Gender Defenders is a critical exploration of the ways Marvel's female characters both reflect and shape the lived experiences of women. Editors Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen knit together a collection of essays that attempt to answer the question how and why Marvel, and by extension other media companies that stand to benefit from embracing female audiences, continues to “hold them at arm’s length” (p. 7). To answer this question, the volume begins with the assumption that the “Marvel product,” which consists of multiple mediums—comics, video games, mobile apps, TV, and films—is bound into what Henry Jenkins terms a “transmedia” product. Transmedia, as a form of storytelling, disperses multiple layers of a fiction across numerous channels, ultimately creating a “coordinated entertainment experience” (p. 5). The editors suggest that the concept of transmedia is what allows Marvel to create different visions of characters that have the potential to suit a wide variety of audiences—including women.

The book is divided into four main sections. Part 1 is authored by the volume editors and lays the foundation for the subsequent case studies. Chapter 1 explores the “Marvel product” and defines key terms, including “transmedia.” Chapter 2 discusses the history of Marvel’s female leads from early comics to the current franchises, arguing that although transmedia offers potential for Marvel to cater to its devoted female audience, it also prevents the company from straying too far from what fans expect from the brand. Much like feminism and the female identity, change is slow and not always linear. Chapter 3 both supports and challenges this argument, suggesting that fans hold the power to develop female agency in characters through their embrace of them. Using Storm from the film Black Panther (2018) as a brief illustration of how complex stories can move us past and through present and future sensibilities, it introduces the concept of “trans/linear feminism,” urging women to view superheroine texts as a venue to imagine expressions of power that do not yet exist.
Part 2 offers a fair bit of optimism, endeavoring to connect how Kairos, the rhetorical notion of good timing, can help challenge problematic narratives women face. Chapter 4 looks at how the frequent mind erasure in Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel allows her to stand as a continually revised site of feminism, avoiding the limits of any one age of gender politics. Chapter 5 provides an account of Agent Carter through the lens of feminist standpoint theory, arguing that Carter stands as a “true transgenerational and transmedia feminist” (p. 51) connecting women to the various “waves” of feminism, consistently reasserting its necessity across time. In chapter 6, Jessica Jones is read through the lens of postfeminism (defined here as a challenge to binary notions of gender) and poses the bold argument that transmedia storytelling offers Jones the possibility of refusing to “do gender as a necessary part of doing heroism” (p. 67).

In part 3, three case studies explore the racialized “body” of the superheroine, offering a refreshingly intersectional array of essays. Chapter 7 draws upon postcolonial feminism and pan-African identity to showcase how Black Panther's Shuri strips away stereotypes of black womanhood while the transmedia-verse allows her to create “social change for marginalized communities” (p. 103). Chapter 8 explores the relationship between Ms. Marvel/Kamala Khan and global feminism, hypothesizing that Khan represents a “cosmopolitan feminism” in which she is not questioned for her femaleness but rather for her race and age, mirroring issues found in global strains of feminism, especially those in Islamic communities. Lastly, chapter 9 draws on spiritual activism from Gloria Anzaldúa and the character Misty Knight to argue for black women as credible producers and sharers of legitimate knowledge and the ongoing need to reevaluate their contributions in both storytelling and to our institutions writ large.

In the final section, four authors explore how the Marvel brand has evolved in response to cultural and social forces to speak to the lived experiences of women. Using an intersectional approach, chapter 10 investigates the convergence of Black Widow's sexualization and her role as a Soviet spy; despite some deviations from the conventions of American myths, the authors conclude that Black Widow remains a mostly traditional female comic figure. Chapter 11 arrives at a similar conclusion; drawing on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the authors showcase how Pepper Potts's appearance in the Iron Man films speaks to the changing roles of women but also reinforces stereotypical gender norms to keep Potts's overall narrative in the transmedia product consistent. Chapter 12 explores a lesser-known character, Squirrel Girl, and likewise highlights how transmedia figures both reflect a listening ear of the comic industry and their female readers—but cannot fully seem to embrace a feminist agenda, despite feminist character actions. The final chapter ends on a more hopeful note, showcasing how Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel offers an important take on feminist trauma post 9/11, taking on important themes of equality and sexual violence against women and highlighting contemporary issues.

Overall, the unique volume addresses various ways by which Marvel's superheroines reflect the evolving, lived experiences of women. The case studies and character investigations are varied, multifaceted, and draw on a plethora of well-known feminist theories. As a work of critical scholarship, the book has a few flaws worth noting. Several chapters fall a bit short on the theoretical grounding, a few fail to clearly define the scope of their study, and others do not fully provide a coherent argument that addresses the overarching narrative of the volume. These gaps leave something to be wanted in terms of theoretical rigor and longer, more in-depth analyses. I would argue that overall the studies certainly offer insight into how and why Marvel's female characters are empowered and limited by the concept of transmedia; but the question of how
this links to the larger industry remains unanswered. Nevertheless, the book is a fascinating study at the crossroads of an underexplored area of pop culture, feminism, and diversity. It is well suited for graduate studies related to literary criticism, pop culture, gender studies, and fandom.

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