YES, WE KHAN—
DIVERSITY AND DE-MONSTERIZATION OF MUSLIM IDENTITIES IN *MS. MARVEL* (2014–)

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Abstract: *In 2014, Marvel comics introduced a new character to take over the mantle of the superhero identity Ms. Marvel. The new heroine is Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old girl born and raised in New Jersey. Khan is Marvel's first Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero to headline her own comic book; as such, she represents a move towards diversification in a historically conservative, white and masculine genre. In addition, Kamala Khan comes into existence in a political and social context where the 9/11 attacks, the 'War on Terror', and Islamophobia continue to reverberate. This article explores how the* Ms. Marvel *comic functions as a critique of the ways in which social norms, stereotypes and prejudices have monsterized multicultural, Muslim identities, especially in the years following 9/11. Conducting analyses of Khan's conflicted relationship to her own identities and issues concerning visibility and concealment, I explore how these negative framings affect her self-perception, and in turn her self-representation. Lastly, I aim to illustrate the ways in which the comic challenges monolithic and monstrous representations of Islam through its depiction of diverse, multicultural, Muslim identities.*

Keywords: *comic books*; *superheroes*; *identity*; *monsters*; *Muslim-Americans*; *de-monsterization*.

Introduction

For a long time, comics were regarded by the academic field as a mass-produced form of easy entertainment. During the last decades however, the medium's potential to tell complex literary and visual stories has caught the interest of academics and readers alike. Today it consists of a diverse array of genres and artistic styles, with the superhero genre still being one of the most persistent presences within the comic book field. The genre has since its genesis been predominantly white, male, and heteronormative with regards to characters, authors, artists and editors, and there has consequently been a lack of—as well as problematic—representation of minorities (Duncan/Smith 2009; Lendrum 2005; Strömberg 2011). In 2014, Marvel took a step towards an increase in the diversity of their superheroes by re-launching *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson/Alphona 2014). As the previous title-bearer Carol Danvers had taken on the mantle of Captain Marvel,[1] a brand-new protagonist was created and introduced as Ms. Marvel. The heroine is Kamala Khan, a 16-year-old girl born and raised in New Jersey, who suddenly finds herself endowed with regenerative and shape-shifting powers. Khan is Marvel's first Pakistani-American, Muslim superhero to headline her own comic book. The creators of the new character are Sana Amanat, a Pakistani-American who grew up in New Jersey, and writer G. Willow Wilson who is herself a Muslim.

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[1] For an introduction to Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel, see for instance *Earth's Mightiest Hero Captain Marvel: In Pursuit of Flight*, volume 1 (De Connick/Ríos/Soy 2012).

The introduction of Kamala Khan comes at a point in contemporary American history where the collective trauma of 9/11 still reverberates. More than a decade of increased surveillance targeting Muslims has created an atmosphere of fear and insecurity for many Muslim-Americans (Shams 2018: 74). Issues of Islamophobia have not abated noticeably; the current political discourse continues to foster a climate of suspicion and hostility through anti-Muslim rhetoric (Bridge Initiative Team 2018).

It is against the backdrop of anti-Muslim sentiments and negative framings in the political and media discourse that I examine Kamala Khan's assumption of the superhero mantle. Drawing on theories of the monstrous and images of Muslims following 9/11, I look at how the comic functions as a critique of the ways in which social norms, stereotypes and prejudices have monsterized multicultural, Muslim identities. Through analyses of Khan's conflicted relationship to her own identities and issues concerning visibility and concealment, I explore how these negative framings affect her self-perception, and in turn her self-representation. Furthermore, I aim to show how the *Ms. Marvel* comic works to deconstruct the categorization of 'Muslims' as a homogenous group. Through the extended cast of characters, the narrative promotes diverse, nuanced and complex representations of multicultural identities and expressions of faith. The conscientious subversion of monstrous tropes related to Muslims furthers the comic's process of de-monsterization.

Superheroes, Conventions and Representation—A Brief History

Comics as a medium have a rich history across the world. For a long time, however, the connection to mass production and notions of 'easy entertainment' did much to exclude it from becoming an academic discipline in and of itself. It was arguably with Will Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985) and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) that academic research truly took hold. Since then, it has branched out significantly, exploring historical and global aspects (Harvey 1994; Harvey 1996 [1994]; Mazur/Danner 2014; Duncan/Smith 2009), ideological aspects (McAllister/Sewell/Gordon 2006), as well as explorations of different genres. Much research has for example been done on specific non-fiction works such as Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Ewert 2000; Kruger 2015), Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (Warhol 2011) and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (Chute 2008; Malek 2006). The superhero genre has been studied at length through works by Robbins (1996), Robinson (2004), Hatfield, Heer and Worcester (eds. 2013), Regalado (2015) and Bahlmann (2016), to mention a few. Since her appearance in 2014, Kamala Khan has also gained scholarly interest, see for example Loeffert (2016) and Kent (2015). I look at these studies in more detail later in the article.

Ms. Marvel is a comic book firmly placed in the superhero genre. It is a genre that has come to be the beacon of comic books, for good and for ill, since Superman made his appearance in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938. According to Reynolds, many of the character definitions and genre conventions of superhero comics were cemented already with the first published Superman stories; the god-like powers, the devotion to justice, the secret identity or alter-ego, the patriotism (1992: 12–16)—and, I will add, the idealized masculine (and eventually feminine) form. With the notable exception of Wonder Woman, early female superheroes were uncommon; women were, as pointed out by Steinem, limited to "sitting around like a Technicolor clothes horse getting into jams

with villains, and saying things like, 'Oh Superman, I'll always be grateful to you'" (204).

Eventually, new female heroes entered the stage. The first issue of *Ms. Marvel* was published in 1997, with Carol Danvers as the first to assume the identity. Two others followed: succeeding Danvers were Sharon Ventura and Karla Sofen, before Danvers again took over the mantle. *Ms. Marvel,* as a superhero identity, is full of history and conventions; similar to heroes like Supergirl, She-Hulk and Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel was created as a female counterpart to Captain Marvel/Mar-Vell[2]—a beautiful, white, blond and muscular alien hero dedicated to protecting mankind. The moniker thus represents one of the most persistent tropes in the superhero genre, which is the establishment of a female version of a male superhero. From her genesis, Ms. Marvel was as such a female spin-off of the hegemonic masculine identity—the white, heterosexual, male hero, written and drawn by white men.

It is perhaps not surprising that the superhero genre has been notoriously lacking in terms of representation. American comics have historically employed detrimental stereotypes and tropes in portrayals of race, nationality, sexuality and gender. For instance, depictions of black superheroes have relied on tropes of hypermasculinity and primitivism (Lendrum 2005), as well as an inclination towards physical violence (Cruz 2018). The portrayal of female superheroes has a long history of impossible anatomies and poses.[3] There has moreover been a tendency to rely on overly sexual and orientalized tropes regarding race, multiculturalism, and gender (Strömberg 2011). One of the darkest tropes in comics is the killing of female characters in order to further the male hero's storyline.[4]

Curtis and Cardo have found that "[t]here has been a noticeable change" in the superhero genre over the last decade or so (2018: 381) with an increase in positive representation of gender, sexuality, race, and religion. As superhero comic books have seen a rise in the number of superheroes of color, queer superheroes, female-led titles, and female writers and artists (381), research on these themes has increased and enriched the theoretical field. The introduction of Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in 2014 can be seen as part of the movement towards greater diversification and a break with the status quo of superhero comics.

Imagining the Monster—Media Conceptions of the Monstrous

Monsters have been a part of our narratives since we began telling stories. The Snake of Eden; Scylla; Medusa; Grendel; Dracula—these creatures, and variations thereof, are born from ancient mythologies, religions and tales; they live, mutate and thrive in ever new expressions, inspiring new monsters to spring forth. Etymologically, the word 'monster' stems from the Latin 'monstrum', meaning something dreadful or repulsive (often an omen of evil or of bad times). The modern meaning of the word has stayed

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[2] See for instance *Essential Captain Marvel*, volume 1 (Lee et al. 2008), for an introduction to the original Captain Marvel. The collection also includes the first appearance of Carol Danvers in the Marvel universe.

[3] Examples include a compilation by Donovan 2015, Astonishingblow 2017—and Marvel's *Ms. Marvel* #5 [Carol Danvers] cover from 2006 (see Reed/Delatorre/Cho 2006).

[4] The trope is referred to as 'Women in Refrigerators', coined by comic book writer Gail Simone as a title for her website created in 1999 (see Simone 1999–). It contains a list of female characters that have been depowered and murdered to further the plotline of a male character.

true to its root. The monster, a dictionary entry will tell us, is the abnormal; the deviate; the unusual; the unnatural—words that at their core signify an aberrance from what is considered to be the norm, the natural way of things. As representations of our fears, anxieties, traumas and desires, monsters are, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996) notes, the offspring of culture; they are embodiments of certain cultural moments (4) and represent various aspects of "the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generates them" (5). In his fourth thesis of monster culture, Cohen connects the monstrous to the notion of the Other: "[t]he monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other […] the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (7). History is rife with examples of the exaggeration of difference—political, ideological, racial, religious—into monstrosity (8–11); one example is the multifarious Nazi propaganda against Jews; another, the framing of people in African countries as primitive savages in order to justify imperialist expansion.

One of the main catalysts for the establishment of the monstrous Other is arguably war, and the anxieties and traumas in its wake. David J. Skal explores this subject in his book *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (2001 [1993]), where he looks at some of history's most enduring monsters. He defines four major, monstrous icons throughout history: Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, the dual nature of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, and the sideshow freak. These archetypes are ingrained into the cultural images of the monstrous and keep coming back; "they mutate and evolve, the better to hold our attention" (2001 [1993]: 19). Skal moreover emphasizes the view that media expressions of the monstrous spring forth and adapt as responses to and reflections of war as an omnipresent cultural trauma (2001 [1993]: 35, 229–230).

The creation of a monstrous Other may also be seen in relation to war-time acts of constructing an image of 'the enemy'. Indeed, this was the case for several of the earliest superhero comics, as the genre was closely intertwined with world war two propaganda (Duncan/Smith 2009; Scott 2007). Cord Scott notes that these comics relied on heavily stereotyped images of American enemies, particularly of German, Russian and Japanese nationalities (2007: 326–327), and at times there was little or no effort to separate them from each other. The Japanese were drawn with "rat-like features, and a general tone of underlying treachery"; sometimes all Asian enemies were grouped together as "sinister looking Orientals" (327), and one Captain America storyline portrayed him fighting "Giant Asian zombies" (334). This era also produced the Nazi villain Red Skull (a man who literally looks like the flesh has been burned from his body), who remains a presence in Marvel comics and films to this day.[5] Such superhero comic book portrayals of US enemies illustrate Cohen's concept of the monstrous Other and the matrix of categories (political, racial, cultural) that can intersect in the creation of "monstrous difference" (7).

The concept of the monstrous Other is moreover relevant to another, still-ongoing 'war' that continues to impact not only a specific religious group, but also people of specific ethnicities: it is the nebulous 'War on Terror'. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, 'Muslims' and 'Arabs' were particularly visible as media coverage surged in US and

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[5] See for instance the collected volume *Avengers: Red Zone* (2010) or *Uncanny Avengers*, volume 4 (2017). Red Skull appeared as the main antagonist in the 2011 movie *Captain America: The First Avenger*. [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

international media discourse. Ahmed and Matthes note an increase in detrimental images of Muslims in this period, finding that several widely read and recognized US newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times,* the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post* relied on negative stereotypes in their representations of Muslims and Islam, "with a common theme being Muslims are 'terrorists', 'extremists', fundamentalists', 'radicals', and 'fanatics'" (2017: 231). Descriptions like these promote images of Muslims as a monstrous, homogenous group, while others quite literally echo Cohen's notion about the monster as "difference made flesh, come to dwell among us" (7). Examples include references to Western countries as 'breeding grounds' for terrorists (Steuter/Willis 2010: 157), and public officials like congressman Peter King referring to American-Muslims as "'the enemy living amongst us'" (quoted in Steuter/Willis 2010: 154). Steuter and Willis's analysis of dominating Western media discourses post 9/11 finds notable patterns of metaphors describing Muslims, specifically connected to animals, vermin and diseases (159–162); two notable sub-categories are the beast and the monster (157–158). The hostility seems not to have abated since the time of these analyses, and the present political reality is still one in which security measures signed into law are largely targeting people who are, or are suspected to be, Muslim. A recent example is the so-called 'travel ban' ordered by the sitting US president, which affected entry rights mainly for Muslim-majority countries (Lichtblau 2016). It illustrates that the stigma towards specific ethnic and religious groups has not abated.

The ways in which cultural, political and religious differences have been constructed as monstrous Otherness across different media, are of relevance in a critical reading of *Ms. Marvel*. Just as other genres and media, the superhero comic explores issues of contemporary society; it is a platform where the conflicts and questions of the real world may be reflected, opposed, negotiated and discussed.

With its introduction of a multicultural, Muslim-American, female superhero in 2014, *Ms. Marvel* has become a channel through which the voices of individuals belonging to much exposed and debated minority groups can be represented in alternative ways. It provides a space to reflect on and explore the post-9/11 American society from the point of view of a Muslim-American, and the ways in which this collective trauma has negatively impacted the psyche of people whose ethnicity or religion are still being associated with monstrous images of extremism and terror.

The Monstrous Metamorphosis of Kamala Khan

The theme of otherness has been one of the most central points to previous analyses of *Ms. Marvel*'s main character, Kamala Khan. Both Kent (2015) and Loeffert (2016) discuss issues connected to a perceived necessity of making Kamala relatable to a non-multicultural audience. Kent identifies the narrow focus of relatability in the reception of the comic book; Loeffert argues that the creators of *Ms. Marvel* have used temporary whitewashing and the pinning of Islamic values against American norms to privilege whiteness, and to make the character more "palatable to non-multicultural readers" (38). While the theme of otherness is central to my reading, I look at it specifically in connection to the notion of the monstrous, drawing on Cohen's theory. Furthermore, I explore how *Ms. Marvel* challenges, negotiates and subverts notions of the monstrous Other in a process that can be regarded as a de-monsterization of multicultural, Muslim identities.

The first volume edition of *Ms. Marvel*, entitled *No Normal*, introduces readers to Kamala Khan: a 16-year-old girl who spends her days gaming, obsessing over comics, fanfics and the *Avengers*, and spending time with her family as well as her best friends, Nakia and Bruno. However, a prominent aspect of the first volume is also Kamala's awareness of the ways in which her looks, her Pakistani heritage and her faith make her very visibly different from many of her popular peers at school. Her wish to fit in is constantly negated by microaggressions from people like Zoe, the white, blonde, blue-eyed and popular girl at school. When Kamala sneaks out to join a party down at the waterfront, Zoe exclaims: "I thought you weren't allowed to hang out with us heathens on the weekends! I thought you were, like, locked up!" (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [9]).[6] The statement reveals an immediate association of Kamala's Muslim faith with notions of dominance and control, which are common tropes especially in the portrayals of Muslim men; they are the capricious and irrational oppressors of women (Khoja-Moolji/Niccolini 2015). Zoe then goes on to point out: "Ugh, Kamala—no offense, but you smell like curry. I'm gonna stand somewhere else" ([10]).

While Zoe's racist remarks may be a caricature of hegemonic identities' ignorance, they feed into dominating, negative stereotypes and aggravate Kamala's conflicted relation to her own cultures, beliefs, and her sense of self-worth; "I can never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I'll always be poor Kamala with the weird food rules and the crazy family" ([13]).

As she walks home, she is enveloped in a mysterious mist that unlocks her superpowers. Her desire to feel 'normal' simultaneously catalyzes a physical metamorphosis; when she exits the mist, Kamala Khan has assumed the physical form of her great hero, the blonde, blue-eyed and white Carol Danvers (the previous Ms. Marvel).

The first frames succeeding the transformation depict a disoriented Kamala/Carol, while Kamala, as the first-person narrator, tries to make sense of it: "okay, so I passed out in the fog and had a dream that I asked Captain Marvel to make me like her. Apparently she took me literally" ([22]). Throughout the series, yellow text boxes are narrative tools that indicate the thoughts and considerations of the main protagonist. The first-person perspective is usually an intimate type of narrative technique because it gives the readers access to the character's thoughts and feelings. The first text box in the sequence highlighted above stands out by being neutral and summarizing; Khan remembers the event and tries to understand what happened. The attempt to gain control fails rapidly, however. As chaos reaches a climax at the bottom of the page, the dominating image depicts a body in anatomical uproar, one abnormally large hand covering the mouth in an attempt to keep from vomiting. Kamala's dark brown hair battles with Carol's blonde; one eye is blue and the other one brown. The speech balloons, the comic's form of direct discourse, reflect and build onto the chaos established by this image. Throughout the metamorphosis sequence, Kamala's speech is repetitive and short, often consisting of sounds only. Words and phrases are incomplete or uncertain, emphasized by the use of several full stops or hyphens. The direct

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[6] Due to lack of page numbers in the collected editions of *Ms. Marvel*, pages are counted starting from the first page after the issue cover page. Page numbers are bracketed, in accordance with guidelines by the Comic Art and Comics Area of the Popular Culture Association.

discourse reflects the lack of control as the protagonist struggles to keep it together—which, visually, she cannot, as she throws up herself from the body of Carol Danvers.

The climactic image of two bodies in battle in itself seems somewhat monstrous; it depicts a being in a liminal state, not one thing or another, and it represents a complete, albeit momentary, loss of agency for Kamala. As such, the image is one in which the monstrous archetype of the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde duality resonates. The intertextual echo is an apt one, firstly because it emphasizes the human mind's recurring battle with itself regarding who we are and who we long to be. Secondly, the Jekyll/Hyde duality is at its core a negotiation (or perhaps a battle) between visibility and concealment, between the conscious and the unconscious desires/anxieties of the self. This negotiation carries very different implications for Kamala Khan, however. While Dr. Jekyll is outwardly perceived as a man abiding by the norms and rules of his society, he may live out his darker desires as Mr. Hyde, whose acts become more atrocious for every metamorphosis. Kamala Khan, on the other hand, feels like she literally has to hide in another body in order to gain accept. To be 'thoroughly' Western is to be white; as her brown-skinned, brown-haired self she seems to be viewed by her peers not as an individual, but as part of something weird and foreign in their midst despite having lived all her life in New Jersey.

Loeffert (2016) reads Khan's metamorphosis as an expression of the creators' 'particular agenda' to establish "an atmosphere in which Kamala is able to reject whiteness by privileging it" (38). The temporary whitewashing, Loeffert argues, becomes a way to "minimize her ethnicity so that she may be more relatable to white readers" (33). The thesis draws on Kent's analysis of the media reception of *Ms. Marvel*, where the critics' narrow focus on the character's relatability is criticized. Kent argues that this insistence on relatability will ultimately "erase individual experiences of marginalized peoples, suggesting that any reader who has ever felt marginalized *should* be able to relate to the book when, in reality, every individual experiences difference differently" (2005: 525).

Loeffert's argument is interesting. Her analysis of the metamorphosis narrative seems to rest on the assumption that the momentary whitewashing for the sake of making Khan relatable and accessible to a non-multicultural audience, is a primary goal of the comic book. "Conscious of the difficulty of promoting a minority character, the creators of Ms. Marvel: No Normal dilute the otherness of Kamala Khan in order to make her as accessible as possible to the majority of readers" (21).

This may have been the case and it may not; but there are nevertheless other possible readings of the metamorphosis narrative. The chaotic abnormality of limbs and faces that highlights Kamala's change may also be read through the lens of Cohen's notion that monstrous bodies are "pure culture […]. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself" (4). The Kamala/Carol 'monster' arguably functions as a visual comment on the limited racial parameters of success in society, and on the historically rigid, normative categorizations of what it means to be a 'proper' superhero. As such, the comic discusses the implicit notion that in order to get somewhere and be someone of consequence, you have to be a white, non-Muslim American. The transformation may be read as a critique of this hegemony exactly because of its monolithic nature and its consequences for minority groups, rather than being read as an appeasement of a non-multicultural audience.

The narrative technique is a central element to the way in which the comic exposes the rigidity of these societal expectations and parameters of success. By focusing on Kamala's experiences, both visually and through the first-person perspective, the narrative reveals the tension between how she (and readers) perceives herself as an individual—with her quirks, interests, thoughts and worries—and the ease with which her white, non-multicultural peers tend to categorize her through harmful stereotypes based on the intersections of her identity. The process of metamorphosis visualizes the collision between these perceptions. It appears almost as a reversion of the strange case of Dr. Jekyll; he concocts an alter-ego that allows him to distance parts of the self from that monstrous Other, which really originates from within (Cohen 1996: 7). For Kamala Khan, it is the outer stereotypes, racism and rhetoric of difference that commence to bleed into her as an internalized monster of racism, ignorance and prejudice.

What the metamorphosis narrative manages to convey through the intimate perspective of Kamala herself, is the notion that the real monster is neither Kamala Khan, nor Carol Danvers or the unruly amalgamation of the two. Rather, it is the matrix of social, cultural, racial and religious norms that works with such a force upon Khan. Carol represents a hegemonic femininity, for Kamala and society in general; as a white, blonde, blue-eyed, successful and conventionally American superhero Danvers is everything that Kamala Khan feels she is not, growing up in a society where racism and Islamophobia are real, recurring aspects of her life. The rigidity and narrowness of these parameters of acceptance become the monstrosity that the metamorphosis of Kamala Khan is rooted in.

"The NSA Will Wiretap Our Mosque"—The Fear of Visibility in a Post-9/11 Society

The tension between visibility and concealment that runs through the metamorphosis narrative in *Ms. Marvel* speaks to Kamala's internalized perceptions of the conflict between her own identities and a larger, social acceptance. This tension may also be said to extend to matters of surveillance and security. As noted earlier in the article, media representations of Muslims in the wake of 9/11 saw a rise in negative stereotyping and visibility. Shams furthermore notes that the events of September 11th "amplified the fears, hostility, and suspicion towards Muslims as a national security threat", eventually resulting in "surveillance programs specifically targeting Muslim immigrants" (2018: 73). The discourse of Muslim immigrants as foreign threats continues to this day (74).

Issues of surveillance, national security and vigilante justice have been a recurring theme in American superhero comics.[7] In some instances, acts of enforcing 'justice' based on superheroes' own convictions have involved pre-emptive strategies eerily similar to profiling,[8] or may have led to mass destruction and the death of innocent people. I mention the history of these thematic issues in order to point out the significant difference between security and surveillance as overreaching ethical themes

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[7] The most famous example is perhaps Marvel's *Civil War* story arc (2006–2007). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

[8] See for instance Marvel's *Civil War II* story arc (2016). [External reference, therefore not listed in the bibliography.]

related to many superheroes' modus operandi, and the specific experience of Kamala Khan as a Muslim-American superhero, in the context of the metamorphosis narrative.

As previously noted, Khan's physical change can be read as a comment upon the racial parameters of success. Loeffert explores the subject by remarking that although Kamala returns to her natural form, she keeps transforming into Danvers several times when a rescue is needed. It is a choice that reveals Khan's assumption that a 'real' and successful superhero is white (35). The continued transformation extends beyond her assumptions, however; that she keeps returning to the shape of Carol Danvers also speaks to her fear of being revealed as herself—including her name, her family, her ethnicity, her culture, her Muslim faith—and the potential repercussions thereof. The clearest example is to be found in one of Kamala's earliest acts of superheroism. Upon witnessing an ongoing robbery at the local Circle Q, Kamala (as Danvers) attempts to stop the culprit, and in the process is shot in the abdomen. Her best friend Bruno immediately tries to call the ambulance, but Kamala—now reverted to her own form— intently refuses: "I have to hide. The police—they can't know it's me. My parents will freak, the NSA will wiretap our mosque or something, and then they'll sell me to science!" (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [67]).

The outburst is humorous, but with dark implications. It illustrates that the post-9/11 American society of surveillance is an implicit yet ever-present aspect of Kamala Khan's life. While her comment following the shooting is somewhat tragicomic in its juxtaposition of her major fears at that moment (her parents and the NSA), it simultaneously reflects her conviction regarding how society will react upon finding out that someone 'like her' has acquired superpowers. It reveals an instinctive anxiety about her own hypervisibility—heightened further by her new superpowers—and its potential consequences. Furthermore, it is a fear that extends beyond Kamala as an individual; not only would she pose a threat, but the NSA would wiretap her family's mosque, presumably scanning the place for potential terrorists. Her assumption echoes Cohen's argument that in the process of constructing monstrous Others, "the boundaries between personal and national bodies blur" (1996: 10), because this can be seen in relation to religions and racial 'bodies' as well. As Shams notes, the categorical homogenization of 'Muslims' results in an institutionalized mentality that holds a large group of different people collectively responsible, for instance in the event of a terrorist attack (2017: 77).

Through this scene, the comic continues to extend beyond the fictional narrative and into the reality of post-9/11 American society, where racial and religious biases affect a number of ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse individuals. It is a society in which, if your skin is brown or your surname is Khan, your visibility fosters a strange, paradoxical matrix of suspiciousness and ignorance. You are picked for 'random' security checks at the airport[9] and if, in a fictional rendering of this society, you happen to be a superhero, the fear of visibility could be momentarily greater than dying. In such a world, *Ms. Marvel* asks, who are the real monsters—those who live under the gaze of suspicion, or the invisible observers?

The metamorphosis narrative in the first volume of *Ms. Marvel* works on several levels regarding notions of the monstrous and the process of de-monsterization. It may be seen as a visualization of the ways in which Kamala Khan has internalized society's

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[9] As illustrated in *Ms. Marvel: Civil War II*, volume 6 (Wilson/Miyazawa 2016), when Kamala travels alone to Karachi to visit her grandparents.

perceptions of her based on her multicultural and religious identity, often relying on detrimental stereotypes. It also reflects Khan's assumptions about who can be an American superhero, exploring her anxieties about her own superhero identity in the context of security and surveillance issues specifically related to the image of Muslims as potential extremist monsters.

Simultaneously, however, the narrative works to deconstruct these harmful stereotypes, firstly by illustrating the crude racism and ignorance they are built on (as exemplified by Zoe), and secondly by not shying away from the divergencies and complexities of Kamala's own emotions. Her desire to be like Carol Danvers implies a radical and conflicted wish to shed her own self for the sake of an uncomplicated whiteness that relieves her of her visibility; such a transformation would mean freedom from racism, cultural ignorance, and the fear of being perceived as a threat based on her ethnicity and religion. A testament to the ways in which the rigid parameters of convention and success seem to dominate Kamala's psyche, is the fact that her main superpower manifests itself as shape-shifting—a power that Carol Danvers never possessed. The metamorphosis may in this way be read as Khan's attempt to de-monsterize herself based on who she feels she should be according to society, with regards to ethnicity, cultural belonging and religious belief.

That these are Kamala's conflicts does not necessarily mean to indicate, as Loeffert suggests, "a presumed inner conflict of any multicultural reader" (33); however, it would not be strange should someone find themselves familiar with aspects of Kamala's struggles. That she wishes to be like Danvers while simultaneously concluding that "being someone else isn't liberating, it's exhausting", is a dialectic that explores the oftentimes contradictory aspects of identities. As Renegar and Sowards (2009) argue, "[c]ontradiction is not just a statement of opposition, but rather functions as a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency" (6). Through such a view of identity one may challenge "traditional notions of identity" (6).

Lastly, and importantly, the metamorphosis narrative ends with Khan's decision to be "the best version of Kamala" ([93]), because as her Abu tells her, she is perfect just the way she is. In fact, posing as someone else is dangerous, as illustrated symbolically by the fact that her regenerative force—enabling her to heal from a fatal bullet wound—works only when Kamala Khan reverts back to her own body. Confronting societal racism and phobia and conquering her own fears, Kamala Khan eventually realizes that the true monstrosity nevertheless lies in being someone else.

Dismantling the Monolith—The De-Monsterization of Muslims

In addition to portraying Kamala Khan as she comes to terms with a new part of her multi-faceted identity, the comic also works to deconstruct the categorization of 'Muslims' as a homogenous group. Through the extended cast of characters, *Ms. Marvel* disrupts common tropes of Islamic faith and culture along the intersecting axes of race, gender, age and religious expressions. Some central figures in this respect are Kamala's brother Aamir and his wife Tyesha, the Khan parents Yusuf and Muneeba, as well as Kamala's best friend Nakia.

One of the strengths of the *Ms. Marvel* character gallery, as argued by Kent (2015), is the diversity of their expressions of faith, contributing to the notion that "Islam is not

merely a monolith" (524). Kamala's initial struggles with herself in many ways find their contrast in her brother Aamir. He is dedicated to his faith, spends a lot of time with the community at the mosque, and feels proud of the life he leads. In the fourth volume of *Ms. Marvel* (Wilson/Alphona 2015) Aamir is confronted with the manifestation of superpowers brought on by a forced mutation, and his immediate reaction is anger and rejection. When asked how he could possibly be happy the way he was, Aamir interrupts: "I'm a what? A religious freak? An MSA[10] nerd? A Salafi? Yeah, I'm all of those things. And I'm not ashamed of any of them" ([48]). While he is happy with his life as it is, he constantly has to defend the choices he has made. He does it in volume eight, when confronted by biased policemen who try to frame him as an illegal immigrant and a potential terrorist (Wilson et al. 2017: [22–26]), and he has to do it when faced with the discontent of his father regarding his lack of a steady job. Nevertheless, he persists: "I do my own thing. I go to the mosque. I volunteer. I read books. Why doesn't anybody believe I'm happy the way I am?!" ([59]). Aamir's contentedness with his own identity emphasizes that belonging to a minority does not need to "indicate a presumed inner conflict of any multicultural reader", as Loeffert (2016) suggests.

   Yet another aspect of the diversification of Muslim identities in *Ms. Marvel* relates to the representation of the other female characters. In her analysis, Kent highlights the comic's careful attendance "to familiar topics with regards to women, Islam, and race" (2015: 524). The deconstruction of stereotypical representations of these issues are significant advances in the process of de-monsterizing Muslim identities. Connected to de-monsterization is the notion of de-victimization, specifically regarding the image of the veiled and silent Muslim woman as a victim of oppression from the monstrous, angry and irrational Muslim man (Khoja-Moolji/Niccolini 2015: 25–26). Myra Macdonald argues that the Western "obsession with the veil" as an example of the "problems of Islam" has pervaded media coverage also prior to 9/11 (2006: 8). *Ms. Marvel* ridicules this kind of obsession through the character Zoe, who at the beginning of the first volume (2014) shamelessly asks Nakia (who wears a hijab): "nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody's going to honor kill you?" (Wilson/Alphona 2014: [2]). The blatant ignorance of the remarks is evidenced by the reactions: Kamala hides her face in embarrassment while Nakia counters that her dad wants her to take it off, thinking it is just "a phase" ([3]). This short sequence is the only place in the *Ms. Marvel* series to date where the issue of veiling is brought up in connection to such a rhetoric. The wearing of different types of veils, or the lack of veiling, is otherwise seldom brought up verbally, while still being a natural part of the visual narrative. More importantly, when it is brought up, it is on the female characters' terms. A particularly powerful scene in volume five (2016) shows Nakia and Tyesha debating the use of the hijab and whether or not its religious value has been damaged by the younger generations' use of it as a more of a secular symbol for justice. While they discuss this, the two women are walking the streets as the leaders of a group of political protesters. The scene exemplifies the way in which both Nakia and Tyesha are portrayed throughout the series: as intelligent, funny, critical and actively engaged in their community. Nakia continues to wear her hijab and Tyesha

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[10] Muslim Students' Association.

wears the longer chador;[11] the former sees it as a combination of faith, pride and as a social statement, while the latter cherishes it as a symbol of faith. Kamala Khan, on the other hand, does not cover her head except when she attends the mosque. In this way, the *Ms. Marvel* comic manages to depict female characters whose expressions of religion through clothing are neither overshadowed by didacticism, which has been a tendency previously in comics (as noted by Strömberg 2001), nor reduced to symbolic discourses regarding freedom of choice versus oppression.

As noted earlier, negative images and stereotypes of Muslims and Islam have according to Ahmed and Matthes (2017) been a dominating part of the public discourse post 9/11 (235–236). Morey and Yaqin (2011) further note that even though nuanced portrayals are attempted (213–214), the dominant images are still simplistic and thus fail to convey the "unwieldy and complex realities" (19) of Muslim identities. *Ms. Marvel* attempts to disrupt these images by dismantling one-dimensional expressions of identities in the protagonist as well as the supporting cast of characters. An additional aspect of this process is the comic book's conscientious portrayal of its Muslim characters as flawed and sometimes prejudiced, creating psychological nuance and depth. In volume five of *Ms. Marvel*, the Khan parents Muneeba and Yusuf display a somewhat limited acceptance of difference upon first hearing the news that Kamala's brother Aamir plans to marry Tyesha (Wilson et al. 2016). She is an African-American woman raised by Christian parents, but she decided to convert to Islam at some point before readers meet her. The initial reaction of the parents is one of shock and dismay— Muneeba laments the news loudly: "I could have gotten an excellent rishta[12] with a Karachi girl who wouldn't mind having a penniless husband who is too pious to have a bank account or get a mortgage!" ([75]). The reaction is immediately countered by Aamir, exclaiming "[w]hy don't we just admit what this is *really* about?" He sarcastically continues: "[Y]ou would *never* reject a rishta with a smart, beautiful, honorable woman because of some outdated idea that a good bride looks like a circa-1989 Bollywood commercial for Fair and Lovely.[13] Right?" ([75–76]). Yusuf and Muneeba's racial bias is shown to be related to their perception of the familiar versus the foreign; Muneeba speaks of "people like us" and "the right background" in relation to Aamir's marriage ([76]), implicitly constructing Tyesha as Other. Tyesha is visibly uncomfortable, holding a pillow against her body in a protective manner. This shift in the perspective of Othering is a fascinating twist on the ways in which Kamala, earlier in the narrative, is treated by her classmates.

The exploration of the Khan parents' racial prejudices shows that while the narrative works consciously to disrupt monolithic and monstrous tropes of 'the Muslim', it does not shy back from displaying flawed characters. There is something inherently human in prejudices, and in this scenario the comic book shows how issues of culture, religion and race intersect in a variety of ways across different groups in society. Importantly though, *Ms. Marvel* also explores the ways in which personal biases may be overcome and conceptions changed. Yusuf and Muneeba quickly realize that they have a lot in common with Tyesha. When they meet her parents, Yusuf's reflections on generational and cultural changes brought on by their children reveal a multidimensionality in his

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[11] A long garment covering the body and the head. It may or may not cover parts of the face.
[12] Marriage proposal.
[13] "A skin-lightening cream popular in Asia" ([76]).

character that contrasts considerably with the previously discussed media images of monstrous Muslim men. The contrast to their initial reaction of this 'Other Muslim' girl is great as he concludes the meeting stating he will treat Tyesha "as my own flesh and blood" ([101]).

The family and friends of Kamala Khan are important to the *Ms. Marvel* narrative, not only as pieces of the puzzle that is Kamala's life, but as fully formed, rounded characters in their own right. Through portraying their relations to each other, their multi-faceted religious expressions, their strengths and shortcomings, the comic further de-monsterizes the monolithic, stereotypical images of Muslims and minority identities.

Conclusion

As with many superhero comic books before it, *Ms. Marvel* is to a large degree about standing out, about being different—about being, as the first volume title emphasizes, 'no normal'. In addition to dealing with the extraordinariness of superpowers however, *Ms. Marvel* reflects on notions of normality and monstrosity by questioning dominating, negative stereotypes of Muslims in US political and media discourse. By visually and verbally portraying how these public, monsterizing discourses affect individuals like Kamala Khan both physically and mentally, the comic critically examines the repercussions of issues like Islamophobia, media visibility and targeted surveillance in the wake of 9/11. The comic connects Khan's exposure to racial, cultural and religious bias to the rigid, normative parameters of acceptance and success in society. These norms, fueled by some of her peers, become monstrous as they continue to eat their way into Kamala's conflicted psyche, eventually catalyzing a metaphor-laden physical metamorphosis.

My contribution has attempted to show that *Ms. Marvel*'s nuanced and diverse representation of characters like Kamala Khan, her family and her friends, may function as a de-monsterization of very visible minority identities that are often associated with the monstrous, especially relating to fundamentalism, violence and terror. Through Khan, *Ms. Marvel* has further potential to become a powerful text in the discussion of representation of multi-faceted, female identities; but as Kent argues, in order to realize its potential, it is important to focus on "the specificity of Kamala's female-teen-American-Muslim subjectivity" (2015: 524). What critics have tended to concentrate on is how Kamala's experiences "fit into their experiences" (524); upon its release, her relatability became the overarching theme for many critics, and the notion that she is 'just like you and me' was according to Kent a refrain in the initial receptions of the comic book. It is problematic that the specific experiences of marginalized, multiple identities seem to have been ignored; it moreover underlines the need for critical examinations of these themes in a medium with the range and power of voice such as the comic book. It would be interesting to see further explorations of these topics.

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