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# Drawing Fear of Difference

## Race, Gender, and National Identity in *Ms. Marvel* Comics

**Dean Cooper-Cunningham**

University of Copenhagen

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Feminist scholars have provided important analyses of the gendered and racialised discourses used to justify the Global War on Terror. They show how post-9/11 policies were made possible through particular binary constructions of race, gender, and national identity in official discourse. Turning to popular culture, this article uses a Queer feminist poststructuralist approach to look at the ways that *Ms. Marvel* comics destabilise and contest those racialised and gendered discourses. Specifically, it explores how *Ms. Marvel* provides a reading of race, gender, and national identity in post-9/11 USA that challenges gendered-racialised stereotypes. Providing a Queer reading of *Ms. Marvel* that undermines the coherence of Self/Other binaries, the article concludes that to write, draw, and circulate comics and the politics they depict is a way of intervening in international relations that imbues comics with the power to engage in dialogue with and (re)shape systems of racialised-gendered domination and counter discriminatory legislation.

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### **Keywords**

Popular Culture, Identity, Queer Feminist Poststructuralism

Feminist International Relations (IR) scholars have provided important analyses of the gendered discourses used to justify the US-led Global War on Terror. These works, especially those grounded in postcolonial feminisms and feminist security studies, address the Bush Administration's securitization of Islam, the mission to 'save' brown women, and the accompanying constructions of Muslim women, femininity, masculinity, Americanness, and racialised Others<sup>1</sup>. They do important and necessary work to show, identify, and destabilise the gendered and racialised nature of the official discourses constituting the Global War on Terror. A central concern in feminist IR has been critiquing the dichotomies upon which these types of discourses are founded (e.g., 'oppressed Muslim woman' versus 'liberated Western woman') as well as finding ways in which they are destabilised. A focus on how these dichotomies are destabilised and contested is important because it both reveals the power relations sanctioned by Self/Other binaries that structure international politics and enables ways of thinking about identity and subjectivity<sup>2</sup> in plural and non-binary ways. This provides space for an analysis of the complex intersections and ambiguities of race, gender, and national identity as well as their associated power structures.

Using Lene Hansen's intertextual model of discourse analysis, which suggests an analytical focus on popular culture, this article examines how dichotomies are troubled and contested through comic books<sup>3</sup>. Rather than studying official discourses about the Global War on Terror alone, which postcolonial and feminist security studies scholars have already meticulously done<sup>4</sup>, this article looks at the types of contestation comics offer; how constructions of race, gender, and national identity in official and wider policy discourses are disturbed and contested in and by popular culture. This speaks to questions about the politics of identity, subjectivity, representation, and the visual. Particularly, how identities are represented and power structures (re)produced and undermined through the visual.

The article explores how new *Ms. Marvel* comics featuring Kamala Khan as their protagonist (since 2013) provide a reading of race, gender, and national identity in post-9/11 USA that destabilises binary categorisations and provides space for a more complex logic of identity. This complexity allows individuals' multiple intersecting identities—and their competing interests—to be recognised and people

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<sup>1</sup> Including, *inter alia*: Miriam Cooke, 'Saving Brown Women', *Signs* 28, no. 1 (2002): 468–70; Laura Shepherd, 'Veiled References: Constructions of Gender in the Bush Administration Discourse on the Attacks on Afghanistan Post-9/11', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 19–41; Meghana Nayak, 'Orientalism and "Saving" US State Identity after 9/11', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8, no. 1 (2006): 42–61; Cynthia Weber, 'Not without My Sister(s): Imagining a Moral America in *Kandahar*', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 7, no. 3 (2005): 371; Melanie Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner "Abuse" in Abu Ghraib and the Question of "Gender Equality"', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 9, no. 1 (2007): 38–59.

<sup>2</sup> I follow a poststructuralist understanding of identity as discursive, political, relationally constituted, and social. When referring to identity, I mean collectively articulated constructions and codes, not individual level 'identity'. On this, subjectivity refers to the possibilities of identification that are constituted discursively. See: Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., Nayak, 'Orientalism'; Shepherd, 'Veiled References'; Meghana Nayak and Christopher Malone, 'American Orientalism and American Exceptionalism: A Critical Rethinking of US Hegemony', *International Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2009): 253–76; Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, Desire and Violence'.

to occupy subject positions that are *both/and* not *either/or*. *Ms. Marvel* comics have been hailed by critics for their ability to challenge gendered-racialised assumptions and constructions of Muslims<sup>5</sup>. I use them to theorise race, gender, and nationality from an International Relations perspective. This is not only a way of unpacking and analysing discourses in the Global War on Terror beyond the official statements studied elsewhere but focusing on an artefact that is actively doing—or is at least praised as doing—the destabilisation of gendered-racialised dichotomies that feminist scholars are concerned with.

Building on postcolonial and feminist security studies works, I offer a Queer feminist poststructuralist analysis that is concerned with deconstructing fixed dichotomies in post-9/11 identity politics<sup>6</sup>. Given that the goal of this article is an analysis that actively thinks about destabilisation, I incorporate works from the Queer (IR) literature into what is a largely poststructuralist framework. Queer scholarship, with its affinities to (feminist) poststructuralism, its recognition that gender is always racialised and sexualised<sup>7</sup>, and its refusal to take a singular ‘proper object’ of analysis<sup>8</sup> (i.e., sexuality) is important because it encourages recognising the messiness, plurality and incommensurability of the constituent parts of one’s identity<sup>9</sup>. It also focuses on the delinking of constructed binaries that hold power by being made appear natural (e.g. male/female).

Using Cynthia Weber’s theorisation of Queer IR, this article foregrounds the plural logics of identity where a person can be “*both* one thing *and* another (plural, perverse), while simultaneously one thing *or* another (singular, normal)”, such as the normal ‘American’ and/or perverse ‘Muslim’<sup>10</sup>. Deconstructing dichotomies, destabilising and opening them up to a plural logic, allows for an account of subjectivity that enables one to be, for example, *both* Muslim *and* American while *simultaneously* being *either* Muslim *or* American, never signifying monolithically.

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<sup>5</sup> E.g., Aja Romano, ‘What Ms Marvel’s Rare 6th Printing Means for Diversity in Comics’, *The Daily Dot*, 19 July 2014, <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/ms-marvel-kamala-khan-gets-sixth-printing/>; Emine Saner, ‘Ms Marvel: Send for the Muslim Supergirl!’, *The Guardian*, 1 January 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/jan/01/ms-marvel-muslim-superhero-graphic-novel>; Aja Romano, ‘This Muslim-American Superhero Has Become a Real-World Protest Icon’, *Vox*, 2 February 2017, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/2/2/14457384/kamala-khan-captain-america-protest-icon>; Coco Khan, ‘All Hail Ms Marvel, a Young, Female Muslim Superhero for Our Times’, *The Guardian*, 17 May 2018, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/may/17/ms-marvel-female-muslim-superhero-kamala-khan>.

<sup>6</sup> Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (in IR) But Were Afraid to Ask: The “Queer Turn” in International Relations’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 46, no. 2 (2018): 7.

<sup>7</sup> Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’, 51.

<sup>8</sup> Queer scholarship is unstable, a shifting site of contestation that must remain open to different and expanding political purposes. Thus, there is no singular ‘proper object’ of Queer investigation: Queer work refuses gender to be solely the proper object of feminism, race that of post/decolonial scholarship, and sexuality that of Queer theory. Queer perspectives refuse a stable subject, instead analysing subject-making and identity as political processes. See: Judith Butler, ‘Critically Queer’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 17–32; Lauren Wilcox, ‘Queer Theory and the “Proper Objects” of International Relations’, *International Studies Review* 16, no. 4 (2014): 612–15; Cynthia Weber, *Queer International Relations: Sovereignty, Sexuality and the Will to Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14–15; Melanie Richter-Montpetit and Cynthia Weber, ‘Queer International Relations’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Richter-Montpetit and Weber, ‘Queer IR’; Weber, *Queer IR*, 40; Cathy Cohen, ‘Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 3 (1997): 437–65; Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 228.

<sup>10</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 40. Weber’s Queer theory is theoretically influenced by Barthes’ concept of the *and/or*. See: Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Malden: Blackwell, 1970).

*Ms. Marvel* is an important popular culture artefact that comes out of a multibillion-dollar global industry spanning a breadth of widely-consumed media. Comics are sites of knowledge—what Foucault calls the ‘archive’ that makes certain (re)presentations possible—about international relations<sup>11</sup>. Analysing them enhances our understanding of international (security) politics because they meld popular culture and politics in unexpected ways. *Ms. Marvel* is relevant for IR because its central motif is (in)security: the comic explores identity and the securitization of Islam in ways that allow for an engagement with the subject positions available in post-9/11 US-America. *Ms. Marvel* is apt for exploring identity dichotomies because of its protagonist’s complex identity: Ms. Marvel/Kamala Khan is a Muslim teen who was born in America to Pakistani immigrant parents *and* she is a superhero.

Kamala is irreducible to just one of these intersecting identities. It is pertinent to look at how the character deconstructs identity dichotomies by contesting hegemonic ideas that legitimated the Global War on Terror, especially since superhero comics is a genre in which gendered-sexualised-racialised norms and stereotypes—e.g., women as victims, hyperfeminine, sexually available and wearing anatomy-emphasising costumes—are often replicated or exaggerated<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, appropriations of Kamala as a symbol in order to protest Islamophobia, as discussed below, highlights *Ms. Marvel*’s political importance.

Exploring the complications and paradoxes involved in declaring ‘I am an American’, Weber interviewed soldiers and citizens who were ‘American’ in ways that contradicted the Bush administration’s conceptualisation of loyal and law-abiding ‘Americanness’<sup>13</sup>. Similarly, I use *Ms. Marvel* as an entry point for reading non-normative performances of race, gender, and national identity. Comics can destabilise identity dichotomies by contesting hegemonic ideas, bringing those who are often not represented (well) into focus<sup>14</sup>, enabling readers to imagine themselves and others otherwise<sup>15</sup>. Like Weber’s videos, *Ms. Marvel* exposes the paradoxes and complications of declarations like ‘I am American’, ‘I am Muslim’, ‘I am brown’, and/or ‘I am a woman’. These comics speak to questions about the politics of representation of women, people of colour, and Muslims, and the power that dichotomous identity categories hold over lived realities by exploring what it means to (not) embody the norm. Kamala’s varying performances as multiple different versions of Ms. Marvel not only call into question existing norms and prescribed

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); Iver Neumann, “‘Grab a Phaser, Ambassador’: Diplomacy in Star Trek”, *Millennium* 30, no. 3 (December 2001): 604.

<sup>12</sup> Miriam Kent, ‘Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine’, *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 3 (2015): 522–27; Aidan Diamond and Lauranne Poharec, ‘Introduction: Freaked and Othered Bodies in Comics’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8, no. 5 (2017): 402–16; Mel Gibson, ‘Comics and Gender’, in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy Cook, and Aaron Meskin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 287.

<sup>13</sup> Cynthia Weber, *I Am an American: Filming the Fear of Difference* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Lene Hansen, ‘Reading Comics for the Field of International Relations: Theory, Method and the Bosnian War’, *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 23 (2017): 582.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 216–17.

subject positions but simultaneously make visible those plural subject positions that were invisible – erased even – under binary formulations and discourses about identity<sup>16</sup>.

I show how *Ms. Marvel* and its characters destabilise institutionalised dichotomies found in post-9/11 US politics through a Queer reading of *Ms. Marvel* using three lenses: the Muslim/American, female/heroic, and presence/absence of whiteness. These are critical in the sense that they are not the common and institutionalised dichotomies linked by categories such as religion (Muslim/Christian) or nationality (American/Pakistani) that are prevalent in most (analyses of) identity-based politics<sup>17</sup>. They are more complicated and unsystematised (i.e., religion/nationality), which speaks to the complexity of subject-making processes.

This article falls in four parts. I first discuss how postcolonial and feminist security studies scholars have studied the Global War on Terror and the significance of dichotomies in identity construction. Then, I outline what it means to destabilise dichotomies. Third, I introduce *Ms. Marvel* comics, their storyline, reception, and the co-opting of Ms. Marvel as a protest icon. Lastly, I read *Ms. Marvel* through the aforementioned lenses to show how the comic destabilises binary logics of identity and opens up previously unseeable subjectivities.

## Gender Dichotomies and Post-9/11 Politics

Questions about identity go to the heart of IR scholarship, though much of this, including poststructuralist IR, as Ole Wæver demonstrates, theorises identity in dichotomous terms, principally because identity is predominantly analysed in situations of international (political, societal, military) (in)security<sup>18</sup>. A poststructuralist understanding of the social and political world is that both are constructed in discourse, broadly conceived as written, verbal, bodily, and visual representations<sup>19</sup>. Discourse is never purely verbal/textual: the visual and/or bodily show and tell stories in conjunction with and/or separately from text/word<sup>20</sup>. These representations constitute identities wherein certain bodies, actors, get meaning(s) attached to them through discourse<sup>21</sup>. This often takes place through processes of linking and differentiation in relation to others<sup>22</sup>. Discursive representations establish and impose (sexualised-gendered-racialised) subject positions that certain bodies can occupy<sup>23</sup>. The analysis below comes out of poststructuralism, which focuses on the subject positions *made* available, not on how

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 227, 334; Cohen, 'Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens', 480.

<sup>18</sup> Ole Wæver, 'Identity, Communities and Foreign Policy: Discourse Analysis as Foreign Policy Theory', in *European Integration and National Identity*, ed. Ole Wæver and Lene Hansen (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985); Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language*.

<sup>20</sup> Dean Cooper-Cunningham, 'Seeing (In)Security, Gender and Silencing: Posters in and about the British Women's Suffrage Movement', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 3 (2019).

<sup>21</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*; Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>22</sup> Wæver, 'Identity, Communities, and Foreign Policy'; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

<sup>23</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Said, *Orientalism*, xii–xiv.

people self-construct, which is a more hermeneutic approach<sup>24</sup>. This also follows a tradition in comics studies of examining representations: who is allowed to be what<sup>25</sup>.

Security discourses are potent and divisive, revolving around “a national Self facing one or more threatening Others” with radically different identities<sup>26</sup>. They aim to create stable links between particular (racialised-gendered-sexualised) identity representations and proposed policies<sup>27</sup>, usually drawing Manichean and temporally situated—i.e., backwards or progressive—boundaries between a ‘Self’ and an ‘Other’ to give meaning to a situation or event (e.g., ‘9/11’) and to construct the objects and actors within it (e.g., ‘USA’, ‘Islam’)<sup>28</sup>. To speak of the ‘American’ is to constitute the ‘non-American’; to speak of ‘Muslim’ is to constitute ‘non-Muslim’. There is always a failure in binary categorisations: they capture neither the complexity and multiple subjectivities of the individuals they claim to represent nor the naturalisation and political implications of identity dichotomies<sup>29</sup>. In post-9/11 USA, white, cisgender, heterosexual, Christian, Americanness is privileged, facilitating the consolidation of a single, proper, patriotic, American identity and the production of Other subject positions for non-white “Muslimified” bodies against which ‘Americanness’ cohered: ‘evil terrorist’ and ‘woman-to-be-saved’<sup>30</sup>.

The ‘terrorist’ figure and ‘terrorism’ are signs constituting a radical enemy Other who is barbaric, backwards, and dangerous<sup>31</sup>. Post-9/11, terrorism and ‘the terrorist’ figure were linked to radical Islamism<sup>32</sup>, which became symbolic of a civilizational fight between the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’. As Islam was equated with terrorism, particularly racialised non-white bodies were coded as Muslim through crude Orientalist generalisations<sup>33</sup>. Melanie Richter-Montpetit refers to these bodies as “Muslimified”: it is not about whether someone self-identifies as Muslim but if they are perceived and attributed as such<sup>34</sup>. Once the boundaries of the Others’ identity were established, individuals needed only to look, and thus be coded Arab/Muslim (i.e., brown, wearing supposedly ‘Middle Eastern’/‘Islamic’ dress) to be deemed suspect and potentially terrorist and ‘un-American’—what Puar calls the “terrorist-lookalike”<sup>35</sup>. ‘Muslim’ and ‘American’, despite the image of an American melting pot Weber identifies<sup>36</sup>, became mutually

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<sup>24</sup> While the analysis does consider the personal experience of creators this is not strictly speaking a study of self-identification and the agency therein.

<sup>25</sup> Diamond and Poharec, ‘Introduction’, 407.

<sup>26</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 6.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>30</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xv; Didier Bigo, ‘Security and Immigration: Toward a Critique of the Governmentality of Unease’, *Alternatives* 27, no. 1 (2002): 63–92; For discussions about the racialised-sexualised-gendered nature of ‘the evil terrorist’, see: Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Weber, *Queer IR*, chap. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*; Said, *Orientalism*, xiv.

<sup>32</sup> Clara Eroukhmanoff, ‘The Remote Securitisation of Islam in the US Post-9/11’, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no. 2 (2015): 246–65.

<sup>33</sup> Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>34</sup> Melanie Richter-Montpetit, ‘Beyond the Erotics of Orientalism: Lawfare, Torture and the Racial–Sexual Grammars of Legitimate Suffering’, *Security Dialogue* 45, no. 1 (2014): 45.

<sup>35</sup> Weber, *I Am an American*, 18; Jasbir Puar and Armit Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots’, *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117–48; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

<sup>36</sup> Weber, *I Am an American*.

exclusive<sup>37</sup>. This happened despite terrorism being neither a new phenomenon nor a religious- or culturally-specific tactic, and the figure of ‘the terrorist’ preceding the Global War on Terror<sup>38</sup>.

Using fear and hatred, Islam and Muslimified Others were constructed as the antithesis of the enlightened, civilised, democratic (White) ‘West’ and its citizens<sup>39</sup>. The Global War on Terror centred on this gendered-racialised-sexualised construction of a threatening and demonic Islamic terrorist figure. The salience of this discourse, and the justification for the Global War on Terror, Agathangelou and Ling argue, hinged on arguments about the demonic, undemocratic, uncivilised nature of Muslim(ified) Other(s) and their homeland(s), giving semblance of ontological stability to an ‘Us’ and ‘Them’<sup>40</sup>. Post-9/11, one can speak of a “war on terror culture” characterised by the exploitation of feelings of insecurity and an enduring securitization of Muslim(ified) individuals<sup>41</sup> that seeks the quarantining, eliminating, of terrorist “monsters”<sup>42</sup>.

Gender was mobilised to justify the Global War on Terror through a discourse about ‘saving’ Afghan and Iraqi ‘womenandchildren’<sup>43</sup> from the brutally repressive threat of al Qaeda, Saddam Hussein, the Taliban, and, generally, Islam<sup>44</sup>. This discourse, Tickner argues, focused on how the oppression of Arab and Muslim women proved Islamic terror and backwardness, and how their liberation confirmed Western civility<sup>45</sup>. Jessica Auchter and Laura Shepherd note how the veil became symbolic of “civilizational differences and identities”, a marker of absolute otherness, and what Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood call a “visible sign of an invisible enemy that threatens not only ‘us,’ citizens of the West, but our entire civilization”<sup>46</sup>. The unveiling of ‘Muslim women’ who had been “turned into invisible creatures without rights”, became justification and success criterion for the Global War on Terror<sup>47</sup>. Muslim women’s bodies became the site of (Western, heteropatriarchal, protectionist) power politics and their liberation a means for rallying domestic populations against the so-called Islamic threat<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> For further discussion, see: Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Puar and Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag’.

<sup>38</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, xiii–xiv; Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’, 46; Richter-Montpetit, ‘Beyond’.

<sup>40</sup> Anna Agathangelou and L.H.M. Ling, ‘The House of IR: From Family Power Politics to the Poisies of Worldism’, *International Studies Review* 6, no. 4 (2004): 33; Cooke, ‘Saving Brown Women’; Said, *Orientalism*, xii.

<sup>41</sup> Moustafa Bayoumi, *This Muslim American Life: Dispatches from the War on Terror* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 12; Sara Ahmed, ‘The Politics of Fear in the Making of Worlds’, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16, no. 3 (2003): 392; Eroukmanoff, ‘Remote Securitisation’.

<sup>42</sup> Puar and Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag’.

<sup>43</sup> Gendered discourses about women’s essential innocence and vulnerability construct women and children as indistinguishable, thereby infantilising women and producing a masculine protector/feminised protected binary.

<sup>44</sup> Cooke, ‘Saving Brown Women’; Lila Abu-Lughod, ‘Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?’, *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 783–90; Nayak, ‘Orientalism’; Weber, ‘Not without My Sister(s)’, 371.

<sup>45</sup> J.A. Tickner, ‘Feminist Perspectives on 9/11’, *International Studies Perspectives* 3 (2002): 340.

<sup>46</sup> Jessica Auchter, ‘Reimagining the Burqa: Farkhunda Zahra Naderi’s Campaign for Afghan Parliament’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 3 (2012): 371–73; Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, ‘Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency’, *Anthropological Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2002): 341; Shepherd, ‘Veiled References’.

<sup>47</sup> Auchter, ‘Reimagining the Burqa’, 373.

<sup>48</sup> Hirschkind and Mahmood, ‘Feminism’, 340–42.

Feminist security studies work has examined the construction of terrorist-linked women—what Caron Gentry calls “nefarious Lady al Qaeda” figures—who, associated with terrorist activity, are subsumed under a broad construction of hypermasculinised and virulent Islam that threatens Western security<sup>49</sup>. Gentry notes how the “all-consuming threat of radical Islam, al Qaeda, and the Taliban to the US” became a means of establishing boundaries between Self/Other as Muslim/American, two identities that post-9/11 were irreconcilable because of Islam’s association with terrorism and oppressive rules<sup>50</sup>. This, Richter-Montpetit as well as Nayak and Malone argue, is underpinned by the sexualised-gendered neo-Orientalism of imperial American protectionism, exceptionalism, and a will to dominate, which helped establish the binary between progressive and civilised (white) US and backwards radical (non-white) Islamist threat<sup>51</sup>. Weber and Jasbir Puar have shown how a particular racialised construction of US-American heterosexuality and gender order versus (Muslimified) terrorists’ sexual barbarism and gender disorder was essential to the Global War on Terror<sup>52</sup>. These find expression in post-9/11 praise for Huntington’s Clash of Civilisations and a Global War on Terror envisaged to protect ‘civilization’<sup>53</sup>.

Tying these discourses together is that, through binary *either/or* logics, they (re)construct ‘American’, ‘Muslim’, ‘feminine’, ‘masculine’, and ‘Middle Eastern’ identities. Postcolonial and feminist security studies works draw attention to how, for example, Muslim women were discursively constructed as victims to justify an imperial civilisation-saving and civilising mission in official discourse<sup>54</sup>. What follows below is an analysis of how those gendered and racialised *either/or* logics underpinning ‘Muslim’ and ‘woman’ are destabilised by civil society actors using popular culture. This is a crucial step for complicating theorisations of identity: tracing the moments when the binary system is ruptured by those actors affected by their power.

While sexuality is not the primary focus here and I am interested in destabilising categories of gender, race, and national identity in the below reading of *Ms. Marvel*, this analysis draws on Butler and Weber’s theorisations of gender and Queer<sup>55</sup>. Both hold that sex, gender, and sexuality are intertwined to such a degree that constructions of acceptable gender/sex performances are always bound up in questions about non-/normative sexuality as well as race<sup>56</sup>. Weber’s work in particular links this to performances of

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<sup>49</sup> Caron Gentry, ‘The Mysterious Case of Aafia Siddiqui: Gothic Intertextual Analysis of Neo-Orientalist Narratives’, *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 45, no. 1 (2016): 3–24; Marysia Zalewski et al., ‘Roundtable Discussion: Reflections on the Past, Prospects for the Future in Gender and International Relations’, *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 1 (2008): 153–79; Linda Åhäll, ‘Motherhood, Myth and Gendered Agency in Political Violence’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 14, no. 1 (2012): 103–20.

<sup>50</sup> Gentry, ‘The Mysterious Case’, 7–8.

<sup>51</sup> Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’, 42; Nayak and Malone, ‘American Orientalism’; Gentry, ‘The Mysterious Case’, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 96–98; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, xii–xiii, xxiii–xxv, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>55</sup> One could go into a much deeper theoretical engagement with the differences, commonalities, and compatibilities of Queer, feminism, de-/postcolonialism, and poststructuralism than is offered here but that goes beyond the scope of the analysis.

<sup>56</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, ‘Critically Queer’; Weber, *Queer IR*.

national identity<sup>57</sup>. Reading *Ms. Marvel* through a Queer lens inherently seeks to disrupt the aforementioned racialised, paternalistic, masculinist, heterosexed discourses that justified the War on Terror and made certain Muslimified bodies (un)liveable<sup>58</sup>. As such, I reiterate Weber's refusal to disconnect a Queer analysis from consideration of (non-normative) sexes, genders, and/or sexualities; that Queer, albeit committed to undermining the logics of normativity, is not just everything non-normative<sup>59</sup>. Similar to poststructuralism, Queer scholarship is committed to analysing subject-making processes and "unsystematized" lines of linking/differentiation<sup>60</sup>.

## Destabilising Dichotomies

The dichotomies underpinning discursive constructions of identity are never fixed, stable, and unalterable: they can always be challenged, deconstructed, eschewed<sup>61</sup>. While certain dichotomies (e.g., male/female) are constituted as natural, this does not mean they are<sup>62</sup>. Slippages, instabilities, and contestations are important sites for analysis because they demonstrate the political, ordering power of dichotomies and the subjectivities they produce, as well as the potential for rethinking and reframing particular (securitized) identities and opening new political space(s)<sup>63</sup>. Queer scholarship eschews binary logics forcing a choice between one term *or* another to understand the "true meaning" of a person, text, act in favour of multiplicity<sup>64</sup>.

Destabilising, Queering, dichotomies means acknowledging and addressing the always-shifting intersections, contentions, and multiple (polysemic) meanings that go into the social construction, maintenance/subversion, reading, and performance of identities<sup>65</sup>. To complicate theorisations of identity requires two moves. The first, which feminist analyses theorising gender as socially constructed do, is understanding how race or gender identities are essentialised and then examining the power in that construction. The second, a move associated with poststructuralism and Queer, requires tracing the moments when the binary system is challenged, where 'coherent' categories are questioned and identity shown to be always-shifting, myriad, "malleable and transformable"—a doing<sup>66</sup>.

The implications of this second move are destabilising and productive. They are destabilising by refusing to give dichotomies 'naturalness', which allows critics to expose and intervene in power relations

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<sup>57</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*; Cynthia Weber, 'Performative States', *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 27, no. 1 (1998): 77–95; Cynthia Weber, *Faking It: U.S. Hegemony in a Post-Phallic Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); See also: Richter-Montpetit, "'Queer Turn' in IR"; Richter-Montpetit, 'Empire, Desire and Violence'; Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Puar and Rai, 'Monster, Terrorist, Fag'.

<sup>58</sup> Wilcox, 'Queer Theory', 615; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>59</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 15–16; Nicola J. Smith and Donna Lee, 'What's Queer about Political Science?', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17, no. 1 (2015): 52.

<sup>60</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66.

<sup>61</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 20–21; Weber, *Queer IR*.

<sup>62</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

<sup>63</sup> Hansen, *Security as Practice*, 41–42, 63.

<sup>64</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 40.

<sup>65</sup> Richter-Montpetit and Weber, 'Queer IR'; Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 199.

<sup>66</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 216.

structured, for example, by race, gender, and nationality. There is a destabilising operation in de-linking established dichotomies such as male as juxtaposed to female. This destabilisation is also made in analysing, for example, how ‘female’ might be juxtaposed to ‘heroism’. Vis-à-vis productiveness, established subject positions are reworked by refusing entrenched identity norms and dichotomies, thus exposing non-binary subject positions.

Despite dealing with themes such as identity, the state, and security, Queer scholarship has previously been treated as unrelated to IR<sup>67</sup>. However, heightened interest in Queer approaches within IR has engendered discussions of a ‘Queer turn’, collapsing the artificial divide between the two<sup>68</sup>. This is partly owed to Cynthia Weber’s work, from which I draw. Using Barthes’ *and/or* rule, Weber argues that one must “appreciate how a person...is constituted by and simultaneously embodies multiple, seemingly contradictory meanings” that complicate an *either/or* binary<sup>69</sup>. Deconstructing dichotomies, shifting away from reductionist categorisations and following a plural logic of subjectivity, a person can, for example, be *both* Muslim *and* American while *simultaneously* being *either* Muslim *or* American. This can be because they are read and coded as *either* Muslim *or* American while also being read as *both* Muslim *and* American or some combination that does not fall on one side of the slash between constructed binary identities. A Queer approach allows for the content of identity categories to be questioned and radically politicised<sup>70</sup> while also exposing their insufficiency<sup>71</sup>.

To recognise plurality, thereby defying dichotomous identity constitutions, is to destabilise and challenge the social, cultural, and political effects of ordering principles—like racialised, gendered, and sexualised norms—that accompany *either/or* identity politics and play out on people’s bodies<sup>72</sup>. Thereby, norms, and normativity become confused, undermining the ‘rationality’ behind Self/Other politics and the American/Muslim, civilised/barbaric, masculine/feminine, heroic/victim dichotomies that structure post-9/11 security politics and readings of individuals as either threatening or non-threatening<sup>73</sup>.

One of the places where one finds this destabilisation is in popular culture artefacts such as comics. Comics studies has addressed the ways comics challenge dominant gendered-racialised norms and perspectives<sup>74</sup>. While popular culture frequently (re)produces Self/Other, good/evil, hero/villain dichotomies, it can be a space for counterhegemonic discourses<sup>75</sup>. Readers often encounter foreign lands

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<sup>67</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 13; Richter-Montpetit and Weber, ‘Queer IR’.

<sup>68</sup> Richter-Montpetit, “‘Queer Turn’ in IR’.

<sup>69</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 40.

<sup>70</sup> Cohen, ‘Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens’, 480–81.

<sup>71</sup> Wilcox, ‘Queer Theory’.

<sup>72</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 41; Cohen, ‘Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens’, 481.

<sup>73</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 42.

<sup>74</sup> e.g., Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (Columbia University Press, 2010); see: Diamond and Poharec, ‘Introduction’ for an overview.

<sup>75</sup> Daniel Nexon and Iver Neumann, eds., *Harry Potter and International Relations* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 19; David Shim, ‘Sketching Geopolitics: Comics and the Case of the Cheonan Sinking’, *International Political Sociology* 11, no. 4 (2017): 401; Edward Said, ‘Homage to Joe Sacco’, in *Palestine*, by Joe Sacco (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2002).

and marginal or silenced ideas and voices through comics<sup>76</sup> such that—as argued of images—comics function as outlets for critiques and voices that have been suppressed, structurally silenced, and/or ignored<sup>77</sup>. Artists and authors often engage with politics and hegemonic power constellations such as patriarchy and racism<sup>78</sup>, thereby reflecting and contesting “general cultural themes and assumptions”<sup>79</sup> and destabilising the politics and power constellations in radical Self/Other constructions accompanied by representations of a monstrous ‘Other’<sup>80</sup>. This is important since media is powerful in “developing, reinforcing, and validating” as well as critiquing “stereotypical beliefs and expectations” of gendered-racialised bodies<sup>81</sup>.

Comics can defy “boundaries of the common-sense”, contesting taken-for-granted discourses about racialised-gendered bodies, and, as Said argues, wreaking “havoc with the logic of a+b+c+d”<sup>82</sup>.

Kamala/Ms. Marvel can be constituted as American, heroic, and passing as white but she might equally be constituted as a subjugated Pakistani Muslim teen: she can be constituted differently at various parts of the comic but also as multiple subjects at once. As Queer scholarship shows, the constitution of subjectivity is never final. There are always gaps, dissonances, and opportunities that allow subjectivity to be read through other intertexts and in different context, which generate new readings<sup>83</sup>.

### *Ms. Marvel* Comics: a brief introduction

Every reading of a text is intertextually located, which is to say that all texts are read through multiple other texts and discourses by different audiences<sup>84</sup>. The point, here, is not to give *the* reading of *Ms. Marvel*, the subject positions enabled and foreclosed by the comic, and the identities it destabilises. Rather, it is to give a reading that shows how dichotomous subject positions found in official post-9/11 discourses are destabilised and identity’s complexity shown by and in popular culture. This reading enhances understandings of the international by locating the ways gendered-racialised security politics plays out on bodies and how this is negotiated.

To understand the deconstructive work of *Ms. Marvel* comics after the introduction of Kamala Khan, some background is necessary. *Ms. Marvel* was first launched as a book in 1977 (Figure 1) with a white, blonde-haired, stereotypically feminine protagonist, Carol Danvers. At the time, she was—as Kelly Sue

<sup>76</sup> Said, ‘Homage to Joe Sacco’, ii.

<sup>77</sup> Andrew Kunka, ‘Comics, Race, and Ethnicity’, in *The Routledge Companion to Comics*, ed. Frank Bramlett, Roy Cook, and Aaron Meskin (New York: Routledge, 2016), 275–85; Hansen, ‘Reading Comics’, 604; Cooper-Cunningham, ‘Seeing (In)Security’.

<sup>78</sup> Hansen, ‘Reading Comics’; Sarah Harris, ‘The Monster Within and Without: Spanish Comics, Monstrosity, Religion, and Alterity’, in *Representing Multiculturalism in Comics and Graphic Novels*, ed. Carolene Ayaka and Ian Hague (New York: Routledge, 2014), 113–29; Leonard Rifas, ‘Race and Comix’, in *Multicultural Comics: From Zap to Blue Beetle*, ed. Frederick Aldama (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2010), 27–38.

<sup>79</sup> Nexon and Neumann, *Harry Potter*, 14; Rifas, ‘Race and Comix’; Chute, *Graphic Women*, 136.

<sup>80</sup> Harris, ‘The Monster Within and Without’; Diamond and Poharec, ‘Introduction’, 405–6.

<sup>81</sup> Osei Appiah, ‘Cultural Voyeurism: A New Framework for Understanding Race, Ethnicity, and Mediated Intergroup Interaction’, *Journal of Communication* 68, no. 2 (2018): 234; Michael Shapiro, *Reading the Postmodern Polity: Political Theory as Textual Practice* (Minneapolis: University Press of Minnesota Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Said, ‘Homage to Joe Sacco’, ii; Diamond and Poharec, ‘Introduction’, 407.

<sup>83</sup> Wilcox, ‘Queer Theory’; Butler, ‘Critically Queer’.

<sup>84</sup> Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

DeConnick argues was common of all female heroes—conceived of as the “boobed” female counterpart, a “side dish”, to then-male Captain Marvel, Mar-Vell<sup>85</sup>. While DeConnick over-simplifies and Mel Gibson shows how there is more complexity to Danvers, her representation is problematic for various reasons<sup>86</sup>. Danvers’ superpowers and figure-hugging costume—high-heeled boots, long black gloves, tiny shorts, and red crop top—were derived from Mar-Vell, replicating male/female, masculine/feminine, hero/sidekick dichotomies. An officer in the US Air Force, Danvers is portrayed as an “all-American blonde bombshell” serving her country—a “good soldier”<sup>87</sup>. In 2012, after Mar-Vell’s death, Danvers becomes Captain Marvel. This is important because Danvers is Kamala Khan’s predecessor as Ms. Marvel and her idol and leader as Captain Marvel.



Figure 1. Issue #1 of *Ms. Marvel* (1977) featuring Carol Danvers as Ms. Marvel

In 2013, *Ms. Marvel* was relaunched as Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American-Muslim born in New Jersey. She is the first Muslim superhero with a solo comic series, which is significant in the post-9/11 context replete with problematic representations of Muslims<sup>88</sup>. As a second-generation Pakistani-American

<sup>85</sup> Laura Hudson, ‘Kelly Sue DeConnick on the Evolution of Carol Danvers to Captain Marvel’, *Comics Alliance*, 19 March 2012, <http://comicsalliance.com/kelly-sue-deconnick-captain-marvel/>.

<sup>86</sup> Mel Gibson, ‘Who Does She Think She Is? Female Comic-Book Characters, Second-Wave Feminism, and Feminist Film Theory’, in *Superheroes and Identities* (Taylor and Francis, 2014).

<sup>87</sup> Kent, ‘Unveiling Marvels’, 523; Hudson, ‘Evolution of Carol Danvers’.

<sup>88</sup> Kent, ‘Unveiling Marvels’, 523; Puar and Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag’; Richter-Montpetit, ‘Beyond’.

teenager living in New Jersey with her parents and brother, who migrated to the US before she was born, Kamala is a US citizen. Readers follow Khan/Ms. Marvel's daily confrontations with Islam-paranoid America throughout.

In issue #1, after sneaking out to a party against her parents' wishes, Kamala gets caught in Terrigen Mist, which activates her super-powers<sup>89</sup>. She can self-heal and manipulate (“embiggen”) her body, e.g. getting smaller or larger, changing appearance. Neither Kamala's appearance as herself nor as Ms. Marvel conform with the hyper-femininity/-sexualisation of women common in superhero comics. However, it is only after trialling and disliking what Kamala calls “the classic, politically incorrect” (issue #1) superhero look where she is *identical* to Captain Marvel (issues #1-4)—in “giant wedge heels” and with white skin—that Kamala fashions a loose-fitting costume from a burkini (issue #4). From the end of issue #4, Ms. Marvel is performed in Kamala's image rather than “a watered-down version of” Danvers' hypersexualised Ms. Marvel (issue #5). This speaks to all three of the lenses used below: how whiteness is present/absent; how, in Kamala, we have a female hero; and how the Muslim/American dichotomy that emerged post-9/11 is complicated by a Muslim who is *and/or* is not American. Kamala's body occupies, exceeds, and reworks various dichotomies such that they are no longer coherent juxtapositions<sup>90</sup>.

I focus on two collected volumes of *Ms. Marvel*: ‘No Normal’ (issues #1-5) and ‘Civil War II’ (issues #7-12)<sup>91</sup>. The former because it was Ms. Marvel's debut as a Pakistani-Muslim-American; the latter because it intersects with the Marvel-universe-wide ‘Civil War II’ crossover storyline. Both ask political questions: the former about negotiating life as brown and Muslim in America<sup>92</sup>; the latter, whether pre-emptive action is justifiable and moral. The plot of the ‘Civil War II’ crossover series is a struggle between superheroes about whether the Inhuman<sup>93</sup> Ulysses Cain should use his ability to calculate the probability of events taking place, which is essentially a question about pre-emptive action. Both volumes are distinct points in the comic and character's development: namely, Ms. Marvel's (re)introduction on the one hand, and involvement in a universe-wide story that tackles current and past political realities and major events on the other. A recurring theme in ‘No Normal’ is Kamala's desire to be a “normal” American teenager who can go to parties and drink, and her struggle to balance being a superhero with her already complex, competing subjectivities. ‘Civil War II’ focuses on an allegorical Global War on Terror where Kamala/Ms. Marvel and Danvers/Captain Marvel disagree about crime prevention strategies. This raises questions about “profiling”, “predictive justice”, and actions such as detention and denial of *habeas corpus* plaguing the War on Terror.

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<sup>89</sup> G. Willow Wilson, *No Normal*, vol. 1, Ms. Marvel (New York: Marvel, 2014).

<sup>90</sup> Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 217.

<sup>91</sup> Wilson, *No Normal*; G. Willow Wilson, *Civil War II*, vol. 6, Ms. Marvel (New York: Marvel, 2016) Note: ‘Civil War II’ does not follow directly from ‘No Normal’: *Ms. Marvel* issue numbering was reset in 2015.

<sup>92</sup> Kent, ‘Unveiling Marvels’, 523.

<sup>93</sup> In the *Marvel* universe, Inhumans are genetically modified humans.

### *Reception and Readings*

I begin with *Ms. Marvel's* production context and reception because it has been discussed and appropriated for its ability to destabilise gendered-racialised assumptions about and constructions of Muslims. As discourse ascribing meaning to *Ms. Marvel*, its creators' words encourage certain readings of *Ms. Marvel*<sup>94</sup>. G. Willow Wilson and Sana Amanat say they draw on their experiences as Muslims, women, and teenagers in America. When considering its reception, it is important to note that they position *Ms. Marvel* as a critical work contesting hegemonic discourses and disturbing post-9/11, Islamophobic identity politics. They also argue *Ms. Marvel* is about demystifying Islam and has an explicitly feminist politics targeting exclusionary, discriminatory politics<sup>95</sup>. By mixing struggles and storylines with which most readers can identify—namely, one's teen years—with those specific to Muslim(ified) bodies, they endeavour to challenge stereotypes of Muslims, complicate Americanness, and show how Muslims and immigrants are not radically different from white, 'homegrown Americans' as they were constructed post-9/11<sup>96</sup>. This somewhat problematically masks difference with similarity and relatability—'look we're the same'<sup>97</sup>—which may reify, not destabilise, a Muslim/American binary: it reproduces Muslim in opposition to American *and* shows each part's likeness, thereby (re)producing white, Christian, Americanness as the norm to which all else must be measured against and aimed for<sup>97</sup>.

Nonetheless, *Ms. Marvel* has been highly praised. It topped the *New York Times*' bestseller list, achieved a rare seventh printing, was nominated for multiple awards, and received substantial media attention<sup>98</sup>. Some consider it "progressive" and "overdue"<sup>99</sup>. Others, amid speculation of a movie, have opined that the world needs *Ms. Marvel* because Muslims—not just since 9/11 but the Middle Ages when the ("militant" Islamic) Orient figure was constructed as a constant threat to the socio-political fabric of white Christian Europe—"have been portrayed with suspicion [and] threat" for too long<sup>100</sup>. Much of this praise centres on the types of representation and visibility *Ms. Marvel* offers, and the hope that comes with its message. Railing against the unabated portrayal of Muslims as threatening and Other in media and popular culture, the positive response to *Ms. Marvel* suggests audiences are receptive to characters who destabilise the status quo. However, the comic has been criticised for tokenistic diversification<sup>101</sup>,

<sup>94</sup> Lene Hansen, 'Theorizing the Image for Security Studies: Visual Securitization and the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis', *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 1 (2011): 51–74.

<sup>95</sup> Jia Tolentino, 'The Writer Behind a Muslim Marvel Superhero on Her Faith in Comics', *The New Yorker*, 29 April 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/g-willow-wilsons-american-heroes>; George Gustines, 'Marvel Comics Introducing a Muslim Girl Superhero', *The New York Times*, 5 November 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/06/books/marvel-comics-introducing-a-muslim-girl-superhero.html>;

Alex Vietmeier, *Sana Amanat Talks Ms. Marvel - Late Night with Seth Meyers*, YouTube, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWxWwewXJbU>.

<sup>96</sup> Tolentino, 'The Writer Behind'; Vietmeier, *Sana Amanat Talks*; Kent, 'Unveiling Marvels'; Saner, 'Ms Marvel'.

<sup>97</sup> Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*; Kent, 'Unveiling Marvels'.

<sup>98</sup> Romano, 'What Ms Marvel's Rare 6th Printing Means for Diversity in Comics'.

<sup>99</sup> Romano, 'Muslim-American Superhero'; Tolentino, 'The Writer Behind'.

<sup>100</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 59–60, 74; Khan, 'All Hail Ms Marvel'.

<sup>101</sup> Kent, 'Unveiling Marvels'.

reinforcing “tired stereotypes of men of colour”<sup>102</sup>, and the target of Islamophobic right-wing backlash, that suggests *Ms. Marvel*’s existence is “Sharia creep”—Islam’s invasion of America<sup>103</sup>.

Comics are increasingly repurposed for political agendas and causes beyond their creators’ control. *Ms. Marvel* has been appropriated across various media as a symbol of tolerance and progress. She is regarded as an “emblem of protest against Islamophobia” that destabilises hegemonic constructions of racialised and gendered ‘American’, ‘Muslim’, and ‘Muslim-American’ identities<sup>104</sup>. Her image has become a symbol against discriminatory, Islamophobic, anti-immigrant politics (Figure 2, Figure 3), and her stylisation, politics and imagery appropriated to challenge exclusionary, difference-loathing politics. This indicates that *Ms. Marvel* shapes discourse beyond its pages, challenging the constitution of Muslimified bodies as threats and making a political statement that contest discrimination and security legislation. In so doing, the Manichean carving of the international and human bodies into safe versus unsafe categories such as West/Rest in the name of increasing US security is questioned. This in turn alters and makes visible previously unseeable subject positions for gendered-racialised, Muslimified, bodies.

This is demonstrated in Figure 3 where artists associated with activist group *Bay Area Art Queers Unleashing Power* graffitied *Ms. Marvel*’s image over Islamophobic adverts on buses. This received online support with positive comments and shares on the initial Facebook post containing these images<sup>105</sup>.

Appropriations and the interpretative work of fans are as important as representations of characters and politics in comics, if not more<sup>106</sup>. Here, it indicates receptiveness to *Ms. Marvel*’s message and shows that its creators’ politics is translating as intended. It also reinforces how comics, as visual stories, decrease the representation—interpretation gap<sup>107</sup>. Similarly, Phil Noto<sup>108</sup> redrew one of his cover illustrations.

Protesting Trump’s immigration ban he tweeted Figure 2, which shows *Ms. Marvel* tearing Trump’s photograph<sup>109</sup>. While the image requires decoding and intertextual knowledge to ascertain its message, it challenges and brings into question Trump and his politics.

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<sup>102</sup> Noah Berlatsky, ‘Ms Marvel Is a Progressive Superhero, but Latest Story Arc Is a Step Back on Race’, *The Guardian*, 5 June 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jun/05/ms-marvel-g-willow-wilson-muslim-race-comics>.

<sup>103</sup> Travis Gettys, ‘Colbert: *Ms. Marvel* Comic Reboot as Muslim Teen Another Example of “Sharia Creep”’, *The Raw Story*, 7 November 2013, <https://www.rawstory.com/2013/11/colbert-ms-marvel-comic-reboot-as-muslim-teen-another-example-of-sharia-creep/>.

<sup>104</sup> Romano, ‘Muslim-American Superhero’.

<sup>105</sup> See post from 25 January 2015:

[https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=348076972052222&id=102257986634123](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=348076972052222&id=102257986634123)

<sup>106</sup> Ramzi Fawaz, Justin Hall, and Helen Kinsella, ‘Discovering Paradise Islands: The Politics and Pleasures of Feminist Utopias, a Conversation’, *Feminist Review* 116, no. 1 (2017): 11.

<sup>107</sup> The representation—interpretation gap is the uncertainty and openness between what is represented and what is interpreted to be represented. See: Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).

<sup>108</sup> Phil Noto is an American illustrator, comics books artist and painter who has drawn covers for all of *Marvel*’s ‘Civil War II’ series and illustrated for DC and Image Comics.

<sup>109</sup> Romano, ‘Muslim-American Superhero’.



Figure 2. Phil Noto's redrawn cover image featuring Kamala Khan's Ms. Marvel tearing up a photograph of Donald Trump. Posted to Twitter on 28 January 2017.



Figure 3. Two Images posted on *Street Cred-Advertising for the People* Facebook page on 25 January 2015.

*Ms. Marvel* and its appropriations make invisible assumptions that structure US-American society visible and, by exploring American beliefs and the ever-changing values behind them, encourage audience(s) to reflect on the socio-political-cultural situations allegorised on its pages. ‘No Normal’ pre-dates the 2016 presidential election and rise of right-wing populist politics but ‘Civil War II’ was written during Trump’s campaign. The foundations of his politics can be linked to the USA’s historical uneasiness with immigrants and the post-9/11 Islamophobic Inside/Outside—and even *inside-outsider* (i.e., the Muslim-American)—mindset that facilitated the construction of Muslim(ified) people as “barbaric” and “on the move” threats who represent Islamic (un)civilisation<sup>110</sup>.

## Ms. Marvel Disrupting Dichotomies

*Ms. Marvel* can be read in many ways and through various dichotomies, none of which can be disentangled from each other. I use the Muslim/American, female/heroic, and presence/absence of whiteness as lenses to unpack how Ms. Marvel destabilises these binaries. Because I use *Ms. Marvel* to carry out a critical reading of these dichotomies and the Global War on Terror, only panels<sup>111</sup> linking to

<sup>110</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 95–96.

<sup>111</sup> Comics are traditionally arranged in sequential *panels*: that is, enclosed illustrations that are *framed* with a border (usually, but not always, black). Panels are separated by a *gutter*: the space between and separating bounded panels. The gutter turns time into space and is where readers fill in the gaps of the story. It also speaks to the politics of absence/presence. Figure 7 below is an

them are presented. These dichotomies are particularly significant because they shaped how the nation understood itself and related to “other(ed)” countries and people post-9/11<sup>112</sup>.

### *Muslim/American*

The Muslim/American dichotomy is particularly powerful because it structures what is and is not American, is and is not normal. As outlined above, Islam, problematically, was constructed as fundamentally un-American and terrorist, which enabled a particular construction of Americanness that excluded being Muslim. This dichotomy provided a means through which to identify security threats and a construction of the proper ‘American’ post-9/11<sup>113</sup>.

The tensions between Kamala’s intersecting subjectivities recur throughout. Issue #1 opens with Kamala eyeing a bacon sandwich. Kamala’s friend suggests: “Either eat the bacon or stick to your principles”, referencing Islamic rules forbidding pork consumption. While this is Kamala’s everyday, it is not most (Christian) Americans’. Issue #1 also sees Kamala attend a party where she is tricked into drinking alcohol. Doing so, some partiers assume that she abandoned “the dumb inferior Brown people and their rules” about alcohol. In a simple way this demonstrates the struggle(s) Muslims face living in America: choosing to live as Muslim (different) *or* American (normal) or as *both* Muslim *and* American in a context where Islam and its rules are seen as antithetical to US-American values<sup>114</sup>. This struggle is documented in Kamala’s battle with her Pakistani-American-Muslim identity in a USA that is uncomfortable with Muslim(ified) individuals who are constructed as uncivilised and backwards within and outside its borders; a USA that paradoxically tries to save Muslim/‘brown’ women from barbaric brown men<sup>115</sup>. Over numerous volumes, the readers experience Kamala’s existential struggle with her Muslim, American, and superhero identities. *Ms. Marvel* highlights how bodies perform multiple, intersecting, conflicting subjectivities as well as the racialised and gendered politics controlling the subject positions those bodies can occupy.

Set in New Jersey, bordering New York, the comic’s spatialisation is important. It is significant that a Muslim superhero’s story unfolds so close to New York, a space that both represents the US melting pot myth and is intimately linked to a nationally damaging and ‘feminising’ terrorist event and America’s cultural power projection and economic might<sup>116</sup>. This newfound vulnerability altered US foreign and

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example of an *inset*: where panels are surrounded by another image. See: Hansen, ‘Reading Comics’; Chris Gavalier, ‘The Visual Superhero’, in *Superhero Comics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 205–70.

<sup>112</sup> Mary Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen Lugo-Lugo, *Containing (Un)American Bodies: Race, Sexuality, and Post-9/11 Constructions of Citizenship* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010), 7.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> Kent, ‘Unveiling Marvels’.

<sup>115</sup> Shepherd, ‘Veiled References’.

<sup>116</sup> Cynthia Weber, “Flying Planes Can Be Dangerous”, *Millennium Journal of International Studies* 31, no. 1 (2002): 145; Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, *Containing (Un)American Bodies*, 8.

domestic security policy, inspiring the (re)assertion of US-American masculinity, and established Islam as a global threat and identity to be feared<sup>117</sup>.

As a Muslim who is not only American but also a superhero that saves other Americans, Kamala/Ms. Marvel's life and work in New Jersey are political and disturb hegemonic discourses about the un-Americanness of Islam and what 'American' is or can be. She undermines the hegemonic us (U.S.) versus them (Islamic terrorists) juxtaposition by refusing to give up her Pakistani-Muslim faith to fit the image of what 'American' (hero) and (evil) 'Muslim' were constructed to be, while also rebuffing the oppression that her white classmates perceive her to face as a result of her faith. This shows ways of being Muslim *and/or* American that resists problematic hegemonic discourses and a politics that desires to make bodies signify monolithically: she cannot and will not be made to signify as *either/or*, thereby confounding dominant notions of the difference and normality<sup>118</sup>. At once, Kamala/Ms. Marvel is both included *and/or* excluded from the fabric of American society, which exposes the contingency of American as juxtaposed to Muslim (and vice versa) in post-9/11 politics, and thus the politics of that construction<sup>119</sup>. Her body is a site where 'coherent' categories are questioned, and the hierarchical international politics enabled by positioning one side of the dichotomy (US-American) over another (Muslim) exposed.

Her characterisation and spatialization as New Jersey's protector complicate the Islamophobic discourses that supported the normalisation of profiling and invasive security practices, which especially affected Muslimified 'terrorist-lookalike' bodies<sup>120</sup>. Reflecting this challenge to Islamophobic politics and practices is Figure 4 where Ms. Marvel sits atop a streetlight contrasted against an eerie New York skyline.

Watching over the city, wearing the red and blue of the American flag, Ms. Marvel reads as a symbol of hope and prosperity for America's future unity. Kamala is the figurative light against New York/USA's darkness. This panel highlights the apparent incongruence of her multiple intersecting identities: as Muslim *and/or* American *and/or* female *and/or* hero. Placing her at distance from New York emphasises her/Muslims' exclusion from society whilst implying a longing to be desecuritized and integrated into society; closer to the 'Americanness' symbolised by the distant, though within reach, New York. After this panel Kamala insists on being "the best version of Kamala" not "some other hero" or ideal-type, thereby reworking meanings of 'Americanness' and exposing the category's problematic and exclusionary constructedness.

Read in *Ms. Marvel's* wider narrative, this panel disturbs the threatening Muslim discourse by representing Muslim(ified) bodies (Kamala) as non-demonic parts of American and global society that cannot be understood through racialised dichotomies as Muslim/American. Rearranging the Muslim—New York

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<sup>117</sup> Weber, 'Flying Planes'.

<sup>118</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*.

<sup>119</sup> Richter-Montpetit, "'Queer Turn' in IR"; Wilcox, 'Queer Theory'.

<sup>120</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*, 91–93.

(symbolising America) relationship *Ms. Marvel* reconstitutes, bends, and melts American/Muslim identities and Self/Other relations to contest the equation of differing with danger and Islam with terrorism. This reiterates both the falsity of the Bush Administration’s construction of ‘Middle Eastern’ and Muslim(ified) bodies as threatening and un-American as well as the power of (security) discourse to determine which bodies, which types of people, get to live. *Ms. Marvel* acts as if a new discourse is in play, thereby providing a set of rules that others can imitate and follow; one where powerful and ordering dichotomies are confounded, a new and reflexive Queer politics emerges, and Muslim-Americans are seen as political subjects rather than evil criminal terrorists<sup>121</sup>. Attempting to desecuritize the Muslim body, *Ms. Marvel* challenges Islamophobic security policy and practices threatening Muslim(ified) individuals.



Figure 4. Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel watches over NYC (2014). From *Volume I, Issue #5*.

’s destabilisation of the (patriarchal) Muslim threat discourse is also found in the character Sheikh Abdullah. Drawn with a big bushy beard, he is the archetypal Muslim figure. Notably, he does not wear a turban, which was mocked and securitized post-9/11□ 122not the image of American with his beard and ‘Islamic’ robes. When first introduced, he is preaching quite stereotypically—arguably used ironically—about the sins of alcohol and sex, and how women are separated from men to protect their modesty. This

<sup>121</sup> K.M. Fierke, *Political Self-Sacrifice: Agency, Body and Emotion in International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13–14, 56.

<sup>122</sup> Puar and Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag’, 125.

all seems to reproduce the Muslim/American dichotomy, even playing into the discourse about saving women from Islam's oppression. However, when Kamala meets the Sheikh on her parents' orders to discuss her erratic behaviour (her attempts to conceal her superhero identity and late-night adventures), he advises her to keep going despite it getting her into trouble. He never attempts to stop her, which pushes discourses about the oppression of Muslim women to their limit by representing what is supposedly an atypical Muslim cleric. .

This attempted desecuritization of Islam, through a representation that undermines discourses of its threat to (Muslim) women and American values, is potent as Kamala had previously drawn on verses from the Quran to give her courage. In her first superhero outing, she quotes the Quran as inspiration: "whoever saves one person it is as if he has saved all of mankind". Kamala does that saving, which disturbs the discourse that Muslim(-Americans) are subhuman containers of future violence. The Quranic verse and the male superhero trope in comics intertwine here by emphasising the male subject, 'he', as the saving actor. This leads into the ways Kamala destabilises female/heroic, vulnerable/male dichotomies.

Post-9/11 there has been an endeavour to secure boundaries around and distinguish between 'good' American citizenship and 'evil' un-American enemies<sup>123</sup>. Ms. Marvel embodies all that is found in the 'good' American—heroic, patriotic, law-abiding, law-enforcing—yet she is a Muslim, American's 'evil' enemy counterpart unworthy of US citizenship. Kamala, however, is a Muslim who is one of the 'good guys'—i.e. not a terrorist—and she is American. She destabilises dominant friend/enemy, American/Muslim discourses, which determine how her body ought to be reacted to. *Ms. Marvel*, in this respect, refuses the boundary between American/un-American, which pulls the carpet out from under the security discourses underpinning post-9/11 appeals to protecting 'civilisation' and the sorting of bodies and spaces into safe/dangerous categories. Nonetheless, if one pushes at the critical potential of this comic, Ms. Marvel/Kamala, in her desire to achieve Americanness, is what one could call a safe/docile citizen: one who is prepared to serve, care for, and protect her country<sup>124</sup>. By emphasising Kamala's 'normalness', her safeness and preparedness to protect and serve, *Ms. Marvel* may, in this reading, inadvertently undermine its own critical potential.

### *Female/Heroic*

In superhero comics, as with war, heroes are traditionally "white, male, straight, cisgender and able-bodied" and women and children are to be protected<sup>125</sup>. Ms. Marvel challenges that by destabilising masculine/feminine and hero/saved dichotomies. Drawn in a less sexualised, more pubescent, manner than many female comics characters, Kamala pushes against both the stereotypical sexualisation of women in superhero comics (and war narratives): she is neither the traditional damsel in distress nor the

<sup>123</sup> Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, *Containing (Un)American Bodies*, 9.

<sup>124</sup> See: Puar and Rai, 'Monster, Terrorist, Fag'.

<sup>125</sup> Diamond and Poharec, 'Introduction', 407.

hyper-sexualised heroine. As the hero protagonist, Kamala subverts the ‘saving Muslim women’ discourses that underpinned official US discourse around the War on Terror. These moves uncouple the ‘heroic’ from (white) heterosexual masculinity and war, throwing into question racialised-gendered norms and the logics behind the gendered protector/protected binary. The spatiality of *Ms. Marvel* also confounds the female/heroic dichotomy. It destabilises gendered discourses about America as masculine saviour and (women in) the ‘Middle East’ as feminine and needing saved. Kamala, the ‘Middle Eastern’ *and/or* American Muslim woman, does the saving.

An important part of ‘Civil War II’ is Ms. Marvel saving a figurative America from its pre-emptive-action-loving Self by challenging Captain Marvel and the FBI’s “predictive justice” (Figure 6). In this satirical rendering of the War on Terror, Ms. Marvel must choose between her personal (‘un-American’) values and the pre-emptive (patriotic, ‘American’) justice of Danvers. This juxtaposes former and current Ms. Marvel; metaphorical pre- and post-9/11 Americas. Captain Marvel embodies government stances on extraordinary rendition and torture; Ms. Marvel is the anti-establishment figure. Important here is the visual representation of Ms. Marvel. Until the latter part of issue #9, Kamala followed Danvers/Captain Marvel’s every instruction without question, even pre-emptively detaining her friend. As her politics changes (issue #9 onwards) and she starts to resist, her depiction around Captain Marvel changes. She shifts from being child-like to a more mature, informed, young adult (Figure 6 from issue #11). This ruptures the protector/protected, agentic/passive binaries structured by masculine/feminine, West/Rest, dichotomies and also delinks the female body from its association with childhood: Khan/Ms. Marvel is no longer a passive vassal and worshipper of Captain Marvel (as Figure 5 from issue #1 suggests) but a hero, setting her own agenda in line with *her* politics.

In this regard, Kamala’s refusal to embody the American security state and her dissent against Captain Marvel is particularly heroic, risky, and notable. The sharp divide between her politics and that of her idol and mentor puts not only her position as a superhero at risk but calls into question the political direction and future of her homeland, of the USA. It carries the risk of being labelled an unpatriotic traitor who undermines her nation’s security in a time of ‘national emergency’. The metaphorical division between two images of progress and law-and-order is central to *Ms. Marvel’s* critical (and political) potential: not only does it push at the propensity to read Muslims as dangerous and un-American, but it forces reflection on the political past, present, and future of the USA. In this way, the comic speaks to big international politics questions about war memory, militarisation, and intervention<sup>126</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> While beyond the scope of this article, the ‘Civil War II’ crossover series is pitched as the ultimate and final battle for freedom and security. Read broadly and intertextually, one can see echoes of the post-World Wars discourses of ‘a war to end all wars’.



Figure 5. Carol Danvers' Captain Marvel (upper-centre) at Kamala Khan's (bottom centre) transformation into Ms. Marvel. From *Volume 1, Issue #1*.

This tension between Khan/Ms. Marvel and Danvers/Captain Marvel—and thus the passive 'Brown Muslim Woman'/agentic 'White Western woman' binary—is already played out in issue #1 ('No Normal') when Kamala transforms into a superhero (Figure 5). Placed below Captain Marvel, Kamala looks up to and idolises this stereotypically 'ideal' female body with its goddess-like, evangelical qualities. Captain Marvel, although destabilising the masculinity-heroism link, is placed over Kamala as the enlightened, all-powerful Western, sexualised, goddess-like saviour who can empower Kamala. Read in the context of Kamala's performance of Ms. Marvel in the *exact* image of Danvers' Ms. Marvel, placing Captain Marvel in a position of superiority and power over Kamala—the teen who worships everything about Danvers—this panel appears to reproduce, not destabilise, official discourses that construct Muslim(ified) women (and Islam) as inferior and in need of saving (by white, Western, Christian society). This suggests that only in the progressive/developed West can women occupy such (heroic) positions of power.

Here, we see the visualisation of developmental, civilizing, discourses underpinning the Global War on Terror. Such discourses emphasise how white, Christian, Americanness and its norms are what Middle Eastern societies/Islam/Muslimified bodies must aim for. However, as Kamala begins to perform Ms. Marvel in her own image (issue #4 onwards), as discussed above, the notion that only white Western female bodies can be agentic is destabilised, enabling a reading of this panel that challenges hegemonic discourses of disempowerment and re-arranges visible, and thus available and legitimate, subject positions. There is an important visual contrast between issues #1 (Figure 5) and #11 (Figure 6) where Kamala no longer occupies a supposedly inferior position but one of power; one that challenges Captain Marvel—who embodies the establishment and post-9/11 status quo—and her politics.



Figure 6. Carol Danvers' Captain Marvel (left) being confronted by Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel. From *Volume Six, Issue #11*.

Visually, Captain Marvel's appearance also changes. She has cropped hair and a much harsher androgynous appearance compared to Figure 5, thus pushing at and rupturing boundaries of acceptable *and/or* non-normative (American) femininity. Nonetheless, Captain Marvel's new, more sex/gender ambiguous, appearance, while challenging the status quo and gender norms, could be read less positively. Having become the villain in 'Civil War II', her androgynous appearance—something that is (problematically) stereotypically associated with lesbianism—may be indicative of a transgression that merits punishment. Juxtaposed against Kamala/Ms. Marvel's newly acceptable American hero image, Captain Marvel and her (sex/gender) deviance becomes troublesome and in need of correction. In these

respects, the drawing of the two comics characters both replicates and contests discourses about international and gender/sexual politics depending on how they are read.

The way Kamala/Ms. Marvel is drawn throughout the comics might be read as supporting the infantilisation of Muslim women. Race, gender, and sexuality come together in the way Kamala is drawn as a pubescent teen. One might interpret this as (re)producing the infantilisation of Muslim(ified) women by denying Muslim women (Kamala) the ability to ever be fully recognised as adult (sexual) subjects. When comparing Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel and Kamala/Ms. Marvel, there is a distinct difference in how their bodies are drawn. Never is Kamala/Ms. Marvel drawn as a fully mature Muslim woman, which may undermine the critical potential of the comic by replicating discourses that construct Muslim women as non-agentic and almost asexual compared to white Western liberated women.

Kamala/Ms. Marvel is also shown as compassionate and caring, going out of her way to help friends. Rather than performing with *either* ‘masculine’ traits traditionally linked to superheroes *or* ‘feminine’ traits linked to motherhood and victimhood, Khan/Ms. Marvel is a more complex Queer figure, embodying *both* ‘masculine’ *and* ‘feminine’ as female *and/or* heroic. She embraces the paradoxes of gender binaries by embodying traits stereotypically associated with *both* masculinity *and* femininity, which draws attention to the constructedness of gender norms and the regulating power they have upon sexed bodies. She is not bound by gendered dichotomies: her performance of her identity Queers the fictional boundary between masculinity/femininity, man/woman. Her Queering of the masculine/feminine, hero/saved is powerful in a context where the superhero figure and entertainment industry convey ideal citizenship and heroism through whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity<sup>127</sup>. *Ms. Marvel* disturbs Islamic threat and female victim discourses, confounding dominant narratives by showing that not all (Muslimified) women need protecting by the West (and its particular heteropatriarchal structures).

Deconstructing problematic and socio-politically powerful gendered-racialised discourses of ‘natural’ difference, Kamala/Ms. Marvel, at various times in the comic, embodies qualities typically associated with masculinity (strong protector, superhero) *and/or* femininity (vulnerable oppressed Muslim), performs as white (Western, Danvers) *and/or* non-white (Middle Eastern, Kamala), and reads as exotic *and/or* dangerous simultaneously. This latter reading as exotic *and/or* dangerous is clear in issue #12 (Civil War II) when she is stopped at airport security because of her surname. She is caught somewhere between discourses of enmity (Muslim) *and/or* victimhood (Muslim woman) *and/or* heroism (good American citizen). Her various performances emphasise the futile reductionism of identity categories and open up their content to challenge/change. Kamala’s constructed and conflicting subjectivities are captured when she first performs Ms. Marvel in that “psychedelic vision” of Danvers which contrasts her identity as

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<sup>127</sup> Sarah Gibbons, “I Don’t Exactly Have Quiet, Pretty Powers”: Flexibility and Alterity in Ms. Marvel’, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 8, no. 5 (2017): 456.

Kamala who is drawn without sexualised anatomy and costume<sup>128</sup>. This leads into the ways *Ms. Marvel* destabilises racialised dichotomies.

### *Presence/Absence of Whiteness*

As a female-presenting Pakistani-Muslim, dominant discourses afford Kamala little agency, voice or power to challenge her assumed passivity, vulnerability, and victimhood. She is presumed a silent/silenced subject who must seek alternate ways of obtaining agency and subjectivity. As discussed above, these presumptions are informed and sustained by discourses about Muslim women's oppression. In what can be read as a bid to problematise white feminism, Khan's first performances of Ms. Marvel are in Danvers' *white* image. To complicate dichotomies of oppressed/emancipated, in/visible, what is *not* represented becomes as important as what *is*: Kamala's brownness is hidden in her first three performances as Ms. Marvel (issues #1-3). International politics, the powerful racialised-gendered discourses about (Muslimified) women, and the tensions therein literally play out upon Kamala's body and are made visible through the drawing of *Ms. Marvel* by showing what is deemed (im)possible depending on her skin colour.

Kamala's struggles to feel 'normal' represent the political effects of hegemonic constructions of Muslim figure(s) as the uncivilised, barbaric, 'terrorist' and 'unwanted im/migrant' that US security politics sought to eliminate and contain<sup>129</sup>. Constructions that cause Kamala frustration as she tries to fit in at school and navigate Western power structures that equate differing—non-normative race, gender, sexuality performances—with danger. A clear example is her being stopped at airport security (issue #12). Hegemonic discourses about un/Americanness force her to question: "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 weird holidays? Everyone else gets to be normal" followed by "I grew up here! I'm from Jersey City, not Karachi" (issue #1). She cannot be reduced to *either* American *or* Muslim: her identity is more complex<sup>130</sup>. She notes this herself after being called "the American" while in Pakistan: "in Jersey...I'm too Pakistani. Here...I'm too American" (issue #12). Performing as white *and/or* brown, Kamala and/as Ms. Marvel embodies/y *both* different *and/or* normal gendered-racialised-sexualised figurations of the 'good American' and 'un-American'<sup>131</sup>. This destabilises identity dichotomies and the political power constellations structuring and being structured by them.

Initially, the comic seems to suggest Kamala only becomes empowered, secure, and agentic by occupying a white, Western body over a brown, Muslimified one. Performing in a comics heroine stereotype, Kamala silences her Pakistani identity to appear 'normal' and 'human' (white, American), not a potentially violent individual *and/or* subject of oppression (Muslim, Middle Eastern, female). This departs from the

<sup>128</sup> Tolentino, 'The Writer Behind'.

<sup>129</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*.

<sup>130</sup> Richter-Montpetit and Weber, 'Queer IR'.

<sup>131</sup> Richter-Montpetit, "'Queer Turn' in IR", 11–12.

usual pattern in Western representations of ‘oriental’ women as enigmatic and exposes the power of “whiteness” and the civilizational discourse<sup>132</sup>; it is her goal to pass as acceptable in the “‘freedom-loving’ First World”<sup>133</sup>. To be like the socially constructed ‘good’ American, enlightened, neoliberal figure<sup>134</sup>. She seeks ‘Americanness’ and capitalist-productive ideal Western/American femininity: the liberated and free-willed, white-skinned, blonde-haired, alcohol-drinking, and high-heeled individual. This is confounded when Kamala decide that saving people, not the hair and hyper-feminised and stereotypical costume or being ‘normal’, drive her. Thenceforth, Ms. Marvel’s brownness is shown and the racialised colonial logics of the Global War on Terror and ‘saving civilisation itself’ discourse destabilised.



Figure 7. Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel in Pakistan. From *Volume Six, Issue #12*.

She oscillates between Muslim women’s supposed disempowerment as Kamala —a brown Pakistani-Muslim-American (Western Other)—and self-obtained empowerment as Ms. Marvel—a white Superhero

<sup>132</sup> Richter-Montpetit, ‘Empire, Desire and Violence’, 50.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>134</sup> Weber, *Queer IR*.

(Western Self). This dichotomy is undermined by performing both in the same image: as female *and/or* white *and/or* Pakistani *and/or* American *and/or* Muslim *and/or* hero. She cannot be made to signify monolithically, which destabilises every part of the dichotomies discussed above by not only embodying both sides of the slash but re-fashioning what each constituent part is and can mean. Different, previously invisible, ways of being and subject positions are, thus, made possible and imaginable. Confounding all three dichotomies analysed above, her later performance as a veil-wearing superhero in Pakistan (issue #12) reify (as mysterious) and rupture the discourse of (Muslim) feminine passivity that helped justify the Global War on Terror (Figure 7). This undermines the notion that the only acceptable (political) body is white, Christian and neoliberal, and suggests that the female hero travels. Working in two spaces associated with the Global War on Terror, Ms. Marvel is both an American hero *and/or* a Pakistani one too; she simultaneously embodies both parts of American *and/or* un-American, female *and/or* heroic, brown *and/or* white binaries, irreducible to *either/or*, thereby destabilising their logic and demonstrating the incoherence of these juxtapositions.

## Conclusion

This article departs from postcolonial feminist and feminist security studies analyses of the official discourses structuring and legitimating the Global War on Terror in order to examine the gaps and dissonances in (scholarship on) those discourses. This set up an analysis of the ways that post-9/11 identity dichotomies can be complicated. The article offered a Queer feminist poststructuralist analysis that is concerned with destabilising—Queering—fixed dichotomies in post-9/11 identity politics. Looking to popular culture is another way of analysing Global War on Terror discourses that goes beyond studying official discourse. Above, I focused on the ways *either/or* logics are complicated and space provided for a more complex, plural, fluid (*and/or*) understanding of identity that works beyond binaries and monolithic constructions. This is important for revealing the ways that dichotomies structure socio-political life; showing the performativity, fluidity and instability of identity; moving towards a theorisation of identity in IR that can see more complex, less coherent structuring dichotomies; and exposing the complications in declarations like ‘I am American’, ‘I am Muslim’, ‘I am brown’, ‘I am a woman’. For IR, this means better recognising that bodies are battlegrounds upon which international (security) politics plays out, primarily through the racialised-gendered-sexualised identities inscribed onto and governing them. The representation of bodies in comics is a site for analysing (resistance to) power.

Comics are a medium in which identity binaries are challenged, those not often represented are given space, and non-elites’ experiences and practises of international relations are shown. They can be spaces for counterhegemonic discourses where gendered-racialised discourses and/or norms are destabilised, making visible previously unseeable or unimaginable subject positions for individuals whose bodies are read/constructed in a particular (gendered-racialised) way. They can (re)arrange *who* is allowed to be *what*, which is important when analysing international political events and security. Above, I show how *Ms. Marvel* and its characters destabilise the dichotomies found in post-9/11 US politics, and analyses of it, by

reading *Ms. Marvel* through three lenses: the Muslim/American, female/heroic, presence/absence of whiteness. Ms. Marvel destabilises these particular binaries and shows how identity is more complex than *either/or*.

Both the analysis above and the comics themselves destabilise these dichotomies by demonstrating that the three are interlinked, inseparable, and ultimately unable to fully capture Kamala's subjectivity. To construct Kamala/Ms. Marvel as *either/or* fails to capture the complexity of her identity: she, like all individuals, cannot be made to signify monolithically, cannot be said to fall on one side of the slash that supports radical Self/Other constructions of identity. This means that IR analyses involving a consideration of identity must avoid simple binaries: they cannot capture the complexity and multiple identities of the individuals they claim to represent or the naturalisation and political implications of identity dichotomies. Reading Kamala through the above different lenses shows how a binary understanding of identity is both untenable and reductionist, whilst also showing how subject positions are opened up and made visible through the comic's rejection of hegemonic readings of Muslim(ified) bodies. Kamala's body occupies, exceeds, and reworks gendered-racialised dichotomies and their associated norms such that they are no longer coherent juxtapositions.

This reading should not be understood as wholeheartedly celebratory of *Ms. Marvel*. In fact, there are at least four ways in which the comic may be read as problematic. First, and despite the superhero action and violence, *Ms. Marvel* could be read as reproducing essentialist assumptions that 'women' are by nature more peaceful than men and that having women in positions of authority would 'make the world a better place'. This is particularly clear when thinking through the female/heroic dichotomy: the traditional role of comics hero is occupied by Kamala, almost implicitly acquiescing to this essentialist discourse of women's supposed predilection for world peace as Kamala negotiates big political questions such as pre-emptive detention and war. Second, and relatedly, the comic may be read as attempting to eliminate racial and cultural difference by showing how Kamala is a born-and-bred American, thereby reifying the melting pot myth but simultaneously drawing boundaries around the ways that 'American' can be performed—primarily through assimilation and subscribing to law-and-order.

A third reading could see the comic as reproducing sexualised-gendered-racialised discourses of US exceptionalism that are prevalent in socio-political discourses about so-called 'third world women'. In this reading, Kamala can only be Ms. Marvel in 'the West', which is held to have a more 'progressive' and less oppressive gender politics. On this, veil-wearing Ms. Marvel might also be read as reproducing a discourse around Muslim(ified) women's oppression. Fourth, Kamala/Ms. Marvel's depiction as pubescent might be read as replicating discourses that construct Muslim(ified) women as non-agentic and almost asexual compared to white Western liberated women. While these interpretations are largely absent in the Queer reading offered above—primarily because I engage with the dominant interpretations

of the comics and the texts and readings ascribing meaning to them—these are readings that could be explored and developed in ways that further complicate our understandings of identity and discourses about international politics.

Ultimately, however, this article shows that drawing how power and identity operate is a politicisation that, alongside Ms. Marvel's appropriation as a protest icon, makes *Ms. Marvel* an important global cultural artefact that destabilises binary codifications of identity, constructs counterhegemonic politics, and renders the gendered-racialised juxtapositions of the Global War on Terror incoherent. Ms. Marvel is not only American but Muslim, not only female but heroic (which destabilises masculinity/femininity gender norms), and not only brown but white. To write, (re)draw, and (re)circulate comics and the politics they depict is a way of intervening in international relations that imbues comics with the power to engage in dialogue with and (re)shape international political architectures, systems of racialised-gendered domination, and counter discriminatory legislation.