

Superhero Sea Change: Generational Conflict in Marvel Comics and Audiences

Recent complaints about the increased diversity in Marvel comics often come from those who self-identify as the “core audience.” While much online and journalistic attention has focused on the role of gender and race in these changes and in the responses to them, this paper will focus on how constructions of age affects these debates. Comics audiences who came of age in the twentieth century have seen their heroes grow up with them, with figures such as Bruce Banner, Tony Stark, and Peter Parker all representing first the baby-boomer generation, and then aging up to emulate Gen X. However, Marvel has recently chosen to bestow several classic mantles on teenagers: Miles Morales as Spiderman, Kamela Khan as Ms. Marvel, and Riri Williams as Ironheart. This paper will explore the promotion of this next generation of Marvel superheroes, which is forging a place in the Marvel universe for a new generation of fans.

We will show how the comics speak specifically to the concerns of children and young adults, and their own generational understandings of a diverse and inclusive world, of interactive fan engagement, and of a hopeful optimism that is at odds with the cynicism of Generation X. We will contrast this inclusivity and looking towards the future with the desire among some segments of fandom for comics to be aimed specifically at the traditional, but aging, audience. We will argue that the replacement of these heroes with younger, more diverse characters has provided a cultural touch-stone for some older fans to express fears about societal transformations in which class and gender privilege are being challenged. While this fear is often expressed in terms of age, with fans complaining that Marvel has abandoned their older audience in favour of a new, younger generation, our paper will examine how these complaints enunciate not just age-ist assumptions about millennials, Gen Y, and Gen Z, but also racist and sexist rejections of the diversity that characterizes the younger generations and the newest slate of superheroes.