

From Veil to Scarf: Gendered Identities in
Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel*

by

Marilyn Enid Sanabria Rivera

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH EDUCATION

UNIVERSITY OF PUERTO RICO

MAYAGÜEZ CAMPUS

2019

Approved by:

Eric D. Lamore, Ph.D.

President, Graduate Committee

Date

Ricia A. Chansky, Ph.D.

Member, Graduate Committee

Date

Leonardo Flores, Ph.D.

Member, Graduate Committee

Chair of English Department

Date

Prof. Grisell Rodríguez

Graduate Studies Representative

Date

Abstract

In this thesis, I study two critically-acclaimed texts to explore the construction of gendered identities by Muslim and Muslim-American women in contact zones where they struggle to stay true to themselves. I draw on Judith Butler's notions on gendered performances. In chapter one, "Marji's Veil: A Tool for Constructing Gendered Identities," I focus on the first volume of Marjane Satrapi's autobiographic *Persepolis*. I argue that the veil and its associated meanings dictate who Satrapi should be and provide her with a tool to construct and govern her gendered identity. I also maintain that Satrapi's autobiographic made it possible for Western audiences to welcome future publications about Muslim-Americans such as *Ms. Marvel*. In the second chapter, "Kamala's Scarf: Subverting Gendered, Hyphenated and Superhero Identities," I study the gendered performances of Kamala Khan—the new Ms. Marvel—by drawing on the work of sociologists and psychologists who study the gendered and cultural identities in Muslim immigrants living in the US. I argue that Khan carries out her identity negotiations—both national and gendered—in a contact zone where she navigates a hyphenated identity in the US. Finally, I discuss how I would use both *Persepolis* and *Ms. Marvel* in a secondary-level literature class to teach students how to read and interpret comic books and sharpen their critical thinking skills by using Shirley Lee Linkon's cognitive apprenticeship model.

Resumen

En esta tesis, estudio dos textos aclamados por la crítica para explorar la construcción de identidades de género por parte de mujeres musulmanas y musulmanas-americanas en zonas de contacto donde luchan por mantenerse fieles a sí mismas. Me baso en las nociones de Judith Butler sobre las representaciones de género. En el capítulo uno, “El velo de Marji: una herramienta para construir identidades de género”, me enfoco en el primer volumen del texto autográfico Persépolis de Marjane Satrapi. Argumento que el velo y sus significados asociados dictan quién debe ser Satrapi y le proporcionan una herramienta para construir y gobernar su identidad de género. También sostengo que la autografía de Satrapi hizo posible que las audiencias occidentales les dieran la bienvenida a futuras publicaciones sobre musulmanes estadounidenses, como Ms. Marvel. En el segundo capítulo, “La bufanda de Kamala: subvirtiendo las identidades de género, compuestas y de superhéroes”, estudio las interpretaciones de género de Kamala Khan, la nueva Ms. Marvel, a partir del trabajo de sociólogos y psicólogos que estudian las identidades de género y culturales en inmigrantes musulmanes que viven en los Estados Unidos. Argumento que Khan lleva a cabo sus negociaciones de identidad, tanto nacionales como de género, en una zona de contacto donde navega una identidad compuesta en los Estados Unidos. Finalmente, discuto cómo utilizaría tanto a Persépolis como a Ms. Marvel en una clase de literatura de nivel secundario para enseñar a los estudiantes a leer e interpretar cómics y mejorar sus habilidades de pensamiento crítico a través del modelo de formación cognitiva de Shirley Lee Linkon.

Acknowledgements

It was not until 2014, the summer before I started graduate school, that I met who would become my favorite comic book character. She was a sixteen-year-old, Muslim-American girl from Jersey City: Kamala Khan. It was in the *Ms. Marvel* series that Khan took the mantle of Ms. Marvel from her role model Carol Danvers, now Captain Marvel. I soon realized that Marvel Comics' roster of heroes had become more diverse in their recent publications. Miles Morales had already been established as the Black and Puerto Rican Spider-Man and the new Ghost Rider was now Robbie Reyes, a Mexican-American youth finishing high school and taking care of his younger brother. During the Fall semester in Dr. Catherine Mazak's Research Methods class, I decided that I wanted to focus my thesis project on Kamala Khan.

As I researched and read the primary and secondary sources for this thesis project, I had the opportunity to see texts that I had previously read in a more-informed and critical fashion. Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel* became much more than just exciting and interesting reads; they stirred in me a deeper interest in memoirs, autographics, and comic books. During the past two years, I have learned more about memoirs, autographics, and comic books than I would have imagined, and I have found myself reading and collecting graphic novels and comic books—at times, graphic novel adaptations of well-known “words-only works.” Developing this project took some time to put together, but after refocusing the initial ideas it finally took shape and became what is here before you.

I would like to thank Dr. Pablo Dopico for his amazing feedback and ideas on how to approach this project since its beginning. Your course on the History and Language of Comics was extremely helpful in introducing me to not just the language but the rich and vast history of

comic books and their impact on literature and society. I am grateful for your insights and inspiring creativity; thank you for sharing your love and respect for this art and its history.

Dr. Leonardo Flores, thank you for sharing your knowledge of all things multimodal and pop culture. Your love and enthusiasm for comic books, film, poetry, and digital literature, among others are not just exciting, but also infectious. I am grateful to have worked with you in the Electronic Literature Collection 3 project, which is still astonishing to me. Thank you for believing and reassuring me that there was something to study in Kamala Khan's story.

I want to thank Dr. Ricia Chansky for her inspiring words when I felt lost and helpless. Thank you for encouraging me and cheering me on. I am grateful for your vital input and guidance throughout the revisions to the thesis. Dr. Chansky, you have shown me how an educator can change a student's perspective for the better by providing words of encouragement and sharing your joy. I know who I want to be like when I grow up. Also, thank you for the Kleenex.

I cannot express how grateful I am to you, Dr. Lamore. Your guidance helped get this project off the ground and completed. When we first met to begin working on chapter one, you suggested a different take on this project: connecting *Ms. Marvel* to a possible predecessor in another genre, the autobiographic *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi. Never would I have considered exploring and connecting gendered performances and identity constructions in contact zones by using these two texts. Your support, encouragement, and patience were key when I considered quitting. Thank you for pushing me to see this project through.

I want to thank my parents and sister for supporting me throughout this entire endeavor. Thank you for your patience and understanding. Thank you for checking up on me, but not questioning me when I tried to write at 3:00 a.m. on a Saturday night. I appreciate it.

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Introduction

Though it has been over seventeen years since the events of 9/11, representations in various media outlets in the US have not necessarily shown Arab/Muslim-American characters in a good light—or even a realistic one. Instead, categories such as the “good Muslim” and the “bad Muslim” are still being enforced in media outlets. This point is particularly important due to both the current political and social atmosphere in the US and during a time in which prejudice and conflict with immigrants, minorities, and women regularly appear in commercial news media. Critics have argued that creators of television, film, and other media, should produce content that provides viewers with what they consider to be a more realistic representation of the world in which they live and, at the same time, certain segments of audiences demand more diversity—ethnic and gendered—in titular roles as well as less stereotypical characters in their media.

Following 9/11, representations in the media of Arab/Muslim-American communities in the United States have impacted in significant ways citizens’ understanding—or misunderstanding—of these marginalized groups. Popular culture texts often offer various misrepresentations of these groups that prove to be damaging. To define popular culture, I turn to John Storey’s *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. In his book, Storey provides six definitions for the term popular culture, but I focus in this project on two of these definitions. In one of these definitions, Storey writes that “popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well-liked by many people” (5), while in another he invokes the term hegemony and argues that those who use this approach “see popular culture as a site of struggle between the *resistance* of subordinate groups and the forces of *incorporation* operating in the interest of dominant groups” (10), a definition that parallels in certain ways Mary Louise Pratt’s

concept, the contact zone. Many students of popular culture find themselves reading about a contact zone, while simultaneously living in one.

The misrepresentation of Arab/Muslim-American peoples in popular culture may encourage marginalized groups in the United States to disregard these texts, as this space and texts make them feel alienated and isolated. This point is especially the case for Muslim youth in America—especially after 9/11—when many major media outlets presented them in a negative light by stressing the alleged violent behavior, extremism, and acts of terrorism by men along with presenting women as victims of oppression and sexism. It is necessary to stress the importance of the connection between popular culture and representations of marginalized communities, as this connection should be taken more seriously and given its due merit. In this thesis, I study two texts that attempt to counter inaccurate representations of Middle Eastern and Muslim-American peoples for US readers. In chapter one, I focus on Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and argue that the veil and its associated meanings dictate the author's identity, while still providing a tool to construct and govern her own gendered identity. In chapter two, I study Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel* and I argue that Kamala Khan, the protagonist and new Ms. Marvel, carries out her identity negotiations in a contact zone where she navigates a hyphenated identity.

In her book *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, Evelyn Alsultany explores and analyzes Arab and Muslim representation—mostly in film, television shows, public service announcements (PSAs), and advertisements—in the decades after 9/11. Alsultany analyzes the typecasting of Arab/Muslim individuals as “dangerous” Muslim men and “oppressed” Muslim women typically as terrorists and victims, respectively. Though these representations have increased in the US media, more-recent representations of Middle Eastern peoples in popular culture offer a more sympathetic approach in outlining these

peoples' lives. These newer representations show a more sophisticated level of complexity, rather than the superficial and simplistic misrepresentations like the "dangerous" Muslim man and the "oppressed" Muslim woman. These representations are being presented in a supposed post-race era in America since "if we interpret an image as positive or negative, then we can conclude that the problem of racial stereotyping is over because of the appearance of sympathetic images of Arabs and Muslims during the War on Terror" (Alsultany 14). Yet, the representations deny or try to hide the persistence of discrimination and racism in the US. Alsultany refers to these representations as *simplified complex representations*, a term she coined with the help of Amy Sara Carroll (184). According to Alsultany, this new representational mode "seeks to balance a negative representation with a positive one...if an Arab/Muslim terrorist is represented in the story line of a TV drama or film, then a 'positive' representation of an Arab, Muslim, Arab American, or Muslim American is typically included, seemingly to offset the stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist" (14). This "good Muslim" needs to "prove their allegiance to the U.S. nation" or be considered a "bad Muslim" (Alsultany 15). Alsultany mentions seven strategies used by writers for film and television to create these simplified complex representations: (1) inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans; (2) sympathizing with the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11; (3) challenging the Arab/Muslim conflation with diverse Muslim identities; (4) flipping the enemy; (5) humanizing the terrorist; (6) projecting a multicultural U.S. society; and, (7) fictionalizing the middle eastern or Muslim country (21–26). All these strategies help create a representation meant to balance out the negative portrayal of Arabs, Muslims, and Arab/Muslim Americans in mainstream US media outlets. The representations developed with the strategies above create the illusion of a multicultural and post-race space in US culture. For Alsultany, Arab/Muslim American characters in these texts negotiate the very real situations of

having their civil rights put on hold or jeopardized by US institutions looking to keep the nation safe and secure. Alsultany states that these texts allow the presentation of the patriotic Arab/Muslim as he or she agrees to this treatment to prove they are a “real” American and a good person (70). These texts also provide viewers with a space to discuss cases of racial stereotyping and discrimination, as well as the ill-fated war on terror and its justifications. These representations help the viewer validate themselves. By becoming sympathizing viewers of this group, the consumers of these texts “can feel bad, remorseful, and apologetic for the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans” (Alsultany 70).

Importantly, the simplified complex representations also negotiate the sympathy that viewers may have for female Arab, Muslim, and Arab/Muslim American characters. Women tend to be presented by government and commercial news media as oppressed Muslim women that need to be saved from brown men (Alsultany 71). Alsultany maintains that television dramas and films do not prominently present women as victims of oppression (71). Instead, they fit into three categories: “Arab/Muslim American patriots, victims of hate crimes, Arab/Muslim terrorists” (Alsultany 71). The oppressed Muslim woman did not help in entertaining or commercially-successful TV dramas, but she did “make for compelling news” (Alsultany 71). These exposés try to inform viewers about the reasons behind terrorism by showcasing Arab/Muslim women and their struggles. In these texts, the writers “take the viewers ‘behind the veil’ to reveal to the world—termed in varying degrees secret, hidden, and mysterious—that would shed light on why Arabs/Muslims are terrorists” (Alsultany 75). In the same fashion that a post-race and multicultural fantasy is created by TV shows, this type of news project “a postfeminist imaginary” that “purports that gendered violence is not a problem in the United

States”—the oppressed Muslim woman becomes a contrast to the liberated American woman (Alsultany 83).

The sympathy evoked from these representations is meant to be directed at the Arab/Muslim woman and not the man, argues Alsultany (99). Viewers are conditioned to feel outrage and concern for the oppressed female, while the males are treated with contempt. Commercial news media show Arab, Muslim, Arab/Muslim American men in a negative light as they try to explain the reasons for their behavior as terrorists. These simplifications in representations describe the people and their actions. For the men, all acts of violence are labeled as terrorism, “regardless of historical context or political grievance; such explanations are depoliticized, dehistoricized, and decontextualized” (Alsultany 101). Terrorism is then framed in a way that ““mask[s] the fact that there are multiple and interlocking forms of ‘terror’ that need to be combated; the terror of neo-imperialism and global militarism, the terror of global corporate capitalism, the terror of poverty and starvation, ...bioterrorism, ...racial terror, ...sexual terror, the terror of occupation and exile...”” (Alsultany 101). And finally, the United States government and media framed those who committed acts of terror as not “worthy of sympathy and understanding” (Alsultany 102). Alsultany makes a few suggestions to counter the problematic representations in the media. She suggests that Arab, Muslims, and Arab/Muslim Americans should be presented outside of the context of terrorism and other tropes associated with Islam. If the media continues to perpetuate illusions of a post-racial, multicultural, and post-feminist US society, no legitimate and positive changes will occur. In her autographic, Satrapi does not only try to evoke sympathy from Western readers, despite presenting the oppressive treatment towards women at the time of the Iranian Revolution; instead, she shows how women chose to oppose these fundamentalist rules and empower themselves in order to construct their

own identities. Regarding *Ms. Marvel*, one could say that the publishers chose a female protagonist that would evoke sympathy in order to connect with readers, making it a popular mainstream series.

In chapter one, “Marji’s Veil: A Tool for Constructing Gendered Identities,” I focus on the first volume of Marjane Satrapi’s autobiographic *Persepolis—The Story of a Childhood*—and argue that the veil and its associated meanings dictate who Satrapi should be and provide her with a tool to construct her gendered identity. I discuss Satrapi’s gender construction by analyzing three female figures that inspire her gendered performances: her mother, her grandmother, and the important scientist, Marie Curie. Before diving into the discussion on the gendered performances in *Persepolis*, I delineate the memoir boom, “a period roughly spanning the first decade of the twenty-first century, when the production and public visibility of American and British memoirs by celebrities and by relatively unknown people sharply increased” (3), as discussed by Julie Rak in her book *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*. For Rak, memoirs became a space for interacting with others, a textual space where the US reader (and others) could make “safe” contact with the non-Western peoples, who, according to various media outlets, were their enemies (165–70). This boom in personal narratives published after 9/11 includes Satrapi’s graphic memoir, which invites Western readers of the graphic memoir to unveil and explore the life of Marji, Satrapi’s graphic avatar (Rak 167). An important aspect of Satrapi’s memoir is its format: an autobiographic—a term coined by Gillian Whitlock “to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics” (Whitlock 966)—that explores trauma during a young Iranian girl’s formative years. After reviewing relevant commentary on memoirs and autobiographics, I contextualize the veil, which,

according to Farzaneh Milani, the Iranian government has “imposed, withdrawn, and reimposed within a single lifetime,” thereby creating “a puzzling diversity of personal and political ideologies” (19). The veil has become a strong cultural symbol, so much so that the removal of the veil has been met with “hostile, and at times fatal, resistance” (Milani 27) and become “an emblem of social deprivation and oppression” (Milani 31) for Iranian women. Beside using Milani’s work to inform my analysis of the veil, I also implement Judith Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in which she discusses gendered acts and how gender is socially constructed. To contextualize properly the space in which these gendered performances take place, I also utilize Mary Louise Pratt’s “contact zone,” or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). I draw on Pratt for the theoretical frame to analyze the gendered performances of the aforementioned women who appear in the best-selling graphic memoir. Because it is a critically-acclaimed text, I argue that Satrapi’s *Persepolis* paved the way for future female Muslim and Muslim-American characters in US comics.

Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* informs my reading of the texts in this thesis. McCloud analyzes the elements of comics, or what he describes as a combination of pictures and words in a comic book format. In this book, McCloud provides the vocabulary necessary to identify and analyze important elements in *Persepolis* and *Ms. Marvel*. Specifically, I use McCloud’s discussion of iconicity and pictorial vocabulary in the second chapter of this book. He defines the term icon as “any image used to represent a person, place, thing, or idea” (McCloud 27). McCloud considers the term symbol as “too loaded,” but he writes that they are “one category of icon... images [used] to represent concepts, ideas, and

philosophies” (27). McCloud classifies icons using a chart that separates them in the realm of reality, meaning, and the picture plane that represent the total pictorial vocabulary (51–53). In the chapter on *Persepolis*, I use McCloud’s discussions of icons as well as the elements of comic book page layouts—gutters (space between panels), word-picture relation, and transitions (passage of time)—to read gendered performances in the graphic memoir as well as to study Satrapi’s artistic and narrative choices, such as her illustration style and color palette.

In chapter two, I turn to analyze the gendered performances of Kamala Kahn in *Ms. Marvel*. I draw on Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine’s 2007 study of how Muslim-American youth negotiated their identities in the post-9/11 US. Through a mixed-method study, Sirin and Fine explored “the challenges of being Muslim and American: the ways Muslim-American young men and women negotiate their gendered identities, and the difficulties faced at home and within Muslim communities as these youths try to find their unique voices” (152). Sirin and Fine presented in this study that these young individuals, while juggling between hyphenated identities (American and Muslim), not only suffered oppression but some tried to reject discriminatory actions aimed at them.

The young Muslim men in the study perceived Muslim and American as two contradictory pieces that formed their identities (Sirin and Fine 159). This group felt split between diving into their home culture and integrating into both cultural spheres. The men seemed to present more anger, frustration, and hopelessness as a result of their complex identity formation. This differed from the young women in the study, who seemed more flexible in their disposition and ability to embrace both cultures. According to the researchers, the young women embraced a more fluid identity as their American identity has garnered them “more freedom...to

choose their own path in terms of their religious practices, educational goals, and career expectations” (Sirin and Fine 159).

For Sirin and Fine, the young Muslim-American women have a much more fluid and intertwined way of dealing with both cultures; unlike the male participants, the Muslim-American women see the culture as complementary and not contradictory. The women can see the opportunities and challenges both cultures offer. In the United States, the women can enjoy certain freedoms in their choices concerning religious practices, education, and careers. Even though they struggle with the same issues regarding discrimination, acculturation, and anxieties as their male counterparts, the women in the study see both cultural spheres as equal and important parts of their identity. Unlike the men, who seem to feel doubt and struggle through their bi-cultural world, the women are empowered. These thoughts were perfectly expressed in the identity maps created by two participants, Muhammed and Selina. The young man drew an image of a man split in half by his hyphenated identity (Muslim-American), while the woman drew an image where she refused to separate both identities, insisting on “the psychological project of synthesis, a fluid sense of identity, rightfully claiming both currents...decorated with... a beautiful blending of shades” (Sirin and Fine 156–57). As Sirin and Fine state, the women “walk under the shadow of the stereotype of the ‘oppressed woman’ because of their choice to wear Hijab, but they also recognize that in the U.S. they are choosing to wear it, hence, they feel empowered by their choice itself” (Sirin and Fine 159).

The study suggests that government policies, social relationships, and media representations affect their sense of self (Sirin and Fine 161). As the researchers explain, “when one’s social identity is fiercely contested by the dominant discourse either through formal institutions, social relationships, and/or the media, one of the first places we can witness

psychological, social and political fallout is in the lives of young people” (Sirin and Fine 151). The young participants of this study are only a small sample of the vast number of individuals who are labeled as “others” by US citizens and as such “they are forced to contend with the press of media produced and socially legitimated (mis)representations” (Sirin and Fine 160). Therefore, many young Muslim-American men see themselves as displaced individuals confronting the “specter of terrorism” on a day-to-day basis (Sirin and Fine 160). On the other hand, the women see themselves as “transnational or belonging to multiple places as citizens of the world” (Sirin and Fine 160).

For the past fifteen years, many Muslims living in the United States have lived through intense experiences involving discrimination and prejudice. Not only was the stable life of adults challenged in the workplace and community, but Muslim-American youth were affected as well. Young Muslim-American individuals suffered social oppression as well as humiliation and mistreatment. After the September 11 attacks, Muslim and Arab-Americans became the victims of hate crimes such as beatings, and at least three murders were reported, according to FBI statistics (Anderson; Serrano; and, Swanson). Arabs and Muslim-Americans have also become targets of racial profiling and immigration policies, leading to illegal surveillance, unjustified arrests, and deportations (Bayoumi 3–5; Davis et. al. 800–01; and, Goodstein). Their identities as Arab/Muslim-Americans have been put into jeopardy.

Given this cultural climate in the US, it was only a matter of time for the comic book industry to explore Muslim-American identities. Throughout the second chapter, “Kamala’s Scarf: Subverting Gendered, Hyphenated and Superhero Identities,” I study Khan’s gendered performances by drawing on the work of sociologists and psychologists who study the construction and performance of gendered and cultural identities in immigrants living in the U.S.

I argue that Khan carries out her identity negotiations—both national and gendered—in a contact zone where she balances a hyphenated identity. In this chapter, I review academic research papers and books on Muslim representation in US comic books since the 1970s and onward to discuss in this medium the lack of Muslim super heroes and heroines. Leonard Rifas presents an important description of Arabs and Muslims in comic books in his article, “Image of Arabs in U.S. Comic Books,” published in 1988. Rifas describes these characters as “barbaric, ignorant, backward, primitive, bloodthirsty, violent, villainous... dishonest, dangerous, decadent, fanatic, vengeful...” (qtd. in Strömberg 579). The characters in US comic books demonstrate the negative images with which Arab/Muslim communities were associated. Based on these studies, one can determine that there was no culturally-significant presence of Muslims in comic books prior to the 9/11 attacks. A couple of years after this attack, Muslim female characters began appearing in comic books by the mainstream publisher Marvel Comics; thus, scholars started to study the representations of Muslims in this medium as these characters appeared in these texts.

In early 2014, Marvel Comics relaunched *Ms. Marvel*. G. Willow Wilson—an American writer from New Jersey who converted to Islam while attending Boston University—created this rendition of the popular character. Illustrator Adrian Alphona and editor Sana Amanat were also closely involved in the project. This narrative stems from a conversation Amanat had with a senior editor at Marvel Comics, Stephen Wacker. Amanat told Wacker anecdotes about her personal experiences growing up in New Jersey as a Pakistani Muslim. She said that “there weren’t many people who looked like [her] or who had [her] background... In different ways, not only in terms of [her] being Muslim or Pakistani but just in terms of [her] personality and how [her] family was” (qtd. in Files). Wacker asked about the possibility of having a superhero

for girls like Amanat. The team approached Wilson and, once she committed to the project, she presented the idea to the Marvel creative committee who went forth with publication.

The secret identity of the original Ms. Marvel was that of Carol Danvers. Danvers—a blonde Caucasian female with blue eyes, standing at a height of 5’11”’—joined the United States Air Force at eighteen in order to facilitate her education and obtain her goal of space travel. As she climbed through the ranks and became a successful soldier, she was then tasked with further missions with S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division) and NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration). After meeting with Captain Marvel (Mar-Vell), she received her powers and embraced her identity as Ms. Marvel. Later, in 2012, Carol Danvers took over the mantle of Captain Marvel. Ms. Marvel has received quite the makeover in recent years: now a sixteen-year-old Muslim girl, Kamala Khan, living in Jersey City, occupies the role.

Readers were formally introduced to Kamala Khan in Marvel Comics’ *Ms. Marvel* (2014) after she made a small appearance in the *Captain Marvel* series. This character’s introduction is an important move forward for Marvel Comics. Kamala Khan is a protagonist and a member of a marginal population in the US. Because this series is recent, scholars have yet to study Kamala Khan’s gendered performances, even though the character is slowly becoming the subject of some academic papers (see, for instance, Clark; Longo; Priego; and, Trattner). Furthermore, web commentators have discussed the comic on social media online, and some skeptics questioned the announcement of this publication in late 2013.

In this second chapter, I explore two popular female, Muslim characters in the post-9/11 Marvel Comics storyline—Sooraya Qadir/Dust and Faiza Hussain/Excalibur—and how they set the stage for future comic book stories. Dust has been considered a character that “has reinforced

the negative stereotype and caricature of Muslim women” (Pumphrey 35), and some readers have chosen to read this character as an empowering Muslim woman whose costume breaks down stereotypes and asserts that Muslim women can be heroes and not just victims of male-perpetrated oppression. Regarding Excalibur, the audience’s positive reaction toward her indicates a big step toward positive representations of Muslim women in superhero comic books.

After examining the characters Dust and Excalibur, I analyze Ms. Marvel’s origin story as a young Muslim-American female in Jersey City by exploring her gendered performances throughout the first seven issues of the series published in 2014 to 2015. In these volumes, readers meet Khan, her multicultural group of friends, the teens that bully them, and her role model—Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, the original Ms. Marvel. To study Khan’s gendered performances, I use a framework like the one in the first chapter. Besides using Butler’s ideas on gendered performances, I examine hyphenated identities in the US. Sirin and Fine’s research on this topic aids my analysis of Khan’s performances in Jersey City as she struggles to fit in with US culture while still being true to her origins and home culture. I look at various instances in her story, such as when she comes to terms with her powers and her superhero and personal identity. I also study Khan’s interactions with popular and established superheroes like Wolverine, who also interacted with a female Muslim hero before Khan, Dust. I believe that the creators of Kamala Khan have given the world a different and conscientious representation of a Muslim-American youth, a character who combats the negative associations with these peoples in the US and educates readers on their culture, practices, and daily life.

Finally, I present in the conclusion of this thesis my experiences with teaching graphic novels in a literature class. I had the opportunity to teach a lesson using a page from Satrapi’s *Persepolis 2: A Story of a Return* alongside an excerpt from Azar Nafisi’s memoir, *Reading*

Lolita in Tehran, which are included in my students' textbook. Even though the editors of this textbook included valuable background information that helped young readers understand the context that shaped these texts, they did not provide adequate information on how to read and understand the medium of comics. In this conclusion, I discuss how instructors and professors can use parts of Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* to introduce students to the medium of comics. After outlining this introductory lesson, I offer arguments on why *Persepolis* and *Ms. Marvel* are relevant texts for high school or college students in Puerto Rico. I state that these texts are particularly important after the passing of Hurricane María, which resulted in many families moving to the US mainland to seek out better opportunities as well as negotiating their identities in uncertain spaces after suffering from a traumatic experience.

Chapter 1

Marji's Veil: A Tool for Constructing Gendered Identities

In this chapter, I first review relevant scholarship on *Persepolis*, Marjane Satrapi's graphic memoir (or autographic), a critically-acclaimed book since it was first published in English in 2003.¹ I do so to establish that discussions in this body of scholarship on gender and identity in late twentieth-century Iran have been absent. I focus only on the first volume of Satrapi's *Persepolis* and argue that it offers nuanced reflections on the topic of gender and identity in late twentieth-century Iran.² In this work Satrapi navigates in Iran her gendered identity all the while focusing on what is considered this country's most "heavily charged symbol...in modern history" (Milani 19), the veil. To support my arguments in this chapter, I use relevant ideas from Farzaneh Milani's *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* to contextualize the veil and Judith Butler's seminal essay, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," to read selected representations of gender in volume one of *Persepolis*. My argument is that this garment and the cultural meanings associated with it both dictate who Satrapi should be and provide her with a tool to construct and govern her own gendered identity.

Readers of the first volume of Satrapi's graphic memoir have focused on the significance of the paratexts in the editions marketed for United States readers as well as the presence of the veil as an indicator of differences between Iranian (and Middle Eastern) and Western cultures. These readers include Julie Rak, Gillian Whitlock, and Hilary Chute, among others. In her book *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, Julie Rak examines memoirs as a tool that allows Western readers to access the lives of non-Western peoples. According to Rak, the "memoir boom" is "a period roughly spanning the first decade of the twenty-first century, when

the production and public visibility of American and British memoirs by celebrities and by relatively unknown people sharply increased” (3). The enthusiasm for life narratives about non-Western subjects shaped both the memoir boom and the publishing of their memoirs after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. As United States citizens (and others) searched for answers and attempted to understand the world around them after the attacks, memoirs became a commodity they could buy and read to learn about the lives of non-Western subjects and to discover information on places and cultures not readily accessible to them (Rak 3). What may be exotic and unknown in the minds of Western readers becomes accessible and (to a certain degree) relatable through the reading of non-Western lives. For Rak, memoirs became a space for interacting with others, a textual space where the United States reader could make “safe” contact and interact with the non-Western peoples, who, according to various media outlets, were their enemies (165–70). This boom in personal narratives published after 9/11 includes Satrapi’s graphic memoir.

Rak notes that the publication of *Persepolis* in France consisted of four issues before it was translated into English and released in the United States; the French L’Association published one issue per year, throughout 2000–2003. The four issues shared a similarly formatted cover: they present the author’s name, the work’s title, an issue number, and an illustration of a Persian revolutionary and military leader who appeared under the publisher’s name (Rak 163). “The simplicity of these covers identifies Satrapi’s work with the L’Association style because other covers from the same period look similar to them, and they could appeal to a French audience that approves of revolutionary figures” (Rak 163). The covers also position the text as an attempt to educate French or more broadly European readers on a specific version of Iran’s history—Satrapi’s history with Iran. This notion plays into the subject chosen for the cover of the last

issue as it positions the author as the latest revolutionary leader and hero of Iran (163–64). As Rak discusses, the graphic memoir documents Iran’s history as well as various rebellions against Islamic fundamentalism (164–65). Additionally, Rak notes, “*Persepolis* was read in France as a political narrative in a number of ways, and...the paratextual elements of its production by an avant-garde press were geared to help readers do this” (165).

Rak also writes about the ways in which the marketing directors at Pantheon, the publisher, edited the paratexts in *Persepolis* for U.S. readers. The four original French issues were repackaged as two volumes, each with its own subtitle. Issues one and two were collected in the first volume, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, while the last two issues were collected in *Persepolis: The Story of a Return*, published in 2004 and 2005, respectively (Rak 165). In the U.S. edition of *Persepolis*, the title and subtitle are centered at the top of the cover, while the author’s name appears on the bottom of the page. Thin, gold lines with a black-colored trim frame the red cover of the first volume. Interestingly, the revolutionary leaders on horseback are not to be found; instead, a blue backdrop shows a veiled girl sitting at a table with her arms crossed—the same image in the very first panel of the book where Satrapi introduces her ten-year-old self in 1980. An elaborate black and gold design encase this image; under it a lotus—a symbol of martyrdom—appears. The second volume, *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, has the same general format with a few exceptions. The colors on the cover are inverted: the book is blue and the backdrop inside is red, and the ornate black and gold designs that surround the cover are the same as the first cover. In this book the veiled child is replaced by an adult and unveiled Marjane. Western readers likely recognize the little girl as an *other* because of her hijab. This cover caters to U.S. readers by framing the memoir as one about an unknown/mysterious child from a Middle Eastern country; these elements invite Western readers of the graphic memoir to

unveil and explore Marji's life, the graphic avatar created by Satrapi (Rak 167). Importantly, Rak argues that *Persepolis* became a best-selling graphic memoir because the content aligned in certain ways with the historical context in which it was published. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi provides a first-person account of Iran, a territory that was included in George W. Bush's "Axis of Evil" (162). Satrapi includes in her "Introduction" to the Pantheon edition of *Persepolis* "September 2002" as the date on which she wrote this part. Therefore, the U.S. publication of Satrapi's *Persepolis* occurs in a post-9/11 context, and the author's introduction attempts to correct Western readers' conflation of Iran with extremists; this introduction allows Satrapi to connect with U.S. readers and tell her story in light of stereotypes against Middle Eastern peoples (168).

Readers of *Persepolis* have also focused on the significance of multimodality, or the conjunction of the visual and the verbal. Gillian Whitlock's "Autographics: The Seeing 'I' of the Comics" addresses autobiographical narratives written in the medium of comics. For Whitlock, images are of importance because of their power to "relay affect and invoke a moral and ethical responsiveness in the viewer regarding the suffering of others" (965). Whitlock coins the term, autographics, "to draw attention to the specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text in this genre of autobiography, and also to the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through comics" (966). Like Rak, Whitlock argues that autographics permit creators and readers to meet through the visual and verbal grammar of comics and consider cultural differences (978).

Whitlock discusses Satrapi's style, its iconicity—both as a symbolic representation of herself and Iran and as a recognizable and well-established art style. For Whitlock (and others), visual images in a cartoonish style become more iconic and less realistic, thereby helping readers connect with the graphic representation of a person with better ease. This point means that Satrapi's cartoonish style may even be read by U.S. readers as safe and non-threatening, yet it

manages to address the political climate in late-twentieth-century Iran that oppressed women during the Islamic revolution. In this way her icons work two-fold: they represent Iranian women (and men), but also connect with the reader and elicit sympathy, empathy, and association. As Whitlock writes, “the garment [the veil] is represented in a highly iconic (as opposed to realistic) cartoon drawing of the newly-veiled Marji” (976). The cartoon images of the veiled Marji and other Iranian girls, women, and men throughout the text “promote identification between reader/viewer and image... [and] association between the viewer and image” (Whitlock 976).

Whitlock revisits the concept of autographics at the end of *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*. In this section, Whitlock explores the autobiographical avatar of Marji as well as the medium of comics and its role in trauma and censorship (23). Quoting McCloud, Whitlock writes,

We are forced to pause and speculate about the extraordinary connotative force of cartoon drawing, which both amplifies and simplifies: “When we abstract an image through cartooning we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’ an artist can amplify meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.” (188)

Satrapi’s art style, though cartoonish, is sophisticated and nuanced as the renditions are “human and expressive and highly individual” (188). Satrapi’s cartoon style may “function as a humanizing form of representation,” regardless of the cultural differences signaled by a veiled, female autobiographical avatar (Whitlock 189). Whitlock reads the veil as a sign of social change, one that brings about school segregation, the policing of Iranians’ lives, and other social changes in this country during the late twentieth century (189–90). Though Whitlock explores the veil and considers Satrapi’s handling of the veil as liberating rather than oppressive, I am

interested in reading Satrapi's use of the veil alongside Judith Butler's ideas of gender construction.

As several readers have pointed out, *Persepolis* is not just a memoir rendered graphically; it is also an autobiographical text that explores trauma during a young Iranian girl's formative years. In *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Hilary Chute addresses how Satrapi in the medium of comics handles memory, trauma, and feminist themes. Satrapi's choice to work with the medium of comics "allows for a dialectical conversation of different voices to compose the position from which Satrapi writes, verbally and visually inscribing multiple autobiographical 'I's" (Chute, *Graphic* 143–44). Chute makes the important observation that Satrapi in *Persepolis* creates three different autobiographical I's. Chute refers to these three I's as Satrapi (the author), Marjane (the narrator), and Marji (the autobiographical avatar) (144). The narrative voices identified by Chute help the reader navigate through Marji's childhood, teenage, and young adult life as well as her reflections on Iran (and elsewhere) that shaped her self (Chute, *Graphic* 144).

In discussing trauma and the artistic style, Chute mentions that "[Satrapi's autographic] is expressionistic and minimalist. The stylization of *Persepolis* suggests that the historically traumatic does not have to be visually traumatic" (135). Chute describes Satrapi's style as one that "suggests the horrifying normalcy of violence in Iraq" (152). Significantly, Chute reads *Persepolis* as a site of graphic witnessing as readers encounter in certain panels war, limbs not attached to bodies, scenes of execution, and the penetration of the traumatic into domestic spaces. For Chute, *Persepolis* has an "apparent visual simplicity coupled with emotional and political complexity" (137), and there is a "radical disjuncture between the often-gorgeous minimalism of Satrapi's drawings and the infinitely complicated traumatic events they depict:

harassment, torture, execution, bombings, mass murder” (146). Chute believes the life story drawn and written by Satrapi contains horrors, but her art style does not necessarily discourage or deter readers from becoming witnesses to these events; instead, her style draws them in and achieves the goals of highlighting the effects of the Islamic Revolution and war among a variety of Iranian peoples.

Of course, Rak, Whitlock, Chute, and others have contributed important insights on Satrapi’s graphic memoir.³ However, I argue that Satrapi uses the veil in the first volume of her graphic memoir not only to highlight the differences between non-Western subjects and Western readers. Satrapi uses the veil as a symbol of one of the options available to her as she explores her gendered identity in late twentieth-century Iran. Through both the presence and absence of the veil as well as the combining of elements from Eastern and Western cultures with the veil, Satrapi reflects on her gendered performance as an Iranian adolescent living in a fundamentalist country. *Persepolis* may be read as a text that comments on the options available to Satrapi as she navigated her gendered identity in twentieth-century Iran. In their scholarship, Rak, Whitlock, and Chute do not address the competing understandings of the veil’s meaning in *Persepolis* and the garment’s links to identity and gender in Iran as it is presented in the graphic memoir. In this thesis, I use Milani’s scholarship on Iranian women’s writing and gender to offer new insights on gendered performances in the first volume of *Persepolis*.

Several points from Milani’s book are important for my reading of *Persepolis*. In her book, Milani discusses the literal and metaphorical meanings of the veil, as well as how the veil has impacted and shaped the literary expressions of Iranian women. Milani defines the veil as:

any form of extra covering a woman has to wear on top of her dress when in public or in the presence of forbidden men, that is, all the men who could marry her, those who are

free of incest taboos. This definition includes the different shapes, sizes, and forms of the veil: from the all-encompassing cloak that covers the whole body but leaves the face bare, to the kind that covers the face as well, to the head scarf worn by rural and tribal women who can ill afford to wear the full veil. (2–3)

Historically, Iranians have debated the notions of veiling and consequently their views of acceptable gendered performances by women in this culture (Milani 1–2). According to Milani, the Iranian government has “imposed, withdrawn, and reimposed [the veil] within a single lifetime,” thereby creating “a puzzling diversity of personal and political ideologies” (19). Concepts of veiling have surfaced throughout the twentieth century be it under accepted cultural codes or the government-sanctioned unveiling edict in 1936 and the obligatory veiling in 1983 (19). The veil has become a strong cultural symbol, so much so that the removal of the veil has been met with “hostile, and at times fatal, resistance” (27). For many Iranian women, the veil has become “an emblem of social deprivation and oppression” (31).

Milani writes that the main function of veiling has been “to hide women from the view of forbidden men” (21). For many, the veil is seen as a garment intended to guard women’s modesty; it is meant to “conceal [the body] and to reduce sexual enticement” (Milani 21). In this way, the veil serves to regulate the social interactions between men and women in Iranian culture and other spaces in the Middle East. According to this line of thinking, Middle Eastern women must be modest and wear the veil, while Middle Eastern men must respect the garment—and the women under it—and understand how it keeps them from committing lustful acts. Milani also discusses the veil in ways that expand the meaning of this word. For Muslims, the veil is meant to hide one from view, based on the respective definition of “the Persian word *Pushesh* [clothing], [which] is derived from the verb *Pushidan*, which means to cover up, to conceal from

view; whereas the English term *dress* means...to decorate, to adorn” (22). Taking these similar terms into account, there is a dichotomy when thinking about clothing in Western and Middle Eastern cultures. For many Muslims, modesty is the principal concern for covering up; as Milani writes, “[n]akedness was a punishment for the fallen Adam and Eve, as it continues to be for their Muslim sons and daughters today” (22). For many in Western cultures, clothing is used to adorn and dress; in other words, these garments decorate the person. This décor, in turn, seeks, demands, and captures the attention of others—an action that can be placed directly at the opposite end of clothing as a type of covering.

Milani further identifies the veil as “the expression par excellence of a sexually segregated, male-dominated society, [and] an indication of the strong forces of deindividualization, protection, and secrecy” (23). This linking of the veil with segregation, separation, and the erasing of the individual creates a society in which Iranian women’s lives and experiences are private and concealed; these restrictions attempt to silence them and prevent them from expressing themselves. Their identities become blurred as individuality is concealed by the veil. Furthermore, men even govern the ways in which female sexuality is approached—they control the “gateway to women’s bodies” (23).

The intersections of the veil with identity and gender may be best understood with Judith Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” For Butler, biological sex (or anatomical difference) and gendered identity are neither synonymous nor linked with one another; that is, one’s biological sex does not determine one’s gendered identity. Butler discusses in this essay how gender and the notions of what it means in particular contexts to be a man and a woman (or masculine and feminine) are not only socially constructed but also performative as well as normalized. Individuals in certain cultural

and historical contexts regularly believe that they must follow these social rules governing gendered identity and perform accordingly. For Butler, historical backdrops shape ideas on what constitutes an acceptable gendered performance and ones that are not acceptable. Gendered performances are “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (Butler 521). In other words, gendered performances never occur in a vacuum; these performances are not original; and, they are not done without another performance (or performances) in mind. Additionally, Butler argues that gender does not have an essence, thus without gendered performances “there would be no gender at all. Gender is...a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (522). In her text Milani historicizes gender and its performance in Iran in ways that Butler endorses; she explains how the concepts behind veiling and its practice are adopted differently based on the historical and cultural moment. I use both Milani and Butler to analyze how Satrapi comments on gendered performances in late-twentieth-century Iran.

In an introductory essay to a special issue on graphic narrative, Chute explores Whitlock’s term autographics as the concept provides “new ways of thinking in life narrative across cultures” (qtd. in 778). Chute explains that the visual grammar used by Satrapi allows for more productively mediated cross-cultural relations with her audience (“Introduction” 778). This point helps scholars understand Satrapi’s visual representations of gendered identity. I argue that Satrapi explores gendered performances in what Mary Louise Pratt has called in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* a “contact zone,” or “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (7). *Persepolis* is a product of a contact zone.⁴ Importantly, Satrapi makes it clear in the “Introduction” to *Persepolis* that Iran, the setting of the graphic memoir, may be

understood as a contact zone. Historically, Iranians have experienced the oppression and indoctrination orchestrated by a variety of peoples, such as Cyrus the Great, Alexander the Great, its Arab neighbors, and Turkish and Mongolian conquerors; due to “its wealth and its geographic location, it invited attacks,” according to Satrapi (1). In this part of the text, Satrapi offers a brief history of Iran, a country she describes as one “often subject to foreign domination” (1). One can then argue that Iran, like *Persepolis*, is a product of a contact zone, as Persia was constantly the setting of conflict with various oppressive groups that left marks of their own cultures in Satrapi’s country. These historical instances are the background of *Persepolis* as Satrapi reflects on a certain period of her life and navigates a cultural contact zone where fundamentalists and more modern Iranians battle over their visions of Iran. To help readers understand how *Persepolis* grows from a contact zone, Satrapi narrates in the chapter “The Passport,” “The Internal war had become a bigger issue than the war with Iraq. Anyone showing the slightest resistance to the regime was persecuted” (118). As Satrapi notes, the religious fundamentalists attempted to shape the country to suit their ideological views and enforce their beliefs. In the graphic memoir, Marji navigates different spaces: she lives with her upper-middle-class, left-wing, progressive family who teaches her about her self-worth and introduces her to a number of modern ideas, but she belongs to a culture eventually run by Islamic fundamentalists who—besides changing Iranian culture to suit their needs—police, intimidate, and even kill Iranians who resist their national vision.

In her “Introduction” to *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, Satrapi explains that Reza Shah attempted to modernize and westernize Iran until oil was discovered in the early twentieth century, which invited even more invasions from outsiders (1). She writes,

Since then [1979], this old and great civilization has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know that this image is far from the truth. This is why writing *Persepolis* was so important to me. I believe that an entire nation should not be judged by the wrongdoings of a few extremists. (2)

Here Satrapi argues against stereotyping and generalizing non-Western peoples. Satrapi positions herself as what Chute calls a graphic witness to the violent Iranian revolution because she lived in Iran and during the country's revolution. As Chute notes, Satrapi's work addresses "the ethical visual and verbal practice of 'not forgetting' and about the political confluence of the everyday and the historical" (*Graphic* 136). In this way the graphic memoir

...presents a normalizing view of Iranians to the West through the necessarily nonthreatening figure of the charming female child...Satrapi herself has stated her desire to demonstrate the diversity of the Iranian people to non-Iranians: we in the West may find the Satrapis and their experiences extraordinary, but her aim is in part to reveal that her family's experiences and their left-wing outlook are more common than the average Western reader would presume. "I wanted people in other countries to read *Persepolis*, to see that I grew up just as other children do." (138)

By creating this autographic, Satrapi presents what her life and others' lives were like during the revolution; she attempts to normalize Westerners' conceptions of the Middle East and its people. Thus, she admits in the sentence quoted above by Chute that she has written and drawn her graphic memoir for *others*, that is, not only for Iranian peoples but for Western readers, those individuals who have not experienced life in Iran, especially under a fundamentalist regime. It is important to note that Satrapi exalts in the "Introduction" the greatness of Iran while still

mourning for it and for those in exile (including herself). By revealing the story of her life during the revolution and her country's war with Iraq, Satrapi educates her non-Western readers on these politically-fueled and religiously-fueled historical events. Most importantly, she sheds light on the effects of the cultural revolution. Considering the overwhelmingly negative representations of Middle Eastern peoples in the United States following 9/11, Satrapi challenges in *Persepolis* Western peoples' understanding of Iran as a nation comprised of what she refers to in her introduction as "extremists." As the memoir largely focuses on Satrapi's reflections on her younger self negotiating her identity, the narrative of Satrapi, her family, and others resisting both the revolution and the fundamentalist government invokes Western readers' interest in the lives of these Iranians and sympathy for them. Revolutionary struggle unites the non-Western subject and the Western reader.

In *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, Scott McCloud contributes important terminology on the medium that provides insights into Satrapi's visual choices. First, McCloud defines the medium of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (9). In discussing the vocabulary of comics, McCloud addresses the use of icons in comics. He defines icons as "any image used to represent a person, place, thing[,] or idea," and he explains that symbols, or images that "represent concepts, ideas, and philosophies," are a category of icons (27). According to McCloud, to understand iconicity, the relation between form and meaning, it is necessary to understand photographs, cartoons, and colors. "Photograph[s] and the realistic picture are the icons that most resemble their real-life counterparts," but the realistic picture—as a pictorial icon—can move toward abstraction (28). As the picture "continue[s] to abstract and

simplify... [it moves] further and further from the ‘real’ face” and usually closer to the cartoon (29).

McCloud considers cartoons as “a form of amplification through simplification” (30); that is, when cartooning one does not eliminate details on a face, but instead focuses the attention on specific features on the human face, like the size and shape of the eyes, nose, and lips. By cartooning, as shown in the triangle continuum created by McCloud on page 51, the illustrator can simplify the features of a human face, while amplifying certain characteristics. He expands this continuum on pages 52 to 53 by using illustrations from popular comic books to explain the concept of cartooning. McCloud argues that cartooning allows readers to make connections with the drawn subjects/characters in comics via “the universality of cartoon imagery. The more cartoony a face is, for instance, the more people it could be said to describe” (31). For McCloud, amplifying the human face is the cartoon’s power in the medium of comics; by performing these two feats, that is, “the ability of cartoons to focus our attention on an idea... [and] the universality of cartoon imagery,” cartoonists have the capacity to captivate the reader as well as help them connect or identify with a character (31).

McCloud specifies that the reader processes the newly-created image of the human face as realistic, but with its simplification and universality the cartooned human face represents more and more people. McCloud renders the first face in his continuum in different ways to explain how each new illustration may stand in for “[o]ne. A Few. Thousands. Millions. (Nearly) All [faces]” (31). McCloud’s cartooning continuum is important because it helps classify Satrapi’s avatar into the “millions” category, as Satrapi composes Marji’s avatar with simpler strokes and features that become relatable to more readers; this cartooning results in non-Western readers identifying with Satrapi’s avatar. While Satrapi’s illustrations depict in a surprisingly inexplicit

fashion a history of violence and suffering, she delivers her ideas of gendered performances to a substantial group of readers. Where the veil can potentially deter Western readers, whose only picture of Middle Eastern peoples has been largely perpetuated by Hollywood stereotypes and news coverage of wars in the Middle East, Satrapi's cartooning of herself and other Iranians eases these readers into her graphic memoir. Her cartooning addresses important ideas on gender in the Middle East without lessening any of the graphic memoir's serious and somber tones.

According to Whitlock, the more cartoonish the image, the more iconic it becomes; the image becomes less realistic and helps readers connect with the graphic representation of a person with more ease ("Autographics" 976). Importantly, iconicity allows Satrapi to communicate in her graphic memoir her perspectives on gendered identity. The first chapter of *Persepolis*, "The Veil," opens with an image of ten-year-old Marji wearing this object in 1980. This chapter introduces the Western reader to the most powerful symbol in her narrative: the veil. In this chapter she makes important comments on her gendered performances, which in turn comment on Iranian culture, U.S. popular culture, and the meaning of the veil.

Satrapi draws her avatar-self wearing the veil in school where its use was made obligatory by fundamentalists; she visually reproduces in a class photo herself and others. She presents how the veil's presence created a sense of confusion among the young female students—who, until the previous year, did not need to wear one. As Satrapi expresses in her introduction, she believes that Iranians should not be judged by the actions of a few extremists. This avatar serves as the first non-threatening connection that bridges Western readers with Satrapi and her life narrative. Marji's features may be read as an icon because her face mirrors the universal sign for the human face in the last space of McCloud's cartooning continuum (31). This icon created by Satrapi consists of minimalistic features which readers will process as a

human face—a set of eyes along with eyebrows, a nose, and a mouth. Satrapi customizes in her graphic memoir these icons with hairstyles and fashion items to create distinctions between the Iranian girls, which prevent the Western reader from collapsing all of them into a single category. Satrapi presents in other parts of her graphic memoir panels acts of violence and death, but her cartoon-like renditions do not appall or deter readers. Instead, she uses cartooning to make Western readers feel at ease by using icons and likely reminding them of their own childhoods. Based on McCloud's cartooning continuum, Satrapi's avatar can be more precisely categorized as one that represents "millions" (31) instead of only herself. Therefore, her icons work two-fold: they represent herself and other young Iranian females (ones ranging from ten to fourteen years old), but they also connect with Western readers by making a potentially hostile setting and people approachable and understandable; Satrapi's use of the icon elicits from the Western reader sympathy, empathy, and association as the author explores in her graphic memoir her own gender performances.

Satrapi also uses specific panels in "The Veil" to introduce the fundamentalist leader while setting the historical context for her recollections on her life in Iran during the Islamic Revolution and war with Iraq. According to Satrapi, Iranian fundamentalists made her (and others) wear the veil, and this garment gains additional importance as it symbolizes how Marji's world changes during the Islamic Revolution. In this chapter she presents an authority figure—a male fundamentalist—who addresses in four consecutive panels the Iranian people with the following language: "All bilingual schools must be closed down. They are symbols of capitalism. Of decadence" (4). The stern, commanding, and angry-looking man speaks of Western-influenced centers of education as symbols of capitalism, a source of evil and corruption as well as a powerful force that ruins Iranian men and women. Thus, fundamentalists

read the school as “dens of iniquity, centers of corruption” (Milani 56) and breeding grounds for decadence that must be stopped. Satrapi renders this man as the figure who imposes the veil and oversees the segregation at school by separating Iranian boys and girls. Satrapi even draws other Iranians in the panel as endorsing the fundamentalist by exclaiming, “Bravo!” and “What wisdom!” (4). By presenting the obligatory use of the veil in 1980, Satrapi historicizes gender in a way that agrees with Butler’s ideas: “to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility” (522). Marji’s gendered performances are severely limited because of the Islamic Revolution and its effects on Iranian society; at this stage, she cannot explore gendered performances not endorsed by the Iranian fundamentalists. The Iranian fundamentalists police gender performances and seek to punish subversive behavior. As Butler puts it, “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences” (522).

Though the revolution had taken place the year before when Satrapi and her friends were ten years old, it is apparent that the Iranian children had begun to internalize ideas about gender from listening to adults and being aware of their culture. Through their actions and willingness to wear the veil, Marji and her friends further exemplify Butler’s remarks on complying with gender roles emerging from a historical and cultural context (522). As they act, Marji and her classmates try on a newly-imposed gender performance that they do not entirely comprehend. Satrapi makes this point clear when she draws multiple Iranian girls playing in a segregated school. Here Satrapi presents the veil being used by the girls in different ways—whether with reverence expected from the fundamentalists or with disregard and aloofness. In this manner, Satrapi visually documents this early stage of gender compliance in late-twentieth-century Iran;

the young girls perform a new gendered vision recently imposed on them, which is an act they do not know how to perform yet.

Satrapi draws the Iranian girls to make it clear that they do not understand the meaning of the garment and its significance. For instance, a veiled girl exclaims in the fifth panel, “Execution in the name of freedom” (3), as she chokes an unveiled classmate. Another child, one with the garment covering her face, says, “Ooh! I’m the monster of darkness,” while chasing a classmate (3). “Giddyap!,” yells a veiled girl as she sits on an unveiled classmate’s back, as if hinting at the garment possessing status and power: the veiled have power over the unveiled. Traditionally, Westerners read the veil as a symbol of religious fundamentalism, but Satrapi argues that the young Iranian school girls do not fully understand the function of their veils; they use them incorrectly and they disrespect them and what they symbolize to the new government and its religious leaders. Satrapi makes additional comments on gendered performances in this panel. She associates the veil with an executioner for freedom and a “monster of darkness” (3). The fundamentalists represented by the veil are willing to execute those who do not agree with them in their search for freedom from Western influences. At the same time the veil, as a “monster of darkness,” blinds others from seeing the wearers’ individuality and uniqueness, leaving those who are veiled silenced and separated from others. These points about the veil’s meaning extend to the performance expected from its wearers as well as the punishment if this ritual was not enacted.

Satrapi’s focus on her school shifts to another setting with a visual representation of Marji with her arms wide open in a gesture of defeat, disbelief, frustration; she shrugs as she says, “And that was that” (4). The image can be read as a young Satrapi trapped inside the panel—a graphic extension of the veil that keeps her hidden away and separated. This panel

serves as a transition from Satrapi's discussion of the veil's implementation and how the veil limits and impacts others' lives at school to her own segregation. As Milani states, "the veil can readily be compared to a portable wall" (21). As such the veil is an extension of the segregation Marji will experience; she will be segregated from her male classmates in school, but outside she will also be isolated as her ideas and actions will be policed. The panel signifies the real consequences that result from Marji's living in Iran at the time. The veil, and the social implications it holds, cause Marji to struggle with a divided personality—one that must meet the expectations of the fundamentalist society and one that has been molded by her family's progressiveness.

Besides introducing the veil, Satrapi presents in this first chapter her divided personality because gendered performances have started to become limited, restricted, and policed during this period. Satrapi looks back at her childhood and understands how her family influenced her identity. On the one hand, Marji's family has instilled in her a modern and avant-garde perspective on life, while on the other hand she feels that "[she] was born with religion" (6). The first panel on page six illustrates this point. In this panel, Satrapi renders her six-year-old self and her conflicting identities. Satrapi splits her avatar down the middle and each half represents a part of her conflicted identity. On the right half of the panel, Satrapi focuses on Marji's religious side as indicated by her wearing of the full-bodied chador, a singular occurrence in the graphic memoir for she never again wears this type of garment. This chador symbolizes both Marji's desire to be religious and Islamic fundamentalism or the culturally-enforced-religious views to which she must subscribe. Marji stands on this side of the panel in front of a white background seemingly decorated in a Persian style with leaves and vines. This calligraphy recalls the Persian alphabet and the visual representations of Islamic fundamentalism, like the tulip on the cover of

Persepolis. On the left side of the panel, Marji wears a plain white shirt and her short hair is uncovered. Satrapi adds to the black background gears, rulers, and tools. These items reference the modern world, progress, industrialization, and engineering. Marji's father is an engineer who, like his wife, actively participates in demonstrations against the Shah and Islamic fundamentalism. This side of Marji aligns with her family—a part of Marji that is highly progressive and even revolutionary. This side as well signals Marji's aspirations for learning about her country's political history as she begins to educate herself by reading books about Iran and the Middle East as well as “a comic book entitled ‘Dialectic Materialism’” (12).

This panel references what can be considered Marji's options regarding her gendered performance at this stage in her life. In other words, Marji can choose to conform and comply with the fundamentally-instituted performance or the progressive one inspired by her family's ideals and lessons. She can follow what is considered the norm by the fundamentalists or she can challenge it with other gendered performances. One can say that Satrapi has outlined “possibilities of gender transformation” (Butler 520) by presenting Marji with performative options. Butler explains that “‘a style of being’ or ‘a stylistics of existence’... is never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (521). Referring to gender, Butler notes that it is achieved “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). As Butler further explains, gender is thus conceived via a “legacy of sedimentation” (523); gender norms may at times seem individual and unique, but they come from previously enacted performances.

These ideas on gender performances may be connected with G. Thomas Couser's commentary on relationality in his book *Memoir: An Introduction*. Couser explains that memoirs are “situated on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are those that focus on their authors,

at the other, those that focus on someone else” (20). Memoirs, like Satrapi’s autographic, document how the author is “formed as [an individual] in and by relationships and exists within social networks” (20). As a result, Couser argues that life stories can be described as “relational... [a term] now used to refer to narrative that arises from, and is primarily concerned with, intimate relationships. The most common [of] such relationships are those between siblings, between partners, and between parents and children” (20).

In *Persepolis* Satrapi explores relationality in various ways. She discusses and draws her family and her Iranian community as she interacts with them throughout her childhood and young adulthood. All these social spheres work together to form her identity through time. As Butler would put it, “the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (523). Here I wish to explore the relationships between Marji and her female family members as well as the female role models who influenced her gender performance in *The Story of a Childhood*. These influential female figures provide Marji with different ways to view and understand her gendered performances; these women include her mother, Taji, her grandmother, and the Polish-French physicist and chemist Marie Curie. The gendered performances of these three women—ones that may be described as protesting against fundamentalism, yearning for academic growth, and achieving independence—clearly counter the fundamentalist and state-imposed performance of wearing the veil and what it represents. Relationality links, then, to gendered performances in *Persepolis*.

Taji, Marji’s mother, may be considered her major female role model in the graphic memoir. As Couser explains “[b]ecause most early parenting is done by women, defining oneself in terms of relatedness to another may be more typical of females, who form their identities initially in relation to a parent of the *same* sex” (20). The mother-daughter relationship between

Taji and Marji is a tangible example of relationality and gendered performances, as Taji presents her daughter with an alternative performance she could follow: a balancing act of sorts between two contradicting performances. Marji's relationship with Taji in this volume involves two different dynamics: she is first a source of inspiration and then a source of restriction and control. In one part of the graphic memoir, Marji recognizes Taji as a key female figure who aligns herself with the opposition against the fundamentalists and their implementation of the veil. After a demonstration, Marji notes that she "was really proud of her [mother]. Her photo was published in all the European newspapers" (5). In this photograph, an unveiled Taji wears a pair of sunglasses during a demonstration. She raises a fist in the air while shouting and her eyebrows express anger (5).

This photograph of Taji represents a possibility for Marji's gendered self. Satrapi includes a drawing of this photo to underscore that Marji may be passionately pursuing social justice and even be angry as a young woman living in Iran. Yet, Satrapi highlights that this option is also dangerous. Taji becomes immediately worried about the consequences of her political action, so she decides to dye her hair a lighter color, as seen in the fifth panel, and wear dark glasses to keep hidden from fundamentalists who may recognize her from the protest (5). By concealing herself, Taji protects her family and herself from becoming targets. Satrapi makes it clear that her mother is now visibly concerned about how she can influence Marji's gendered self. Satrapi reflects on how her mother's actions of aligning with the West and the gendered performances that mimic the West can have drastic repercussions.

She visually explores in the chapter titled "The Letter" Taji's unease. Marji's parents join a demonstration that she and Mehri—a young girl who came to live with the Satrapis at the age of eight because her family was not able to provide for all their children—are not allowed to

participate in, but they sneak out anyway (38). Upon finding them, Taji slaps both girls because she informs them that many people had been killed in a neighborhood during the demonstrations (39). Taji's reaction is one of care; she does not want Marji to suffer any harm or punishment at the hands of the fundamentalists. One year later, Taji continues to alter what type of gendered performances she wants her daughter to access and use. Marji's mother had been insulted by two fundamentalist men; as she states, "[t]hey said that women like [her] should be pushed up against a wall and fucked. And then thrown in the garbage...and that if [she] didn't want that to happen, [she] should wear the veil" (74). Though not explicitly explored visually in the panels, one can see this situation as involving "[a] man's sinful grace... [and] a woman's unveiled body" (Milani 25). After this episode wearing the veil was made obligatory and readers see Marji wear a headscarf outside (74–75). This situation is an example of the fundamentalist Iranian groups policing the way Iranian women may perform their gendered identity according to state-mandated rules. In their eyes, Taji does not perform her gender correctly and, as Butler notes, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (522). Taji was verbally threatened by these men and, once her emotional anguish subsided, she became even more protective of Marji. For instance, she polices her daughter's gendered performances, particularly when she appears in public. In the last three panels on page 75, Taji—after critiquing the performance of a hypocritical family in their neighborhood—advises Marji to virtually do the same as that family, which for Marji was "[a]t first, ...a little hard, but [she] learned to lie quickly" (75). For Marji, this advice must have seemed unusual, especially coming from her mother, because it goes against everything Taji had originally taught her. The choice of putting on an act, lying, to keep her safe does not align with her mother's evident fight against fundamentalism, initially making it a difficult request to follow through with.

However, Satrapi later explores visually and verbally how demonstrations were organized to once again protest the veil. Unlike before, Taji wanted Marji to participate in the protest: “She should start learning to defend her rights as a woman right now!” (76). An unveiled Taji raises her fist, and this time she is not wearing sunglasses. The illustration mirrors the photograph from the European newspaper that Satrapi draws in the first chapter. In the same panel, Marjane’s narrative voice states: “Since the 1979 revolution, I’d grown older (well, a year older) and mom had changed” (76). Through her relationship with her mother, Marji learns to negotiate both performances, her fundamentalist identity and her more radical self. Via interactions with her mother, Marji understands that she must be able to offer a persona that meets the expectations of the fundamentalist groups in social situations while still embracing, in the privacy of her family’s home, her identity as a subversive young girl.

Besides her mother, Marji’s other female role model at home is her grandmother. Marji’s grandmother, who had suffered at the hands of the Shah’s father, plays an integral part in her development, as she teaches the young Satrapi valuable lessons about perseverance, conscientiousness, responsibility, integrity, and authenticity. Marji’s great-grandfather had been the emperor of Iran; when he was overthrown, her grandfather was a young man and he lost everything to the Shah’s father. Her grandfather became a communist and spent a lot of time in prison (23–24). This situation was difficult for Marji’s grandmother and mother; as Satrapi notes, “[they] lived in poverty” (26). To survive and feed her family, Marji’s grandmother “took in sewing and with leftover material, [she] made clothes for the whole family” (27). In these panels, the reader can see how Satrapi’s life story is “situated in a continuum from those focused on the author [her] to those focused on another” (Couser 20). As a result of these years of hardship, Marji’s grandmother understands how bad the situation they are currently living can

become; thus, her actions support and educate Marji and her family as they all navigate and persevere against the fundamentalist regime.

An example of Marji's grandmother's caring ways can be seen in the sixteenth panel of the chapter titled "Persepolis," where Marji's grandmother states that she has "bought [Marji] some books. You will see why the people are revolting" (28). This moment takes place right after Marji asks her grandmother to tell her about her grandfather's life. In the panel referenced above, Marji and her grandmother hold hands, while making their way into the kitchen to see Taji. As they enter the kitchen, Marji thinks that she will not talk to her about her grandfather. Instead, Marji's grandmother narrates important events in the family's history. Marji learns about her grandfather's and uncles' life stories—a royal leader and a subversive scholar, respectively—as well as the strength, persistence, and cleverness of the women in her family. Her grandmother is of vast importance as her family's stories are what allow Marji, the graphic subject, and the readers to form a better and more complete understanding of her past and self, which she explores in these panels. Satrapi's constant focus on the women in her family supports Couser's notions on relationality and how females tend to define their identities in relation to members of the same sex (20). At the same time, Satrapi employs relationality to stress that her gendered identity developed out of generational bonds. The most important instance of Marji's grandmother impacting her self appears at the end of *The Story of a Childhood*. In "The Dowry," after Marji misbehaves in school and gets expelled, Satrapi's parents understand that a difficult decision must be made. They state, "[c]onsidering the person you are and the education you've received we thought that it would be better if you left Iran. Your mother and I have decided to send you to Austria" (147). As Marji began to prepare for her exile, she shared a meaningful conversation with her grandmother. Marji's grandmother asked her to "always keep [her] dignity

and be true to [herself]" (150). This advice is important for Marji because it will help her survive in Europe, where she continues to negotiate her gendered identity outside of Iran. At this point in the autographic, Marji is about to leave Iran and move to the West, where she will have to come to terms with her identity, but especially with how others perceive her as an Iranian woman. By asking Marji to keep her dignity and be true, her grandmother reminds her that she is worthy of honor and should feel pride in herself and self-respect while not compromising her identity.

Couser argues that relationality in memoirs is primarily concerned with intimate relationships and the genre may be understood as situated on a continuum where authors focus on themselves and others (20). Satrapi's use of relationality typically depicts in her graphic memoir relationships with other people who she knows such as family members and friends, but she does align herself with another important woman who she never meets face-to-face, Marie Curie. In "The Trip," Marji mentions how the U.S. Embassy had been occupied, then a couple of days later "[t]he ministry [sic] of education has decreed that universities will close at the end of the month" (73). Satrapi clarifies that universities were closed for two years to reevaluate the educational system and eradicate its imperialist influences. Marji's reaction to these events is not unexpected, as she was raised by a progressive family that inspired her not to conform to the fundamentalists. In the last three panels on page 73, Marjane's narrating voice states, "No more university. And I wanted to study chemistry. I wanted to be like Marie Curie. I wanted to be an educated, liberated woman. And if the pursuit of knowledge meant getting cancer, so be it. And so another dream went up in smoke" (73). Here Marji alludes to the Polish-French chemist and physicist Marie Curie, a pioneer in radioactivity research. At this point in the graphic memoir, Marji wishes to be like Curie. She contrasts her potential future to Curie's life in the seventh panel; "[a]t the age that Marie Curie first went to France to study, I'll probably have ten

children” (73). While Curie managed to enjoy a degree of freedom, as she was able to visit France and pursue her education in the field of chemistry, the same cannot be said for Marji. For her, this hindrance to education produces concerns about pregnancy and raising multiple children. She understands these roles to be the gendered performance of Iranian women expected by the fundamentalist government. These panels present the difference between Satrapi’s limited freedom in relation to Curie’s intellectual freedom. In her graphic rendering, the last two panels push the reader to recognize the parallels between Curie in her deathbed and Marji understanding that the price for freedom is death in some cases. The following panel shows Marji in her own bed, crying in defeat as she realizes the limitations imposed on her gendered performance by the fundamentalists. Satrapi’s choice to reflect on how Curie inspired her to question and rebel against these limitations to her freedoms reinforces Couser’s ideas on the genre of memoir and the relationship between the self and other. Via Curie, Satrapi evaluates herself and her identity development.

Though Satrapi initially presents her gendered identity as a dichotomy between religious and non-religious ideologies as well as intellectual freedom versus the raising of children, her comments on U.S. popular culture additionally shape her view of herself in the last few chapters of this first volume, particularly the chapter titled “Kim Wilde.” Though the fundamentalist government bans cassettes, clothes from the West, and other accessories, Satrapi manages to find ways to consume the popular culture of the United States. For instance, she obtains and listens to the music of Kim Wilde, Iron Maiden, and Camel, wears “punk shoes” and jean jackets via the help of Iranians who sell these products on the black market as well her parents who visit Turkey and purchase items not available in Iran. Near the end of her graphic memoir Satrapi makes it clear that her identity exists both in private and public spaces. The private space is her home,

where one could say she is safe—if the guardians of the revolution, the police, do not force their way into this space. In this space, Marji can be herself; she listens to, wears, and does what she wants without having to worry about the judgment of others. On the other hand, in the public space, Marji can become the focus of judgment and criticism from the authority figures like the Guardians of the Revolution, who both represent Iranian fundamentalism and police the boundaries of acceptable gender performances. As Satrapi notes, the Guardians’ “job was to put us back on the straight and narrow by explaining the duties of Muslim women” (133).

Near the end of the graphic memoir, Marji takes a risk by blurring the boundaries of private and public spaces; in other words, she presents in public objects that were important to her private identity. She displays in public her consumption of U.S. popular culture by wearing a pair of Nike “punk” shoes and a jean jacket with a Michael Jackson pin, indicating US influences, along with her veil. Marji’s gendered performance violates what the Guardians consider proper and acceptable. Since these acts would be considered part of an inappropriate gendered performance, the Guardians would “[initiate] a set of punishments” for Marji (Butler 528). The Guardians stop Marji and question her about her outfit and even say they could detain her for hours (even days) without informing her parents (134). The circumstances surrounding Marji’s performance are an explicit example of the policing committed by the fundamentalists, whose duty in their eyes is to interrogate the gendered performances of Iranians and deliver punishments when necessary. As the Guardians interrogate Marji, she defends her clothes. She justifies her wearing of Nike sneakers by saying that she played basketball at school—which the Guardians did not believe. She then explains her wearing of a pin by stating that it was Malcolm X—“the leader of black Muslims in America” (133)—and not Michael Jackson. It is interesting to see how the Guardians recognize Michael Jackson and label him “a symbol of decadence”

(133) after Marji tries to create a connection with the women via Malcom X and his leadership as a Muslim. This moment reestablishes the fundamentalists' strong abhorrence of Western influences (133). After this initial conflict, the Guardians' charges become more concerned with Marji's veil, jeans, and other Western-influenced accessories. The women call Marji "a little whore" (133) for not wearing the veil appropriately, as it exposes some of her hair, and she wears tight jeans. In this case, Satrapi recalls her mother's experience with two fundamentalists who verbally assault Taji for not wearing the veil. For the Guardians, wearing the veil incorrectly is a reason to label Marji a whore and send her to the committee for punishment. It is as if the veil (or its absence) helps "make women an object, a puppet in the hands of men" (Milani 38). To save herself from being punished, Marji lies that she had lost her mother and her new family would hurt her if she did not return home immediately. Evidently, the lying that was once difficult for Marji seems to have saved her and her family in this situation. Marji sets up the tragic family story to gather sympathy from these women and avoid punishment, and it proves successful. In what seems to be a chapter celebrating Western popular culture and influences, Satrapi shows readers the dangers of Marji expressing her identity and subverting the gendered performance expected of her by the fundamentalists. Marji returns home defeated, yet she chooses to dance to British singer Kim Wilde's 1981 song "Kids in America"—another indication to how Western influences help Marji cope and escape. Marji's resistance during this incident becomes an act with which Western readers can sympathize. In this moment, Marji is perceived by Western readers as a victim of fundamentalism; readers likely envision a link between themselves and Marji. Western readers likely interpret her subversive performance against the Iranian government seen as an act "contesting [gender's] reified status" (Butler 520), making Marji a brave and heroic young woman in their eyes.

Even though “notions of autonomy, equality, and development are [not] solely the prerogative of Westerners” (Milani 12), Marji’s consumption of U.S. popular culture needs to be read as rebellion against Iranian fundamentalism. It is a way for Marji to embrace her modern views as she embraces manifestations of Western culture. Her use of Western culture sets up who she is when she moves to Vienna as a teenager. She is exposed in this new space to art, philosophy, music, and drugs. These acts may be understood as Marji’s own “cultural revolution,” which drives and influences her feminist views and desire for independence when she returns to Iran.

In this chapter, I have focused my discussion on the presence of the veil and Satrapi’s use of it in her autographic. Readers of the memoir witness the power the veil possesses for Satrapi. Satrapi presents three female role models in her childhood—her mother Taji, her maternal grandmother, and Polish-French chemist Marie Curie. After experiencing and understanding the veil and its limitations, these three women become responsible of carrying out subversive gendered performances, which Marji observes closely. In various instances throughout the autographic, Satrapi shows how these performances, whether witnessed intimately or not, inspired Marji’s development from a young age. Throughout the graphic memoir, Marji realizes that she must stand up for what she believes in, follow her goals, and be true to herself, as these three internalized ideas ultimately make up her identity. As I have argued, Marji incorporates Western-influenced popular culture into her wardrobe. With this act, Marji balances herself between the gendered performances acceptable in Iranian culture. In this space, Marji manages to reclaim and redefine the veil as a tool for identity development and individuality rather than a garment associated with submission and silence.

Notes

1. *Persepolis* is not only a best-selling book in the U.S., but the graphic novel's publishing history may be described as transnational. The Spanish comic book publisher Norma Editorial has published six paperback editions of *Pérsepolis*. Its most recent publication was printed on November 2017. This 2017 Spanish edition's cover references Marji's divided personality. *Pérsepolis* includes a translation of the original introduction written by French comic book artist David B. as well as a graphically rendered epilogue by Satrapi. Scholars have not yet explored this Spanish edition of *Persepolis*.
2. The scope of this project focuses on the first volume of Satrapi's *Persepolis—The Story of a Childhood*. Therefore, I will not discuss the second volume—*The Story of a Return*—and the 2007 film *Persepolis*. Additionally, this chapter focuses on Satrapi's gender performances in Iran, though there are other settings in the second volume (like Vienna) that require additional analysis.
3. For other readings of *Persepolis*, see Horn, Pedri, Botshon and Plastas, as well as Tensuan.
4. Another contact zone in *Persepolis* is Vienna, though I will not examine this space in this project.

Chapter 2

Kamala's Scarf: Subverting Gendered, Hyphenated and Superhero Identities

In the wake of September 11, 2001, media outlets in the U.S. (and elsewhere) presented more Arab and Muslim characters in their productions, thereby increasing the mainstream representations of these people.¹ There was a memoir boom in the literary marketplace from 2000 to 2010, as Rak argues. One pocket of the memoir boom contained Middle Eastern memoirs authored by females, which created interest in Western readers for these types of life stories. By the first decade of the twenty-first-century, Western readers had been primed by Satrapi's coming-of-age story wherein she reflects on her life in Iran and how the socio-political circumstances at home influenced the development of her gendered performances. As a critically-acclaimed graphic novel, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* paved the way for future female Muslim characters in U.S. comics. With the growing popularity of memoirs about Middle Eastern lives in the mainstream market, it was only a matter of time for the comic book industry to explore them. "The comic book industry [had] seen a huge boom in book sales and popularity, more than doubling their gross sales since 2001" (Moulton 5). One could maintain that this boom in the comic book industry parallels the memoir boom identified by Rak. Since superheroes have not only been used to comment on important events, it makes sense that a comic book revitalization would occur at this time. Following 9/11, comic book heroes became more realistic, more human; they were now weak and fallible, almost broken, like the human beings who experienced the national disaster (Moulton 16). In this fashion, the superheroes and their stories reflected real world events and the national tragedy. These elements developed an audience in the U.S. ready to welcome the coming-of-age story of a Muslim-American youth, specifically the story of Kamala Khan in Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel*. It is important to note that

before Khan, Marvel Comics had published other female Muslim heroes. These post-9/11 mainstream comic book characters were Sooraya Qadir and Faiza Hussain, otherwise known as the superheroes Dust and Excalibur, respectively.

In this chapter, I will review scholarship about the representations of Arabs and Muslims in U.S. comic books published after 9/11. I will also review the slim body of scholarship on *Ms. Marvel* as well as explore Sooraya Qadir and Faiza Hussain and how they serve as prototypes for Kamala Khan. Before Khan's appearance, Qadir and Hussain were the two most prevalent female Muslim superheroes produced by Marvel Comics. The creators of Qadir's and Hussein's characters offer different representations of the Muslim community both in the U.S. and in Europe. It is especially necessary to attend to the gendered performances of these two characters as reference points in order to understand Khan's own gendered performance in the first seven issues of her first run—*Ms. Marvel* (2014–2015).² I will mainly study Khan's gendered performances in this chapter. To analyze gender in *Ms. Marvel*, I draw on the work of sociologists and psychologists who study the construction and performance of gendered and cultural identities in immigrants living in the U.S. My argument is that Khan carries out her identity negotiations—both national and gendered—in a contact zone where she balances a hyphenated identity.

In the 1990s a limited number of studies analyzing Arab and Muslim characters in U.S. comic books were published. Jack G. Shaheen's article, "Arab Images in American Comic Books," published in 1994, presented the most extensive research into such depictions. "Shaheen analyzed 215 comic books and identified a complete absence of Arab or Muslim heroes or heroines" (qtd. in Strömberg 579). Instead, he was able to identify certain categories of Arab and Muslim characters in comic books. One was commoners, "passive [characters], meaning they did

not engage in ‘fighting the good fight’” (qtd. in Strömberg 579). Shaheen identified the abundance of Arab and Muslim villains, and classified them as “‘the repulsive terrorist,’ ‘the sinister sheikh,’ and ‘the rapacious bandit’”; he also included two categories for women, “‘a scantily-clad and salivated-upon belly dancer’ and ‘a faceless house wife, whose thick-set form is bundled up in dark robes’” (qtd. in Strömberg 579). Leonard Rifas presents another description of Arabs and Muslims via comic books in his article, “Image of Arabs in U.S. Comic Books,” published in 1988. Rifas describes these characters as “barbaric, ignorant, backward, primitive, bloodthirsty, violent, villainous... dishonest, dangerous, decadent, fanatic, vengeful...” (qtd. in Strömberg 579). The characters in U.S. comic books demonstrate the negative images with which the Arab/Muslim community were associated. These descriptions indicate that before 9/11, Arab and Muslim superheroes were not culturally significant in comic books. Most well-known characters were males and included Kismet (1944), Black Tiger (1976), and Arabian Knight (1981) (Strömberg 579). In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Dwayne McDuffie (Milestone Comics) and Chris Claremont (DC Comics) created male, Muslim superheroes Wise Son and Rampart, respectively. All these characters further othered the Muslim/Arab community as they represented the differences between Middle Eastern characters and U.S. readers. Following 9/11, Muslim representation in comic books also increased and superheroes and their stories became more realistic and grimmer. Muslim, Arab, or Muslim/Arab-American characters were now more present in mainstream U.S. comic books.

Studies on the lack of Arab and Muslim representation in U.S. comics has continued into the twenty-first century. In his article, “Holy Islamophobia, Batman! Demonization of Muslim and Arabs in Mainstream American Comic Books,” Jehanzeb Dar discusses the ways in which Arabs and Muslims have been portrayed as sinister and violent, a stereotype that still persists in

Hollywood (Dar 100). Dar mentions Jack Shaheen's book *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) which documents and discusses "over 900 Hollywood films to expose the industry's unapologetic degradation and dehumanization of Arabs and Muslims... [the movies] depicted them in an extremely negative light: 'brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women'" (100). Not only are these Arab and Muslim characters portrayed as such in Hollywood movies (and other fictional texts), but Dar points out that the portrayal of Muslims in the U.S. mainstream media is similar: "Muslim men are typically seen as angry mobs rioting in the streets, shouting in Arabic, and burning an American or Iranian flag, while Muslim women are projected as secluded, fully veiled, and oppressed victims of Muslim men and the religion of Islam" (100). Clearly, these images have impacted U.S. viewers and shaped their attitudes and perceptions of these groups.

Fredrik Strömberg, in his article "'Yo, rag-head!': Arab and Muslim Superheroes in American Comic Books after 9/11," published in 2011, reviews studies on representations of Arabs and Muslims in U.S. comics during the 1980s and 1990s as well as examines this portrayal after 9/11. Strömberg believes that superhero comics "act as a mirror of the political and socioeconomic climate in the U.S., providing an image that, although distorted by media and genre-specific constraints, is still indicative of the ways in which ideas and ideologies are developed and disseminated in the society within which they are created" (574).³ Importantly, Strömberg writes that "the depictions of Arabs and Muslims in American superhero comic books have so far been largely ignored in academic circles... [and that] no recent scholarship on representations of Arabs and Muslims in comics exist" (574). In the past years, this lack of academic research and attention on Muslim representations in the media has changed, and more scholars have published on the topic.⁴ The discourse usually alludes to Edward Said's

Orientalism and the process of Othering, but not gender. Strömberg's work is an important contribution to the discourse on Arab and/or Muslim characters in the media—be it news, films, or comic books—yet his study falls under the umbrella of scholarship on Arab and Muslim comic book characters that examines them as others. Strömberg does not attend to the study of how these characters present and negotiate gender.

Most studies published on the representations on Arabs and Muslims in U.S. comic books tend to focus almost exclusively on otherness, yet studies such as Mercedes Yanora's "Marked by Foreign Policy: Muslim Superheroes and their Quest for Authenticity," collected in *Muslim Superheroes: Comics, Islam and Representation*, include some discussion on gender. In this article, Yanora mainly discusses the foreign policy of the U.S. and its link to U.S. comic books. Yanora identifies Captain America as "one of the most iconic superheroes to ever embody U.S. foreign policy" (110). Captain America along with other major and minor characters "have dueled against the U.S.'s many foes; Nazis, communists, and foreign terrorists have all had their time as antagonists in the superheroic spotlight" (110). Like other scholars, Yanora mentions that Muslim characters have predominantly been shown as villains in the medium of comics (110). She presents this Arab/Muslim-villain conflation, one analyzed by Jehanzeb Dar, to outline how U.S. foreign policy surfaces in comic books. Dar writes, "superheroes and superheroines are meant to embody the values of truth, justice, liberty, and equality, and yet the comic book industry suffers from the same injustice that plagues American cinema: negative representations of Muslims and Arabs" (101). Dar discusses the way in which U.S. foreign policy frames Muslim communities "as threats and polar opposites to Western values" (101). This image of Muslims has been widespread since the late 1980s, as seen in comic books such as *Batman: A Death in the Family* (1988), *Action Comics #598* (1988), and *The Punisher: Nuclear Terrorists*

over Times Square (1988), as well as in post-9/11 publications such as *New X-Men: Dust* (2002). Dar explains that comic book creators' "disregard for cultural, religious, and political accuracy simply points to a crude and racist generalization: Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims are all the 'same' and 'hate' the West" (Dar 102). These comic books "group Arab, Iranian, and Muslim identities as one uniform identity exhibiting a radical hatred of the West" (Yanora 110). Drawing on the political scientist Matthew Costello, Yanora claims: "in terms of the West [comics offer] 'an avenue through which one can access the core values of a society, the ideals that give that society an identity, and the "other" that society fears'" (115).

Significantly, Yanora presents some important points on the relationship between gender and comic book superheroes when discussing the "muscular men and women dressing in bright-colored tights, defeating their foes, and performing superhuman feats" (115). She argues that the creators of U.S. mainstream comic books largely favor heterosexual, white males, which may be seen through the hypermasculinity in its characters. Since Muslim characters are othered, as seen through the consistent conflation of them with terrorism, "a Muslim superhero protecting American society and institutions, as opposed to destroying them, is for many very unrealistic" (116). Yanora then explains that female superheroes are also othered as they do not meet the usual hypermasculine demands in the genre and find themselves under the male gaze and absorbed as sex objects (116). Regarding superheroes, Yanora holds that the female body represents a disciplined, idealized, and hypersexual femininity (117). Yanora writes, "[f]emale superheroes perform their gender within a patriarchal context; thus, the female superhero straddles both her masculine superhero identity as well as her traditional and feminine identity, because acting too much like a man or woman would effectively undermine her credibility as both a desirable woman and legitimate superhero" (117). As shown above Dar does not take his

research far enough to discuss gender in his analysis, as he concentrates on the villainous representations and otherness of the Arab and Muslim characters. Likewise, Yanora's take on Khan/Ms. Marvel does not fully address the topic of gender.

After decades without any Arab and Muslim mainstream superheroes, Marvel Comics published two superheroes after the September 11 attacks in 2001: Dust in 2002 and Excalibur in 2008. Both Muslim female superheroes are important to my discussion on cultural and gendered performances and serve as a scaffold to discuss Khan/Ms. Marvel, whose story was published years later in 2014. Some scholars have studied these superheroes. Following the media trends popularized in post-9/11 U.S., as stated in Nicholas Pumphrey's "*Niqab not Burqa: Reading the Veil in Marvel's Dust*," "comic book creators propagated stereotypical depictions of Muslims as terrorists along with other 'well-intentioned-but nevertheless-stereotypical characters'" (20). As early as 2002, Marvel Comics began publishing stories with Muslim superheroes. In *New X-Men* #133, Marvel introduced readers to writer Grant Morrison's and artist Ethan van Sciver's character Sooraya Qadir, who the artist created "in an attempt to satirize the fear that Americans were propagating and to create a misunderstood hero based on obvious stereotypes that all Muslim women wear burqas" (20). Morrison's and Sciver's first publication of the character has been analyzed by Strömberg, Dar, and Davis et.al. among others, as it offers stereotypes on Middle Eastern peoples. It is important to mention that Dust—Sooraya's alter ego—is a popular female character with superpowers. Dust, according to Dar, is a character "of Afghan descent and wears an abaya and niqab, the former is a long outer garment and the latter is [a] veil that covers a woman's entire face except for her eyes," and she can "hide in dust [sand], shape into violent sandstorms, and even tear the skin off of her enemies" (107). According to Strömberg, Dust was "created very much in the Orientalist tradition: the sexualized female Oriental Other

who needs to be rescued by the character with whom Western readers are supposed to identify” (585). Strömberg bases this point on Dust’s first appearance, as Wolverine—a Western, white, and male mutant—rescues her from Afghanistan and the Taliban (Dar 107). Even though Dust possesses powers that could cause great damage to others, she still needed to be saved by Wolverine, according to this issue. Dust’s second appearance in *New X-Men: Academy X #2* documents her as an official member of the mutant team in the U.S. In this new environment, the creators have generated various socializing mishaps due to how they have used the abaya and niqab and how she observes her faith. Dar explains how Dust is a modest young woman and her beliefs and behavior make her teammates react with hostility and judgment, he points this out through a conversation between Dust and Surge, a female mutant that questions Dust’s attire and accuses her of being shameful and “subservient to men” (107–08). Dust states that “it is not right for [her] to show off by exposing [herself] or flesh to them” (Dar 108). Also, Dar explains that Dust’s reasoning for her modest clothing is “‘protecting herself from men,’ which not only make men sound lustful and perverted, but it also sexualizes herself and makes her an object of desire” (Dar 108). This garment “heightens her socio-cultural separation from other superheroes” (Davis et. al. 802) as well as from her readers.

As a superhero in Marvel Comics, Dust is “part of and yet apart from society” a status that “renders Dust’s presence safe by defining her potentially transgressive intrusion into the West’s social space as tame, temporary, and situated to serve mainstream needs” (Davis et. al. 805). For Dar, Dust’s character is stereotypical, underdeveloped, and incomplete as she is separated from her team members by her religion and its harsh restrictions, as interpreted by the writers (Dar 108). Furthermore, Pumphrey argues that “[t]he way Dust has been characterized and represented under Morrison and after...is a negative reinforcement of the Muslima

stereotype” (21). Even though Dust has been considered a character that “has reinforced the negative stereotype and caricature of Muslim women,” some readers have chosen to read Dust as an empowering Muslim woman whose costume breaks down stereotypes and asserts that Muslim women can be heroes too and not just victims of male-perpetrated oppression (Pumphrey 35). Pumphrey argues that Craig Kyle and Christopher Yost, writers who took over after Grant Morrison, empower Dust due to her agency and ability to choose (34). Davis and Westerfelhaus read Dust as a character with “a liminal license that permits her entry into American mainstream culture (807). In these studies on Dust, scholars point out the limitations of her character as she spreads negative stereotypes relating to Middle Eastern people and do not necessarily focus on her gendered performances.

Another Muslim mainstream female superhero character surfaced six years after Dust’s first appearance. Marvel Comics published *Captain Britain and the MI:13*, which presented Great Britain in the narrative of the Marvel Universe. British writer Paul Cornell and American artist Brandon Peterson created Faiza Hussain—Excalibur—who debuted in the first issue in 2008. Cornell has stated that he had two aims when creating Hussain: “to make her a real person and not someone who has to represent the entire British Muslim world all the time... and to make her an everyday religious person who you won’t hear anything religious from until it would naturally come up” (Strömberg 591; Wanner 41). Scholars have researched and read Faiza Hussain and her superhero persona Excalibur in certain ways in order to explain her impact in society. Strömberg, for instance, describes Faiza as “a young doctor, clad in white, modern clothes and a white hijab or headscarf, signifying that she is a modern Muslim woman” (591). Faiza received her power, the ability to change the molecules in the human body, after being zapped by the Skrull aliens in a battle zone. She acquires her superhero name and costume,

Excalibur and a modern version of a knight's armor, after proving herself worthy of receiving the magical sword Excalibur from Captain Britain. According to Strömberg, Excalibur is "more than a token character... [her] religious beliefs are only one aspect of a more complex personality" (590–91). Strömberg's comments regarding Faiza are important because they highlight her nationality and her gender; he explores Faiza's and her family's acceptance of British culture. Faiza's father initially expresses anger towards his daughter's superhero costume "which is associated, in part, with the Crusades," before accepting that the sword Excalibur also represents him—"it [Excalibur] is of this nation...and thus...mine. Ours" (Strömberg 591). On the other hand, her mother makes jokes about marrying Faiza off to other men, "[i]t's always interesting what happens when I say that to a boy," which "could be interpreted as a positive statement of empowerment for women" (591). Strömberg also comments on how the narrative written about Faiza contains less of the male gaze (593). Despite analyzing Faiza's national identity and her treatment as a female character, Strömberg does not expand his study to analyze the development of Faiza's gendered identity in the series.

Like Strömberg, Kevin Wanner has studied Faiza. In the article "“And, erm, religious stuff”: Islam, Liberalism, and the Limits of Tolerance in the Stories of Faiza Hussain," Kevin Wanner discusses how her creation was a defining moment for representations of Muslims in comic books and how she seems to have inspired the creation of Kamala Khan, Ms. Marvel. Wanner writes that Faiza and Khan are:

...female, young, and Muslim, both are only daughters of Pakistani immigrants; one is a doctor, while the others' parents aspire for her to go into medicine; both speak in a breathless, colloquial style studded by youthful slang and coinages; both possess powers of radical body manipulation that they deploy sparingly and usually defensively; both

dislike violence and killing; and, both are ardent fans of superheroes, before and after they join their ranks. (40)

Khan, Wanner says, “may be regarded as a corporately-sanctioned plagiarism” of Faiza (40). Furthermore, Wanner mentions that Cornell assembled an oversight team of “four British Muslim women to advise him on how to depict someone like them and, it seems fair to suggest, provide some guarantee of authenticity that his own identity as a white, male Anglican could not” (41). Faiza’s identity was well received as readers regarded her as “[a]t last, a superhero who is Muslim and yet ‘normal,’ ‘identifiable,’ ‘believable, relatable,’ ‘interesting [...] in her own right,’ ‘vibrant, individual,’ and ‘really very human’” (Wanner 41). Cornell’s oversight team of British Muslim women was a success as he seemingly managed to publish a commercially-successful representation of a young Muslim woman. Considering the audiences reaction and the history of mainstream female Muslim superheroes, whether before or after 9/11, the audience’s positive reaction toward Faiza indicates a big step toward more positive representations of Muslim women in superhero comic books. For Wanner, “Faiza conceals, reveals, and enacts her religion in ways that liberalism deems legitimate and salutary. Furthermore, while Faiza models how to be a Muslim woman in a culturally tolerant society, characters with whom she interacts illustrate, with few but significant exceptions, how others in such a society should regard and treat a Muslim woman” (43). Wanner also states that another aspect that makes her a relatable character is her “‘fangirlish’ enthusiasm for superheroes” (44), which Faiza demonstrates with her “deep knowledge of British superhero minutia, and being a fan of superheroes” (44).

According to Wanner, readers may easily identify Faiza as a Muslim woman; the veil is an explicit symbol evoking Faiza’s religious and cultural background. She wears a “white scarf

that covers her hair, ears, and neck” (Wanner 44). In her superhero costume, the illustrator renders Faiza wearing a chainmail version of a veil with knight’s regalia. “...in her old job in medicine or new one as a superhero/intelligence agent, her being a Muslim is to all appearances a non-issue” (46). Her character is anointed as “the living embodiment of all that is British’...she does not simply represent the inclusion of an ethnic/religious minority in a tolerant body politic” (54). In another issue, Queen Elizabeth II tells Faiza “Excalibur represents the Empire and its history far more than I. And the sword has chosen you” (54). In Faiza’s story, the creators developed a link between the character and the country; she represents a female symbol of British power. Based on this literature review, it is apparent that critics have written about Muslim representations in the mainstream media. They have analyzed various representations in television series, films, and news. In the last decade, more has been written about Muslim representation in mainstream comic books, as shown above. And though these scholars examine gender to a certain degree, they do not explicitly focus on the gendered performances of the characters under study and how these performances help construct the characters’ identity. This point holds for *Ms. Marvel*, which has recently become the focus of study. I have chosen to study *Ms. Marvel* because of its successful and extensive run since 2014 as a mainstream comic book. A gendered reading of Ms. Marvel is important because the original character Ms. Marvel—Carol Danvers, now Captain Marvel—serves as an initial role model and inspiration for Khan.

Discussions on *Ms. Marvel* have largely appeared in magazines, newspapers, and fan blogs/websites.⁵ A series of articles on the comic were published in November 2013, months before the publication of the first *Ms. Marvel* issue in February 2014. Most of these writers celebrate the mainstream publication of a Muslim-American female superhero. In a *New York Times* article from November 2013, George Gene Gustines writes about how Khan’s creation

was set in motion after Sana Amanat, the series editor, shared an anecdote of her childhood growing up as a Muslim-American in New Jersey. In his article “Marvel Unveils New Ms. Marvel: A Muslim Pakistani-American Teenager,” published on November 5, 2013, Andrew Wheeler highlights how the publication of *Ms. Marvel* is a “welcome change of pace for readers who want to see more diversity in their super-books” (Wheeler). Wheeler argues that superhero comic books need more female and racially diverse protagonists and “to introduce a hero who is Muslim—one of the most maligned and misunderstood minority groups in America today—is especially bold and laudable” (Wheeler). In other publications on *Ms. Marvel*, various writers quote *Ms. Marvel*’s writer G. Willow Wilson who states that “Captain Marvel represents an ideal that Khan pines for. She is strong, beautiful and doesn’t have any of the baggage of being Pakistani and ‘different’” (qtd. in Ching, Gustines, and Wheeler). In “Wilson Writes the New Ms. Marvel, a Teenage Muslim Shape-Shifter,” Albert Ching mentions the creative team’s expectations on the success of this new series:

The “Ms. Marvel” team is quoted as expecting the book to receive some negative reaction from multiple sides. “I do expect some negativity,” Amanat said in the article. “Not only from people who are anti-Muslim, but people who are Muslim and might want the character portrayed in a particular light.” (qtd. in Ching)

Other reactions to the news of the publication were not as openminded. In a *Business Insider* article, Aly Weisman writes about Conan O’Brien’s Twitter post regarding Ms. Marvel: “Marvel Comics is introducing a new Muslim Female superhero. She has so many more special powers than her husband’s other wives” (qtd. in Weisman). Weisman continues the article by documenting how Twitter users reacted to O’Brien’s post calling him out on his misinformed, stereotypical, “insensitive,” and “tasteless” joke (Weisman). In 2014, Emine Saner of *The*

Guardian published an interview with G. Willow Wilson, “Ms Marvel: Send for the Muslim Supergirl!” In this article, Saner not only presents Khan’s origins story but also offers an interesting comparison between Khan and a classic Marvel character: “Marvel’s new comic-book character is a typical teenager, dealing with the angst of high school, before discovering superhero powers. So far, so Peter Parker” (Saner). This analogy is significant, especially considering that Peter Parker, Spider-Man, is Marvel’s most important character. The Spider-Man brand has not only proven to be commercially successful in all sorts of media formats—comic books, prose novels, movies, and various types of merchandise—but Parker’s status as just a typical youth from Queens, N.Y., who happened to be bitten by a radioactive spider, captivates the imagination of audiences of all ages, making him an iconic super hero.

As opposed to the mainstream treatment on Khan, few scholarly treatments have been published on *Ms. Marvel*. This new take on a classic and popular Marvel superhero came at a time when Marvel Comics diversified its roster of superheroes. As Miriam Kent states in her article, “Unveiling Marvels: *Ms. Marvel* and the Reception of the New Muslim Superheroine,” Khan appeared with a bang on the comic book scene as

...media outlets reported a revamping of the previously all-American blonde bombshell [Carol Danvers, the current Captain Marvel], who would now be a sixteen-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim girl. Sites reporting the announcement ranged from *Comics Alliance* (Andrew Wheeler 2013) and *Comic Book Resources* (Albert Ching 2013) to *The New York Times* (George Gene Gustines 2013) and the *Daily Mail* (Wills Robinson 2013). (523)

For Kent, Khan’s character is a “breakthrough for Muslim women’s representation in the West” (523), especially when one considers the publisher’s previous attempts at establishing a more

realistic and nuanced Muslim character. This series is a “beacon of intersectionality and minority representation, with the potential to become a powerful feminist text” (Kent 523). The character’s narrative is one connected to themes of alienation, oppression, and the other, which makes the comic an “arena in which issues of multifaceted feminine identity can be explored over time... [as well as a space to negotiate] Khan’s ‘otherness’ and the dominance of Western attitudes” (Kent 523–24). Though Kent describes how some of the press framed Khan as “controversial,” the critical reactions to the Marvel series were “overwhelmingly positive” (524). As Kent writes, “Joshua Yehl wrote for *IGN* that ‘Kamala is conflicted and quirky... She’s you. She’s us’” (qtd. in Kent 524). This relatability has become one of the comic book’s biggest strengths—and inevitably a selling point for Marvel. In fact, Kent quotes several critics’ reviews, each of them noting the relatability of the Pakistani-American Muslim youth.⁶

Despite how relatable Khan is to her readership, readers must understand that she still struggles with her identity formation. In this chapter, I will examine how Khan navigates her hyphenated and gendered identity in a given contact zone. I will first read parts of *Ms. Marvel* as commenting on the 9/11 attacks, particularly the content in the first two issues. Second, I will draw on Selcuk R. Sirin and Michelle Fine’s work to analyze how Khan’s experiences in New Jersey mold her hyphenated identity. Third, I will examine Khan’s gendered performances in relation to a contact zone. In a similar fashion to how I analyzed the intersections of the veil with identity and gender in *Persepolis* using Judith Butler’s essay, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” I will use this essay to explore the ways in which Khan negotiates her gendered identity through her two personas: her private life and her superhero alter ego. Butler believes that gender and what it means to be masculine and feminine are constructed, performative, and normalized in socio-cultural spaces. In comic

books, even super heroic characters may be understood as being governed in certain ways by socially-constructed ideas on gender; they perform accordingly to the gender scripts accepted by a given society (or not). Butler mentions that gendered performances are “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (Butler 521). This point translates into Khan’s story as she inherits the moniker of a previous super hero, Carol Danvers, the original Ms. Marvel. This existing gendered performance directly influences Khan’s gendered performance as the new version of Ms. Marvel. Khan’s personal situation—being the daughter of Pakistani immigrants and balancing her Muslim-American identity—further impacts her gendered performances as she negotiates her cultural and religious identity in the U.S.

Trattner argues that the 2014 publication of *Ms. Marvel* was a watershed moment, as this new character not only “followed through with Marvel’s recent surge in female-fronted books... [indicating] the demand, and response, for powerful female representations in mainstream comics,” but she defied the Muslim comic book character stereotype, as she met the “demand for accurate and real characteristics for minority groups” (1). Khan, a young Muslim-American girl from Jersey City, has a very interesting, coming-of-age story—“the same mega-meta-genre to which many other superhero comic books belong” (Priego 4). It is important to note that Satrapi also uses the coming-of-age narrative, in a dynamic contact zone, in her autobiographic *Persepolis*. The narrative of Khan unfolds in a contact zone, Jersey City, known to house a diverse community. Before Khan gains her powers, readers get a glimpse of her public and private life. In public, Khan does not wear a veil and dresses in outfits that reveal her fangirl personality. Yet, I read the new Ms. Marvel’s origin story as one that contains imagery from the 9/11 attacks. This

point means that Khan may be considered a post-9/11 representation of Muslims in U.S. popular culture.

In the article “Hyphenated Selves: Muslim American Youth Negotiating Identities on the Fault Lines of Global Conflict,” Sirin and Fine discuss the results of their study with Muslim-American youth in the U.S. Sirin and Fine explain that cultural identities are formed and reformed during the developmental period now called adolescence (151). This issue is an even more “complex psychological task for youth living in contexts, or historic moments, in which their diverse racial, ethnic, national, religious, sexual origins stir in tension” (Sirin and Fine 151). Sirin and Fine provide readers a with comprehensive examination on the challenges Muslim-American youth face when developing their identities while living on the “intimate fault lines of global conflict” (151). Sirin and Fine’s research efforts on immigrant youth has shown that the successful integration of both one’s own culture and the dominant culture leads to more positive developmental outcomes whereas marginalization, that is disengagement from both cultures, is associated with mental health problems for immigrant youth... minority stress (i.e., discrimination and stress associated with one’s social status) can lead to mental health problems in terms of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic complaints. (152)

When looking at the gendered differences in the survey data collected, Sirin and Fine notice a correlation between feelings of discrimination and acculturation and anxiety indicators in males and females, respectively (155). Sirin and Fine explain “that the more Muslim boys were integrated in social and cultural activities in both the mainstream U.S. culture and their home culture, the less likely they were to report discriminatory acts” (156). Yet, according to the study, the Muslim girls did not associate their acculturation with perceptions of discrimination; instead,

“the more they perceived being discriminated against, the more they felt physiologically anxious and worried” (156).

For instance, Sirin and Fine invited the boys and girls in the study to draw identity maps; these maps demonstrate how each group member handles the labels while being in a hyphen. Virtually “[ninety percent] of the young women designed maps that reflected fluid movement between being a Muslim and being an American” (Sirin and Fine 156), as they attempted to blend elements of Muslim and American cultures. On the other hand, seventy percent of the young men created “‘fractured’ maps of conflict, tension, institutional and personal struggles with racism, white supremacy, U.S. aggression, and war” (Sirin and Fine 156). For Sirin and Fine, the Muslim youth in America seek to create hyphenated-selves in a world where their identities are constantly contested. Based on the interviews, the males “[feel] swallowed by a representation [they] can’t actively resist, lest [they] embody the hegemonic trope—young Muslim man filled with rage” (Sirin and Fine 157). Alternatively, the females interviewed reached the consensus that their identities are fluid; they “actively [refuse] to separate the currents of Islam and America that move through the river of [their] body, yet still recognizing the distinct pools of water from which they gather” (Sirin and Fine 157). Unlike the young Muslim-American males, the females in the study insist on the synthesis of both identities. According to this study, the young women resist the oppressed woman trope common in U.S. media by attempting to educate their peers and helping them understand their culture, community, and presence in the country—where they are constantly blamed for and accused of terrorism (Sirin and Fine 157). Young Muslim-American males “struggle to contain their anger, their rage, and to not fight back” (Sirin and Fine 158).⁷

Sirin and Fine also study contact zones and connect them with Muslim youth's identity negotiations in the U.S. To define the term contact zone, Sirin and Fine draw on Mary Louise Pratt who defines the contact zone as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 7). Maria Elena Torres extends the notion "suggesting that within contact zones, psychologists could find a textured understanding of human interactions across power differences," which connects the contact zone with the psychology of intergroup relations (Sirin and Fine, *Muslim* 157). The ideas of Pratt and Torres allow researchers to study the space between, or "what Anzaldúa (1987) calls 'the borderlands,' or the 'work at the hyphen'" (Sirin and Fine, *Muslim* 158). Sirin and Fine's writing about the contact zone is important because it helps U.S. citizens understand the challenges that the immigrant Muslim community faces. As they write, "Immigrant youth import to social settings both their anxieties and their desires to belong; their collective memories of oppression, colonization, and cultural pride; their fantasies and projections; their fears and longings" (Sirin and Fine, *Muslim* 158). As presented above, the millions of Muslims that are part of the U.S. population have often been misrepresented in dangerous ways in the mainstream media. The creators of Khan not only wish to alter the negative representations of Muslims in the U.S. media, they also wish to address problems regarding Muslim-Americans' hyphenated identities by focusing on a protagonist who attempts to balance both identities via her attempt to be accepted in a community and country that may otherwise dismiss or reject her.

Khan's performances take place in a contact zone consisting mainly of Jersey City, the setting of her adventures and where readers first meet her.⁸ The writers of *Ms. Marvel* situate Khan in a specific geographical location during a meaningful period—the setting of Jersey City in the early stages of the twenty-first century. The comic book presents an inclusive world where

multiple Muslim identities exist together without being labeled terrorists, such as the protagonist's family and her Muslim friends (Yanora 126–27). The New Jersey in which Khan lives is not totally free of stereotypes, but these are used strategically in order to eradicate damaging misconceptions of Muslim peoples. I draw on Sirin's and Fine's scholarship to support my analysis because this contact zone influences Khan's gendered and cultural identity, especially how she negotiates her Pakistani-Muslim side with her American side.

In the first issue, aptly titled "Metamorphosis," readers meet Kamala Khan prior to her superhero transformation, and they learn about her public and private life, which I will unpack. At the beginning of this issue, Khan is with her friends Bruno and Nakia in the Circle Q, a local convenience store—and Bruno's workplace—before school starts. Khan is being tempted by the smell of bacon, which she calls "delicious infidel meat" (Wilson, "Metamorphosis"), as Nakia and Bruno poke fun at her in a friendly manner. Khan longingly smells the BLTs in the store, while her veiled Turkish friend Nakia suggests alternatives she could consume, and Bruno reminds her of her principles and how she should stick to them if she will not commit to consuming the meat. Khan, Nakia, and Bruno may "differ in their choices, [but] they still respect each other, and the three might be presented as a multicultural group" of friends (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 76). Readers then meet Josh and his girlfriend Zoe, who Bruno calls a "concern troll" (Wilson, "Metamorphosis"), due to her behavior. In this scene, Josh asks Bruno if he will be going to the party at the waterfront that night. He extends this invitation to Nakia and Khan stating, "You guys should come too. If, uh, you're **allowed** to do that kind of stuff?" (Wilson, "Metamorphosis"; emphasis in original). Though a harmless invitation to participate in their gathering, Josh's use of the word "allowed" can be perceived as perpetuating a stereotype: Muslim-American youth have strict parents and little freedom to socialize with others outside

their cultural circle. Nakia answers that she is “**not** allowed” to go, while Khan states that she “is not going if there’s going to be **alcohol**” (Wilson, “Metamorphosis”; emphasis in original). On the one hand, Nakia’s answer can be considered one that enforces the negative stereotype in having to abide by the strict parental figure; on the other hand, Khan’s answer is phrased as her own decision, regardless if it is due to her parents’ instructions. Zoe then becomes a bully as she uses a number of stereotypes to belittle and ridicule others. First, she mocks Bruno’s economic situation and then goes as far as to question Nakia’s use of the veil; initially, she compliments the headscarf’s color and then she asks, “But I mean... nobody pressured you to start wearing it, right? Your father or somebody? Nobody’s going to, like, honor kill you? I’m just concerned” (Wilson, “Metamorphosis”). Nakia responds to Zoe’s questions by mentioning that her father wants her to stop wearing it, that he “thinks it’s a phase” (Wilson, “Metamorphosis”). Here Nakia chooses to defend her choice to use the veil by standing firm on the garment not being “a phase,” as her father thinks it is. Nakia’s father’s comment can be read as a Muslim parent reasoning with his or her daughter to stop wearing the veil, a symbol that would attract negative attention in the United States. “The veil here is affirmed as a choice” (77), writes Reynolds-Chikuma and Lorenz. “It is not imposed by a male family member as it may be done in traditional Muslim families” (77). Nakia negotiates and balances her hyphenated identity through self-made choices and not those imposed by male authority figures around her. This action by Nakia leads readers to notice Khan’s own choices; while Nakia wears the veil, Khan actively and regularly chooses not to wear the garment. Both young Muslim-American females, then, enjoy a degree of agency in the U.S., despite being questioned by their white classmates. Even though Khan chooses not to wear the veil at all times and only uses it during Sheik Abdullah’s service at

the mosque, she still abides at this point by her family's influences in the choices she makes regarding her modest attire.

The creators of *Ms. Marvel* begin shaping Khan's identity from these panels. In other words, Wilson highlights Khan's hyphenated identity, Muslim-American, from the start. Khan referring to the bacon as "infidel meat" recalls Muslims' dietary prohibition of consuming pork, while "infidel" refers to Westerners that do not follow the Quran. Khan's word choice further indicates the identities with which she struggles. In other words, Khan understands and follows the cultural traditions coming from her family, but she is still tempted by Western attitudes and cultures. This admiration that Khan has for Westerners, their food, and their culture gives readers the impression that Khan is merely innocent and naive when looking at how Zoe treats her and her friends. Zoe may not be rude on purpose and is curious about Khan and Nakia as she reflects that cultures are interesting. The choice to highlight the word "interesting" in Zoe's response "gives a sense that [she] still believes that Nakia and Khan are separate from her and that she is above them" (Trattner 3). On the other hand, Zoe is seen to spew "racially-charged hatred" toward others (Ahmad 37). I consider this introduction to Khan very important, as it lays the foundations for the story by showing the readers an aspect of Khan's public life. This identity struggle continues to occur on different levels throughout the comic book.⁹

That night, halfway through the issue, Khan sneaks out of her house—after not getting her father's permission—and goes to their party at the waterfront. This scene is where Bruno intervenes to defend Khan from Josh and Zoe who give Khan alcohol. She leaves the party after this episode and walks back home. Khan's life-altering transformation happens after this incident at the party. As Khan walks the streets of Jersey City by herself, thinking about Bruno's "patronizing attitude when he tries to help her,... she faints" (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 80); at

this point, a strange blue mist takes over, and she is trapped in the mist after she loses consciousness. The rendering of the blue mist in this panel parallels imagery of the September 11 attacks. In his book, *The Superhero Response: How 9/11 Changed Our Superheroes and Why it Matters*, Jeffery Moulton discusses how superheroes and their struggles served as a space to reflect upon the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the effects that followed. Moulton opens his book by narrating the disastrous event:

The towers shook as yellow flames flared... and black smoke belched into the pristine morning sky. Firefighters, policemen, and EMTs rushed about the ground below, pushing back the stunned public and organizing rescue attempts...A wall of dust swept through Lower Manhattan, chasing panicked citizens who had dared brave the streets that terrible morning. (1)

In this passage, Moulton outlines a horrific picture of destruction and darkness that emerged as the result of the 9/11 attacks. He mentions the victims as well as the first responders who risked their lives to save others. The author explains that this attack was inconceivable in the pre-9/11 real world. “The explosions, black smoke, terror in the streets, vows of retribution, and a ruthless enemy with seemingly limitless power felt more like a comic book...than cold hard truth” (Moulton 2). Though Moulton’s description is one that creates an image of chaos in the reader’s mind, the mist presented in the first two issues of *Ms. Marvel* mirrors the clouds of smoke, ash, and debris after the towers collapsed during the 9/11 attacks. Instead of viewing the chaos involving multiple people fleeing Manhattan, readers of this issue of *Ms. Marvel* experience a single perspective on the event and the creators of the issue place Khan at the center of this event to receive her powers. Therefore, one can read Khan as a post-9/11 superhero not just because of the series’ publication date occurring in 2014, but also because of the imagery the creators use to

depict the time at which she receives her powers. The creative team also focused on Khan's subversive behavior as she breaks traditional gender stereotypes in the U.S. by going against her parents' rules, something she reflects on while trapped in the mist. Her time in the mist, described in more detail below, becomes a transformative moment for Khan—not just into a hero, but into her own private and personal self.

At the end of the issue, Khan's favorite superheroes—Iron Man, Captain America, and Captain Marvel, who speaks Urdu to Khan while the other two heroes translate—wake her up. They inform her she is at a “crossroads” (Wilson, “Metamorphosis”). When asked who she wants to be, Khan answers, “I want to be beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated. Except I would wear the classic, politically incorrect costume and kick butt in giant wedge heels” (Wilson, “Metamorphosis”). This language indicates Khan's desire to be somebody else; specifically, she wants to be “less complicated” and be her superhero role model—Carol Danvers, the original Ms. Marvel and current Captain Marvel. Danvers represents a “less complicated” identity because, despite being a woman, she is a white, blonde American, a profile more acceptable to many in the U.S. when compared to Khan's identity as a Muslim-American. To Khan's request, Captain Marvel responds that the situation, this new chapter in Khan's life, is not going to turn out the way she thinks it will. As the mist changes around her, Khan emerges as the original Ms. Marvel, the all-American blonde bombshell in a one-piece outfit and thigh-high boots. The first issue ends with her transformation; from this cloud of obscurity emerges an all-new Kamala Khan, a superpowered youth full of hesitation as she asks if it is too late to change her mind. Recalling Judith Butler's ideas on gender performances, it is evident that Khan wished to style her own gender performance on an already-established, gendered performance that proves to be a safer option than her own. Butler states that gendered

performances are “never fully self-styled, for living styles have a history, and that history conditions and limits possibilities” (521). This point is particularly interesting when reading *Ms. Marvel* because Khan’s future superhero moniker is that of Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers’s original superhero name. From a publisher’s perspective, this choice can be read as a marketing technique in that the representatives at Marvel associate a new Muslim-American character with a well-known and already-established superhero. The writers of *Ms. Marvel* could have chosen Khan to follow Danvers, which would have likely guaranteed success for this comic. Instead, the creators of *Ms. Marvel* decided to produce a comic in which Khan negotiates and balances her cultural background with those expectations. With the creation of Khan and her struggles with her identity in this new *Ms. Marvel*, the representatives at Marvel Comics comment on diverse gendered performances and try to break in the U.S. traditional gender stereotypes of Muslim-American peoples.

The second issue, titled “All Mankind,” has an even stronger image that parallels the imagery from 9/11: a full-page cityscape with buildings engulfed by mist, reminiscent of smoke and ashes. In this issue, Khan looks from across the water, as Zoe and Josh stumble upon the area and she reacts to seeing Zoe again: “It’s almost like a reflex. Like a fake smile. As soon as Zoe shows up I feel... uncomfortable. Like I have to be someone else. Someone cool. But instead I feel small” (Wilson, “All Man Kind”). This instance recalls Sirin and Fine’s work in which they write about how young, Muslim females wish to fit into social groups in a post-9/11 U.S. As they write, “the more they [young, Muslim females] perceived being discriminated against, the more they felt physiologically anxious and worried” (“Hyphenated Selves” 156). Khan’s words highlight how aware she is of Zoe’s judgements of her (she had been demeaned by her on previous occasions) and how she wishes to conform to this young person’s idea of how

she should perform gender. The tone of the comic takes a turn as Khan finds herself facing her first rescue mission: a drunken Zoe has fallen into the water and is in danger of drowning. Before jumping in to save Zoe, Khan quotes the Quran, as her father had done before, ““Whoever kills one person, it is as if he has killed all of mankind, and whoever saves one person, it is as if he has saved all of mankind”” (Wilson, “All Man Kind”). Khan’s call to action, referred to in the issue’s title, comes from a Quranic text. This point indicates Khan’s personal feelings about belonging to her community. She tries to push her religion and culture away in order to fit in with her U.S. friends, but it is her religion that motivates her to act and save Zoe from drowning. If Khan were a participant in Sirin and Fine’s study, her identity map would very likely recognize both sides of the hyphen and how they both influence her (“Hyphenated Selves” 156). Khan “resist[s] the trope of ‘oppressed woman,’” and in doing so she exhibits “strength, authority[,] and confidence in re-presenting [herself]” (Sirin and Fine, “Hyphenated Selves” 157). As she breaks gender stereotypes, she answers her call to action and embarks on her hero’s journey, saving Zoe from drowning and preventing Josh, who would have been expected to save her, from causing further problems.

It is not until the third issue, “Side Entrance,” that readers see Khan wearing a veil while at a mosque during Sheikh Abdullah’s Saturday youth lecture. The set of panels that compose the scene are interesting as they show how a partition separates the men from the women in the mosque. Inside, Abdullah sits with the men, while the women are in a separate area reached via a side entrance. While the Sheikh lectures about modesty and guarding their chastity, Khan and Nakia talk and he asks them to restrain from this behavior. Khan, surrounded by other girls who look uninterested and bored, answers “S-sorry, Sheikh Abdullah, but it’s really hard to concentrate when we can’t even see you” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”). The Sheikh explains that

“[t]he partition and the side entrance for women are there to preserve your modesty and dignity” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”). Khan questions him: “But - - didn’t you tell us there was no partition at the Prophet’s mosque in Medina? That men and women went through the **same door** and sat in the **same room**?” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”; emphasis in original). Sheikh Abdullah answers by stating that “those were **blessed** times, free from today’s **scandal** and **temptation**” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”; emphasis in original); Abdullah highlights how modern times negatively affect the behavior of men and women. At this point, Khan, reluctantly, sneaks out at Nakia’s suggestion, who convinces her that no one will notice they are gone. Once outside, Khan dons her usual jacket while adjusting her veil and wearing it at her neck—unveiling herself. This scarf later becomes an iconic part of Khan’s superhero costume, which she has not yet chosen. Though she had not formally worn the scarf before this issue, Khan uses a piece of red cloth tied around her waist when she turns into Carol Danvers in both her Ms. Marvel and Captain Marvel costumes. Like Marji, Khan uses clothing in a subversive way. This red scarf becomes a permanent part of her own Ms. Marvel costume. By wearing it, Khan honors Danvers and her own cultural background. Once more, Khan shows her determination to negotiate both sides of the hyphenated identity as a young Muslim woman.

Towards the end of the issue, Khan heads to the Circle Q to mend her friendship with Bruno after the incident at the party. At this point, she thinks about her newly-acquired powers and how these can transform who she is both literally and figuratively. She asks herself, “What does it mean to have **powers**? To be able to look like someone I’m not?... Would I still be Kamala?” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”; emphasis in original). Khan positions herself to make a choice: she can transform into Carol Danvers or continue to be herself. Here she explores the “possibilities of gender transformation” (Butler 520). Khan finds Bruno in the middle of what

seems to be a robbery and when she decides to call 911 her phone battery dies. The two panels that follow show a frustrated and helpless Khan. In the first panel she thinks, “Wait a minute. I have **super-powers**. I saved somebody’s **life** on Friday,” as she audibly states, “I **am** 911!” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”; emphasis in original). Khan’s reflection continues in the second panel, as she states, “But - - everybody’s expecting **Ms. Marvel**. Ms. Marvel from the **news**. With the hair and the spandex and the **Avengers swag**. Not a sixteen-year-old brown girl with a 9 PM curfew” (Wilson, “Side Entrance”; emphasis in original). I read this moment as a critical one in Khan’s identity journey, as she begins to come to terms with her newly-acquired superpowers and how she can use them to protect her family, friends, and neighbors. She questions her own merit as a hero, even though she is fully aware that she had recently saved Zoe’s life. She labels herself as “911,” as someone who handles emergencies—saves people—but she also states that she is a “sixteen-year-old brown girl,” and nobody in the U.S. expects or wants her to save the day. When Khan mentions how everybody seems to expect Danvers—the white and blonde superhero—to show up, she focuses on the social and cultural construction of not just gender but also the superhero figure. Even though Khan has proven herself a hero, she does not fit the mold of who a female superhero should be, according to gender norms in the U.S. Khan’s identity as a Muslim-American superhero in the U.S. has not been normalized in this country. One could even argue that Bruno prompts her to act fast, yet she still chooses to hide her identity in this scene by transforming into Carol Danvers and wearing her Captain Marvel suit. She saves Bruno from being robbed by his own brother, Vick, who accidentally shoots the superhero.

In the next issue, “Past Curfew,” this scene continues as Bruno tries to call 911 to save Ms. Marvel and Khan tries to get his attention by claiming they cannot see her like that since she is not Ms. Marvel or Captain Marvel. The creators continue to explore Khan’s gendered

performances. Nobody can know it is Khan in the costume, because she thinks, “[her] parents will **freak**, the NSA will **wiretap [their] mosque** or something” (Wilson, “Past Curfew”; emphasis in original). Through this conversation, Khan reveals that she is fully aware of her gendered performances in a given context. She is scared that if any form of authority figures out that she, “a sixteen-year-old brown girl,” has superpowers her mosque will be under surveillance and her friends and family will be scrutinized. Like her subversive gendered performances, Khan’s heroic act in connection with her Muslim identity has “clearly punitive consequences” (Butler 522). This instance further establishes how in a post-9/11 U.S. Muslim-Americans continued to be the victims of stereotyping and surveillance. Even after saving a life, Khan still has to endure the judgment of others who question her place in U.S. culture. Regarding her bullet wound, she claims she “healed. As soon as [she] went back to [her] **regular self**, [she] **healed**” (Wilson, “Past Curfew”; emphasis in original). Khan having to choose between embodying Danvers or her own identity as a superhero follows Butler’s ideas on the “legacy of sedimentation” (523). Khan’s gendered performances are not “fully self-styled” (Butler 521) she explores them “through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time” (Butler 523).

The creators of *Ms. Marvel* continue to offer commentary on gendered performances as they build up to Khan’s initial fight with her first archnemesis. After this incident in the Circle Q, Khan and Bruno realize that Vick, Bruno’s brother, has been talking about someone called the Inventor—the first villain in the series. Bruno tracks his brother’s phone to an abandoned location where Khan heads to in order to save him. At this point, Khan, still concerned with her appearance, and her identity as a Muslim in the post-9/11 U.S., designs a superhero costume. She designs it using her burkini, a modest piece of swimwear that symbolizes a compromise between

tradition and modernity. Khan's design mimics Carol Danvers's own Captain Marvel costume by using a combination of red, blue, and yellow. I believe her costume design shows a blending of the sources that form her identity at this stage in the series: the modesty of her cultural and religious upbringing and her own admiration for Captain Marvel. This costume design indicates that Khan "can be read ideologically and visually as being in between two poles, between a certain kind of traditionalism and modernity" (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 76). This blend of the traditional and the modern, however, can be considered an act of subversion regarding how comic book creators present females in the medium. Instead of adopting a highly-sexualized costume, like Dust before her, Khan's Ms. Marvel costume may be considered modest yet stylish (like her civilian outfits). Khan's choice of costume is seen as "contesting [gender's] reified status" (Butler 520) in comic books. Most importantly, it is in this moment that Khan first identifies her superhero persona. "**Who** am I? It seems like an easy question. And then I realize... Maybe what I said to those cops wasn't a joke. Maybe the name belongs to whoever has the courage to fight. And so I tell them. I tell them who I am," Khan thinks before clearly stating, "You can call me **Ms. Marvel**," (Wilson, "Past Curfew"; emphasis in original). Here, for the first time, Khan links herself to the Ms. Marvel moniker after rationalizing why she could take the mantle. Khan claims her gendered and superhero identity. She willingly chooses to defy the female Muslim stereotype in the U.S. as complacent and instead identifies herself as a hero, formally taking the responsibility to protect others in need in a post-9/11 U.S.

The sixth and seventh *Ms. Marvel* issues, encompassing the storyline titled "Healing Factor," showcase Khan breaking gendered stereotypes in additional ways, as she continues to discover her identity. This is particularly evident when comparing other female Muslim representations in Marvel comic books. In the sixth issue, Khan finally talks to Sheikh Abdullah

about her father's claim regarding how she has "been sneaking out and acting strangely" (Wilson, "Healing Factor Pt. 1"). At this point, she does not outright confess that she is the superheroine Ms. Marvel. Instead, she tells the Sheikh that she ends up breaking curfew because she helps people: "I don't mean to disobey Abu and Ammi. It's just that sometimes I have to in order to do the right thing" (Wilson, "Healing Factor Pt. 1"). Khan has always been aware of how her subversive behavior could have "punitive consequences" (Butler 522) within her own cultural group. This quote indicates that Khan's fear has always been that Sheikh Abdullah will overreact and not understand her actions, possibly even forbid her to continue her work as a superhero. Instead, Abdullah goes against the traditional stereotype in U.S. culture of the strict, religious, and/or paternal figure in the Muslim community. The Sheikh gives her advice and an inspirational speech. First, he suggests that Khan needs a teacher who will appear when she is ready. Then, he continues, "If you insist on pursuing this thing you will not tell me about, do it with the qualities befitting an upright young woman: strength, honesty, compassion, and self-respect," (Wilson, "Healing Factor Pt. 1"). Khan is both surprised at and grateful for Abdullah's words, which empower her as they describe young Muslim women in the U.S. in a very positive and non-stereotypical way. These words echo the positive traits in young Muslim-females from Sirin and Fine's study: ones that they identify as "strength, authority[,] and confidence in representing [herself]..." ("Hyphenated Selves" 157)

In these two issues, "Healing Factor Pt. 1 & 2," Khan fights against bionic alligators set loose by her archnemesis, the Inventor, in the sewer systems of Jersey City. Khan dresses up in the official version of her Ms. Marvel costume and goes into the sewers to investigate this threat. In the sewers, after confronting a hologram of the Inventor, she meets Wolverine—a member of the X-Men. Wolverine's presence is an interesting one, especially when considering his roles in

Khan's story and Dust's story. As Pumphrey discusses, Wolverine appears in *New X-Men* #133 as Dust's savior. Wolverine saves Dust from what seem to be slave traders, some of which she had already attacked. In other words, Wolverine may be understood as a Western male hero who saves a Muslim woman from the Taliban (Pumphrey 26). Apparently, according to Dar, "the Taliban were trying to remove Dust's clothes, obviously to molest her, and since there weren't any 'good Muslim men' around to take a stand against the Taliban's perverted behavior, who better to rescue her than Wolverine" (107). Khan's gendered performances are more meaningful when compared to the representations of Dust as a voiceless character.

The creators of *Ms. Marvel* use Wolverine in a different way. Specifically, they use the interactions between Khan and Wolverine to comment in additional ways on Khan's gendered performances. Wolverine's role is not as stereotypical in *Ms. Marvel*. Wolverine—who happens to be on another rescue mission for a young mutant, female—fights alongside Khan, teaching her to put her priorities in order, as the young heroine continues to fangirl over him. In this case, the Marvel creators render the Western male hero Wolverine as vulnerable, as he no longer has his healing factor and the roles are reversed: the young Muslim woman with a healing factor, Ms. Marvel, must save him from the bionic threat in the sewers. Wolverine goes from being front and center in the fight to becoming Khan's mentor as he proceeds to guide her. They win the fight by teaming up. Importantly, during this scene, Wolverine is the only person (besides the reader) who learns about Khan's origin story. She tells him everything in issue #7, the second part of the "Healing Factor," story as they try to escape the sewers after battling the alligators. While they navigate the tunnels to get out, Khan navigates her superhero identity. Wolverine calls her out on using Carol Danvers's name and filling her shoes: "So, what's a kid like you doing with **Carol Danvers**' old name? Those are **big shoes** to fill" (Wilson, "Healing Factor Pt. 2"; emphasis in

original). Khan explains that she has looked up to Danvers and she mentions that she had saved the city singlehandedly. To Khan, Carol is a bona fide hero. As she states, “she was the bravest person who ever lived... I guess that’s who I thought a hero had to be... It took me a while to figure out that Ms. Marvel could be me. That I didn’t have to pretend to be someone else in order to wear the lightning bolt” (Wilson, “Healing Factor Pt. 2”). Khan finally sees that she is worthy of the Ms. Marvel moniker. She follows in the steps of Danvers’ legacy, but she does so on her own terms without transforming into Danvers. According to Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz, “Kamala’s transforming into a superheroine who is fully herself and not a copy of someone else [i.e. a blond, white, scantily-dressed Carol Danvers], addresses the issue of assimilation” (82). Rather than assimilating, as Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz claim, I would use the words adapting and integrating her hyphenated identity and using it to develop her superhero persona. Khan does not just become a typical civilian. She redefines the person who can claim themselves as Ms. Marvel.

After Wolverine and Khan rescue Julie, “...a runaway... [who] [d]isappeared from the **Jean Grey School**” (Wilson, “Healing Factor Pt. 2”; emphasis in original), Khan mentions the green mist from the first issue, “Metamorphosis.” Wolverine asks her, “Wait. Green mist? Are you sayin’ you got your powers after the Terrigen Bomb?” (Wilson, “Healing Factor Pt. 2”). The issue ends with Captain America relaying the message of Khan’s existence to Medusa, queen of the Inhumans. Readers of the comic understand that Khan is not a mutant, as Wolverine once thought; Khan, says Captain America, is a “young Inhuman patrolling Jersey City. [Wolverine] says she’s got **no idea** what she is... she’s determined to figure things out on her own. Apparently she’s almost as stubborn as [Wolverine] is” (Wilson, “Healing Factor Pt. 2”; emphasis in original). As an Inhuman, Khan has alien genes in her DNA that awakened her

dormant powers when she was exposed to the Terrigen mist. This strategy is an interesting way for the creators to lead their readers to label Khan's identity in the U.S. Khan is the descendant of *aliens* and this label can be read in two different ways. First, Khan's parents and her entire family were born outside the U.S. in Pakistan. The second reading of this term and what is meant by Wolverine, Captain America, and Medusa is that part of Khan's genetic material comes from another planet, particularly the Kree race. In both readings, readers of this comic consider Khan as an outsider in the U.S. As Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz write, "Contrary to the belief in one essentialist way of representing identity, Khan presents an extraordinary flexibility, with several simultaneous and equal identities (American, Muslim, woman), reflective of her shapeshifting powers" (83). Khan illustrates to readers that the performances that comprise her gender may be understood "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 523). Her shapeshifting powers, which had allowed her to transform into her role model Carol Danvers, reflect the transformations she must perform in her civilian life as she tries to become part of the U.S. and her local community. Khan could have chosen to reject her family's culture and adopt the cultural values and practices she sees in Jersey City. Instead, she empowers herself and preserves her Muslim heritage while managing to become less of an outsider and strengthening her multicultural group of friends.

In his book Moulton states that a variety of other creators, such as artists, poets, and authors, attempted to make sense of the 9/11 attacks and how the U.S. had been changed after they occurred by "find[ing] the right metaphors" (2). I have argued that comic book authors and artists working at Marvel took on that task in creating *Ms. Marvel*. Yet, one could ask if Marvel has gone far enough to find the right metaphor that accurately describes the Muslim community in the U.S. In the first seven issues of *Ms. Marvel*, readers embark with Khan on, as Reyns-

Chikuma and Lorenz write, her “quest for identity. Caught between what is represented as an excessively liberal society and as a conservative Muslim family, Khan is presented as struggling to find a way to be acceptable and accepted by both” (79). Khan is made by the creative team behind the series, an alien—not in the sense that she has illegally come to the U.S., but in the comic book sense of the word. Though initially it could have been considered a device to focus on Khan’s Muslim-American identity while also providing accidental negative connotations—calling her an Inhuman—I believe that this aspect of her identity further empowers her. Khan’s abilities are meant to be innately hers and not provided by external sources. Her super powers are also symbolic of this quest as her shape-shifting powers “can easily be read as a typical metaphor of the changes that a teenage body and mind encounters” (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 76), as well as the changes that need to occur to guarantee a better acceptance of Muslim peoples and alternative gendered identities in the U.S. Additionally, her healing power serves as an extension to her own healing from the trauma she suffered by the Terrigen mist along with the healing of Muslim and U.S. communities following 9/11.

In a period when Marvel Comics printed comics on culturally-diverse male and female superheroes, it chose to publish one featuring a female Muslim-American character. The fact that Khan is a series protagonist shows that the creators of Marvel Comics are willing to take a risk with the material it publishes. Yet, this was a calculated risk. *Ms. Marvel* is reminiscent of Evelyn Alsultany’s research on what she calls simplified complex representations. The comic *Ms. Marvel* features a Muslim-American female who negotiates Western ideals and her identity as a Muslim in a multicultural U.S. society. “The most difficult choice for Kamala is choosing with which models/ideals to identify. ...However, Kamala progressively transforms into what moderate Muslims and other non-Muslim groups would see as a ‘decent’ multicultural Muslim

American woman” (Reyns-Chikuma and Lorenz 80). In other words, Marvel decided to publish a comic featuring a character who would elicit sympathy from U.S. readers while still being relatable on some levels with their lives and experiences.

Notes

1. I believe it is important to clarify that “being an Arab does not automatically make someone a Muslim (and vice versa)—the former refers to an ethnic background, while the latter is a religious group” (Dar 100). An individual who identifies as an Arab can choose to practice any religion; likewise, a person of the Muslim faith can belong to any ethnic group. Despite these points, movie studios and media outlets in the U.S. tend to fail to break this stereotype and continue to conflate the people in the same group, further promoting the erroneous notion that “Arab=Muslim=Terrorist” (Dar 100).
2. In 2014, Marvel Comics published *Ms. Marvel*, which was written by G. Willow Wilson, illustrated by Adrian Alphona and edited by Sana Amanat. This first run was comprised of nineteen issues published between 2014–2015. A second run was published after the Secret Wars event; this second run includes thirty-eight issues, beginning with a new #1 issue and ending on January 30, 2019 with issue #38. Marvel has announced that a third run will be published on March 2019 as *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel* with a new writer, Saladin Ahmed (Frevele 2018).
3. Jehanzeb Dar (2010), Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus (2013), as well as Yanora Mercedes (2017) all argue that comic books serve as a space where writers and illustrators examine foreign policy.
4. Evelyn Alsultany (2012), Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus (2013), Miriam Kent (2015),

Nyla Ahmad (2016), Ernesto Priego (2016), Casey L. Trattner (2016), and A. David Lewis and Martin Lund (2017) are among those who study Muslim representations in comic books and other media outlets.

5. Articles published around the time of *Ms. Marvel*'s initial publication in 2014 include those by Albert Ching, Gene Demby, George Gene Gustines, Tammy Oler, Emine Saner, Brian Truitt, Aly Weisman, and Andy Wheeler, among others. Most of these articles celebrate Marvel's diversifying roster of comic books, as well as a female, Muslim-American protagonist. These authors also consider fans' reactions to *Ms. Marvel*.

6. In her article, Miriam Kent discusses the aspect of relatability, the "just like us" discourse, between the main character—Kamala Khan/*Ms. Marvel*—and potential readers.

7. Sirin's and Fine's research was expanded upon in a book published in 2008, two years after the initial article was published. In the book, *Muslim American Youth: Understanding Hyphenated Identities through Multiple Methods*, Sirin and Fine expand on the key details of this hyphenated community more thoroughly.

8. Readers experience other contact zones as they learn about the Khan's family background, especially when they fled Bombay for Pakistan after the 1947 partition as well as when they meet Khan's family in the city of Karachi throughout the second run of this series (2015–2019). In this chapter, I will not focus on these other contact zones.

9. For instance, Khan struggles with dating restrictions as she develops crushes on various boys (Bruno, Kamran, and Kareem), but she does not know how to handle these relationships as her family will not allow them. Khan then goes against her role model, Captain Marvel, and her crusade to maintain safety via profiling and to defend her community from groups trying to police the Muslims in Jersey City.

Conclusion:

Marji and Kamala in the Secondary Literature Classroom

Using graphic memoirs and comic books in the classroom is not a new trend in education, but it has proven to be an effective tool for teaching analysis and critical thinking. In this concluding chapter, I will discuss how I use Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel* in the classroom. I utilize pedagogical models from Sherry L. Linkon and bell hooks to teach critical reading and thinking skills that students can then apply to any text. I will also address how Scott McCloud's ideas on comic books can be used in the classroom, particularly his comments on time in the medium of comics and how students can be taught to read time in this medium and then offer interpretations of Satrapi's autographic and Marvel Comics' latest *Ms. Marvel* series. Finally, I draw from Anne N. Thalheimer and James Bucky Carter to comment on contextualizing these two texts.

In "From Book to Tool: Editorial Remarks," A. David Lewis and Martin Lund discuss the ways in which comic books can be implemented as part of a course curriculum. Lewis and Lund reference Fredrik Strömberg and his defense of comic books as educational tools in the classroom (246). In his pamphlet, "Comics in School: A Teacher's Tutorial for Primary Schools," Strömberg states that comics are "often easier to get students to read, as they seem less of a chore than prose text...promote reader engagement... easier to remember than longer texts...[and] stimulate the reader's reading comprehension, visual interpretive skills, and associative ability" (qtd. in Lewis and Lund 246). Here Strömberg argues that the comic book medium promotes a deeper analysis of the text than prose.

My experience with comics books in the classroom has not been what I expected. I have been teaching a literature class for middle and high school students for the past three semesters.

In my class we use the *Collections* textbook series published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, which the school adopted on August 2018. Last December, I taught a selection for the ninth-grade class from the second chapter, “The Struggle Between Us.” The editors titled the section, “Compare Text and Media,” and this part contained excerpts from two critically acclaimed memoirs from Iranian women: Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis 2: A Story of a Return*. The book has an established format for the instructor teaching each selection from the text: a background (which intends to present information on the authors and to contextualize the reading to help students better understand the text); the main text; literary terms exemplified in the reading; and, finally, a section with questions for students to answer and to test their vocabulary acquisition. The background for this selection reads as follows:

The Iranian Revolution in the late 1970’s resulted in the overthrow of the pro-western Shah of Iran. Iranians established a theocracy, or religious government, based on the rule of Islam. The new government passed laws that segregate men and women and that force women to adhere to an Islamic dress code. Iranian women are required to wear veils that cover their hair and neck and coats that cover their arms and legs. The “morality police” ensure that people comply with the laws. People who do not comply may be taken to the morality police headquarters (called the Committee in *Persepolis 2*) to be questioned, beaten, or jailed. (Beers, et. al. 81)

This information introduces students to this selection by giving them a historical background that focuses on the 1970s Iranian Revolution, one of the more obvious links between Nafisi’s and Satrapi’s memoirs. When informing student readers about the author of *Persepolis*, the textbook editors state that Satrapi was born in Iran and sent to Europe to attend school after the revolution

and that she later “studied illustration and learned to create comics” (81). When addressing *Persepolis*, the editors write, “*Persepolis 1* tells the story of her childhood in Iran, and *Persepolis 2* tells the story of her adolescence in Europe and Iran and of her struggle to fit in” (81). Here it is important to note that the editors do not include any background that would aid the students in developing a deeper knowledge of the medium of comics, even though part of the graphic memoir appears in this book.

The page presented in the textbook comes from *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*, specifically page 148, the fourth page in the chapter titled “The Socks.” In this entire chapter, Satrapi explores the regulation of the universities, the moral codes between women and men, the discreet protests carried out by the Iranians who did not support the fundamentalist government, and consequences of these acts, among other topics. However, in the textbook these significant topics are boiled down to one page, one on which Satrapi discusses how fear became a tool for controlling the masses. My point is not that the editors did not choose a good page from the chapter; however, they have missed an opportunity to expose students to the medium of the graphic memoir and the other topics expressed in Satrapi’s story. Even though the editors present in this book the various mediums and relevant work, they ultimately sell the graphic memoir short and they do not construct opportunities for the students to understand this medium more fully.

As a result of this textbook’s ineffective approach to comic books, I provide in this conclusion a more effective pedagogical approach to the medium of comics. This lesson would have benefitted from introducing the students to the medium of comic books before reading this part from *Persepolis*, and, if I were given the chance to teach this lesson again next year, I would supplement the textbook selection with relevant parts from Scott McCloud’s *Understanding*

Comics: The Invisible Art. Specifically, I believe McCloud's first chapter, "Setting the Record Straight," resonates with students because they likely see comic books in the same way McCloud initially saw them. As he writes in this chapter, "[c]omics were those bright, colorful magazines filled with bad art, stupid stories and guys in tights" (2). Students, though they may be fans of comic books, likely only think of these texts as ones containing superhero stories or even the source material for their favorite movies. Twenty-first-century students for the most part do not see comic books as a medium, but as a genre. Students also seem to have a limited notion on the variety of topics that artists can present through the medium. In my teaching experiences, students have claimed that they do not want to read comic books or graphic memoirs containing political or social topics. However, once students have learned more about the medium of comics their understanding of it becomes more sophisticated. They come to realize after engaging with McCloud that comics are an art form in which authors of any genre can present their ideas. After discussing McCloud's work, students understand that comic books, thanks to their illustrations and economy of text, are a relevant space to explore topics they did not wish to discuss. Students usually engage in a much deeper way with these political and social topics when they receive instruction on how to analyze the medium critically.

Another important discussion I would lead with before diving into a comic book or graphic memoir with my students is the concept of time in the graphic medium. McCloud addresses this point in the fourth chapter of his book, "Time Frames." In this chapter, McCloud explains that time passes in the gutters between panels, but time also transpires within panels since "[j]ust as pictures and the intervals **between** them create the illusion of time through **closure, words** introduce time by representing that which can only exist **in** time—**sound**" (95; emphasis in original). The action and reactions of different characters, even within one panel,

take time to play out. McCloud explores how graphic artists depict time and how the readers perceive it (99). He also explains that the shape and sizes of comic book panels dictate how time progresses; as McCloud states “...time and space in the world of comics are closely linked. As a result, so too are the issues of **time** and **motion**” (107; emphasis in original). An analysis of this part of McCloud’s book would serve a double purpose in the classroom: not only will students be able to better understand the concept of the chronological passage of time in graphic narratives, but because this part of McCloud’s book may be considered what Gillian Whitlock calls an autographic (966), students will also be able to grasp the notion of Satrapi’s many voices—the author, the narrator, and the avatar—just as McCloud draws his younger self and present-day self. In other words, students will understand from McCloud’s discussion of time, along with the exploration of his youth, that Satrapi reflects on her childhood in Iran from her perspective as an adult reflecting on and making sense from these experiences.

Besides introducing students to the medium of comic books, it is necessary to “equip them to understand and appreciate the significance of those texts” (Linkon 37). In my experience, my own enthusiasm for these texts is not enough to convince students to go beyond their initial impression of these graphic narratives—whether they consider the medium trivial, boring, or, at times, difficult to follow. Shirley Lee Linkon mentions that it is important for students to “acquire interpretive tools [because] they gain confidence in their ability to tackle difficult texts...they recognize the value of developing their skills as readers and interpreters” (37–38). Linkon suggests that educators should adapt the pedagogical model she calls “cognitive apprenticeship, which casts learning as a process of acquiring and internalizing expert ways of thinking” (38). As an educator, one must model the interpreting of texts in ways that students are able to practice these skills and internalize these skills set. Based on this Linkon’s model,

students become apprentices and they learn “ways of thinking in much the same way that people learn practical physical skills like how to throw a baseball or make a quilt” (Linkon 38). In offering this model, Linkon proposes that educators view learning as a skill set that students can learn and develop by learning how to read texts from others and then improving their interpretive skills with repeated practice.

This process of cognitive apprenticeship first begins with modeling, which Linkon states “involves not simply performing a critical task in front of students but actively demonstrating the process” (39). The second step in this cognitive model, Linkon argues, is scaffolding which “supports students as they build their interpretations and literary thinking abilities” (39). When both steps are put together “we can make visible literary knowledge that is both complex and intuitive... students develop their strategic knowledge... [and] help make the learning transferable” (Linkon 43). By modeling the techniques, Linkon argues that “we can help students build their own repertoires of critical tools” (44). Besides the development of critical tools, I also focus on critical thinking in this pedagogical activity. In her book, *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom*, bell hooks explores the meaning and importance of developing students’ critical thought. hooks states that

Thinking is an action. For all aspiring intellectuals, thoughts are the laboratory where one goes to pose questions and find answers, and the place where visions of theory and praxis come together. The heartbeat of critical thinking is the longing to know—to understand how life works. Children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers. Across the boundaries of race, class, gender, and circumstance, children come into the world of wonder and language consumed with a desire for knowledge. (7)

Though young persons may be in positions to exercise their critical thinking skills, hooks states that they are often not encouraged to hone this skill set because as they become older, they come face-to-face with pressures to conform (hooks 8).

To encourage students to take critical thinking seriously, one must share the definition of this term with students. hooks provides plenty of examples that help define this term. She quotes Daniel Willingham when she writes that the process of critical thinking consists of

seeing both sides of an issue, being open to new evidence that disconfirms young ideas, reasoning dispassionately, demanding that claims be backed by evidence, deducing and inferring conclusions from available facts, solving problems, and so forth. (qtd. in hooks 8)

I expect my students to work with these concepts in my classroom. For instance, I explore what hooks calls “the who, what, when, where, and how of things...and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables them to determine what matters most” (hooks 9). In my case, our class textbook regularly provides the students with many opportunities to hone their critical thinking skills, despite their reluctance to perform the task. The students’ reluctance to engage critically with the reading material from the class textbook hurts their ability to develop their critical thinking skills. hooks also describes critical thinking as “self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective” (9). Students rarely monitor their thinking, especially when asked to be “clear, accurate, precise, or relevant” (qtd. in hooks 9), all of which are key characteristics of critical thinkers. Following hooks, I believe that in order to develop students’ critical thinking, instructors must adopt her point that “all participants in the classroom process be involved” (10). The instructor and the students must be willing to keep open minds when exploring new texts, to be able to analyze various perspectives when it comes to reading a text, and to be honest enough

to accept and acknowledge what is not known—as we cannot always be right, and knowledge is continuously changing (hooks 10). By adopting Linkon’s method of cognitive apprenticeship and hooks’s ideas on critical thinking, one can better train students to critically read Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* and Marvel Comics’ *Ms. Marvel*.

When I first saw *Persepolis* in one of our class textbooks, I was surprised. It was not because the graphic memoir formed part of a popular school textbook, but because it was being included in a ninth-grade book, and I believe *Persepolis* to be more complex than what they have read in previous courses. My intention had always been to discuss the graphic memoir with the twelfth-graders, since I had already assigned them to read Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, a short novel detailing Edna Pontellier’s subversive gendered performances while feeling exhausted by her marriage in the late 1890s. Such topics could have been compared with the ones in Satrapi’s graphic memoir. However, before assigning the ninth-grade students to read *Persepolis*, and because the textbook does not provide enough context for this selection, it is necessary to present students with the historical context of the autographic: the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. This first lesson needs to focus on these contextual details without becoming too overwhelming for the students. Knowing the historical context that shaped the graphic memoir helps students understand the socio-political reasons that inspire Marji’s own rebellious behavior as well as her gendered performances. This context could be taught using news articles and encyclopedia entries on this period in Iran and Iraq; documentaries and films could also help students better visualize and comprehend this historical moment, one that may appear distant from their everyday experiences. After discussing the historical context, I would move to teaching the pertinent vocabulary found in McCloud’s work. It is especially important to teach students about the concepts of closure and the gutter, along with the concept of time in this

medium. For instance, studying McCloud’s book ensures that students become more familiar with reading this medium as well as comprehending how they can continue to improve as readers of this medium.

Once students have understood McCloud’s work, they can more fully understand Satrapi’s visual choices. For students’ reading *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood*, I believe that the first chapter, “The Veil,” is the perfect text to put into motion Linkon’s cognitive apprenticeship model. In this chapter, Satrapi presents various panels that would exemplify McCloud’s work to students: size of panels, content of panels, and narration boxes and speech bubbles, among others. By reading the first chapter in the classroom, students can gain confidence in how to move from panel to panel when reading as well as how to differentiate between narrative text boxes and speech bubbles, and how to pay attention to and interpret the details within the panels. For example, on the fifth panel on the third page, Satrapi includes a long panel that takes up the bottom-third of the page illustrating ten little girls in the school playground, including a young Marji (Satrapi 3). Satrapi draws within the panel the girls engaging in five different acts: Marji taking off her veil due to the heat; one girl scaring another while wearing the veil over her face; a veiled girl choking an unveiled classmate “in the name of freedom” (3); one girl skipping a rope made from tied veils; and, a veiled girl horseback riding on an unveiled classmate. This panel highlights McCloud’s discussion on the passage of time within as well as between panels—as a following panel documents the girls arriving at the school and being handed veils (Satrapi 3). On this first page of the autographic, Satrapi also presents a flashback in the third panel in which she documents her life in 1980 and then the Islamic Revolution, which took place in 1979 (Satrapi 3). This panel serves not only as a perfect example of the significance of time in the graphic memoir, but it is also providing content that helps the

students construct meaning from the surrounding panels. Students can also pick up the nuances of Satrapi's illustrations and art style, as she still renders each veiled girl as a unique person, providing enough visual clues for the reader to differentiate the students. After leading discussions on the first chapter, the instructor can then use the second chapter, "The Bicycle," to further contextualize the historical situation in the graphic memoir.

In Anne N. Thalheimer's essay, "Too Weenie to Deal with All of This 'Girl Stuff': Women, Comics, and the Classroom," she explains how comics can be used by teachers. Because most students consider comics "lightweight entertainment, nearly any assignment involving them becomes less like schoolwork" (Thalheimer 85). Secondly,

graphic novels provide an unparalleled opportunity for difficult and unfamiliar subject matter to be broached. Often these are issues that students are reluctant to discuss—feminism, gender inequality, women's history. Women's graphic novels in particular present an innovative approach to material that seems too difficult for students to discuss or even grasp. (Thalheimer 85)

Fortunately, most of my students read mainstream superhero comic books, so they may be less reluctant to read the autographic. Yet, I agree with Thalheimer's commentary regarding students "not [knowing] how integral women have been in comics. Women working in the comics industry generally do not have name recognition, yet they have been working in large numbers at every level for decades" (86). The graphic novel medium allows students to see Marji's development along with her gendered performances as they apply the skills they have learned in their "words-only works" to comics (Thalheimer 89). With women's graphic novels dealing with "corporeality," *Persepolis* is a great source for students to learn about the struggles for freedom

and gender equality women have gone through as well as their gendered performances (Thalheimer 89).

This graphic novel resonates with students in Puerto Rico not just because Satrapi presents themes on social justice, gendered performances, and feminism, but because high school seniors (my target audience at my current workplace) and college students on the island will identify on some level with Satrapi's forced migration. At the end of the volume, Marji's parents send her to Vienna, Austria, as an attempt to keep her safe and provide her the opportunity of obtaining a better life. Her subversive gendered performances made her a target for the modesty police and those who ensured the rigid rules of the fundamentalist government. This point resounds with the students' understanding and feelings regarding migration and the most recent wave of the Puerto Rican diaspora, as they look for better jobs and living conditions in the United States especially after Hurricane María. This disaster has caused several families and young professionals to leave the island.

After teaching *Persepolis* in a lesson exploring identity construction, instructors can then turn to Marvel Comics' *Ms. Marvel*. As Lewis and Lund write, "Muslim superheroes can be used in a wide variety of courses, from religion classes and Islamic studies, to history, social studies and social sciences, to media and literature classes, and far beyond" (246). This point connects to Satrapi's *Persepolis* and *Ms. Marvel*, as both texts can be used to discuss topics "from factual and historical accuracy, to representation, to issues like Islamophobia" (Lewis and Lund 246), whether in the same course or not. For example, once students have read and discussed *Persepolis*, they can move on to *Ms. Marvel* to discuss the topics mentioned above. Students could study how representations of Middle Eastern persons have changed in the United States, especially after 9/11 and the immigration crises in different places around the globe. They could

also compare and analyze the gendered performances of both protagonists in their different historical contexts and contact zones. With the current availability of more academic research and resources for teaching comic books with Muslim protagonists, there are more opportunities for using these texts in effective ways in the classroom.

As a post-9/11 publication, *Ms. Marvel* not only comments on the post-9/11 U.S., but the narrative contains illustrations that parallel the tragic event. The first comic book issue in this series can be a lesson on its own, as the text can be used for students to explore how Muslim and white characters “meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination,” (Pratt 7) in a contact zone. Khan’s own transformation occurs during an attack in the city that frees the mist responsible for awakening her powers, the Terrigen bomb. As James Bucky Carter writes about the aftermath of 9/11, “we came to terms with horrific images of buildings on fire and a new world of uncertainty” (107). Khan’s response to her transformation includes her struggling with the uncertainty of how it affects her identity and how others around her accept her. *Ms. Marvel*’s creative team have used the text as a space for self-reflection on their own experiences and connected it with social, cultural, and political meanings in the U.S. One cannot deny that this comic book series has truly been inspired by its creators’ reality, as mentioned in the previous chapter—Sana Amanat’s life experiences inspired Khan’s narrative. Puerto Rican high school and college students can likely sympathize with the character and even identify her struggles with their own as they discuss Khan’s “current place in time in the aftermath of 9/11” (Carter 101) and their own place in time and the most-recent events that have affected them, such as our waning economy and hurricane María. Both the economy and the natural disaster have served as catalysts for Puerto Ricans’ exits to the U.S. mainland and other countries in search for better opportunities. By encouraging

students to make these types of connections, they will likely alter their views on what topics comics can address and they will learn more about themselves by analyzing Khan's predicament in the Ms. Marvel series. The linking of comics and students' lives comes into play at this point of the lesson.

Besides managing her transformation into a superhero, Khan also struggles with her personal and superhero identities as she explores how her role model—Carol Danvers, the original Ms. Marvel and the current Captain Marvel—inspires her actions. Khan's gendered performances are initially inspired by Danvers, as she considers the superhero worthy of admiration. As the story progresses, Khan comes to terms with her superhero identity. Her superhero persona is inspired by her role model and her cultural background; Khan can negotiate her identity without betraying her self. This text will resonate with young Puerto Rican students as they also find themselves in a conflicting space. During the aftermath of the hurricane, as the island was almost at a standstill due to the lack of power and water service, many families moved to the U.S. in search of better opportunities and a sense of normalcy. Other families left to ensure that their children would not fall behind and could finish the academic year; various college students also opted to make this move. This sudden move to a new location caused diasporic Puerto Ricans to question their identity as they tried to become accepted in these new spaces. Even those who did not leave the island needed to manage their own performances and identities in what Carter calls a “new world of uncertainty” (107).

After taking into consideration Linkon's cognitive apprenticeship model and hook's definitions of critical thinking, I believe that I can achieve better engagement from my students in a future lesson on graphic lives and comics. By using McCloud's *Understanding Comics* in the classroom, students can better comprehend the medium and learn how to manage more

effectively the medium of the comic book. I also think that students will benefit from learning how to contextualize a text, a skill that helps them understand how culture and politics influence the text. Once students understand the medium and receive more appropriate context, their reading becomes more meaningful and they can build connections between themselves and the text. *Persepolis* and *Ms. Marvel* are exceptional texts that not only serve to teach about gendered performances and identity construction, but Puerto Rican students can internalize the content, as they identify with it, and create personal meaning from the text. These texts would resonate with Puerto Rican students as they have negotiated (and continue to do so) their identities in uncertain spaces after suffering from a traumatic experience. And as the texts demonstrate, despite the struggles of both Marji and Khan, their stories prove that one can be socially successful and fit in without betraying one's uniqueness.

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