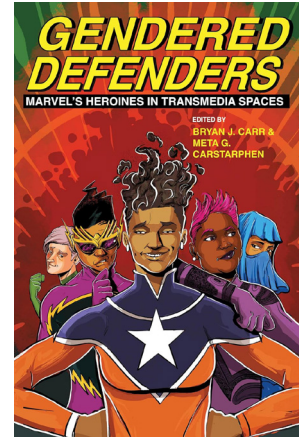


Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces, edited by Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen



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Bryan J. Carr & Meta G. Carstarphen, eds. *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Trans-media Spaces*. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality. Columbus, OH: The Ohio University Press, 2022. Paperback. 216 pg. \$36.95. ISBN 9780814258521.



Scholarly, analytical works such as *Gendered Defenders* demonstrate that, despite opinions in some quarters (including the already tiresome Internet hot takes about being “so exhausted by all the comic book movies”), superheroes have significant cultural value. They produce emotional attachments among their readers and viewers, and they truly do *mean* something to people. For generations, media consumers have seen their own desires for heroism and goodness reflected in Superman, their own psychological darkneses and conflicts in Batman, their identities as social outcasts and misfits in the X-Men, their belief in love and justice triumphant and the power of a female warrior in Wonder Woman, their frustration with the foibles and troubles of everyday living in Spider-Man, their joy and pride in the heroic Black experience in Black Panther. Whatever their origins, Earthly or cosmic, superheroes are part of our shared human identity. Carr and Carstarphen quote comic writer Grant Morrison in their book’s introduction, noting that Morrison speculates “that the superhero (regardless of gender) holds significant psychic resonance in a world without an optimistic view of the future, providing the reader a surrogate ‘spiritual leadership’; the best superheroines, for all their supernatural exploits, are connected to universal human experiences” (4). One of those experiences is that of gender, and thus *Gendered Defenders* was brought into being to examine how the Marvel Cinematic Universe has dealt with this most fundamental of human conditions and identities. The fact that the MCU does so, and that its varying treatment of superheroines has produced high levels of both dizzying excitement and high dudgeon (much of the latter inspired by Internet trolls), suggests the ongoing relevance of superhero media to the lived experiences of people. As the editors note, “[p]opular culture has value and power because it can be a conduit through which an individual adapts and forms their own identity...as well as a means of finding commonality and relationships with others and metaphors that provide strength and catharsis in one’s own life” (5).

The MCU looms particularly large in this ongoing phenomenon because of its highly visible and entrenched cultural presence. The MCU is one of the grandest examples of what Henry

Jenkins calls ‘transmedia storytelling,’ a form of media production that involves using multiple channels of adaptation (films, comic books, novels, cartoons, games, and other tie-in products) to tell the integrated story of an integrated fictional world across both overlapping and separate narratives. (The editors note that the MCU, of course, is more problematic than traditionally reinvented and reimagined worlds such as the Arthurian cycle, because it is a wholly corporate owned- and directed product geared towards market share and profits at least as much as towards telling new or reinterpreted stories.) How the MCU portrays female characters has significant cultural impact, and—in the book’s core conceit—the evolution of Marvel superheroines over time “mirrors the development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world” (7). The MCU does not stand apart from the greater movements of human society, but gives us a reimagined mythology through which to view their evolution. There is great importance in that, and Carr and Carstarphen, in bringing together scholarly essays of thoughtfulness and deep social consideration, demonstrate that superheroines are not mere cultural confections or vehicles for selling toys, but are windows through which we might view ourselves and our treatment of gender.

The book’s opening section, with three essays by the editors, sets the stage, presenting the overall thesis as well as necessary context for understanding how Marvel has portrayed women in its past, and a call to examine Marvel heroines through the lens of a trans/linear feminism (a conceptual model coined by Carstarphen that allows for female agency to pass beyond traditional constraints in progressive personal journeys, obviating the old style master linear narrative). With all these considerations in mind, the majority of the essays in the book involve examinations and critiques of specific Marvel heroines and their relationships to expressions and emanations of power. J. Richard Stevens and Anna C. Turner analyze Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel), the first MCU heroine to be the center of her own film; the essay notes Carol’s evolving image (and problematic portrayals at times) over the decades in comics and her reworking into a figure of positive feminism in the 2019 film (and the comic books beyond, as part of the MCU transmedia experience) in which Carol takes control of her own past and her own identity. The book’s final essay also concerns Carol, examining her character via feminist trauma theory and characterizing her film as a trauma narrative that carries her from trauma to recovery to empowerment. Kathleen M. Turner Ledgerwood looks at the character of Agent Peggy Carter (the first MCU heroine to lead a television show) through the analytical lens of ‘standpoint feminist theory,’ that is, the framework that examines society from the points of view of women (as a marginalized group) in their everyday worlds and the ways in which women socially construct those worlds – it’s a particularly relevant frame for looking at Peggy, a character we see navigating her way through the white male-dominated and intensely gender-divided workplaces of the 1940s and evolving to connect viewers to subsequent waves of feminist thought and action. Amanda K. Kehrberg studies the complicated figure of Jessica Jones and the ways in which Jessica visually and vocally subverts and refuses not only the traditional hero role but the traditional binary concept of gender, particularly through her use (or NON-use) of the superhero costume.

In her essay, Rachel Grant examines the character of Shuri, T'Challah's sister and the leader of her native Wakanda's scientific endeavors. Shuri is an active example of an Afrofuturist counternarrative that prioritizes the heroism of intelligence and future thinking and promotes anti-colonialist (very explicitly, in Shuri's case—viewers of *Black Panther* in the theater will well recall the many excited responses by audience members to her use of the term “colonizer” when speaking to white CIA agent Ross) structures and viewpoints. Grant notes that Shuri “defies gender stereotypes of Black women” and is “a role model that empowers women to be smart and innovative in fields dominated by the patriarchy” (102). Maryanne A. Rhett deftly analyzes Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel) as a new type of cosmopolitan, even global, heroine, who embodies multiple and overlapping identities (woman, Muslim, teenager, feminist, daughter), none of which dominate her character but all of which define her in different ways. In an unusually constructed piece, Stephanie L. Sanders uses the character of police officer and cyborg Misty Knight to represent the possibilities for Black women to be change agents in dismantling unjust systems and presents Misty herself as a source of intersectionality “where gender, race, and power relations are hypervisible” (132).

Julia A. Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus look at the character of Natasha Romanoff (Black Widow), the first MCU heroine, her status as an “outsider” hero (as a Slav on a primarily American team of heroes and as a hero operating within a secret world of espionage) and her sometimes problematic depiction as a physically objectified figure. Mildred F. Perrault and Gregory P. Perrault examine Pepper Potts, her evolving role/increased presence in the MCU across a close reading of multiple examples of Marvel transmedia (films, animated TV, comics, video games), and how her gender and gender roles have been performed in these various media. And Carrielynn D. Reinhard presents a careful and complex analysis of the character Squirrel Girl (who has not yet appeared in an MCU film, though I remain hopeful) that centers on the various ways in which transmedia storytelling can affect and complicate the development and portrayal of a character. Squirrel Girl is a positive character, promoting dialogue over confrontation and friendly diplomacy over fighting, and who focuses on intelligence, friendship, and female empowerment. In doing so she embodies multiple iterations of feminism and the contradictions therein, but Reinhard suggests that the nature of her corporate transmedia existence allows her to reflect and express feminist values but never truly seek to subvert systems of power.

Gendered Defenders is a wonderfully varied collection of thought on a wonderfully varied collection of heroines, and it is a welcome addition to the body of scholarly study of superhero media. [I do admit that I was surprised not to see an essay on Wanda Maximoff, whose journey from *Avengers: Age of Ultron* through *WandaVision*, I think, would make for a fascinating examination of female trauma and power.] If it suffers at all, it is only because, of course, it must inevitably fall behind as the MCU marches on and characters continue to grow and change, and new ones to be introduced. It would be interesting to see how some of the writers might change their conclusions in light of new MCU developments: for example, Peggy Carter becoming an alternate Captain America, or Shuri becoming the new Black Panther. New series like *Hawkeye*

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(featuring Kate Bishop) or *She-Hulk* (with Jennifer Walters) have brought new iterations of superheroines to our attention and express new directions that Marvel is moving in with respect to its female heroes. A sequel to this volume—a *Gendered Defenders 2*—would not only be thematically appropriate to studying a transmedia universe fueled by sequels but would provide new and welcome insights into the continuing evolution of the vitally significant cultural figure of the superheroine.

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