

THESIS

“THERE IS NO NORMAL”: HOW MS. MARVEL CONSTITUTES U.S. AMERICAN
CITIZENSHIP BETWEEN COMICS AND SCREEN

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ABSTRACT

“THERE IS NO NORMAL”: HOW MS. MARVEL CONSTITUTES U.S. AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP BETWEEN COMICS AND SCREEN

In 2014, a new superhero crashed into the Marvel Comics universe; Kamala Khan, a Muslim Pakistani American superheroine, took on the heroic mantle of “Ms. Marvel.” Then, in 2022, Kamala’s story was adapted to the screen as a part of Disney’s Marvel Cinematic Universe. Ms. Marvel’s story is one of intersections, tensions, and navigating identity in a contemporary, multicultural America. To understand how Marvel and Disney constitute U.S. American citizenship and identity, this thesis compares two versions of Kamala Khan’s superhero origin story: the Marvel comic, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (2014), and its streaming television show adaptation on Disney+, *Ms. Marvel* (2022), produced by Disney’s Marvel Studios. Pairing rhetorical criticism with media industry analysis, I argue that, through their adaptation of *Ms. Marvel* to the screen, Disney widens the borders around U.S. American sociocultural belonging enough to incorporate intersectionally marginalized identities without fully displacing hegemonic understandings of U.S. American citizenship. This thesis demonstrates the utility of multi-methodological critical analysis and expands the theory of constitutive rhetoric by demonstrating how one text can interpellate audience members differently. My analysis also illustrates the continued relevance of superhero media as exemplars of identity formation in contemporary culture.

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Chapter 1

(Re)Making a Superheroine: Introducing Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel

In June 2022, a new Marvel superhero television show stirred up a great deal of attention from fans and critics alike. The title hero in question: a Muslim, Pakistani American teenage girl from Jersey City, New Jersey. Kamala Khan made her first appearance as the superhero “Ms. Marvel” in comic form in 2014. Her story was adapted for the screen, with episodes released weekly on the streaming platform Disney+ beginning in June of 2022.

As trailers featuring Kamala as Ms. Marvel dropped, discourse surrounding the show ramped up on social media and review sites. Audiences expressed excitement about the new character and her Muslim, Pakistani American identity: “As a fellow Pakistani, I am absolutely in love with this character. Her Muslim side complements her character as a superhero and her teenager side fuels it as well.”¹ They called attention to the new aesthetic and genre for Marvel: “It feels a lot like a Disney show instead of a [M]arvel show.”² They also debated about the changes that were made from the comics: “Kinda bummed they're switching up the powers...”³ However, some discourse took a different turn. One IMDB user claimed that “Disney is off the mark. Please stop bowing to the woke mob and make something genuine. Focus on your fans, not social issues. It is a shame that Disney is distorting yet another franchise.”⁴ A Metacritic user commented, “Marvel has gone full woke with girl power! Avoid watching this trash! It's like a bad Disney Channel movie.”⁵ My interest was piqued. As a woman in a traditionally male-dominated fandom, I saw myself and a new generation of superhero fans reflected in Kamala’s Ms. Marvel. This discourse exposed sociocultural conflicts about *who* superheroes could/should be and debates about *how* identity could/should be represented in popular culture. These conflicts are deeply rooted in the superhero genre, across its various mediums.

Marvel has a long and messy history of representing its characters; superheroes from minoritized populations are not only rare but have been stereotyped and sexualized. As a dominant force within popular culture, the superhero phenomenon—from its comics origins to the screen—can shape ideologies and reflect political movements.⁶ Inevitably, then, superhero media functions rhetorically. Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen explain that “Superheroes...serve a powerful rhetorical purpose, offering their fans the ability to transcend the mundane and embrace multilayered identities that act in ways we can only imagine while still speaking to these universally held experiences and situations.”⁷ With sociopolitical ideologies on the line, *who* is depicted as a powerful hero is just as important as *how* they are represented. If superheroes are both fantastically complex and mundanely relatable, what are we communicating when we represent heroic identities on screen?

Scholars argue that not only is it important to study representation in pop culture, we should study representation within Marvel and the superhero comics genre because they signify prevailing U.S. American ideologies and influence a wide, global audience.⁸ Sophia Rose Arjana explains that pop culture “helps to form personal identity, ideals of nationhood, and beliefs about cultures and communities outside our own.”⁹ Nicholas Carnes and Lilly J. Goren note that popular fiction encourages audiences to speculate about what the world could be, and “if we want to understand any society, including our own, we need to consider and understand the content of its popular culture, which is a product, a driver, and a crucial part of any society’s politics.”¹⁰ Popular media is made to be palatable for the general public, so it has the potential to widely influence political and social perceptions. More specifically, superhero media is rhetorically significant because it reflects real-world ideologies and power structures. I concur with Terence McSweeney’s argument that “superhero films are historical prescriptions formed

by ideologies of the times...and should be considered as resonant cultural artifacts rather than disregarded as ‘just a movie.’”¹¹ Carnes and Goren explain that as “a touchstone of contemporary American life,” the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) “sends fans scores of messages about a wide range of subjects related to government, public policy, and society,” and “is itself a product of contemporary politics and society.”¹² Therefore, the timely rhetorical study of Ms. Marvel’s representation through adaptation furthers the discipline’s understanding of how pop culture texts both reflect and impact American culture, ideology, and identity. The comic version of *Ms. Marvel* is—as Arjana calls it—a “culturally important text” in that it signifies a shift to portray Muslim characters more positively and dimensionally in popular media.¹³ Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid argue that the *Ms. Marvel* comics invite scholarship because “she challenges traditional comics character tropes.”¹⁴ Thus, in this conversation about how Marvel and Disney—two of the largest and most influential media production companies of this century—produce and represent their characters in a fictional universe, I consider the real world implications of these depictions on the page and screen.

In this thesis, I examine how multiculturally representative artifacts produced by influential, corporate, hegemonic rhetors like Marvel and Disney imagine U.S. American identity. I compare two versions of Kamala’s origin story as the superheroine Ms. Marvel: the 2014 Marvel comic, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, and the 2022 streaming television show adaptation, *Ms. Marvel*, on Disney+. I ask: how does Kamala’s representation as Ms. Marvel change between comics and television? What are the consequences of these textual differences? And what does Ms. Marvel’s adaptation signify about how Disney constitutes U.S. American identity? Drawing upon media industry analysis and rhetorical criticism, I argue that Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel represents Marvel’s and Disney’s image of what it means to belong as a U.S.

American citizen. Through the adaptation of *Ms. Marvel* from comic to screen, Disney conveys that Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel can be an authentic, intersectionally complex superhero *and* belong as a relatable American citizen. Disney widens the borders around U.S. American sociocultural belonging enough to incorporate intersectionally marginalized identities without fully displacing hegemonic understandings of U.S. American citizenship.

Throughout this chapter, I trace a path through Marvel's universes, placing both *Ms. Marvels* into the context of a superhero multiverse influenced by Disney. First, I provide an overview of Marvel's history, its shift into a cinematic production company, and its relationship with The Walt Disney Company. Then, I review scholarship that examines ideology, identity, and representation within Marvel superhero comics and film, introducing Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel into this discursive context. Finally, I explain the methodology of this thesis—which pairs media industry studies with rhetorical criticism—and provide an overview of subsequent chapters.

Understanding Marvel's Universe(s)

Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel is a product of Marvel's complex history as a comic book producer, a cinematic production studio, and a storytelling organization. In the 1960s, Marvel Comics was a major player in the booming comic book industry, revolutionizing the scene with its new characters and placing old characters in new, modern stories. Ronald Schmidt explains that, in the 60s, Marvel "refounded"¹⁵ (i.e. adapted and rewrote) some of their most popular heroes from their 1940s iterations.¹⁶ In 1961, as the American superhero comics industry took off, artists Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, and Jack Kirby developed and adapted numerous superheroes from the Marvel vault—like Spider-Man and Captain America—in the pages of their comics.

Marvel has built its brand identity and intellectual property on the tradition of refounding their characters and adapting them across mediums.

Marvel Comics Group began as a prolific storytelling institution; its heroes have stood the test of time not only because their characters are well-developed but because Marvel knows how to carefully craft and adapt their origin stories across time *and* across mediums. Martin Flanagan, Andrew Livingstone, and Mike McKenny highlight this skill in particular, noting that

Marvel understands the significant comic book convention of the “origin story,” in which lies the core identity of a hero (or villain) . . . superheroes that have become dated, or overlooked by time, are sometimes given a story arc that reinterprets, or simply retells their origin story to better resonate with contemporary readers (a good example would be the shift from the specifically Vietnam-era 1963 origin of Iron Man to the Middle Eastern “terrorist plot” of the 2008 MCU iteration).¹⁷

Marvel expertly crafts origins and skillfully organizes their intellectual property into an aesthetically linked, narratively interconnected universe, simultaneously shifting their heroes’ origins to reflect the changing world outside their stories. This careful organization and storytelling became especially blatant as the company moved beyond the comics medium.

The road from the golden age of Marvel Comics to the MCU blockbusters of the early 2000s was sometimes bumpy. As the popularity of physical comic books declined, so too did Marvel’s success. Ben Fritz explains that “By the 1990s . . . Marvel Management had made a series of bad business decisions, and the company was floundering, burdened with hundreds of millions of dollars in debt.”¹⁸ Toy experts Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter bought the then-bankrupt Marvel for cheap, taking over control of the company in 1998. While their toy sales kept Marvel afloat for some time, it wasn’t enough to last. Fritz describes how Marvel’s primary competitor—DC Comics—had made Batman’s story into a film and boosted the character’s popularity, inspiring Marvel to traverse into the world of animated children’s television.¹⁹ But Arad and the

Marvel team believed that blockbuster films could really put their brand on the map. So, Marvel adapted their stories to the big screen.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the filmic and televisual iteration of Marvel's interconnected web of characters, deployed in what Flanagan et al. describe as, "an organized and ostensibly seamless continuity on screen since the release of *Iron Man* in 2008."²⁰ As of January 2024, Marvel's multi-mediated universe includes thirty-three feature films, a handful of short films called "One-Shots," numerous digital web series, a variety of accompanying books and comics, and twenty-three television shows (twelve of which were produced by Marvel Television; Marvel Studios took over production in 2018 and has churned out eleven series for streaming on Disney+).²¹ Schmidt explains that the creation of the MCU followed Marvel's refounding traditions by "revisiting an older layer of narrative to create the appearance of continuity as members of the imagined community change."²² Scholars link Marvel's success with superhero blockbuster franchises with the creation of their interconnected universe.²³ McSweeney highlights this unprecedented (but now common) move by Marvel Studios to "create a cohesive narrative in which the characters and events portrayed reside within the same diegetic world."²⁴ James C. Taylor cites Marvel's "intertextual aesthetic," urging scholars to examine "the ways in which these films manage their wider textual network," from films and television to video games, comics, and more.²⁵ Flanagan et al. explain the appeal of this aesthetic phenomenon, noting that "every time a [cinematic] spectator sees its signature and quality hallmark, that cue of the flipping comic pages . . . Marvel becomes a studio again."²⁶ However, while the Marvel brand has been carefully curated and is iconic in its own right, Marvel Studios' contemporary production power is heavily influenced by another cultural behemoth: Disney.

The "Disneyfication" of Marvel

The Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Studios in 2009, ushering in numerous changes for the superhero production company. While “Marvel” itself is a separate brand with its own connotations and history, Disney’s acquisition of the comics-turned-film-studio has undeniably influenced Marvel’s trajectory and ability to produce content.²⁷ Marvel is now firmly aligned with Disney’s own powerful legacy, ideologies, and motivations. The 2019 launch of their streaming platform Disney+ further affected the distribution of Marvel’s content; now Marvel Studios could create direct-to-streaming superhero shows for the MCU, like *Ms. Marvel*.

Disney’s control over the production of current and future Marvel television shows and their exclusive availability on Disney’s streaming platform indicate the company’s clear regulation of Marvel’s cinematic canon. A prominent example of Disney’s control over the MCU is *Black Panther* (2018). Rachel Griffin and Jonathan Rossing examine how “Disneyfication” drastically changed the film; it “secures white, U.S. American, ethnocentric normativity at the corporate foundation of every MCU film . . . Disney’s business model allows *Black Panther* to be minimally different from its MCU peers, despite being the first Black superhero film in the franchise.”²⁸ Michaela Meyer adds that Disney’s film adaptation erased queer relationships that were prominent in the comic’s storyline, also arguing that the film had been flattened to appeal to Disney’s ideologies.²⁹ Griffin and Rossing describe the film as paradoxical, as “reformist yet simultaneously pernicious cinema” with progressive intentions but corporate roots.³⁰ *Black Panther* remains one of the MCU’s most critically acclaimed films and has transformed the discourse around representation in superhero media, yet Disney’s influence over the production sterilized the story into a formulaic, family-friendly retelling.

Jennifer Forestal explains that “by narrowing the boundaries of what is deemed ‘acceptable’ material for inclusion in the MCU to only those stories that fit a ‘Disneyfied’ ideal

of family, ... conformism worked to undermine the possibilities for democratic politics, which is predicated on plurality and difference.”³¹ Essentially, Disney has ultimate control over what Marvel is able to do and represent within its multiverse, limiting its potential to depict difference. Disney’s brand is famous for their family-friendly ideals, reflected by the content allowed on their platform. For example, Marvel’s made-for-Netflix TV shows like *Jessica Jones* (2015) and *Daredevil* (2015)—which feature grittier, more violent content—were not originally included as part of the MCU’s official canon or available on Disney+.³² The “Disneyfication” of Marvel’s content is something that *Ms. Marvel* (2022) fans have debated. A common complaint from viewers was that the show felt childish, described often as “like a Disney show instead of a Marvel show.”³³ Clearly, viewers noticed the aesthetic changes.

The combined power of Disney’s expertise in brand-building and Marvel’s deep roster of established, adaptable characters expanded the company’s existing reach into the blockbuster film market. When Marvel’s red, comics-page-turning introductory logo appears before a film or TV show, “the notion of stories, rooted in print origins, remains the symbol of the company’s artistic compact with audiences.”³⁴ However, with Marvel’s strong, resonant symbolism comes significant implications for their ideological influence.

U.S. American Ideology and Representation in the MCU

The ideologies present within Marvel's cinematic creations have both mirrored and defined U.S. American culture in the 21st century. Ramzi Fawaz notes that popular fantasies pair reality with fiction “to produce figures that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires and modes of social belonging that appear impossible...within the terms of dominant political imaginaries.”³⁵ If popular media reflect sociopolitical dynamics and imaginings of cultural citizenship, then cinema—given its widespread popularity over the last century—is especially

pertinent. McSweeney advocates for the analysis of blockbuster films because they are “heterotopic narratives, that is, physical representations of what society considers its idealized dimensions.”³⁶ With their heightened focus on ability, identity, and nationhood, superhero films help audiences to understand social conflicts and political turmoil; they are products of ideological systems, and they have very real consequences.³⁷ McSweeney concludes that the superhero genre is an “articulation and manifestation of contemporary cultural mythologies” because it both shapes and is shaped by collective imaginings of national identity.³⁸

The MCU emerged in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, and its correlation with the aftermath’s rising U.S. American nationalism became quite evident. Within a national climate of uncertainty and fear, fantastical superheroes—particularly those that symbolized American strength—drew audiences to the theaters in droves. McSweeney links the MCU’s success in reviving the superhero genre on the big screen to the trauma left in the wake of 9/11, noting that 2008’s *Iron Man* was “the superhero that the United States needed” in the tumultuous time.³⁹ The U.S. film industry needed superhero movies to “save” theaters, draw crowds, and appeal widely to an audience that spanned age, gender, and race. While the sociopolitical milieu of the United States shifted, Marvel Studios continued to produce stunningly successful superhero blockbusters; the MCU’s decades-long saga culminated in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), which grossed \$2.799 billion and held the title of highest grossing film of all time.⁴⁰ In fact—as of January 2024—five of the top fifteen highest grossing films of all time were produced by Marvel Studios. Critically, economically, and ideologically, superhero cinema has reigned over popular media for the last twenty years.

Superhero films rose to popularity to fill an ideological void in a post-9/11 American cinematic world, and they dominated the box office for decades following. They also act as what

McSweeney calls a “cultural barometer.”⁴¹ If the MCU reflects American ideology, then the identities represented within its films are a touchstone for the current state of sociocultural politics in the United States. McSweeney concludes that the adaptation of comics to films is “more than the transition from one medium to another, they also reflect the shifting coordinates of the cultural climate.”⁴² The MCU echoed shifting sentiments surrounding identity representation on screen throughout the 2010s and 2020s. The MCU kickstarted its success with a film that portrayed a one-dimensional Middle East (*Iron Man*, 2008). Today, their mainstream canon features Ms. Marvel, as a Muslim, Pakistani American teenage girl, who has become one of their most popular heroines to date. Thus, the release of *Ms. Marvel* on Disney+ in 2022 expanded on the narrow constructions of U.S. American ideals of the original MCU films, broadening the scope of what a Marvel superhero could be. Carnes and Goren note that:

The choices that creators and artists make about representation are especially weighty. If straight white men are usually the heroes, if women are usually the damsels in distress, if people of color are usually presented in stereotypical and degrading ways or depicted as villains, those choices can have real consequences for how audiences see not just the imaginary world of superhero fiction but also the real world that we all inhabit.⁴³

With these ideological consequences in mind, I turn to the scholarly conversation about how Marvel and Disney have represented marginalized characters in both comics and cinema.

Superwomen, Revisions, and Feminist Perspectives in the Marvel Universe

As a traditionally male dominated genre and industry, comic books and their corresponding films have consistently underrepresented women in positions of power as both creators and as characters. Typically, female characters in superhero narratives have been highly sexualized.⁴⁴ Carr and Carstarphen explain that, while Marvel “loves to tout its female characters and creators,” their company continues uphold patriarchal structures, both on and behind the screens. They assert that “while these heroines have power on the page and on the screen, the

power surrounding them is concentrated elsewhere.”⁴⁵ Superwomen appear in earlier iterations of Marvel Comics, but I am most concerned with Marvel’s most recent refoundings of its female heroes in their comics over the last ten to fifteen years, as these are the representations that they reflect in their film and television adaptations.

In Cocca’s analysis of how superwomen are produced and received, she firmly asserts that superheroine representation matters because “you are more likely to imagine yourself as a hero if you see yourself represented as a hero.”⁴⁶ If fictional superheroes are consistently depicted as white, traditionally masculine, heterosexual men, then society imagines heroes as such. Social imagination expands by opening the canon to a more diverse spectrum of heroic identities and providing space for marginalized voices to tell their own stories. Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Hillary Pennell apply Cocca’s perspective to how gender representation within superhero stories affects audiences psychologically.⁴⁷ Audience identification with heroes is a common finding among scholars who study identity representation, and Behm-Morawitz and Pennell echo these findings, noting that “gendered media portrayals influence individuals’ self-concept, beliefs about traditional gender roles, gender stereotyping, body esteem and eating disordered behaviors, and self-objectification.”⁴⁸ Therefore, superwomen both break gender norms by being empowered women but also conform when they are presented as hypersexualized or as embodying masculine traits.

Miriam Kent applies a feminist lens to a specific Marvel Comics example starring a superheroine: *Captain Marvel* (2012). As a refounding of a previously male hero in the Marvel Comics, Carol Danvers’s *Captain Marvel* “was both conventional in its reliance on the superhero comics custom of reinvention and ambitious in its dedication to a projected progressive gender politics.”⁴⁹ Captain Marvel’s revision was part of a movement to signify change in superhero

comics. However, Kent claims that “these relaunches, which have resonance in terms of gender and race representation specifically . . . signify an illusion of change driven by industrial imperatives resulting in ‘hegemonic reversion.’”⁵⁰ Kent argues that this move is merely an act on Marvel’s part to appear superficially feminist. As per their tradition, Marvel uses adaptation, revision, and refounding to update their characters to reflect contemporary sentiments, but *Captain Marvel*’s depiction of white female heroism and peripheral depictions of women of color “(re)centers white femininity in its heroic narratives,” as Kent concludes.⁵¹ Marvel’s first revision of a male character into a powerful heroine did open the door for more representation of superwomen, but it was only one step towards representing intersectional identities in Marvel Comics.

In the MCU, representations of superwomen have evolved (somewhat) from their original depictions as sexualized objects. The women in the MCU’s Phase One and Two (Marvel Studios films set between 2008 and 2015) were love interests or, in the case of *Black Widow*, hypersexualized heroines there to further the male heroes’ goals. McSweeney observes that the Phase One and Two women characters “tend[ed] to be at best marginalized, at worst objectified, sexualized, and infantilized.”⁵² Carr and Carstarphen contend that because its fantasy universe exists inside a real world setting such as New York City, Marvel’s fictional female representations should echo the “development, struggles, and triumphs of women in the real world.”⁵³ Thus, there was (and still is) a need for more accurate and nuanced representations of women in Marvel’s superhero cinema. Stephanie Green argues that the Marvel-Netflix show *Jessica Jones* (2015) “embodies resistance to gendered power because she is at once superhuman and noir anti-hero,” offering a deeper exploration of a female action hero.⁵⁴ However, others contend that these depictions may only be surface level. Linda Beail explores how the

reimagining of Natasha Romanov's Black Widow moves away from one-dimensional sexualizing yet still conforms to Western ideals of feminine beauty.⁵⁵ Meyer notes that *Black Panther* (2016) included stronger and more complex depictions of Black masculinity and femininity than its source material, like more empowered and less sexualized roles for the Dora Milaje warriors of Wakanda. However, the film also erased the queer identities of the Dora Milaje depicted in the comics, specifically the lesbian relationship between warriors Ayo and Aneka. In this adapted, “sanitized vision of Wakanda,” Meyer argues that Marvel still reinforced “heteronormative and patriarchal cultural logics, thereby remaining allegiant to whiteness.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the film adaptation failed to adequately represent the characters’ intersectional identities.⁵⁷

Heroic representations influence real-world perceptions of gender, either reinforcing or subverting gender stereotypes. In recent comic-to-film adaptations and comic revisions, Marvel has been more intentional in how it represents female characters. However, identity is complex, and these representations often lack intersectionality, neglecting to consider multifaceted representations of ethnicity, race, or religion.

From Stereotyping to Replacing: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion in the MU

Comics are particularly susceptible to racial stereotyping since they rely on illustrations to depict their characters.⁵⁸ Marc Singer explains that racial stereotypes found in superhero comics often “operate not only as tools of defamation but also as vehicles for far more subtle manipulations of race.”⁵⁹ Not only have superheroes of color been hard to find, but those that are portrayed in superhero comics are often tokenized and defined by their race, like Marvel’s “Black Panther” or DC’s “Black Lightning.”⁶⁰ But with more attention on racism within superhero media in the last few years, Marvel has begun to make changes.

Jeffrey Brown examines how Marvel has taken steps towards advancing diversity in their content, and he argues that their changing heroes are indicative of social change. Miles Morales—a Black and Puerto Rican American teen—was introduced as Spider-Man in 2011, kicking off Marvel’s top-down “attempt to parallel the real-world changes in American society” about “what a hero is supposed to mean—and look like—in modern America.”⁶¹ What Brown calls “The Replacements” or “new heroes that take on the role of more established characters” were part of Marvel’s intentional move to diversify their characters called the “All-New, All-Different”⁶² initiative in the 2010s.⁶³ In this modern refounding movement, Marvel began “changing the landscape of superheroes,” from passing the mantle of “Captain Marvel” to Carol Danvers, writing Miles Morales as Spider-Man, or introducing Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel. Each of these refounded comic heroes has been adapted to the screen by Marvel Studios, implying that these changes have both economic and ideological benefits for the company.

With each refounding, however, some fans expressed concern, worried that the original, beloved, white male superheroes were being replaced. Brown directly addresses this, noting that “online trolls” are complaining about Marvel “pandering to whiny social justice warriors.”⁶⁴ Importantly, as Brown points out, both the legacy and original heroes carry a powerful message: “The Marvel Universe shows readers that there is enough room for everyone; nobody has to be replaced just because new versions of something come along . . . Through the legacy heroes, Marvel presents ethnic and gender diversity among superheroes as natural and desirable.”⁶⁵ If Marvel is embracing these social changes, then readers should too. However, in the MCU, it took until 2016’s *Black Panther* for a hero of color to be the title character and until 2019’s *Captain Marvel* for a heroine to headline her own film. Certainly, Marvel’s less-than-stellar history of representing marginalized identities cannot be undone but, as Brown concludes, “over the last

two decades, [Marvel Comics] has managed to produce an impressive new roster of heroes that construct diversity in a more positive and progressive manner.”⁶⁶ The MCU appears to be mirroring its comics, introducing young women of color from this new roster into their films; America Chavez and Riri Williams appear as sidekick superheroes in films featuring existing MCU heroes, *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness* (2022) and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022).

While representations of race, gender, and (to a lesser extent) ethnicity in superhero comics have received a great deal of attention from scholars, depictions of a superhero’s religious identity are far less common. Heroes like Ms. Marvel demonstrate that religion plays a significant role in identity, especially for Muslims in America. Arjana explains that traditional, Western representations of “Muslim characters and images do not represent reality; rather, they express fantasies about Muslims that originated in the medieval period, are validated by Orientalism, and are sustained by neoliberalism, colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy.”⁶⁷ On the other hand, Arjana also concludes that, when their characters and religious complexities are represented accurately, “Muslimah superheroes are not simply entertaining; they are part of a larger movement challenging patriarchy, colonialism, and Islamism.”⁶⁸ Brown notes that, in comics, “It is difficult to incorporate Muslim characters effectively in a genre that requires bombastic action and a medium that relies on colorful and easily understood visual codes” because it leads to misrepresentations of minority characters.⁶⁹ To explore how Muslim superheroes are depicted, Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus analyze the character Dust, a Sunni Muslim woman who immigrated from Afghanistan to the U.S. and became a part of Marvel’s X-Men. Dust’s characterization and costuming—like her veil and black garment that is nevertheless form-fitting⁷⁰—reflect and resist the American monomyth. The comics depict Dust’s

struggle between her religious identity, the secular and frequently hostile West, and her superpowers. Importantly, they conclude that, “in introducing Dust, Marvel managed to make a place within its universe for a Muslimah superheroine, but that place is a small one, far removed from its narrative center.”⁷¹ Thus, Kamala stands out from Marvel’s other superheroes, particularly because her Muslim identity is normalized, placed at the center of her narrative rather than at the periphery.

Throughout its history, Marvel’s representation of marginal ethnicities, races, and religions has been inconsistent at best, often leaving non-white characters at the fringes of their narratives. Yet, in the past decade, they have attempted to change by hiring diverse creators, passing old titles on to new, multicultural characters, and bringing more marginalized superhero identities to the center. Therefore, with Kamala Khan’s comics introduction as Ms. Marvel in 2014 and her MCU debut in 2022, Marvel has given a place for a Muslimah superheroine at the center, but how and to what effect?

“Maybe I’m Finally Part of Something Bigger”: Kamala Khan’s Comic Debut

The mantle of “Ms. Marvel” in Marvel Comics was originally given to Carol Danvers in 1968, who was then depicted as the love interest of the (male) Captain Marvel.⁷² Fans of the MCU know Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel and Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, reflecting the Marvel Studios’ clear and intentional shift away from the characters who originally held these titles in the comics. But in terms of the choice to refound the character of Ms. Marvel in the comics, Cocca explains that “having a character of color take on the title of a previously existing white character was...meant to increase diversity and update an old character, while easing acceptance of change among longtime fans through familiarity.”⁷³ And it succeeded. *Ms. Marvel* (2014) remains one of Marvel’s best-selling comics worldwide.⁷⁴

When comics' readers first meet her, Kamala Khan is an "ordinary" high school girl from Jersey City, New Jersey.⁷⁵ But as a second-generation Pakistani immigrant and practicing Muslim, she doesn't feel "normal" around her peers. People mispronounce her name, she is embarrassed by her overbearing, traditional parents, and she constantly is treated like an outsider in her home city. She dreams of fitting in with her white, non-Muslim peers, and she especially wishes to have extraordinary abilities like her hero, Captain Marvel. Low and behold, this superhero fangirl gets her wish granted when she suddenly can shapeshift, stretch, and shrink. In a coming-of-age story of self-discovery, the comics explore how Kamala navigates her newfound abilities, the awkwardness of being a teenager, and the constant struggle to find belonging in high school, especially when she is ethnically, religiously, and culturally different from those around her. And in doing so, *Ms. Marvel* offers important insight into a new era of Marvel Comics and superhero representation.

Kamala made headlines with her introduction as the re-founded Ms. Marvel in 2014, and scholars—especially those who study pop culture, comics, and media—were eager to analyze her depiction and reception. Many sought to understand how Marvel was going to unveil—quite literally, since Kamala does not wear a hijab—its first Muslim, Pakistani American title hero. Written by G. Willow Wilson—a white woman who converted to Islam—and edited by Muslim American Sana Amanat, *Ms. Marvel, Volume 1: No Normal* rocked the superhero comics world and sparked conversations among scholars, readers, and the news media alike.⁷⁶

The discourse around *Ms. Marvel* showcased the significance of a superheroine in the mainstream, but it was also accompanied by critical debates about Kamala's depiction.⁷⁷ As Kent explains, "Critics' responses indicate almost a fondness for assimilation," placing emphasis on Ms. Marvel's relatability to a non-Muslim, Western audience.⁷⁸ The scholarly controversy

around Kamala’s “relatability” has been the subject of a great deal of literature, and her relaunch was not without debate and resistance.⁷⁹ In reviewing Kamala’s comic debut, scholars describe *Ms. Marvel* as “genuine contemporary female subjectivity,”⁸⁰ a model of “real multicultural citizenship,”⁸¹ what a “representative American superhero looks like in the twenty-first century,”⁸² a “specifically South Asian/American diasporic text,”⁸³ “the embodiment of intersectional feminism,”⁸⁴ and an “unambiguously modern type of hero.”⁸⁵ Brown concludes that a film featuring Khan as Ms. Marvel “could forever change the public perception about what superheroes are, who can be one, and the various ways they can represent what America is.”⁸⁶ Perhaps Disney’s Marvel Studios agreed, as they wrote her a headlining show on Disney+, and *Ms. Marvel* (2022) remains the highest rated (yet widely debated) Marvel television show to date.⁸⁷

While scholars have certainly spent a considerable amount of time analyzing the industry and context of Marvel’s comics, their cinematic universe, and the representations contained in both, there has been very little academic discussion (let alone any rhetorical scholarship) about the newest aspect of the MCU: their Disney+ television show adaptations like *Ms. Marvel* (2022). Kamala Khan’s comics iteration of Ms. Marvel has received a great deal of attention, but if we are to fully understand the current state of representation in the MCU, its television adaptations deserve examination. Therefore, by bridging the literature between media and rhetorical studies, this project fills the gap in our scholarship about the MCU and its cultural impacts, specifically in how their comic-to-screen superheroes—in this case, a young, Muslim, Pakistani American, teenage girl—are depicted on television.

Methodology

Studying Media through the Circuit of Culture

Informed by scholarship from media industry and materiality studies, the next chapter in this thesis conducts an industrial analysis. I examine historical and cultural contexts, industrial discourse, and material affordances of each medium to shape an understanding of how each *Ms. Marvel* fits within Marvel's comics and film industries. This method employs media studies practices in its evaluation of production, industry discourse, and materiality, attending to the artifacts' industrial contexts in ways that compliment rhetorical analysis.

Production, placement, and distribution play an important role in how an artifact is understood by its audience, and I am interested in how the *Ms. Marvels*, as cultural artifacts, were produced. In Chapter 2, I turn to *Doing Cultural Studies* by du Gay et al. They provide foundation for cultural studies of media artifacts and establish a "circuit of culture" that considers "representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation" within an artifact's creation and circulation.⁸⁸ One method of understanding a media artifact's production is to examine industrial discourse surrounding said artifact, since access to information may be restricted by its creators.⁸⁹ In my industrial analysis of the *Ms. Marvels*, I assess discourse from trade publications to understand audience and critical receptions of both the comics and show.

When communicating messages, all mediums have affordances and limitations that are produced by their materiality. Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "The medium is the message," establishing the importance of materiality within the study of mediums.⁹⁰ Mediums have different physical capabilities of transmission, and, through their material structures, they communicate meaning differently. As Grant Bollmer states, "physical materiality...matters in the shaping of reality," and "when we only examine meaning, what a medium is and does is limited to human perception and experience."⁹¹ Therefore, I include considerations of how streaming television and comics function materially as mediums to fully understand how they shape reality

for their viewers. In this analysis, I refer to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* as a basis for understanding the materiality of comics.⁹² In considering the materiality of streaming television, I look to work done by scholars like Amanda Lotz, who examines how streaming platforms function as "subscriber-funded portals."⁹³ As streaming complicates the status of both broadcast and cable, television's materiality continues to be a popular topic of discussion among scholars.⁹⁴ Thus, I intentionally incorporate material considerations of both mediums, as understanding the differences between them is essential in conducting a comparative criticism of this adaptation.

A Visual, Intersectional, Feminist, Constitutive Rhetorical Criticism

Symbolic artifacts have ideological consequences, and a rhetorical criticism investigates said artifacts in order to assess their potential meaning(s) and affordances. G. Mitchell Reyes and Kundai Chirindo define rhetorical criticism as "the study of symbolic inducement."⁹⁵ Comics and televisual artifacts are composed of symbols that represent and convey ideological meanings about the sociocultural environment that produces them. Kamala Khan's identity as Ms. Marvel is inextricably linked to how her gender, race, ethnicity, religion, etc. are represented, so my methods are informed by intersectional feminist rhetorical theory.

Intersectional feminist criticism considers the multiple, intersecting systems of oppression that impact individuals differently depending on how parts of their identity fit together. Kimberlé Crenshaw notes that focusing solely on perspectives of those with privileged identities or only accounting for a one-dimensional view of gender "marginalizes those who are multiply-burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination."⁹⁶ Bonnie Dow and Celeste Condit explain that feminist criticism

is oriented toward the achievement of "gender justice," a goal that takes into account the ways that gender always already intersects with race, ethnicity, sexuality, and class.

Gender justice may include but can also go beyond the seeking of equality between men and women, to include understanding of the concept of gender itself as politically constructed.⁹⁷

As Dow and Condit indicate, feminist communication research aimed toward “gender justice” should not only strive for the goals listed above, but it must account for how gender is influenced by interlocking aspects of one’s identity. Lisa Flores notes that “rhetorical studies is fundamentally—at its core—the study of race.”⁹⁸ I take up Flores’s call to enact “racial rhetorical criticism” by examining identity representation within popular culture, and one locus of this analysis is whiteness. Race undergirds any discussion of representation, *and* identity is fluid and multifaceted; this project also considers the relationship between whiteness and the identity intersections between religion, ethnicity, gender, nationality, etc. Therefore, this project promotes gender justice, exploring how identity is politically and intersectionally constructed through Ms. Marvel’s stories.

Orientalism is foundational to understanding how Southeast Asian identity is constituted in popular media. Edward Said explains how “the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”⁹⁹ He asks: “How does one represent other cultures? What is another culture?”¹⁰⁰ Within rhetorical studies, scholars like Raka Shome have discussed implications of “The Other” in rhetorical canon, referring to Said’s theory.¹⁰¹ This study is concerned with how The Other is represented in the media. In particular, I place great importance on how representations can construct reality, or, as Said explains, how “texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.”¹⁰² Thus, in evaluating Kamala’s represented identity, this criticism is informed by Said’s theory of Orientalism and the scholars who have built upon it.

Rhetoricians have considered televisual texts as noteworthy rhetorical artifacts.¹⁰³ Dow explains that television is rhetorical in that its subjectivity—both in text and visual elements—offers a particular image of the sociocultural environment that it represents.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, a rhetorical criticism of television is interested in establishing an artifact’s historical and cultural contexts, examining affordances of the medium, and using textual analysis to understand how the artifact constitutes identities and frames reality for its audience. This method focuses on, as Dow puts it, the “purpose, strategies, and functions that can be discerned from an understanding of the television text and its potential interaction with audiences.”¹⁰⁵ While I utilize trade discourse about Ms. Marvel’s creators to establish their creative intents, I also consider the artifacts as polysemous, capable of positioning meaning and interpreting culture in a plethora of ways.¹⁰⁶

Dow’s analysis of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* set the precedent for feminist rhetorical criticisms of television, providing a “basis for a critical approach to television that focuses on its hegemonic effects.”¹⁰⁷ Feminist scholars have expanded and complicated Dow’s original framework, considering how production and culture impact gendered representation on television. Kristen Hoerl states that “the lessons of any particular television program respond directly or indirectly to the sociopolitical and economic contexts of its production and circulation.”¹⁰⁸ John Greene and Michaela Meyer also expand upon Dow’s work in their examination of women’s roles in *The Walking Dead*, noting that “feminist approaches to media studies seek to expose the ways in which women's representation is linked to larger cultural issues of gender oppression.”¹⁰⁹ In taking an intersectional feminist approach to rhetorical criticism, this project emulates the work of Dow, Hoerl, and others in its considerations of hegemonic effects, artifact production, and broader cultural implications.

Rhetoricians have also examined how identity is *visually* represented on screen. Claire Sisco King and Vanessa Beasley analyze on-screen representations of Black presidents, concluding that racial representations of our political leaders matter because they influence U.S. public opinions and voters' conceptions of possibility.¹¹⁰ In their analysis of animated Russian and Mexican depictions in the *Despicable Me* franchise, Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager and Roberto Avant-Mier highlight the influence of visual representations on ideology: “visuality has the power of influencing our minds and at the same time to serve both reflectively and constructively of social reality and dominant ideologies and thus must be studied more rigorously.”¹¹¹ When studying representation in television and film texts, these rhetoricians note the medium's reliance on visual depictions and how these depictions influence sociocultural ideologies. While I also examine discursive elements of these artifacts, visual rhetorical criticism offers important tools to unpack ideologies within visual depictions in the *Ms. Marvels*.

This study conducts a rhetorical investigation of how U.S. American citizenship is constituted in popular culture. In the third chapter, I expand upon Maurice Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric, which examines how audiences identify with rhetorically constructed identities. Furthermore, my consideration of rhetorical citizenship is informed by theories of borders as both “physical and ideological,”¹¹² apparatuses—as Josue David Cisneros describes—that “designate, produce, and regulate the space of difference,”¹¹³ per D. Robert DeChaine. Citizenship is bound up in identity, interpellation, and ideological borders, and rhetorical scholars have contended that criticisms of citizenship should go beyond considerations of civic engagement and policy.¹¹⁴ Since cultural artifacts mediate citizenship, I emulate said scholarship to better understand how corporate rhetors like Marvel and Disney conceptualize and constitute U.S. American citizenship.

Overview of Chapters

In the following chapters, I compare the comic versions of Kamala's origin story with her adaptation into a streaming television show on Disney+. By conducting this comparison, I consider how the representation of her identity changes between comics and television, evaluate the consequences of these textual differences, and examine how this adaptation demonstrates Disney's imaginings of U.S. American identity. I purposely pair industry analysis with rhetorical criticism. Chapter 2—From Comics to Streaming Television: Framing Ms. Marvel's Meaning through the Circuit of Culture—harnesses the circuit of culture as a framework to investigate how the representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation of the *Ms. Marvels* differ. This chapter reveals that, while the show's creators aimed to authentically represent the intersections of Kamala's superheroic identity, the adaptation between comic and streaming television mediums changed how the audience was able to consume and create meaning from the show. These intentions were also located within the broader context of Disney/Marvel as a global corporate entity with a multinational audience and aggressive economic ambitions. Chapter 3—Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel: Negotiating the Borders of U.S. American Identity through Constitutive Tensions—conducts a critical, rhetorical comparison between the two artifacts, looking specifically at how differences between the original comic and the televisual adaptation provide insight into Disney's constitution of American identity. The chapter examines constitutive moments of socio-cultural border negotiation as tensions, as what Marvel and Disney signify as the possibility of both/and intersectional identities within the American popular culture milieu. These rhetorical tensions act as tools for Marvel and Disney to present intersectional identities as palatable for a general audience while simultaneously constituting more nuanced identities within the Marvel Universe. This chapter also contributes to rhetorical

theory, concluding that constitutive rhetoric can interpellate two audiences simultaneously yet differently.

In Chapter 4, I put these two analyses in conversation with one another, offering broader implications for my findings and reflecting on the advantages of pairing media industry analysis with rhetorical criticism when assessing pop culture texts. Ultimately, I analyze how the adaptation of Ms. Marvel's superhero origin story renders a clearer picture of identity representation within popular media. The following chapters examine what this retelling of a young, Muslim, Pakistani American superheroine's story indicates about what it means to be American.

Chapter 2

From Comics to Streaming Television: Framing Ms. Marvel's Meaning through the Circuit of Culture

...with a cover like that, you're not looking to tell someone, "Okay, this is the final draft of the character" — you want to pique their interest. The best way to do that is to tie that character to a legacy with which they are already familiar, in this case the Carol Danvers/Ms. Marvel legacy.¹¹⁵

G. Willow Wilson, the co-creator and writer of the *Ms. Marvel* comics, explained the thought process behind the first volume's cover image: a young, brown-skinned brunette girl in a bright scarf and a black shirt splashed with a yellow lightning bolt holds textbooks in one hand and clenches her other fist. For Wilson, Kamala Khan's debut as "Ms. Marvel" was about familiarizing Marvel's comics audience with this new superheroine while emphasizing her unique identity. Alternatively, the poster for Disney+'s *Ms. Marvel* places a suited-up Kamala at the center of her the show's other characters; it's crowded with colorful South Asian and New Jersian iconography, underscoring her ethnic and religious heritage to audiences who might be familiar with the comic heroine and eager to watch her story on screen. While both Kamalas are depicted as clenching their fists, the similarities end there. Just as the two versions of Kamala place the visual aesthetics of the comics and streaming television show into stark contrast, so too will this chapter discuss how their material differences impact the text's meaning. While both *Ms. Marvels* tell the origin story of Kamala Khan, they are distinct mediums that encode their messages through different affordances and limitations.

Culture imbues its artifacts with social meanings, and vice versa. Culture is not only a "whole way of life," but it can also be the "production and circulation of meaning," as cultural theorists like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and others have discussed.¹¹⁶ An artifact's positioning within culture plays an important role in how its meaning is conveyed to an audience.

As Paul du Gay et al. explain, “Meaning is constructed—given, produced—through cultural practices.”¹¹⁷ The creation of meaning is an ongoing, active process composed of simultaneous, power-laden cultural practices. When studying media artifacts and their cultural impacts, du Gay et al. contend that critics should attend to a “circuit of culture,” “through which any analysis of a cultural text or artifact must pass if it is to be adequately studied.”¹¹⁸ The circuit considers an artifact’s “representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation.”¹¹⁹ By applying these lenses to a cultural artifact like *Ms. Marvel*, we are able to better understand how it comes to be imbued with meaning and what impacts said meaning might have on an audience.

I utilize the circuit of culture to examine my first question: How does the rhetorical representation of Kamala Khan’s Ms. Marvel change between comics and television? Before looking explicitly at Ms. Marvel’s textual depictions, we must first examine the context within which this adaptation occurred and the process through which meaning its meaning was (and continues to be) made. Because access to explicit information about a media artifact’s production may be restricted, secondary sources such as trade press articles and interviews, press releases, and earnings reports can lend insight into a text’s cultural circulation.¹²⁰ I examine discourse from trade publications, unpacking how production teams describe their intentions in representing and producing the comics and show, as well as critical receptions of both. In what follows, I scrutinize industrial discourse to understand how the comic and show were produced, how they were represented as accurately depicting social identity, how they were consumed by a critical and general audience, and how their mediums regulated their content. Finally, because the circuit of culture is cyclically non-linear (and many of these steps are concurrent), I conclude by analyzing the show’s production as an adaptation. I argue that industrial discourse conveyed the production team’s intention to portray authentic and essential identity representation, but this

intent was complicated by the material process of adapting between mediums. As the discourse reveals, both the public audience and the critical audience alike were divided as to whether the show succeeded in fulfilling this goal.

Producing a Superheroine: Marvel, Disney, and the Creators of the *Ms. Marvels*

In determining how the *Ms. Marvels* produce cultural meaning, we must first investigate what du Gay et al. call the “culture of production—the ways in which practices of production are inscribed with particular cultural meanings.”¹²¹ This section considers how organizational values, beliefs, and structures manifest particular production processes and how these processes in turn shape the representation of the produced artifact(s). Below, I outline the identities of important individuals involved in creating the *Ms. Marvels*, particularly those involved in the media industry’s discourse. Then, I provide a brief overview of Marvel Comics, Marvel Studios, and The Walt Disney Company, reflecting on how these organizations impact the meaning of the *Ms. Marvels*.

G. Willow Wilson, the co-creator and writer of *Ms. Marvel*, is a white, New Jersey-born, Muslim American woman who converted to the Islamic faith later in life.¹²² While Wilson brought Kamala to life on the page, the idea to create a Pakistani American superheroine came primarily from Sana Amanat, the co-creator and editor of *Ms. Marvel* and a South Asian, Muslim American woman from New Jersey.¹²³ Along with her Marvel co-editor, Stephen Wacker, Amanat developed Kamala’s Ms. Marvel to emulate her own experience growing up Pakistani and Muslim in New Jersey. No comic book would be complete without an artist, and Adrian Alphona was brought in to illustrate the first volume of *Ms. Marvel*.¹²⁴ Alex Alonso, Marvel Comics editor in chief from 2011-2017, spearheaded the revamp that opened the comics to welcome marginalized superheroine identities.¹²⁵

Ms. Marvel's translation to the screen was led by head writer Bisha K. Ali, a British Pakistani woman and an experienced MCU writer on the show *Loki* (2021), who was tasked with "talking about our experiences as Pakistanis in Marvel Studios," as she put it.¹²⁶ Outside of the writers' room, five directors helped guide the show's journey to the screen. Bilall Fallah and Adil El Arbi, producers and directors of the first and final episodes, are Belgian Moroccan men and spoke to their experiences in the Islamic community.¹²⁷ Director and Indian American woman Meena Menon led episodes two and three.¹²⁸ Pakistani Canadian Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy directed the episodes set in Pakistan and in India during the Partition.¹²⁹ As I will explore in the following section, each of the directors spoke during interviews about their unique standpoints and the importance of identity depiction in *Ms. Marvel*. Iman Vellani, the Pakistani Canadian actress that played Kamala, also acted as spokesperson for the show, speaking in interviews about her personal fandom of the character and the importance of understanding her own family's Pakistani history.¹³⁰ Finally, President of Marvel Studios Kevin Feige, who acts as overseer of the MCU, was asked to provide insight into the creation of the show.¹³¹ Media outlets also asked comic co-creator Sana Amanat to interview about the show, as she acted as an executive producer.¹³² The "series writing credits" of all six episodes also included Will Dunn (story editor and writer), Aisha Bhoori (staff writer), Kate Gritmon (staff writer), Josh Levine (story editor), Sophie Miller (story editor), and G. Willow Wilson, Adrian Alphona, and Sana Amanat ("Ms. Marvel/Kamala Khan created by").¹³³ While the list of other involved creators goes on, it should be noted the interviewed creators were generally limited to the directors, the head writer, and the President of Marvel Studios. While I can only speculate as to whether this was an intentional choice by Marvel Studios to promote their intersectional, South Asian American-representative creators or whether popular news media were just interested in hearing

from these particular creators, their discourse had a profound effect on the representation of the show in mainstream media.

The organizational structures, values, and goals of Marvel Comics, Marvel Studios, and the Walt Disney Company played essential roles in the production of the *Ms. Marvels*. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of each company's history and how they jointly shape their productions. A few key takeaways from that overview are important for this discussion: 1) Marvel Comics built its brand identity on developing origin stories and refounding its superhero characters.¹³⁴ 2) Marvel Studios emerged as a film production company in the 1990s when Marvel Comics was in economic decline, which led to the rise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) as the dominant canon of superhero cinema.¹³⁵ 3) Throughout all of its superhero properties, Marvel has a poor track record of representing marginalized identities, often reverting to stereotypical and/or harmful depictions. In the past few years, they have been making efforts to overcome these depictions by introducing intersectional superheroes, like Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel and Miles Morales's Spider-Man.¹³⁶ 4) The Walt Disney Company bought Marvel in 2009 and has strong influence and control over Marvel's characters, branding, and content distribution.¹³⁷ As the following sections will reflect, Marvel (and therefore Disney) are motivated to represent superhero identities with care and nuance, particularly given the critical scrutiny of this contemporary moment. However, Marvel does so from within their own familiar lane of developing origin stories, refounding characters, and funding large, cinematic productions. The discourse from the *Ms. Marvels*'s creators reflects this.

Promoting the *Ms. Marvels* through Identity (and) Representation

The *Ms. Marvels* were depicted (or "represented") by their creators as accurately and authentically showcasing the story of a young, Muslim Pakistani American superhero. However,

it is important to note that an artifact's *representation* signifies how it is marketed, displayed, advertised, etc. "in language, both oral and visual," as du Gay et al. explain.¹³⁸ This should not be confused with the content's representation of *identity*, or how social identities are encoded into and associated with an artifact.¹³⁹ In this section, I interweave the circuit steps of "identity" and "representation" because the *Ms. Marvels*' creators utilized their product's careful focus on Kamala's intersectional identity to purposefully align the comic and show with Muslim, Pakistani American sociocultural identity representation.

From the Comic's Creators: "Authentically" Representing Identity

When discussing the creation of the *Ms. Marvel* comic, its creators emphasized that the primary purpose of the comic series was to authentically reflect South Asian American and Muslim American identities and experiences. For Wilson and Amanat, Kamala was not only a true depiction of the experience of being a Pakistani American and Muslim girl in New Jersey, but she brought a sense of relatability for a broader audience when making meaning with these complex and often stereotyped identities. The industry discourse surrounding the *Ms. Marvel* comic around the time of its 2014 release was heavily focused on Kamala's identity as the first Pakistani and Muslim American character to receive her own comic headline. While they inquired about the creative elements—like Kamala's powers or the cover art—journalists also asked Amanat and Wilson to speak to the inspiration for their new, intersectional character. When referring to the creation of *Ms. Marvel* as diverse, complex, and representative, both of her creators played specific roles in formulating the discourse around the comic and the character; Amanat addressed the ethnic and cultural experience of being Pakistani American in New Jersey and Wilson related to the religious experience of being Muslim in America.

As a South Asian, Muslim American woman herself, *Ms. Marvel* co-creator Sana Amanat was very vocal about her role in the comic's creation. Kamala's story reflected her own personal experiences: "We're creating a character who's a South Asian Muslim girl, so you can't help but reflect on your own life. It was a form of therapy, if you will, in the creative process, which was really interesting and also painful at times, but important."¹⁴⁰ Amanat imbued her own story into *Ms. Marvel*, reinforcing the argument that the comic accurately represents South Asian American identity and combats harmful Muslim American stereotypes. For Amanat, telling Muslim American stories through media was "the best way to combat Islamophobia...If you can't meet a Muslim, maybe you can read about one. I do believe she's had the ability to combat those negative stereotypes in a way that's also sweet and endearing and funny."¹⁴¹ She explained that Marvel Comics's diversifying audience had become tired of only-male, only-white heroes: "People want a different type of story...We've created the space for something else."¹⁴²

G. Willow Wilson, co-creator and writer of *Ms. Marvel*, expressed similar sentiments. However, Wilson—as a white woman from New Jersey who converted to Islam later in life—offered a different outlook on Kamala's creation. In her interviews, Wilson emphasized complexity and authenticity, noting that

I really wanted her to be representative of young American Muslims as they are, not how we idealize them. Most young American Muslim women do not cover their hair, so she doesn't cover her hair...The key thing is authenticity, and not trying to please everybody with a cardboard cutout that doesn't feel like a human being with flaws and quirks and charms.¹⁴³

As a writer, Wilson spoke primarily to the creation of *Ms. Marvel* as "authentic" and "representative" yet nuanced, but she did so as a white Muslim American woman. Her standpoint appeared within her dialogue as she defended the authenticity of her own experience:

...there's a certain amount of apprehension from the Muslim community about whether or not [Kamala] is going to be a stereotype or a whitewashing...I've spent my entire adult

life in Muslim communities of various kinds both abroad and here in the U.S. and these are issues that are really close to my heart.¹⁴⁴

Wilson purposefully outlined her sympathy with the Muslim American standpoint, noting that she exists within Muslim communities and drew from that experience when creating Kamala's world. Wilson elaborated on the effort made toward creating an "authentic" Muslim character, but former Marvel Comics's editor in chief Alex Alonso, also weighed in on the efforts Marvel made in the 2010s to write "authentic" heroines. He noted that the superheroines created under his tenure had "rich interior lives, interesting careers and complicated families who are defined by many things—least of all their looks."¹⁴⁵ Between the two creators and the editor in chief, there was a clear push in 2014 to make Marvel's efforts to diversify and complicate their characters more visible while promoting the comic's launch. Certainly, this was in response to Marvel's poor track record in representing authentic intersectional identities.¹⁴⁶

Upon its 2014 release, Marvel Comics advertised the new comic as "groundbreaking" in its representation. When prospective readers searched for the comic in Marvel's database, this description would appear under the first *Ms. Marvel* volume:

The legend has returned! Marvel Comics presents the all-new MS. MARVEL, the groundbreaking heroine that has become an international sensation! Kamala Khan is just an ordinary girl from Jersey City--until she is suddenly empowered with extraordinary gifts. But who truly is the all-new Ms. Marvel? Teenager? Muslim? Inhuman? Find out as she takes the Marvel Universe by storm, and prepare for an epic tale that will be remembered by generations to come. History in the making is NOW!¹⁴⁷

This snippet offers some insights into Marvel's hopes for *Ms. Marvel*. First, they positioned the reassignment of "Ms. Marvel" to Kamala as an exciting, uncontroversial choice, one that made her "an international sensation." Further, they emphasized Kamala's Muslim, New Jerseyan, teenage identity, advertising intersectionality as central to her superhero story. Finally, they told readers that, by reading *Ms. Marvel*, they would be a part of history, "NOW!" Thus, Marvel

attempted to justify their refounding of the Ms. Marvel mantle while promoting the representational choices that serve as advertising techniques. These undertones appear obvious when paired with discourse from *Ms. Marvel*'s creators.

Ms. Marvel's "relatability" was a significant point within her creator's discourse about her identity. Amanat and Wilson both reiterated that Kamala's story had a broad resonance, regardless of her audience's religion or ethnicity. In her 2014 Ted Talk, Amanat explained that Kamala is "still figuring out that journey to her authentic self. But all she knows is that she does not want to be limited by the labels imposed upon her. So really, Kamala Khan's story is everyone's."¹⁴⁸ Paradoxically, Amanat explained that Kamala's characterization also reflects her own identity and story; can Kamala be both nuanced and broadly relatable? *Vox*'s Alex Abad-Santos thought so:

Considering how different she is from the popular superheroes who preceded her—her religion, the color of her skin, her being a suburban teenage girl—it's a testament to Wilson and Alphonso's touching storytelling that Kamala's life...is so universal and yet specific to her experiences.¹⁴⁹

The juxtaposition of "universal yet specific" encapsulated Amanat's and Wilson's goals with the character. Wilson explained that she wanted to write about the teenage experience: "Not all of us have superpowers but we all remember being 16 and feeling out of place in our bodies. Having different limbs growing at different rates, it's a struggle we can all relate to, and having a powerset that spoke so clearly to that part of life, that part of growing up, was really appealing to me."¹⁵⁰ In this interview, Wilson referenced Ms. Marvel's shape-shifting powers, explaining that they reflect the relatable awkwardness of a changing teen body. In purposely shaping a complex, authentic, and relatable story, Wilson and Amanat took on an almost paradoxical challenge. I will return to the discussion around Kamala's "relatability" when evaluating the consumption of the *Ms. Marvels*; scholars and popular media critics had much to say on the subject.

Expanding Identity and Representation in the Disney+ Show

Discourse around the adaptation of *Ms. Marvel* was also very interested in both Kamala's identity and the identities of her televisual creators. Bisha K. Ali, the head writer on *Ms. Marvel*, was a frequent interviewee about the show. Her conversations also conveyed the importance of her identity as a creator, and she represented the show as accounting for authenticity of identities. She emphasized the importance of her cultural perspective when creating the MCU's *Ms.*

Marvel: "I was able to share with [Marvel Studios] why I thought this show was important for me personally, as a fan, as a South Asian person, as a Pakistani woman, as a woman from a Muslim background. I explained why those things were important, but also how we could marry them in a way that's specific and universal."¹⁵¹ Similar to the comics' creators, Ali was vocal about her intersectional identity when discussing the show. In various interviews with trade publications, she expressed the importance of this show to her as a Marvel screenwriter and as a Muslim and Pakistani woman. The show's four directors also brought their own identity perspectives to its production. Director Meera Menon summarized how the show's creative team brought their personal standpoints to the table, including herself, Amanat, Ali, Fallah and El Arbi, and

a whole team of cultural advisers who were constantly vetting the scripts and vetting the things we were about to shoot on any given day. So there were a lot of people bringing their personal experiences to these sequences, and I'm hoping that they come across as authentic at the end of the day, because a lot of people put their own lives and their own sense of selves into the storytelling.¹⁵²

Like Wilson, Menon described the show as "authentic" and "personal." As Menon said, Fallah and El Arbi, producers and directors of *Ms. Marvel*, explained that their upbringing helped them understand Kamala's perspective: "Just relating to the character of Kamala being between those two worlds, between the Western world and the traditional world. We grew up like that."¹⁵³ For

Ms. Marvel's creative team, it was important for the show to be so obviously rooted in intersectional standpoints that reflected the identities represented on screen. As noted previously, Marvel has been criticized for its poor representation of diverse identities; with *Ms. Marvel*, they attempted to change that.¹⁵⁴

The advertising around Disney+'s *Ms. Marvel* reflected its creators' discourse. The "Official Trailer" for "Marvel Studios' Ms. Marvel" premiered on YouTube on March 15, 2022.¹⁵⁵ The trailer cut together snippets of dialogue and film to convey that Kamala's superhero journey centers around her identity and her struggles to fit in. For instance, it included a clip of Kamala saying: "It's not the brown girls from Jersey City who save the world...that's a fantasy too," reinforcing her feelings of exclusion and difference. Especially considering how *Ms. Marvel*'s creators represented the show to the media, its official trailer offers specific snippets of its scenes, dialogue, music, and graphics that reinforced its message that the diverse identities of new MCU superheroes will be both fresh and more culturally nuanced and authentic than those of past superheroes.

Ms. Marvel's "relatability" was also a consistent theme around its Disney+ debut. Ali explained that Kamala's onscreen portrayal was meant to "feel universal." Yet she also noted that "We're not going to represent a billion people. We're not even going to represent the exact experience of a million people, but we're going to represent something that's true to us in this room, and that hopefully people can relate to."¹⁵⁶ Ali voiced the question that many critics posed: is it possible for *Ms. Marvel* to be both universally relatable and represent an authentic experience? As the head writer, Ali believed so. Director Obaid-Chinoy reflected a similar sentiment, arguing that "Ms. Marvel matters because she is a superhero for so many people beyond the Marvel fandom. She represents something that we've never seen on screen

before.”¹⁵⁷ For both Ali and Obaid-Chinoy, Kamala’s story was written and portrayed to be universally relatable. However, she also signified that Marvel was willing to open up both its superheroic canon and its writers’ room to a wider range of identities. Whether Kamala’s relatability is “good” for representation is still a topic of debate within critical discourse—as the following point in the circuit of culture will demonstrate—but the show’s creative team explain that it was a driving motivation for *Ms. Marvel*’s production.

Consuming the *Ms. Marvels*: Audience Reception and Critical Reviews

A study of an artifact’s “consumption” considers how its audience uses said artifact and what cultural significance it may gain as a result. As du Gay et al. explain, consumption practices affirm that “meaning-making is a process” since “meanings are not simply set by producers and received by consumers but are always made in usage.”¹⁵⁸ Meaning creation is a cyclical effort, and an audience’s consumption connects the intentions of the producers and the regulations surrounding their artifacts. Comics and television shows are consumed or “used” by their readers and their viewers, by those who attend to, interpret, and discuss the artifact. As they do so, the audiences of the *Ms. Marvels* make meaning from the produced artifacts. Before considering how materiality impacts an artifact’s consumption, I review how the *Ms. Marvels* were consumed by their public audience and how they were discussed by their critics.

Critical and Scholarly Consumption of the *Ms. Marvel* Comics

In October 2014, the release of *Ms. Marvel, Volume 1: No Normal* rocked the superhero comics world and sparked dialogue among scholars, readers, and the news media alike. The conversation surrounding *Ms. Marvel*’s creation centered primarily on her identity. Trade publications were very interested in how this new hero would represent the South Asian American community and open up the superhero genre to a wider demographic. They

emphasized Kamala's relatability and praised the creators for writing a diverse, representative character into the Marvel canon.¹⁵⁹ NPR's Etelka Lehoczky praised Wilson in that "she cleverly folds Kamala's Muslim heritage and teen angst into her emerging hero identity."¹⁶⁰ *Vox*'s Abad-Santos said that "With Kamala, an entire swath of Marvel fans were able to finally see someone with their skin color, with their religious beliefs, and within their age group saving the world."¹⁶¹ Both critics pinpointed important aspects of the comic for Marvel: to introduce a new identity to their heroic canon and to interpellate a new audience into the fandom. Both observations are pivotal in the following chapter's rhetorical criticism.

Critics also noted that *Ms. Marvel* was a commercial hit, arguing that this reinforced to Marvel that their audience demographic was expanding.¹⁶² According to Diamond Comic Distributors, the first volume of *Ms. Marvel* was the best-selling graphic novel in October 2014. *Comic Chron* reports that 75,280 hard copies and an estimated 500,000+ digital copies of the comic were sold in 2014.¹⁶³ *Ms. Marvel* was commercially successful and critically acclaimed, but its accessibility was limited by its medium. By the 2010s and 2020s, the popularity of comic books had narrowed. Culture and comics scholar Henry Jenkins explains that "different media attracts different market niches. Films and television probably have the most diverse audiences; comics and games the narrowest."¹⁶⁴ If the abundance of discourse surrounding the television show is any indication, adaptation to the screen certainly boosted the character's visibility and broadened the conversation about her, as I will explore shortly.

After Kamala Khan made headlines with her introduction as the refounded *Ms. Marvel*, scholars jumped to analyze her depiction and understand just how Marvel was going to unveil—quite literally, since Kamala does not wear a hijab—its first Muslim, Pakistani American title hero. Kamala Khan's identity as both Pakistani American and as a practicing Muslim hold a

great deal of weight for comics scholars, who argue about whether the character is representative of a complex Islamic diaspora or a sympathetic portrayal merely for non-Muslim readers to relate to. Rebecca Wanzo contends that Kamala's Ms. Marvel contradicts the harmful post-9/11 representations of Muslim Americans by depicting a heroine with her own title comic in the Marvel Universe—a position traditionally given to heroes with white American identities and traditional values.¹⁶⁵ Dean Cooper-Cunningham says that the comics “provide a reading of race, gender, and national identity in post-9/11 USA that destabilizes binary categorizations and provides spaces for a more complex logic of identity” because Kamala is not reduced to just one aspect of her identity.¹⁶⁶ He argues that comics work to destabilize dichotomized identities like Muslim/American, female/heroic, and presence/absence of whiteness “by contesting hegemonic ideas, bringing those who are often not represented (well) into focus, enabling readers to imagine themselves and others otherwise.”¹⁶⁷ As I expand upon in the next chapter, identity tensions play a central role in representing Kamala's intersectional identity through both the comic and television show. Jeffrey Brown agrees, noting that *Ms. Marvel* frames assimilation as “not about giving up one's individuality and cultural heritage in order to conform to a monolithic image of what an American is” but rather as the process of “adapting cultural environment by merging and balancing social, political, ethnic, and cultural beliefs and values.”¹⁶⁸ Sophia Rose Arjana addresses Kamala's faith in particular, noting that her identity does not rely on the usual Muslim stereotypes, but rather Islam is “presented as an integral part of Kamala, not as a costume or accouterment.”¹⁶⁹ Neal Curtis and Valentina Cardo focus on how *Ms. Marvel* signifies the shift in comics to represent gender more diversely, reflective of third-wave feminism. They explain that Kamala's Ms. Marvel is intersectional and complex, portraying “religious, ethnic, and cultural components of the character are related, yet distinct,” as shown in her family members'

various relationships with their Islamic faith.¹⁷⁰ As the work of this multi-disciplinary group of scholars suggests, Ms. Marvel has the potential to complicate Muslim and South Asian American representation in Marvel Comics's heroes.

Conversely, Kamala's "relatability" may undermine this potential. Scholars discuss *Ms. Marvel's* relatability across a wide range of audiences. Miriam Kent argues that reviews and industry responses focus too much on the comic's relatability:

It should be possible for readers to have a positive experience of the text even though it may not resonate with their individual lives...Such reviewers also 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.¹⁷¹

Anja Borg Andreassen disagrees with Kent, discussing how Muslims have been portrayed as "monstrous" in the media and arguing that Kamala's relatability functions productively as a way to "reflect on and explore the post-9/11 American society from the point of view of a Muslim-American."¹⁷² Winona Landis asserts that *Ms. Marvel* complicates relatability by inviting readers to think about superheroic identity.¹⁷³ Landis's argument that the comic invites both disidentification and identification encapsulates the multifaceted debates surrounding the text and how Kamala's identity is portrayed.

To provide a snapshot of what consumers thought of the comics, Safiyya Hosein interviewed Muslim consumers about their reactions to *Ms. Marvel* (2014). She notes that, while audiences said *Ms. Marvel* is a "good" representation of a Muslim woman in the media, the comic nevertheless perpetuates stereotypes of Muslim women being more "worthy than Muslim male ones" and emotionally alleviating white guilt for readers because of her relatability.¹⁷⁴ Hosein concludes that, "Muslim superheroes provided a sense of affective relief. However, this also led [the participants] to not question the movies of Western media in promoting the Muslim

superhero typology.”¹⁷⁵ Marvel’s decision to represent a young, relatable Muslim woman with non-violent powers—while effective at opening up the character to a wider audience—may still perpetuate different Muslim stereotypes. Cooper-Cunningham asserts that Kamala’s hesitation to use violence reproduces essentialist assumptions that women are more peaceful and that it attempts to eliminate racial and cultural differences by reifying the American melting pot myth that “they’re just like us.”¹⁷⁶ While many scholars argue that Kamala’s representation is groundbreaking within superhero comics, others like Hosein and Cooper-Cunningham point out *Ms. Marvel* walks the line between being “good” representation and reinforcing harmful stereotypes about Muslim Americans. Thus, when considering her adaptation to the screen, these criticisms invite further scrutiny. Scholars have certainly spent a considerable amount of time analyzing the industry and context of *Ms. Marvel*’s comics, their cinematic universe, and the representations contained within them, but there has been very little academic discussion about the Disney+ television adaptation. For the time being, popular media provides insight into critical receptions of the streaming television show.

Consumption of *Ms. Marvel* as a Streaming Show

The first episode of *Ms. Marvel* premiered on June 8th, 2022, on the streaming platform Disney+, and around 775,000 American households watched the show’s premiere within the first five days of its release.¹⁷⁷ According to Scott Mendelson from *Forbes*, globally, the “first episode of *Ms. Marvel* earned just 4.2 million households via that week’s Nielsen ratings,” lower than many of the other MCU streaming television premieres.¹⁷⁸ While a full audience analysis would be needed to thoroughly unpack viewer trends, popular media was quick to report that audiences appeared divided about the show. Mendelson cited its appeal to a younger audience that resulted in the alienation of a wider demographic.¹⁷⁹ For NBC News, Brahmjot Kaur

reported that some reviewers called the show's diversity "woke and cringe," while fans were excited about Marvel's first Pakistani Muslim superhero.¹⁸⁰ While general audiences seemed split, critics had much to say about the show.

Many critics found it hard to separate discussion of the television show from discussion of the comics. Likely because the MCU by nature of its cinematic medium is more mainstream than its comics, publications like *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, Huffington Post, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Empire*, and *Rolling Stone* covered the conversation about bringing Ms. Marvel to the screen. They discussed the unique visuals of the show, its particular status in the MCU as a coming-of-age story, and, of course, what changed from the comics. A broader conversation about representation and identity was also present in discussion of televisual elements. As it took place within the intense popularity and scrutiny of the MCU, the magnitude of this conversation expanded proportionally. Between the creators and the critics, there seemed to be conflicting discourses that celebrated new representation in the MCU with hope, debated whether this was "good" Marvel/televisual content, and detailed how elements of the comic were adapted to fit the screen.

Much critical discussion centered around South Asian and Muslim representation in *Ms. Marvel*. Critics acknowledged Marvel's move to open up their canon and creative teams to a wider range of identities. Petrana Radulovic from Polygon wrote that the show focused on the "everyday lives of regular people," a stance that the MCU often neglects, and how "Ms. Marvel finally gives the MCU a hero who actually feels relatable—and one with an actual connection to the world that she needs to save."¹⁸¹ Writing for *Empire*, Destiny Jackson said that "The series also has an authentic take on Pakistani-American culture and...takes admirable care in explaining the rituals and realities of life as a modern Muslim."¹⁸² Similarly, *Variety*'s Caroline

Framke noted the change that *Ms. Marvel* brings to the MCU, explaining that “it’s undeniably refreshing to see an origin story from the perspective of a Muslim Pakistani American, whose only role in the first wave of Marvel movies might have been handing Captain America a sandwich from behind a bodega counter.”¹⁸³ These critics acknowledged that the show’s “authenticity” and “relatability” were important, “refreshing” changes for the MCU—exactly how the production team described the show. For HuffPost, Hediya Sizar acknowledged Marvel’s efforts to diversify their superhero lineups and their writers’ rooms, noting that *Ms. Marvel* “feels like another step in the right direction. It’s not enough to be included on-screen; Our communities have to be represented in various ways to reflect our realities.”¹⁸⁴ Sizar celebrated exactly what creators like Ali championed about *Ms. Marvel*: the authenticity of storytelling from its creative team. Clearly, critics responded positively to Disney’s efforts to open up their writers’ rooms. Since we see the same words from both creators and critics, the creators’ intended effects at least somewhat resonated with their audience. Between Marvel’s intentional positioning of the show as diverse and populating its production team with diverse voices, the company’s own discourse as well as discourse from trade publication communicated “representation” as the main theme surrounding *Ms. Marvel*’s MCU debut.

However, some critics were less eager to celebrate the show. Mohammad Zaheer for BBC Culture argued that, while the show is unique in its portrayal of Pakistani American superhero, it “seems to walk a tight rope between pronounced representation and stereotyping and doesn’t always get the balance right. The amount of time the word haram gets bandied about becomes almost comical, verging on becoming parody.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, while Disney opened up its creative team, the show still borders on stereotyping, something I explore in the following chapter when considering the MCU’s global audience.

Popular media also paid careful attention to the show's skewed ratings. Even before all six episodes had been released, critics deemed *Ms. Marvel* to be the most recent target of "review-bombing." A work is considered "review-bombed" when the general public bombards review sites like IMDb with 1-star ratings, despite an equal number of 10-star ratings and positive reviews from critics. According to *Vogue*'s Jessalyn Lye, "Review bombing...happens when a group of like-minded users swarm a piece of media with negative reviews in order to actively harm its sales or popularity," usually before the media has been released.¹⁸⁶ Lye draws a link from review-bombing to bigotry, arguing that the phenomenon is "driven by ideological disagreement as opposed to objective criticism," or that reviewers are targeting the show because of the marginalized identities represented in it.¹⁸⁷ NBC's Kaur explained that "A wave of negative reviews was posted when the series was first released, criticizing it for its diversity...*Ms. Marvel* was initially the lowest-rated Marvel Cinematic Universe series, with thousands giving the show one-star reviews—many of the reviewers were men over the age of 30."¹⁸⁸ For *Forbes*, Paul Tassi wrote that *Ms. Marvel* was "review-bombed into being the MCU's lowest-scoring show on IMDb."¹⁸⁹ On a scale of one to ten, the distribution of user ratings on IMDb falls thus: 21.3% are ten-star ratings (21,533 ratings, 686 reviews) and 19.3% are one-star ratings (19,527 ratings, 416 reviews).¹⁹⁰ The ratings between two-stars and nine-stars barely approach this, with the next highest rating percentage of seven-stars at 13.5% of the total. Despite the show's strong critical reception, the audience was drastically skewed between the two ends of the spectrum, hence the moniker of "review-bombed." While I can only speculate on the explicit opinions of *Ms. Marvel*'s audience and why they rated the show such, the widely skewed reviews indicated that something peculiar occurred; Disney was not completely successful in representing this new superhero to its audience.

As the industry discourse surrounding them indicated, the audiences of both *Ms. Marvels* consumed the artifacts and, in doing so, entered into the creation of their meaning: the show could be nuanced and relatable yet “woke and cringey.” Critics—both in popular media and academic spaces—were very interested in and excited about the representation of Kamala’s superhero identity within the Marvel Comics universe. In particular, scholars debated whether Ms. Marvel’s universal relatability overwrote her nuanced representation. This discourse followed the superheroine into her streaming television debut, enhanced by the MCU’s heightened attention by the public. Thus, while *Ms. Marvels*’s creators sought to represent Kamala’s identity authentically, the audience’s consumption of and response to the artifacts suggested that their success was (and remains) up for debate. As the circuit of culture mandates, an artifact’s meaning is continuously being created, and the process of consumption also is dictated by how an artifact is regulated, materialized, distributed, and controlled.

Regulating through Materiality: Distribution and Mediation of the *Ms. Marvels*

All media is regulated by mechanisms that control its distribution and its audience’s consumption. As the platforms via which audiences access them, the physical comic book and the streaming platform Disney+ regulate the *Ms. Marvels*. Mediums—such as comics and streaming television—have affordances and limitations that are produced by their materiality; this is an important consideration when evaluating how artifacts communicate meaning. Adrienne Shaw explains that affordances are the possibilities structured by an object or environment, and they are “highly interpretive, as deciphering the use of objects and environments is related directly to the subject position of the organism.”¹⁹¹ Further, Shaw studies how Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model can be used to expose power, resistance, and interactivity within designed affordances of digital media environments.¹⁹² As they each

facilitate their environment differently, mediums afford different experiences with power and resistance. Materiality includes the tools and structures that a medium offers its user, indicating that mediums have different physical capabilities of transmission, and in their variations, they communicate meaning differently. As Grant Bollmer states, “physical materiality...matters in the shaping of reality,” and “when we only examine meaning, what a medium is and does is limited to human perception and experience.”¹⁹³ Materiality influences how mediums shape meaning for an audience, and it expands critical consideration of a text beyond its content. Comics and streaming television present reality differently for their viewers, and these differences are fundamental in understanding how their content is regulated and how this regulation, in turn, affects their cultural meaning.

The Materiality of Comics

The faint smell of ink wafts up toward me as I crack open the thin comic book titled *Ms. Marvel*, shining out in bright pink letters on the cover. I flip the smooth, colorful pages back and forth, stopping as my finger catches on a page at random. Eye-catching but neutral-toned illustrations appear almost realistic, despite their hand-drawn nature. Most pages are separated into squiggly, drawn panels with small lines of white between them. The spoken dialogue, appearing in white speech bubbles with black font, is sprinkled across each panel. Kamala’s internal dialogue is depicted in yellow boxes with all capitalized text. Words and noises burst across the page in bold or colorful fonts, standing in for sound effects like “WHAAA!” and “Pew! Pew! Pew!” In 2014, most readers of *Ms. Marvel* accessed the comic digitally.¹⁹⁴ While “flipping” pages would be metaphorical for the many readers of *Ms. Marvel* in digital form, the rest of a physical comic’s materiality translates smoothly into pixels. “Flippable” pages, dialogue

in text boxes, and illustrated characters are not only part of the experience when consuming the comic's content, they define how the content is transmitted.

When considering the materiality of comics, I would be remiss not to refer to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. McCloud delineates comics as made of images in a deliberate order that transcribes meaning, and the comic reader is centered as the receiver of this information. Comics are composed of panels: the often box-like spaces where content plays out; gutters, the small or large spaces between said panels; and pages, which organize the panels into a readable format. A method of materializing unique to comics, the panel is especially important in that it establishes how time and space function in the story. McCloud suggests that, in comparison to a film reel which is made up of numerous images, the control of time through the space of panels is unique to comics.¹⁹⁵ Because they are made of panels on pages that can be perused and flipped at the reader's leisure, the holder of a comic book has far more agency as to the experience of negotiating meaning with a comic's content. McCloud explains that the comic reader's gaze dictates time:

Wherever your eyes are focused, that's now. But at the same time your eyes take in the surrounding landscape of the past and future! Eyes...can change direction. Yet we seldom DO change direction, except to re-read or review passages. It's left-to-right, up-to-down, page after page. This may, in part, be the influence of other media like film and television where viewer choice has generally not been feasible.¹⁹⁶

McCloud notes how the material structure of comics affects how viewers interact visually with the medium, indicating that "viewer choice" is different in film and television mediums because their form restricts how viewers perceive content. Materially, comics allow viewers to play with time. They can linger or skim, go back a page or peruse. Whether one chooses to change direction when reading, it is this compression of time and space for the reader that affects how a comic's content is perceived and consumed.

As a comic book, *Ms. Marvel* offers a specific mediated experience for its reader; they are able—by the book’s lack of page numbers, colorful pages, tightly linked panels, and small speech bubbles—to open to a page at random and flip through the illustrations. Or one could begin on the first page, carefully scan the dialogue, and read from left to right, top to bottom. The medium offers them these choices, among many. Therefore, while any reader has the potential to peruse the same story of Kamala’s origins from the illustrated panels and written dialogue, meaning is interpreted through how one chooses to interact with the text. While a careful examination of the comic’s content provides essential insight into how Kamala’s identity is constructed, comics’ materiality—that of panels, gutters, and pages—offers readers a choice in how they make meaning from said identity representation. Streaming television, on the other hand, mediates a different viewer experience.

The Materiality of Streaming Television

The first episode of *Ms. Marvel* opens to the traditional, red Marvel Studios logo flipping from comics to cinematic depictions of its heroes. As the bright soundtrack of *Blinding Lights* by the Weeknd ramps up, the logo becomes digitally rendered, transforming into Kamala’s hand-drawn, fanfiction video about Captain Marvel. By juxtaposing colorful and fast-moving multimedia, this opening sequence places the viewer into the imagination of the teenager as she records, edits, and posts a video on YouTube. We zoom out of the cut-out video montage into Kamala’s real world, where her family pesters her about her imminent driver’s test. Within the opening minutes of *Ms. Marvel*, the viewer is fully immersed in the mediated experience of this streamed episode on Disney+, which incorporates various sounds (music, voice-over, sound effects) and visuals (animation, graphics, and film). Kamala now has an audible voice, a moving

body, and a background soundtrack. Marvel has materially adapted Ms. Marvel's story; originally illustrated on the page, Kamala now manifests as moving pixels on a screen.

Streaming television is a web-based, televisual medium that channels viewers' experiences through branded platforms. There, "television" is made accessible to users through digital interfaces, or what Amanda Lotz deems "subscriber-funded portals" (also called subscription video on demand or SVOD).¹⁹⁷ Lotz describes this phenomenon as the "post-network" television era, where "viewers now increasingly select what, when, and where to view from abundant options."¹⁹⁸ Especially because they are nominally linked to other forms of television, what Derek Johnson calls "online television portals" have upended traditional television's linear constructions of time through scheduling and their structured business models by offering viewers numerous, nonlinear "pathways through the television experience."¹⁹⁹ However, streaming interfaces still attempt to reinscribe traditional televisual experiences, such as viewing from within the home and only accessing one episode at a time. With new episodes available weekly on Disney+, *Ms. Marvel's* materiality in streaming form replicates the television tropes of seriality, episodicity, and domesticity. But watching television through a digital interface—where users can log in, scroll through content that the SVOD service provides, watch previews, select from numerous options, pause and play on demand—is a fundamentally different experience than consuming content on broadcast, cable, or satellite television.

Notably, SVODs negotiate a sense of (false) agency for their users, and they serve as extensions of their owner's brands. Marika Lüders and Vilde Schanke Sundet explain that Netflix, as a leading platform in streaming television, advertises its services by highlighting "viewer freedom" in order to "conceal how viewers meet interfaces and mechanisms designed to guide their attention."²⁰⁰ Mike Van Esler expands on this, noting that, by using algorithms to

personalize recommendations, a viewer's "choice" is "largely delimited to which television shows or movies the algorithm deems appropriate."²⁰¹ While streaming television is often purposefully depicted and perceived as being agentic, this rhetorical move actually undermines the materiality of the medium and helps to carefully situate streaming brands. The user interface, or the literal structure of a streaming platform, plays a fundamental role in establishing a streaming provider's brand. As Van Esler explains, the power of interface is in "their illusory nature."²⁰² Through algorithms, online platforms act as invisible frames by organizing and facilitating how and when a user sees content. Thus, while a viewer may be able to select what, when, and where they interact with content through a streaming platform, this perception of choice occurs within the structural framework of a digital interface which is owned, operated, and controlled by a corporation. This is significant when considering how Disney/Marvel distributes content—like *Ms. Marvel*—through their own platform, Disney+.

In the main library of Disney+ interface, users are greeted with an automatically scrolling panel of popular and recommended content. Below this panel, rectangles suggest that users select from one of the many (Disney-owned) brands represented on the platform: Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, and National Geographic. When passed over, each brand's rectangle plays a brief graphic depiction of their unique brand, like the iconic red, comic book flipping intro when one's cursor hovers over Marvel. If the user chooses to scroll past these suggestions, the interface features more rows of options, including "Recommended For You," "New to Disney+," "Continue Watching," and more specialized recommendations. Throughout this experience, the user is positioned as agentic and as the central focus of the platform; suggestions are algorithmically catered directly for the user's preferences, otherwise the user can quickly search by the brand or by a specific title. A user could either be actively searching for *Ms. Marvel*, the

show could be referred to them in their recommendations, or they could stumble upon it while perusing the platform's specific Marvel category. Not only is *Ms. Marvel* grouped with Marvel's content, but users can find the show under the "Disney+ Originals" tab or the "Action and Adventure" genre. Before they are able to watch *Ms. Marvel*, the user/prospective viewer has been interpolated into the regulated, mediated experience of watching "television" on a branded, personally curated streaming platform.

Whether one watches the show on a television, smart phone, laptop, or tablet, viewers must access *Ms. Marvel* by first navigating through this "Disney" branded, digital interface. While *Ms. Marvel* is a Marvel Studios production, Disney+ houses (and therefore regulates) the Walt Disney Company's array of intellectual property, including Marvel's cinematic productions. Kyra Hunting and Jonathan Gray explain that Disney+ is promotionally valuable to Disney, "ever looping audiences back to its central brands and connecting viewers to the sprawling corporate network that is Disney through an interface...that serves as a tightly woven net of Disney interests."²⁰³ Marvel is just one brand under Disney's umbrella; the interface reminds users of this by organizing its options by brand. By providing subscribers access to MCU movies and shows situated side by side on their streaming interface, Disney has rhetorically linked content like *Ms. Marvel* with their other intellectual property. Here, the medium of the streaming platform plays an essential role in establishing brand (both Disney's and Marvel's) and inviting meaning from its texts.

Because of the limitations and affordances of the medium, comic readers have agency with their content consumption and may even feel distanced from the branded, regulated distribution process of the comic book; once a reader purchases a book, they need not enter back into the regulated sphere. On the other hand, streamed television content lives behind a paywall

and within a branded, tightly regulated web-based interface. Disney+ reinforces the experience of Disney's brand even above Marvel's as users interact with *Ms. Marvel*. Thus, the regulation of the *Ms. Marvels* through their respective mediums affects their audience's perception of and ability to consume said content. More importantly, by adapting Kamala's story to streaming television, Marvel and Disney invite audiences to interact with and better understand marginalized identities through a medium that is tightly linked to Disney's brand identity. In doing so, the production company had to make strategic choices when adapting Ms. Marvel's identity, as her representation reflected back upon their own branding. These choices—as I explore in Chapter 3—attempt to un/complicate intersectionality for a mainstream audience.

A Return to Production: Adapting Comics to Disney+

The circuit of culture is not a linear process, as du Guy et al. repeatedly emphasize by interweaving the circuit's five “processes” together. As an adaptation, a return to the artifacts' production is better informed following an exploration of its regulation, consumption, representation, and identity association. What happens when comics are adapted into television? How does a medium influence how meaning is encoded in its content? How does this process manifest in *Ms. Marvel*? And how did the show's creators articulate these impacts and justify their changes?

The show's release was surrounded by discussions about its production choices, especially as an adaptation. Since the show was so tightly linked to the original comics, its comic-like visual elements were a common point of interest among trade publications. In interviews, creators were frequently asked about the tone, aesthetic, and animation used in the show. Amanat commented on the unique style choices made within the show, like animating text messages and incorporating comic-like elements in the visuals:

It's kind of told through the lens of Kamala's experience and her wild imagination...it's a coming-of-age story through the lens of a young brown woman. I think that in itself is going to make it stand apart. Her world is naturally colorful. She grows up in a colorful environment, not only because of the community that she's from, but also the city that she's from. Jersey City is a pretty crazy and vibrant and multicultural place, and we really wanted to showcase that, too.²⁰⁴

As Amanat explained, the creators wanted to harken back to the comics, establish their own niche within the MCU, and emphasize Kamala's "colorful" interior and exterior worlds.

Producer-directors Fallah and El Aribi also talked about the show having a "comic-book aesthetic," to bring Kamala's fantasies onto the screen.²⁰⁵ These visuals encouraged critics to draw connections between *Ms. Marvel* and other contemporary comic adaptations. For instance, *Ms. Marvel* is often compared to *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* (2018)—the film adaptation of Miles Morales's Spiderman, whose colorful and comic-like animation was both commercially and artistically groundbreaking.²⁰⁶ Critics from the *Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* both compared *Ms. Marvel* to the Spider-verse franchise; Angie Han argued that the television show comparatively fell flat²⁰⁷ while Caroline Framke claimed that it was "the closest Marvel comparison point."²⁰⁸ Discourse around *Ms. Marvel*'s visual style solidified its function to be both reminiscent of its comics origins and mimic animation of other comic-to-screen adaptations.

Nearly all of the industrial discourse, whether reviews or production teams discussing the show, addressed the comic and what the showrunners decided to change. The show's changes were a point of contention with fans, particularly the changes made to Kamala's superpowers and origin story. (On the "Official Trailer," one viewer commented "Kinda bummed they're switching up the powers."²⁰⁹) Kevin Feige, the President of Marvel Studios, elaborated on their decisions: "We adapt the comics; it's not an exact translation...[Kamala] came about in a very specific time within the comic-book continuity. She is now coming into a very specific time within the MCU continuity. And those two things didn't match."²¹⁰ Feige's tone bordered on

defensive as he responded to criticisms that the show wasn't true to the comic. As the head writer for the show, Ali was also asked to comment on the changes. Like Feige, Ali credited the changes as necessary because of the new medium and the MCU's changed plot trajectory:

Television is a different medium; adaptation is adaptation for a reason. The core of looking at what should we keep from the comics, what feels essential, was the character work...but it's television and it's an arc, so the look and feel of the show has to evolve with the character.²¹¹

Ali explicitly referred to the change in medium from comics to television as the crux of the narrative differences between the two *Ms. Marvels*. As the regulation and distribution of *Ms. Marvel* through Disney+ establishes, medium adaptation plays a significant role in affecting the artifact's content. Ali's comment reinforced that this is something that the production team considered.

Scholars have examined what occurs materially in the process of adapting comics into television series, particularly noting the mediums' similarities. Sherryl Vint focuses on how the materiality of both mediums prime them for adaptation into each other. Like comics, television is serial; episodes or chapters are released at regular intervals. Vint explains how comics mirror television's episodicity in that they "tell a single story through several issues that are later bound and sold as a volume, but which must also keep open the chance for a new volume/season."²¹² *Ms. Marvel's* adaptation supports this: each episode of the show is not only named after a comic volume but tells an episodic-yet-serial story that connects to an overarching narrative. However, comics mediate space and time differently for their reader. Therefore, when comics adapt into television, their content is not only adjusted but dematerialized.

When considering how comics adapt across mediums, Henry Jenkins notes how content changes with adaptation. To do so, he expands upon McCloud's theory of comics' "dematerialization":

There is another sense in which comics have been dematerialized: as comics content transforms into intellectual property repurposed across multiple media platforms. The superhero genre dominates the output of mainstream publishers such as DC and Marvel, moving into other media—from blockbuster movies to highly rated television series to top-selling video games—even as the readership for superhero comics has declined sharply.²¹³

As Jenkins explains, superhero comics might be diminishing in popularity, but their remediation has allowed producers like Marvel to continue to profit from their contents. He categorizes this move as “dematerializing,” as comics adapt into other mediums, like video games, films, and television series. In other words, the materiality affordances of comics—like those addressed earlier in this chapter—are deconstructed and reframed as producers fit their content into new mediums. As both McCloud and Jenkins address, comics provide more flexibility for their viewer to perceive time and space. Thus, to convert comics into film, any adaptation must consider how these mediums account for said time and space, how drawn images convert to filmed/photographed images, and how viewer agency is adjusted in doing so.

With episode names that match the comic volumes’ titles—“Generation Why,” “Crushed,” “No Normal,”—the show clearly harkens back to its comic origins in typical MCU fashion. The opening scene takes the viewer through a multi-mediated, somewhat-illustrated story before cutting to real life. Kamala’s daydreams and fantasies are depicted with comic-like graphics interwoven with the real-life streets of Jersey City. Emojis and messages appear as lights and images knitted into the city as the characters text each other. The end credits take panels straight from the comic books and paint them onto real buildings and streets around the city, such as the cover image from the *No Normal* comic depicted as graffiti.

As much as it may try to mimic comics, streaming television cannot physically *be* comics or even present their stories in the same way. While they may harken back to their comics origins, Marvel Studios benefits and is limited by its film and television mediums which are

inherently different in how they negotiate meaning for a viewer. Time and space are mediated differently, and their material experience with the text is different. This encoding/decoding process shapes any potential rhetorical meaning that a text may have.

While both comics and streaming television present their content differently, their meaning is complicated further when they are adapted. The collision of these particular mediums generates a unique material experience in itself. As comic-book-turned-cinema company, Marvel Studios relies on adaptations from their comics to create their content. Thus, MCU content—like *Ms. Marvel*—facilitates a unique material experience for its audience: one that simultaneously brings viewers' attention to their comic-to-screen adaptation process while asking them to imagine stories as new, original, and authentic. Therefore, the circuit of culture around *Ms. Marvel* allows for paradoxical meanings. Creators imbue the show with recollections to its comics origins and advertise it as relatable yet “authentic.” When audiences consume the show, they look for and critique what has changed and how well it represents intersectional identities. These intersecting and conflicting meanings shape *Ms. Marvel*'s cultural impact.

Conclusion: Making Meaning through the Ongoing Circuit of Culture

By applying the circuit of culture to the *Ms. Marvels*, this analysis revealed that, while the creators aimed to authentically represent the intersections of Kamala's superheroic identity, the adaptation between comic and streaming television mediums changed how the audience was able to consume and create meaning from the show. Thus, the show in particular received mixed receptions, instigating debate over whether it was “good” television, “good” MCU content, and “good” representation of intersectional identities. This chapter is a clear reminder that, while producers like those at Marvel Studios may produce and represent their content with the specific

intention to authentically depict marginalized experiences, audiences and the mediums through which they interact with said content are also part of the creation of cultural meaning.

Superheroes, especially those as mainstream as the MCU's Ms. Marvel, are national and cultural symbols. Jeffrey Brown explains that "superheroes occupy a position as idealized role models for children and as avatars for abstract cultural beliefs about justice and the [American] nation...the abstract ideal of American values is made concrete in the nationalist superhero."²¹⁴ Therefore, the creation of superhero identities is a process of sociocultural meaning production. As this chapter revealed, Ms. Marvel's creators intended for her to signify an under-represented, uniquely American identity: that of a Muslim, Pakistani American young woman from Jersey City, NJ. This chapter discussed how production, consumption, regulation, identity, and representation come together through the *Ms. Marvels* to shape cultural meaning. In the following chapter, I conduct a textual comparison between comic and show, investigating the rhetorical meanings embedded within each, to determine how Marvel and Disney use Ms. Marvel to depict a palatable yet nuanced understanding of intersectional identities for a public audience interested in diverse representation.

Chapter 3

Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel: Negotiating the Borders of U.S. American Identity through Constitutive Tensions

In *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, Kamala Khan's transformation into Ms. Marvel is guided by her heroes—Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America. The three superheroes stand over Kamala with their hands raised and their eyes closed as if in prayer, reciting a poem in Urdu. They also say: “We are faith. We speak all languages of beauty and hardship,” and “You are seeing what you need to see. You stand at a crossroads.”²¹⁵ In this pivotal moment, Kamala's values and identities intersect as these prototypical U.S. American superheroes act as pseudo-religious, spiritual leaders in her transformation. During the first episode of *Ms. Marvel* (2022), Kamala's guidance counselor comments, “I see a girl divided. Is she there or is she there? Where's Kamala?”²¹⁶ The screen splits and the shot flips, indicating that Kamala does indeed feel divided: between her Pakistani heritage and her New Jersey home; between her Muslim faith and her U.S. American nationality; between being authentic to her cultural heritage and belonging in her community. With these vastly different but thematically similar scenes in mind, this chapter considers: how does the representation of Kamala Khan's “Ms. Marvel” change between comics and television? What are the consequences of these textual differences? What does Ms. Marvel's adaptation signify about how Disney constitutes American identity?

The *Ms. Marvels* tell stories about coming-of-age in America; Kamala's superhero origins reflect her journey of identity discovery, further complicated by the intersections of her faith, nationality, culture, and ethnicity. Scholars have established that the superheroes can represent what it means to be U.S. American.²¹⁷ *Who* has superpowers is as significant as what powers they acquire and through what means. Therefore, by representing Kamala's identity and

story in a title comic and a MCU television show, Marvel Comics and Disney (through Marvel Studios)²¹⁸ interpellate Ms. Marvel as American.

Constitutive rhetorical criticism, a framework initially theorized by Maurice Charland, seeks to understand how audiences come to identify with a text. Artifacts invite audiences to see themselves as particular identities through interpellation, the “process of identification within rhetorical narratives.”²¹⁹ Through this process, rhetorical artifacts also establish these identity narratives as “pregiven and natural,” as Charland describes.²²⁰ Once interpellated, as Sarah Stein explains, audiences “‘live inside’ the rhetoric that constructs them.”²²¹ Constitutive rhetoric is successful when audiences embody and embrace the identities that the artifact has established for them. Ultimately, constitutive rhetoric asks audiences not only to relate but to identify with particular understandings of identity that said rhetoric upholds. This has profound implications when national identity intersects with different socio-cultural identities: for instance, how popularly mediated rhetorical artifacts represent intersectionality within U.S. American citizenship.

Rhetoricians have examined how constitutive artifacts interpellate American identity.²²² The use of “American” as a generalized label to signify *U.S.* American identity is significant here; exclusionary rhetorics that center white, settler colonial imaginings of “Americanness” also constitute public feeling and national identity in the United States. Christa Olson argues that visual imagery plays an essential role in shaping “American magnitude,” or the appeal for a grandiose “place called America.”²²³ She asserts that “by seeing American scenes, audiences in the United States learned the contours and responsibilities of being American.”²²⁴ The Walt Disney Company has contributed directly to the production and circulation of American values through a number of educational and entertainment-based propaganda films.²²⁵ Contemporary

visual artifacts, particularly those produced by Disney, certainly continue to perpetuate specific understandings of what Americans should value. Produced and adapted by two U.S. American corporations, the *Ms. Marvels* represent Marvel's and Disney's imaginings of American identity. As I argue throughout this project, both *Ms. Marvels* function constitutively to interpellate their audiences into a version of American identity that depends on them embracing intersectionality. The *Ms. Marvels* constitute a Muslim, Pakistani American teenager as an authentically American superhero. In doing so, they manipulate discursive borders around American citizenship.

Kamala's story is one of tensions, intersections, and borders. Liminal spaces are present both internally—within characters' identities—and quite literally—between nations, cultures, languages, and religions. Josue David Cisneros emphasizes that borders are both “physical and ideological,”²²⁶ and D. Robert DeChaine defines a border as “a bounding, ordering apparatus, whose primary function is to designate, produce, and regulate the space of difference.”²²⁷ Cisneros also says that public discourse creates and shifts “borders of belonging.”²²⁸ Julia Johnson explains that “bordering practices” construct citizenship by purposefully including and excluding specific bodies, and they “always involve the simultaneous performance of intersectional identities.”²²⁹ Thus, I define these constitutive moments of socio-cultural border negotiation as *tensions*, as what Marvel and Disney signify as the possibility of *both/and* intersectional identities within the American popular culture milieu. These rhetorical tensions act as tools for Marvel and Disney to present intersectional identities as palatable for a general audience while simultaneously constituting more nuanced identities within the Marvel Universe.

It is here—with the representation of intersectionality as *palatable*—that this project adds to our understanding of how constitutive rhetoric functions. As Charland theorizes, constitutive rhetoric interpellates audience members into an identity that resonates with them but has not

been defined previously. As this chapter will suggest, differences between Marvel's and Disney's imaginings of the *Ms. Marvels* offer insight into another use for constitutive rhetoric within a diverse, U.S. American democracy: it can interpellate new audiences into an identity while also addressing previously constituted members of a dominant identity. While Michael Leff and Ebony Utley argue that rhetoric can constitute both primary and "eavesdropping" audiences, I add that constitutive rhetoric can interpellate multiple audiences to both resist *and* uphold representational power structures.²³⁰ Simply, Disney's *Ms. Marvel* interpellates two audiences in different ways. Disney speaks to a diverse audience through depictions of intersectional characters as authentically nuanced. Simultaneously, Disney asks white audiences to identify with the same characters, interpellating viewers as U.S. Americans who embrace diversity *and* feel welcome within a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, intersectional America. Thus, constitutive rhetoric can normalize the existence of multiple, equally accepted identities, all while complicating diverse identity representation without attacking whiteness.

The main difference between the comic produced and distributed by Marvel Comics and the television show produced by Disney's Marvel Studios and circulated for streaming on Disney+ is the influence of The Walt Disney Company. Disney targets (and reaches) audiences of all ages worldwide, but they concentrate on *families*. On its website, Disney states that the corporation's mission "is to entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled storytelling" and asserts that "Disney proudly continues its legacy of creating world-class stories and experiences for every member of the family."²³¹ Thus, adaptations like Disney+'s *Ms. Marvel* must suit "people around the globe" and "every member of the family" in order to serve the company's intended audience. However, scholars have also been critical about how Disney's ideologies influence the adaptation of superheroes into the

MCU. In considering questions of race on screen, Marvel Studios's *Black Panther* (2018) has been a text of interest for numerous scholars because of its potential to both uplift Black voices and reinforce white, hegemonic structures.²³² Among others, Godfried Asante and Gloria Nziba Pindi argue that the film is both a shift from yet not quite an "emancipation from the dominant gaze."²³³ Rachel Griffin and Jonathan Rossing explain that *Black Panther* exemplifies the process of "Disneyfication," which

secures white, U.S. American, ethnocentric normativity at the corporate foundation of every MCU film...Marvel's cookie-cutter approach anchored in the logic of safety prioritizes sameness over difference and reinforces a mythically normative 'superhero' grounded in dominant logics of whiteness.²³⁴

Ultimately, Disney is motivated to preserve white, U.S. American power structures and "sameness over difference," as Griffin and Rossing argue. While Disney may want to appeal to families worldwide, they do so through this lens of "white, U.S. American, ethnocentric normativity." This project responds to these findings, discussing how Disney's most recent representational efforts attempt to negotiate intersectional identities for their global audience. However, thematic differences that appear in the streaming television adaptation of *Ms. Marvel* must be considered as potentially furthering Disney's approach to reinforcing "dominant logics of whiteness." The changes to Kamala's representation between comic and show center the importance of family within cultural identity. But they do so by circumventing the comic's repudiation of whiteness, allowing Kamala's character to remain nuanced while opening her relatability to Disney's broader, global audience.

To understand how Marvel and Disney constitute American identity through Kamala Khan's *Ms. Marvel*, the following analysis compares the first volume of the comic and the first season of the streaming television show, focusing on particular scenes, dialogue, moments, and visuals that depict sociocultural, religious identity. Through this comparison, I argue that both

Ms. Marvels present contemporary American identity as composed of intersecting tensions, but their constitutive functions differ. These tensions negotiate the borders of American identity to invite audiences to relate to and therefore accept Kamala's identity as socioculturally American, interpellating two audiences simultaneously. Within a post-9/11 cultural milieu, the *Ms. Marvel* comic constitutes Muslim American identity as legitimate by representing Kamala Khan as a mainstream, authentic superheroine, interpellating a new, more diverse audience of young, female comic book readers into the Marvel fandom. However, Disney's *Ms. Marvel* un/complicates intersectional representation within mainstream popular culture, thereby imagining differences within American citizenship as simultaneous possibilities rather than divisive sites of marginalization. Similarities between comic and show suggest that relatability and cultural authenticity remain true to their creators' central focus while differences correspond with Disney's need to appeal to a broader, global audience. This chapter analyzes representative elements in the *Ms. Marvels* and is organized around five thematic identity tensions: *Muslim/American, authenticity/belonging, relatability/uniqueness, individualism/collectivism, and New Jersey/Pakistan.*

Muslim/American

After September 11th, 2001, Islamophobic discourse proliferated in the American sociocultural milieu as a result of political-rhetorical efforts to frame Muslims as terrorists and Americans as venerably seeking justice; this rhetoric pitted imaginings of Muslim identity against American identity, even though Americans can and do practice Islam.²³⁵ This was especially evident in the superhero canon. In the MCU, *Iron Man* (2008) refounded Tony Stark's superhero origin story (which originally took place during the Vietnam War) to instead center on Afghanistan during George W. Bush's "War on Terror," depicting the Muslim Afghans as one-

dimensional and anti-American.²³⁶ Marvel Comics created “Dust,” an X-Men heroine and Sunni Muslimah refugee from Afghanistan who, as Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus argue, “is depicted as in, and yet not of, the Western world she now inhabits.”²³⁷ In the mainstream superhero universe, Muslim characters were represented as unable to fit into the West or as un-American terrorists.

Fictional depictions of Muslim American identities have also reflected ideologies present within contemporary nonfictional political rhetoric. Baldanzi and Rashid note that the *Ms. Marvel* comic “appear[ed] at a time when anti-Muslim rhetoric in the United States [was] also increasing.”²³⁸ Former-President Trump’s xenophobic and Islamophobic rhetoric spread fear about Muslim Americans as outsiders, essentializing them as un-American. Arjana notes how this tension can be felt in the depiction of Muslims in the media, particularly through anti-Muslim stereotypes representing them as terrorists and as one-dimensional villains. She argues that “characters and storylines featured in *Ms. Marvel* construct a vision of Islam in America that challenges Islamophobic discourse.”²³⁹ Kamala’s *Ms. Marvel* normalizes Muslim American identity by authentically depicting her Muslim faith alongside her American citizenry. Arjana explains that nuance is important: “Islam plays a prominent role in the series, but it is presented as an integral part of Kamala, not as a costume or accouterment.”²⁴⁰ Arjana points out that Kamala’s faith is not a token or cultural signifier; it is part of her everyday life and guides her decisions and her superheroic actions. Simultaneously, Kamala is a practicing Muslim in an ideologically Christian nation; she faces numerous barriers because of her faith and her cultural identity. Cooper-Cunningham argues that Kamala’s Muslim/American dichotomy is that of *and/or*, it cannot “be made to signify monolithically.”²⁴¹ The comic and show depict Kamala, the Khan family, and their Muslim community as facing constant discrimination and systemic

oppression because of their faith. I contend that the process of Ms. Marvel's adaptation to television ensures that the tension between her Muslim faith and her American nationality constitutes a *both/and*-ness within Kamala. Both comic and show explicitly resist the discursive, post-9/11, paradoxical framing of "Muslim" and "American" identities, arguing that Muslims *are* American, *and* audiences should accept them as such. However, their overarching goals differ, and that difference is evident in their representations of Muslim American identity. The comic attempts to interpellate a new audience—young Muslim women and other women of color—into Marvel fandom. Alternatively, within their larger, global context, Disney seeks to establish a broader definition of what it means to be American, a definition that highlights the importance of embracing difference in a multicultural world.

The comic places emphasis on the daily microaggressions that Kamala and Nakia—Kamala's best friend—face. More specifically, their oppressor in the comics is white femininity, both literally and metaphorically. Zoe, a popular white girl, asks Nakia why she wears a hijab:

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 just a phase."

Zoe: "Really? Wow, cultures are so interesting."²⁴²

Zoe assumes that Nakia has been forced to wear a hijab by men with authority over her. Nakia responds that the hijab was her own choice, one that actually opposes her father's wishes. By clearly presenting Zoe's "concern" as rude, extreme, and incorrect, the comic challenges the stereotype that all Muslim women are forced to be submissive to Muslim men. But this scene also symbolically rejects norms of white U.S. American femininity. In the illustration, Zoe's neck sticks out awkwardly and her eyes are huge, physically depicting her insensitive nosiness when talking to Nakia. Importantly, the comic depicts Zoe, a white woman, as Kamala and

Nakia's bully. Later, Zoe offensively says to Kamala: "I thought you weren't allowed to hang out with us heathens on the weekends! I thought you were like, locked up!"²⁴³ Zoe's microaggressions, rooted in Islamophobic stereotypes, are an everyday occurrence for Kamala and Nakia as Muslimah in an American city. The comic repeatedly depicts these offensive comments to establish why Kamala feels that she doesn't belong, but it also encourages the reader to empathize and feel frustrated on her behalf. Kamala is constituted as both Muslim *and* American, and she must resist the oppression of white femininity to be authentically both. The comic represents these identities as definitively concurrent yet in tension, as seen through the prejudice that Kamala faces. The Islamophobic microaggressions illustrate the identity tension of being Muslim/American while signifying to the reader that Kamala is indeed both Muslim *and* American.

The show takes a different approach to representing the tensions within Kamala's Muslim/American identity: the antagonist is not white feminism but rather governmental and systemic oppressions against the Muslim American community. First, Zoe's character is reframed as a (albeit somewhat irritating) friend to Kamala rather than her bully. Instead of villainizing the only white female main character in the show, its creators chose to have Zoe team up with Kamala. With this change, Disney can avoid alienating the young white women who are part of its audience. Instead, Disney's *Ms. Marvel* aims its critique towards systemic oppression.

When agents from the Department of Damage Control (DODC) discover that the new Jersey City heroine is South Asian, they say, "Search every temple, community center, and mosque. Just be respectful. The FBI is already surveilling them; you know that."²⁴⁴ The DODC exemplifies the oppressive American federal government that profiles all Muslims as anti-

American and as potential terrorists. On numerous occasions, these special federal agents burst into Kamala's and Nakia's mosque and disrespect their faith and traditions. The DODC agents try to search the mosque without a warrant, refuse to remove their shoes, and disrespect the Qur'an. The show depicts the DODC as an American governing body which does not believe that Muslims can function as true Americans. The agency is the ignorant and harmful villain, and the show depicts prejudice against Muslim Americans as evil. In the climax of the show, the DODC try to capture Ms. Marvel, but people of Jersey City help her escape. As her community resists the Islamophobic, oppressive governmental entity and accepts Kamala, this scene constitutes ordinary Americans as embracing Muslim Americans as their welcome neighbors.

Kamala's faith is very important to her, but she is often marginalized in American society because of her religious identity. On the other hand, she has hobbies and values that interpellate her as "American." Kamala attends her local mosque regularly and prays, yet she doesn't wear a hijab, loves Avenger's fanfiction, and wants to fit in at her American high school. While Kamala doesn't discuss her own choice not to wear a hijab, Nakia's characterization offers insight into this embodied aspect of her Muslim/American identity. Nakia feels caught in-between: she is Turkish American, Muslim, wears a hijab, but also can pass as white. Through Nakia's dialogue, the show also attempts to reject the oppressions of whiteness, but whiteness is a systemic construction rather than directly present—like Zoe's microaggressions in the comic. In the third episode, Nakia talks about her feelings of liminality and her decision to wear a hijab:

My whole life I've either been too white for some people or too ethnic for others, and it's been very uncomfortable, stuck in-between. So, when I first put this on, I was hoping to shut some people up, but I kinda realized I don't really need to prove anything to anybody. Like, when I put this on, I feel like me, like I have a purpose.²⁴⁵

While Nakia is certainly stating that whiteness is oppressive, this scene establishes whiteness as a *systemic* problem. Like the comic, the show characterizes whiteness as inauthentic for both

Nakia and Kamala, but it places the harm on the systemic level, rather than locating it, as the comic does, in an individual white female bully.

A consequential difference between Ms. Marvel's representation in comic and show is that of her superpowers: in the comics she can shape-shift, while in the show her powers are those of light manipulation. When placed into the context of the post-9/11 socio-cultural milieu, Ms. Marvel's Muslim American identity invites us to take a critical lens to her shape-shifting abilities in the comics. Kamala's superpowers aren't those of violence, but rather they correspond with visual manipulation, disguise, and hiding. Her abilities are genetically "Inhuman," as Jeffrey Brown explains: "Inhumans are an ancient race of superpowered people in the Marvel Universe, and Kamala emerges from the mist with fantastic shape-shifting abilities. Kamala can stretch her limbs, expand to be a giant, shrink to the size of an insect, and mold her appearance to be like someone or something else."²⁴⁶ There is a racialized element to the characterization of Kamala's powers, one that correlates Muslim Americans to a hidden "race" of "Inhumans" and that gets perilously close to establishing race as genetic. Considering the continued proliferation of harmful depictions of Muslims as terrorists at the time of *No Normal's* publication, the comic's turn away from superpowered violence functions to destabilize this stereotype. However, a Muslim woman shapeshifting aligns with another post-9/11 stereotype: that of Muslims as hidden, inauthentic, and untrustworthy. Kamala's shapeshifting abilities are indicative of the expectations and burdens placed on her gendered, racialized body. G. Willow Wilson explained that she gave Kamala shapeshifting powers so the broad audience could relate to her and to the awkwardness of a changing body in puberty.²⁴⁷ Scholars have been very interested in the significance of Kamala's shapeshifting. Sarah Gibbons talks about Kamala's "extraordinary flexibility" as an important metaphor for the pressures of embodied femininity:

“her visual non-conformity suggests that she is an admirable hero because she refuses to subscribe to a contemporary economic narrative that requires individuals to be flexible to unreasonable bodily demands.”²⁴⁸ On the other hand, Cooper-Cunningham suggests that Ms. Marvel’s passive superpowers “could be read as reproducing essentialist assumptions that women are by nature more peaceful than men.”²⁴⁹ Kamala’s abilities signify how women must mold and stretch themselves to balance patriarchal, socio-cultural expectations; Muslimah in particular must bend further to prove they are able to fit into white, Western society. In the comics, Kamala has to break with *white* Americanness to adhere to her cultural identity. The comic critiques whiteness and white femininity, but it also reiterates the constant struggle that people of color and/or Muslims face to be seen as authentic U.S. Americans. Thus, Disney’s removal of Kamala’s shapeshifting abilities in the television show has profound significance in terms of Muslimah American representation.

When *Ms. Marvel* was adapted to the screen, Kamala’s superpowers underwent a significant change. During a Captain Marvel cosplay contest in the show’s first episode, Kamala puts on a bangle that she got from her grandmother (something to make the costume more “her”), which unlocks her abilities: she can manipulate light into solid shapes. Like the comic, Kamala’s powers are “unlocked” by something, but the show represents her light powers as innately “her”; Bruno tells Kamala that “it looks like the power isn’t coming from the bangle, it’s coming from within you. Like the bangle unlocked a superhuman part of you.”²⁵⁰ Instead of being “Inhuman,” the show explains that Kamala’s great-grandmother was a “Clandestine” from an alternate universe. Kamala is labeled as not-quite-human, as part alien. Importantly, the show attempts to override this label: Bruno’s research supports that Kamala’s powers are actually a “genetic mutation,” which is why the rest of her family doesn’t have abilities. By refashioning

Ms. Marvel’s superpowers into light-manipulation that does not originate from “Inhuman” genes, Disney distances itself from making critiques of whiteness, constitutes Muslim American identity as always having been authentic and worthy of belonging, and attempts to strengthen Ms. Marvel as a multicultural, diverse, and representational character. By taking shapeshifting out of the story, Disney shifts blame from white femininity to oppressive institutions; instead of getting her powers genetically from an “inhuman,” “ancient race” and shifting into and rejecting Carol Danvers’s white body, Kamala’s abilities come from her maternal ancestors—from her cultural heritage—and the DODC is the oppressor. Thus, Disney circumvents correlating Kamala’s abilities with harmful Muslim stereotypes and avoids implicating alienating its white female fan base while continuing to appeal to its new audience of young women of color. Disney+’s *Ms. Marvel* constitutes a more open and united imagining of American citizenship, one that reinforces a sense of belonging around Muslim American identity.

The illustration of an authentic, welcomed, and nuanced conception of Muslim/American identity emerges as a central theme in both comic and show. When portraying a new Muslim American teenage superheroine in a *post-post-9/11* popular culture milieu, Disney needed to be intentional about their choices, given their problematic history representing Muslims on both page and screen. Throughout both mediums, Kamala’s Ms. Marvel constitutes Muslim/American identity as accepted and normal within American citizenry. Arjana argues that *Ms. Marvel* shapes a “vision of Islam in America that challenges Islamophobic discourse.”²⁵¹

While the comic purposefully narrows its focus and constitutes young, Muslim, South Asian, women of color into its audience, the show crafts a broader definition of what it means to be American in multicultural world. Disney complicates the paradoxical tension of being Muslim/American to shape a rhetorical representation of intersectionality that unites rather than

divides. Their representational changes suggest that America is a place where cultures come together, where South Asian and Muslim identities are inherently part of the U.S. American socio-cultural milieu. As I explore in the following section, the Disney+ show makes strategic changes to keep Kamala authentically unique and quirkily relatable while avoiding alienating its white audience members. Interpellating a Muslim, Pakistani American heroine into mainstream superhero media also means negotiating the tension between Kamala's cultural "authenticity" and the borders of "belonging" around American citizenship.

Authenticity/Belonging

Authenticity implies being genuine or true to one's self, while *belonging* indicates fitting in with and earning acceptance from a group; these states of being can be at odds when one's identity is excluded from or marginalized within a space. Kamala's story centers around understanding her identity while finding belonging within the traditionally white, Western, Christian, patriarchal spaces around her. Representations of her narrative journey constitute a simultaneously "new" (in the context of Marvel's and Disney's universes) *and* tangible American identity by negotiating between understandings of authenticity/belonging. Cultural scholars have discussed the thematic relationship between authenticity and belonging in representational media. Eleanor Ty argues that comics' illustrations shape illusions of authenticity to represent the artists' experiences of non/belonging.²⁵² Barbara Yngvesson and Maureen Mahoney explain that identity narratives negotiate a sense of belonging through their storyteller's authenticity.²⁵³ The *Ms. Marvels* offer Kamala the possibility to remain authentic to her culture while simultaneously finding belonging within her New Jersey community. Through their different representations of Kamala's superheroic transformation, the *Ms. Marvels* provide their audiences with different frameworks for interpreting who belongs as an American citizen.

During the transformation scene, Kamala tells Captain Marvel that she wants “to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and *less complicated*.”²⁵⁴ Kamala hopes that being superpowered, blonde, and *not* defined by her “complicated” intersectional identity will allow her to fit into sociocultural constructs of Western feminine beauty. When Kamala gets her wish and quite literally transforms into a beautiful, blonde superheroine, she quickly realizes that she made a mistake. After shapeshifting into Carol Danvers—who wears a tight-fitting and revealing costume—she appears physically ill, saying, “This is what I asked for, right? So why don’t I feel strong and confident and beautiful? Why do I just feel freaked out and underdressed?”²⁵⁵ In a body that isn’t her own, she fiddles with her blonde hair, pulls down her short skirt, and stumbles home on her uncomfortable heels, pondering that

being someone else isn’t liberating. It’s exhausting. I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly—that would make me feel strong. That would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch, and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie... Maybe putting on the costume doesn’t make you brave. Maybe it’s something else.²⁵⁶

Kamala wants to fit into American society and to belong with her white, New Jersey peers. But when she’s given the chance to look like them, to be quite literally super-powerful, or to feel “liberated” as she puts it, Kamala instead feels physically uncomfortable in her body. Her bravery comes from within her, not from a “costume” or false façade. Kamala communicates her discomfort with her new identity by criticizing its costumed layers of smothering hair, pinching boots, and tight leotard. Nowhere does she explicitly consider the façade of whiteness, but the visual image of race on the comic page allows readers to correlate the costume and the costume-like white skin with a mask of inauthenticity. More specifically, the comic positions white femininity as inauthentic for Kamala. She eventually rejects the costume and the white body given to her by the superhero transformation, and she claims an outfit that is authentic to who she

truly is, made from an old burkini (a modest, fully covering swimsuit). By the end of the comic, her Jersey City neighbors accept her as “Ms. Marvel,” even when she doesn’t look like the white, blonde Carol Danvers. Here, the comic becomes meta; Kamala’s transformation communicates to the external audience—the comic book readers—that her identity should be accepted because she is her authentic self, not merely posing as the original Ms. Marvel. Therefore, the audience should also accept her as genuinely the hero Ms. Marvel who does indeed belong in the MCU.

The comic’s transformation scene pairs Kamala’s immediate regret with images of duality to depict the authenticity/belonging tension. Sophia Rose Arjana comments on Kamala’s transformation, noting its layered religious imagery: “Visually it is represented as a religious experience, complete with clouds, an Urdu poem, and references that are both Christological (the scene resembles the paintings of Jesus's assumption) and Islamic (the inclusion of birds has resonances of Attar's classic text on spiritual transformation).”²⁵⁷ Andreassen also evaluates this scene as a form of Jekyll/Hyde duality, a battle of “visibility and concealment between the conscious and the unconscious desires/anxieties of the self.”²⁵⁸ However, they argue that this is *not* a form of “whitewashing” like some critics argue, instead explaining that the transformation is a critique of hegemonic structures present in comics. Andreassen concludes that Kamala’s transformation into and eventual shrugging-off of Carol Danvers’s white skin displays the monstrous “matrix of social, cultural, racial, and religious norms that work with such a force upon Khan.”²⁵⁹ For both Arjana and Andreassen, Kamala’s comics’ transformation symbolizes the duality happening within her identity, implying that she can represent many aspects of identities intersecting within her. This scene is particularly important to critics (and to me) who are concerned that, no matter the underlying messaging, a woman of color literally becoming a white woman is problematic, especially when translated onto the screen. The show’s creators

may have had similar concerns, as this scene is notably absent from Kamala's televisual origins. The comic actively interpellates a new audience of young women of color into the Marvel superhero fandom. However, through Kamala's putting-on and eventual rejection of a white, feminine mask, the comic also repudiates whiteness. For a corporation like Disney, aimed at a broader audience, this depiction could alienate a white, female audience (especially considering Kamala takes up the "Ms. Marvel" mantle from Carol Danvers, a powerful white heroine).

Without rejecting white femininity, the show subtly reflects the authenticity/belonging tension through costuming, facial expressions, and camera angles. Kamala cosplays as Captain Marvel instead of literally putting on the white, blonde body of Carol Danvers. Cosplay allows Disney to communicate Kamala's admiration of the hero without her actually becoming white herself. However, cosplay means more than just wearing a costume; it is still a taking-up of a discursive identity. Interestingly, Kamala also rejects her original cosplay like she does Carol Danver's body in the comics, although more subtly. When she puts on her Captain Marvel costume for AvengerCon, Kamala looks into the mirror and stands proudly; she is excited to look like her hero. But, similar to the comic scene, she realizes that this cosplay isn't quite her; she doesn't feel authentic. Kamala quickly appears uncomfortable in the costume, pulling at the tight fabric and tying a scarf around her waist to make the outfit more modest. The camera angle centers on her reflection in the mirror while her body is out of focus, allowing the viewer to see Kamala entirely. The shot invites audiences to step into her perspective and feel her discomfort. This is directly paralleled with a scene in the last episode: Kamala's mom gives her a costume made in Pakistan that is designed to be like a burkini, with a skirt, scarf, and leggings that cover her body (like her comics costume). Through the same camera angle, Kamala instead looks into the mirror and smiles. While bright music plays, Kamala bounds off into the streets of Jersey

City in her new costume. The music and costuming combine to signify Kamala's comfort in wearing clothes that reflect her authentic self; Ms. Marvel's costume accentuates rather than conceals her cultural identity. But unlike the comic, Kamala's discomfort comes only from her clothes, not from her white, blonde mask. Thus, the show adjusts the nuances of Kamala's superhero transformation to avoid rejecting white femininity outright while still accentuating that Kamala's authenticity matters and her identity belongs.

The show's shift in Kamala's superpowered origins offers insight into Disney's imaginings of American values. Rhetorical scholars have often considered how American identity is constituted through texts.²⁶⁰ Vanessa Beasley ponders: "Who are the American people? How are they explained, defined, and portrayed in these texts? What central and/or defining characteristics are they assumed to share?"²⁶¹ Beasley finds that U.S. presidents have, among other constitutive acts, "carefully and consistently...called up images of a peaceful, attitudinally homogenous citizenry."²⁶² While Beasley examines how real U.S. presidents have constructed American national identity, this framework can and has been applied to fictional, popular culture artifacts as well.²⁶³ The rhetorical tension between authenticity/belonging provides a constitutive lens to how American identity can be understood in the *Ms. Marvels*.

The negotiation between authenticity/belonging within Kamala rhetorically eliminates borders around American citizenship and constitutes belonging through difference. Borders are ideological, and as Cisneros explains, they "demarcate identity and 'belonging.'"²⁶⁴ The term "belonging" on its own also implicates rhetorical conceptions of "citizenship," or as Cisneros describes it, "one's inclusion in a sociocultural and 'imagined' community."²⁶⁵ Kamala is an American citizen, but depictions of microaggressions against Kamala and her family, their cultural and embodied differences, and her own feelings of exclusion speak to the borders of

exclusion around her sociocultural citizenship. Though the transformation scenes differ, both comic and television narratives depict Kamala as physically and emotionally uncomfortable when she resists her cultural values and embodied identity. Both narratives suggest that Kamala can fit in by being her authentic self. In doing so, Marvel and Disney constitute an American citizenry shaped by accepting difference. However, in the comic, Kamala must actively reject white femininity and normative U.S. Americanness because it is not authentically part of her identity. In the show, the resolution of Kamala's story suggests that she has always belonged, just the way she is. Instead of rejecting U.S. citizenship, she expands it and interpellates her audience into a broader version of U.S. American womanhood that corresponds with Disney's international audience.

In contrast to Beasley's findings that U.S. presidents have largely promoted national unity through claims of American homogeneity, Marvel's and Disney's representations of Ms. Marvel situate American identity—and ideological American citizenship—as driven by the discovery and negotiation of intersectional identity tensions. However, Disney deviates from the comic in that it constitutes American womanhood as broadly authentic, rather than repudiating white femininity and isolating their white audience. They depict Americans as inherently and authentically different but accepting of differences among other American citizens. This representational tension signifies that cultural difference and marginalization can be negotiated by acknowledging that intersectional identities are both authentic and made to belong, especially when paired with Kamala's depiction as both relatable and unique.

Relatability/Uniqueness

Relatability signifies resonance through similarity between audience and character. Alternatively, *uniqueness* implies difference and singularity. Marvel and Disney represent

Kamala's particular identity as a teenager, Muslimah, and Pakistani American as also broadly relatable, and this tension allows them to uncomplicate the contradictions of intersectionality for their audiences. When studying the comics, many scholars have discussed the importance of the tension between Kamala's unique standpoint and her relatability.²⁶⁶ In one such discussion, Winona Landis notes that "readers, even and especially those who are dominantly situated, are invited to figure out these moments of connection as well as notable difference as Kamala also navigates her own heroic becoming, which is complicated by conformity as well as a desire for critical reimagination."²⁶⁷ From the very beginning of both the comic and the show, Kamala just wants to be "normal," but her identity intersects with her locality, and she is perceived as "weird," "unique," and "special" by her peers and family alike. Kamala's relatability manifests through how both artifacts portray her unique experiences while normalizing them for a broader audience to identify with. However, the relatability of Kamala's simultaneous rejection of "normalcy" gestures more broadly toward a simultaneous acceptance/rejection of white, U.S. American ideology. While they both negotiate the tensions around Kamala's relatability/uniqueness, the comic and show differ dramatically in how they resolve said tensions.

To constitute Muslim American identity as legitimate and to interpellate new, Muslim American readers, the comic spends time establishing Kamala's identity as unique yet normalized and even relatable. The first page of the comic opens to Kamala leaning over a deli counter, sniffing BLT sandwiches, saying, "Delicious, delicious infidel meat..."²⁶⁸ This image holds weight; it's the first illustration that readers see of Kamala. As a Muslim, she is forbidden from eating pork. Immediately, the picture and Kamala's muttered words work together to signify that religious identity is important to her, at the same time normalizing her experience in the everyday rather than in the unfamiliar.

Kamala's desire to be "normal" establishes her as relatable for the audience. Later in the chapter, Kamala's thoughts reveal her core motivations for disobeying her parents by sneaking out to a party: "Why am I the only one who gets signed out of health class? Why do I have to bring pakoras to school for lunch? Why am I stuck with the weird holidays? Everybody else gets to be normal. Why can't I?"²⁶⁹ These panels provide a glimpse into what Kamala perceives to be "not normal" in New Jersey: she can't participate in health class because of her religious beliefs, her lunch is Indian vegetable fritters, and she celebrates Islamic holidays like Eid. For Kamala, "normal" means both physically and ideologically fitting into the white, Christian, hegemonic imagining of American identity. As Kamala compares herself to her "normal" peers, her thoughts suggest that she believes normalcy and uniqueness cannot exist simultaneously. More importantly, she believes that she cannot be "normal" while being herself; she thinks she can *either* fit into "normal" American cultural milieu *or* practice her religious and cultural traditions. The comic spends the rest of its narrative proving Kamala wrong. A few pages after saying "Everybody else gets to be normal. Why can't I?" Kamala (ironically) develops shapeshifting superpowers. Thus, not only does the comic refuse to let Kamala be "normal," it positions her identity as simultaneously special (she's a superhero who practices Islam and loves the Avengers) as well as relatable (she's just a kid who wants to fit in and is hindered by her awkward, changing body). Importantly, this relatable/unique tension signifies to the audience that Kamala is American.

In the Disney+ show, the relatable/unique tension functions to broaden Kamala's relatability to a wider demographic without explicitly alienating any particular identity. Kamala wants to be accepted, and the show reiterates this desire as relatable for its global audience. In the first episode, Kamala's peers stare judgmentally in the hallway and laugh when she gets hit

with a dodgeball in gym class; these scenes tell us she doesn't quite fit in with her classmates. But this episode complicates "normal" to also mean inclusion within her own community, not only within white American culture. This theme plays out in dialogue between Kamala and her friend Bruno:

Kamala: "There was a girl who decided she wanted to go backpacking around Europe. And you would literally think she joined a death cult given the way all the aunties just gossip about her."

Bruno: "I'm lost. What does that have to do with AvengerCon?"

Kamala: "Because dressing up as Captain Marvel is weird."

Bruno: "No, it's not."

Kamala: "It is childish, and I know that, okay? And let's be honest, it's not really the brown girls from Jersey City who save the world."

Bruno: "Sure they do. You're Kamala Khan. You wanna save the world, then you're gonna save the world."²⁷⁰

While Kamala is very passionate about superheroes, she's afraid that the "aunties," the older women in her community, will think she's "weird" and won't approved of her obsession with Captain Marvel. She wants to be accepted by her community, but she wants to be accepted *in spite* of her differences; as seen in this conversation, Kamala doesn't believe that is possible. Bruno, on the other hand, implies that she is special *because* of her unique standpoint. At this point, Kamala hasn't even acquired superhuman abilities yet. Bruno argues that her identity gives her power and signifies that just by being herself she can save the world. She sighs that "it's not really the brown girls from Jersey City who save the world," emphasizing that her identity as Ms. Marvel complicates the current superhero canon, normalizes South Asian superheroines within the MCU, and highlights her individuality as unique.

In both comic and television narratives, Kamala's identity is located at a border, held taut between her cultural identity and the expectations of white American society. Both media attempt to resolve this tension in different ways, offering greater insight into each of their constitutive effects. By the end of the show, when Kamala confronts Kamran—another South

Asian teen with superpowers—she comes to an epiphany. When Kamran says, “They’ll never accept me...How can I be normal?” Kamala responds, “There is no normal. There’s just us and what we do with what we’ve been given.”²⁷¹ Although they are explicitly referring to not being accepted because of their superpowers, Kamala and Kamran’s dialogue also gestures towards the relatable/unique identity tension that has also been building throughout the show. Instead of relying upon her peers to determine if she belongs, Kamala embraces the identity she has “been given” by recognizing that there isn’t such thing as “normal.” Kamala wants to fit in but instead develops powers that set her apart; instead of resisting her unique standpoint, she discursively embraces her identity as “Ms. Marvel” or as “not normal.” Kamala’s identity is normalized as relatable within this mainstream comic, but her intersectional nuances are also emphasized as special and important. Thus, the narrative tension directly correlates to the creators’ desire to depict Kamala’s identity as both relatable (as just wanting to be “normal”) as well as complex (as “special”). Here, “no normal” serves a double purpose: Disney asks the audience to accept Kamala’s difference on the basis of her relatability while understanding that her unique standpoint sets her apart from stereotypical, white, U.S. American identity. Kamala realizes that she herself can create belonging, and therefore the audience, no matter their identity, can also interpellate her as belonging.

Using the relatable/unique tension, both *Ms. Marvels* interpellate Kamala’s identity into the American superhero milieu. They communicate to the audience that her characterization is not only very real in its nuance, but her intricately intersectional identity does not prevent her from resonating with a global audience. By the end of the show, Kamala accepts that “there is no normal,” and her family, friends, and community accept her anyway. She embraces the intersections of her identity as a Marvel superhero who is also a Muslim, Pakistani, American

teenage girl. But while Kamala rejects “normalcy” of white, U.S. American identity, she does so without putting on and eventually rejecting a (literal) white mask like in the comics. Kamala’s authentic and unique relatability—worthy of belonging in American citizenry—is further emphasized in how her religious and cultural values are represented differently between mediums.

Individualism/Collectivism

Ramzi Fawaz explains that “the superhero has historically functioned as a visual meditation on the political contradiction between the values of individual liberty and collective good.”²⁷² As a superheroine, Ms. Marvel fits this typology, but her cultural values complicate the tension further. In addition to being commonly seen within superhero motivations, the dialectic of individualism/collectivism is one of Geert Hofstede’s six dimensions of culture. It describes how individuals within a culture integrate into groups. Hofstede suggests that cultures can be defined as *individualistic*—valuing independence and individuality—or as *collectivistic*—valuing harmony, belonging, and strong familial support.²⁷³ Importantly, the individualism/collectivism dimension is classified on a spectrum; it can shift and vary. The United States is considered to be an individualistic society, valuing privacy, autonomy, and individual decision making. Muslim nations, Pakistan included, are generally considered more collectivistic, although there are certainly nuances between different cultures. Generally, familial loyalty and strong community relationships are of utmost importance in collectivist cultures.²⁷⁴ As an American citizen and a practicing Muslim of Pakistani heritage, Kamala faces internal and external tensions between her individualistic and collectivistic values. I apply this understanding of cultural grouping to how Kamala’s morality is represented differently in the comic vs. the show.

While both *Ms. Marvels* represent Kamala's family and religion as influencing her moral motivations, the show detours from the comic to better appeal to Disney's target audience. The comic directly references Islamic teachings, but the show centers around the importance of valuing family while encouraging the American ideal of individuality as Kamala harnesses religion and tradition to shape her own, new identity. Disney's *Ms. Marvel* emphasizes that Kamala values her individual liberty as well as her family and community. By steering away from the specifics of religious teachings, Disney promotes freedom of religion and appeals to a broader audience, establishing family as an important American ideology-shaping institution.

In the comic, Kamala's Muslim faith influences her heroic decision making; she directly quotes from the Qur'an in times of danger. Kamala's internal dialogue reinforces Islam's impact her moral identity. When deciding if she should step in to save someone, Kamala thinks about an Islamic teaching that her dad often refers to:

There's this ayah from the Quran that my dad always quotes when he sees something bad on TV... '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.'... Because no matter how hard things get...there are always people who rush in to help. And according to my dad...they are blessed.²⁷⁵

Kamala quotes the Qur'an through her father as her moral inspiration. Her superheroic actions are driven by her desire to help everyone, to save the collective above herself as an individual for the sake of the "greater good." Not only are heroes supposed to act on behalf of the community, but if they do so they are spiritually "blessed." Her internal dialogue reinforces that Kamala values not only her family but the explicit teachings of her faith.

Instead of including direct references to the Qur'an, the show depicts wisdom as passed down interpersonally, through the relationships that Kamala builds with her family and her community. In the third episode of the show, Kamala feels guilty that she accidentally injured a

child while trying to save him. Without giving away that she is the “new masked neighbor,” Kamala asks her sheikh, Abdullah, “So, how does she convince everyone that she’s good?” and he responds, “Good is not a thing you are, Kamala. It’s a thing you do.”²⁷⁶ Here, the values of individualism and collectivism meet and intersect within Kamala’s identity and discourse. Importantly, the comic iteration of Sheikh Abdullah is fairly one dimensional; he only appears once to lecture about female chastity, modesty, and the importance of separating women and men in the mosque. In the comic, Kamala recites this saying to herself, not indicating where she learned it from. By giving this quote to the Sheikh Abdullah instead, the show’s creators adapted the sheikh’s characterization from minor and caricature-like into a strong religious and moral influence in Kamala’s life; the show’s Sheikh is a wise and gentle mentor for Kamala. This scene takes place on Kamala’s porch instead of in the mosque, and this location shift depicts Kamala’s relationship with the sheikh as a father-like mentor, rather than just a religious figurehead. The show’s Sheikh Abdullah gains relational depth but is also further removed from explicit references to the Islamic faith; he is more generalizable for a global audience.

Kamala’s on-screen relationship with her mother, Muneeba, offers further insight into the both/and possibility between valuing individual identity and collective support. Kamala confides in Muneeba about her overwhelming feelings about being a superhero:

Kamala: “Have you ever felt like you were up against the world? Like you wanted something so bad and then it actually happened but in reality, it’s just not as great as you imagined it.”

Muneeba: “Yes, actually. America was my mountain...I’ve never felt so alone in my whole life.”

Kamala: “What did you do?”

Muneeba: “I found the mosque. I found Auntie Ruby and Humaira, and I found my family and I let them love me. Kamala, listen to me, whatever mountain you’re facing, you don’t have to do it alone.”

Muneeba tells Kamala that community is essential, especially as a Pakistani immigrant to the United States. Her relationships saved her from the “lonely mountain” that was immigrating to America. In this conversation, individualism/collectivism appears as an underlying theme; Muneeba felt extremely alone in individual-centered America without her family, but her “found” community—her friends and her religion—supported her. In this moment of internal turmoil, Kamala finds comfort in her mother’s wisdom. Muneeba empowers Kamala to make the personal decision to choose to embrace her support network. Thus, Kamala finds immense value in the collective, but she does so within her own personal journey of self-discovery.

The show utilizes Kamala’s brother Aamir’s wedding to elaborate on the importance of family when negotiating the individual/collective tension. Yusuf, Kamala’s father, talks to a nervous Aamir before his wedding. Kamala listens at the door as Yusuf tells his son,

A man has one fundamental choice in life: to live a life in fear or love. The man who chooses love chooses junoon. Passion. He chooses faith, courage. You wear a shalwar kameez every day on the street. You are about to stand in front of God and your family and commit to the love of your life. You are brave, my son. Because you have chosen family. And a man who chooses family is never alone.²⁷⁷

Yusuf explicitly tells Aamir—and indirectly tells the eavesdropping Kamala and the show’s audience—that family should be one’s top priority. More importantly, he says that valuing family is also a choice. In referencing Aamir’s shalwar kameez, a traditional Punjabi outfit, Yusuf insinuates that the act of appearing Pakistani and Muslim in America takes courage. He indicates that Aamir has already chosen family, because family is innately linked to his faith, ethnicity, and culture. Aamir literally wears his identity as both an individual act of courage but also as a gesture towards the importance of the collective above his individual wellbeing; Yusuf notes that Aamir is brave for himself and for his family. Yusuf allows his son to make his choice, but he does so by encouraging Aamir to be brave enough to “choose family”. The values of

individual choice and collective support are reinforced once again through interpersonal, familial relationships.

Kamala is a shapeshifter in the comics, while in the show she can manipulate and shape light into solid crystals. Disney may have made this change to keep her abilities consistent with the MCU's canon, but Kamala's different powers also function to signify a shift towards the importance of family in self-discovery.²⁷⁸ Instead of transforming into Carol Danvers, Kamala acquires abilities through a bangle from her grandmother. Kamala's powers are genetic—passed down through her family—specifically from mother to daughter. By adding the secretly empowered bangle to her Captain Marvel cosplay costume, Kamala unlocks powers that have always existed inside of her, given to her through a maternal connection. The show's change quite literally showcases that, in order to unlock her strength, Kamala had to embrace her heritage. While the comics note this more generally, the show avoids transforming a young woman of color into a white woman. Kamala belongs in this televisual space without changing her identity; she embraces her authenticity.

Finally, the show also makes a significant deviation from the comics in how Kamala gets her superhero name. In the comics, Kamala looks like Carol Danvers, so people begin calling her "Ms. Marvel." However, the character of "Ms. Marvel" had not existed previously in the MCU. For Kamala to keep the name in the Disney+ series, the showrunners had to adjust how Kamala was named. Throughout all six episodes, characters skirt around giving Kamala's superhero identity a definitive name, calling her "Night Light" or "our masked neighbor." In a concluding scene, Yusuf talks with Kamala about identity and the importance of names:

Yusuf: "So, you are now the great superhero called...called what?"

Kamala: "I'm still figuring it out."

Yusuf: "Of course you are. Yeah, we're all still figuring it out. But you saved people,

Kamala. You saved lives. And if you saved one life, well, you saved the world. Do you know why we named you Kamala? Your mother and I tried for years to have a second child. We'd almost lost all hope. And then you came. Beta, you were just so perfect. That's what kamal means in Arabic. 'Perfect.' But in Urdu, it's more like...What's the word? 'Wonder.' 'Marvel.' Kamal means marvel."

Kamala: "I share the same name as Carol fricken Danvers?!"

Yusuf: "I don't know who that is. But you sure are and always have been our own little Ms. Marvel."

In this salient moment, Kamala gets her name and title from her father; instead of being handed down from a white heroine, Ms. Marvel's name is discursively reclaimed by her family. This climatic conversation harkens back to the scene from the comics where Kamala recollects wisdom from her dad and the Qur'an ("whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind"), again reinforcing both the show's connection to the comics and her father's influence on her morality. Her morals come from her family, therefore her superhero identity must also. In choosing to have Kamala's name quite literally mean "marvel" and to have Kamala's father give the title "Ms. Marvel," the show firmly establishes that family is not only essential to Kamala's identity, but it shapes who she is at her core.

While both comic and show reinforce the importance of Kamala's religion and her family, the show takes a slight step back from religion as compared to the comics. Instead of directly quoting the Qur'an like she does in *No Normal*, Kamala leans on her familial relationships and the wisdom of her sheikh outside of the mosque to shape her morality. The show promotes religious pluralism an important American value; while American morality can originate from religions other than Judeo-Christian traditions, they reinforce the importance of family above direct references to Islamic faith. As a production company with a global reach, appealing to the importance of "family" above a specific religion could help Disney relate Kamala's moral motivations to broader audience and prevent alienation of other religious identities while still remaining true to Kamala's original characterization. Her Muslim faith is

still present, but the show manifests it through her connection to her family and community rather than specific religious teachings.

To ground this cultural analysis, I return to Fawaz’s discussion of the individual/collective tension at work within superhero representation:

What distinguished the superhero from the merely superhuman...was its articulation of an extraordinary body to an ethical responsibility to use one’s powers in service to a wider community. When attached to the prefix *super*, the word *hero* irrevocably transforms the concept of a body gifted with fantastic abilities by framing the bearer of such power as an agent of universal good.²⁷⁹

Figuratively located alongside other superheroes of Marvel Comics and Disney’s Marvel Studios, Ms. Marvel inevitably embodies the common superhero tension of having individual agency yet being ethically responsible for the “universal good” of the collective. Disney has a history of representing “individualist American values” to their global audience; Olson notes that a series of Disney-made World War II-era health and literacy films that targeted Latin American audiences presumed that the individual was the “prime locus of action and interaction.”²⁸⁰ Therefore, when representing a contemporary, multicultural superhero, Disney needed to navigate between their traditional stance on American individualism and the importance of the collective in both superhero narratives and Muslim, Pakistani cultures. Ultimately, they depict a liminal, cultural compromise.

By placing importance on *family* as both a collective unit and a supporter of individual autonomy, Disney deviates from the comic and represents Kamala as both individualistic and collectivistic. But they do so by circumventing the explicit advocacy of Muslim teachings above any other religious practices. They depict U.S. Americans as open to embracing some collectivistic values—like the traditional family unit—but avoid upending the priorities of the self within American individualism. Overall, Disney uses the thematic tension between

individualism/collectivism to suggest that Americans can and should value both the support of the collective (the family) as well as the journey of individual self-discovery, but not in a way that fundamentally disrupts previously existing American values.

New Jersey/Pakistan

As the two primary settings for the show, New Jersey and Pakistan represent the dyadic localities of Kamala's identity: her home state and her ancestral homeland. While *No Normal* keeps Kamala in New Jersey, the show places Kamala in Pakistan, directly contrasting the spatial nuances of her life in the United States. Within the eight episodes of *Ms. Marvel*, Disney symbolically positions Jersey City alongside Karachi, echoing the MCU's tradition of dropping their superheroes into foreign settings to keep films moving and interesting for a global audience. But Disney also carefully represents both Pakistan and New Jersey as genuine, complex, and important places for Kamala. Although she does visit Pakistan in later comic volumes, the show emphasizes Kamala's cultural locality from the very beginning; this difference demonstrates Disney's need to appeal to their global, cosmopolitan audience through wider, global settings.

Places are made up of material and symbolic events and moments; they are what Doreen Massey calls collections of a space's "stories-so-far."²⁸¹ Places represented on screen manifest differently than their material counterparts, but all places shift and change, especially in how they are discursively constructed. The show depicts New Jersey and Pakistan—visually, discursively, and auditorily—as distinctly authentic settings where Kamala feels simultaneously included and excluded. However, while Disney signifies that they are unique cultural localities, the show also implies that they are not so different that their spatiality cannot be interwoven, especially for a second-generation immigrant like Kamala. The *Ms. Marvel* television show

represents Kamala's feelings of liminality as indicative of a new, metaphorical place, that of New Jersey/Pakistan.

In the comic, Kamala often imagines herself as a misfit in New Jersey. As she walks away from a party, sad and uncomfortable, she thinks: "I should have known better. Who was I kidding? 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."²⁸² The authenticity/belonging tension intersects with Kamala's feelings about being between an American citizen *and* the daughter of immigrants from Pakistan; she feels her sociocultural exclusion is an impossible border to cross. However, while the comic sets up this tension, this first volume only takes place in New Jersey, and Kamala's Pakistani heritage is more discursive than spatial.

Episodes four and five—"Seeing Red" and "Time and Again"—are where the show fully deviates from the comic. Disney chose to spend time and money to depict Pakistan, devoting two of the six episodes to Kamala's visit to her family there. Long shots showcase the bustling cityscape and the bright colors of Karachi. Kamala leans out the window of the car, smiling in wonder at the city. Fast-paced music matches the excitement and movement of the people and the vehicles flashing by. Then, the busy streets contrast against the cozy, bright, and warm scenes in Kamala's grandmother's home. The contrast in mood between the urban and domestic shots demonstrates that, for Kamala, Pakistan is both new and interesting yet familiar and welcoming. Importantly, the show's creators were careful to ensure that Pakistan would feel authentically distinct but not alien in its difference from the United States. When asked about the use of the "yellow filter" often used by Marvel to depict scenes in South Asia and the Middle East, Sharmeen Obaid-Chinoy—the director of the episodes set in Pakistan—said she very intentionally showcased diversity in the use of color in the show:

I told my team that...there would be no yellow in general because my world is not yellow. It is green and pink and red and orange, and that's what I want the world to experience. And when you bring authentic storytellers who are rooted from that part of the world to tell a story, you will notice a visual difference in the way the story is told.²⁸³

Like her peers on the *Ms. Marvel* production team, Obaid-Chinoy referenced the importance of creators who are “authentic” and “rooted from that part of the world” to ensure the story was also visually authentic. Thus, while Disney’s *Ms. Marvel* international setting opens up the story to a cosmopolitan audience, their storytelling intentionality reflects back on their goal to genuinely represent global intersectionality.

Set in direct contrast to Kamala’s home in Jersey City, the episodes in Karachi emphasize Kamala’s feelings of liminality to suggest a new metaphorical, intermingling locality of New Jersey/Pakistan. The show sets two of its six episodes in Pakistan, but it also highlights the uniqueness of New Jersey as a space throughout the other episodes. In Jersey City, people mispronounce her name and Kamala feels uncomfortable in skin-tight, popular clothes, yet her family doesn’t understand her passion for the Avengers. In Karachi, Kamala struggles to eat the spicy foods and to understand local languages, but she finds connections with her grandma and their family history. Kamala is frustrated when locals see her as a tourist because, in New Jersey, she is Othered because of the very things that the Pakistanis say she doesn’t fully embody. As Kamala gazes around Karachi, her cousin says, “Is this not exotic enough for the ABCD’s Instagram? You know, American-born Confused Desi.”²⁸⁴ Even her relatives interpellate her as the Other in this place; she is “American-born” and therefore not fully “Desi.” Depending on her location, Kamala’s intersecting identity positions indicate her difference and proclaim her as Othered, even if those labels are inaccurate.²⁸⁵ Kamala feels both excluded and welcome in both spaces, complicating what it means to spatially and culturally “belong” as a citizen. When

Kamala's discursively Pakistani body exists in Jersey City, she is conscripted as the Other, but when she exists on the streets of Karachi she is seen as too-American.

Kamala feels split between these two places, which the show demonstrates through dualities: the title credits flash through numerous illustrated versions of "Ms. Marvel" in various hand drawn, graffitied, and South Asian fonts; Kamala's Pakistani parents gush about their favorite artist, Bon Jovi, who is from New Jersey; Kamala and her mom run errands through the shops in Jersey City, shopping at colorful stands and chatting with the Pakistani community in the city. When Kamala's brother, Aamir gets married, his wedding blends together New Jersian and South Asian traditions. When the sheikh marries them, Aamir and his new wife, Tyesha, fist bump and laugh as the guests chant "Allahu Akbar!" The live band that plays for the reception is called "Brown Jovi." The wedding guests—no matter their cultural background—perform a choreographed Bollywood-style dance during the reception. Even during a fight scene, "Livin' on a Prayer" by Bon Jovi plays while Kamala evades bad guys in her pink shalwar kameez.²⁸⁶ Instead of asking Kamala to choose between her Pakistani heritage and her home in Jersey City, the show demonstrates a new spatial identity that combines both together.

In expanding the setting of *Ms. Marvel* to Pakistan, the show indicates that Disney sees value in exploring the international spatiality of intersectional identities. Placing Kamala on the streets of Karachi complicates her feelings of belonging, and it opens up the show to a global audience. The show deviates from comic in that it physically explores the unique aspects of each place, reinforcing their material feel for the audience. It depicts spatial-cultural differences to demonstrate how Kamala embodies both cultures, creating a new metaphorical, liminal but merged locality within Kamala's identity. The show suggests that, as a second-generation Pakistani immigrant and an American citizen in New Jersey, Kamala belongs in neither but both

places simultaneously. The rhetorical tension implies that Kamala’s identity is located not within either New Jersey or Pakistan, and not even with both, but within a different New Jersey/Pakistan locality that blurs the borders between the two places. Disney emphasizes the importance of cultural locality and of second-generation immigrants’ unique relationship with their family’s past and present homes. Thus, Disney utilizes the simultaneity of New Jersey/Pakistan in *Ms. Marvel* to un/complicate cultural-national intersectionality, constituting American citizenship as located within a new, united space of nationality.

Conclusion

Superheroes are powerfully rhetorical and rhetorically empowered; their narratives respond to human desires to escape into the fantastic, embody good, and triumph over evil.²⁸⁷ Superhero media acts, as Terence McSweeney says, “as a cultural barometer for attitudes towards national identity” and “as an articulation and manifestation of contemporary cultural mythologies.”²⁸⁸ Through its sociocultural influences, superhero media can shape global ideologies and reflect political movements.²⁸⁹ The superhero genre—Marvel included—has long neglected to (accurately or carefully) represent marginalized identities within their canon. Therefore, *who* has superpowers and *how* they are represented offers insight into the cultural milieu. To better understand how contemporary superhero media (led by Disney’s Marvel Studios) shapes cultural imaginings of identity, I asked a few questions of these artifacts.

First, how did the representation of Kamala Khan’s “Ms. Marvel” change between the comic and its streaming television adaptation? This critical comparison revealed that, in *Ms. Marvel*’s MCU adaptation, Disney chose to both complicate and uncomplicate the representation of intersectional identities. They complicated identity by funding, producing, and championing a previously un-represented superheroic identity to the screen. They hired showrunners of Muslim

and South Asian American descent who brought detail, care, and nuance to the project, and whose primary goal was to accurately represent Kamala as a young, Muslim, Pakistani American woman. At the same time, their global audience and economic objectives mandated that the series have broad appeal. Disney uncomplicated identity by reinforcing relatability, by making Kamala's story and standpoint—which are innately complex because of the intersections of her gender, religion, culture, and nationality—palatable. They did so by bolstering general themes of family and blurring the lines around spatial-cultural locality. By representing both the complicated aspects of identity while uncomplicating intersectional experiences for a mainstream audience, Disney demonstrated the possibility of simultaneity within identity tensions. These tensions work together to eliminate borders of citizenship around American identity.

What are the consequences of the differences between the comic and streaming television adaptation of *Ms. Marvel*? And what insights does this adaptation offer into Disney's imaginings of U.S. American identity? Both *Ms. Marvels* formulated representation through constitutive rhetorical tensions. Marvel and Disney used Kamala to interpellate readers into a version of U.S. identity that is more expansive than the previously established "norm" of white, Judeo-Christian citizenship. As Brown puts it, "*Ms. Marvel* represents an alternative type of Americanization...that emphasizes the complexity of citizenship as the real point of connection for a diverse nation struggling with a shifting cultural and ethnic landscape."²⁹⁰ However, the show's departure towards a broader, global palatability showcased different constitutive implications. Not only did *Ms. Marvel* aim to interpellate specific audiences of South Asian, second-generation immigrant, Muslim, young, female fans into American superhero fandom, but Disney also gestured towards a second audience. White audiences were encouraged to identify with diverse characters, but Disney also interpellated them as the kind of U.S. Americans who

embrace diversity *and* feel welcome within a cosmopolitan, multi-cultural, intersectional America. Thus, this comparison demonstrates that constitutive rhetoric can normalize the existence of multiple, equally accepted identities.

Ultimately, both artifacts proclaim that Kamala *is* Ms. Marvel. The identity tension between Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel—of the Muslim, Pakistani American teen and the heroic title that signifies her superhuman abilities—represents a duality that manifests in tensions throughout her identities. In its adaptation, Disney asserted that Kamala/Ms. Marvel could be a broadly relatable, uniquely authentic, and intersectionally complex superhero, *and* she belongs as an American citizen. Disney presented American identity as both unified and polysemic, using Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel as constitutively representative of “belonging” within U.S. American citizenry.

Chapter 4

Conclusion: “There is No Normal”

Superheroes offer us an escape from the mundane. Their stories are those of hope, of good vanquishing evil. They represent our perceptions of morality, how we imagine law and order should be enforced, and, importantly, *who* should be able to wield power. Thus, when new, superpowered characters appear from the margins, they deserve our attention. Kamala Khan’s superheroic origin story is a quirky yet heartfelt journey of growing up, self-exploration, the importance of familial strength, and the teenage struggle to find belonging. But within the broader context of Marvel Comics, Marvel Studios, and Disney, the story of Ms. Marvel is also one of intersections, of tensions, and of discovering what it means to navigate identity in a contemporary, multicultural America. After all, as Kamala reminds us in the climax of the show, “There is no normal. There’s just us and what we do with what we’ve been given.”²⁹¹

Throughout this project, I explored how the context around and adaptation of *Ms. Marvel* has greater implications for how we understand superheroes, U.S. American identity, and our diverse world.

First, this thesis posited: how did Kamala’s representation as Ms. Marvel change between comics and television? I grounded this question in the industrial context and mediated affordances that surrounded these textual changes. In Chapter 2, I applied the circuit of culture as an analytical framework to both *Ms. Marvel* artifacts, looking intentionally at the mediated differences between their comics and streaming television forms. I studied how critics and audiences alike consumed and received them, how each medium influenced the regulation of its contents, how their adaptation affected production, and how their creators represented the artifacts. The creation of superhero identities is a process of sociocultural meaning production,

and as this chapter revealed, Ms. Marvel's creators intended for her to signify an underrepresented, uniquely American identity: that of a young, Muslim, Pakistani American woman from Jersey City, NJ. While Disney and Marvel produced and represented their content with this specific intention, the creation of cultural meaning is multifaceted; meaning is made through a continuous process of an artifact's representation, identification, production, consumption, and regulation. The creators may have aimed to authentically represent the intersections of Kamala's superheroic identity, but the adaptation between mediums changed how the audience was able to consume and create meaning from the show. Thus, a thorough, investigative, textual comparison between Ms. Marvel's representation in comic and show built upon the broader industrial context of the artifacts' circulation through culture.

du Gay et al. explain that "meanings bridge the gap between the material world and the 'world' in which language, thinking, and communication take place—the 'symbolic' world."²⁹² It is here, between the material and the symbolic "worlds," that industrial analysis meets rhetorical criticism. Chapter 3 rhetorically evaluated the representational changes between Ms. Marvel's comic and television iterations. I looked particularly at the consequences of their textual differences, asking: What does Ms. Marvel's adaptation signify about how Disney constitutes U.S. American identity? My analysis revealed that both *Ms. Marvels* represented Kamala's intersectionality through constitutive identity tensions, working to redraw borders around American identity. However, Disney's adaptation both complicated and uncomplicated the representation of intersectional identities; they hired diverse creators to bring a marginalized superhero to the screen, but they also utilized Kamala's authentic relatability to untangle the complexity of her identity and make her more palatable for a general audience. Thus, Kamala's representation helped Disney to interpellate readers into a more expansive conception of U.S.

American citizenship and belonging. So, what *are* the ideological consequences of Ms. Marvel's MCU debut? By adapting *Ms. Marvel* into streaming television, Disney asserted that Kamala/Ms. Marvel could be simultaneously relatable, authentic, intersectionally diverse, *and* also belong as an American citizen. Disney constituted American identity as multicultural and Americans as welcoming of diversity, but they did so by preserving white, hegemonic norms. Ultimately, Disney's representational choices reflected a particular context around their superhero franchises: that of their global, capitalist motivations. And for a corporation with as much social, cultural, and economic capital as The Walt Disney Company, the implications of their position of *who* can be American should not be ignored.

Media Industry and Rhetorical Methods in Conversation

As the pairing of these two chapters suggests, the creation, distribution, and reception of rhetorical artifacts impacts how their meaning is created, and vice versa. This dual-methodological approach offers a few important insights. First, an antecedent study of media industry discourse and materiality also invites a rhetorical criticism to investigate the multiple audiences, multiple meanings, and multiple implications of an artifact. Chapter 2 discussed how the circuit of culture implies that an artifact's meaning is continuously in motion, and the intentions of its creators do not necessarily coincide with its eventual meaning(s). Importantly, as Chapter 3 added, multiple audiences can receive different meanings from and be interpellated differently by an artifact. By pairing mediated cultural analysis with rhetorical criticism, this project revealed how multiplicity within the *Ms. Marvel* texts has ideological significance. Especially when considered in how they differ between the comics and show, Kamala's separate identity tensions—Muslim/American, authenticity/belonging, relatability/uniqueness, individualism/collectivism, and New Jersey/Pakistan—work ideologically together to create

meaning within the broader context of Marvel's and Disney's industries and intentions. Exclusions around U.S. American identity are thematically negotiated through these tensions: Disney portrays Muslim American identity as unique and authentic yet relatable and deserving of acceptance; they depict the complexities of being a second-generation Pakistani immigrant through Kamala's feelings of liminality between New Jersey and Pakistan, yet they also utilize international locations and a stronger emphasis on the importance of family to open Ms. Marvel's story to a worldwide audience. Multiplicity of meaning allows Disney's *Ms. Marvel* to be simultaneously representative—it works to renegotiate ideological borders around American identity—and supportive of hegemonic systems. In doing so, Disney implies that U.S. American citizenship, while accepting of difference, continues to privilege whiteness.

Accordingly, Disney—an international, Fortune 500-ranked corporation—has a global audience to consider when producing content, and this consideration has ideological consequences. Chapter 2 discussed how Ms. Marvel's creators represented the show as authentically cosmopolitan. Then, Chapter 3 revealed how this intention appeared throughout Disney+'s *Ms. Marvel*. The show globalized its setting from Jersey City to Pakistan and shifted from specifics of Islam to instead focus on the family as the moral center. While it may not be revelatory that Disney's economic gain depends on successfully appealing to a global audience, it is important to note that the company's interest in both its international *and* U.S. American audiences led to a simultaneous un/complicating of fictional yet "authentic" intersectional identities. Specifically, while the comic interrogated whiteness (and white femininity) as an antagonistic force, Disney's adaptation put up protective walls around whiteness, catering to an expansive audience while avoiding alienating its white viewers. This suggests that Disney imagines the borders around American citizenship as flexible, yet not so malleable as to upend

hegemonic, capitalist, white structures of power that bolster their dominant position as cultural producers. *Ms. Marvel* is an intersectionally representative artifact that brings diversity to the MCU's superhero canon, but its disruptive impact is undermined by Disney's priorities of self-preservation. Thus, *Ms. Marvel* inevitably reinforces whiteness as the norm; Disney imagines U.S. American citizenship as welcoming of multicultural identities, but their representation also neglects to disrupt the correlation between white privilege and American identity.

The reading of Chapters 2 and 3 together allows this thesis to expand upon previous scholarship on Marvel's comic to screen adaptations. Samuel M. McMillen argues that Netflix's adaptation of Marvel's *Luke Cage* comics "revises narrow and stereotypical portrayals of Black masculinity" since adaptation expands its narrative abilities.²⁹³ Stephanie Green comes to a similar conclusion about Netflix's *Jessica Jones* adaptation.²⁹⁴ On the other hand, in an analysis of MCU films set in Asian locations, Jessie Rogers asserts that the MCU's diversifying efforts are undermined because Marvel Studios "'invade[s]' Asian spaces for their own financial gain, with representation appearing as a side effect rather than an intention."²⁹⁵ The conclusion of this project most closely resonates with Michaela Meyer's understandings of *Black Panther* (2018). Meyer contends that, "while it certainly did make strides toward stronger representations of Black masculinity and Black femininity, by containing its progressive representations in heterosexist and cisgender logics, it failed to capture the complexities of contemporary discourses of intersectional sexual identity politics."²⁹⁶ Rachel Alicia Griffin and Jonathan Rossing echo this sentiment, noting that "Disneyfication" establishes "white, U.S. American, ethnocentric normativity at the corporate foundation of every MCU film."²⁹⁷ Overall, it seems that Disney is the common denominator in problematic comic-to-screen superhero representation. While the industrial discourse surrounding *Ms. Marvel* suggests that its

representation *should* authentically reflect real identities, this project reinforces and elaborates upon previous scholarship that finds disconnection within Disney's intersectional superhero adaptations. In addition to maintaining the influence of "Disneyfication" on flattening intersectional representations, I add that Disney does so to cater to a global audience and to maintain their dominant ideological position.

Implications and Future Directions

The pairing of methods in media studies and rhetorical criticism also reveals implications and paths for future scholarship. As a tool to study mediated culture, the circuit of culture is typically utilized to evaluate the cycle of one artifact. However, this project demonstrated that this method can be utilized to compare two artifacts and tease out the differences between them to better understand the circumstances and effects of their existence. The critical rhetorical comparison between the *Ms. Marvels* would not have been complete without first tracing their path through the circuit of culture.

This thesis contributes to both media industry studies and rhetorical theory, specifically those of how constitutive rhetoric functions. Especially when they have the reach of a production company like Disney, popular culture artifacts have the potential to interpellate their audiences and manipulate discursive borders around U.S. American citizenship. The *Ms. Marvels* invited audiences to identify with a version of American identity that welcomed difference. Within the context of its adaptation and integration into the MCU, Disney's *Ms. Marvel* interpellated two audiences simultaneously; not only did the show aim to interpellate a new, diverse audience into the superhero fandom, but Disney also gestured towards a second, dominant audience, encouraging them to relate to and therefore accept marginalized identities. Thus, constitutive rhetoric can interpellate multiple audiences to both resist *and* uphold representational power

structures. Further, constitutive rhetoric can normalize the existence of multiple, equally accepted identities, all while expanding conceptions of American citizenship without interrogating white privilege. Overall, this project continues to reinforce the importance of interweaving methodologies to better investigate our complex, mediated, cultural milieu.

This project demonstrates how Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is being considered beyond academia. Disney is placing importance on hiring representative creators to shape multicultural stories, and mainstream television has begun to explore the impacts of intersectionality on its diverse characters. This analysis suggests that Crenshaw's work has positively impacted how production corporations consider representing multicultural characters. However, I should reiterate that Disney's *Ms. Marvel* is not a complete fulfillment of Crenshaw's aspiration: it represents intersectional identity as worthy of belonging but does not dispute hierarchal structures of power around identity. Nonetheless, diversifying efforts by companies like Marvel and Disney deserve a critical lens from a wide range of scholars. Since Marvel superheroes are more diverse, more representative, and more complex than ever before, we must adjust our methods and mindsets when approaching these texts.

Kamala reminds her audience that "Good is not a thing you are. It's a thing you do."²⁹⁸ Against its textual backdrop, this quote is a powerful sentiment about the role of superheroes and morality. However, it also speaks to a larger conversation about these texts and their potential. This comparative case study reminds us that rhetorical artifacts are multilayered; they are not necessarily "good" or "bad," but rather they have potential to be productive, to do good or act harmfully. *Ms. Marvel* widens sociocultural borders around U.S. American citizenship, and while the show doesn't disrupt hegemonic structures, it allows audiences to find connection across difference. Thus, I pose the question: for whom can these superhero stories *do* good?

Disney's curation of Kamala's identity as relatable, palatable, and nondisruptive to existing structures speaks to the "good" the *Ms. Marvels* can do in speaking to dominant audiences, to those who may not otherwise connect with her standpoint. While the comic certainly opened up the superhero canon to welcome difference—inviting those who do identify more explicitly with Kamala's story to imagine themselves as heroes—it is important consider that the show's overarching theme of relatability could also function to, on an ideological level, flatten intersectionality into a simplified conversation about identity. Nonetheless, this project continues to complicate the good/bad conversation to instead imagine *who* is affected by these artifacts and *how* they continue to resonate.

Since *Ms. Marvel's* release in June 2022, Marvel Studios has continued its diversifying efforts, adding a number of other non-white and/or non-male superheroes into the MCU. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) was an emotional exploration of Black femininity and grief in the wake of Chadwick Boseman's death; *She Hulk: Attorney at Law* (2022) bitingly commented on the objectification of superheroines; *The Marvels* (2023) brought Carol Danvers, Monica Rambeau, and Kamala Khan together to save the universe; and *Echo* (2024) followed a deaf assassin as she reconnected with her Indigenous family. This project—with its conclusion that *Ms. Marvel* could both authentically represent intersectionality while circumventing critiques of whiteness—suggests that these efforts should be recognized, but they should also be evaluated. Scholarship must apply critical rhetorical and media industrial lenses to assess how Disney's Marvel Studios approaches the next phase of their superhero narratives. In doing so, scholarship can highlight the ideological impacts of these widespread and influential artifacts. In addition to the nature of representation in said artifacts, scholars should attend to *which* stories Disney chooses to adapt—particularly if and how they represent intersectional superheroes—because, as

this project demonstrated, these stories have broader ideological effects on how audiences perceive citizenship and sociocultural belonging. Ultimately, this analysis offers a template for evaluating superhero comic-to-screen adaptations: the materiality of both mediums, their industrial contexts, *and* their textual content all deserve consideration when assessing how on-screen representation implicates broader power structures.

This project both enhances our scholarly understanding of and invites further investigation into Marvel and Disney, their superheroines, and how stories like Ms. Marvel's constitute U.S. national identity in popular culture. First, Marvel and Disney are still sometimes attended to as separate entities, in both industrial and academic discourse. As this study supported, the "Disneyfication" of Marvel superheroes implies that we must investigate them as linked. Disney's influence over Marvel's creations is an essential consideration for any scholar interested in the MCU. Second, feminist scholars have devoted much attention to superheroines, and this project contributes to that collection by looking at intersectional identity in a U.S. American context in particular.²⁹⁹ Disney's *Ms. Marvel* certainly demonstrates that mainstream corporations are considering how intersectionality influences characters (by placing representative creators into the conversation, for instance). Finally, this project implies that producers of pop culture artifacts can powerfully constitute U.S. American identity. By using Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel to present Americans as both unified and polysemic, Disney ideologically constructed *belonging* within U.S. American citizenry. Although productions like *Ms. Marvel* are indeed fictional, the combination of the artifact's rhetorical meanings and Disney's enormous reach should be an indication of the importance of these texts within our sociocultural milieu. Simply, Disney has the power to alter our understanding of who belongs as

an American citizen, shaping national feelings of unity and/or difference. This power deserves serious attention, especially as Disney's Marvel Studios moves into a new era.

Marvel's New(?) Normal

While Marvel Studios might be a creator of fictional, on-screen, (and, as some might argue, superfluous) superhero stories, scholars agree that the production company can profoundly impact our international, sociopolitical world.³⁰⁰ Therefore, it is important to critically observe and discuss the studio's actions. So, what's next for Disney's Marvel Studios? On November 1st, 2023, *Variety*'s Tatiana Siegel published an article called "Crisis at Marvel," positing "Is Marvel in trouble?"³⁰¹ While they still dominate the superhero entertainment market, Marvel is struggling to replicate its earlier heydays at the box office. Siegel cited numerous issues for the company, including high labor and monetary costs of visual effects, the domestic violence conviction of Jonathan Majors (the actor they set up to play the next big villain), diminished belief in the quality of Marvel's brand, and less public interest because of the general oversaturation of superhero content in popular media. Undoubtedly, it's time for a change.

After spending a considerable amount of time sitting with Ms. Marvel's story, I see areas of both weakness and great potential in Disney's adaptation of the superheroine. Led by a passionate team of creatives determined to produce an authentically representative character, Kamala's MCU debut dabbles with what it means to be intersectionally marginalized in Disney's universe and in the real world it reflects. On the other hand, this analysis suggests that adaptations from corporate rhetors like Disney also sacrifice nuance for relatability to appeal to a widespread, heterogeneous audience and to maintain their hegemonic position. However, the significance of Kamala's representation on screen and her status as a title Marvel superhero cannot be understated. When audiences watch a young, Pakistani, Muslim American girl dressed

in a burkini and a scarf fight to save her community, her nation, and the world under Marvel's famous logo, they recognize her as a hero. And when Kamala says, "There is no normal," audiences—those of both dominant and marginalized identities—can acknowledge their differences *and* connect with her. Thus, as Disney's Marvel Studios is forced to pivot into a new "phase" of their own, Kamala's story stands out. *Ms. Marvel* narrows the often-vast scope of superhero cinema, bringing its audiences intimately close to the daily struggles of its young, intersectional heroine. This daydreaming, fangirling, awkward, big-hearted superhero tells her audiences that it's okay to be different, that difference is deserving of acceptance. And perhaps, it is in this discernment of difference that we—as audience members—begin to decipher what it means to be American.

NOTES

¹ @smh6761, June 2022, comment on Marvel Studios' Ms. Marvel | Official Trailer | Disney+ by Marvel Entertainment, <https://youtu.be/m9EX0f6V11Y>.

² @xolitary, June 2022, comment on Marvel Studios' Ms. Marvel | Official Trailer | Disney+ by Marvel Entertainment, <https://youtu.be/m9EX0f6V11Y>.

³ @portsyde3466, June 2022, comment on Marvel Studios' Ms. Marvel | Official Trailer | Disney+ by Marvel Entertainment, <https://youtu.be/m9EX0f6V11Y>.

⁴ IMDB user quoted in article: Hargrave, Sam. "Ms. Marvel Gets Review Bombed on IMDB after Disney+ Premiere." *The Direct*, June 10, 2022. <https://thedirect.com/article/ms-marvel-review-bombed-imdb-disney-premiere>.

⁵ @BillCooper2049, June 8, 2022, comment on "Ms. Marvel - Season 1." Metacritic, 2022. <https://www.metacritic.com/tv/ms-marvel/season-1/user-reviews>.

⁶ Nicholas Carnes and Lilly J. Goren, eds., *The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2023).

⁷ Bryan J. Carr and Meta G. Carstarphen, eds., *Gendered Defenders: Marvel's Heroines in Transmedia Spaces* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2022).

⁸ Terence McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (Wallflower Press - Columbia University Press, 2018), 25.

⁹ Arjana, *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture*, xvii.

¹⁰ Carnes and Goren, *The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 5.

¹¹ McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 268.

¹² Carnes and Goren, *The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 2.

¹³ Sophia Rose Arjana, *Veiled Superheroes: Islam, Feminism, and Popular Culture* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 49.

¹⁴ Jessica Baldanzi and Hussein Rashid, eds., *Ms. Marvel's America: No Normal* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2020), vii, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvx5w9qc>.

¹⁵ Schmidt explains how "refounding" is a process of invoking a nation's origins or founding while simultaneously changing them. He uses the example of Lincoln invoking the founding of the United States in his Gettysburg address, comparing this process to Stan Lee's "refounding" of the World War II Marvel characters to those of the Cold War Marvel Universe.

¹⁶ Ronald J. Schmidt, "'Operation: Rebirth' and the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Origin Stories as Founding Narratives," in *The Politics of the MCU*, ed. Nicholas Carnes and Lilly J. Goren (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2023), 93.

¹⁷ Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny, 14–15.

¹⁸ Ben Fritz, “With Great Power: The Rise of Superhero Cinema,” *The Journal*, accessed July 8, 2023, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/with-great-power-part-1-origin-story/7a460e36-a426-4f27-a792-e596ae02c6ad>.

¹⁹ Fritz.

²⁰ Martin Flanagan, Andrew Livingstone, and Mike McKenny, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2017), 6.

²¹ These numbers have been updated from those originally cited to reflect the newest MCU releases. Carnes and Goren, *The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 87.

²² Schmidt, “‘Operation: Rebirth’ and the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Origin Stories as Founding Narratives,” 87.

²³ Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon*. 1.

²⁴ McSweeney, *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, 14.

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⁷⁵ G. Willow Wilson, *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, ed. Sana Amanat, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2014).

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⁷⁷ Anna F. Peppard, “‘This Female Fights Back!’ A Feminist History of Marvel Comics,” in *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, ed. Matt Yockey (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2017), 131.: Peppard explains that “the 2014 relaunch of Ms. Marvel, starring a Pakistani American, Muslim teenager named Kamala Khan, and the rebirth of Thor as a woman...were reported by nearly every major news outlet in North America, including CNN and the New York Times...the success of the new Ms. Marvel, the only current legacy title to feature a female superhero taking over from another female superhero, does inspire belief in the possibility of sustained change.”

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⁸⁰ Kent, “Unveiling Marvels,” 523.

⁸¹ Rebecca Wanzo, “Ms. Marvel Punches Back: Twenty-First-Century Superheroes and Alienated Citizenship,” in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination* (New York University Press, 2021), 207, <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.18574/nyu/9781479891252.003.0022/html>.

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