for course adoption and perhaps of uneven merit to researchers working in areas like popular culture studies, gender studies, or adaptation studies, this collection still makes useful strides toward intersectional considerations of Marvel heroines that I hope to see future scholarship develop even further.

BIONOTE

Maria K. Alberto is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of Utah, United States of America, where she is currently working on her dissertation on canon(s) as constructed through *Dungeons and Dragons* texts. Her research interests include digital storytelling, transformative fanworks, and genre literature of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Her other recent work has included essays on digital platforms and forthcoming book chapters on J. R. R. Tolkien's legendarium.