

BOOK REVIEW

Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel: Militarism and Feminism in Comics and Film

Carolyn Cocca. New York: Routledge, 2021 (ISBN 9780367894696)

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Carolyn Cocca's book is a recent entry in Routledge's series "Focus on Gender, Sexuality, and Comics." The series publishes "short-form research in areas of gender and sexuality studies as they relate to comics ..." (ii). Cocca begins by stressing that her book strives "to illuminate contemporary cultural concerns about gender, sexuality, race, migration, imperialism, and war," while focusing on two female superheroes who have "long histories grounded in feminism and military service" (i). In this way, Cocca sets the interpretive framework for her book. Throughout, Cocca iterates that there is a great deal of ambiguity surrounding these characters and their stories, an ambiguity that lends itself to multiple interpretations. Where some might see empowerment, others might see imperialism; where some might see strong, independent women, others may see neoliberal, exclusionary narratives. It is this ambiguity that Cocca trades on to drive her short, yet rich, analyses of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel. As will be noted below, she regularly points out competing interpretations of these works, using ample examples, albeit from limited runs of these series, to support her reading. Overall, Cocca's assessments of these works are negative, minimizing the progress made as insufficient. Although Cocca offers modest praise to these series for centering women as well as minority characters, she concludes by claiming that this progress is not merely insufficient, but in fact, reinforces conservative, neoliberal values, values with which she obviously disagrees. It is this proclivity to focus primarily on negative assessments, dismissing great advances toward equity, that detracts from otherwise rich and insightful analyses.

Cocca's introduction prepares the reader well for what will follow: an interrogation into themes of inclusivity as well as militarism in the comic and film worlds of Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, although the scope of her study is narrow. Cocca notes that, with regard to Wonder Woman, she will focus only on material from the 2011 reboot through 2022—a notably limited representation of Wonder Woman's oeuvre given her presence in popular culture since World War II. Cocca also stresses in the introduction the ambiguous nature of these works, noting that they "can be received as both progressive and conservative, as both fomenting equity and reinforcing long-standing hierarchies" (2). The reader sees this ambiguity in the way Cocca is often at odds with herself: she lauds these comics for empowering women and centering often neglected voices while chastising them for not being inclusive enough.

With respect to inclusivity, Cocca begins by considering the means of production of these comics and films. She notes that, historically, these works have been produced by white, cis-gendered men, and only recently have alternative voices been brought into the production process with, for example, women as directors and writers on films and as artists and authors of comics. In this way, the production side of these comics has become much more representative, and the net result is storylines that are more inclusive. But her praise is measured. Cocca notes, “producers of superhero media have far to go to reach parity ...” (20). Although she highlights progress, her general assessment is that “The two characters’ stories, therefore, may appear in some ways feminist, but they are more aptly described as white hegemonic feminism ...” (4). Thus Cocca finds progress limited and in fact negligible because it has failed to achieve an ideal of parity or equity she never articulates but clearly uses to critique advances in this field. One question we might pose to her is: “Can you envision a Wonder Woman comic that meets all your criteria of inclusivity?” If the answer is “no,” then perhaps there is a problem with the normative standard driving her interpretation and assessment. The remainder of Cocca’s book follows this pattern with varying degrees of success.

The first chapter is titled “Gender, Violence, and Militainment” and focuses primarily on the subversive nature of women using “male” violence, as well as how it is made more palatable by being interposed with the jingoism of a glorified military aesthetic. Thus, women’s military service can be interpreted to both represent “female strength and ambition” as well as “shoring up neoliberal capitalism and liberalism” (40). Through a detailed analysis of comics and films, Cocca argues that the militaristic narratives surrounding Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel are laudatory insofar as they provide these women arenas in which to excel, while simultaneously reinforcing exclusionary narratives. One of the primary components of her analysis is the militaristic aesthetic of these works. Cocca notes that these narratives, as well as the actors’ own narratives around their roles in these films, “frame military service as honorable, necessary, and empowering” (39). Seeing military service in itself as honorable or empowering is not negative; military force ended the Nazi tyranny of Western Europe. But when military power is read as synonymous with imperialism, one can see how such a viewpoint would be problematic. Cocca clearly sees connections between military force and male violence and imperialism, at one point highlighting an artistic panel from Captain Marvel #3 (31, Figure 1.1) to emphasize the usual feminist trope that bombs are “phallic objects.” Of course, bombs are aerodynamic objects, and this shape is “phallic” loosely perceived, but sometimes a bomb is just a bomb. However, when one strives to impose an interpretive paradigm on a particular form of media, confirmation bias will “find” in that media what is needed to reinforce that interpretive scheme.

Yet Cocca does bring out, quite clearly and sharply, with ample examples, how narratives that center military force and focus on violence as dispute resolution often neglect the victims of war, often women (63). This component of her analysis is quite compelling. She even delves into the connections between the actors who portray these superheroes and their narratives around military training and service. This element of her work successfully addresses how purified, idealized, and glorified military use of force is portrayed in these media and minimizes or ignores the very real suffering generated by military force, often at the expense of marginalized people.

The themes of chapter 1 are carried over to chapters 2 and 3, making the demarcations fairly arbitrary. But as Cocca opens her section on military service, empowerment, and diversification, she reiterates the ambiguous nature of the material with which she’s dealing, noting, “The focus on the formerly marginalized individual and on the

diversity of the group may be read as empowering, feminist, anti-racist work that subverts inequalities, but also as tokenizing, postfeminist, and postrace success stories that shore up the status quo" (41). In this case, particularly, it would be helpful to remind the reader, and Cocca, that just because something is susceptible to multiple interpretations doesn't mean each is equally plausible, or constructive. For example, with reference to Wonder Woman, centering a black, lesbian Etta Candy is progress, considering the Etta Candy of old. Cocca notes that Etta Candy's evolution is an improvement. She is a strong, empowered Black woman who does not evince traditional stereotypes such as "jezebel, sapphire, matriarch, welfare queen ..." (54). In addition, her same-sex relationship is foregrounded. So for Cocca these indicate "some success" (54). But she notes immediately thereafter, "the presence of this small number of individuals from marginalized groups ... can also lead to neoliberal, postfeminist, and postrace assertions ..." such as "difference is acceptable as long as it does not make a structural difference ..." (55). It is unfortunate that Cocca undercuts the advent of a major, laudable, Black, lesbian character, like Etta Candy, by claiming not only that it is insufficient but also that it may be retrograde because she reads a successful Black woman as reinforcing the status quo. One wonders what success looks like to Cocca. What would an acceptable Etta Candy be?

Cocca's book continues by focusing on the othering of adversaries and refugees. She opens by noting, "The centering of women in such narratives is still novel, but which women are centered and nuanced and which are unnamed and homogenized reinscribes hierarchies of race, ethnicity, religion, and nation" (61). Cocca's emphasis in this chapter on refugees and marginalized peoples is intriguing. She is playing here with the common trope of the great, white savior, and how these white, Western women rush in to save people of color. She documents instances where Wonder Woman combats Latino warlords, and assists the fictional African nation of Bwunda, as well as refugee camps, and areas throughout the Middle East. She notes how in these engagements these people are presented as background, not focused on as unique individuals. She concludes, "it is not transcultural feminist solidarity but neo-colonial, neoliberal and neoconservative in its assumptions of superiority" (73). Insofar as these characters are "background figures without agency and nuance" (73), it is hard not to agree with Cocca. Herein one can begin to appreciate her concern with imperialist metanarratives. It is in moments like these that Cocca's book earns its place on one's bookshelf. Superhero narratives do often paint a simplistic picture of the world, of good and evil. How this is portrayed does matter insofar as we interpret real life according to narratives we find compelling. If we uncritically accept the narratives portrayed here, we do risk minimizing the agency and humanity of the other. Yet this analysis is hampered by Cocca's inability to see any laudable act by Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel as praiseworthy. Even Wonder Woman's sparing of Dr. Poison at the end of the 2017 Wonder Woman film is evaluated thus: "This re-centers Diana's whiteness, traditional beauty, and nondisabled body as heroic, as it others and dismisses Maru" (69). Cocca can't see Wonder Woman's act as compassionate; it has to be insidious, so it becomes an othering of Maru. Would Cocca have been happier if she'd killed Maru? As Cocca notes, "Stories framing these white, female, cisgender, nonqueer, nondisabled superheroes as vulnerable individuals themselves can be read in multiple ways ..." (80). That she chooses the most uncharitable reading is unfortunate.

Any interpretive framework is a hypothesis. It is an example of abductive reasoning that seeks to explain what appear to be disconnected phenomena under a single account (see Peirce 2020). For example, one notes incidences A, B, and C, and at first they

appear to be disparate, yet somehow similar instances of a kind of behavior or attitude. They make sense if they are understood as manifestations of, for example, imperialism or white supremacy. One then applies this interpretive framework to the instances, and sees that they in fact do make more sense read through this lens, so one's interpretation becomes more plausible than alternative accounts. Further incidences, when located, reinforce this interpretation insofar as they clearly fit this paradigm. The proper methodology, therefore, is to note a series or conglomeration of seemingly disparate phenomena, proffer a hypothesis, and then determine whether it explains these facts best among possible alternatives. Cocca gets the process reversed. She begins from the assumption that all facets of Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel are always already neoconservative, neoliberal, imperialist, ableist, or what have you and then forces every detail of these stories into that framework to confirm her interpretation. The most egregious example of this is when she claims that the nickname "Bean" is problematic due to its similarity to a slur for Mexicans (74). The problem with this reading is that it disregards several facts that undercut that interpretation. First, "Bean" is a fairly common nickname for a small baby or child. Second, the nickname is explainable by the fact that Captain Marvel is from Boston, or "Bean town," which Cocca acknowledges. The fact that Captain Marvel uses the nickname "Bean" is more readily and plausibly explained by alternative accounts. Cocca takes an innocuous nickname and attributes it to anti-Mexican sentiment by unconvincingly connecting it to a pejorative term that is only loosely etymologically related to it and ignoring the surrounding context that accounts for the nickname fully. One could say this is disingenuous, but I think it exemplifies the confirmation bias present in some instances wherein Cocca seeks to validate her interpretive schema through labored, infelicitous readings of these works. The problem with this approach to interpretation is that applying a monolithic and myopic interpretation to complex phenomena in media is inaccurate insofar as it fails to address the subtleties of the human condition and, more important, it trivializes actual instances of problematic phenomena that Cocca is adept at bringing out in other places. She thus unnecessarily undercuts her own credibility with unnecessary and infelicitous interpretations of innocuous material. It's the academic equivalent of crying wolf, and it is unfortunate because it detracts from Cocca's at times insightful work.

Cocca would do well to adopt the principle of charity. Such an approach would enable her to even-handedly appreciate the value of the efforts of the creators of these works for what they are, bona fide attempts to create more inclusive stories for a broader, more diverse audience base, and provide greater legitimacy to her critiques when relevant.

Reference

Peirce, Charles Sanders. 2020. Abduction and induction. In *Philosophical writings of Peirce*, ed. Justus Buchler. New York: Dover Publications.

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