

Our Mightiest Heroes: US Identity Politics and Ideal Citizenship in the new *Ms. Marvel*

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Introduction: Theory and Methodology

A young woman holds a comic book up in front of her. On the cover of the book is image of a woman, with a bright red scarf and a bold yellow lightning bolt on her t-shirt. Where the top of the image has cut off the figure's face, the woman has carefully positioned the book so that her eyes and her head complete the image. Her composite picture joins other, similarly staged pictures online, as people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities all post the picture to Twitter with the same signifier: #IAmMsMarvel.

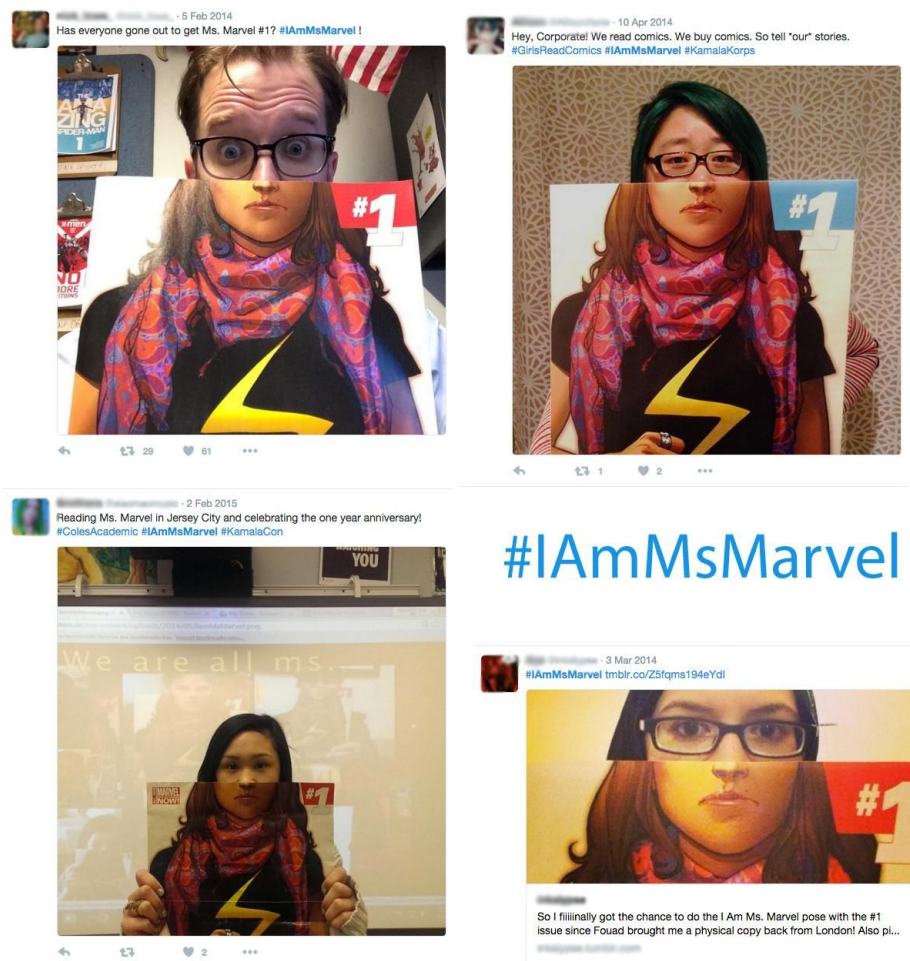


Image 1.1

These images bear different messages and seem to serve different purposes: some celebrate the comic's success, others urge their friends and followers to read the comic for themselves, while others still use the image to call corporate attention to the growth of female audiences.¹ A single figure seems to contain a plurality of meanings and to represent a myriad of identities. It bears the question then—who is Ms. Marvel? It is my goal in this paper to explore the answer to this question, of who Ms. Marvel is, as a comic book superhero, as an industry product, and as a cultural icon.

In a popular culture environment saturated with images of superheroes, it is important to look beyond the apparent entertainment value of the genre and consider the social effects of superhero stories, particularly their potential to visualize national ideals and engage a shared morality. The central question of my research is whether the ideal-laden narratives of superhero comics serves only to reflect established social norms, or if they can themselves act to constitute new ideals and imagine a new national morality. Towards this end I examined the new *Ms. Marvel* series starring Kamala Khan—a polymorphing, Pakistani-American high school student who replaced Carol Danvers, the white, European-American military officer who previously held the mantle. I conducted my research over many sites, both physically bounded and virtually constituted, mixing

¹ See Image 1.1. Top left: Nick Lowe (nick_lowe), “Has everyone gone out to get Ms. Marvel #1?”, (Feb 5, 2014) Tweet. Top right: Alison (AllisonAerie), “Hey, Corporate! We read comics. We buy comics. So tell ‘our’ stories.”, (Apr 10, 2014) Tweet. Bottom left: Smithers (xiaomaomusic), “Reading Ms. Marvel in Jersey City and celebrating the one year anniversary!”, (Feb 2, 2015) Tweet. Bottom Right: Aya (inkalypse), (Mar 2, 2014) Tweet.

participant-observation, interviews, and archival research. I offer insight into the industry norms that dominate comics “diversity,” the public narratives *Ms. Marvel*’s creators employed in presenting the series, the narrative and aesthetic techniques used to encode socially salient themes in the comic, and the way these themes were received and renegotiated by audiences through fan productions. Ultimately, I find in *Ms. Marvel* a dynamic text and a site of reimagining that engages an emerging praxis of identity politics, built upon an intersectional model of identity. Before outlining in more detail the method of my research and format of this paper, I will turn to the theoretical underpinnings that enabled and shaped my approach to this research.

On one level, my project owes much to comic studies and its existing literature, especially that regarding the tension between industry and audience agency. The conception of comic companies as pluralistic entities that both aim to achieve commercial success and to reflect the narrative wishes of its readers is of particular interest to me. I was struck by the emerging “collaborative effort” that results from the increasing “permeability of the barrier between” producer and reader as social media and new talent recruitment destabilize these once assumed categories.² Throughout this paper I have encountered moments that seem to

² Jason Dittmer, “Introducing Nationalist Superheroes: Metaphors, Narratives, and Geopolitics,” in *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 3-4. Also see Magda Erik-Soussi “The Western Sailor Moon Generation: North American Woman & Feminine-Friendly Global Manga,” in *Global Manga: Japanese Comics Without Japan*, ed. Casey Brienza, (London: Ashgate, 2015) 23-44 for how this trend is influencing comics production beyond “Western” Anglophone traditions of comics.

foreground both of these aspects—the different meanings that can be interpreted in the simultaneous but at times incongruous contexts of respective commercial and audience interests, as well as how perceptions of closer audience or fan involvement complicate these frictions. This shifting environment will also be important to my discussion of fan production, and of how an imagination of the industry gives a primacy of visual fan art over other kinds of production.

Several academics working in comics studies have been incredibly useful for shaping this project. Crucially, Jason Dittmer’s geopolitical analysis of what he isolates as “nationalist heroes” offers insight into how superhero comics serve not simply as a “‘reflection’ of preexisting and seemingly innate American values,” but are “a discourse *through which* the world becomes understandable.”³ My own approach diverges, however, from Dittmer’s isolation of “nationalist heroes” as characters like Captain America who embody the nation, “legitimizing, contesting, and reworking states’ foreign policies.”⁴ Instead, I posit that all superheroes contribute to claims, not about what the nation should do (which would focus on foreign policy), but rather who it is that carries out moral actions in the United States—thus contributing to national projects of belonging that construct citizenship. I return to this subject in the following section.

Because of this difference in focus, rather than encountering Dittmer’s conceptual problems of reconciling the range of gender, race and general diversity

³ Dittmer, 2-3. Emphasis in original.

⁴ Ibid., 3, 7.

of the body politic into a single body heroic,⁵ I look towards how a diversifying range of heroes both reflects a similar change of national socialities and suggests still further change. I further focus by examining how Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel, offers a claim about who can constitute a hero, an ideal moral actor, in contemporary U.S. culture. I do this while keeping in mind Anna Beatrice Scott's work on "supernatural" blackness as an exoticized othering of African American superheroes.⁶ Clearly it is important to analyze seemingly positive representations of non-white heroes for underlying, internalized conventions of marginalization - a nuance which will be important for my visual and textual analysis of *Ms. Marvel* in a later chapter.

I am also calling upon existing anthropological investigations that have isolated comics as a way to shed light on projects of citizenship formation and community change. Notably, Andrew Dicks and his visual ethnographic work with the Khwe San community in South Africa demonstrate the power of a comic as a dynamic text that serves to re-imagine society and construct new social values to be enacted by its readers.⁷ In this research, members of the Khwe San community were asked to produce short comic strips to model desired public health practices for the community.⁸ The comics drew upon the reader's basic identification of the protagonist—the character depicted with a favorable, positive

⁵ Ibid., Chapters 2-3.

⁶ Anna Beatrice Scott, "Superpower vs Supernatural: Black Superheroes and the Quest for a Mutant Reality," "journal of visual culture," 5, no. 3 (2006).

⁷ Andrew Dicks, "Stories from Below: Subject Generated Comics" *Visual Anthropology*, 28, no. 2 (2015).

⁸ Ibid.

outcome—as a figure who modeled behavior and values that should be replicated. This system of representation is not conceptually dissimilar from the ability of mythology to serve as a teaching device for shared community values and expectations for adulthood. In this case, the comics modeled a form of ideal biomedical citizenship that the South African community wanted to achieve. While my interest does not lie with biomedical citizenship, the dynamic potential of comics that is demonstrated in Dicks’ study are suitable to build upon for my exploration of the moral citizenship inspired by superheroes.

Before I proceed with contextualizing my investigation within anthropological trends and outlining the course of my project I will first expand upon the understanding of citizenship that I am utilizing. My theorization of citizenship owes much to Nira Yuval-Davis’s work on the nation-state and what she terms the “politics of belonging,” which demarcate “boundaries of the political community of belonging,”— in this case the “‘imagined communities’” of nations.⁹ Yuval-Davis subsequently asks the question, “are nationalist politics of belonging still the hegemonic model of belonging at the beginning of the twenty-first century?”¹⁰ While her investigation of alternative non-national categories of belonging, such as to religious groups¹¹ or diaspora networks,¹² is compelling and certainly problematizes the primacy of national citizenship in

⁹ Nira Yuval-Davis, *Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations*, (London: SAGE Publishing, 2012), 20, with reference to Benedict Anderson.

¹⁰ Ibid., 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 113.

¹² Ibid., 81.

identity politics, national belonging is still a model of belonging that has relevance and unexamined aspects. One only has to look at the rhetoric of the presidential campaigns this year to understand the continued importance of this project and the lived consequences of those who are othered through the politics of belonging. National belonging, experienced by the individual as citizenship, is by no means conferred on the basis of geography, or birth alone, and the question of what “is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community” is at the heart of my research.¹³ In the project of citizenship that comics construct, I argue that belonging to a *shared morality*, and having the ability to perform this morality, reveals a specific form of citizenship that is at the center of constructing and maintaining the imagined nation.

This morality is historically tied to certain identity aspects privileged by most national institutions of power¹⁴—white, cis-male, able bodied, upper-class, Judeo-Christian, heterosexuality. However, in light of social changes, the United States strives more and more to imagine itself as a multicultural-nation whose morality is based on the tolerance of cultural diversity. The recent growth of “diversity” in comics, including superhero comics seems to be a reflection of this multicultural tolerance, and indeed *Ms. Marvel*, in many ways, manifests as a celebration of the “cultural” position that Kamala Khan occupies. However, in my analysis, I ultimately moved past the idea of multiculturalism to examine how *Ms. Marvel* participates in an emerging discourse on national morality that utilizes

¹³ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12-15.

intersectionality¹⁵ to question the centrality of “culture” as a homogenous unit of national belonging. This theoretical shift in my work builds on the political theory of Rita Dhamoon, whose criticism of the unfulfilled promises of acceptance through multiculturalism in Canadian politics of belonging¹⁶ Dhamoon posits that multiculturalism as a political project serves only to reify cultures—both normalized, national “white” culture, and marginalized but celebrated cultures—and their lines of difference, rather than to truly integrate these heterogeneous groups into a single national imaginary.¹⁷ In Dhamoon’s thinking, the critical lens of intersectionality—which both points to the multitude of power-laden categories that are imposed on any individual and denies the possibility to extricate the lived experiences of these categories from one another—becomes a tool for combating this reification.¹⁸ Intersectionality illuminates both the variance within groups constructed by the multicultural nation-state as occupying a single cultural category and the common experiences—of gender, age, ability—that move between these categories. This shift ultimately exposes the instability of the “lines of difference” upon which belonging is conveyed, made conditional, or denied, and thus questions their legitimacy as the basis for institutions of power. This political theory is an

¹⁵ A concept developed out of third-wave feminism largely by women of color, and theorized as a key concept in both Yuval-Davis’s and Rita Dhamoon’s work.

¹⁶ Rita Dhamoon, *Identity/Difference Politics: How Difference is Produced, and Why It Matters*, (Toronto: UBC Press, 2009).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

elaboration of the same move “against culture” that Lila Abu-Lughod¹⁹ and other anthropologists are undertaking in contemporary anthropology. It is my hope that this project can touch upon the way that this reflexive thinking has begun to influence the model of identity politics enacted by popular entertainment mediums, such as comics.

Another position that my project occupies within the body of anthropological literature is its relation to visual anthropology. This subfield isolates three distinct sites of engagement in studying visual culture: points of production (encoding); of transmission, and of reception (decoding). This general structure formed the backbone of my research. I am also in debt to projects like Deborah Matzner’s,²⁰ who explored the ways that media producers are influenced by their own imaginings of the audience, which creates moments of crossover and complexity within these seemingly distinct roles.

This ultimately brings me to the outline of this paper. After a brief history of comics, particularly *Marvel* comics traditions, which provide a context for the models of heroism from which Kamala Khan emerged, my paper is divided into three sections. Chapter 2 is focused on the production of comics of “diversity” generally (section 1), as well as the production of *Ms. Marvel* specifically (section 2). My methods are a blend of ethnographic engagement at a convention site, and

¹⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, ed. Richard G. Fox, (1991), 138-162.

²⁰ Deborah Matzner, “‘My Maid Watches It’: Key Symbols and Ambivalent Sentiments of the Production of Television Programming in India,” *Anthropology Quarterly*, 87 no. 4, (2014) 1229-56.

the use of digital archives, and the details of the rationale and effects of these methods are addressed throughout. Chapter 3 is an analysis of the *Ms. Marvel* comics themselves, looking at the way that value claims have been encoded and transmitted in the visual indexes of the dynamic text itself. In Chapter 4 I turn to looking at the fan reception of the comic and isolated a digital site of production to look at the ways that audience members of the comic have responded to the text's content as well as form. Finally Chapter 5 serves to reflect on the work I have completed in this project, as well as on the way I have completed it. I leave with a discussion of how this work may contribute to an ongoing discursive process occurring not only in academia, but also in the lived experiences of people negotiating and re-imagining ideal citizenship in the United States.

From Mar-Vell to Kamala Khan: A History of Marvel Comics

In December 1940 *Captain America Comics #1* was released; on its cover a star-spangled Steve Rogers socked Adolf Hitler across the jaw.²¹ This image was met with controversy and even hate, as it appeared a year before the United States entered WWII; it also sold over a million copies. Marvel's predecessor, Timely Comics, used their hero to imagine a national future through the creation of an ideal man, a superhero, who embodied the characteristics they wished for the nation. Captain America's idealized American patriotism, as the strong, brave and just soldier who fought to defend his country, was aimed directly at the heart and selfhood of a nation that had yet to enter the war.

In November 2013, Marvel announced that Kamala Khan would be the new Ms. Marvel, releasing an image that would be the cover of the first issue. The image featured the torso and lower face of a young, non-white woman wearing her own Ms. Marvel lightening bolt symbol and a colorful scarf.²² When the collected first volume was released in the following October it was the best selling graphic-novel of any company and in any genre. *Ms. Marvel* also dared to imagine a new future for our nation, one in which the Islamophobia and racism which divides our country and marginalizes too many of its people will be replaced by a shared morality that accepts these groups as a part of a unified ideal, and in fact finds heroism within them. Captain America and Ms. Marvel are by no means the only Marvel superheroes who have utilized their genre to comment on

²¹ See Image 1.2. *Captain America Comics #1*, cover by Jack Kirby.

²² See Image 1.3. *Ms. Marvel #1*, cover by Sara Pichelli.

or engage with questions of what it is to be a national ideal, to extend the virtues and expectations of positive citizenship to their heroic extremes. There have been many heroes who have come between, each with their own relationship and approach to the topic, and each contributing to a tradition of political representation that Kamala Khan participates in. Thus the goal of this section is to trace the continuity of various historical approaches used by comics to construct or challenge ideals, and to consider if and how *Ms. Marvel* contributes a something new to this practice.



Image 1.2

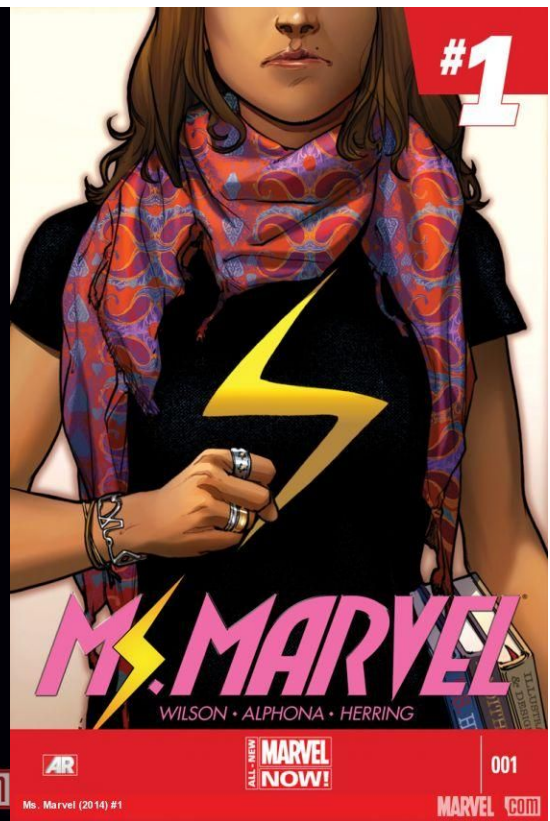
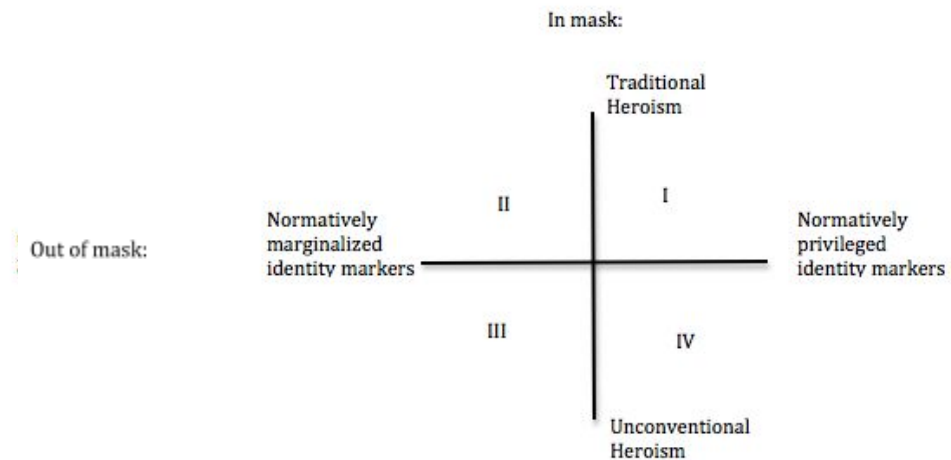


Image 1.3

The heroic ideal, and the everyday model of citizenship it creates through narrative representation, has two essential components. It is the through

interaction between these two components that I will explore the different methods of political engagement in comics over time. One of these components is the identity of the hero underneath the ‘mask’, the secret identity, the one that more closely displays the real, lived identity aspects that are then idealized through heroism. It is against this ideal that boundaries of marginalization are illustrated, strengthened, or challenged. While superhero characters may not always be easily separated from their powers, I will be examining the out of mask identity as those visual and narrative markers that map directly onto lived experiences that occur in the real world. The other component I will be examining is the behavior of the hero in the ‘mask.’ The actions of a character as they perform super-heroism make claims about shared morality and virtuous behavior. Examining the relationship between characters’ out of mask identities and their in mask actions may reveal different claims about who can or should fulfill a heroic ideal. Furthermore I will be tracing ways that these two components were used either to affirm or challenge normative social and genre expectations of a hero. Heroes may challenge hegemonic notions of ideal citizenship identity (and the structures which privilege them) through one of these aspects while affirming the normative hegemony with the other. Examining the different combinations of normative or non-normative aspects will shed light on the position that *Ms. Marvel* occupies within comics as well as other traditions the comic is in dialogue with.

In order to facilitate this analysis I have created a grid with two axes to visualize the different possibilities that a comparison of out of mask identity models and in mask heroic action models can offer. On the x-axis is the out of mask identity, which can either be norm affirming, or norm challenging. While the exact details of which identity categories are privileged in dominant societal norms changes based on context and time, this is a fairly traceable category. The y-axis contains the in mask models of action, which are based on genre expectations and again, are highly reliant on social and industry context.



Returning to the example of Captain America, this hero would occupy quadrant I of the grid. Captain America is the very visualization of normative, privileged identity—Steve Rogers is a white, (cis) male who is extremely able bodied. He also displays the traits of firmly traditional heroism. While superheroes themselves were a relatively new concept, Captain America, as a super soldier fit into an existing cultural narrative. In the wake of World War I, soldiers and men of the national military were championed as national heroes.

Captain America consciously calls upon this shared understanding of national heroism to create their hero. The comic's subversive or dynamic potential, therefore, was not a product of denying or challenging social norms, but rather affirmed these norms to make a claim that the existing national morality already constructed US participation in World War II as a necessary, just action.

Miles Morales, the Ultimate Spider-Man, is a good example of a superhero from Marvel comics who occupies quadrant II. He is representative of a trend in comics of broadening representation by taking established white male superheroes and creating a close replica of them who is of another gender or race. Sometimes these heroes occupied lesser or sidekick status positions, but they have largely gone on to become titles in their own right. In these cases, the broadening of the definition of hero occurs distinctly in the representation of the hero's out of mask identity as a marginalized identity, but does little to challenge the behavior and values which render this identity worthy of inclusion into heroic ideals. Instead it calls upon traditional forms of heroism that were established and remain dominated by white, male heroes.

Miles Morales is a young man of mixed race—his father is African American while his mother is Latina— from Brooklyn, New York. He is an incredibly intelligent student who is selected to attend a prestigious private boarding school in New York.²³ While Miles certainly shares identity

²³ Brian Michael Bendis, artist Sara Pichelli and David Messina, *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man #1*, Marvel Comics. See Image 1.4, cover variant by Sara Pichelli.

characteristics with groups of people still marginalized by the norms of privilege, the way he enacts his role as a hero largely affirms rather than renegotiates the ideal. Miles Morales gets bitten by a radioactive spider from the same science experiment that created the one which bit Peter Parker, the original, white Spider-Man, albeit a few years later.²⁴ After briefly meeting Peter Parker, and also looking up to him as a media icon and hero, Miles Morales builds his heroic morality directly around Peter Parker and his actions. After Peter's death, Morales draws upon his memories and decides to take up the mantle of Spiderman, convincing himself by thinking, "With great power comes great responsibility, What would Peter Parker do."²⁵ Other role models and mentors he encounters are also directly reverent of the first Spider-Man, such as Jessica Drew, a female clone of Peter.²⁶ Even though Morales exhibits some powers different from Peter Parker's original array of spider abilities, he works to develop these powers to once again be able to achieve the kinds of heroic actions that Peter did as Spiderman.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* #12.

²⁶ *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* #4.



Image 1.4

Thus Morales' success and worthiness as a hero is built entirely on his ability to replicate the existing white dominated model of heroism. I would term this an assimilative model. While one cannot deny that the diversity Morales' out of mask identity has had an impact on the cultural understanding of a hero, his ability to access the heroic ideal is predicated on adhering to normative behavior rather than expanding the definition of the norm in order to reflect and re-evaluate the intersectional realities of identity in society. To make plain its real world representational claim, acceptance as ideal citizens is extended to non-white individuals only to the extent that they are willing and able to perform the existing

models of white citizenship and assimilate. Not only is this rigid model of belonging unachievable for many people facing institutional systems of oppression that make performing white citizenship impossible, but I would severely question that this constitutes a step towards inclusivity at all.

Heroes that occupy quadrant IV also can fall into an assimilative model. For example the *X-Men*, a comic with its origins in the 60s, has often addressed issues of prejudice, racism, and models of activism as they are viewed by the government. However, it does this largely through metaphoric and symbolic approaches located in the actions and structures of the heroic team while in mask. Professor X and his virtuous X-Men were subject to scrutiny and prejudice due to their role as mutants—a unique species diverged from the homo sapiens species by virtue of their puberty-activated, power-bestowing ‘X Gene.’ Out of mask mutants were subject to discrimination and prejudice, justified on the grounds of the characters actions while in mask. Furthermore, the original X-Men team was all white, heterosexual, middle to upper class, cis-gendered and largely male.²⁷ Thus, I feel confident placing the original X-Men in a normative identity category because if one were to remove the elements of superpowers, the remaining factors largely affirmed normative ideas of heroism and citizenship. The X-Men could visually and narratively ‘pass’ and did not challenge readers to accept a difference in their heroes that directly challenged hierarchical identity norms, as they might have been asked to if the original X-Men included members of different races or

²⁷ Stan Lee, artist Jack Kirby, *The X-Men* #1, Marvel Comics, 1963. See Image 1.5, cover by Jack Kirby.

sexualities for example. While eventually characters with more diverse ‘out of mask’ identities who experienced a wide range of privilege or oppression based on intersectional contexts were included in the X-Men, thus moving some of its members into other quadrants of the conceptual grid I am utilizing, this was largely lacking in the comic during the time its metaphors of activism were most strongly relevant to public debate.



Image 1.5

This brings me to the second classification of the X-men, as furthering unconventional models of heroic or admirable action. As a superhero team, the mutants of the X-Men work cooperatively alongside the non-mutant armed forces, police, and civilians as well as non-mutant superheroes. They behave morally and as the comic continues often seek diplomatic resolutions before turning to violence. These factors in themselves do not greatly stretch the bounds of heroic

action. When viewed in a larger social and historical context, however, the unconventional form and purpose of this representation becomes clear. The X-Men's mutant adversaries were Magneto and his Brotherhood of (Evil) Mutants, a group that sought only the betterment of mutant-kind and actively attacked human society and those mutants who aided humanity. These two teams, the X-Men and the Brotherhood, were clear metaphors for the existing division in the leadership, ideology and methodology of the Civil Rights movement in the US. The X-Men with their assimilation oriented, (relatively) peaceful and cooperative approach were a direct parallel to the nonviolent movement headed by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The Brotherhood's separatist militancy was meant to represent more violent Civil Rights forces such as Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. The moral roles that these two fictional groups were placed in throughout the narrative of the comic's original run made definite claims about the moral justifiability of their real life counterparts and called for their inclusion into society or exclusion respectively.

The *X-Men* comic's claims about heroic and therefore civic worthiness were based on 'out of mask' identities that were kept firmly in the metaphorical and ambiguous realm—these mutants were white passing and visually aligned with the norm rather than mirroring the realities of racial discrimination they were allegories for. Thus the claims about national life were made through the narrative depiction of 'in mask' actions rather than through 'unmasked' identities. It drew a new form of civic engagement as praiseworthy into the national imaginary by

introducing it symbolically as a new model of super-heroism used by the X-Men combining protest, activism, and heroic combat. Ultimately, however, this limited call for change joined other social forces in idealizing the peaceful and partial assimilation of marginalized peoples into privileged norms in order to prevent more radical, violent action.

I will now turn to the new *Ms. Marvel*, Kamala Khan, and the quadrant she fits into. Kamala Khan is the nerdy, Muslim, First-Generation-American daughter of Pakistani immigrants who lives and goes to high school in Jersey City. She is also a polymorphing superhero. While at first glance Kamala Khan might seem to follow a model of ‘diverse’ hero similar to that of Miles Morales because she is taking on the mantle of a white hero, I would argue that she actually occupies a place in quadrant III. When her powers first manifest, Kamala considers using her shapeshifting abilities to actually embody her idol, Carol Danvers—which would constitute a literal performance of normative heroism. Instead, in a reflexive process that I will look at more closely in my aesthetic and narrative analysis of the comic in Chapter 3, Kamala decides to forge her own path as a hero. She constructs her own moral and behavioral in mask identity using the values that her family and her faith taught her. This unconventional process forces readers to acknowledge that Kamala’s ability to perform the heroic role she undoubtedly occupies is based directly on her ‘diverse’ identity markers and not on her ability to subsume them through assimilation or subordinate them to a dominant norm. This model of representation and heroism truly challenges

and reconceptualized existing norms in order to call for the integration of currently marginalized groups into the ideal of citizenship without requiring them to abandon the identity markers and experiences that currently marginalize them. The quadrant III example of Kamala, which harkens to existing and established traditions of comic superheroes and then purposefully questions them in order to suggest new possibilities, nonetheless utilizes a positive notion of heroism to affirm that a shared national identity exists and that ideal citizenship is both possible and a positive construct.

At this point I think it is important to move away from this focus on ideal in order to acknowledge the parts of the superhero genre that actively deconstruct ideals and challenge the romanticized nationalism that underlies the metaphor of citizenship. In the quadrant axes I have been referring to, I have kept my interpretations of unconventional heroic behavior within certain positive moral bounds. Now I wish to extend them to their logical ends—the vigilante, the anti-hero. I am excluding villains from this consideration because I would argue that they largely make claims about exclusionary practices, and anti-ideals,²⁸ rather than serve to question the usefulness of the hero concept generally.

The Punisher, a character created in 1974,²⁹ is one example of a quadrant IV anti-hero. Frank Castle is a former Marine who dons the name the Punisher

²⁸ For example the Cold War depiction of Soviet Red Room superspies, or Iron Man's foe the Mandarin, are both clear practices in Othering rather than subversions of the discourse of national heroism itself.

²⁹ First appearance, *The Amazing Spider-Man* #129, writer Gerry Conway, artist Ross Andru, Marvel Comics. See Image 1.6, cover by John Romita Sr.

when he sets out as a vengeful killer on the mission to take down worse criminals. Created in the disillusioned wake of the Vietnam War, Castle seems to embody the dark cynicism of a nation exploring the question if the ends justify the means. This subversion of the hero model, enacted by a white, hyper-masculine former soldier does not deny the ideal of moral citizenship to one unworthy man, but rather questions that the



Image 1.6

nation even has a moral center to participate in. A quadrant III anti-hero, on the other hand, may often be excluded from the ideal of national citizenship, and rather than deconstruct the concept, offers a separatist, pluralist view that normative citizenship and national belonging is not necessarily the only goal. For example, Magneto, whose origins as a villain—which I discussed previously—become more complex as a quadrant III anti-hero. Unlike the original X-Men, Magneto also occupies an identity category outside of the norm—he is a Jewish man, who, after surviving the Holocaust and leaving his native Germany, remained without a permanent home. Magneto’s actions shift through normative categories of morality and immorality in the pursuit of his goal to protect mutant-kind. His range of actions highlight the relativity of moral views, and posits that an incommensurability of views does not necessarily

relegate a character permanently to villainy. His character is an important figure for exploring the possibility that groups excluded from national norms instead formulate their own system of morals and standards for ideal behavior and belonging.

The complexity introduced by these anti-hero figures also reflects a view to transform comics into a more mature, edgy medium. While at their creation in the 1940s comics were widely accepted across many age groups, by the 1950s calls for censorship limited material to that which was appropriate for children alone.³⁰ Subsequently to push back, and rebuild an appeal with older audiences, and compete with audiences captured by unrestrained content of the underground and independent comics, many industry comics adopted darker themes and more complex characters.³¹ Thus it is important to consider how the publishing environment itself, and the relationships between different titles influences the development of each superhero.

Now that I have examined in part how the new *Ms. Marvel* compares to existing models of heroism and identity within the comics tradition, it is also important to understand how Kamala Khan relates to previous heroes who have worn the mantle that she has inherited. Kamala's Ms. Marvel is heir to a lineage of heroes who have held the name Captain Marvel or Ms. Marvel since the very early days of comics. Examining this line, and looking at how the characters

³⁰ Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009).

³¹ Ibid.

around which the titles were formed fit into my previous quadrant model, will provide further insight into *Ms. Marvel*'s positionality within the comics industry, its audience, and a national imaginary at large.

The original Captain Marvel was made by Fawcett Comics in the 1940s; he was a hero with super strength, flight, and a number of other powers who was accompanied by a team of related heroes called the Marvels.³² Fawcett Comics was legally banned from continuing the title due to its similarities to Superman until the 60's when Marvel Comics won the rights to the character and name. In this new incarnation Captain Marvel, or Mar-Vell, was an alien hero who adopted Earth as his realm to protect after being branded a traitor and banished from his original home.³³ Though he had alien origins, Mar-Vell appeared as a white, blonde, hyper-muscular man, and much like the Kryptonian Superman, resembled the peak of white masculinity. Both at its inception and in later runs featuring Mar-Vell, the hero firmly occupied quadrant I of the grid, affirming norms of both white identity and masculine morality as a basis for ideal citizenry behavior.

³² *Whiz Comics* #2, Fawcett Comics, (1940).

³³ Stan Lee, artist Gene Colan, *Marvel Super-Heroes* #12, Marvel Comics, (1967).



Image 1.7

Meanwhile a companion title to Captain Marvel, *Ms. Marvel* began printing in 1977. Carol Danvers originated the role of Ms. Marvel.³⁴ She is a United States Air Force officer given powers when an explosive accident with Captain Mar-Vell leaves her with partially hybridized alien DNA.³⁵ With only two short interruptions, Carol Danvers had occupied the role from its inception, being the only star of two stand-alone title runs of *Ms. Marvel*. While Danvers challenged sexist norms in her out of mask roles—voicing feminist concerns at the time and fighting for equal pay as an officer in the armed forces³⁶—many of

³⁴ Carla Conway, artists John Buscema and Joe Sinnott, *Ms. Marvel* #1. Marvel Comics, (1977).

³⁵ Roy Thomas, artists Gil Kane, John Buscema and John Romita, *Captain Marvel* #18, Marvel Comics, (1969).

³⁶ *Ms. Marvel* #1, (1977).

the plot arcs as well as Danvers' highly sexualized and male-gaze oriented character design³⁷ relegated her in an auxiliary, feminized hero role for much of her early appearance in print. This places the hero in a quadrant II role similar to that occupied by Miles Morales.

In 1982 Mar-Vell was replaced by a new Captain Marvel whose out of mask identity was Monica Rambeau, an African American police lieutenant from New Orleans.³⁸ Rambeau's Captain Marvel went on to become the leader of the Avengers for a time.³⁹ While this character had the potential to be revisionist and expansive of heroic norms as an example of quadrant III—challenging both the identity norms of a hero and the expected actions of a hero with a marginalized identity—I believe her lack of lasting recognition as Captain and minimal saturation into popular media iconography prevents this character from having a larger impact. Rambeau also featured in only a single one-shot issue of *Captain Marvel*, existing primarily as an ensemble character or guest character in other comics.⁴⁰ Furthermore her contribution as Captain Marvel was in part erased and silenced when in 1999 Genis-Vell, white passing alien son of Mar-Vell, took his father's mantle, which Rambeau surrendered without a fight.⁴¹ Though Rambeau

³⁷ Ibid. See Image 1.7. Cover art by John Romita.

³⁸ Roger Stern, artist John Romita, *The Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16*, Marvel Comics (1982).

³⁹ Roger Stern, artist John Buscema, *Avengers #279*, Marvel Comics, (1987).

⁴⁰ Dwayne McDuffie, artist Mark Bright, *Captain Marvel Vol 2 #1*, Marvel Comics, (1989). See Image 1.8. Cover artist, Mark Bright.

⁴¹ Glenn Herdling, artist M.C. Wyman, *Avengers Unplugged #5*, Marvel Comics, (1996).

continued to exist under different heroic aliases,⁴² her visibility and impact was greatly undermined.



Image 1.8

In a similar situation to Rambeau, Genis-Vell's sister Phyla-Vell also made a claim to the Captain Marvel mantle. She occupied an interesting space in between quadrants I and II. At the time of her creation in 2003, female superheroes had become largely normalized and this aspect of her identity was not groundbreaking. However, it was largely implied that Phyla-Vell was a lesbian woman, whose relationship with another female hero, Moondragon, bordered on

⁴² Photon, Pulsar, and Spectrum are some of her more well known names.

the romantic. While this kind of tentative, circumspect form of representation may not have been satisfactory for those who wished to see greater representation for non-heterosexual sexual orientations, this aspect of her character did set her apart from many other heroes. Ultimately, however, this character's impact was greatly minimized as throughout her existence, Phyla-Vell's claim as Captain Marvel was overshadowed by her brother's retention of the title. The dominance of this white, male figure silenced what could have been the character's subversive potential.

In 2012, Carol Danvers took on the role of Captain Marvel, and with it a clearer leadership role in the Avengers as well. This new position also saw the character receiving a new design, changing from an over-sexualized blonde bombshell in a leotard and thigh high boots to a more realistic, edgy hero with a practical flight suit—a reference to her military background—and an undercut.⁴³ It was recently announced that Danvers' Captain Marvel would also be appearing as the title character in an upcoming motion picture, being the first female character to be featured in Marvel Entertainment movie. This shift has positioned Danvers in a more challenging role, altering her place within the visual and narrative norms that remain prevalent in superhero comics. At the same time Danvers' identity has been largely normalized, thus shifting the character from quadrant II to quadrant IV. Danvers' feminist role within comics has functioned much like a Rosie the Riveter figure in comics and has raised the same debates

⁴³ First appearance as Captain Marvel in: Kelly Sue DeConnick, artist Terry Dodson, *Avenging Spider-Man #9*, Marvel Comics, (2012). See Image 1.9—*Ms. Marvel vol 2*, cover by Frank Cho, See Image 1.10 *Captain Marvel #10*, cover by Joe Quinones.

regarding to the limitations of her character in addressing a truly intersectional approach to feminism. While the character has recently been adopted as an icon of female empowerment in the popular social media based fan movement the Carol Corps, her white femininity is not enough to satisfy a growing interest in diverse representation. Rather than leading the imagination of national ideals, this Captain Marvel is more of a reflection of already established social movements.



Image 1.9



Image 1.10

After Danvers vacated the role of Ms. Marvel in 2013, the creative team of editor Sana Amanat, writer G. Willow Wilson and artist Adrian Alphona proposed a new character to star as Ms. Marvel in her own standalone comic title, Kamala Khan. As argued before, I feel that Kamala Khan is a quadrant III character that has the potential to truly subvert marginalizing norms and to

broaden national ideas about who should be included in our shared ideas of citizenship and heroism. As the heir to a lineage of heroes that have shifted over the last seventy years to grow the transformative potential of a single title, Kamala has an established foundation upon which to build, yet in a tradition with a loose enough continuity that she does not have to be limited by what has come before her. I find this positionality interesting in light of Jenkins' scholarship about subversive potential of "poached" works derived from established narratives.⁴⁴ While Jenkins was referring to fan produced works, the practice of revising and revamping characters and heroic titles such as Ms. Marvel, a widespread practice in the comics industry, is akin to an institutional form of "poaching." Jenkins argues that these "poached" works serve as "a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups...to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations."⁴⁵ I would argue that each revision of a character, like Ms. Marvel, allows for the creation of different social spaces and for different claims to be made therein—in this case the history of the established heroic name add strength and protection to the revision of that name to achieve a new representational voice.

While Kamala Khan is by no means the first Muslim or even first female Muslim character in Marvel comics, because of her legacy and the editorial choice to feature her in her own title this character has more visibility than those

⁴⁴ Jenkins, "Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," 37-60.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 40.

that came before her. Furthermore, neither of the two Muslim heroes most prominent in visibility after Kamala, the *New X-Men*'s Sooraya Qadir—an Afghan woman who wears a niqab and has the ability to control and transform into sand or dust⁴⁶—and *Captain Britain and the MI-13*'s Dr. Faiza Hussain—a British Excalibur-wielding, hijab-wearing medical doctor⁴⁷—are American. This difference minimizes their impact on national morality. For Kamala Khan, on the other hand, her national and local identity is central to the story, as she becomes Jersey City's protector. In light of the history, both of the Ms. Marvel lineage, and of comic's heroic models, it is clear the Kamala Khan gains much meaning in the context of the genre that has produced her. Ultimately however, the continuity that this character has is filtered by the shifting social atmosphere that comics engage with and challenge. Kamala Khan is thus reflective of a particular moment in the comics industry. In the next section I will therefore analyze how industrial trends of representation as well as the specific positions of *Ms. Marvel*'s creative team shape the comic as a dynamic social text.



Image 1.11



Image 1.12



Image 1.13

⁴⁶ See Image 1.11, *New X-Men: Hellions* #2, cover by Clayton Henry.

⁴⁷ See Image 1.12, *Captain Britain and the MI-13* #1, cover by Bryan Hitch. Image 1.13, cropped from Image 1.12.

The Universal and the Specific: Dialogues about Diversity in Comics

As a part of my research I had the opportunity to attend Special Edition: NYC, a two-day convention that took place in June of 2015. Special Edition: NYC, run by the same groups that organize the larger New York Comic Convention that takes place every fall, is a smaller convention that focuses specifically on the artists and writers that create comic books, rather than the larger web of media that has become incorporated into major conventions. While comic conventions have placed fans at the center of their purpose, they have shifted to reflect the changing focus of fans. Comic conventions began in the mid-60s as a place for fans to gather and discuss their favorite comics; while there were a few guest speakers who were artist or writers of comics, by and large the focus of the event were the comic vendors from whom fans could purchase rare or missing issues for their own collections.⁴⁸ Eventually, however, the gatherings grew to focus on panels and speakers, as comic book stores became the locus for collectors. Today, conventions are used to announce new comics or plotlines, to allow fans to get autographs from their favorite artists or even the actors who have portrayed superheroes in television or film, and to give fans a chance to celebrate each other's creations costumes and fan art.⁴⁹ While Special Edition: NYC may be more similar to the original conventions than other contemporary cons, it still

⁴⁸ Ben Zackheim, "A brief history of comic cons," *Story: Visualized*, School of Visual Arts, (2013), blog.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

featured the panels, celebrity creators, and exclusive comic previews that satisfy the demands of fans today.

Special Edition: NYC took place at Pier 94 in New York City. Located on the riverbank, the convention was housed in a large warehouse like space, a single massive room divided into sections by rows of booths selling new or used comics, tables housing individual artists or writers, and three larger stage areas where panels and autographing events took place. Over the course of this ethnographic engagement, I was able to participate in the line waiting, casual camaraderie, and shopping that comprised the general atmosphere of the convention. For the purposes of this section, however, the aspect of my participant-observation that is of most interest is the many panel discussions that I attended over the course of the weekend.

Panel discussions featured a moderator who usually stood at a podium to the left of a table at which three to ten panel speakers sat with microphones. The table and podium were situated on a small riser stage at the front of the audience, who were seated on folding chairs. The space could seat approximately 200 audience members. Moderators were a range of fan organizers, reporters, and publishing representatives, while the panel speakers were all comic creators, primarily writers and artists, but occasionally including an editor as well. While most of the verbal exchange in a panel is between the moderator and panel speakers, audience involvement is also deeply important to shaping panel discussions. In addition to including a time for the panel speakers to answer

audience generated questions, the panel members, speakers and moderators alike, were very invested in responding to and eliciting audience reactions, be it through humor or a rhetorical style of speaking. Consequently this forum differed significantly from standard individual or group interviews. The fluctuating feeling of enthusiasm and camaraderie generated by the audience seemed to have an impact on the panel speaker's responses. Certain speakers even commented on the effect of the audience and panel format reflexively, noting that they would or could not make certain comments in interviews that they had the freedom to in panel discussions because of the assumed trust of the fan audience.

While there were a variety of different panel topics, many of them were focused, either directly or indirectly, on themes of diversity and representation in comics and the relationship of comic creators to this diversity. There are five panels that I will be referring to in this paper; two that took place on Saturday, June 6th and three that took place on Sunday June 7th. The Saturday panels are entitled *#BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics* and *Publishers Weekly Presents: People in Comics*. The Sunday panels are entitled *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, *Creating Comics: The Real Stories*, and *Secret Identities: Transgender Themes in Comic Books- Collectors Edition!* In this section I am focusing on three of these panels. While parts of my analysis will discuss these panels in the chronological order that I have listed them in above, in tracing the movement of certain themes and shared narratives, I will move less linearly. Because these panels were voluntarily given in a public

forum in which professional and amateur reporting was allowed and furthermore, because much of the content of these panels is built around the specific work and life experiences of the comic creators, I have not changed the names of the panel speakers that I will be discussing.

#BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics panel was the first panel of the convention that was specifically focused on discussing diversity within comic books. The panel was moderated by one of the fan organizers that created the ‘BlackComicsMonth’ hashtag as an awareness campaign on twitter. There were nine speakers on the panel: Skuds McKinley, Kim Gaines, Valentine Delandro, Che Graceson, Greg Pak, Alitha Martinez, DMC McDaniels, Amy Chu, and Brian Michael Bendis, all of whom had done major work creating or creating for comics with black protagonists. Some of these panelists were artists, some writers, and some working in both areas of comic creation. While, as the title suggests, the organizer of the panel was particularly interested in depictions of African Americans and black characters in comics, the panelists also spoke on other forms of diversity in their work.

Early in this panel, one of the speakers offered an anecdote that would become one of the dominant narratives used by various creators to discuss diversity in comics over the course of the convention. Greg Pak, writer of 2014 stand alone title *Storm* among other credits to his name, in answering the moderator’s question about the importance of creating diverse characters in his work responded by discussing the realism he tries to bring in and through

diversity in his work. He cited a remark made by one of his creative inspirations Spike Lee, “I remember reading something that he had said that the more specific something is the more universal it can become... when you get into the real specificity of whatever an experience is, that’s when everyone relates to it...Because [his work] was so specific it was real, and everybody gets it when it's real.”⁵⁰ When Pak made this remark, his fellow panelists reacted, many of them showing signs of thoughtful consideration, of being impressed, most nodded along. Signs of agreement and popularity were also clear in the audience as people nodded and a few even clapped. As moderator questions continued many of the panelists referenced back to the importance of realism, and while most focused their comments more on describing their own work in relation to the question, the themes brought up in Pak’s comment continued to linger.

The interesting circulation of the narrative that Greg Pak introduced was complicated when, later in the very same panel, another speaker, Brian Michael Bendis the co-creator of Miles Morales, seemed to co-opt this narrative as his own. Towards the end of the panel, Bendis stated “I have discovered that the more specific a story that you tell the more universe that story becomes, just tell an honest true story,” demonstrating neither maliciousness nor even awareness that he was clearly paraphrasing from the earlier anecdote about Spike Lee.⁵¹ Pak, sitting only two seats down, looked away and showed an expression of both

⁵⁰ Greg Pak, panel moderated by MizCarmelVizen, *#BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics*, Special Edition: NYC, June 4th, 2015.

⁵¹ Brian Michael Bendis, panel moderated by MizCarmelVizen, *#BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics*, Special Edition: NYC, June 4th, 2015.

embarrassment and discomfort at this statement, and yet remained silent. Other panel members also looked uncomfortable in this moment, some looking back and forth between Pak and Bendis, but they too remained silent. Even the moderator chose not to comment on the situation; instead, she helped to close out the discussion as its time slot expired. In reflecting on this awkward encounter, I see a number of different reasons it could have occurred and been left unchallenged.

One possible reason is that Brian Michael Bendis occupies a kind of celebrity status within the world of comic book creation, and while Greg Pak is also an established artist, there is somewhat of a power imbalance between the two. Furthermore within the context of the convention Bendis was a featured guest with his own spotlight panel and autographing section. Because of this dynamic, it is possible neither Pak nor his fellow panelists nor the moderator felt comfortable challenging Bendis. Another reason is simple conflict avoidance; nobody wanted to further the embarrassment of the situation or see it escalate into an argument because of their individual and group value of conflict avoidance.

However, I think it is important to consider how a third factor could have influenced the situation. Bendis was the only white, member of the panel. The majority of the creators on the panel were African-American while two of its members were Asian-American, including Pak, and only Bendis was European-American. In a discussion focused on racial diversity within comics, both their production and their producers, it is interesting to consider how racial dynamics could have added to other power dynamics and created an environment

in which people did not feel comfortable speaking out in the face of a, while not necessarily malicious, nonetheless blatant example of narrative appropriation. In this tense moment of appropriation, however, we also see how the narrative is normalized in the industry. If a major creator with significant industry power has internalized this narrative so well that he appropriates it, he has also become a reproducer of this idea, and it is ever more likely that the idea of the specific as the universal will become a lasting industry paradigm and not just a momentary trend.

The narrative of specificity as a universally relatable concept continued to circulate throughout the convention. In the first panel of the convention on Sunday, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*—a panel about how world building in comic books is just as important as character development in conveying diversity—it was interesting to see a public attempt at re-attributing the narrative to Greg Pak. The panel speakers were Valentine Delandro, Aritha Martinez, Amy Chu, Greg Pak, and Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez. The panel’s moderator, after introducing the topic of the panel and its panelists, chose to open the conversation by asking Pak to elaborate on his statement from the previous day that specificity makes a work more universal.⁵² All the other panel speakers but Miranda-Rodriguez, who in fact joined the panel a few minutes late, had also taken part in the

⁵² From panel moderated by Daisy Rosario, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

#BlackComicsMonth panel the previous day and showed visible signs of approval at the reprisal of this topic, particularly Delandro.

Both the moderator generated origin of this return and also its placement at the start of the panel gave this action the impression of institutional support, that the convention, and the weight it carried as a concept, was correcting the embarrassing misattribution that had occurred in the same space the day before. I contend that the solidity of this action not only reestablished Pak as the origin of the narrative, but also that this officiated move allowed other speakers to feel more comfortable elaborating on the ideas it introduced without risking another instance of appropriation. In this rectified environment, all of the panel speakers elaborated on the themes and strategies of comic creation incorporated into Pak's Spike Lee anecdote.

The fact that this narrative moved so quickly and remained a central aspect of discussions on diversity throughout the convention indicates that the idea contained something deeply attractive and accurate not only to Pak's approach, but to other artists, writers, and editors work as well. What does it mean for comic creation then, to think of the specific leading to the universal and relatable as a central industry narrative? One of the effects that this narrative can have was made clear when the panel members reflected upon the impact that other creative works executing specificity have had on them. For example both Greg Pak and Amy Chu discussed the way that they were powerfully moved by the specificity of a scene from Peter Wang's movie *A Great Wall* about a Chinese-American

family in which a mother is shown cleaning out her son's ears.⁵³ While Pak and Chu have different backgrounds within the category of Asian-American, both felt like the intimate specificity of that scene not only represented them in media but also through this representation fostered a greater feeling of connectedness to media culture.

However, as the larger conversation about narratives of specificity emphasized, this specificity ultimately moves beyond impacting only the audience it represents, and is able to reach a larger crowd. The creator acceptance and visible salience of this claim reveals something important about the role of intersectional theories of identity within comic narratives. The industry narrative of the specific as a key to the universal indicates a view of cross-identification as an empathetic act predicated on a character's realism. This realism is not a reflection of whether or not the character's super heroic powers are feasible, a quality which would greatly diminish the narrative power of most comic books, but rather the realism is achieved through specificity of identity. As I will demonstrate shortly, many of the creator's saw a large difference in the authenticity of characters created with this specificity in mind, and those that were simply defined or characterized by a single "diverse" or in many cases othered identity trait. The emergence of this narrative not only signals a shift towards the new types of character representation that I discussed in a previous section, but

⁵³ Greg Pak and Amy Chu, panel moderated by Daisy Rosario, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

also aligns with the rise of discourses of intersectionality in public awareness. Specificity is only achieved through a multifaceted depiction of character, one which displays the intersections of race, gender, class, age, and other aspects of identity. This complex model of character specificity is one to which I will return when analyzing the ways in which the creative team of *Ms. Marvel* build Kamala Khan and other supporting characters in the title.

Another aspect of this discussion about specificity that was valuable in providing a framework through which to further my analysis of *Ms. Marvel* as a case study was in revealing some of the creator's strategies for researching and formulating this specificity. While some creators who worked on comics featuring characters with similar backgrounds as theirs said that they called upon memories and personal experiences as inspirational material there were also a number of different methods used to supplement or gain information not accessible through personal experience.

In the panel on *Representation Beyond Characters* Amy Chu, Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, and Greg Pak all shared some of their research methods for gaining specificity. Chu discussed using Google Earth to look at the actual cities and neighborhoods in which her stories were set. She also recalled a particular comic she wrote about a Latina combat pilot in Afghanistan for which she did in depth textual research about ground troop deployments, living conditions, dress, and terminology and slang used. Chu also emphasized the value of observation in

everyday interactions as an information-gathering tool.⁵⁴ Miranda-Rodriguez stressed the value of looking at documentaries and autobiographical works as a source from which to gain insight into smaller more specific details. Due to his roots as a community activist, he also discussed volunteer work as a way to interact with and learn from people of different circumstances.⁵⁵ Pak furthered Miranda-Rodriguez's recommendation of documentaries and memoirs, adding that twitter can provide another way to learn about other people's daily lives, if you follow a variety of people on the social media platform.⁵⁶

In the following section I will be looking more specifically at the techniques and narratives employed by the creative team of *Ms. Marvel* in approaching their work and the ethnographic information gained from the convention will allow me to compare and contextualize their work within other popular industry strategies. But first I will augment my discussion of diversity through specificity with other creator narratives conceptualizing the creation and function of diverse characters and comic worlds.

The narrative of universality through specificity was often, though not always, integrated into a larger discussion about representations of diversity in

⁵⁴ Amy Chu, panel moderated by Daisy Rosario, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

⁵⁵ Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez, panel moderated by Daisy Rosario, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

⁵⁶ Greg Pak, panel moderated by Daisy Rosario, *Representation Beyond Characters: How Diversity Bleeds into Work*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

comics. It is a reactionary trend that has historically constructed male whiteness as the unmarked norm for universal stories, while stories featuring people of color, women, and other marginalized groups were thought to be relevant only to the people it depicted. This trend has been explored in critical race and postcolonial theory in regards to the literary canon⁵⁷ but it exists within comics as well. In order to combat this hegemonic idea of universality, which privileges whiteness and requires cross-identification from everyone else, the new narrative moving into comics reconstructs universality around realism. Realism is in turn constructed around specificity of experience. While this specificity applies to depictions of all characters—white and non-white—it ultimately serves as a way to reclaim a space in mainstream comics for the stories of diversity that have previously been excluded.

This new paradigm of universality through specificity and by extension diversity through specificity was placed in contrast to a narrative of “diversity for diversity’s sake.”⁵⁸ This was most directly addressed during the *Representation Beyond Characters* panel in the context of diversity—including but not limited to racial and gender diversity—expressed through the creation and design of background characters. Amy Chu described an experience in which she asked the artist working on a comic that she was writing to remove one of the boardroom

⁵⁷ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (Harvard University Press, 1992) is one work that explores this norm.

⁵⁸ P. Kristen Enos, panel moderated by Charles Battersby, *Secret Identities: Transgender Themes in Comic Books- Collectors Edition!*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th, 2015.

executives from a background scene who the artist had designed as an African-American man because Chu did not want “to be fake diverse.”⁵⁹ To include “fake” diversity would have contradicted the reality of institutional racism that she wanted to depict, “this is a message like this [the boardroom] is not a great place, this is not a diverse workplace, this woman [the main character] is miserable at her job because it’s not diverse.”⁶⁰ In response to an audience generated question about the virtue of “inspirational” diversity, Chu reflected that the African-American executive added to the comic for the sake of diversity, “wasn’t a real character, that’s not good enough for that situation, I’m not saying that there aren’t black CEOs, but let’s not pretend that we live in a world where everything is cool.”⁶¹ Editor of DMC comics, Edgardo Miranda-Rodriguez agreed, saying that characters like the one Chu removed are “throwaway characters” rather than real characters.⁶² Greg Pak, on the other hand, had a different view. While he stated that he did “buy into the fact that there are certain points in a story when it’s not a diverse section,” most of the time “I will totally do diversity for diversity all day long.”⁶³ Ultimately all three of the creators believed that creating “real fleshed out”⁶⁴ characters, that occupy not only primary but also secondary narrative roles, is the best way to create a fully diverse

⁵⁹ Chu, *Representation Beyond Characters*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Miranda-Rodriguez, *Representation Beyond Characters*.

⁶³ Pak, *Representation Beyond Characters*.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

narrative world, rather than a white dominated world with a few token figures of diversity.

Another group of creators discussed a different perspective from which to view the narrative value of seemingly diverse characters, as speakers in the *Secret Identities: Transgender Themes in Comic Books- Collectors Edition!* panel addressed token diversity used to fulfill merely comedic roles and comics (and manga). The panel speakers were P. Kristen Enos, Marjorie Liu, and Marguerite Bennett. An audience member, using the example of *One Piece*—a Japanese manga series popular in the US—asked the panel speakers about their opinions on the place of representation that features a diverse character for the purpose of a comedic or parodying role. P. Kristen Enos responded that in order to judge the merit of representations of diversity, one should ask the following question, “who is the target audience for this series? Is *One Piece* really targeted for the queer community to partake of it and enjoy it or are they going to be the ‘other.’”⁶⁵ Enos concluded that if the group of people being represented by a character in a comic is not expected or included as a part of the comic’s audience, then that representation becomes alienating and othering. In this case it is negative representation and should be discouraged. Thus this is another point of view that elaborates on how there are different forms of seemingly diverse representation—the specific, the throwaway, and the alienating parody—and that these forms have different narrative and social values and moral impacts.

⁶⁵ P. Kristen Enos, in panel, *Secret Identities: Transgender Themes in Comic Books- Collectors Edition!*, Special Edition: NYC, June 6th, 2015.

The models of diversity through specificity, diversity for diversity's sake, and othering diversity will be important tools as I analyze *Ms. Marvel*, both through the narratives of creation that the creative team offers, and through a thematic analysis of the work itself. The models each align with underlying claims about what diversity is and what its social effect is or should be. Diversity through specificity, as explored earlier implicitly calls upon an intersectional understanding of character and identity, which can either be used to illustrate difference between people, or, as many of the comic creators seem to think, to foster empathetic cross-identification. Diversity for diversity's sake can provide inspirational figures and through representation model ideals for the future, but it can also act to erase current realities of inequality and privilege. Othering diversity clearly draws upon social exclusionary models based on the isolation and exclusion of groups based upon lines of difference, similar to Rita Dhamoon's view of multiculturalism.⁶⁶ It is potentially possible for these character archetypes to all function within the same comic narrative, and it is my goal to examine how these three models and their ideological possibilities are utilized or distanced within *Ms. Marvel* both as a social text and a creative project.

⁶⁶ Dhamoon.

Behind the Mask: The creative team of *Ms. Marvel*

In this section I will examine the values and creative approaches utilized or expressed by members of the creative team behind *Ms. Marvel* in discussing the comic and their work generally. This analysis is largely a media based archival project, wherein I have selected a number of interviews, speeches, and personal statements made by the lead editor, writer, and artists of *Ms. Marvel*. I will also discuss the effect of different mediums—live speech or written artist statement for example—and different audience contexts—comics fans or the general public among other groups—on shaping what narratives these creators call upon and the manner in which they express them.

The first person I will be focusing on is Sana Amanat, the lead editor who worked on *Ms. Marvel*. While she was not credited as the senior editor for the title, she is publically acknowledged as one of the co-creators of Kamala Khan as a character. Furthermore, she is the most vocal and publically visible editor associated with *Ms. Marvel*. Among her other work, Amanat was also an editor for *Ultimate Comics: Spider-man*, working with writer Brian Michael Bendis on Miles Morales, and the *Captain Marvel* series that debuted Carol Danvers in the role. While she continues to work as an editor for *Ms. Marvel*, she now serves as Marvel's Director of Content and Character Development. In an interview with an online magazine called *Rookie*, Amanat described her role in this new position:

The larger role will be focusing on the franchises that we'll be developing across all our divisions, and making sure all our divisions—publishing, TV, animation, films, games—are coordinating with the larger vision. This all translates to one larger mission for me—connecting Marvel content and characters with as many audiences as possible. Reminding

people that Marvel is the meeting ground for every kind of fan of great stories.⁶⁷

While I will be returning later to discuss the topic of widening audience appeal, I first want to reflect upon how Amanat's past and present jobs position her, both within the industry, and as a public figure.

Sana Amanat is one of the only South Asian female comic book editors.⁶⁸

Just as writers and artists of color in the comic book industry are being celebrated as the champions of ever increasing diversity, both in the industry and in the stories it produces,⁶⁹ so too is Amanat placed within public discourse as a proponent for change in comic books. This public perception can cause her editing work and her work as a new director to be seen as a way to strategically 'legitimize' a project's diversity. It calls upon the idea that even a single member of a minority, be that minority delineated on the bounds of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or something else, has access to greater authenticity in depicting another member of that minority, the group as a whole, or even other disadvantaged minorities, and a member of a privileged group would.

While this is not the focus of my research, it would be interesting to examine the effect that Sana Amanat's visibility as an editor had on a project like *Ultimate Comics: Spider-man*, where Miles Morales—a black Latino teenage boy—was being written by a white European American man, Brian Michael

⁶⁷ Marie Lodi, with Sana Amanat, "Why Can't I Be You: Sana Amanat," *Rookie*, May 4th, 2015, Web.

⁶⁸ Sana Amanat, "Myths, Misfits & Masks," *TEDxTeen*, 2014.

⁶⁹ Special Edition NYC's #BlackComicsMonth panel is only one example of this recognition.

Bendis, and primarily drawn by a white European woman, Sara Pichelli. The problematic nature of assuming that having a person of color (or belonging to another minority) on a creative team lends the project ‘authenticity’ outside even the degree to which that person’s experiences are similar to those depicted in the material brings to mind the narrative of ‘diversity for diversity’s sake’ which I discussed in the previous section. Here, however, the location of this token diversity is not on the level of character within a comic, but on the industry environment that produces these comics. For many years there has been a myth of diversity perpetuated by aspects of the comic industry that constructs inclusivity solely on the existence of a handful of female or non-white creators (or editors) working on an handful of titles with female or non-white stars. While the actual number of non-male and or non-white creators and editors in the publishing houses, particularly Marvel, is increasing, the model of the token diverse creator is still powerful in shaping the visibility of many editors, writers, and artists in the industry. To be clear, I am absolutely not positing that Sana Amanat was not a qualified and well suited member of the creative team of *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man*. I merely want to call attention to the power dynamics which affect the public narratives and industry realities of many ‘minority’ creators.

The parallels I am drawing between models of diversity discussed within the industry about the comics they create and the narratives that are formed about industry creators and editors as a part of popular entertainment is directly influenced by Sana Amanat’s own reflection about the way her experiences of

difference and alterity become mapped onto the creative projects she is a part of. Within her work on *Ms. Marvel*, Amanat focused this parallel on the experience of being labeled. Anecdotes about social labeling and its effects on identity formation were prevalent in several of the speeches and interviews that Amanat gave, including a TEDxTeen talk and an interview for *The Atlantic*'s "New York Ideas" segment.

At the start of Amanat's TEDxTeen talk, she asked the young artists and fans who made up her audience to make a list in their head of the labels that they would apply to her.⁷⁰ Later in the talk she listed some of the labels that could be given to her, "Muslim, woman, American, comic book editor, short, lazy, nerd," and reflected that regardless of if these labels were imposed by others or self chosen, they all come with "assumptions and expectations...[that cause us to] begin to accept a standard of self that is not of our own choosing, become a splinter of the self we were destined to be."⁷¹ In this segment she deliberately uses a rhetorical style that invokes the cadence and themes of a heroic narrative. This not only provides a sense of familiarity and accessibility for the audience, who, as fans of comics, would recognize the construction, but it also allows Amanat to shift later in her talk from describing her own struggles with identity categories and label assumptions to the way Kamala faces and overcomes these same

⁷⁰ Amanat, "Myths, Misfits & Masks."

⁷¹ Ibid.

difficulties. She ultimately describes Kamala as a girl on a “journey to find her authentic self” who “does not want to be limited by the labels imposed on her.”⁷²

In her interview for *The Atlantic*, Amanat discusses the same conceptual focus on identity within her work, however she expresses it in a much different style. Amanat discussed the process of creating a character, such as Kamala, and the importance of building from a central concept:

And for us [the creators of Kamala] we found out that it was about identity. It was about the concept being given all these labels from a very, very young age, and trying to sort of create your own definition of them. Everyone is telling you who you are and what to believe and fundamentally how do you get away from that? You get away from that by actually becoming an adult and choosing what you believe in. That's a very difficult thing. And that's really what her struggle is.⁷³

It is interesting to think about the difference between the two methods of expressing the same creative narrative when, especially as it reflects upon the difference in audience. The interview segment that Amanat did for *The Atlantic* was filmed in front of an audience that, when asked at the start of the interview, consisted of very few comic book fans, if any. In her discussion of identity in *The Atlantic* interview she calls more upon the conventions of a literary coming of age narrative, rather than using the dramatic flair associated with comics. While both aspects are present within the *Ms. Marvel* comic itself, it is significant that she stresses a different associative lineage when characterizing Kamala. While she does still discuss the way her work on Miles Morales and Kamala Khan draw

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Sana Amanat, interview by Ta-Nehisi Coates, *New York Ideas, The Atlantic*, May 21, 2015.

upon familiar Marvel comic stories, just prior to the segment which I have included a quotation from, she reflectively and publically made an effort to step away from comic book jargon and make her remarks accessible to everyone.

What remains clear across both formats of Amanat's creative narrative, is its strong alignment to an intersectional understanding, and experience, of identity. She repeatedly links authenticity of representation with the need to represent the various labels that are applied to characters, both internally and externally, and how these many parts, and their perception, are what constitute a negotiated but "authentic" self. Furthermore she expresses, on many forums, her frustration with views of, both herself and *Ms. Marvel*, that reduce identity down to a single aspect. In her *Atlantic* interview, Amanat ruminated about many of the reactions that she received about *Ms. Marvel* after its concept announcement in the *New York Times*. She stated that many people reacted by essentializing Kamala Khan to 'the Muslim superhero' and expecting the comic to deal with highly stereotyped situations, such as "child marriage and oppression for women."

⁷⁴ Amanat wanted to combat this limited view of her character, asserting that Kamala's religion was only one aspect of her character. In this way Amanat is distancing herself and her work from the 'othering' model of diversity representation that replaces complex character development with a minority status—even depicted sympathetically, a one-dimensional character alienates all readers, particularly those they are meant to represent. By employing and

⁷⁴ Sana Amanat, *New York Ideas*.

highlighting the intersectional nature of a character's identity, that character moves much closer to specificity than othering.

Just as the intersectional model of identity and character formation allows Sana Amanat to combat othering stereotypes, she also stresses that it creates a more realistic character that can strive towards self-betterment. As mentioned earlier, Sana Amanat utilizes the idea of an “authentic self” which, within the context of a hero narrative, a “best self” towards which the hero strives.⁷⁵ It is in light of this conceptualization of superhero narratives, that Amanat also calls upon the aspirational model of character, which I discussed in a previous section. However she reshapes it to be a continuous characteristic of the genre rather than the particular concern of diverse characters. She stated:

There's something very aspirational in superheroes that we all sort of want to be like. ...Take away all the capes... and it's really about that, about people wanting to be the best version of themselves despite the obstacles that are put in front of them.⁷⁶

Under Sana Amanat's view, the goal of a best self is shared by all superhero stories, while the exact form this self takes, and the exact methods of achieving this goal are directly reflective of a character's specific identity experiences.

While I am skeptical that this model applies even to the anti-hero archetype that I discussed in Chapter 1, section 2—whose cynicism may acknowledge the reality of a corrupt self—this concept is interesting when applied to the other “quadrant” heroic types that I discussed. In this light an assimilative character could be

⁷⁵ Amanat, “Myths, Misfits & Masks.”

⁷⁶ Amanat, *New York Ideas*.

defined as a hero who strives towards a best self that conforms to hegemonic norms, while a more revolutionary heroic figure could imagine a best self that achieved moral norms while challenging identity norms. Amanat's description of the aspirational self as a generalized feature of the superhero genre suggests how the universal can reveal itself in the particular.

In her online interview with *Cosmopolitan Magazine* about her work as a female editor for Marvel, Amanat remarked:

What I would say in particular to a lot of women is to understand that the winds are shifting a little bit and that if you look at comics for what they are and the characters themselves, they're really very universal stories. They're definitely the classic hero's journey, but they're ultimately stories about these relatable characters who are striving to be better, striving to be the best versions of themselves. That's something that I think is exceptionally universal, and it goes beyond racial and gender stereotypes.

While placed within the context of Amanat's larger statements about best-self narratives emerging from a character's particular struggle with labels and stereotypes, this comment about universality is in line with the idea that universal stories are born from well fleshed-out characters and on generalized ones.

However, within the context of her *Cosmopolitan* interview, the idea of universality is also mobilized in a unique way as a method of justifying and illuminating the growth of inclusivity in the imagined audience of comic books.

While female readers are by no means new to comics, they are growing in number and visibility. Thus the quote that I have included serves both to explain why

⁷⁷ Sana Amanat, interview by Eliza Thompson, "Marvel Editor Sana Amanat: 'A Female Doesn't Need to Show Off Her Entire Body,'" *Cosmopolitan*, September 25, 2015.

existing comics are attractive to audiences that would have to cross-identity with them, and also why creating more female or non-white led comics would not alienate a non-female or non-white audience. Both of these options are combated through the idea of universality that widens a story's appeal beyond the lines of difference that Amanat calls to mind, those of gender or race, as well as others not specifically mentioned here.⁷⁸

Another key aspect of the aspirational model that Amanat places centrally within her narratives about comic book creation is that, by depicting searches for best-selfhood that are ultimately relatable, comic books have a real impact on their readers. In Amanat's TEDxTeen talk, she described, "mirror neuron theory," or the way people internalize outside opinions and representations of the groups with which they identify. Because of this theory, Amanat asserted the importance of telling stories that "are empowering, aspirational, and challenge us to be better."⁷⁹ In this line of argument, Amanat was stressing the potential of comics to actually change people's self-perceptions for the better. Furthermore, by including the audience, a group of young fans and artists, in her challenge to tell empowering stories, she implicated them in a potential imagining of the future of comics and the comic industry that they could help create. This specific approach to expressing the importance and real impact of comics was directly reflective of the familiarity and enthusiasm that the audience already had with comic books.

⁷⁸ *Ms. Marvel*'s success as the best selling comic of 2015 regardless of audience demographic speaks to Amanat's success in creating once such universally appealing narrative.

⁷⁹ Amanat, "Myths, Misfits & Masks."

Amanat utilized a very different approach when impressing the impact of comics upon her *Atlantic* audience, who were largely, save for the interviewer Ta-Nehisi Coates, unfamiliar with comics. In this setting Amanat called upon more concrete anecdotes of reactions that she has received for her work on Kamala Khan and *Ms. Marvel*:

I've spoken to a lot of young women and older men and people who are just like 'this is, you're telling my story and I needed a story like this for such a long time' I've had mothers coming to me and actually, physically crying and telling me, 'you don't understand what this means for me, you don't understand what this means for my daughter.'...and that's the point...stories have an impact and super hero stories can and have had an impact and that's the point for me.⁸⁰

In order to make her point both accessible and significant for her audience, Amanat stresses the real experiences of people whose lives have been positively shaped by one of her projects, *Ms. Marvel*. Here she is demonstrating the lived effect of the positive, empowering “mirror neuron theory” engaging stories on the internalized and conscious self-images of comic book readers. It is this mechanics of this transformation that comics, and *Ms. Marvel* in particular, render in the social lives and understandings of their readers that I will be focusing on analyzing in the next section. It is interesting to consider what effect that the editor of the comic being mindful of and vocal about the social efficacy of the work might have in shaping audience's expectations and experiences of *Ms. Marvel*.

⁸⁰ Amanat, *New York Ideas*.

G. Willow Wilson, the other co-creator of Kamala Khan and writer for the series, also had many interesting things to say about the impact and significance of their work on *Ms. Marvel*. G. Willow Wilson is an acclaimed writer who has published independent books and graphic novels as well as serving as the writer for *Ms. Marvel* and the new female avengers team *A-Force*, which she worked on with co-writer Marguerite Bennett. Wilson is a European-American woman who converted to Islam after college. Several interviews with her touch upon the ways that her personal experience both does and does not match up with that of Kamala Khan, who has a background more similar to Amanat's. Wilson credits Amanat as a wonderful collaborator who helped bring "authenticity" to the character, by sharing her lived experience of some of the aspects of her own life that could inform aspects of Kamala's family and social history. Wilson also stated that she "spent a lot of time talking to colleagues and friends of mine who have grown up with those hyphenated identities, who come from immigrant backgrounds... asking them, what was it like? What did you have to go through in high school, you know growing up, that maybe is not as obvious to me or somebody who is not from that background."⁸¹ Wilson clearly places import on the value of research, just as many of the creators who spoke at Special Edition:NYC did, to supplement those aspects of character identity that she did not share.

It is interesting to me that this comprised a fairly visible aspect of Wilson's, and other creators working on "diverse" or non-white characters, public

⁸¹ G. Willow Wilson, interview by Arun Rath, "The Woman Behind Marvel's Newest Team of Heroines," *All Things Considered*, NPR, February 22, 2015.

creator narratives, while questions of research for white characters, even very specifically situated white characters, are far less visible. Furthermore the question of “authenticity” or the apparent need to cite an “authentic” source of experience does not often surface when discussing white characters either. I would argue that this implicit bias reveals the same legacy of the idea that white characters—as an unmarked norm—occupied an unquestioned position of universality, which the paradigm of universality through (equal) specificity is working to supplant within the comics industry.

Like Amant, Wilson does utilize some of the personal anecdotes about impact that Amanat called upon in her interviews aimed at wider audiences. However, she focuses more on the continuity of political consciousness that exists between public sentiments and comics. Wilson’s anecdotes usually pertain to her hopes for her children, who are Egyptian-American children being raised as practicing Muslims. For example, during an interview with Arun Rath for NPR, Wilson reflected that one of the reasons she felt “the need to create space in which it is okay to talk about”⁸² issues faced by non-white, non-privileged students and adolescents was:

Because by the time my own children are old enough to begin to start grappling with these things, I would love for there to be a canon of literature there that they can turn to to see that they are not alone. That there are people that came before, and not only survived, but thrived, and hopefully went on to make the world a better place. So if we can contribute even a little bit to that dialogue, then I think we've succeeded.⁸³

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

In this way she ties her personal goals for her work on *Ms. Marvel* to the aspirational model of representation that has been discussed several times. However, while engaging with this narrative, she remains highly conscious of the potential of representations to do harm as well as good.

Some of this awareness manifested on the level of character. Willow reflected on the initial cautious responses of some people in Muslim-American communities upon the announcement of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, that “often what are portrayed in the media as ‘sympathetic’ characters end up rehashing the same stereotypes and racist baggage that all of the unsympathetic characters have reflected,” and that she and Amanat worked diligently to ensure that Kamala was a real character.⁸⁴ In addition to the intersection of labels that Amanat focuses on in her creator narratives, Wilson also stressed the importance of Kamala’s specificity of social context,

It was very important to me to give Kamala a recognizable voice — not just of a young person from any time and place, but a young person that is very grounded in the reality that young people face living in America in 2015. I’m in a position to advocate for these younger people at a time when not a lot of people are.⁸⁵

For Wilson, one of the key aspects that shape Kamala as a specific and effective character is her continuity with the generational subculture within the United States referred to as the “millennials” and their concerns. I will be tracing the

⁸⁴ G. Willow Wilson, article by Blake Hennon, “‘Ms. Marvel’: G. Willow Wilson, Sana Amanat on Kamala’s transformation,” *Hero Complex*, March 27, 2014.

⁸⁵ G. Willow Wilson, interview with Christian Holub, “Best of 2015 (Behind the Scenes): How G. Willow Wilson created an all-female Avengers, Plus, how she took Ms. Marvel into year two,” *Entertainment Weekly*, December 30, 2015.

methods through which the aesthetic and narrative decisions within *Ms. Marvel* communicate this social signification in the following chapter. What is of more interest in the context of this section is the way that Wilson pivots her use of specificity away from the narrative of universality that appears throughout the industry, towards a narrative of comic's political efficacy. She describes her position as a comic writer as one which allows her to "advocate" for teens and young adults in America. Furthermore it imagines and activates this younger generation as a group with social and political concerns that is being underserved or underrepresented by other cultural forums.

This narrative is further expanded in other interviews given by Wilson wherein she characterizes comic books as an access point to the contemporary "zeitgeist,"⁸⁶ and particularly our goals for and anxieties about identity politics of gender, race, and alterity. In another interview about work on *Ms. Marvel* as well as *A-Force*, Wilson reflected upon the way her female-based comics fed into larger "pop cultural media" trends and beyond them social trends:

I think one of the big conversations we're having as a culture is we thought we'd solved sexism and racism, and we're realizing more and more that we haven't...There are still questions and some lingering issues that are really coming to the fore, politically and socially, and our pop culture reflects that. So to me [my comic work] fits into this larger narrative and these sometimes fraught arguments we're having as a culture about women, and about politics.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ G. Willow Wilson, interview with John Weiland, "G. Willow Wilson Taps into the Zeitgeist with 'Ms. Marvel,'" *CBR TV @ NYCC, Comic Book Resources*, August 24, 2015.

⁸⁷ Wilson, *Entertainment Weekly*.

She goes on to reflect further on the effect that she hopes *Ms. Marvel* can have on the perception of Islam in the United States.

We're living in a very fictionalized time in terms of the way we tend to see the world in general, and the Muslim world in particular. The line between fiction and reality has become very dangerously blurred...The upshot of that is the stories we tell about ourselves as a culture, about who we are and what the rest of the world is are very important. When people think about the moments in their lives that formed who they were and their opinions, no one talks about a segment on CNN. They talk about *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*. These are the stories, especially now when we're starting to crowdsource belief systems, these are the things that really matter. If I can in some way add something constructive to that dialogue, make people think again about the black-and-white ideas they may have had, then that's great... The hope is when you get some core story that comes from a place of authenticity, that changes the way people think about those characters or that group of people.⁸⁸

Not only does Wilson draw continuity between her comics work and other efficacious narratives in popular entertainment, she also expresses a belief similar to my argument that these stories, these dynamic texts, can actually be the site of social change and can create ideals rather than simply reflect dominant thought. It is the mindfulness and visibility of *Ms. Marvel*'s creators about this political potential and the real, lived effects it can have, that is one of the reasons I argue that *Ms. Marvel* is a particularly powerful and unique iteration of efficacious fiction.

One last thing that I believe needs mentioning before I move on to an analysis of the comic itself is the way that these producer narratives map onto a larger trend of discourse in popular culture about diversity; while I have mentioned the connections that exist between the creators' use of intersectionality and emerging

⁸⁸ Ibid.

understandings and implementations of identity politics, there is another factor that needs to be considered. Multiculturalism and diversity, and even the idea of authenticity, are values that have become integrated in the liberal, neo-liberal values of the nation, and while I am positing that truly applied intersectionality can challenge this paradigm, the general attention to diversity and inclusion that Amanat and Wilson employ also benefit from an alliance with these values. Values of social progress and praise of diversity could even be thought of as a trend among politically minded millennials. It is possible that the public expression of the goals of *Ms. Marvel* strategically employ these progressive terms in order to capitalize on the social currency they presently have. In this light it is difficult, and perhaps even unnecessary, to separate the comic industry's need to expand their audience to increase their sales from the new inclusive rhetoric they are fostering in their new products. This economic motivation does not preclude a dedication to transformative fiction, nor would intent ultimately deny the values that are encoded within the comic itself, however it is important to keep in mind as one factor of this complex subject.

Ms. Marvel: A Narrative and Aesthetic Analysis

In his work on *The Politics of Aesthetics*, philosopher Jacques Rancière wrote:

The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parceling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.⁸⁹

To this powerful toolset, comics have the added dimension of the multi-textuality created by the sequence of both image and text used to construct their narratives. This feature creates a plurality of representation that speaks to the hybridity and intersectionality of identity politics in ways other mediums cannot. Furthermore, studies like Aaron Peginotti's examination of manga demonstrate the way that contrasting aesthetic modes that draw meaning from multiple visual indexes effectively communicate the boundaries of difference and marginality.⁹⁰ In light of this, it is necessary to undertake an analysis of the comic as a visual art object itself to understand how the comic as an artistic experience communicates cultural claims.

I have already given much air to the prevalent idea circulating in the comic book industry that specificity, often executed through an intersectional rather than emblematic construction of character, leads to the creation of universal

⁸⁹ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, (New York: Continuum, 2004) 19.

⁹⁰ Aaron Peginotti, "Scott Pilgrim vs. MANGAMAN: Two Approaches to the Negotiation of Cultural Difference," in *Global Manga: Japanese Comics Without Japan*, ed. Casey Brienza, (London: Ashgate, 2015) 55-74.

stories. Added to this narrative is editor Sana Amanat's posit that the universal appeal of superhero stories is their depiction of people striving towards their best selves. Within *Ms. Marvel* this aspiration is situated in Kamala Khan's struggle to accept, negotiate, and challenge the social labels that are applied to her, as well as the grounds upon which these labels are given coherence and relevance. While examining the intentions and perceptions that have shaped *Ms. Marvel* are important, it is also important at this point to turn my analysis to how these narratives are mapped into the actual comic. Furthermore I will suggest how the narrative and aesthetic communication of Kamala's heroic journey constitutes, in itself, the formation of a new social ideal and a corresponding new imagining of what it means to be responsibly engaged in projects of citizenship in the United States. I begin this examination with a look at the specificity of Kamala's heroic morality.

As discussed in the first chapter, I am using the term heroic morality to refer to the personal ideology that a character employs to motivate, justify or otherwise guide their actions as a superhero while "in the mask." This morality is important not only in allowing the reader to understand a hero's actions, but also because it connects the traits that a character has "out of mask," when they more resemble the lived experiences of readers, with the cultural ideals that their heroic persona represents. For Kamala Khan, as *Ms. Marvel*, while her initial motivation to become a costumed hero was influenced by her immense admiration for the other heroes that existed in her world, and her choice of costume and moniker are

an aesthetic tribute to Carol Danvers, the morality that actually guides her once she is a hero is much more personally motivated.

Kamala, in struggling with choosing the right course of action as she navigates her new role as a costumed hero, is often shown calling upon things that her father taught her. These lessons are, in turn, often influenced by Islamic principles. For example in Issue 2, when Kamala undertakes her first heroic act she recalls:

There's this ayah from the **Quran** that my dad always quotes when he sees something **bad** on tv. A fire or a flood or a bombing./ 'Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind—// '—and whoever **saves** one person, it is as if he has **saved all of mankind.**'// When I was a little kid, that always made me feel better. // Because no matter how bad things get...//There are always people who rush in to **help.**// And according to my dad...//...They are **blessed.**⁹¹

We see here how the strong spiritual and ethical morality her father taught her helps directly form her heroic principles, her heroic morality. This emphasizes both the importance of her family and her faith in enabling Kamala to perform as a hero. I would argue that this nuanced heroic morality is more real, grounded and specific than that of other well-established characters. For example, while Uncle Ben's admonition about power that forms the basis of Peter Parker's, and by extension Miles Morales', heroic moralities may have been poignant due to its internal narrative context, it communicates very little about the life worlds of the people who it motivates. This contrast highlights the ways Kamala is shaped by

⁹¹ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 2, pg 9-10. Emphasis in original.

her specific, intersectional, and at times marginalized, experience and explicitly claims that these experiences are the very same things that make her heroic.

This is quite a different model of hero than even Miles Morales, who is often praised alongside Kamala as a symbol of progress for diversity in comics. While Miles Morales as a character outside of the mask is built through specificity, his heroic morality and the Spider-Man that he enacts while masked is made less specific and general in order to fit another character's (Peter Parker's) motivational paradigm. The specificity that makes Miles appealing is made rather irrelevant while he occupies his heroic persona. Kamala, on the other hand, carries this specificity through to her actions and heroic morality as Ms. Marvel, and it is the very basis around which her heroism is solidified. It is sense-making, only because of its particularity and the continuity that is preserved between Kamala's in-mask and out-of-mask characters. We are thereby called not only to incorporate Kamala, as individual, into the heroic narrative, and thus abstractly into our ideals of moral citizenship in the US, but we are also called to incorporate the marginalized groups which enable her heroism into the norm, not by assimilation and erasure of differences, but by deconstructing the very boundaries of difference that currently exclude them.

Another important aspect of the construction and depiction of Kamala's heroic morality is that it challenges the boundaries of exclusion and difference within national ideals not only by asserting the ways she, and the background that shaped her, should be included, but also by highlighting the continuity of values

that already exist, albeit with different forms of expression, in the currently marginalized communities Kamala is a member of. This point is most clearly illustrated on page 17 of Issue 1,⁹² during a dreamlike sequence that occurs as the Terrigen mist activates Kamala's powers. While, as I stated earlier, Kamala's initial transformation into a costumed superhero is influenced by her admiration for the other heroes that exist in her world, this influence is integrated from the start with religiously and culturally specific imagery that adds resonance, meaning, and specificity to Kamala's journey into super-heroism.

Above a rising Kamala, the three figures that dominate page 17 are highly recognizable and important figures from the Marvel universe. Iron Man and Captain America appear to the left and right, respectively, of Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel; the figure's central position mirrors her preeminence in Kamala's esteem. These figures, in addition to being super heroes and Avengers, are also significant because they each have a particularly nationalistic tie to the United States. Captain America quite literally serves as an embodiment of the national ideals of the United States, and their noble, righteous ambitions. Iron Man, whose roles as a hero in the suit and out of it as Tony Stark, billionaire, has long been a figure through which the United States expressed both its hopes and anxieties about the individualist capitalism at the core of our modern society. Captain Marvel, originally an Air Force Pilot, is often situated as a Rosie the Riveter figure within the gendered environment of comic books, striving to reconcile

⁹² *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 1, pg 17. See Image 3.1.

patriotic and feminist informed goals. These figures clearly align with the narrative and national images of heroism that comic books have established in the United States over the last several decades.

What is so important about this page is the unique way that these recognizable figures are depicted, and the ideas they become narrative allusions for. The clouds and the feeling of descending created by the perspective of the composition both provide religious or even saintly connotations to the image. The hand gestures and postures hearken to a number of different oratory traditions, including the Urdu poetry that the page's text contains. Iron Man's hand in particular is interesting as the gesture invokes saintly icons, the dance mudra Ardhapataaka, and the hero's customary peace sign. The Urdu poem, spoken by Captain Marvel and translated by her companions not only invokes the rich culture that Kamala's Pakistani family have tried to share with her, but also brings up feminized imagery and the idea of a growth, life, or change that is just unfolding. In the midst of all of this highly symbolic and culturally complex imagery are also the clear signs of Kamala's own sense of whimsy and personality, evident, for example, through the bird in the lower right of the image that wears her hat, and the winged-sloth that serves as Kamala's backpack brought to life and resting in Iron Man's arm.



Image 3.1

The page is a visual integration and depiction of several of the aspects of identity that make up Kamala's character and demonstrate that it is impossible to separate her into constituent, emblematic parts. This constitutes a success of the careful, multifaceted, and specific kind of character that *Ms. Marvel's* creative team, including editor Sana Amanat and writer G. Willow Wilson, wanted to achieve. However, it also has significance internally within the social object that

the comic is outside of its creator's goals. The page that I have described is the start of an exchange in which Kamala is faced with, for the first time, the idea that she can be a hero, and it shapes the exchange that allows her to express the expectations and ideas that she brings to the idea of being a hero. The superheroes that appear to Kamala express and represent the same sentiments of moral good and heroism that her poem and spiritual elements encode in the scene. This is important because it disrupts an idea of multicultural inclusion that incorporates a group into the idealized and imagined norm because of their new way of enacting a standard that exists only within the normative group. Rather, it highlights the fact that the idea of heroism already exists in meaningful if distinct ways within the various life worlds that Kamala participates in, not just those that are already aligned with and included in the norm. This depiction thus works to actively break down perceptions of an imagined ideal that belongs solely to a central group, which periphery groups work to learn. Instead it argues for an underlying continuity of ideals and morality that is segmented only by the specific and heterogeneous ways these ideals are enacted. On this new ground and with this new empathy, we are led to question just what do we draw these lines of difference between?

Thus far I have discussed the ways in which Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel has challenged the hegemonic bounds of ideal citizenship models in such a way that calls for the inclusion of people who share the experiences and identity categories that Kamala Khan is meant to represent. This would seem to reify a

multicultural model that calls for the acceptance of different groups on cultural bounds, while maintaining the lines of difference between these groups. This is not my intention, nor, I would argue, the intention of the Ms. Marvel narrative. One key factor that problematizes this simplistic multicultural model is the way Kamala Khan and the other characters in her title are shown with different experiences and opinions not based solely on the axis of culture or ethnicity. This ultimately challenges and deconstructs the concept of any homogenous group that Kamala Khan is meant to represent. The effect of this narrative and representational complexity is that it challenges readers to look beyond a simply multicultural theory of marginality and inclusion, towards a complex intersectional praxis which questions the fuller range of power structures implicated in the formation and reproduction of citizenship ideals.

One of the key ways that the comic challenges assumptions of homogeneity is in its depictions of Islam. The depiction of different characters throughout Ms. Marvel with different relationships to Islam goes a long way to combat the assumption of a Muslim monolith that many people in the United States hold. Not only does this enrich the narrative world of the comic, but it also challenges the idea that there is one cultural group that can be condensed around religion and around Kamala Khan. Kamala's family is a clear and important example of variety within the assumed cohesion of an Islamic cultural and religious monolith.

For example, Kamala's father Yusuf, as I discussed earlier, plays a large role in informing Kamala's heroic morality and the teachings that she recalls from her father demonstrate a philosophy that is infused with the sentiments of his religious ideas. In the excerpt that I quoted from earlier, he is even calling upon the Quran while he interprets it in the context of empathy for current events. However, Kamala's father is shown to draw upon a number of different social, spiritual, and secular values that interact with his faith. His very character design helps to inform the reader of his relationship to different cultural forces.⁹³ Yusuf is drawn wearing business clothes, a collared shirt and tie, reading a local paper. His hair is graying and he has a trimmed mustache and no beard. These aspects all communicate different aspects of his positionality. While he is by no means show rejecting his Pakistani cultural ties, emblemized by the community paper he carries with him, he is presented in a secularized way that emphasizes his concerns with his economic role, as a banker and provider for his family. This character is shown to have a very different relationship to Islam than Kamala's brother, Aamir.



Image 3.2

⁹³ *Ms. Marvel Vol 1: No Normal*, Issue 1, Page 5. See Image 3.2.

Aamir is drawn wearing religious garments and following a particular virtuous aesthetic. He has a beard, always wears a white tunic, and covers his head with a cap.⁹⁴ When we are introduced to him, he is in the middle of a debate with his father about the importance of prayer and holy work as opposed to the importance of getting a productive job.

[Aamir:] "Money earned from a profession that offends Allah has no merit. I refuse to profit from **usury**...unlike **some** people."

[Yusuf:] "My job at the bank allows you to sit at home **contemplating eternity**, beta. If you don't like it you can—"

[Kamala:] "Oh my God, can we **not** have this argument again?"

[Aisha:] "Now now, Abu-Jaan, I'm sure Aamir will find the right job **soon**."

[Yusuf:] "Apparently no job is good enough for his **holiness**."⁹⁵

The immediate and visible contrast between these two characters in this scene, both in design and opinion, shows just how much variance can occur within a single family, a "cultural" unit long thought to have the most cohesion of experience. These character also challenge another commonly held assumption, which is that the younger generation will inevitably be more secular and therefore in conflict with a more religious older generation. This assumption is entirely opposed by the dynamic that is created between Kamala's father and brother. Furthermore it demonstrates how people's relationships to their religious identities can change based on context and their interaction with other identity categories that are constantly negotiated and placed in a hierarchy. In the scene described above, Yusuf's role within the capitalist economy, and as a father who

⁹⁴ Ibid. Page 5. See Image 3.2

⁹⁵ Ibid. Page 6.

has to raise his children to be successful in the same system, is more important to him than his religious identity. This is not the same expression of identity factors that occurs within Kamala's memory of her father's reaction to nightly news stories, in which his religious identity is the prominent way through which Yusuf expresses his concern and connectedness with national events.



Image 3.3

Kamala's mother, Aisha, is also shown in this scene, and constitutes another unique character with her own particular relationship to her religion. Aisha, while in the privacy and intimacy of her home goes unveiled,⁹⁶ later is shown to wear a hijab in public.⁹⁷ As demonstrated in the two panels I quoted from above, Aisha often calls upon a religiously informed value system to

express her support or anxiety for her

children. While she is shown supporting her son's religious convictions in wanting to get a responsible job, she frequently is placed in the position of reprimanding Kamala for the secretive and seemingly irresponsible behavior that she adopts after becoming Ms. Marvel. These reprimands most often employ ideas of gender specific virtue and expectations that are shaped by both culturally

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 4, Cover. See Image 3.3.

Pakistani-American, and religiously Muslim concerns. It is interesting then, when this relationship shifts in Issues 18 and 19 when Kamala, also motivated by a familial love infused with ideas of religious virtue, reveals to her mother that she is Ms. Marvel, and her mother, in turn reveals that she already knows.⁹⁸ Her moving praise is phrased in religious terms as well, a language I think that is purposefully used by the character to express the intensity and sincerity of her sentiment is built off of an understanding of religion's high place in her regard.⁹⁹ Thus, the comic carefully develops the way that each member of Kamala's family interacts with their faith and how this faith informs and is leveraged against other aspects of their character identity. This complexity is an effective way of deconstructing the assumption of homogeneity that plagues the stereotypes that dominate public discourse about Islam in the United States.



Image 3.4

⁹⁸ *Ms. Marvel Vol 4: Last Days*, Issue 19, Page 2. See Image 3.4.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, Issue 18, Page 19. See Image 3.5.



Image 3.5

I have previously discussed how religious virtues have directly shaped her heroic morality, but now I want to discuss a scene which both illustrates Kamala's relationship to the community structures of faith. In Issue 3, the comic opens with Kamala attending a Saturday youth lecture given by Sheikh Abdullah. She is wearing a shalwar kameez, similar in silhouette to the Ms. Marvel costume that Kamala ultimately fashions for herself. She is distracted from the lesson by her recently discovered powers and the wish to talk to Nakia about them. Her main engagement with Sheikh Abdullah is to debate the presence of a partitioned women's section, a debate that nonetheless demonstrates Kamala's familiarity with the sheikh's past teachings and religious philosophy.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 3, Page 5-6. See image 3.6.



Image 3.6

While in this interaction, Kamala seems slightly irreverent and not that interested in attendance, in Issue 6 Kamala has a more personal interaction with Sheikh Abdullah when her parents ask her to go to him for advice and guidance. In this conversation there is an obvious level of respect and understanding that the sheikh shows Kamala, and that she shows in return. His advice helps her to solidify her heroic commitment regardless of her doubts or insecurities.¹⁰¹ This community and even religious based moral guidance shows some level of continuity with other Marvel comics' uses of guidance figures, including Peter

¹⁰¹ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 6, Page 4-5. See Image 3.7.

Parker's Uncle Ben, or perhaps more directly, the Daredevil, Matt Murdock's numerous Catholic support figures, including Sister Maggie.

Another important aspect of the first scene with Sheikh Abdullah at the Saturday youth lecture can be seen in the depiction of the background characters. The youth lecture is populated by a number of unnamed tertiary characters that visually flesh out a diverse community. In this case diversity refers both to the array of apparent racial characteristics of various members of the lecture group as well as different styles of dress and attentive body language that indicates different levels of religious engagement.¹⁰² While these characters may not seem important at first glance because they do not directly further the plot of the narrative, they are essential in communicating the comic's creator's claims regarding the identity politics that I would argue lie at the heart of their production.

¹⁰² *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 3, Page 5-6. See Image 3.8.1 and 3.8.2



Image 3.7



Image 3.8.1



Image 3.8.2

Why does this visual and narrative diversity matter? What does it mean to challenge an assumed monolith? In the United States there is a highly salient and politicized archetype of what a Muslim person looks like, who they are, and how they fit in—or are excluded from—ideal citizenship and projects of national belonging. This archetype has been solidified around the idea that a Muslim-American is a non-white Arabic or South Asian immigrant who wears a hijab or is bearded. Kamala Khan matches some of these identity category distinctions, as do her family and friends. This is important because it does not deny the aspects of real experience that have been condensed into the US archetype. Furthermore strategically repurposing the archetype does provide a codified set of cultural associations that can be used to make the narrative more accessible. It is equally important, however that none of the characters match this archetype exactly and many push back visibly against some of these distinctions. What this does, in providing a more realistic heterogeneous view of Muslim-Americans, is provoke readers to question not just the validity of the criterion of the archetype, but the utility of forming one entirely. It breaks down the assumed correspondence between race and ethnicity and culture and religion that makes up normative multicultural identity politics. It leads readers towards a model of ideal citizenship and nationalism that focuses on value claims and responsible acts rather than power-laden axes of acceptable difference.

While the interpretation above is one that seems to be strongly supported in the material, and is one that I find compelling, it is also important to look that

the ways the examples of representation I have discussed above can be interpreted as diversity included for diversity's sake. This is particularly true in looking at the tertiary and background characters, such those who attended the youth meeting Kamala went to.¹⁰³ While I have suggested narrative and thematic purposes which these choices fulfill, it is also possible to imagine other choices being made, particularly in the surrounding without much alteration of the primary narrative. Does this hyper-diversity give the comic an overly-aspirational sense? In this case I am referring not to the character-driven, best-self approach that Sana Amanat places centrally to the narratives of creation for the comic, but rather to the idea of over idealized diversity that Amy Chu, Greg Pak, and others discussed in one of Special Edition: NYC's panels. If the world built within *Ms. Marvel* seems too idealized, does this lessen the impact of the comic's social commentary? Does it invite, with the glimpse of a more complex and diverse world, the reader to ignore the ongoing realities of structural inequality and active discrimination that exist in our society? The inclusion of several key depictions of this discrimination would challenge this conclusion.

The presence of a character who exhibits the biases of normative identity politics allows the characters and readers alike to face and challenge the circumstances of exclusion. The character of Zoe, one of Kamala's classmates in high school embodies the white-blond-feminine ideals that Kamala struggled against in accepting her own place within heroism. She also embodies the

¹⁰³ Ibid.

problematic ignorance and micro-aggressions of someone privileged by hegemonic norms yet viewing themselves as progressive or practicing multicultural inclusion. For example, in the first issue of *Ms. Marvel*, Zoe has an exchange with Kamala's friend Nakia which reveals her "cultural acceptance" and its problematic nature:

Zoe: 'Your headscarf is so **pretty**, Kiki. I love that color.'

Nakia: '**Nakia.**'

Zoe: 'But I mean... nobody **pressured** you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to, like, **honor kill** you? I'm just **concerned**.'

Nakia: 'Actually my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it's a **phase**.'

Zoe: 'Really? **Wow**, cultures are so **interesting**'¹⁰⁴



In this encounter we see Zoe seemingly accept Nakia as she compliments her hijab, however even her language there is trivializing more than honest. After establishing her "acceptance" of Nakia's hijab she goes on to voice a very negative stereotype which calls upon the narrative



Top: Image 3.9.1, Bottom: Image 3.9.2

¹⁰⁴ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 1, pg 2-3. Emphasis in original.

of “saving” Muslim women from the apparent “oppression” of their male relatives. When Nakia refutes this in her experience, Zoe continues to reify Nakia and her family’s actions as emblematic of ‘culture’ rather than as people she knows. The illustrated reactions of the other characters to this encounter, as well as their discussions of dislike for Zoe when she is not there, demonstrate their disdain for her damaging opinions.¹⁰⁵ Thus, while she is exaggerated, Zoe’s presence, and the other character’s reactions to her invite the readers to recognize the views she represents and analyze them with scorn.

This interaction also serves as another example of Islam’s “intra-group” heterogeneity as depicted in *Ms. Marvel*. We see how Nakia’s opinions on wearing a hijab are different not only different from the ignorant assumptions of Zoe but also from the personal view of her father. Furthermore, in an exchange of dialogue between Nakia and Kamala on the previous page, we learn that Nakia has only recently been going by her full “proud Turkish” name as opposed to her “‘Amreeki’ nickname” of Kiki.¹⁰⁶ This demonstrates that even in the experience of one person, identity does not remain homogenous, but rather over time negotiates various relationships between different aspects of ‘cultural’ and religious identity markers.

Despite the main characters’ ridicule of Zoe, she is not so simply dismissed, just as the trends of exclusionary multiculturalism she voices are likewise not easily escaped. In the second volume, directly after Kamala discovers

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. See Image 3.9.1 and 3.9.2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 1, Page 2-3.

she has powers, she briefly assumed the form of Carol Danvers in an attempt to claim her place within the existing hegemonic norm before returning to her regular form. Then she hears Zoe's voice in the distance and tries again to claim the Danvers form but fails and instead shrinks to a tiny version of herself. The visceral effect Zoe has on Kamala's form reveals the way Zoe's character re-imposes the boundaries of hegemonic norms:

It's almost like a **reflex**. Like a **fake smile**. / As soon as Zoe shows up I feel... **uncomfortable**. // Like I have to be **someone else**. / Someone **cool**.
// But instead I feel **small**.¹⁰⁷

Kamala's reaction demonstrates the internalized feeling of exclusion and marginality, which Zoe brings out. Zoe enacts this marginalization by both embodying the traits that are idealized by norms (white, blonde and pretty), and also by regularly voicing the multicultural narrative that reifies the difference between them as cultural institutions. The readers, being in sympathy with Kamala, are able to understand these power dynamics and see how our hero must struggle against them. The critical eye we are compelled to adopt is not only turned outward to the workings of the real world being depicted, but also inward, to reflectively examine the internalized hegemonic structures we are privileged or marginalized by.

¹⁰⁷ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 2, pg 6. Emphasis in original. See Image 3.10.



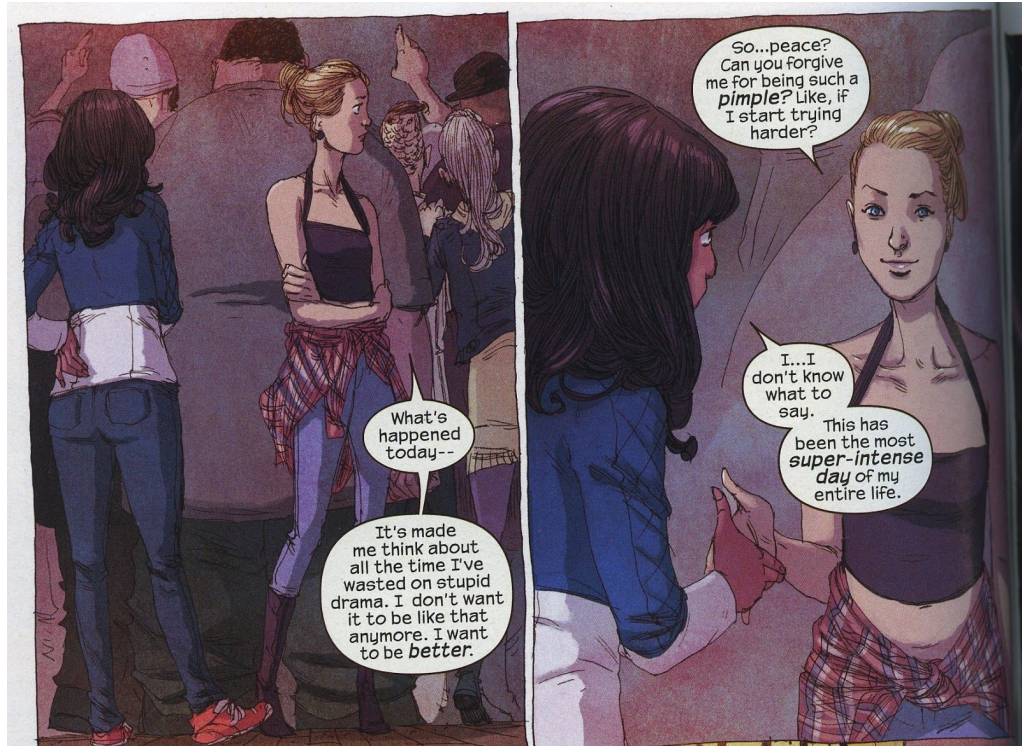
Image 3.10

In light of this narrative function that Zoe serves, it is interesting to look at the larger ramifications when, in Issue 19, the creative team chooses to have Zoe reconcile with and apologize to Kamala. In the Issues 16-19, the conclusion of the title's first run, *Ms. Marvel* is dragged into a larger crossover event called "Lost Days" that affected all of the titles produced by Marvel. During this event, the characters of *Ms. Marvel* are faced with what seems to be the end of the world. This motivates many changes, including the truth-revealing conversation between Kamala and her mother that I discussed earlier. Another of the eleventh-hour exchanges occurs between Kamala and Zoe. Zoe apologizes for her actions, reflects on her behavior, and promises to take accountability for her future decisions.¹⁰⁸ In this scene Zoe's dialogue addresses the hurtful stereotypes, based on culture and religion, that she used as well as, briefly, the effects of the internalized misogyny of compulsory heterosexuality has had on her interactions with her peers. The interaction does allow Zoe as a character to pursue her "best self," one of the goals Sana Amanat had for the characters of *Ms. Marvel*. Furthermore, it opens the door to imagining a new future wherein the people who are privileged by the current systems of alterity can be accountable for their actions and stop reproducing these harmful systems. However, it can also be seen to lessen the impact of the character's previous role. By showing the individual reconciliation between Kamala and Zoe, it is possible that the reflexivity the character previously invoked could be dismissed. Does it allow readers whose

¹⁰⁸ *Ms. Marvel Vol 4: Last Days*, Issue 19, Page 9-10. See Image 3.11.1 and 3.11.2

behavior might resemble Zoe's to let themselves "off the hook" so to speak? Was the decision to include this redemption a strategic move by the creator's to lessen any alienation her character might have caused and make the story more palatable to audiences who might have been made uncomfortable by the past moments of self-reflection?





Previous page: Image 3.11.1, Above: 3.11.2

It is also important to look at the possible implications of Zoe's new role and design in the first issue of the *Ms. Marvel*'s second year run. The first time we see this character Kamala's narration emphasizes her new role: "Even **Zoe Zimmer** is different now. That whole thing with the world almost ending gave her some kind of **existential crisis**. And now she's going through this what-does-it-all-mean phase./ What can I say? It's like we're all **growing up**."¹⁰⁹ She seems to be a friend to Kamala and Nakia, and certainly occupies the place of an ally rather than antagonist. In addition to this change in personality, Zoe has also been given a change in visual character design.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 1 (2016), Pg 6.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* Page 8. See Image 3.12.



Image 3.12

Zoe now has blue and pink streaks in her blond hair, dark nail polish and lipstick, and favors baggier clothing over her old midriff-exposing look. This new image calls upon a new archetype, using the “alternative” aesthetic rather than the “popular” one. This visually and symbolically aligns her with a subculture that more of the audience would probably feel belonging with. By equating Zoe’s moral change with her aesthetic change, it taps into an existing stereotype that popular students are more apt to be ignorant or discriminatory, while “alternative,” edgy, or nerdy teenagers are more morally mature and socially engaged. If white or otherwise privileged readers see this new Zoe, who visually resembles them now more than she did as a “popular” kid, it is possible this will also lessen the social commentary of her previous character role. Readers will take

their participation in “alternative” youth subcultures as proof positive that they are free from “popular” Zoe’s micro-aggressions and other negative behavior, rather than actually reflecting on their behavior itself. While this reading of the character may be comforting, it also works against the goals of the comic’s larger narrative.

Ms. Marvel also uses depictions of the setting, and of generational tensions to convey the comic’s dedication to displaying the realities of marginalization and Kamala’s persistence against them, rather than represent an imagined utopia in which this exclusion does not exist. I am first, however, going to analyze how Kamala’s powers make visible the ways in which those who are marginalized internalize exclusionary norms and how the negotiation of difference is embodied. My focus on this issue is, again, informed by the apparent weight that editor Sana Amanat places within her public representation of the comic on the process of accepting, rejecting, and negotiating the identity labels imposed on Kamala as the way towards achieving her best and most authentic self.

Kamala Khan takes up the mantle of Ms. Marvel after discovering she has the power to shapeshift and change her physical appearance and scale. Initially she uses this power to literally become Ms. Marvel, taking on the exact appearance of Carol Danvers’ younger self.¹¹¹ She does this because she thinks that to be a hero she needs to be tall, blonde, white, and wear the big boots that

¹¹¹ *Ms. Marvel Vol 1: No Normal*, Image 1, Page 19-20. See Image 3.13.

denote normative beauty and female sexuality. In this way her power can be seen a visible narrative exploring Foucault's idea that power structures are internalized and that people embody the methods of social and self-discipline that enforce hegemonic modes of normalcy and difference. Kamala, through her power, is visibly embodying the marginalizing norms she has previously internalized; she briefly claims an "empowered" position by embodying Danver's ideal form. However soon after discovering her powers, Kamala also discovers, in a suitably dramatic scene befitting the comic narrative, that she has incredible healing powers, but they can only work when she returns to her 'true' form.¹¹² This speaks metaphorically to the toxicity that internalizing the marginalizing lines of difference has for people constructed as outside of the norm. The only way healing, growth and true empowerment can occur is when one's identity is embraced and internalized insecurities— and power structures— are recognized and fought against. This aspect of Kamala's story strongly dismantles the assimilative narrative that has plagued many comics speaking on diversity. Kamala must wear her own face and find the power and heroism that exists within her own authentic selfhood.

¹¹² Ibid., Issue 4, Page 2-3. See Image 3.14.



Image 3.13



Image 3.14

Kamala's powers, however, are not the only ones that are used to metaphorically address issues of negotiated identity and contemporary social issues. During the "Last Days" event Kamala's brother, Aamir, is kidnapped and exposed to an altered version of the same mists that gave Kamala her powers. This results in him developing unstable, possible temporary, powers. Unlike his sister, however, Aamir has the ability to create powerful psychic shields.¹¹³ He uses his new ability to protect himself from attacks, both physical and emotional, which are made against him and his family. While this power externalizes the great inner strength that the character possesses, in part solidified around the strength of his faith, Aamir ultimately laments this added complication and rejects having powers, stating, in the face of scorn, that he is perfectly happy in his identity without them.¹¹⁴ This moment not only illustrates a new side of a major character, but it also addresses and rejects the prevalent idea that powerful, or privileged, positions are always desired by people marginalized from them. Aamir doesn't want to stop being a "religious freak? An MSA nerd? A Salafi?...I'm all those things. And I'm not ashamed of any of them,"¹¹⁵ he just wants to stop being othered, marginalized, or insulted because of it.

¹¹³ *Ms. Marvel Vol 4: Last Days*, Issue 18, Page 6. See Image 3.15.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*



Image 3.15

The character that perpetuates Aamir's kidnapping also adds a level of complexity, heterogeneity, and reality to the comic. Kamran is another Muslim Pakistani-American, super-powered Inhuman,¹¹⁶ but he works for a different faction of the Inhumans that wants a "new world order" run by the superior Inhumans rather than help protect humanity as it is. He uses his energy-manipulation powers to try to recruit new people to his leader's faction, people including Kamala and her brother. Following a long history of thinly-veiled political allegories in comics,¹¹⁷ Kamran and the group that he works for resemble extremist and fundamentalist groups that currently are at the heart of



Image 3.16

¹¹⁶ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 13, Page 15.

¹¹⁷ Recall my discussion of the X-Men in the introduction as an example.

many world conflicts. The character, therefore is important in making the political allegory less abstract. He adds a level of complexity to the multifaceted depiction of Islam by preventing an unrealistic idealization of the group, a romanticization which could alienate people. *Ms. Marvel* is not ignoring the lived reality of contemporary conflict. It also explores the effect this violence can have on forming negative stereotypes that are then imposed upon larger identity groups. Kamala's very pointed reaction to an attack made by another of Kamran's Inhuman allies takes an especially evocative turn when she ends it with the conviction, "**Never again.**"¹¹⁸ Equally important, however, is that the other members of Kamran's faction, including the leader, are not Muslim. This allows the narrative to avoid harmful vilifying stereotypes and combat the idea that there is a criminogenic aspect of Islam.

Before leaving the topic of Inhumans however, there is one more element that I feel the need to discuss. While within Marvel comics lore, the word Inhuman is an established signifier referring to one major way many heroes received their powers, the literal effect of the category is an othering one. The implication that a hero like Kamala Khan gains her power from the trace of alienness in her may add to the subversive transformation of marginality that *Ms. Marvel* achieves, but it also creates a small space in which Kamala's otherness is absolute. I wonder what motivated the decision to name Kamala as Inhuman, if it was the convenience of the Terrigen mist plot device, or if it was a deliberate

¹¹⁸ Ibid., Page 19. Emphasis in original. See Image 3.16.

stand? Regardless of the reason, Kamala is Inhuman. What would be the effect if she wasn't? Would it vastly alter her positionality or the social icon that she is in the process of becoming? To be the kind of hero she is, Kamala Khan needed a reason to have powers. Is there any way to create a powered superhero without introducing an othering factor? If there was, would it be appropriate in a comic that grapples so centrally with issues of otherness.

Another aspect of the comic which directly addresses, rather than ignores, the realities of marginalization is its setting, Jersey City. New York City has always been an essential location in the Marvel comics universe, in many ways its 'capital'. Home of some of the biggest heroes and teams, including Spider-Man, Daredevil, the Fantastic Four, and the Avengers, it is constructed as the center of heroism. Jersey City is quite literally on its periphery. Kamala Khan defends Jersey City because of her love and pride in her hometown. Her actions and morality prove time and again that Kamala Khan, the new Ms Marvel, is a hero, no qualms or qualifications about it. Her position, mirroring her positionality, challenges the normative standard of hero. She is inextricable from the hometown she defends, just as she is from the intersectional complexity of her identity. Thus in order to incorporate her into the heroic ideal, an expansion which her deeds render a necessity, it is not possible to pick her up and move her into the center, just as it is impossible to pick up Jersey City and move it to New York City. Kamala's story challenges us, as an audience carrying and reproducing norms, to expand our idea of center in order to acknowledge that what was periphery, while

remaining distinct, was excluded based on standards of difference that must be renegotiated and challenged. This is parallel to the way Kamala as Ms. Marvel challenges us to expand our ideal of citizenship and belonging to include the identities that she represents while maintaining their distinctness, thereby changing the axes on which we draw hegemonic norms of the ideal and anti-ideal.

As the comic has gone on, it has even begun to address the visible effects of the progress that Ms. Marvel has already made towards being incorporated into this new center. *Ms. Marvel*'s major economic success, as a, if not the, top selling stand-alone title in 2015, is being reflected within the comic as Ms. Marvel has become a member of the *All-New All-Different Avengers*. This new role is being addressed in its own comic series, but the consequences of it are also explored in the 2016 run of *Ms. Marvel* itself. Furthermore, Kamala's high school and neighborhood in Jersey City is also shown as the recipient of increased monetary funding and social prestige. It is fascinating that the ambivalent effects of this gentrification and the public renown of both hero and hometown, are actually being explored as the central topic of the new year's first plot arc. While this narrative is still developing it will be interesting to see in what ways the story engages itself reflectively, and what aspects, such as Zoe's characterization, may be changed for this wider audience.

One last aspect of the comic's social narrative that I will examine is the way it engages generational politics, as this was an issue of particular concern to the series writer G. Willow Wilson in her public discussion of the comic. I briefly

touched on this issue in my comparison of Kamala's brother and father, but there are far more direct ways that *Ms. Marvel* seeks to model and invoke millennial concern and political action. Kamala's age, constant, if nerdy, popular culture references, and her social surroundings place her solidly as a member of the millennial generation, a generation which has been publically characterized as uninformed, uninterested, and unproductive.

In *Ms. Marvel*'s first narrative arc, whilst also learning how to control and hone her powers, Kamala also faces a villain who explicitly brings these assumptions to the foreground. This villain, called the Inventor, is slowly convincing the local youth and young runaways in the Jersey City area that the only way they can be of use to society is if they allow themselves to be turned into human batteries.¹¹⁹ Kamala ultimately wins the day by convincing her peers that not only do they have the potential, but they have the responsibility to make the future better rather than give up.¹²⁰ And then she inspires them to fight back alongside her against the inventor. While this narrative itself is not novel, it is still attractive in imagining the extraordinary power and significance of a young generation that feels particularly disenfranchised. As demonstrated within the comic, it is possible that a hope for the future is enough to inspire action that will then precipitate into social change. Furthermore, by choosing to premiere a hero with this particular plot line, the creators have set up Kamala's actions as a model for engaged millennial citizenship, albeit one augmented by super-heroic feats.

¹¹⁹ *Ms. Marvel*, Issue 10, Page 3. See Image 3. 17.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, Page 4 & 14. See Image 3.18 and 3.19 respectively.

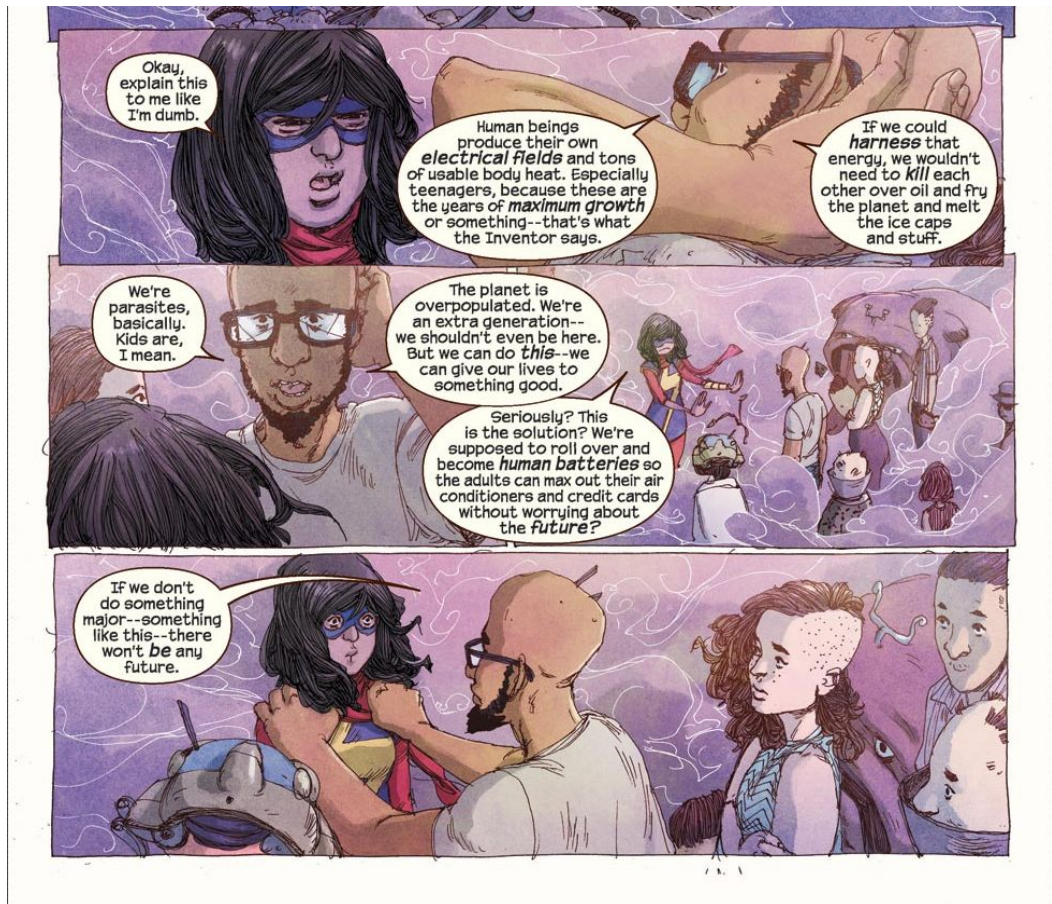


Image 3.17



Top: Image 3.18, Bottom: Image 3.19

As I wrap up this chapter however, I would like to address the idea of intersectionality that I developed over the last two chapters—both what its very real limits are as well as its ultimate usefulness to me. As I discussed the various aspects of *Ms. Marvel* and Kamala Khan at times it seems that intersectionality means nothing more than a signifier of categorization. Rather than truly challenge the reification of one group—be it “culture,” or “religion,” or “generation,” etc.—it suggest that the solution is to simply include more categories in an analysis of any given topic. If this were the extent of intersectionality’s meaning, it would be of little transformative or conceptual use to me. What allows the idea to retain its relevance is the cognitive dissonance.

When driven to its rational extreme, an intersectional theory of identity fractures a group infinitely into constituent identity categories until the largest coherent unit is the individual; it aims towards absolute specificity of experience. Yet, even as I have applied intersectional theory, some categories remain highly visible and highly agential. The most straightforward example of this is that when I include a panel from the comics, no matter how much I theorize it, the Kamala is still understandable, readable as a woman. Gender remains a visibly salient category regardless of our awareness of how Kamala’s experience of gender may be impacted by her heritage or religion, or age. The stubbornness of these categories to dissolve in the face of theory points towards the dynamics of power that exist and maintain and reproduce the reification of certain strategic categories. The implication of power structures inherent in any invocation of

intersectionality is what distinguishes the theory as a framework. In this way I can discuss identity politics without reifying categories as innate or natural, but rather in such a way that questions their normalcy and distills the role that, in this case national, power structures play in creating dissonance between the goal of specificity and the realities of the hierarchical present.

Over the course of this chapter I have traced different aesthetic and thematic ways that *Ms. Marvel* challenges normative stereotypes and proposes intersectional complexities through which groups currently marginalized can be recognized not only in their belonging to shared national standards of moral ideals, but also as the source of heroism itself. It will be essential to see how the continued public scrutiny, pressure to perform, and increased connectedness to Marvel's larger titles will impact the form and intensity that the comic uses to achieve these goals in the future. I have already suggested some ambiguities that exist in the representations offered, and their implications for overall efficaciousness of the comic. However, for all that I have striven using my anthropological perspective to draw out and make explicit the ways in which *Ms. Marvel* has encoded and engaged with culturally intelligible and salient discourses within the United States, my analysis cannot and should not stand alone. It is in this light that I turn to the topic of my next chapter, fan reception, which I will be exploring both through the wealth of interpretations that can be observed in the work of communities of fan-producers online, and also through interviews with some of these fan-producers themselves.

Fan Productions: Finding the Field

In this chapter I will be examining the fan reactions to the new *Ms. Marvel*, particularly through the lens of the new material that these fans create to be in dialogue with and expand the visual and narrative world of the comic, and the encoded ideals that it contains. The term I will be using to describe this umbrella of material is fan productions. These fan productions include visual art—fan art—meta-analysis, *Ms. Marvel* themed blogs, and cosplay—fan-created costumes, usually worn at conventions, in which fans can perform and embody characters. In the first section I will look at these fan productions, primarily focusing on fan art, as they are presented online and the complex network of continuity and renegotiation that occurs both internally within fan communities, and also between fan work and the original “canon” of *Ms. Marvel* comics. In the second section I will turn to the interviews I conducted with several fan producers and examine the way these individuals interact with, conceptualize, and present their work.

As I touched upon at the end of last chapter, in many ways, as I am a fan of comics and of *Ms. Marvel*, this piece of writing constitutes one long, albeit more academically presented, meta-analysis, and I am one more fan producer contributing to the popular wealth of material that circulates around *Ms. Marvel*. Though they do not use the anthropological methods, concepts, and literature that I draw upon, many other fans have written about the social impact that they feel Kamala and her breakout title have or will have on larger communities. In

addition to the effects that situating myself as a fan as well as a researcher have had on facilitating rapport with the fan producers I interviewed, this position has had other impacts on my work. The almost hybrid position I occupy as both fan and researcher not only allows me to encounter interesting moments of reflexivity, but it also highlights the unique aspects of researching popular media in this way. While I am working on a multi-sited project, engaging with issues of production, reception, and the methods of encoding present in the object of the comic itself, my very research in one area, the reading of *Ms. Marvel* that makes up the last chapter, also contributes to my participation in another area, that of fan production. Mindful of the particularity of this position, I searched for an appropriate site of reception and fan production, and once I found this site, I remained reflexive about how my position as a fan both facilitated and limited my interactions therein.

From the start of my conceptualization of this project, I knew that finding a site through which to engage with the reception of *Ms. Marvel* and the cultural ideals that I argue it creates would be essential to the kinds of questions I wanted to answer that I wanted to answer. However, as with the subject of production narratives, it is impossible to isolate a single place in which these interactions between fan and comic, or between fans, are taking place. This is even more true if you try to conceptualize a suitable site as a geographically bounded one. Ultimately, both in light of the larger, networked view of fan producers that I wanted to pursue, and taking into considerations pragmatic issues of access and

time, I chose to conduct my research on the social media site tumblr, and the group of fan producers coalescing around the Kamala Khan “tag.” Using tumblr as my ‘field’ allowed me access to a wider array of fans of varying degrees of participation and activity, as well as producers who are professional artists and amateurs alike. Furthermore I found voluntary and often vocal interactions that are born out of a community of fans who link their work together via the Kamala Khan tag to be very appealing. These fan producers can view and contribute to each other’s work using their unifying “tag” while still intersecting with and placing *Ms. Marvel* in dialogue with other aspects of popular entertainment, daily life, and a wider audience of non-fans. It is from this place of exchange and public engagement that I drew both the “archive” of works that I will discuss in this section, as well as the specific producers I interviewed in the next section. It also calls to mind another aspect of the hybridity of my position as a researcher. I also participate as a user of tumblr and in fact even “follow” some of the fan producers who I discovered over the course of my research, thereby interacting with these producers both as an observer, but also contributing as a fan to the growing circulation, praise, and critique of fan productions and the “canons” they depict.

On tumblr, a blog is made up of content both posted originally by the user who made the blog as well as content shared from other blogs, or even other sites, like twitter, with different comments. While most blogs are made by a single person, and people frequently make more than one blog in order to have a more focused subject for each one, sometimes blogs are run by a pair or team of fans

who work together to “moderate” the content, which still generally conforms to a certain view of the character or story of focus. All of these posts can be “tagged” by the blog creator or creators, which means that when they create or prepare a post, they can list the words by which the post can be searched, and thereby the indexes it becomes a part of. In my analysis of fan participation, I view blogs as a kind of fan production regardless of how much original content that user creates. A blog is a way for a fan, or a small group of fans, to curate and compile a kind of archive of the things that excite them about a comic or character, integrating different sources to make a claim about who they feel that character is or what about their story is central. Different fans have different approaches to this and these approaches foster the development of various aspects of tumblr’s fan communities.

One blog, for example, called “kamala-korps”—an homage to Kamala’s continuity with both the character and fan base of Carol Danvers, who had her own Carol Corps—seems to focus on compiling information about Kamala from various media, following the 2014-2015 and the new run of her *Ms. Marvel* title, the *All-New Avengers*, and Kamala’s appearances in her new teammate’s stand alone titles, as well as the appearances Kamala is beginning to make in various video games that Marvel is releasing. This fan blog not only traces the way that Ms. Marvel is spreading and being integrated into the wider universe of Marvel comics, but it also offers emphatic critique about when these new depictions of Kamala deviate or compromise on what the fan producer holds as a strongly

formed idea of what Kamala's character is and what is "authentic" therein. For example "kamala-korps" posted a picture of some of the panels that Kamala Khan appears in from a *Nova* comic, in which new artists drew Kamala and two of her Avenger teammates, with a caption that not only draws attention to, but incredulously condemns, the new artist's depiction of Ms. Marvel: "Why is Kamala suddenly a lightskin redhead??? Is she going to turn out to be a clone of Jean Grey or something??"¹²¹ While the creators of the blog did not themselves add this caption, they chose to post the image with the caption that another fan added when it could have easily been removed or they could have offered a counter argument in their own comments. This action demonstrates a fear that many fans have that Kamala, particularly now that she drawn by other creative teams, will become whitewashed. It also illustrates a method that many fans used to support each other's views—by spreading visibility of one person's opinions on another person's blog. This visible, traceable network of ideas allows fans to connect to one another and generate larger dialogues.

¹²¹ Tumblr post made by superherosincolor, comment by autisticbrownscottsummers, featured on the blog of kamala-korps, <http://kamala-korps.tumblr.com/>. See Image 4.1.



autisticbrownscottsummers:

superheroesincolor:

Nova Vol 6 #3 (2016) // Marvel Comics
 Nova (Sam Alexander), Spider-Man (Miles Morales) and Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan).

Story: *Sean Ryan*, art: *Cory Smith*

Get the Nova series [here](#)

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Why is Kamala suddenly a lightskin redhead???? Is she going to turn out to be a clone of Jean Grey or something??

(via [kamalakhan](#))

Image 4.1

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The “Kamala-korps” blog also includes twitter posts and other public, social media based comments from members of *Ms. Marvel*’s creative team, particularly Sana Amanat and G. Willow Wilson. This content ranges from sharing excitement over the creator’s posts about accolades and awards that the comic has won, to social commentary that these creators have posted in connection to their work on *Ms. Marvel*. The presence of this kind of content, which appears on many blogs¹²² not simply the one that I am using as an example, reiterates the importance of the industry and creator narratives which I explored in chapter two, in characterizing the larger significance and interpretation of the comic in the eyes of its fans. Fans frequently, though by no means unanimously, view the original creators of *Ms. Marvel* very highly and think of that creative team as being aligned with the fans, even when the same fans don’t extend this sympathy towards other artists, writers, or Marvel Comics at large.

Another, more direct, way that the larger threads I have been drawing upon throughout my analysis shows up in fan blogs is through meta-analysis, which, as I stated earlier, engages in much the same discourse that I am working with in this research, albeit through a less academic, and usually more personal lens. One of the meta-analysis posts, which are characterized generally as posts that discuss how and why the narrative of a popular story is important, that appears on the “kamala-korps” blog highlights this trend. The blog shared content posted by another user who made a post to answer the prompt: “Why Kamala

¹²² Some other examples include: fykamalakhan.tumblr.com, nakiabahadir.tumblr.com, and superheroesincolor.tumblr.com

Khan is important to you.”¹²³ Drawing upon current events that illustrate the environment of Islamophobia prevalent in the United States, this fan turned to describing her experience of *Ms. Marvel*:

A year and some odd months ago, I was not a comic book fan. Then Marvel announced Kamala Khan, a young, muslim american geek with superpowers, would be headlining their new Ms. Marvel. I eagerly counted down the days and bought issue one the first day it came out. And then eagerly counted down the days to issue 2. And recommended it to all my friends. And made my first trip to a comic bookstore.

Here, in this character, I finally can see myself. An american muslim looking at her culture, her religion and her country and trying to figure out just what does it mean to be an american muslim. A fangirl who dreams of being like her pop culture superheros, and when she is granted the opportunity to actually become them, decides to stay true to who she is.

Here, in this one comic book character, is everything I could hope for in a muslim character in pop culture. She isn't a stereotype - not an orientalist stereotype of the meek, subservient, abused muslim woman, nor the muslim stereotype of the perfect muslima. Her enemies are not islamophobic rednecks, nor are they evil mullahs topped in black turbans.

Kamala Khan doesn't put on her mask and go out to fight stereotypes, but in the very act of being a normal, teenage superhero, she shatters all the stereotypes. One can be a muslim, a geek, a superhero and an american, and that's all perfectly normal (at least in a universe where superheros exist).

I hope that in Kamala Khan, comic book fans will meet a muslim character and go huh, that's not like what I expected a muslim woman to be. Maybe all those negative things about muslims that I've been unconsciously absorbing aren't true.

That is why Kamala Khan is important to me.
(and yes, I do cosplay Kamala Khan)¹²⁴

This meta-analysis, particularly in the fourth paragraph excerpted here, though with traces throughout, demonstrates an understanding reception of the intersectional model of identity that Amanat and Wilson encoded within Kamala

¹²³ Tumblr post made by umms, featured on the blog of kamala-korps, <http://kamala-korps.tumblr.com/>.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Khan. The fan analyzer also extends the model encoded in the comics, through the process of identification and reflexivity, out into the real world and lived experiences of negotiating various identity aspects in contemporary US contexts. She also draws out, though focused on different aspects that I did in my narrative analysis last chapter, the ways that the superhero genre itself shapes specific and unique circumstances through which to make social claims. Furthermore, while my research may be delving into a relatively new dimension of comics, it is clear from this meta-analysis that my endeavor shares much common ground with the discussions fans have been having regarding their narratives of interest. Fans have long thought the stories that matter to them are stories that truly matter, and fans have been carrying out meta-analysis for a fairly long time, trying to tease out the details of how and why this significance is created, transmitted, and ultimately recreated by their own fan productions.

The blog I focused my analysis on thus far is almost exclusively about *Ms. Marvel*, and thus occupies a place in the tumblr fan community that is almost exclusively for audiences that are already fans of *Ms. Marvel*. Most of the references are internal and various depictions or opinions about *Ms. Marvel* are leveraged against each other to create a picture of how the creators of the “kamala-korps” blog view the hero and her narrative. Other blogs mix content focused on *Ms. Marvel* with that focused on other comics, other popular entertainment stories, and even with non-narrative-based reflections on

experiences of marginalization.¹²⁵ These blogs spread the interpretation and impact of *Ms. Marvel* even further, introducing new audiences not only to the comic series as a source of entertainment, but also to worldviews in which *Ms. Marvel* is placed as a fulcrum of social change and a new praxis of representational politics.

¹²⁵ <http://nakiabahadir.tumblr.com/>

Fan Art: Participating in a Dynamic Text

With this, unfortunately cursory but I would hope still illuminating, look at the kinds of fan interaction, production, and claim making that occurs within the context of a fan produced blog, I will now turn to a more specific unit of fan production—fan produced art or fan art. This method of fan production was of particular interest to me for a number of reasons. One of which is the way that it most closely resembles, and thus is in dialogue with, the canon format of a comic, using both aesthetic and textual tools¹²⁶ to bring forth or change the content of the original *Ms. Marvel* in their work. Another aspect of added interest and significance is the increasing weight and perceived potential of effect that is placed on fan artists in relation to the environment of the contemporary comics industry.

Regardless of the actual numerical prevalence of this practice, the high visibility of a few star or up-and-coming artists who were offered professional jobs after their fan art became popular and was “discovered” by industry professionals through social media, has created a feeling of closeness between fan artists and the professional works they that inspired them. It is thought that popular fan artists and the re-imagined possibilities they depict may actually have the power to turn their vision into “canon” reality. This atmosphere permeates, not only the outlooks of fan producers, but also the perspectives of established industry producers when considering the future of their stories and their

¹²⁶ While some fan art is produced in the form of a comic panel or strip, in many cases this textual component is in the form of a caption, title, or artist comment.

businesses. Engaged fans are endowed with the potential, or at least the imagined potential, to have a real impact on the future of comics.

This mindset was visible at the Special Edition: NYC convention panels that I attended as well. For example *Publisher's Weekly* hosted a panel on the Saturday of the convention called *People in Comics*, where the three featured artists and writers traced their own relationships to comics as fans, either of US comics or of Japanese manga, reflected on how this informed their start as creators, and speculated about the impact an increasingly accepting and large audience of fans for contemporary comics could have on future creators.¹²⁷

Marguerite Bennett, panelist on another panel, *Creating comics: The Real Stories*, addressed this issue more directly in response to a question about shifting norms dominating representation in comics today:

How much of it is growing pains? And how much of it is going to dissipate in five or ten years when we have a whole slew of new creators who are taking in all this new media [currently being created], these new stories and characters. Like, how many girls growing up reading *Ms. Marvel* now are going to get into comics [professionally], like how is this going to look in ten years, what is the playing field going to look like.¹²⁸

The above statement was significant to my work, not only because of its direct call to the impact that *Ms. Marvel* is and will be making—though that was a heartening statement also because of the industry perspective it demonstrates. This perspective, by no means unique, imagines that the fans who are currently

¹²⁷ *Publisher's Weekly Presents: People in Comics*, Special Edition: NYC, June 4th 2015.

¹²⁸ Marguerite Bennett, *Creating Comics: The Real Stories*, Special Edition: NYC, June 5th 2015.

producing work and engaging in titles like *Ms. Marvel* are not only going to participate as creators in the comics industry, but that through this participation, because of their influences (like *Ms. Marvel*), these fan producers are going to change the dominant course of the industry into one of greater “diversity” and inclusivity. It is through this reasoning, echoed between industry professionals and hopeful fan producers alike, that fan art is situated as a particularly important, meaningful, and potentially impactful act of fan creation.

Fan produced art has the opportunity, because it is created outside of the constraints of industry, production, or commercial standards, to change elements of the characters and world that they depict through their art. Generally fans maintain the elements of the characters that they like most, changing other elements to reflect their own views or hopes for the works that they are reproducing or adapting. Some of these changes are aesthetic, as artists expand beyond the usual modes of representation that superhero comics generally employ, while others purposefully re-contextualize narrative aspects of the story or character. Through these strategic changes and the dialogue they create between official productions and fan productions, it is possible to gain insight both into the general reception of *Ms. Marvel* and Kamala Khan, as well as into the way certain aspects of her identity and her narrative are received and expanded outward into other areas of lived experience or culturally salient issues.

The first piece of art I present here is a definite example of the ability of fan artists to use their design and aesthetic choices to make or emphasize cultural

claims by leveraging different aspects of Kamala Khan.¹²⁹ This fan art, as it says in the picture's caption, allowed the artist to draw Kamala using influences that she found in her own experiences of Pakistani culture. The design clearly draws upon codified clothing aesthetics attached to Eid traditions, depicting Kamala in a salwar kameez more elaborate than either of the ones she is shown wearing in the comics, the geometric, gold patterns of which are echoed in the mehndi designs



I drew Kamala Khan inspired by all the pretty Pakistani outfits I saw during Eid. And hopefully this means I'm slowly getting out of my artblock. Image 4.2

¹²⁹ See Image 4.2. Art by: Aaliya MJ, digital art, <http://aaliyamj.tumblr.com/post/124881302791> (July 23, 2015).

that adorn Kamala's hands. She also is shown with her scarf loosely covering her hair in keeping with the religious nature of the holiday. While choices, as well as the artist's contextualization of them, clearly emphasize the Muslim aspects of Kamala's identity and privilege them over her regular aesthetic, the piece also maintains important signifiers that tie back to Kamala's general *Ms. Marvel* design, primarily through the use of the pallet and the inclusion of a sun or star design at the edge of Kamala's red scarf, an unadorned garment that appears in Kamala's usual superhero costume, that refers to Carol Danvers' Captain Marvel design. Additionally, while the elements I described earlier are indicators to religious ideas, they are also highly specific, Pakistani iterations of these symbols. This, along with the artist's emphasis on Kamala's darker skin—an aspect of her appearance that, as I will demonstrate changes frequently—also coalesce around a celebration of Kamala's visual coherence with a specific ethnically articulated cultural group.

Another fan artist also created work that seems to bring out Kamala's spiritual side. They completed two works which explore a similar side of Kamala, albeit using different mediums, and when both visually refer back to the symbol laden scene that occurs as Kamala's powers are activated by the Terrigen mist, an effect that is heightened when the two pieces are viewed together.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ See Images 4.3 and 4.4. Image 4.3: Michi, watercolor, <http://chrysanthemumskies.tumblr.com/post/130366565650>, (October, 2015). Image 4.4: Michi, marker and pen, <http://chrysanthemumskies.tumblr.com/post/133475711605/> (November, 2015).



Image 4.3

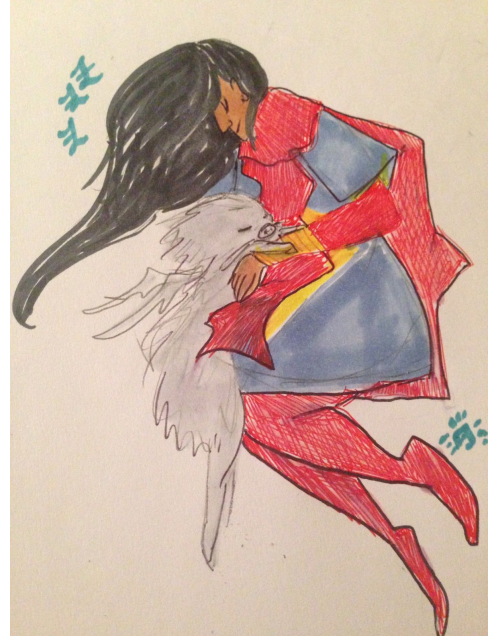


Image 4.4

The posture of the figures the two pieces, particularly the one on the left, Image 4.3—due to the position of Kamala’s legs and the upward flow of her hair and scarf—convey a feeling of floating or slow descent. This visual mood aligns with the Terrigen mist scene and the appearance of Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel, Captain America, and Iron Man. The winged sloth that appears in Kamala’s arms in Image 4.4 is another visual reference to that scene, in which the sloth was held by Iron Man. Thus, like my original analysis of the Terrigen mist scene in Chapter 3 suggests, this picture dwells at the intersection between Kamala’s unique superheroism and spirituality, highlighting this as an aspect of the character that interests the artist.

Another artist chose to highlight, through their work, Kamala’s national identity and patriotic potential. This artist created a piece that features Kamala as

Ms. Marvel, in a design almost entirely true to the comic's original rendition of her, on the statue of liberty as Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel watches on.¹³¹

The strategic use of an iconic American monument as the backdrop places Kamala as a figure integrated into the national imaginary. Furthermore the figure of Captain Marvel, and her posture, looking back over her shoulder, visually signifies Kamala as the future of Danvers' legacy. This continuity is furthered by the artist's choice of colors, using the same exact red, blue, and yellow in the two heroes' costumes. The conflation of the heroic imagery with national imagery makes explicit through fan art what remains allegorical in canon—that the heroes we are shown stand for our ideas as a nation. They are not simply entertainment.

¹³¹ See Image 4.5. Art by: John, digital, (March, 2015).



Image 4.5

Another fan artist that depicts Kamala with Carol chooses a more personal focus to the composition. In this piece Carol, as Captain Marvel, is giving Kamala a piggyback ride while she raises a fist triumphantly in the sky.¹³² The heroes are each



Image 4.6

¹³² See Image 4.6. Art by: Mona, digital, (September 8, 2015).

shown with their own version of the color pallet they share, most notably Captain Marvel sports a darker, almost black, blue for the torso of her uniform. Their difference in skin tone is also much greater than in the previous piece, which due to the overall compression of the pallet into pale, desaturated tones, deemphasized this difference. This piece, Image 4.6, contrasts with the national but rather distant tone of the first, building Kamala's continuity on a more personal, emotional connection. While not necessarily inherent in the piece, when viewed through the role it plays in dialogue with other fan productions, this piece seems to offer a future built off of fostering real emotional relationships rather than just abstract ideals, and thus indirectly offers an approach which places social change in a more accessible and seemingly achievable light. Both pieces—Images 4.5 and 4.6—however, speak to the generational aspect of Kamala's character, that she is a new chapter for the Marvel mantle and the company that shares its name.

Yet another artist produced a work featuring Kamala and Carol alongside a number of other female superheroes.¹³³ Due to the composition that she chose, however, in which each hero is drawn in portrait style and these portraits are arranged in a grid, Kamala is placed as a peer to these women rather than a newcomer or legacy. It is interesting to me that Kamala is shown with only some of her hero costume—the top of her scarf is shown but she is not wearing her

¹³³ See Image 4.7. The piece features, from upper left to bottom right: Doreen Green (Squirrel Girl), Kamala Khan (Ms. Marvel), Mary Jane Watson, Ororo Munroe (Storm), Jennifer Walters (She Hulk), Monica Rambeau (Spectrum, Captain Marvel), Faiza Hussain (Captain Britain, Excalibur), Jubilee, Carol Danvers (Captain Marvel). Art by Lex, digital, <http://oftlop.tumblr.com/post/130204276911/>, (September 30, 2015).

mask. This choice has the effect of emphasizing the unity between Kamala's heroic persona and her out of mask personality. It is also of note that while the artist chose to caption the artwork: "Some of my favorite Marvel characters!" which is a more general categorization, all of the heroes included in the illustration are female. This brings to the fore Kamala's gender as her most salient identity aspect—as it is the only one that she shares with all of the other characters shown. The fan art also, however, because of its caption, implores the viewers to view these women as heroes and characters in their own right and holds that they have achieved distinction among all characters, not just those of their gender, and not because of it.



Some of my favorite Marvel characters!

Image 4.7

By far the most common trend in fan art however, are not the interpretations I have discussed previously, but rather a depiction of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, in costume, striking a heroic pose. This pose generally shows Kamala raising one or both “embiggened” fists, thus demonstrating her polymorphing powers. While there is an underlying visual association of some of these poses with that of Rosie the Riveter, an iconography that often has been encoded as feminist imagery, the fan art under this category is largely a simple celebration of Kamala and Ms. Marvel’s power and heroic status. The joy that the artists feel about the character is mapped onto the character itself, as both artist and subject revel in her place as a hero. The artist who made the fan art of Kamala on Carol’s back¹³⁴ also completed a piece featuring Kamala in her dynamic hero’s pose, sitting on a rooftop with her scarf dramatically and geometrically adding interest to the composition.¹³⁵ Another fan artist also demonstrates this trend, using both the foreshortening of perspective and a slight exaggeration of scale to achieve a subtler “embiggening” of Kamala’s fist.¹³⁶

Both of the artists note, in their captions, that they haven’t often drawn Kamala despite enjoying her character, may help explain the celebratory, heroic pose they both chose to create. These pieces are also interesting in that they call upon different traditions of aesthetic representation that are found within comics currently. The first piece, Image 4.8, calls upon the more historically prevalent

¹³⁴ See Image 4.6.

¹³⁵ See Image 4.8. Art by Mona, digital, (August 29, 2015).

¹³⁶ See Image 4.9. Art by Jacki, digital, <http://bananasandguavas.tumblr.com/post/97010600432/>, (September 8, 2014).

style that utilizes strong line work to contour shapes and figures and a strong primary color based pallet.

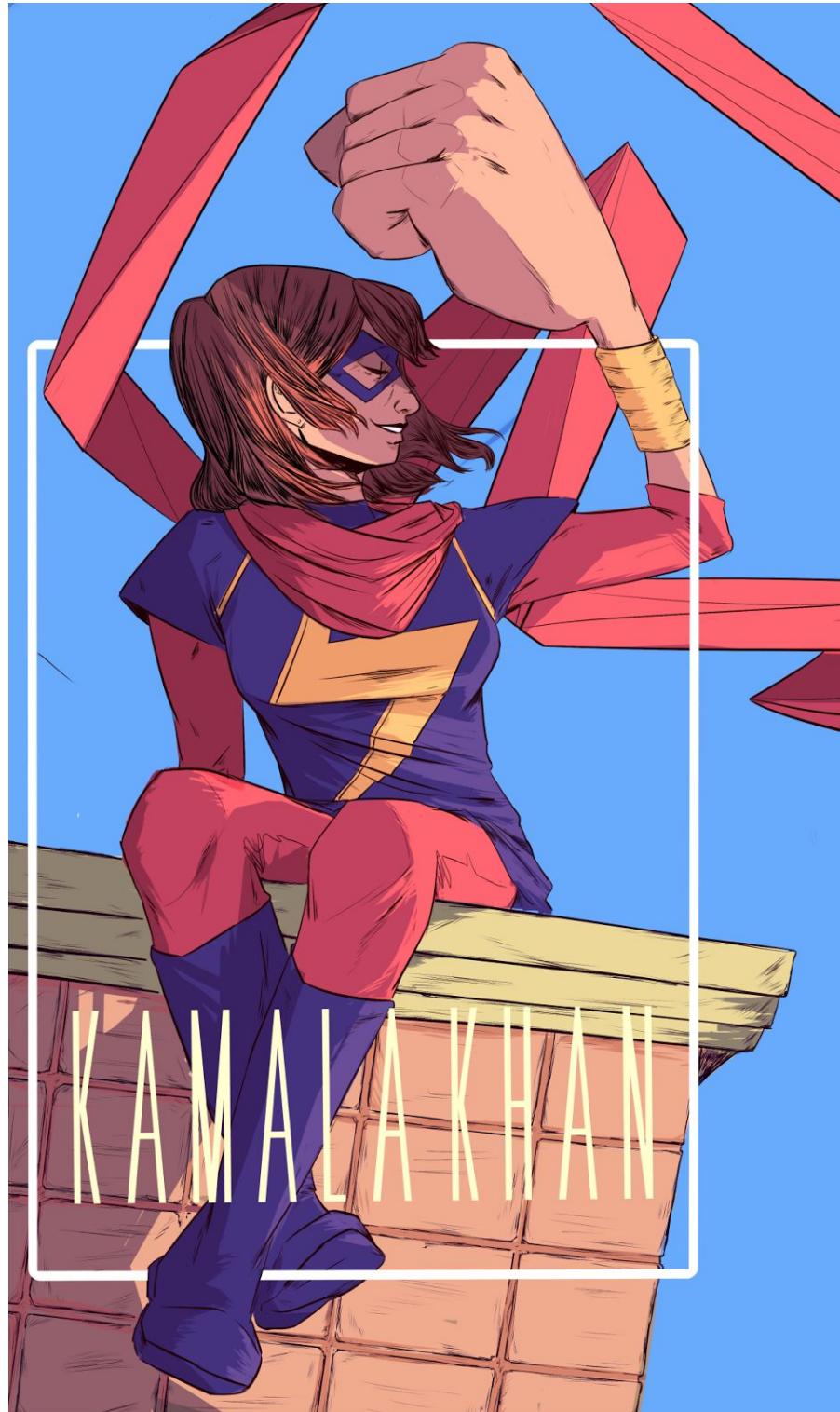


Image 4.8

kamala from my walkthrough! im sad that i don't draw her a lot
Image 4.9



The second piece, Image 4.9, achieves a softer style both through compositional choices, and through the elimination of black line work, achieving shape definition and contrast through block colors alone. Furthermore the pallet is shifted to generally feature larger amounts of green in the hues. This second style is aligned with a mode more recently integrated into mainstream industry comics.

¹³⁷ While the art of *Ms. Marvel* generally stays within the traditions of the first style, it does occasionally utilize the softer, potentially more dynamic, look that is achieved by the second style. It will be interesting to see how a diversification of aesthetic traditions both in fan art and industry art allows for a wider range of expressive and associative imagery in the communication of character and narrative.

The heroic pose that I just discussed is also prevalent in the pictures of Ms. Marvel cosplay that fan producers post. While the act of performing cosplay is in itself an interesting performance of fan production—and constitutes the subject of a research project in itself¹³⁸—I am interested in the way that fan producers then translate their performance back into a visual art form through the staging of pictures. For example, the artist who produced Image 4.6—of Kamala and Carol—and Image 4.8—of Kamala striking a heroic pose—also posted a picture of their own cosplay of Kamala and Ms. Marvel.¹³⁹ Altering only the

¹³⁷ This style can be seen, for instance in the work of Phil Noto, in the *Black Widow* run that began in 2014.

¹³⁸ Natasha Nesic, *No, Really: What is Cosplay?*, Honors Thesis, Mount Holyoke College, 2013.

¹³⁹ See Image 4.10. Art by: Mona, digital photograph, (July 28, 2015).

configuration of Kamala's scarf in order to serve as a hijab and thus allow the artist to maintain her own performance of religious identity, the cosplay is a close rendition of the Ms. Marvel costume. In one of the pictures that this artist posted of this cosplay, she has created a tableau utilizing imagery of the heroic pose I



Image 4.10

discussed to further continuity between her and the character she is performing. This act of creation, of both cosplay and photo tableau, allows the artist to embody a popular twitter "hashtag" that circulated around the release and first issues of *Ms. Marvel*: #IAmMsMarvel.

Another fan producer took this tableau approach a little further. In addition to creating a picture of herself in cosplay holding her fists up, ready for a fight,¹⁴⁰ the fan artist also reenacted one of the panels from the comic itself.



Image 4.11

¹⁴⁰ See Image 4.11. Art by: Eleni, digital photography, <http://youngtitan213.tumblr.com/post/132525890671/>, (November 3, 2015).



Image 4.12

During the process of creating her cosplay, the fan producer staged a picture made to resemble one of the panels when Kamala, within the context of the narrative, is also creating her costume.¹⁴¹ This act allows the fan producer to embody, not only the character of Kamala, but also the art of the *Ms. Marvel* comic, to become, at least partially, a part of the narrative. The careful reconstruction of the panel

¹⁴¹ See Image 4.12. Top image from: *Ms. Marvel Vol 1: No Normal*, Issue 5, Page 12. Bottom Image created by fan producer: Eleni, digital photography, <http://youngtitan213.tumblr.com/post/132525890671/>, (November 3, 2015).

evident in the fan producer's photo tableau demonstrates how much of an impact the comic itself, not just as a vehicle for character, has impacted its fans.

An aspect of fan art that takes on embodiment in a different way than cosplay and cosplay tableau pictures is the use of realism. For example, one tumblr blog posted art made by an artist who usually worked on a different site, in which Kamala as Ms. Marvel is depicted using a highly realistic style.¹⁴² Through this piece the fan producer himself is not trying to embody the character, but rather, to imagine, aesthetically, how this character would be embodied in the real world.



Image 4.13

¹⁴² See Image 4.13. Art by Rahzzah, digital, <http://rahzzah.deviantart.com/art/Ms-Marvel-576955775>, found on tumblr at <http://vagrantsaint.tumblr.com/post/134886995650/>, (December, 2015).



"All this time I thought I was alone...that I was the only nerdy Pakistani-American-slash-Inhuman in the entire universe. And then suddenly...I wasn't."

Image 4.14

Another fan artist utilized a partially realistic style, hybridizing the line work of illustrative styles with color contouring that suggested the three dimensionality of a realistic form. This artist also spoke to the realities of an embodied—physically and socially embodied—Kamala through the use of a caption.¹⁴³ This caption, printed with the image above, is a quote from the comic. Within its original context Kamala speaks this line when she first discovers that Kamran is also super-powered, though before he is revealed to be a villain, thus the term Inhuman has a very specific, internal meaning—referring to a long established shared of superpower origin. When this quote is used as the caption for the fan art, however, it emphasizes the sense of longing for connection and familiarity that could resonate between the character of Kamala and the art’s viewers. The viewers who have the shared life experiences that the caption refers to become a part of a reciprocal legitimization—they give Kamala realism while she gives them representation—that makes the story meaningful. In this context, “Inhuman” becomes less of a term from the Marvel universe, and more of an emblematic piece of shorthand for the feeling of othering and marginalization that many “nerdy Pakistani-American” people experience. Realism, therefore, in fan art has the potential to further increase the communicative and representative power that is constructed in the original comic.

¹⁴³ See Image 4.14. Wendy, digital, (June 3, 2015). Artist signature removed from the lower right corner of the picture to respect the artist’s wishes for anonymity.

Over the course of this section I have explored a virtual site in which fans of *Ms. Marvel* share, critique, and celebrate not only information about the comic that they love, but also their own creative productions that feature the comic. While working with Tumblr as a site had its own limitations, it also provided insight that would have been impossible to find using a geographically bound, physical site. The fan productions that I found on Tumblr were illuminating in demonstrating different fan's reactions to the themes of identity and heroism that I discussed in the previous chapter, and thereby spoke to the dynamic nature of *Ms. Marvel* and its ability to create exchanges and interactions beyond the bounds of its own covers.

The interactions that occur in fan production utilize tools of aesthetic and narrative to juxtapose similarities or differences with the original source and illustrate the wider possibilities of representation that can be extrapolated from *Ms. Marvel*'s "canon" material. Furthermore, by looking at the way individual fan productions, such as fan art or meta-analysis are integrated into different kinds of blogs that fans create, you can see how this material moves between insular communities of dedicated readers, out towards blogs aimed at a wider audience through which new readers could potentially be introduced to the narrative of *Ms. Marvel*. These fan productions thus have the power not only to demonstrate the existing reception of the fans, but also to influence the expectations and opinions of a wider audience. In light of the key role that fan productions play in creating and maintaining a wider network of social actions around the dynamic text of *Ms.*

Marvel, in the next section I will turn to look more closely at some of the motivations and experiences expressed by a few fan producers and consider what these perspectives can suggest about the environment of fan production and audience reception.

Kamala Korps: Interviews with Fan Artists

As stated previously, in this section I will be discussing the perspectives gained through interviews with several fan artists. These interviews are drawn from the same social location of interaction that the other fan productions I examined were from, Tumblr. Because of the nature of the site through which I first encountered these artists, my contact was conducted via digital communication using the emails that these artists listed on their tumblr blogs. In the process of gaining written, informed consent from the artists, I prompted them to indicate what method of communication they would feel most comfortable participating in an interview in. I will ultimately be discussing the interview information I received from four fan artists. Three of these artists indicated a preference for email-based correspondence, and thus the majority of interviews were conducted through written email responses. The remaining interview was conducted via a Skype video conversation.

It is true that there is a difference between the kinds of interactions that take place through (primarily) spontaneous verbal communication, like the kind that Skype facilitates, and that which occurs in the less immediate text-based communication of email. However, in light of the way that textual and digital communication is used for a wide range of social interaction, that there are entire communities that interact solely through this medium—like Tumblr—I believe that email based field interactions are still a worthwhile source that should be treated with equal validity, if different contextualization, as verbal and visual

communication. While anthropologists have historically privileged “face-to-face” forms of interaction in their fieldwork, to the point of conceptualizing it as a feature that distinguishes the discipline from other social sciences, I think that we have to acknowledge the ways that the virtual or digital “faces” which are created through social media and other remote forms of communication are at times the only, or even the preferred, “face” with which an anthropologist interacts. Furthermore, as I will discuss towards the end of this section, there are certain kinds of interactions that only occur in the masked spaces of textual, online communication, which would be lost to anthropologists if they focused on or privileged physical, verbal forms of field research over those which are conducted virtually, using text-based exchanges. It is with this posit in mind, that I will now turn to the interviews I conducted.

While all of the people I interviewed were fan artists who had produced work featuring Kamala Khan, beyond this, their backgrounds varied widely. I interviewed people of various genders with different cultural and religious backgrounds. One of the people I interviewed was John, a “white, cis-gendered, straight male” from Newfoundland, Canada who is an aspiring illustrator.¹⁴⁴ Another person I interviewed was Mona, a college student studying art from the Boston area who is Muslim and whose family is from Jordan.¹⁴⁵ I also interviewed Michi, a nonbinary college student who lives in Brooklyn, is Jewish, and is of

¹⁴⁴ John, interview, January 29, 2016.

¹⁴⁵ Mona, interview, January 29, 2016

Armenian, Russian, and Romani descent.¹⁴⁶ The final person I interviewed was Wendy, an Asian-American woman who lives in Minneapolis and works in comics professionally.¹⁴⁷ While most of the participants live in the United States, one of the people I interviewed is Canadian. Though my focus was on gauging responses within the United States, as I have argued that *Ms. Marvel* operates and participates within the US national and political imaginary, I did want to acknowledge the reach that the comic has beyond socio-political borders. All of these artists produced work that I referenced in the previous section, and which will be discussed again in light of the fan artists' motivations in this section. Due to their different backgrounds these fan artists have different relationships to Kamala Khan and *Ms. Marvel*, as they are on different places between the self-identification and cross-identification axis of representation models. I will be discussing the effect of these different perspectives more specifically when I turn to look at the motivations these artists had for producing fan work of *Ms. Marvel*.

The fan artists I interviewed also had different relationships to comics generally. While these fan artists participate as fan producers in other “fandoms” they have differing levels of focus on *Ms. Marvel*, other Marvel heroes, and superheroes as a whole. All of my participants recall being exposed to Marvel superheroes first through animated TV shows and movies, and subsequently—three of them citing the very same *X-Men* franchises that I fondly recall as my own introduction to the superhero genre. Beyond this common ground, some of

¹⁴⁶ Michi, interview, February 20, 2016.

¹⁴⁷ Wendy, interview, February 29, 2016.

the fan artists have been reading comics for many years while some started reading only recently. However as one of the people I interviewed, Mona, observed, Marvel's marketed comics audience is "no longer a boys only club, it's no longer a person who understands the whole entire Marvel universe club,"¹⁴⁸ and thus Marvel's and *Ms. Marvel*'s current fans don't need the encyclopedic knowledge of comics that stereotypical "nerds" of old were seemingly expected to bring to their reading experience.

This shift is a new and highly gendered change, as comics are expanding not only to be more accessible to new or casual readers, but also from a narrow white male demographic to a more inclusive spread. Wendy spoke to this shift as they have experienced it in their own lifetime, "I grew up in Seoul, Korea, so I read a ton of manga/manhwa and wasn't as exposed to Western comics—not because I didn't have access to it, but because most of the boys I went to school with made it feel like 'not a girl thing'."¹⁴⁹ This feeling of gendered exclusion appears in other accounts of personal exposure to comics. For example, one of the artists in Special Edition: NYC's *People in Comics* panel recalled also initially reading manga only as a teenager because their local comic book store was an environment dominated by older men who were not welcoming or interested in welcoming a young woman into their space.¹⁵⁰ In these two experiences, the exclusionary behavior is located at various levels of the audience, however Mona

¹⁴⁸ Mona, interview.

¹⁴⁹ Wendy, interview.

¹⁵⁰ Natalie Nourigat, *Publishers Weekly Presents: People in Comics*, Special Edition: NYC, June 6, 2015.

discussed the ways that this gendered understanding of who does or should read comics is expressed in the comics themselves. Upon revisiting the comics that she used to enjoy growing up Mona found “this weird deep rooted misogyny” that was “really jarring” to return to now as a more socially aware and engaged reader.

¹⁵¹ Furthermore she expressed that one of the reasons she prefers Marvel over DC comics is because she sees a lot of this misogyny and feels “as an artist, what they’re doing to these female characters is horrific” as they continue to draw them in over sexualized ways.¹⁵² *Ms. Marvel*’s positive representation of a young woman like Kamala seems to be far less alienating than other contemporary comics, an aspect which adds to its appeal to fans, as do the other ways that the comic works to broaden both audiences and the visual cultural landscape of the genre.

Because of the varying backgrounds that the people I interviewed had, they each highlighted different aspects of the comic as being important, “relatable,” or unique about *Ms. Marvel*. For example, while John stated that he “appreciate[d] the fact that they created a Muslim superhero that challenges the narrow and often bigoted view of Muslims that a large group of people in the west seem to have,” he was personally drawn to Kamala because of her realism as a believable teenager, and a nerdy one at that.¹⁵³ He expanded by saying he found Kamala an appealing character because, “I like the fact that she geeks out and I

¹⁵¹ Mona, interview.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ John, interview.

like the idea that when she got super powers she decided she wanted to be like the Avengers – that’s probably what I’d do if I got powers.”¹⁵⁴ The continuity of fan behavior between Kamala (towards the real superheroes that exist within her world) and her audience helps facilitate the cross identification that fosters empathy between Kamala and border demographics that aren’t represented by the more politicized and therefore emphasized aspects of her identity, like race, ethnicity, or religion.

Mona, on the other hand, found Kamala to be a much closer representation of her own identities, a representation that does not often appear in popular media. She discussed the disbelief that she felt upon the original announcement of the comic and how Kamala’s impact has spread beyond just her and existing comic readers, as even her younger sister, who had no previous interest in comics wanted to know about *Ms. Marvel*, a hero that seemed too good to be true. At the same time Mona also stated that she glad that Kamala is not reduced down into one component part;

But what I really appreciate about the authors and the editors who work on it...[realize] she’s a superhero, who happens to be Muslim. She’s a teenager who happens to have these relatable problems that a lot of like first generation immigrant kids have too... the story was the important thing and for them to realize that means a lot.¹⁵⁵

For Mona it was important both that Kamala’s faith was both authentically—not emblematically—illustrated but also that it remained only one aspect of her identity rather than its sole aspect. Other parts of the comic also had a larger,

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Mona, interview.

more personal impact on Mona. For example, the character of Zoe seemed to make a distinct impression on her:

Zoe has an important role, because people like her do exist...they represent general society's expectations on these immigrant kids who feel like they don't really fit into that world, they might not be as explicit as this one girl who shows up to and says all these things to you, but she had to be there in order to... make the story more real.¹⁵⁶

This reaction to the character of Zoe speaks to some of the character's narrative purposes that I traced in the previous chapter, and indicates one perspective that another reader of the comic had regarding the same topic.

Mona is not the only fan producer I interviewed however, who reacted to the way that *Ms. Marvel* depicted an experience of being a second-generation American and the external factors that shape this identity embodiment. Michi also spoke to this experience. When asked about what aspects of *Ms. Marvel* they enjoy and relate to, they responded that as the child “of immigrants, I can definitely relate to Kamala about worrying whether or not I fit in with the rest of the crowd, and how to juggle both my own identity of gender and sexuality with my parent's expectations, and the general struggle and stress of everyday life.”¹⁵⁷ These reactions of self-identification that two fans with seemingly disparate backgrounds had with a single text are drawn from a shared experience of family migration. This instance illustrates the way that intersectionality functions not only to draw connections between different identity categories within a single person's identity, but also between similar identity aspects experienced by people

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Michi, interview.

differentiated by other major identity aspects. In this way it demonstrates the myriad of connections that occur between and within people's experiences of identity and challenge the idea that any reified category is stable enough to be the basis for differentiation.

Wendy's relation to the comic was built upon a different space of shared experience, that of being excluded from the dominant norm that characterized both the audience and the heroes of the genre. She held that "Kamala Khan is proof that a leading character does not have to be a white man for a series to be successful or have a loyal following."¹⁵⁸ In this way Kamala becomes a model for new ways to achieve the goal of "diversity" in comics that fans have increasingly rallied around. This sentiment also speaks to one of the largest fears that many fans of the series expressed when the comic was first released. Michi, John, and Wendy all expressed that they were worried the comic would be a short-lived series. As titles in the comics industry live or die by their sales, an unpopular or underperforming series is often canceled or discontinued in the middle of a run. While *Ms. Marvel* occupies the top-selling spot of the past year, and the character has become integrated into the Avengers team, John and Michi both continue to worry that the series might be cancelled.

Michi also expressed their skepticism upon hearing the announcement of Kamala Khan as *Ms. Marvel* that the title was actually "a marketing ploy set to pacify fans who want more diverse and interesting narratives" which would be

¹⁵⁸ Wendy, interview.

canceled “before she even gets to make a lasting impression on people.”¹⁵⁹ While the decision to approve *Ms. Marvel* for production may very well have been a commercially motivated decision to appease fans, or a pragmatic understanding that, as Mona put it, being “more inclusive equals more money”¹⁶⁰ as a larger audience base buys more comics—Michi was satisfied with the quality of the comic as “the entire Ms. Marvel team, including G Willow Wilson blew me away entirely, because of just how much energy and care they put into Ms. Marvel and Kamala. It entirely exceeded my expectations.”¹⁶¹ Michi was not the only one with reservations about the series, however.

Mona, as briefly mentioned before, was concerned that *Ms. Marvel* would be depicted using stereotypes. She was also concerned that the comic would exoticized her, “I was worried she would be like the novel brown person for the new marvel universe.”¹⁶² While ultimately she was happy with the series, both with the writing and the artistic choices that were made, her discussion of the way that *Ms. Marvel* depicted Kamala’s relationship to her family highlights Mona’s thoughts on how stereotypes were addressed and then avoided:

The one thing that I cannot stand...this happens a lot with Muslim kids being portrayed, specifically Desi kids being portrayed in popular media whether or not they are Muslim is irrelevant—but in Western media they are expected to want to resent their parents, they want to resent tradition, and they [the media] portray them like that's the right way to go...what I like about Kamala, she kind of falls into that at the beginning. She wants to go to that party and that's how she gets exposed to the Terrigen mists, but later on she realizes that it's her family who's the one who's protecting

¹⁵⁹ Michi, interview.

¹⁶⁰ Mona, interview.

¹⁶¹ Michi, interview.

¹⁶² Mona, interview

her. Her father is actually the one looking out for her the whole time. Its her mom who's known her secret the whole time, and who's been making sure the family is still together. Her dad never stopped being supportive of her, and that positive family dynamic, that narrative is not given to brown kids, it's not. And that is...one of the things that really resonated with me in Ms. Marvel. They did that right.¹⁶³

And while Mona was very pleased with this aspect of the comic, there were parts of the series that the fans were more critical of. For example, both Mona and John were not impressed by the villain which dominated Kamala's first narrative arc as a hero, the Inventor. John found that he was "not too much a believable threat"¹⁶⁴ while Mona felt that he was there just so Kamala "has someone to fight... to see how she faced them,"¹⁶⁵ rather than constituting an interesting element in and of himself. While this lackluster review did not prevent either fan from enjoying the series as a whole, it does reveal certain narrative priorities that may exist in the comic as well as its audiences.

Furthermore, while, as is to be expected from fans, all of the artists I interviewed enjoyed the comic, most of them expressed fears for the future of the title. John expressed these as a wish that any future writers will have the ability to maintain the current quality of the series.¹⁶⁶ Mona expanded upon this worry in the face the current performance of writers who feature Kamala as a guest in other series, "I'm kind of afraid of her being given off to any other writers, because I'm not going to lie, I don't like her when she's featured in other comics. She just

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ John, interview.

¹⁶⁵ Mona, interview.

¹⁶⁶ John, interview.

doesn't feel the same, she isn't drawn the same. It's not the same energy.”¹⁶⁷

Michi takes one step further and isolates one principle fear regarding the future of *Ms. Marvel*, they fear “that artists will continuously lighten and whitewash Kamala,” echoing fan discontent about the artists who currently alter Kamala when they draw her as a guest character, a sentiment that was discussed in the previous section as well.

While up until this point I have been discussing the interviews primarily in their capacity to provide insight into my interlocutors as fans, I will now turn to their role as fan artists, and examine the various motivations they had for creating fan art. Just as there are many possible motivations operating within the same project in industry productions—to appease fans, bring in more money, and speak to diversity as a concept—there can be many reasons that inform a single act of fan production. I will begin by discussing Michi's reflections on their fan art. Michi cited comics as a sanctuary for them from the “daily stress in my life” and that creating fan art and posting that art on a blog were both ways to further that feeling of escape as well as a way to extend that positive interaction to a larger community of fans: “My blog is a continuous source that changes and grows as I grow, and Kamala helped/helps me get through extremely bad days and provides a sense of storytelling that makes the troubles go away, which is what I try to do through my own art and through my interactions with people via my blog.”¹⁶⁸ This sense of peace that Michi pursues through reading comics also seems to be

¹⁶⁷ Mona, interview.

¹⁶⁸ Michi, interview.

reflected in their fan art itself. The two pieces that they created,¹⁶⁹ were inspired by a desire “to grasp some sort of innocence or child like calm” in Kamala’s usually energetic character, and was a reference to the “first issue of Ms. Marvel where Kamala sees Carol in the fog,”¹⁷⁰ as previously discussed.

However, occurring at the same time as this personal motivation, Michi’s second work was also completed as a commissioned piece of art. While the person who commissioned the artwork did not have a substantial impact on the composition or design of the piece, which revisited the first work using different materials, it was nonetheless created as part of an economic exchange. This commercial motivation exists concurrently to the emotional motivation that Michi brings to their work, neither eclipses or negates the other, ultimately demonstrating the pluralism that underlies fan creation.

John’s engagement with fan art was also somewhat economically motivated; though in a less direct way than working by commission. John stated that while he does not frequently create fan art, when he posts it on his blog it is “in order to get more followers. I am always trying to get more people to see my work in order to get new clients and fans.”¹⁷¹ As a newly established illustrator, this is very important to him as a source of possible business. Therefore, part of his reason for drawing Kamala Khan was because of “how often she kept popping up in social media,”¹⁷² and the fact that popular or trendsetting characters are often

¹⁶⁹ See Images 4.3 and 4.4.

¹⁷⁰ Michi, interview.

¹⁷¹ John, interview.

¹⁷² Ibid.

able to generate more attention from other fans on tumblr or other social media sites. That being said, John also stated that “I’m usually pretty busy, so for me to set aside time to draw fan art it also has to be a character that I’m a fan of,” and that Kamala particularly had a fun costume design that he wanted to draw.¹⁷³ Furthermore John was motivated by his admiration of Jamie McKelvie, an artist who drew a few covers for *Ms. Marvel*,¹⁷⁴ and thus his illustration featuring Ms. Marvel and Captain Marvel on the Statue of Liberty¹⁷⁵ was a fan art tribute not only to a character, but to a specific artist.

Wendy’s fan art is strongly motivated by a theme of celebrating “strong female characters” generally, and in the case of Ms. Marvel, Wendy also used fan art as a way to “show support for a series that I’d like to stick around.”¹⁷⁶ When asked about the quote that she used to caption her piece¹⁷⁷ Wendy replied, “to me, Kamala represents hope—especially for a new generation of comic fans that don’t look like comic fans did 10 years ago. That quote really resonated with me. They are not alone.”¹⁷⁸ These two statements reveal interesting things about the assumed audience of fan art. While the caption that Wendy used is clearly meant as a way to interact with and celebrate other members of the fan community, her characterization of fan art as a way to lend support to the longevity of a title also

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Including the cover for *Ms. Marvel*, Issue # 4, See Image 3.3.

¹⁷⁵ See Image 4.5

¹⁷⁶ Wendy, interview.

¹⁷⁷ Caption: “All this time I thought I was alone...that I was the only nerdy Pakistani-American-slash-Inhuman in the entire universe. And then suddenly...I wasn’t. See Image 4.14.

¹⁷⁸ Wendy, interview.

indicates an awareness of how audience reaction can potentially help increase visibility or sales of a comic in such a way as to help it continue. Another aspect of Wendy's production of art as a fan that was interesting is the fact that she also works professionally in the comics industry. While she does not work on *Ms. Marvel*, she does occupy both the space of an industry professional and a fan artist. That she continues to produce fan art for the some comics while she works professionally on others highlights the continuity between the audience and the industry that I discussed in previous sections.

Mona is not yet sure if she wishes to pursue a place in the industry; as an art student, she is still negotiating her career goals. Her perspective as a fan artist does however, demonstrates how one act of production may influence another. While Mona generally views fan art as a way to “contribute to...this great big conversation that's happening online,”¹⁷⁹ the production of her first fan art of Kamala Khan was motivated in part by her decision to cosplay as the character. Mona recalled a friend's comedic warning that “you're gonna make a Kamala Khan print because if you show up in cosplay and you don't have one, I'm going to disown you.”¹⁸⁰ While this hyperbolic reaction is funny, it also demonstrates an implicit understanding that a fan who produces art has a responsibility to use that as the primary expression of her love or admiration of the work, and that for expression in another form of production, like a created and performed cosplay, must be supplemented with visual art production as well. Fan art becomes a

¹⁷⁹ Mona, interview.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

privileged form of fan production—perhaps because of the economic exchange potential that it, alone, has. Both of Mona’s fan art pieces were a part of some kind of exchange, the first was sold as a print during a comic convention,¹⁸¹ while the second was created on commission for another fan.¹⁸²

A further discussion of the experience of being a fan producer at a convention highlighted some interesting distinctions between the kinds of interactions that occur between fans in digital spaces and those that occur in physical spaces. Mona received a lot of positive attention at the convention saying “I’ve never gotten anything by positive responses in person,”¹⁸³ particularly about her cosplay as many fans, from little girls who read the comics with their fathers, to young Muslim women who were inspired by Mona’s hijab incorporated cosplay to find a way to make their own costumes that respect their religious observations. There were also, however, a few moments that revealed silent discrimination and microaggressions. For example Mona recalled that despite the fact that *Ms. Marvel* was at the top of the sales charts for Marvel, “what I found interesting was there wasn’t a lot of fan art, I was at a comic convention and no one was selling pieces of the most popular heroine. I don’t know what to say about that— it was kind of weird.”¹⁸⁴ This realization of this atmosphere of erasure or silence is similar to the moment of appropriation that occurred at Special Edition: NYC, when Brian Michael Bendis adopted Greg Pak’s narrative

¹⁸¹ See Image 4.8.

¹⁸² See Image 4.6.

¹⁸³ Mona, interview.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

of the specific and the universal as his own without acknowledging its origin.¹⁸⁵

Thus while the physical social interactions that occur between fans at conventions seem to be positive, they also exhibit a passive silence that speaks to the dominance of marginalizing norms that persists despite emerging changes.

Digital interactions between dedicated *Ms. Marvel* fans, larger comics audiences, and critics, on the other hand, are not silent. Perhaps because of the anonymity available to participants, or the emboldening distance of text, regardless the cause, negativity is much more openly aired through public forums or negative replies. Mona briefly recalled an experience of religiously motivated discrimination wherein after a popular cosplay of hers, in which she wore a hijab, was met with “aggressive hate messages” and racist, eroticizing parodies.¹⁸⁶ This explicit intolerance, lacking from most convention interactions that only cautiously address the status quo, occurred alongside an equally direct call for change. The meta-analysis and outraged posts about whitewashing are only some of the examples of fans using their digital spaces to challenge normalized discrimination and celebrate *Ms. Marvel*’s resolutely positive subversive potential. Both of these extremes of interaction demonstrate the way that the digital context sheds a greater light on the realities structural inequality and discrimination that *Ms. Marvel* pushes back against. Their comparison to the relative silence of physical spaces of fan interaction also makes it clear that the

¹⁸⁵ Brian Michael Bendis, *#BlackComicsMonth: Diversity in Comics*. See Chapter 2, section 1 of this paper.

¹⁸⁶ Mona, interview.

digital space has unique potential as a dialogue-generating forum in which change may be possible.

Conclusion

Over the course of this research project, I have endeavored to demonstrate how *Ms. Marvel* is a case study for a new kind of intersectional identity praxis¹⁸⁷ that is enacted through the dynamic text of a superhero comic. The construction of a hero that challenges hegemonic views of moral citizenship, what it looks—and the white privileging, Judeo-Christian underpinnings that are remain rooted in our national morality—and how it is performed transforms the comic into a forum through which this norm is challenged and a new national future is imagined. I examined how *Ms. Marvel* is a product of the contemporary comics publishing industry that seeks to serve, and profit from a growing audience by exploring new models of diversity, specificity and universality. I studied the public presentation of the comic and its goals by the creative team that produced it, particularly by editor Sana Amanat and writer G. Willow Wilson, and looked at how these performances fit into a popular discourse on identity. I undertook my own meta-analysis of the comic, as both a fan and an anthropologist, to trace the visual, textual, and narrative signifiers used to encode and navigate the social claims made through the comic. Finally I engaged with a digital field site in which networked fans produced their responses to *Ms. Marvel* in a multitude of ways, including the same illustrative practices of the original medium. Through a sampling of these fan productions and the completion of interviews with some

¹⁸⁷ Dhamoon.

producers, I touched upon not only how the comic is received, but furthermore how fans participate in and extend the social effect of the comic.

While I am hopeful about the positive potential of *Ms. Marvel*, a view undoubtedly influenced by my personal enthusiasm for the comic, but tempered as well with my academic engagement with this project, this emerging platform occupies a very precarious position. As I discussed throughout the previous section, many fans have fear about the diminishing quality of future writers for *Ms. Marvel* or those that write Kamala Khan in her growing ensemble appearances through the Marvel universe. Others worry about a conscious shift towards assimilative versions of Kamala Khan as the industry pulls away from their stated goals of diversity and inclusion. What happens if Kamala Khan persists as a white-washed token ‘diverse’ hero who becomes an ally to the silencing of the people that she is meant to champion the inclusion of? Others still worry that the social change will simply be stopped by a cancelation of the series. One only needs to look back towards another carrier of the Marvel mantel, Monica Rambeau¹⁸⁸, to see how a character with potentially revolutionary positionality can be erased or obscured by editorial decisions. There is an incredible weight resting upon the next year, as Kamala Khan shifts from a popular trend to an established character, and the question of her legacy remains unclear.

¹⁸⁸ See Chapter One, section two of this paper.

Furthermore, even if *Ms. Marvel* should continue with its complex and compelling challenge to hegemonic identity norms, what happens next? Yes, the participation of audience members in an expanding community of fan producers demonstrates that the comic is having a ‘real’ effect in precipitating discourse, but is this enough? What even is the goal or standard against which a positive outcome could be judged, and is this even integral to the comic’s purpose? In an environment in which Islamophobic rhetoric is used in domestic US politics to vilify an entire religion, Muslim-Americans included, I cannot help but think that national projects of belonging have heightened significance, across all of the forms through which they are enacted. What, if anything can the anthropological project of knowledge generation contribute to this moment in time?

Anthropological research has the ability to highlight the site it studies as a space of social interaction, interest and significance. Projects such as mine can bring visibility not only to comics as a space of identity politics, but also to fan production, and the digital spaces that it is growing to inhabit, as a site for social change. While this does bring up questions of ethical interaction, and activist anthropology—social sciences have long been implicated in a public discourse that demonizes or others fans of popular, digital, youth entertainments. Henry Jenkins’s work regarding and reflecting upon a social fear of the violent imagery of video games¹⁸⁹ is only one example of how popular understandings of media have fixated on their effect of constructing moral citizens—albeit anti-ideal

¹⁸⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

citizens as the case Jenkins sought to oppose may be. While an atmosphere of fear placed a public focus on the dangers of media, anthropological study may help to legitimize the positive movements that come from entertainment mass medias as well. Furthermore, as anthropological attention can bring reflexivity to the people who are the subject of study, with the current expansion into studies of visual culture, media, and fan participation, people may interact with their social spaces more deliberately, more mindful of the potent liminal, effective space they are engaged with and perpetuating. Future studies that focus on the comic industry itself, that “study up”¹⁹⁰ in the structurally powerful corporate publishing houses of Marvel or DC, may also spark larger conversations about the role these institutions play as participants in our national politics of belonging, in producing dynamic texts that re-inscribe or challenge the boundaries of difference and hegemony in the United States of America. I have posed a lot of questions in this section that I do not know the answer to, but that I would be very interested in finding out. But I hope that this paper has succeeded in answering one question.

Who is *Ms. Marvel*?

We are.

¹⁹⁰ Term from: Laura Nader, “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up,” in *Reinventing Anthropology*, ed. Dell H. Hymes, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).



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