Ms. Marvel's America

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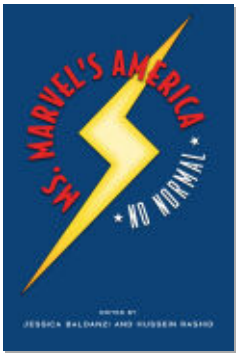

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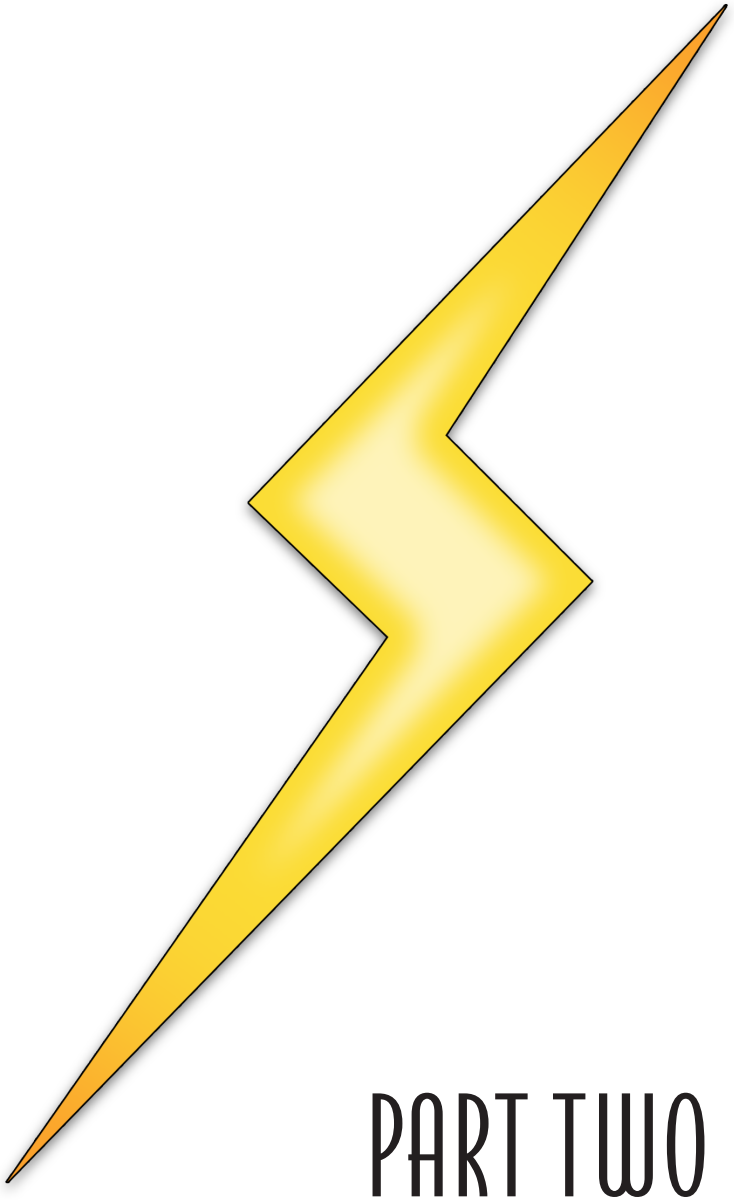

PART TWO

Nation and Religion, Identity and Community

MS. MARVEL IS AN IMMIGRANT

HUSSEIN RASHID

Kamala Khan, the new Ms. Marvel, is a hero who is often described as a Muslim superhero. But her official description mentions more than her religion, explaining that her family is from Pakistan, that she is a teenager, and that she is from New Jersey. In other words, she is clearly a multi-identified individual. Unlike a Peter Parker, none of her characteristics makes her "normal," aptly earning the title of her first collected volume, *No Normal.* By "normal," I mean the "all-American" ideal of the white male, often read as Christian, and at least middle class. This conception of what it means to be American is enshrined in the founding documents of the United States, which privilege race, class, and gender explicitly and establish norms around religious belonging.

Khan is not alone in being "not normal." The way she exhibits her second-generation identity is a particular case study in how immigrants of any generation, unless phenotypically white, are not normal. The reality is that her struggles and demeanor in that immigrant context are perfectly normal and expected. From a sociological perspective, she walks the line between straight-line assimilation theory (the melting-pot model) and integration theory (the mosaic model) of belonging.

The use of language, food, and webs of familial obligations are familiar sites of contestation in the struggle to belong, in both assimilation or integration models. We see all of these markers represented in Khan's story. However, her appearance, which includes more than her clothes, contains important signifiers for her struggle to be part of an "American normal." As a polymorph, an individual who has the ability to change her physical characteristics, clothing becomes only one layer of meaning for her. Her very body represents her conception of being "American."

The discussion of Khan's immigrant nature helps ground us in understanding the socially transformative work that the *Ms. Marvel* series is doing. While there is arguably work being done by the comic through para-social

contact (Charlton; Horton; Pettigrew and Tropp; Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes, "Parasocial"), the stories also mimic the real social transformation performed by immigrants. The stories of immigrants are often invisible to members of the host nation, so *Ms. Marvel* serves to make a subset of those stories visible.

The integration of a marginalized community into the cultural center is not unidirectional, but dialogic; both the center and the margin change. The mechanism for this change is the process of hybridity, but that process cannot be fully understood without an engagement with how the dominant society is marginalizing Khan's various identifications and how she is being written in response to that marginalization. Therefore, I argue that in looking at how Kamala Khan, rather than Ms. Marvel, navigates the competing pulls of her identity, we can more clearly see how the hybridity process functions and the changes it makes. Khan's individual struggles open up doors to understanding communal dynamics. We can say that Khan is a superhero who is Muslim, but not that she is necessarily a Muslim superhero.

South Asian Immigration and Whiteness

In many ways, it is Khan's ethnic identity that is deeply contested in the series, more than her religious identity. While it is true that Muslims are a highly racialized religious group, with South Asian and Arab bodies conflated with Muslim bodies, Khan's story does not seem to play into this elision. Rather, the series demonstrates a wide variety of different ethnicities as Muslim and focuses on Khan's particular Pakistani identity as something distinct from, but related to, her religious identity. Therefore, while her religion is important, it stands in relationship to her ethnic identity and is inflected by the place of that ethnicity in America's social hierarchy.

The story of South Asian immigration in the United States switches from de facto acceptance, to official rejection, to official acceptance, without ever creating or sustaining a social acceptance. The question of social acceptance was further aggravated after the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. We can categorize South Asian immigration into three waves. The first was from 1819 through 1914, which was a period of migrant labor. This wave consisted mostly of male agricultural workers, arriving on the West Coast. For various reasons related to questions of race and citizenship, this wave did not create a sustained community that is politically distinct today. However, it was during this time that the US government established laws

concerning the immigration of Asians to the country, thus, contributing to American stereotypes of South Asians that were developing at this time.

The first immigration law passed in the United States was in 1790. It linked citizenship through naturalization to the category of "free white person" (Kim 33). This exclusion from citizenship eventually transformed into a ban on immigration. Although initially targeting Chinese and Japanese immigration, de facto limits to South Asian immigration began in 1910, and formal exclusion of South Asians began in 1917.

The issue of citizenship was more convoluted. The initial intent of the phrase "free white person" seems to be non–enslaved and non–Native American, the only other possible categories of human beyond white in 1790s America. In 1922, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant, was denied citizenship. The US Supreme Court ruled that "white" means "Caucasian," not just not nonblack or non–Native American. Bhagat Singh Thind, a South Asian immigrant, had applied for citizenship after he served in the US Army in World War I, believing that since Indians are Aryan, he was Caucasian, as the terms were treated synonymously. The US Supreme Court ruled later, in 1923, that he could not become a citizen. According to their ruling, when they used "Caucasian," they meant it in the popular sense of having white skin. Both these rulings retroactively stripped citizenship from members of groups who already had citizenship. Following these cases, the US Congress passed legislation that prohibited immigration for anyone ineligible for citizenship. Indians eventually became eligible for citizenship, and the government slightly eased immigration restrictions in 1946. However, Indian immigration numbers were minuscule and were incapable of generating a large self-sustaining community.

The second wave came after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which had a profound impact on South Asian immigration to the United States. Because the law expressed a preference for immigrants in skilled and professional jobs, the majority of South Asians immigrating between 1965 and 1986 were highly educated. The third wave arrived after the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 was passed. The act granted amnesty to undocumented migrants in the United States, allowed for family sponsorship of new immigrants, and eased the preferential selection of skilled and professional labor. All these factors changed the demographic composition of the South Asian American community.

With each successive wave of migration, there were different patterns for integrating into the American mainstream related to "whiteness." The use of "whiteness" here is not a reference to phenotype, but to power structures,

which in the American context are connected to race. In the first wave of migration, immigrants were stripped of their citizenship, their property, and their ability to integrate in any capacity into the dominant American culture. The argument in the Thind Case connected being Aryan and Caucasian, so that Indians could become US citizens. This argument was one that equated Indian with "white" as a way to get citizenship, while reinforcing narratives of what "American" means through racial power structures.

The second wave, due to preferential selection, had a relatively high economic status and was able to lay a stronger claim to "whiteness." Economic privilege allowed for choices in how to participate in the dominant society—choices that may not have been available to people from lower classes (Karst 411). For example, many of these immigrants came during a period of immigration in America conceived of as a "melting pot," where immigrants would surrender part of their difference to become "American." To participate in this whiteness meant that these immigrants had to ignore the directed racism of groups like the Dotbusters, who targeted South Asians (Prashad 87). The most well-known Dotbuster attack was on Navroze Mody, who died four days after he was assaulted, in September 1987. The attack took place in Jersey City, the home of the fictional Kamala Khan. One of the dominant ways this racism was rationalized by immigrants was to hearken back to the arguments from the early part of the century: racists do not know that South Asians are the true Aryans (Prashad 93). By the late 1970s, the melting-pot model of assimilation was changing to a mosaic model of integration, whereby immigrants could maintain markers of ethnic identity. It was in this cultural environment that the third wave of South Asian immigrants arrived.

The racial dynamic of this period was complicated by the rise of the "model minority," a term that described Asian Americans as economically successful and was used to further marginalize African Americans, who remained pushed down to the bottom of the American racial ladder (Petersen; Prashad 169–70). South Asian Americans of the third wave came through family reunification, and because many of them were not as economically well positioned as their predecessors, they were more racialized. The second-generation of both waves were more conscious of the racial positioning and adopted more integrative practices, which allowed them to exert their own ethnic identities in an American context.

The post-9/11 period further demonstrated the precarity of whiteness for South Asian immigrants, as they were subject to increased national security interest (Maira 4). Ethnic studies scholar Sunaina Maira argues that citizenship and cultural citizenship, "everyday understandings of belonging and

exclusion," are distinct but related categories and that cultural citizenship is tied intimately to popular culture and locality (Maira 10–11)—although earlier generations of immigrants had to contend with discrimination and exclusion based on phenotype, and often that racism was conflated with religious identity. Muslim subjects—in particular South Asians and Arabs who, because of stereotypes and racism, were more readily read as Muslim—were told that Islam and America were competing ideologies (Maira 10). The result for South Asian immigrants was a need to move beyond straight-line assimilation theory and look at other types of integration.

The practice of a segmented assimilation, which recognizes that integration into the American narrative is not bound to whiteness, allows connections and alliances with other marginalized communities. The result is an awareness of South Asian Americans belonging to a diverse American society with a history of ongoing racism, and it is in this context that Kamala Khan functions.

Ms. Marvel's Performance

Based on analysis by Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins and Eric Berlatsky in this volume,[1] we know that Khan was born in the late 1990s. As a result, we expect her to belong to a sociological pattern of segmented assimilation, where she associates with other marginalized groups. The diversity of her friends hints at this pattern of adaptation. We see that she does not jettison her parental languages, and she does not shy away from expressing her religiosity in public. Yet she also exhibits many of the markers of a second-generation individual within the straight-line model, an earlier model of assimilation. She does avoid wearing clothing marking her Pakistani descent, and she does feel the need to distance herself from her parents' Pakistani culture. The latter impulse may also be part of adolescence, but the constant reference to their "unAmerican" way of doing things makes her actions also fit comfortably into a second-wave, second-generation paradigm of assimilation.

We first meet Khan at the Circle Q, a neighborhood convenience store where she is looking at an "Easy Greasy BLT [bacon, lettuce, and tomato]" sandwich. Muslim dietary laws forbid the consumption of swine, except in exigent circumstances. As she looks at the sandwich, she says "delicious, delicious infidel meat . . .," performing her Islam in a public space and in front of her non-Muslim friend Bruno (Wilson and Alphona, v. 1, i. 1). This performance indicates that Khan is comfortable in revealing parts of herself

in public and that there is a level of understanding among her friends who are present. There is a familiarity that speaks to an intimacy among her friends.

Also with Khan and Bruno is Nakia, their friend of Turkish descent, who chooses to wear a *hijab.* As they are talking at the Circle Q, popular girl Zoe and her boyfriend, Josh, enter the store. Bruno describes Zoe as a "concern troll," who, as Nakia says, "[is] only nice to be mean" (ibid.). Zoe questions if Nakia is wearing the *hijab* by choice and if Nakia will suffer an "honor killing" if she removes it. Zoe offers an explicit critique of Islam, Khan's religion, based on stereotypes and violence. All these characters go to the same school, which means that Zoe is aware of Khan's and Nakia's religion and has had the opportunity to talk to them about it (Kent 525). Zoe frames her dominance through feigned empathy, disrupting the idyll of Khan's performance. There is a shift in tenor across the pages as we are introduced to these characters in Khan's life. The shift demonstrates the different worlds in which Khan exists: she can perform aspects of her identity, but she has to be aware of her audience. While audience awareness is not unique to Khan, to understand the tensions in her life, we have to look at how her performance changes in different circumstances. For example, after Zoe makes her comments and leaves the Circle Q, Khan says, "[B]ut she's so nice. . . . [S]he's so adorable and happy." Khan then says there's no chance of she herself "becoming blonde and popular." As a result of this exchange, we can read Zoe as someone Khan wants to be like. Zoe is the "normal" standard who, seemingly, can always be who she wants to be, in any situation. Ultimately, this is Khan's desire, to perform her identities as she wants, regardless of the views of other people.

As a teenage girl born in New Jersey to parents who emigrated from Pakistan, Khan exists in a doubly liminal space: through her age and her cultural referents (Maira 15–16). Religion and/as culture are important to her family. As we see Khan in her home setting, she is writing fanfic about the Avengers, a group she clearly admires. Her older brother, Aamir, who shows his devotion to Islam through dress, language, and public praxis, is vocalizing a prayer of thanks for the food, which remains untranslated.[2] In the next panel, her mother walks in front of a piece of framed artwork on the wall (figure 2.1). The artwork she obscures seems to be "Allah" in Arabic calligraphy. (The word has a recognizable shape الله, and there are popular forms of design of the calligraphy in American Muslim homes that seem to match up with what is visible.) In the same panel, her father is reading an English-language paper that is most likely meant to represent the "ethnic press" of the area. The paper is called *Jersey Akhbar* (*Jersey News*), and

Figure 2.1 Wilson and Alphona, *No Normal*

the back page has an ad for a restaurant, which says "Eat Now! Radoslav's Chicken Salan" (figure 2.1).[3] The word *salan* is Urdu for food in a sauce or broth, what would be considered a "curry" in English. However, Radoslav is an eastern European name, so the ad signifies the ubiquitousness of South Asian food and perhaps the mixing of immigrant/marginalized communities.

Gender-based, heteronormative expectations, such as mixing with boys, checking in with parents, and "acceptable" activities, also play a role in Khan's construction of self. Yet, while initially indexed as Pakistani or Muslim in her familial restrictions, there is nothing out of the ordinary in her father's admonitions from the perspective of a patriarchal American parental figure (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 80). As they sit at the dinner table, Khan asks her father if she can go to a party that night, and he refuses. The conversation continues:

KHAN: Come on, Abu [father]! I'm **sixteen**! I promise I won't do anything **stupid**! Don't you trust me?!

ABU: Of course I trust **you** *beti* [dear]. But it's not safe for a young girl to be out late at night with strange boys, **drinking** God knows what and thinking God knows what.

One could read Abu's references to God as either a common figure of speech or a religious admonishment. The ways in which readers index knowledge of Abu's religion and his immigrant status to his statement dramatically impact the way the text is received. However, as much as possible, I will treat statements as uninflected by religion or immigrant status, unless no other reading is possible. The struggle of Khan's belonging is informed by her familial situation but determined by the power structures outside of that setting.

The way Khan chooses to present herself at various times during the discovery of her powers reveals her struggle with "normalcy" and belonging. The visible manifestations of her sense of self signal a struggle of belonging to an American narrative. This struggle also results in a moral injury to herself. (A moral injury is the performance of actions contrary to one's notion of self, which is dependent not just on individual will, but on structures of authority that condition these actions [Kinghorn 57].) After her father prohibits her from going to the party, Khan sneaks out of her house to go anyway, in order to prove she's "normal." As she struggles with whether to go to the party or not, she thinks "everybody else gets to be **normal**. Why can't I?" (Wilson and Alphona, v. 1, i. 1). Earlier in the day, when Zoe highlighted Khan's "Otherness" via Islam, she focused on some of the gender-based expectations that Khan may experience. Although Zoe's comments are based on stereotypes, they are stereotypes that the reader may have, and they affect the way in which Abu's comments are read. Khan does act against her parents' expectations, and at least some part of her beliefs, to satisfy a competing interest of "fitting in." We are pushed to reading the exchange as based in religion or Pakistani culture, but there is nothing intrinsic in Abu's statements that would lead us to that reading. Such an interpretation could also very easily emerge from the patriarchal culture of the United States. Khan engages with her guilt over her actions, demonstrating an internal discomfort, even as she willingly chooses her actions.

After this party, Khan's powers as a polymorph, or shapeshifter, manifest. At the end of the first issue, Khan is transformed by a Terrigen Mist, and she begins to hallucinate a conversation with Captain America, Iron Man, and Captain Marvel, her heroic idol, also known as Carol Danvers. Khan explains why she snuck out to a party her parents forbade her to go to: "I grew up here! I'm from Jersey City, not Karachi!" When Danvers, in Khan's hallucination, asks Khan who she wants to be, she replies, "I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. I want to be you. Except I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume."

Danvers then promises her a "reboot," but she says that "it's not going to turn out the way you think." We end with Khan morphed into Danvers, asking, "[I]s it too late to change my mind?" In this short sequence, which covers eight panels over four pages, Khan outlines the tensions in her life and how she sees a successful resolution emerging, as well as an awareness that she may have wished upon the Monkey's Paw.[4]

The obvious, initial tension rests between Khan and her parents. At a basic level, this is the reaction of a teenager. There may be a gender issue at

play—a young girl not being allowed to go to a party by herself—but nothing initially marks this tension as an immigrant issue. It is only when Khan begins to explain the situation that she brings her parents' point of origin into the discussion. Khan understands the issue as an immigrant issue, but as readers who know we have been guided to a similar understanding, we can ask whether she is conditioned to think this way by external factors. By having one point of difference, everything Khan does is projected as different, even if that difference is not objectively true.

The rest of the conversation happens in the shadow of the declaration of difference: "I'm . . . not [from] Karachi!" Her peers see her as from "there," and her parents fear her belonging "here." Khan does not dismiss her parents completely, but she places herself in Jersey City. As a result, her sense of beauty is shaped by the stereotypical all-American ideal of Carol Danvers. Khan's belief that she is not beautiful exists despite the fact that Bruno, a white classmate, has a crush on her, of which she seems to be unaware. Bruno's crush signals both that Khan is beautiful and that there are many definitions of American beauty.

Khan further sees beauty as something that needs to be sexualized. She wants Danvers's old "politically incorrect" costume, with a (p)leather look, high heels on thigh-high boots, and significantly more flesh revealed than with Danvers's current costume. Danvers warns Khan that this identity is not what she thinks it will be, but the wish is granted, and Khan immediately realizes that Danvers was right.

In the second issue, Khan, as she looks at her new form, thinks to herself, "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?" She is beginning to realize that that "American girl" is not who she is either (Landis 35). At the same time, when she hears the voice of Zoe—the classmate who was concern trolling her earlier—in danger, she reflexively turns into Danvers again, because she has "to be someone else. Someone cool." She describes her transformation upon hearing Zoe's voice as a "reflex," a "fake smile," because she feels uncomfortable in Zoe's presence. Her initial transformation is into the current Captain Marvel costume, but when she decides to save Zoe, she morphs into Danvers's Ms. Marvel costume. Her first instinct for comfort is the less sexualized, more controlled version of her hero, but as she comes out of hiding to perform a rescue, she switches to the sexualized presentation of her hero. Her intellectual understanding of what is practical and comforting to her and her social conditioning of what look would make her popular are coming into conflict (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 82; Kent 525). By

reflexively taking the form of her idol, Carol Danvers, the former Ms. Marvel and an almost archetypal representation of the American mainstream, Khan literally embodies the multiple pulls on her sense of self through appearance and action. Khan decides to save Zoe's life after remembering a verse from the Qur'an her father taught her.[5] Her guiding spiritual text is the Qur'an, and the verse acknowledges the relationship between Muslims and Jews. A similar passage to the one quoted in the comic is found in the Babylonian Talmud.

At Khan's time of stress, she may wish to look like those around her, but she goes back to the teachings of her parents and her faith. The push-pull forces on her identity continue to exert themselves. After spending some time in her idol's skin, she realizes that that identity is not hers either. After the heroic save, Khan thinks to herself, "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" (Wilson and Alphona v.1, i. 2). The adopted persona is uncomfortable, and solves none of what is really bothering her.

Khan's next full-body transformation happens in the third issue. She is losing control of her powers while in school, and she runs into the locker room to hide. She attempts to regain control of her powers and is moderately successful in maintaining the size of her body. When she tries to turn into someone other than Carol Danvers, she becomes her mother, although she says she was aiming for pop singer Taylor Swift.

Khan's conscious desire is still to turn to stereotypical standards of American beauty. However, in a time of stress, she once more turns into a personal hero, this time her mother. Carol Danvers and her Ammi are the two older women who have influenced Khan the most and who provide comfort to her in different ways. In the two figures she morphs into, we read the pulls on who she is/wants to be. While Danvers is her hero, she is also the epitome of America for Khan. At the same time, Khan cannot escape the obligations and teachings of her family, who have sacrificed for her success.

Khan, as a second-generation immigrant, would normally feel three pulls on her identity: her parents, the dominant culture surrounding her, and her peer group. Because her religion is a salient point in her characterization, it becomes another pole around which she can attempt to craft her own identity. In this situation of competing allegiances, it would be easy for Khan to suffer from moral injury. In sneaking out to the party, we believe that Khan will suffer from a moral injury. Her transformation to Danvers suggests to the reader that she will jettison parts of her identity in order to participate in a

dominant culture. However, in remembering religious teachings as transmitted by her father, she seeks to constitute herself as an American hero with multiple identifications. She is struggling to avoid that moral injury.

This navigation of multiple identifications to constitute something new is a hybridizing process. However, while the broad patterns of hybridization are fairly consistent, it is particularities of each instance that help us understand how Khan operates in her own specific hybridizing environment and what it is she symbolizes and is creating.

What Does the Hybrid Do?

Khan is situated in a metaphoric diaspora (Levy and Weingrod 7, 17). She has no desire to return to her parents' homeland of Pakistan, but she maintains an awareness of, and connection to, Pakistan. Her home, as she clearly articulated during her superhero transformation, is Jersey City. By virtue of having this diaspora consciousness, she rejects assimilation into the dominant cultural forms, without rejecting her host society. The result is that Khan is attempting to redefine how we conceive of the mainstream (Brah 210).

Many other essays in this volume deal with Khan and her fictional world through the lens of hybrid products.[6] My interest is more in the process than the product. That process is determined by the power structures of race and place, as well as time. It is also linked to an audience, presumably the readers of the series. Therefore, we must understand both the premises of hybridity and the potential process through which mass media may effect social change.

Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin argues for a dialogic where multiple meanings of a language can exist simultaneously (Bakhtin 426). Unlike the Hegelian dialectic, there is no need to push toward a resolution of thesis and antithesis. Competing ideas are in relation to one another and exist in a state of harmony, until a rupture occurs, which catalyzes a transformation of that relationship (Kristeva and Moi 58). The coexistence of multiple meanings of language, or the contact among different languages, is called *heteroglossia.* Languages can mix, but the relationship is inherently unequal. As Bakhtin says of the hybrid construction that comes out of heteroglossia,

> Languages that are crossed in it [the hybrid construction] relate to each other as do rejoinders in a dialogue; there is an argument between languages, an argument between styles of language. But it is

> not a dialogue in a narrative sense, nor in the abstract sense; rather it is a dialogue between points of view, each with its own concrete language that cannot be translated into the other. (Bakhtin 75–76)

In this meeting of languages, it is possible that the dominant language can incorporate the weaker language without losing its character (Saussure 194). Bakhtin's view, an alternative to this incorporation, is that the dominant language is so changed that it becomes something new and enters into a new relationship with a different language. What is more likely is that both languages constantly change each other, redefining what is "normal."

While Bakhtin is interested in languages, his work is adaptable to culture as well. Cultural theorist Homi Bhabha argues that it is in the meeting of cultural systems and the ways that the meeting is negotiated that a new culture is generated (Bhabha 38). We can understand that productive, generative space in the hyphen of American racial and ethnic identity labels like "South Asian–American." The hyphen represents that space where the South Asian and American cultural systems come into contact and create something new.

What Is the "New" of Kamala Khan?

However, in this construction, the power dynamic is also visible. "South Asian" and "American" are presented as irreducible entities that cannot be merged. No matter how many generations descendants of immigrants have been in the United States, phenotypically darker-skinned people are always portrayed as "immigrants." Culturally, "American" privileges the definition tied to legal citizenship from the founding of the country: free white person. Therefore, while the hyphen is a generative space, it is also the point at which the heteroglot relationship is fixed. At the same time, Bakhtin argues that there needs to be a rupture to create a new relationship, which becomes a new composite language. Sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee, mirroring the idea of the rupture, argue that when immigrants change the dominant culture, a new "composite culture" is created (Alba and Nee 10).

Kamala Khan, as a character, is embedded in a very particular set of power dynamics. She is located in New Jersey, across the river from New York, and can see the Manhattan skyline from parts of Jersey City. She is the child of immigrants, living in a multiethnic and multiracial neighborhood. While she seems to live in a comfortable environment from an economic perspective, it is not clear what the broader economic class of her fictional

city is within the run of comics we are investigating. Her parents come from Pakistan, and express different levels of religiosity in public. We have to be conscious of how Khan, as a post-9/11 young adult near New York City, is negotiating her space.

Khan's initial transformation into Carol Danvers does not provide the moment of rupture. It reinscribes the categories that already exist—white and not white, American and South Asian—and submits to the dominant power. By integrating the various parts of her identity, Khan maintains the existing relationship of power. However, slowly, over the course of the series, we see Khan offering a disruptive experience. She adapts her burkini, a piece of modest dress that she views negatively, into her superhero costume. She integrates the *dupatta*, a type of scarf worn by South Asian women, into her both her civilian and hero outfits.[7] These visual cues signal that the definition of "American" dress is broadening. Bruno is the only one of her friend circle whom she tells about her secret identity. Aamir becomes engaged to an African American Muslim later in the series. These social connections are more powerful indicators than dress of a changing social dynamic. They signify the changing nature of social networks, with Khan being the center of friends and family of Pakistan, Turkish, Italian, and African American heritages.

The reader sees all of these shifts in what is normal for Khan's world. In addition, they are met with a language, Urdu, that is sometimes glossed and sometimes not. The metonymic gap serves as invitation to the reader to make sense from context and enter into a conversation with the text. Other text, such as the prayer of thanks that Aamir offers in Arabic, remains totally untranslated, and readers are expected to treat it as normal, even if they do not recognize that Arabic is not a national language of Pakistan. While readers may not understand every reference, Khan, as a cultural object, still generates an affective response in the audience.

The basic mechanism of social change is derived from parasocial contact hypothesis (PCH), which argues that media can produce a sense of dissonance within a consumer that can create an attitude change (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes, "Parasocial Contact," 94). This attitude change is the rupture expected from heteroglossia. Although PCH emerges in the context of TV, comics offer a similar structure of serialized storytelling. The result is that the consumer is more inclined to identify with the characters (Schiappa, Gregg, and Hewes, "Can One TV Show," 20). If stories of difference and integration are organically told as part of the story as a whole, rather than as the dominant story, audiences are more receptive to the vision offered by the

story (Bell 134, 138, 149). As a result, the fact that we see Abu reading an ethnic paper or Ammi walking in front of a piece of calligraphy seems to function to allow the reader to make sense of the composite culture of the house.

If the hybrid is an ongoing process, because of the dialogic of power and belonging, we expect the story to adapt to address the new ways in which power systems seek to exclude difference from cultural citizenship. The hybrid product of Khan calling her father "Abu" will not always be sufficient to effect change. We see some of that shift happening within the first pages of Ms. Marvel. When Zoe asks Nakia if she will suffer an honor killing, we as readers are aware of the rhetoric around Muslim women needing saving (c.f., Abu-Lughod). Nakia's dismissal of Zoe's concern is also for the benefit of the reader, who is also being told that this story of weak, abused Muslim women is not actually the story of Muslim women. We quickly understand that the concern of the teenage Muslim women of Jersey City are the concerns of teenagers in general: what to eat, what to wear, who to hang out with, and what to do for fun. Although a full analysis of later Kamala Khan stories is outside the scope of this anthology, we see the series delve into Khan's relationship and connection to South Asia, which continues to push the dialogic, as readers become integrated into Khan's New Jersey identification.

Representing the Real World

This social transformation we experience as readers is a demonstration of PCH. In addition, the Khan story is representative of how quotidian interactions affect relationships and notions of belonging in real life (c.f., Allport). Some critics remain concerned, however, that simply consuming South Asian "products" like *Ms. Marvel* can result in a focus on the product, over the process and power dynamics that produced the product (Hutnyk 38, 102). The result is that the acceptance of the product does not make the producers any more real and may make the producers seem more abstract to the consumers (Kalra 23).

While the commodification of cultures of marginalized communities is an important concern, it does not negate the ways in which social contact effects change. For example, "Radoslav's Chicken Salan" is both a marker of potential segmented assimilation and the recognition that societal norms shift as a result of integration. When Khan describes the BLT at the Circle Q as "delicious, delicious infidel meat," not only does her non-Muslim, non-Pakistani friend Bruno understand the context of the comment, but he is also

able to respond in a way that indicates more than a surface understanding. He says, "[E]ither eat the bacon or stick to your principles." His retort demonstrates that he knows that, for Khan, not eating the bacon is truly a matter of principle, not just something that she is mimicking from her parents. He forces her to confront what is important to her, and that knowledge comes from connection and transformation. Khan accepts the chiding because their relationship is one of mutual change and acceptance.

These two examples that illustrate social and personal transformation are the most obvious ones in the first collection of Ms. Marvel. While there are more detailed and sustained examples in later Ms. Marvel stories that demonstrate similar points, these two points early in Khan's story reveal the details of her world and determine how the hybrid is generated: for Khan, through food and dress, as well as through the pressure of her race, religion, and gender, and the status of her parents as immigrants.

Conclusion

In order to fully understand Kamala Khan as an immigrant, we need to understand the sociology that defines her sense of belonging within the dominant American narrative and how she may change that narrative to integrate herself into it. The result is a hybrid process, which gives us further insight into the sociology of immigrants and the social change they are making—which, in turn, alters the hybrid process. This loop is the diachronic approach to understanding how hybridization and social change happen in society, as opposed to the synchronic approach, which focuses on the hybrid product.

This sort of investigation offers an important way to understand and think about the work that Ms. Marvel is doing in and with the real world. It also demonstrates the need for a religious literacy that does not overdetermine the role of religion. Khan is Muslim, which is a necessary part of understanding her as a character. But she is defined by her ethnicity, her parents' point of origin, her class, her gender, her sexuality, and the environment in which she lives. To read her as a Muslim superhero, instead of as a superhero who is Muslim, flattens her character and misses the ways in which she is doing important cultural work (Yanora 127; Pumphrey 792).[8]

In fact, religious literacy is dependent on this very type of cultural study. Religion does not exist separately from the lived realities of people, so to understand how religion functions, we need to understand their material

conditions. Shifting to this sort of methodology moves us from doing a type of theological work, to understanding religion as a performed and lived tradition (During 1; King 53; Moore 79–80).

Khan is not a Muslim in an abstract sense. She is a living character who interacts with her faith as her situation demands. She is a Muslim of South Asian descent whose parents were immigrants to the United States. Understanding her ethnic and racial situation is as important as—if not more important than—her religion when comprehending what she experiences in the world. She lives in a multiethnic environment and sees the world through the lens of those who need help and whom she can help. Her allies and accomplices come from all the walks of life that make up Jersey City. She cannot escape the history of the attacks on New York City, but that history does not curtail her potential.

All of these histories and identifications help to develop Khan's identity. She, in turn, interacts with her wider world and the real-world audience of Ms. Marvel. It is the dialogic of all these relationships that invites the reader into her world and offers a rupture that helps the reader see the world in a new way. When Khan saves Zoe from drowning, it is the Muslim who does the saving of a white person, not the other way around. This moment is a moment of rupture. Expectations are inverted (Yanora 127).

The more nuanced Khan is as a character, the more the reader has to understand about her reality and to reflect on the structures of the real world. As G. Willow Wilson has argued, it is not diversity for the sake of diversity that brings people to this series, but particularity (Triece and Lacy 3).[9] By remembering that Khan is an immigrant, we are rewarded with a deft handling of a character who allows us to see all of her, not just one facet.

NOTES

1. See "The Only Nerdy Pakistani-American-Slash-Inhuman in the Entire Universe," in part 2 of this book.

2. The comic text is: "Allahoma batik lana fima razaqtana waqina ath—" (Wilson, *Ms. Marvel*: *No Normal,* v. 1, i. 1). The full prayer is most likely:

> اللهم بارك فيما رزقتنا و عذاب النار بسم الله
> Allahuma bārik fīmā razaqtanā ʿadhāb an-nār bismillah.
> Oh God, bless the food you have provided and protect us from Hellfire. In the name of God.

3. See Dagbovie-Mullins and Berlatsky in this book for reference to a "Radoslav's Vietnamese grocery." If connected to Radoslav's chicken curry, this restaurant/grocery is hybridity run amok to a late-capitalist conclusion.

4. Supernatural "three wishes" short story by W. W. Jacobs, first published in 1902.

5. As quoted in the comic, the selection is, "Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all mankind—and whoever **saves** one person, it is as if he has **saved all of mankind**." The full verse of 5:32, using Ali Quli Qarai's translation, follows: "That is why We decreed for the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul, without [its being guilty of] manslaughter or corruption on the earth, is as though he had killed all mankind, and whoever saves a life is as though he had saved all mankind. Our apostles certainly brought them manifest signs, yet even after that many of them commit excesses on the earth."

6. See chapters in this book by Baldanzi and Dagbovie-Mullins/Berlatsky.

7. See Peterson in this volume for a more in-depth discussion of Khan's sartorial choices.

8. For a reading of a more "Muslim" character, see Davis and Westerfelhaus.

9. Also see Baldanzi, in this volume.

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