THE CHANGING ROLES OF WOMEN IN AMERICAN COMIC BOOKS

by

Amanda Rose Loeffert

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Approved by:

_____
Dr. Balaka Basu

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Dr. Alan Rauch

_____
Dr. Katie Hogan

ABSTRACT

AMANDA R. LOEFFERT. The changing roles of women in American comic books.
(Under the direction of DR. BALAKA BASU)

The comic book industry is entering an era in which gender is the trending topic of conversation. Historically, comic books have catered to a masculine audience, with the majority of popular comic books featuring male characters, most often created and produced by men. However, recent years have seen a significant increase in female participation in comic book culture. What was once perceived as a male-dominated space is slowly transitioning to a space that not only promotes strong female protagonists, but welcomes female writers and readers. With this transformative moment in mind, this thesis examines how female heroes in comic books are represented today. This study intends to create a dialog on intersectionality (or the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination) by providing a critical analysis and close reading of the characters of Kamala Khan from *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, Gwen Stacy from *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*, and Jane Foster from *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*. These characters exemplify how modern representations of females in comic books are progressive in some ways, but limited in others. The main goal of this research is to highlight that, while the comic book industry is shifting towards becoming more inclusive to female characters, producers, and readers, there are many obstacles that these heroines must overcome in order to break through the veil of patriarchy surrounding the comic book industry.

DEDICATION

This completed thesis is dedicated to my parents, Martha and Jay Loeffert, who have been unfailingly supportive throughout this process. I would not be who I am, where I am, or what I am with you. I hope that this thesis makes you proud, as that is the guiding motivation in all that I do. Thank you for traveling this adventure with me and on to the next.

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CHAPTER 1: THAT'S GIRLS' STUFF! AN INTRODUCTION TO WOMEN IN COMIC BOOKS

As Suzanne Scott states in her article, "Fangirls in Refrigerators: The Politics of (In)visibility in Comic Book Culture," the last five years have seen an "exponential growth in conversations and criticisms surrounding the state of women in comic books, both as producers and consumers" (Scott). The interests of Scott closely align with my own, and I intend to add to these conversations and criticisms in new and relevant ways. Scott suggests "that we are currently witnessing a transformative moment within comic book industry, comic book fandom, and comic book scholarship, in which gender is one of the primary axes of change" (Scott). With this transformative moment in mind, this thesis examines how female heroes in comic books are represented today. Through a close reading of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*, and *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*, I argue that the protagonists of these books, Kamala Khan, Gwen Stacy, and Jane Foster, are representative of this transformative moment. Although they are helping to pave the way for new female characters to break through the veil of patriarchy surrounding the traditionally male-centric comic book industry, the road to change is riddled with obstacles that these forerunners must get past. My thesis will critically examine these roadblocks through a feminist lens.

Marvel, described by NPR writer Etekla Lehozky as a "key perpetrator of superheroine objectification," has responded to fan demands by releasing a surge of

female-fronted books (Lehozky). Additionally, aware of this perceived shortcoming, Marvel is trying to diversify both its comics and its staff. Comic Book Resources interviewed Axel Alonso, Marvel's current Editor-In-Chief, about Marvel's inconsistency with meeting diversity needs. Alonso responded:

> How does a publishing line diversify? It starts with an editorial staff that is diverse—and there has never been a more diverse editorial staff at Marvel—and that is willing to have tough internal conversations and course-correct when there's a problem. A few years ago, when we cancelled "X-23," leaving us with no solo titles featuring a female lead, we considered that a problem. We took a good look in the mirror, course-corrected and the result was a wealth of solo female titles…and female authors that have enriched our line, paving the road for other writers…who will make their debuts soon. I have no doubt that we are continuing down that path on every front. (Ching)

With this "look in the mirror," Marvel released fourteen new comic series with female leads. Diamond Distributors, one of the top transporters of most major comic publishers (e.g. Marvel and DC), publicizes their monthly and year-end statistics of the top-selling comics and graphic novels in America. In 2015, eleven out of those fourteen ranked on Diamond Distributor's top Graphic Novels of 2015 (Diamond Comic Distributors).

Over the last 70 years there have been innumerable comic books created, sold, and read across the country. The numbers are increasing, thanks to the outstanding popularity of the Marvel *Avengers* film franchise. Based on an observation of online activity, superhero comics are experiencing an unprecedented boom in fan popularity and

participation. Female fans are taking notice of a lack of female representation both within comic books as well as behind the scenes. Although female characters are not missing from even the earliest comic books, there is an imbalance between male and female characters (especially between male and female heroes) that scholars and fans alike have noticed.

From their inception, comic book heroes have certain similarities: a mask to hide a secret identity, extraordinary skills or powers, a love of citizenship and humanity, and a skin-tight costume (Besel 9). It is true that females have been portrayed in comic books since their beginning in the early twentieth century; however, the strength of these women as role models for readers has been and continues to be debated by comic book theorists, particularly by feminist critics. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell discusses one of the earliest comics to feature a woman protagonist, *Sheena: Queen of the Jungle,* in *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative.* She remarks that when Sheena debuted in 1937, she fought villains with strength and skill, killing foes brutally and effectively. However, she fought her foes while scantily clad in leopard skin bikinis, which did not much promote her as a role model for young female readers. Danziger-Russell writes, "Although she was represented as a strong and powerful female, Sheena resembled a pin-up model, designed for the male gaze" (12). In 1940, *Fantomah: Mystery Woman of the Jungl*e, a comic similar to *Sheena: Queen of the Jungle,* hit the shelves. Fantomah is known as the first comic book superheroine. Unlike Sheena, who fought with superior strength and skills, Fantomah protected the jungle with supernatural powers. However, like Sheena, she did not rise to mainstream popularity and quickly faded into obscurity (Besel 18).

Fantomah may have been the first female superheroine, but her legacy pales in comparison to that of Wonder Woman, who debuted only one year later. In 1941, Wonder Woman took the comic book world by storm. Unlike her predecessors, Sheena and Fantomah, Wonder Woman was the first hugely successful female superhero and still remains relevant to popular culture today (Besel 13). Since their debut, comic books had tended to cater exclusively to male audiences and had been designed almost entirely by men, which meant that characters like Sheena and Fantomah remained uninspiring for both male and female readers. Aware of the imbalance between male and female character representation, Wonder Woman's creator, William Marston, set out to intentionally design a female hero that would embody the attributes of femininity that he believed should be championed rather than suppressed. In 1943, Marston stated in an article, titled "Why 100,000,000 Americans Read Comics," that the worst offense of comic books was their "blood-curdling masculinity" (43). Marston goes on to make the following argument:

> Suppose your child's ideal becomes a super*man* who uses his extraordinary power to help the weak. The most important ingredient in the human happiness recipe still is missing—*love*. It's smart to be strong. It's big to be generous. But it's sissified, according to exclusively masculine rules, to be tender, loving, affectionate, and alluring. "Awe, that's girl's stuff!" snorts our young comics reader. "Who wants to be a *girl?*" And that's the point; not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, power. (42)

Marston's argument was, and still is today, profound in its implications. He suggests that the main issue with comics in the 1940s was that they promoted and catered exclusively to masculine qualities. Marston, who self-identified as a feminist, believed that children should be exposed to the qualities of both genders in order to be well rounded. Marston goes on to say, "Not wanting to be girls, [boys] don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weak ones" (43). How, then, do we define "strength" in women?

Marston's above quotes are rather contradictory. In some ways, his words seem ahead of his time. Gender roles in the 1940s were far more binary than they are today. Genders were relegated to male/female, and anything outside of that box was, at best, disapproved of, and at worst, demonized. At the time, Marston was one of the few men who openly championed the female gender and actively sought to not only equalize the genders, but also to actually raise women up as the superior gender (Finn 18). He mentions wanting to make a character that girls, as well as boys, could look up to, but his primary goal was to demonstrate to young male readers "that female strength was not a fantastic supposition" (Matsuuchi 122). Marston believed that, because women were (in his eyes) more tender, patient, and loving than males, women were more suited to be leaders (Finn 19). In 1937, as quoted in "Wonder Woman Wears Pants: Wonder Woman, Feminism, and the 1972 'Women's Lib' Issue," Marston told the *New York Times* that "within 100 years the country will see the beginning of a sort of Amazonian matriarchy. Within 500 years a 'definite sex battle for supremacy' would occur, and after a millennium 'women would take rule of the country, politically and economically'"

(Matsuuchi 122). In this sense, Marston's words and ideologies were frankly a little unlikely.

Perhaps this is because Marston's ideas about feminism and the female sex were extremely limited in scope; he was inclined to propagate controlling and normative ideas about what ought to count as an acceptable female attribute. Although Marston was one of the few prominent men of his time to actively and publicly champion the female gender, it was still a *man* who decided what was and was not appropriate feminine behavior. Marston may not have adhered to normative, patriarchal gender representations of the time, but neither did he truly break away from them. The female gender, then, was defined by a man for men.

This is one reason why feminist theorists debate over the strength of Wonder Woman's character and impact on society, particularly on her female audience. Sharon Zechowski and Caryn E. Neumann discuss the social impact of Wonder Woman in their article, "The Mother of All Superheroes: Idealizations of Femininity in Wonder Woman," comparing and contrasting the positive and negative elements of Wonder Woman's character. Their article argues that Wonder Woman is both a progressive champion of feminist ideologies, as well as a sexualized stereotype of female oppression in a patriarchal society. On the one hand, Wonder Woman symbolizes strength and gender equality. As a particular role model of the renowned feminist Gloria Steinem, her image has been appropriated as the face of second wave feminism (Zechowski and Neumann 139). She "symbolically disrupted the gender norms that had prevented real women from achieving full equality with men in public spheres" (Zechowski and Neumann 134), which was one of the main focuses of second wave feminism in the 1960s and 70s.

Unlike many superheroes who luck into their powers through spider bites or freak radiation accidents, Wonder Woman gains her powers through hard work and determination (Zechowski and Neumann 134).

On the other hand, Wonder Woman also represents the continuing imbalance of gender equality. Zechowski and Neumann consider Wonder Woman's regressive qualities, such as falling in love with the first man she sees and working in subordinate positions (e.g. romance editor) (134). Her contradictions are evident: she combats the evils of patriarchy while embodying the ultimate, idealized female form. Yet, as Zechowski and Neumann point out, the "most radical aspect of Wonder Woman is that she existed, period" (138). Despite her sex appeal, Wonder Woman provided a new context for children, girls in particular, to re-examine gender roles.

Most of the scholarship on Wonder Woman agrees that she functions as a feminist symbol, simply because she is the first female superhero to have gained, and more importantly, retained popularity. Wonder Woman was the first, so it stands to reason that she has paved the way for all female heroes who follow her. However, where exactly has this path led? Has Wonder Woman really gone anywhere? Wonder Woman, though hailed for her success as one of the first female heros, is conspicuously absent from contemporary media, her exposure restricted to the limitations of the two-dimensional world of print (Zechowski and Neumann 133). Wonder Woman, paradoxically, is as absent from popular culture as she is ubiquitous within it. The implications for Wonder Women, then, are that she has transcended the sphere of popular culture and is now marginalized.

An additional paradox of Wonder Woman is that she was created as the futuristic vision of the ultimate ideal of femininity by William Marston in the 1940s, but the future which he imagined has come and gone and been found lacking. As Ann Matsuuchi says, Wonder Woman was created "not as a female counterpart to a male superhero, but as an independent, title supporting character" (118). In spite of this, though she belongs to the famous DC trifecta alongside Batman and Superman, there are not any movies that feature her in the lead role, while Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent are featured in nine and eleven, respectively. When asked if she would direct a Wonder Woman movie, Lexi Alexander commented, "imagine the weight on my shoulders…you carry the [expletive removed] weight of gender equality for both characters and women directors. No way" (Alt). There have been several attempts to launch a Wonder Woman movie in the already well established, popular superhero franchise, but all attempts have failed. Most notably, in 2011, DC attempted to release a television show featuring Wonder Woman in the lead role, but due to leaked scripts and images, it became such a fiasco that the network pulled the show. According to Charlotte E. Howell, "it was the closest DC has come to adapting the character, one of its three most recognizable intellectual properties, to live action, and it was a spectacular failure" (145). There is some hope for Wonder Woman, however. Her character debuted this year in DC's blockbuster movie *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Her own self-titled film is currently in production, and set to premiere in 2017.

However, the take away here is that, even though she has now been introduced to the DC cinematic universe, her name is absent from the title and she appears as a side character in a movie that stars her two more famous male companions. In one memorable scene, Wonder Woman arrives to help Batman and Superman fight the villain,

Doomsday. Superman turns to Batman and says, “Is she with you?” Batman responds, simply, “I thought she was with you” (*Batman v Superman*). Wonder Woman stays silent. Her silence is most telling. Batman and Superman are the privileged heroes, while Wonder Woman is delegated, once again, to the margin. Despite maintaining popularity for the better part of a century, Wonder Woman remains a paradox: she is both modern and archaic, present but silenced, famous yet ignored.

Over 70 years ago, William Marston criticized the comic book industry for elevating masculinity above femininity; his arguments remain relevant today. Only recently has the comic book industry re-evaluated its male-centric focus. Marston raised the additional question that “if children *will* read comics…why isn’t it advisable to give them some constructive comics to read?” (40). Marston’s response to the overwhelming “maleness” of comic books was to provide his readers with a hero he felt was more conducive to establishing an appropriate role model: Wonder Woman. For Marston, “the obvious remedy [was] to create a feminine character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman” (43). Wonder Woman championed all of the feminine qualities that, before her, had been, in Marston’s words, “sissified” (42). Suddenly, there existed a strong, female character that not only boys, but also girls, could look up to. In Marston’s time, there was a need for strong female representations in comic books, so he created Wonder Woman. Today, that need still exists, but has grown to encompass inclusivity for all kinds of women, rather than just Marston’s ideal.

On the issue of diversity, the big comic book companies, such as Marvel and DC, have been found notoriously lacking. Melissa J. St. Amour stresses the importance of representations of diversity in children’s and young adult literature in her article,

"Connecting Children's Stories to Children's Literature: Meeting Diversity Needs." According to St. Amour, it is important for children to recognize themselves in the characters of the books they are reading. "Multicultural stories can be a mirror," affirms St. Amour, "reflecting and validating familiar cultures and experiences for children who rarely have a "voice" in the classroom" (50). If he were writing today, Marston might well suggest that since children are going to read comic books, it might be prudent to provide them with characters with whom they can identify. As previously mentioned, the conversation surrounding the need for diversity in comics has inspired the creation of books like *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* and *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*.

I have discussed at length the ongoing conversations surrounding comic books; now I turn towards the relevant conversations about diversity—specifically, in the context of this thesis, race and gender—in academia. As I have previously mentioned, for many years comic books catered almost exclusively to a male audience. Characters, both male and female, were drawn with male preference in mind. While it is true that both male and female characters tend to be drawn as ideals of the masculine and feminine forms, female features were more often over exaggerated than male features. According to comic blogger Laura Sneddon:

> The sexualisation of women characters goes beyond the issue of costumes. Sure, we're never going to see Batman running around with his manly pecs peeking through strategic tears in his costume, nor is Superman's costume ever going to change so drastically as to have a butt window, but more importantly the "ideal" nature of male superhero bodies will always focus

> on strength and fitness while the "ideal" nature of female superhero bodies will always focus on sexiness and vulnerability. (Sneddon)

Sneddon's main point is that, although males and female bodies are both typically represented with idealized figures, there is a clear imbalance between male and female characters. The sexualization of female characters tends to be more exaggerated. Comics are not the only media in which the phenomenon occurs.

In 1989, feminist critic Laura Mulvey published "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in which she discusses this imbalance between film representations of male and female figures. According to Mulvey, considering cinema through a feminist lens "gets us closer to the root of our oppression, it brings closer an articulation of the problem, it faces us with the ultimate challenge: how to fight the unconscious structured like a language (formed critically at the moment of arrival of language) while still caught within the language of the patriarchy?" (15). One aspect of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" that has often been used in feminist criticism in the decades since its publication is the concept of the male gaze.

The cinema offers many different pleasures, but Mulvey focuses mainly on scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking. As Mulvey puts it:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and ertoic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness.* Women displaed

> as sexual object is the *leitmotif* of eriotic spectacle: from pin-ups to strip-tease, from Zeigfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, and plays to and signifies male desire. (20)

Here, Mulvey makes the assertion that female characters are designed (unconsciously or not) so that men may look at them. The male fantasy of what a female should embody, then, is projected onto that character. Although the points that Mulvey makes are in reference to film, her assertions can be (and have been) applied to other types of contemporary media in which female characters are designed specifically for a male audience.

Applying Mulvey's theory of the male gaze to comic book representations of females is not new. As Scott states, "despite comics' great potential, they still fall prey to many of the same issues Mulvey identified with respect to film, and perhaps exacerbate the male gaze...in the bodies of female superheroes" (Scott). Comics have been objectifying women's bodies since their inception in the 1930s, but recently, the public is starting to push back. One example that has made headlines in comic news in recent years is a public outcry over overtly sexualized portrayals of female characters, namely Mary Jane from *The Amazing Spider-Man* series. The cover, drawn by J. Scott Campbell, portrays Mary Jane posing in a sexually provocative way: Mary Jane is shown sitting on her couch in a "relaxed" pose, holding her morning coffee in her lap with her back arched, breasts jutting out between straight arms. Many fans responded negatively, with the cover "provok[ing] a string of parodic images in which fans attempted to contort themselves into Mary Jane's pose" (Scott), which prove that Mary Jane's "relaxed" pose is in fact nothing of the sort. Scott references Mulvey directly in her criticism of Mary

Jane's posture: "Because Mary Jane is presumably alone in her apartment, the performative pose assumes 'the determining male gaze' of a heterosexual comic book reader projecting his fantasies on the female form" (Scott). This is only one example where Mulvey's theory has been applied to female representation in comic books. While I find this approach interesting, I do not intend to add to the many articles pertaining to this subject. Rather, I am more interested in how the comic book industry is finally responding to these negative backlashes. *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, one of the few successful books featuring a female protagonist that is also written by a female, directly speaks to the misrepresentation and absurdity that has traditionally been associated with the portrayal of female superheroes. For the first time, the industry is both admitting that their representations are wrong *and* actively trying to fix how they portray women by taking into account that women now make up a strong percentage of the comic book audience.

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze is only one theoretical lens through which I am examining *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*. In addition to considering how G. Willow Wilson, writer of the *Ms. Marvel* series, challenges sexualized representation of female heroes, I also take into consideration how race is portrayed. *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* is not only one of the first comics to directly challenge overtly sexualized representations of females, but is also the first comic to star a Muslim protagonist. Kamala's struggle with her Islamic heritage is one of the main points of tension in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal.* Her conflict over conforming to her religious strictures and wanting to assimilate opposing aspects of American culture comes to fruition when she uses her powers to transform into

a literal copy of her idol, the white, blond, and blue-eyed former Ms. Marvel, Carol Danvers (Wilson).

Sharon Chubbuck discusses the theory of whiteness in her article "Whiteness Enacted, Whiteness Disrupted: The Complexity of Personal Congruence." Chubbuck acknowledges that Whiteness, as a literary concept, is difficult to define:

> The vast majority of Whiteness scholars agree that it is directly connected to institutionalized power and privileges that benefit White Americans. Based on the widely accepted notion that race is a social construction rather than a biological reality, Whiteness is seen as one more constructed racial category, yet distinct as the one category with relatively exclusive access to privilege...Beyond its connection to power and privilege, Whiteness is best understood through the process of its social construction and its function in society. For example, Whiteness is socially constructed through a process of negation, an assertion that it is not the Other...This process of negation, ironically, shows Whiteness as intimately related to color, because an entity defined by "I am not that" is meaningless without an Other. (Chubbuck 303-304)

To summarize, Whiteness is best defined by what it is *not,* where everything under the "not" column is relegated as "other."

In terms of applying Whiteness theory to literature, the perspective "provides a different and beneficial lens that, quite simply, brings a fresh perspective and new vocabulary with which to better understand America's long history of discrimination based on racial categorization" (Chubbuck 303). By studying the ways in which a text

privileges whiteness, Whiteness theory then provides the lens in which to examine the binary opposition of white/color.

Unlike Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, far less literature exists in which the lens of whiteness is applied to directly to comic books. Kamala Khan is a unique case. She may be the only comic book character that is whitewashed in her own book. "Whitewashing" refers to the "practice of erasing people of color either through replacing a minority character with a white character, or more commonly, with a white actor replacing a minority actor in the portrayal of a character of color" (Lowrey 1). Through the context of Whiteness theory, I examine the ways in which Kamala must undergo the whitewashing of her identity as a woman of color (even temporarily) in order to render her multiculturalism more palatable to non-multicultural readers.

My next chapter, "Gender Benders Assemble! Gender Fluidity in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* And *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*," switches gears and considers comic books, specifically *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* and *Thor: Goddess of Thunder,* almost exclusively through the context of gender. Gender, as I have already established, is a hot button issue in the conversation surrounding comic books. Axel Alonso, Editor-In-Chief of Marvel Comics, told the Huffington Post, "Our catalog [of comic books] is filled with characters that are defined by their actions, not by their genders" (Roncero-Menendez). However, if this were true, none of the conversation surrounding females in comic books would be happening.

While there are many recently-released books featuring strong female protagonists, *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* caught my eye because it is a subversion of a classic Marvel hero. In the original *Amazing Spider-Man* series created by Stan Lee in the

1960s, the radioactive spider bites Peter Parker, giving him the amazing powers that allow him to become the hero Spider-Man. His first girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, dies tragically, for which Peter blames himself. Conversely, in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*, written by Jason Latour and illustrated by Robbi Rodriguez, the radioactive spider bites Gwen Stacy and Peter Parker dies a tragic death, for which Spider-Gwen, though (arguably) innocent, is blamed (Latour). Fans who love the classic version of Gwen Stacy might be disappointed if they are hoping to get a revamp of classic Gwen's refrigerated character in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*. Latour's Gwen Stacy is not a revamp, but rather an entirely different character. I am most interested in the ways in which the Gwen Stacy of this universe compares to both her canonical counterpart (classic Gwen Stacy) and her gendered counterpart (classic Spider-Man).

It is important to note that superheroes tend to take on dual identities. With a few exceptions (Carol Danvers and Tony Stark come to mind), a character's super identity is often kept separate and secret from their civilian identity. Meaning, for example, the citizens of a particular comic book universe may not make the connection that their friendly local, glasses-wearing reporter and the indestructible, flying, crime-fighting, super-powered hero who keeps them safe from danger are one in the same. Like many comic book heroes, the Gwen Stacy of *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* separates her hero identity and her day-to-day identity (Latour). Gwen's alter ego as Spider-Woman could arguably be considered a separate character. In this regard, I contend that Latour's Gwen Stacy is a genderbent version of classic Gwen Stacy and her alter ego is a genderswapped version of classic Spider-Man.

While there is an entire discourse on gender in literature, in my research for this thesis, I noticed that the academic conversation lacks sufficient material on genderbending and genderswapping. As I intend to demonstrate with my close reading of *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*, genderbending and genderswapping are relevant to the gender discourse. Gender, as a social concept, is very fluid and difficult to define in modern terms. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "[t]he state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones; the collective attributes or traits associated with a particular sex, or determined as a result of one's sex" ("gender, n."). Of course, gender is more complex than this, and identities pertaining to gender do not simply fall into a male/female binary. As such, there exist many subsets of gender with which one may choose to identify. Many feminists and gender theorists study how these subsets and identifications fit within literary discourse. Seminal gender theorist, Judith Butler, problematizes gender categories in her article, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," claiming them to be "instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression" (308). One way to combat the regulatory, limited regime of the gender binary is to subvert it with fluid representations of gender. Genderbending and genderswapping are two examples of fluid gender representations.

"Genderbending" refers to a person who disrupts the male/female binary by intentionally subverting expected gender roles. This can be accomplished through androgynous dress, adornment, and behavior. The purpose of genderbending can (but not always) take the form of social activism in order to "destroy rigid gender roles and defy

sex-role stereotypes, notably in cases where the gender-nonconforming person finds these roles oppressive" ("Gender Bender"). A genderbent individual does not change his or her identified gender, but rather assimilates attributes of the opposite gender with the intention of disrupting cultural gender norms. Genderbending is not to be confused with transgendered identity, which refers to people who "believe they are one gender trapped in the body of the other" ("Youth Culture"), nor with genderqueer, which (in the spirit of Butler) refers to a person who refuses to conform to any gender categories, "thus reflecting the gray area where gender is blurred and [the person in question] feels no obligation to choose female over male—and vice versa" ("Youth Culture"). For the purpose of this thesis, I will be considering genderbending from the angle of making a social statement in a literary context.

Genderswapping, though similar, has notable differences from genderbending. "Genderswapping" refers to the literary trope in which "one or more characters switch binary sexes, such as depicting a male character as a woman" ("Genderswap"). The term originally referred to fanart, or amateur, unlicensed art made by fans of a specific television show, movie, book or other media, which depicts a binary-gendered character recreated as the opposite gender ("Fanart"). In addition to fanart, genderswapping is also a popular trope in fanfiction (unlicensed stories produced by fans of a particular, pre-existing text or media). A fanfiction writer employing genderswapping may explore the different ways a cisgendered (conforming gender to biological sex) character's narrative might change if that character were born, or turned into, the opposite gender. Genderswapping is also a popular choice for cosplay (dressing up as a particular character). It is a trend that is gaining relevance in fandoms and now in literature. The

fact that it is missing from contemporary gender discourse only affirms my need to dissect it further in this thesis.

To summarize, the following chapters will closely examine three female protagonists of three recently-released comic books. In my first chapter, "What's Normal? Minimizing Otherness in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*," I look at Kamala Khan, Marvel's first Muslim superhero. In this chapter, I apply Mulvey's concept of the male gaze to the way in which female superheroes are traditionally represented, and how this concept is challenged in *Ms. Marvel: No Normal.* I also consider Kamala's character through a lens of whiteness. Kamala is not the first multicultural superhero, but she is perhaps the first to have her multiculturalism stripped from her of her own volition. In the following chapter, "Gender Benders Assemble! Gender Fluidity in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* and *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*," I examine the reimagined character of Gwen Stacy and compare her to her canonical counterpart (classic Gwen Stacy) and her gendered counterpart (classic Spider-Man). I differentiate between Gwen's civilian identity and her super identity and use a gendered lens, drawing from Judith Butler and my own preliminary research, to make the comparisons between the characters. When Thor's girlfriend, Jane Foster, takes up Thor's hammer, many of the same themes of gender fluidity come into play. Ultimately, what these characters—Kamala Khan, Gwen Stacy, and Jane Foster—have in common is that, while some aspects of their narratives are progressive, other aspects are as regressive as any other female in comic books. However, much like Wonder Woman, they are important because they exist. Their roads may be bumpy, but they are paving a new road for future characters; perhaps the next

Muslim and genderfluid superheroes will spend less time fighting marginalizing societal norms and more time fighting crime.

CHAPTER 2: WHAT'S NORMAL? MINIMIZING OTHERNESS IN *MS. MARVEL: NORMAL*

Ms. Marvel: No Normal, Marvel's first comic to feature a Muslim-American hero, was met with overwhelming success and critical acclaim. The fourth generation of Ms. Marvel features Kamala Khan, an average teenage girl struggling with her identity as a Muslim-American who, like most teenagers, just wants to fit in. Initially, the protagonist, Kamala, wishes to embody the features of an all-American Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers)—tall, blond, sexy—not an average, self-proclaimed "brown girl with a 9 P.M. curfew" (Wilson 58/2). Kamala gets her wish—literally. Kamala's initial mimicry of Danvers is an externalization of her own inner conflict: in order to fit in, she must minimize her otherness. Eventually, Kamala sheds the sexy, blonde, Americanized identity in favor of a look that is more practical, natural, and ultimately her, but in order to come to this conclusion, she must first experience being white. Conscious of the difficulty of promoting a minority character, the creators of Ms. Marvel: No Normal dilute the otherness of Kamala Khan in order to make her as accessible as possible to the majority of readers. The creators accomplish this accessibility through privileging whiteness as the norm so that Kamala may reject it, therefore rendering her multiculturalism more palatable to non-multicultural readers.

In recent years, feminist critics have questioned the representation of females in comic books. As Miriam Kent states in her article "Unveiling Marvels: Ms. Marvel and

the Reception of the New Muslim Superhero," these feminist critics "recognize the significance of female comic book characters in an industry which has traditionally been dominated by men in terms of content, production, and assumed audience" (523). If female characters in comic books are marginalized, female Muslim characters are even more so. Kent also recognizes that mainstream comics have a history of "framing women within hegemonic ideologies" (523). Kamala Khan, as the first Islamic superhero to headline her own Marvel series, "represents a break from that tradition" (Kent 523). The comic book industry is changing; as previously mentioned in my introductory chapter, Marvel Editor-In-Chief Axel Alonso, has stated that Marvel recognizes this issue and seeks to diversify both its staff and literature, starting with books like *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* (Ching).

The *Ms. Marvel* series has been met with positive reactions and critical acclaim. On the front cover, *ComicsAlliance,* a news website dedicated to comic book culture, is quoted as praising *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* as one of the "most important comics published in 2014" (Wilson). *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* also won the 2015 The Best Comic for Teens Award. In the words of the staff at Comics Alliance, "just about every teenager in history feels like an outsider with secrets to hide and something to prove...in Kamala Khan, [author G. Willow] Wilson and [illustrator Adrian] Alphona have created the most relatable teenage superhero since the original Spider-Man. Kamala's impossible not to relate to" (CA Staff). Comics Alliance was not alone in praising Kamala's relatability. Joshua Yehl of IGN described Kamala as a "marvelous new hero" and No Normal as an "amazing debut that can be enjoyed by anyone, even people who aren't Muslims, females, or superheroes themselves" ("Ms. Marvel #1 Review"). Eric Diaz wrote for

Nerdist that "in almost every way, Kamala is your typical American teenage girl; [s]he just happens to be Muslim" (Diaz). Kent argues that this "emphasis on relatability has the effect of positing a kind of universal teen experience which critics suggested was being fulfilled by the character" (524). Kent also questions the singularity of these critics' reading of *No Normal* and admonishes these critics—who only focus on Kamala's relatability as a teenager—because, while these reviewers enjoy the "just like us" aspect of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal,* they fail to question what "just like us" means or how it might diminish Kamala's identity (525).

The creators of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* appear to have had a particular agenda when shaping Kamala's character. In addition to her multicultural identity, aspects of her character cater to other identities that may be found in her targeted audience. Her character seems to be a reaction to many fan demands. On the one hand, she fulfills the need for more multicultural heroes in comic books. On the other hand, she meets the demand of portraying an accurate account of middle-class American adolescence, which also happens to be the industry's target audience. With this observation, I argue that Kamala's character, though revolutionary, functions as fan service in order to meet fan demands for a relatable *and* ethnic superhero.

"Fan service" refers to material placed within a work of fiction specifically intended to please an audience ("Fan Service"). In *Ms. Marvel: No Normal,* there are several instances in which specific aspects of Kamala's character and narrative seem to exist in order to purposefully market the book directly towards her comic book-reading fans. Kamala, just like her readers, is herself a fan of superheroes. It is no secret that

Kamala idolizes the Avengers. She not only has a poster of Carol Danvers dressed as Captain Marvel on the wall of her bedroom, but she also writes Avengers fanfiction.

"Fanfiction," defined by Thomas Bronwen in his article "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It?" refers to "stories [sometimes shortened to 'fanfic' or 'fic'] produced by fans based on plot lines and characters from either a single source text or else a 'canon' of works; these fan-created narratives often take the pre-existing storyworld in a new, sometimes bizarre, direction" (1). In *Ms. Marvel: No Normal*, Kamala writes a fanfiction based on the adventures of the Avengers.

An entire page of the book is devoted to depicting the fic, which is actually rather popular. As Kamala tells her mother, the fic has received "almost 1,000 upvotes on freakingcool.com" (Wilson 5/1). Of course, like many teenagers who follow fanfiction or are part of a fandom (a subculture of fans of a particular media), Kamala's mother is entirely clueless, telling her daughter with arms folded, "I didn't understand one single word of that sentence," (Wilson 5/1) thus allowing both Kamala and her readers to collectively roll their eyes. Kamala's fic stars Avengers Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America, who fight in a world that appears to be a mash-up of a Marvel universe and *My Little Pony*, a franchise that is marketed towards young girls, but has an unexpectedly large adult following. The ridiculousness of this scenario—mixing the fluff of *My Little Pony* with the action of Marvel Heroes—is like an inside joke between Wilson and her young readers, who are most likely familiar with the fanfiction genre. Anything is possible—Carol Danvers fighting off threats on Planet Unicorn, or even Kamala fighting off threats as Ms. Marvel. In this context, Kamala's story itself reads like a fanfiction, especially since Kamala's own fanfiction is used early in the book to

foreshadow her upcoming adventure. Kamala's friend, Nakia, teases Kamala for her "sad nerd obsession with the Avengers," to which Kamala replies, "Let's face it…my chances of becoming an intergalactic superhero are even slimmer than my chances of becoming blond and popular" (Wilson 3/4-5). The irony, of course, is that Kamala very soon becomes both.

The fact that Kamala is both a fan and active within her fandom creates a bond between Kamala and her readers. This, of course, is another aspect of her relatability. Fans clamored for diversity and for inclusivity, and they got it with Kamala Khan. The book seeks to subvert several hegemonic norms. In an interview with Marvel reporter Andrew Wheeler, G. Willow Wilson discussed some of the challenges she faced with writing *Ms. Marvel: No Normal.* When asked about critical objections to the book, Wilson responded, "I think it faces some unusual challenges, but they come on top of a whole bunch of usual ones, i.e., getting people to pick up a book with a fresh face on it. Convincing readers that new and different can be new and good" (Wheeler). Wilson, in so many words, is referring to Kamala's differences as a Muslim American.

As Miriam Kent points out, the book "negotiates Kamala's 'otherness' and the dominance of Western attitudes" (524). The first scene of the book introduces Kamala as she bends over the sandwich stand in the Circle Q where her friend Bruno works, inhaling the aroma of the "delicious, delicious infidel meat…" (Wilson 1/3). Kamala cannot eat the bacon sandwiches "due to Islamic dietary laws [e.g. eating pork or not drinking alcohol], a principle which may be unfamiliar for some readers" (Kent 523). The readers are instantly alerted to Kamala's dissatisfaction with the cultural limitations of

her religion. The bacon, or "delicious infidel meat," is symbolic of Kamala's desire to assimilate American customs.

However, Kamala has conflicting desires to both assimilate and maintain her principles (hence settling for smelling the bacon rather than eating it). In the interview with Wheeler, Wilson identifies Kamala as her own primary obstacle and that she "struggles to reconcile being an American teenager with the conservative customs of her Pakistani Muslim family" (Wheeler). In Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji's and Alyssa D. Niccolini's article, "Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Femininities in *Ms. Marvel*," they argue that "the actions of the superhero signal to the readers the kinds of values and norms that must be defended" (27). Part of Kamala's main function in the book is to defend her Muslim identity to her American classmates. In the interview with Wheeler, Wilson goes on to explain that "when you straddle two worlds, one of the first things you learn is that instead of defending good people from bad people, you have to spend a lot of time defending good people from each other" (Wheeler). In this book, the "good people" that Kamala must defend herself against are her white classmates, namely Zoe Zimmer, and through an extension of Zoe—a non-Muslim audience.

Joshua Yehl of IGN describes Zoe as a "popular blonde girl...who is as nice-nasty as they come" ("Ms. Marvel #1 Review"). Upon bumping into Kamala and her fellow Muslim friend Nakia, Zoe invites them to a party "if uh, you're allowed to do that kind of stuff" (Wilson 2/4). Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini define Zoe as "a caricature of white middle-class American girlhood" (27) whose "hyper-whiteness is intended as a comic foil" (27) to Kamala and Nakia's otherness. Zoe functions as a caricature of American

readers who are ignorant of Islamic customs. Readers who recognize themselves within her are then in the uncomfortable position of sympathizing with Kamala and siding with her against Zoe, and through her, themselves.

In the next panel, Zoe backhandedly compliments Nakia's hijab, the traditional Islamic veil that covers the head and chest worn by some Muslim women, by saying "Your headscarf is so *pretty,* Kiki. I love that color. 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 2/5). Nakia, affronted, defends wearing the hijab as her choice, "Actually, my dad wants me to take it off. He thinks it's a phase" (Wilson 3/1). Zoe responds dismissively, "Really? Wow, cultures are so interesting" (Wilson 3/1). According to Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini, "culture is marked as foreign to Zoe; she is unencumbered by belonging to a marked religion or identity" (27). By establishing a dichotomy between Kamala and Zoe, "Islam and cultural practices (such as not eating pork, donning the hijab, and observing Muslim rituals) become the primary tropes in and through which Kamala becomes legible" (28). Although Zoe is an exaggerated character, Khoja-Moolji and Niccolini identify her as the norm which Kamala wishes to embody.

However, if Zoe is one end of the spectrum, then Nakia serves as the other. Nakia's character functions to exemplify what Kamala could be like, if she accepted her Muslim identity over her American one. When Zoe invites Kamala and Nakia to the party, Kamala shows uncertainty, torn between wanting to go and knowing she would not be permitted. Nakia scornfully replies with eyes closed, nose up in the air, "I'm not going if there's going to be alcohol" (Wilson 2/4). When Zoe finally leaves Circle Q, Bruno remarks that he hates Zoe. Kamala begins to stand up for Zoe, but Nakia cuts her off,

saying “you’re such a baby, Kamala. She’s only nice to be mean,” and in the next panel, “you’re not allowed to defend Zoe Zimmer” (Wilson 2/3-4). While I do not highlight this passage, as Nakia puts it, to defend Zoe Zimmer, I do want to acknowledge the juxtaposition between Nakia and Zoe. On the one hand, Zoe represents American culture—free, unencumbered by religious or social restrictions. On the other hand, Nakia appears as a proper young Muslim woman—one who wears the hijab of her own volition and actively refrains from hedonistic behaviors. Kamala is the median—torn between the two.

Kamala’s frustration with her strict religious standards escalates when her father forbids her to attend the party that Zoe invited her to. Kamala sneaks out of her home to go to the party anyway, angry because she thinks that if she were a boy, her father would not have forbidden the party. However, the party proves to be a bust as Kamala’s classmates tease her for her family’s cultural values. Josh, Zoe’s boyfriend, gives an unsuspecting Kamala a cup of orange juice and vodka, which Kamala instantly spits out. In the next panel, Zoe makes a racist comment about Kamala smelling like curry. Upset and embarrassed, Kamala leaves the party, lamenting, “I never be one of them, no matter how hard I try. I’ll always be poor Kamala with the weird food rules and the crazy family” (Wilson 13/2). At this moment, these are the personal quality that Kamala likes the least and wishes she could change.

On her way home, Kamala is engulfed by Terrigen mist. Kamala, enveloped by the mist, passes out and is visited in a dream-like state by Iron Man, Captain America, and her idol, Captain Marvel (also known as Carol Danvers). Captain America challenges Kamala for not being true to herself by allowing her classmates to laugh at her. Kamala

shamefacedly admits that she is confused about her identity. “I grew up here!” She tells the superheroes, “I’m from Jersey City, not Karachi! I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I don’t know who I’m supposed to be” (Wilson 17/1). Captain Marvel asks her, “Who do you want to be?” (Wilson 17/2). Kamala’s answer to Captain Marvel’s question sets her on a trajectory that fundamentally shapes her character.

Kamala instantly replies that she wants to be like Captain Marvel. In response, Captain Marvel warns Kamala that what she wants is not going to turn out the way that she thinks, and she’s right. The mist clears and Kamala wakens from her Terrigen stupor to find that she has completely transformed. True to her desires, she not only has shape-shifting powers similar to Carol Danvers, she *literally looks* like Carol Danvers. Gone are her brown skin, hair, and eyes. Instead, she emerges white, blond, blue eyed, and sporting a similar costume to what Captain Marvel wore before her promotion, during her time as Ms. Marvel.

The fact that Kamala wants to be like Captain Marvel is not inherently problematic. Carol Danvers is, in fact, a perfectly acceptable role model, for both Kamala and her female comic book readers. From a young age, Carol Danvers (who is known as the third generation Ms. Marvel and, recently, second generation Captain Marvel) believes that girls are as good as boys and insists on working as hard as her two younger brothers to impress her misogynistic father. When her father chooses to finance her brother Steve’s college career over hers (despite her superior grades), Danvers turns her back on him and joins the Air Force, graduates valedictorian, and quickly rises through the ranks. From there, she is recruited as a spy for military intelligence, and then goes on to work for NASA as the youngest head of security in history (“Carol Danvers”). All of

this she does publicly, in her known identity as Carol Danvers. Her exploits as her secret identity, Ms. Marvel (intentionally opting for the neutral Ms. over Miss), are equally as impressive as "she establishe[s] herself as one of New York's premiere superheroes working with Spider-Man, the Defenders, and the Avengers" ("Carol Danvers"). For Danvers, promotions are not limited solely to the work force. Following the death of Mar-Vell, the original Captain Marvel, Danvers sheds her Ms. Marvel identity and succeeds to the mantle of Captain Marvel. A champion of gender equality, especially in the workforce, Danvers successfully takes on roles traditionally assigned to men.

However, as much as Danvers challenges the objectification of women, her superhero costume, especially during her tenure as Ms. Marvel, did little to help her case. Her look was subject to change over the years, but only by degrees of sexiness. Her original costume was a red and black body suit, with an exposed midriff, a yellow star on her ample chest, boots, and a diamond shaped mask. In 1979, her look changed to a one-piece, sleeveless, high necked bathing suit, a yellow lightning bolt across her chest, black gloves, thigh high boots, and a red sash tied provocatively around her hips. However, once she upgraded from Ms. to Captain in 2012 (largely thanks to the book's current writer, Kelly Sue DeConnick), Marvel updated her wardrobe to compliment her new rank. In contrast to her skimpy Ms. Marvel costume, her Captain Marvel makeover features a full coverage bodysuit, short calf-length boots, and the iconic red sash (looking slightly less provocative with her hips covered). According to Sanat Amanat, an editor at Marvel who helped conceptualize Captain Marvel's new look, Marvel wanted to focus more on Carol Danvers' potential as a role model than her sexiness as a woman. Sanat states that "Carol Danvers went from wearing, essentially, a bathing suit and thigh high

boots to full uniform—now she looks like she's a fighter pilot, and [the book] focuses more on her skills as a fighter pilot than her feminine wiles" (Roberts). Captain Marvel's hair was also revamped. Her flowing blond curls were cut, instead depicting her with a short, punk rock faux-hawk, which had some mixed reviews, but was mostly well-received by fans, according to DeConnick (DeConnick).

Kamala's idolization of Carol Danvers and instantaneous response that she wants to be "just like her" is concerning because she does not focus on any of the traits that DeConnick and Amanat were trying to elevate. When Kamala tells Captain Marvel that she wants to be like her, she does not reference any of Carol Danvers' impressive accomplishments; instead, she says that she wants to be "beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and less complicated" (Wilson 17/3), implying that Kamala, as herself, is none of those things. Kamala's hero worship is superficially based on Captain Marvel's appearance. The most concerning aspect of Kamala's character is not that she is Muslim, or nerdy, or idolizes Captain Marvel. The issue is that when Kamala emerges from the Terrigen mist, she has literally changed herself into a version of Carol Danvers. Kamala's assimilation of Danvers' identity indicates that, in order to be a superhero, Kamala must be the idealized American girl: blond, blue eyed, and white. Even her nose is drawn more slenderly, eliminating the slight curve at the tip that hints at her Middle Eastern heritage. This suggests that nonwhite people are inferior, that only a white girl is worthy of succeeding the mantle of Ms. Marvel.

At this moment in the book, all of Kamala's pent-up frustration with her "otherness" in comparison to her white American classmates comes to fruition. Her desire to be like them literally manifests in her appearance. The last thought on Kamala's

mind prior to the Terrigen exposure is that she'll never be like "them," meaning her party-going, alcohol-consuming, bacon-eating, all-American classmates. As Eric Diaz states, "being sixteen, [Kamala] just wants to be 'normal', or at least what the American media says is normal, in other words, white and Christian" (Diaz). With this on her mind, Kamala unconsciously uses her new powers to externally manifest her internal desire to be less "other."

Of course, Kamala does not spend the entire book posing as a Carol Danvers incarnate; she realizes rather quickly that the look does not suit her. However, the gesture of making Kamala white, even for a short time, speaks to the current climate of American culture. Kamala's character has been hailed by critics as revolutionary, but as Kent indicates, "rather than focusing on the specificity of Kamala's female-teen-American-Muslim subjectivity, critics concentrated on how the themes of the book fit into *their* experiences. This indicates a perceived necessity for a book which, for all intents and purposes, is about being an outsider…to be adaptable for consumption by audiences who do not belong to that marginalized group" (524). In other words, in order to be successful, Kamala's character must be relatable to the majority, or in America's case, white. The creators of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* succeeded in this by whitewashing Kamala's character.

"Whitewashing," described by William Lowrey in his article, "People Painted Over: Whitewashing of Minority Actors in Recent Film," is the "practice of erasing people of color either through replacing a minority character with a white character, or more commonly, with a white actor replacing a minority actor in the portrayal of a character of color" (1). Racebending.com, an international grassroots organization of

media consumers who support entertainment equality, advocates for underrepresented groups in entertainment media. The creators of this website re-coined the term "whitewashing" as "racebending," which "refers to situations where a media content creator (movie studio, publisher, etc.) has changed the race or ethnicity of a character. This is a longstanding Hollywood practice that has been historically used to discriminate against people of color" ("What is 'racebending'?"). By recreating Kamala as a white character, even briefly, her creators minimize her ethnicity so that she may be more relatable to white readers.

Kamala's mimicry of Danvers is an externalization of her own inner conflict, and through an extension of her, indicates a presumed inner conflict of any multicultural readers. When Kamala initially transforms into Carol Danvers, she does it unconsciously. In her confusion following the awakening of her powers, she shifts back and forth between bodies, unable to control the changes. After recovering from the initial shock of her transformation, Kamala realizes that focusing her thoughts will help channel her transformations. Shortly after transforming back to her original self, she encounters Zoe on the street. Even though she has figured out how to control the shifting, Kamala instantly shifts into the blond, blue eyed exterior. Kamala recognizes that seeing Zoe makes her insecure—enough that it is "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" (Wilson 26/3-4). In this case, the "someone cool" means "someone white." By shifting to look like Carol Danvers, Kamala is using the white body as if it were armor, protecting her from feeling uncomfortable over looking different from her white classmate. This

indicates that Kamala, though perhaps unconsciously, believes that the only way to combat otherness is to erase what makes her other.

Kamala's very first heroic act as Ms. Marvel—and consequently her public, Jersey City debut—takes place within the Danvers body. Seeing Zoe's drunk boyfriend accidentally push her into a lake, Kamala actively changes into the Danvers body before saving her, even though she had already proven to herself that she had some control over the shapeshifting. Melissa Schieble expounds upon this theme of the "white hero" in her article, "Critical Conversations on Whiteness with Young Adult Literature." Schieble contends that some fictionalized solutions to racism, such as *No Normal's* privileging of whiteness, "situate white characters as saviors or heroes, thus maintaining constructions of whiteness in a position of power" (214). Schieble also highlights a 2003 study by Jonda McNair in which patterns of "active whites and passive blacks as a profound feature" exist within many children's and young adult texts (217). Kamala, in the Danvers body, is both employing the theme of white hero as well as "active white," as her ethnic identity is eliminated when she shape shifts.

Later, for her second heroic act as Ms. Marvel (rescuing Bruno from a would-be robber at Circle Q), Kamala again chooses to transform into the Carol Danvers inspired body. This time, instead of the skimpy Carol Danvers redux bathing suit that she wore the first time she transformed, she is wearing the full coverage bodysuit worn presently by Captain Marvel (Wilson 59/3). The deviation from the sexy costume is symbolic of Kamala's increasing self-confidence. Instead of embracing the sexy costume as an improvement, Kamala rejects the normative female comic book representations.

Additionally, this time Kamala transforms sans mask, symbolizing her decreasing need to hide herself completely.

Kamala only shifts out of the Danvers body because the Circle Q robber shoots her in the stomach. She does not *choose* to shift back into her natural body, but rather is *forced* to because her powers are weakened from the gunshot. Bruno confronts her, "why *hide?* You saved Zoe, you just saved the Circle Q—why do it all behind someone else's face?" (Wilson 69/2). Kamala responds, "At first, I couldn't control the shape-shifting. And then—it just made sense to keep going […] everybody's expecting Ms. Marvel. A *real* superhero. With perfect hair and big boots. Not Kamala Khan from Jersey City" (Wilson 69/3). Presumably, if Kamala had not been shot and forced to change into her natural body, she would have kept on impersonating Carol Danvers' Ms. Marvel. The distinction that Kamala makes about what she believes the public expects of a superhero is important. It speaks to the stereotype that superheroes are not multicultural teenage girls. As Marvel's first headlining Muslim superhero in their 77 years of producing comics, this assumption is not entirely unfounded. However, Kamala's comment has a dual connotation. It both addresses the issue that superheroes tend to be white males, while simultaneously undermining that tradition; Kamala is neither white nor male, but still just as much a superhero. Bruno says to Kamala, "Who cares what people expect? Maybe they expect some perfect blond, what, I need—I mean, what *we* need— is *you*" (Wilson 69/4). The irony of Bruno's response, perhaps intended by Wilson, is that *he* is a white male. The larger implication is that Bruno speaks not to the people of Jersey City, but to the comic book genre in general. Comic books, an industry overrun with white

males (both in the books and behind the scenes), recognize the need to diversify and are starting with books like *Ms. Marvel: No Normal.*

After the incident at Circle Q, Kamala decides to ditch the Danvers body completely and focus on creating an identity that is unique unto her. She thinks to herself, "Being someone else isn't liberating. It's exhausting. I always thought that if I had amazing hair, if I could pull off great boots, if I could fly—that would make me feel strong. That would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch, and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie" (Wilson 33/2-4). After this revelation, Kamala realizes that she wants to maintain a secret identity—just not the one that belongs to Carol Danvers. Instead, she designs her own costume. She puts together an outfit consisting of a red and blue burkini (a modest swimsuit that covers all but the face), the classic diamond mask, a yellow fanny pack, and beat up sneakers. The costume Kamala designs deviates from the customary sexy swimsuit in favor of comfort and practicality.

Kamala's period as a whitewashed superhero was like a rite of passage: in order self-actualize and accept her multicultural identity, she first had to embody whiteness, then reject it. Wilson created an atmosphere in which Kamala was able to do this by privileging whiteness in the early part of the book by pinning Islamic cultural values against what is widely accepted as American norms (e.g. drinking alcohol). The necessity of this whitewashing makes Kamala Muslim, but not *too* Muslim, thus rendering her multiculturalism more palatable to non-Middle Eastern, non-Muslim readers.

As the sample of reviews discussed earlier indicates, the *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* series have been highly successful. The creators of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* succeeded in marketing their product in a way that would reach a wide audience—particularly white,

middle class American teenagers. However, what the creators could not have predicted was Kamala's success beyond the world of comic books. In early 2015, anti-Islamic advertisements were placed on the sides of city buses in San Francisco by a group who call themselves the Freedom Defense Initiative, according to a report by NBC News (Kai-Hwa Wang). The advertisements, thought by many to be blatantly racist, feature an image of Adolf Hitler conversing with Haj Amin al-Husseini. The ads say "Islamic Jew-Hatred: It's in the Quran. Two-thirds of all US aid goes to Islamic countries. Stop the Hate. End all aid to Islamic Countries" (Kai-Hwa Wang). These advertisements were protected by freedom of speech, despite public outrage.

Although San Francisco's city officials may have been obligated run the ad, its citizens were under no such obligation to respect them. Unknown street artists responded to the ads by painting over them with an image of Kamala in an attempt to subvert the racist messages. Instead of Hitler, the defaced bus ads portrayed drawings of Kamala, leaving only the words "stop the hate" visible from the original image. The new ads featured phrases such as, "Calling all Bigotry Busters," "Stamp out Racism," "Free speech isn't a license to spread hate," "Islamophobia hurts us all," and "Racist," complete with red hearts for punctuation (Kai-Hwa Wang). Kamala, whose main function, I have argued, is to promote acceptance of Islamic cultures within a white audience (the means of which aside), has transcended comic book culture and breached real world issues. Kamala has successfully breached the two dimensional landscape and is battling the ignorant, bigoted Zoe Zimmers of the real world.

The whitewashing of Kamala Khan serves several purposes. In order to successfully promote a multicultural character in a society that privileges whiteness, the

creators of *No Normal* had to create an atmosphere in which Kamala is able to reject whiteness by privileging it. This is accomplished early in the book by pinning Islamic cultural values against what is widely accepted as American norms. The necessity of this whitewashing makes Kamala Muslim, but not *too* Muslim, therefore rendering her multiculturalism more palatable to non-multicultural readers. Although this whitewashing promotes her to a non-multicultural audience, it comes at the expense of her true self. Despite this, Kamala's message has successfully expounded on real world issues in a context that that not even her creators could have predicted. In addition to fighting hegemonic norms within comic book culture, as the defaced bus ads show, Kamala's hate-fighting image has extended beyond the borders of her two-dimensional illustration and into the real world. Kamala, despite the means in which her creators used, promotes positive self-image and tolerance. Towards the end of the comic book, Kamala realizes that true happiness comes from being no one but herself and makes the resolution, "I'm not here to be a watered-down version of some other hero. I'm here to be the best version of Kamala. And it starts now" (Wilson 93/4-5).

CHAPTER 3: GENDER BENDERS ASSEMBLE! GENDER FLUIDITY IN *SPIDER-GWEN: MOST WANTED?* AND *THOR: GODDESS OF THUNDER*

The comic book industry, previously notorious for catering to a male audience, is now "having very interesting discussions in comics about gender, about competing ideologies, about how to be inclusive without making fans of the classic canon feel alienated. These are big questions for the whole industry right now and everybody is grappling to answer in fresh and relevant ways," says comic book writer G. Willow Wilson (Truitt). Although she is referencing her latest book, the *A-Force,* which features an all-female team of Avengers, Wilson's statement resonates with other recently released books. *Thor: Goddess of Thunder,* released in 2014, features Jane Foster, Thor's canonical girlfriend, who picks up his hammer, Mjölnir, and assumes the mantle of Thor. In a similar vein, in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?,* writer Jason Latour takes Gwen Stacy, Peter Parker's tragic first love, and gives her an entirely different configuration. The Gwen Stacy of this universe is drastically different from her canonical counterpart. In Latour's version, the radioactive spider bites Gwen Stacy and Peter Parker dies a tragic death, for which Spider-Gwen, though (arguably) innocent, is blamed. Fans who love the classic version of Gwen Stacy, created by Stan Lee in the 1960s, might be disappointed if they are hoping to get a revamp of classic Gwen's refrigerated character (a concept that will be discussed later) in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*. Latour's Gwen Stacy is not a revamp, but rather a genderbent

version of the original. Her alter ego as Spider-Woman is even more nuanced, as she is a genderswapped version of classic Spider-Man rather than embodying her own unique superhero character. A similar phenomenon occurs in *Thor: Goddess of Thunder,* in which I argue that Jane Foster is a genderswapped version of Thor. These books initially seem to give agency to refrigerated characters, but instead of championing female superheros, *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* and *Thor: Goddess of Thunder* propagate the hegemonic tradition of privileging males over females in comic books.

Gwen Stacy's character, created by writer Stan Lee and illustrator Steve Ditko, originally debuted in 1965. In *Marvel Tales Starring Spider-Man: "If This Be My Destiny,"* the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* series, Gwen is introduced to the reader via Harry Osborn as a flirty, ex-beauty queen (9/5). Peter, consumed by thoughts of Aunt May's illness and his double life as Spider-Man, ignores Harry's attempts to introduce him to Gwen. Harry, outraged by the snub, writes Peter off as socially inept, but Gwen becomes intrigued by the quiet, mysterious boy. She attempts to capture his attentions, but, preoccupied, Peter ignores her once again. Furious, Gwen says to herself, "why—the unmitigated *nerve* of him! Nobody gives Gwen Stacy the brush-off that way!" (19/1). As this excerpt suggests, Gwen was originally conceived as social, popular, an acknowledged beauty, and as vain as they come.

Gwen eventually succeeds; she and Peter Parker begin a tumultuous on-again-off-again relationship, filled with unexplained absences and lies due to Peter's double life. Despite these hardships, the two remain together throughout the series until Gwen's death. The death of Gwen Stacy has become an infamous moment in comic book canon history. Gwen makes her final appearance in issue number 121 of the original Amazing

Spider-Man series. The front cover of the issue features the teaser caption, “Not a trick! Not an imaginary tale—but the most startlingly unexpected turning point in this web-slinger’s entire life! How can Spider-Man go on after being faced with this almost unbelievable death?” (*Marvel Tales Starring Spider-Man)*. Gwen is captured by the Green Goblin and held hostage atop the George Washington Bridge. The Green Goblin throws Gwen off the bridge, ominously proclaiming to Spider-Man that “she’s doomed—and so are you!” (26/6). His words are portentous in more ways than one.

Gwen falls from the bridge, but at the last moment, Spider-Man shoots his web and catches Gwen’s ankle to stop her free-fall. However, the whiplash from the sudden impact snaps her neck. Peter raises her limp body, thinking that he has both thwarted the Green Goblin and rescued Gwen from certain death. He says to himself, “Spider-powers, I love you! Not only am I the most dashing hero on two legs—I’m easily the most versatile. Who else could save a falling girl from certain dea—” (27/5-30/1). His ironic confidence makes the realization of Gwen’s death all the more tragic. The death of Gwen Stacy, as the cover warned, was indeed a turning point for Spider-Man, one that had vital repercussions on the hero’s narrative trajectory.

Whether Gwen dies from the fall or from the whiplash of Spider-Man’s web is still unclear. What is known, however, is that Peter Parker is never the same after her death. It also marks one of the first instances in comic book history in which the hero not only fails to save an innocent but also fails to save his girl. This is only one aspect of the conversation surrounding the death of Gwen Stacy. Her death has been analyzed by comic book critics in the decades since. One particularly significant discussion connected to Gwen’s death is the concept of refrigeration.

In 1999, comic book writer Gail Simone created a website called *Women in Refrigerators* in which she coined the term "refrigeration." Simone observes that "it's not that healthy to be a female character in comics" ("Front Page"). The word "refrigeration" or "fridge" was created in reference to the death of Alex DeWitt, girlfriend of Kyle Rayner (also known as Green Lantern). Alex is murdered by villain Major Force and then unceremoniously stuffed into Rayner's refrigerator. Simone compiled a list of 111 female characters who fit the criteria of "superheroines who have been either depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator […] Some have been revived, even improved—although the question remains as to why they were thrown in the wood chipper in the first place" ("Front Page"). Since Simone released her list, the term has become a common trope in comics as well as other forms of media, such as television and movies. Eric Diaz of Nerdist describes the trope as taking a "male character's interesting female love interest and kill her off just to give drama and angst to said male protagonist" (Diaz). The female characters, then, stop being characters and start being plot devices.

Simone finds issue with this trope because it devalues the female in question. Instead of developing the traits that make a love interest unique and interesting, fiction writers use the female characters solely to add motivation for the hero of the story. Simone's observation and subsequent list garnered overwhelming response from comic book readers and critics alike.

John Bartol, former moderator of Comics Alliance, wrote a response to Simone's criticism titled "Dead Men Defrosting." Bartol provides his own list of men who, in his opinion, were refrigerated, but were eventually allowed to "defrost." In other words, they are given plots in which they suffer, but from which they ultimately recover. In this piece,

Bartol acknowledges that "heroines have had it rough, as the [*Women In Refrigerators*] list shows," (Bartol) but seeks to answer whether or not "they had it any rougher, qualitatively or quantitatively, than their male counterparts?" (Bartol). His answer, in short, is yes. Bartol claims:

> The fundamental difference I have seen is that the majority of male heroes, and especially our Dead Men Defrosting, are introduced to the reader with a situation or condition they must overcome. Female heroes, too, go through this; we meet them in the beginning of their tale with something about them that will play a role in their formation as heroes. But later, those same women heroes are altered again and never allowed, as male heroes usually are, the chance to return to their original heroic states. And that's where we begin to see the difference. (Bartol)

One example Bartol provides of refrigerated male and female counterparts are Batman and Batgirl. Both characters have their backs broken and are, at one time, paralyzed. Batman eventually overcomes his obstacle and uses it to fuel his fight with the supervillain Bane, but Batgirl never recovers from her paralysis. Although Bartol mentions that Batgirl eventually becomes Oracle, a much more developed character in his opinion, "the point is this: our beloved heroes and heroines, the idols of our childhood and myths of our adult nostalgia, are not exactly all running plays from the same Campbellian playbook. Their fates are not the same, their lives are not the identical epics of archetypal meaning. Someone seems to be getting the shaft. And it's not the boys in the y-fronts" (Bartol). Even though both male and female characters suffer from tragedy in their story lines, Bartol makes the observation that the difference lies in the conclusion

of their stories; the men rise from adversity new, improved, and victorious, while the women rarely rise at all, at best coping with such adversities with no such rewards.

In the year following the launch of the *Women in Refrigerators* website, Simone posted many responses to her ideas, with hopes of promoting discussion among readers of comic books. Not all responders were receptive to Simone's refrigeration concept, however. One commenter accused Simone and her collaborators of having unnecessary "feminist paranoia" ("Email as of 4/28/99"). Simone responded to this vitriol with civility, but maintained that her "simple point has always been: if you demolish most of the characters girls like, then girls won't read comics. That's it!" ("Email as of 4/28/99"). Simone's goal with the *Women In Refrigerators* website was to raise awareness that, as of her observation in 1999, women tended to have an uneven portrayal in comic books and that "ultimately, we speak most loudly with the choices we make at the cash register" ("Fan GAIL SIMONE responds"). Simone's point about the cash register is significant: if you don't like it, don't buy it. Her list of battered female characters began as "food for thought," but escalated into a call to arms.

Simone concludes that she is hopeful that future comics will be more inclusive to females, developing them as characters in their own right, rather than solely using them as tragic plot devices ("Fan GAIL SIMONE responds"). Nearly two decades later, Simone's predictions of female inclusivity in comic books are beginning to come true. Gwen Stacy, one of the more famous examples of a refrigerated female character, is finally, to use the words of Bartol, getting thawed out. In 2014, Marvel released a teaser book called *Edge of Spider-Verse,* which featured five different spider characters in five

different universes. One character version garnered far more attention and fan response than the other four: Spider-Gwen.

The character of Spider-Gwen became an instant fan favorite when she first appeared in *Edge of Spider-Verse*, so much so that editor Nick Lowe credits her fans as "one of the main reasons why the character is now starring in her own series" (Quinn). *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?,* written by Jason Latour and illustrated by Robbi Rodriguez, is set in an alternate universe, Earth-65. The radioactive spider bites Gwen Stacy rather than Peter Parker, giving *her* the web-slinging, spidey-sensing abilities instead. The Peter Parker of this universe dies tragically when he accidentally turns himself into the villainous Lizard in an experiment gone wrong, as described by Joshua Rivera:

> Like the original Spider-Man, Gwen gets bitten and uses her powers to become famous as Spider-Woman. Her classmate, Peter Parker, is brilliant but bullied—and inspired by seeing Spider-Woman on television, he experiments on himself in the hopes of becoming similarly superhuman and getting the better of the bullies that mock him. It backfires, and he turns into The Lizard. What then happens is left intentionally unclear, but Peter's transformation and the havoc that ensues results in his death. The public, unaware that The Lizard was in fact Peter, makes a martyr out of him and blames Spider-Woman. (Rivera)

For the rest of the book, Gwen reels from Peter's death and faces some tough obstacles. On the one hand, as Gwen, she must deal with her overwhelming guilt associated with Peter's death, and drama with her band, The Mary Janes. On the other hand, as Spider-

Woman, she must deal with attacks from the villain, The Vulture, and the relentless pursuit of the police, in addition to the tension with her father. Captain Stacy is burdened with heading the task force against Spider-Woman, even though the wanted criminal is, in fact, the daughter he has sworn to protect.

Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted? has been met with overwhelming fan and critical success. Many of the top comic book news websites, such as Nerdist and Comics Alliance, have given the book rave reviews, with most praising either Latour's fresh take on an old fan favorite or Rodriguez's creative adaptation of Spider-Gwen's hero costume. Of the reviews that I have canvassed, few discuss the book's plot and even fewer address the fact that two very important aspects of Gwen's character—her origin story and Peter's death—are unceremoniously glossed over.

The death of Peter Parker in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* mirrors the death of Gwen Stacy in the original *Marvel Tales Starring Spider-Man.* There are many parallels between Spider-Man and Spider-Gwen, which will be discussed later in this chapter. As similar as Earth-65's Gwen is to classic Peter Parker, she no longer really resembles her original character. Fans who love the classic version of Gwen Stacy, created by Stan Lee in the 1960s, might be disappointed if they are hoping to get a revamp of classic Gwen's character in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*.

Radioactive spider powers are not the only attributes that make Spider-Gwen different from the classic version of Gwen's character. The two characters share the same name and general back story, but the similarities end there. For the purposes of this paper, from now on I will differentiate between the two Gwen Stacys by referring to Stan Lee's original character as "classic Gwen" and Latour's 2014 version as "Earth-65 Gwen." In

an interview with Comicosity, Latour says that his motivation for writing Earth-65 Gwen came from "[not knowing] anything about Gwen Stacy except that she was a victim [and] that's kind of a problem" (Santori-Griffith). Eric Diaz of Nerdist agrees: "[the original Gwen Stacy] wasn't really all that interesting. She was sweet and nice and pretty, but always written as not having much in the way of personality. She was really just a trophy girlfriend for Peter Parker" (Diaz). For this reason, Diaz, along with many reviewers, are pleased with the revamp of Gwen's character in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?*. However, Earth-65 Gwen does not necessarily revamp classic Gwen; classic Gwen Stacy, unfortunately, remains firmly in the refrigerator. Latour argues that he created the character of Spider-Gwen to give justice to her classic but vapid and forgettable predecessor. When comparing the two Gwen Stacys, I argue that the Earth-65 Gwen Stacy is not a celebrated, vindicated version, but rather a genderbent version of classic Gwen Stacy that becomes her own, marginalized character. Genderbending, to reiterate from the introductory chapter, refers to when a person of one particular gender embodies attributes of another gender to make a social point. In this sense, I argue that Jason Latour removed the "forgettable" (read: girly) attributes of classic Gwen Stacy and added more "interesting" (read: boyish) attributes to his version, in order to make her character more appealing to a male audience, which is troubling because it continues to suggest that socially constructed masculine qualities are superior to more traditionally feminine ones.

Classic Gwen Stacy's character could be categorized as a "Prom Queen" type character: the kind of female that is popular, beautiful, an object of male desire (often fought over by several males), and entitled, as she tends to get everything she wants. This type of character usually does not have much in the way of a personality, beyond these

attributes. This is partially why classic Gwen, and her subsequent death, is the epitome of the refrigerated character and motivation for Latour's revamp. As previously mentioned, Latour gravitated towards reimagining classic Gwen Stacy because the only memorable aspect of her character was her death and its effect on classic Peter Parker.

Earth-65 Gwen, however, embodies none of the attributes that have rendered classic Gwen so forgettable. Where classic Gwen was dainty and cute, Earth-65 Gwen is grungy and punk. Where classic Gwen was a Prom Queen, Earth-65 Gwen is a "Guy's Girl." The Guy's Girl "can just chill and be 'one of the guys'. She's into sports, beer, action flicks and doesn't give a damn what others think. However, unlike the tomboy, she has her gang of girl mates who she shops with and does girly stuff…this girl is mysterious and elusive. Acts aloof and gives off the 'cool girl' aura, like she's very aware of both guys' and girls' worlds" ("Guys Girl"). Earth-65 Gwen exemplifies this term. She is independent and has her own apartment. She is the drummer of a popular, all-female punk rock band. Her band members may not go shopping together (though they do all wear cute, matching shirt dresses for their band gigs), but the girls are her only established friends, aside from Earth-65 Peter, who has died. Even Earth-65 Gwen's clothing style is fluid, to better suit different male tastes. In the first part of the book she wears a gender-neutral, black t-shirt, green hooded jacket, and long purple shorts over black leggings. Later, she wears a grungy, beat up, literally-pulled-from-a-dumpster sweatshirt that Mary Jane begrudgingly describes as "stupid-awesome" (Latour 48/4). Then, towards the end of the book, Earth-65 Gwen wears a cute, teal jumper with a black long-sleeved undershirt and dainty black flats. In this respect, she can pull off multiple styles, satisfying multiple types on the spectrum between "Tomboy" and "girly girl." All

of this points to Earth-65 Gwen's character as being less individualized and more towards satisfying the particular fetishized archetype of "Guy's Girl."

Latour consciously created Earth-65 Gwen with attributes that would offset her from her decidedly forgettable counterpart. Similarb to William Marston's ideology behind the creation of Wonder Woman, discussed in "That's Girls Stuff," Latour indirectly privileges one set of female attributes over other. In this case, he took the girly-girl features of classic Gwen and replaced them more male-oriented characteristics, ergo genderbending classic Gwen in order to make his character more interesting to the readers. As much as Latour may have meant to individualize and give agency to his character of Gwen Stacy, he merely exchanged one gendered trope for another. While the intention for *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* was to market it towards a female audience, this trope really panders to a male audience. Earth-65 Gwen's clothing—as it shifts from grungy and indifferent to clean cut and cute—appeals to different tastes. Cliched female archetypes like the lofty-but-conquerable Prom Queen, or the cool-but-desirable Guy's Girl become fetishized by the male reader. The real-world consequence of this is that "female archetypes, crop up in real life partly because fiction creates real life, particularly for those of us who grow up immersed in it. Women behave in ways that they find sanctioned in stories written by men who know better, and men and women seek out friends and partners who remind them of a girl they met in a book one day when they were young and longing" (Penny). Earth-65 Gwen Stacy is as marginalized as any other comic book female, in spite of Latour's intention to do otherwise.

Despite Earth-65 Gwen's marginalized status, Latour and Rodriguez have at least consciously attempted to create a character that defies some antiquated tropes, such as

overly-sexualized representations of female comic book characters. Earth-65 Gwen's Spider-Woman costume has received an overwhelmingly positive response from critics and fans alike. Jesse Schedeen of IGN hails her costume as "easily one of the best of the many updates to the familiar Spider-Man outfit" (Schedeen). Earth-65 Gwen cuts a cool figure as Spider-Woman in a form-fitting bodysuit, black on the bottom and white from the chest up, with red webbing on her inner arms and lining the inside of her white hood. Her face and head are obscured by a white mask with wide white eyes rimmed in red. For a pop of color, she wears practical, but feminine, teal ballet flats. Diaz praises Spider-Gwen's costume as a "refreshing change of pace for a book with a female lead" (Diaz). Her costume is flattering rather than overtly sexualized, which is unusual in a genre that tends to represent female characters with over exaggerated feminine features and scanty, revealing (not to mention impractical) costumes.

Conscious of the changing climate surrounding female comic book characters, Latour and Rodriguez intentionally avoided hypersexualizing Spider-Gwen's costume. "I'm not against characters having feminine qualities in their character design," said Latour on his motivation for Earth-65 Gwen's costume, "But in this instance, you have to remember that things have been so oversexualized for so long. We wanted to make a character that wasn't treated like an object or over-emphasized as a woman" (Santori-Griffith). Rather than opting for a scanty, sexy, and cliched costume, Latour and Rodriguez designed Spider-Gwen with Spider-Man's costume in mind: "[T]he original Spider-Man was mysterious. It made sense why people would think he's a menace. And the fact that his face and body was covered made it so it could anyone under that mask.

And that was something we really wanted to reflect with Gwen" (Santori-Griffith). Of course, the costume is not the only similarity that Spider-Gwen and Spider-Man share.

Although Earth-65 Gwen is a genderbent version of classic Gwen Stacy, the same cannot be said for her alter ego, Spider-Woman. Like many comic book heroes, Earth-65 Gwen leads a secret, double life. Her identity as Spider-Woman is known only to her father, Captain Stacy. In this regard, Gwen's alter ego as Spider-Woman could arguably be considered a separate character. Therefore, to differentiate between Earth-65 Gwen's identities (and the dozens of other Spider-Women that have spun their way in and out of Marvel narratives), I will refer to her Spider-Woman alter ego as "Spider-Gwen."

I have argued that Earth-65 Gwen's public identity compares to her classic counterpart, but I now intend to argue that her alter-ego as Spider-Gwen bears far more resemblance to classic Spider-man/Peter Parker, making Spider-Gwen the genderswapped version of classic Spider-Man. Genderswapping, though very similar, is not the same as genderbending. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, genderbending refers to a person or character of one gender embodying socially-constructed attributes of the other to make a social point. Conversely, genderswapping is a literary term that refers to when a character of one gender is reimagined as an alternate gender in order to explore how that person's narrative might subsequently change. By definition, *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* would be a true genderswap if Peter Parker's story were re-reimagined as (for example) Petra Parker, teenage niece of Aunt May and Uncle Ben by day, radioactive spider heroine by night. However, because much of Spider-Gwen's narrative—personality, motivation, origin story, etc.—bears so much resemblance to Peter Parker/Spider-Man, I argue that Spider-Gwen is less her own reimagined character

and more a genderswap of Peter Parker, which ultimately prevents her from having true agency.

A surface-level comparison finds similarities between classic Spider-Man and Spider-Gwen's personalities. Eric Diaz makes the observation that "this version of Gwen is very much in the classic Peter Parker mold—sarcastic, quippy, overall likable, and saddled with tons of personal problems" (Diaz). Like classic Peter Parker, who is constantly disappearing, missing important events, and making weak excuses, Earth-65 Gwen has great difficulty separating her hero identity from her personal identity. This causes tension between Earth-65 Gwen and the people in her life, namely her father and bandmates. True for both spider-people, the tension in one panel is relieved with humor in the next; although, this is one instance where the characters differ slightly. Classic Peter Parker used his wit to make clever wisecracks at enemies during battle, while Earth-65 Gwen opts to spray paint her taunts across city buildings. However, their parallel qualities run deeper and more nuanced than similar personality traits.

One part of the narrative that crosses over directly from classic Spider-Man canon to Spider-Gwen's story is the adage that "with great power come great responsibility." In classic Spider-Man's story, this mantra stems from the murder of Uncle Ben, after Peter realizes he could have prevented Ben's death if he had only used his spider-powers to stop a thief instead of choosing to walk away (allowing the thief to escape, only to subsequently murder Ben). Overwhelmed by grief and remorse, Peter comes to the conclusion that having powers means that he has an obligation to use them responsibly, and chooses to do so as a superhero. This mentality strengthens after the death of classic Gwen Stacy, for which Spider-Man feels even more responsible, guilty, and above all,

motivated. Spider-Man uses these emotions to both stand strong against the persecution for classic Gwen's death and prove that she did not die in vain.

The same quote appears in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* following the death of Earth-65 Peter, for which Spider-Gwen is publicly blamed. It comes as a reprimand from editor J. Jonah Jameson as he demands Spider-Woman's arrest. Like classic Spider-Man, Spider-Gwen chooses to be responsible, to protect the city from crime, and to take on the villain, The Vulture, even if she is persecuted. Uncle Ben's death, spurred on by classic Gwen's, provides the motivation for Spider-Man; however, it is solely Earth-65 Peter's death that motivates Spider-Gwen. Unlike the canonical plot of *Marvel Tales Starring Spider-Man,* Earth-65 Peter's death becomes not just the defining tragedy of Earth-65 Gwen's life, but also her motivation for taking on the mantle of Spider-Gwen. Just like classic Spider-Man, Spider-Gwen is both directly involved in Earth-65 Peter's death and at least partly responsible. She, too, is blamed and persecuted by the city she loves. She, too, chooses to stand strong and be the hero that Earth-65 Peter admired. She, too, wants Earth-65 Peter's death to not be in vain.

If Earth-65 Peter's death then serves as Spider-Gwen's motivation, he becomes the refrigerated character. His death occurs in the opening pages of the book, written as if it were a flashback to another book. This is confusing to the reader because the referenced book in question does not exist. This scene, which includes both Earth-65 Gwen's origin story and Earth-65 Peter's death, is hastily thrown together, almost as if it were an afterthought of the creators. Earth-65 Peter is quickly and efficiently written out of the book before it even begins. In just a two-page spread, he is shown idolizing Spider-Woman, getting bullied, turning himself into The Lizard, and in unclear circumstances,

dying in Spider-Gwen's arms. In one fell swoop, Earth-65 Peter becomes Spider-Gwen's first villain *and* first casualty. Because his story is glossed over, his function as a character becomes solely to serve as the defining tragedy of Spider-Gwen's life. Classic Gwen Stacy has spent the last 43 years in the refrigerator; at least now she has some company.

One of the most compelling arguments for identifying Spider-Gwen as a genderswapped classic Peter Parker is her origin story. Earth-65 Gwen is not the first female to take on the powers and/or moniker of Spider-Woman; there have been dozens. However, out of these dozens of female spider characters, aside from Spider-Gwen, only one Spider-Woman shares a parallel origin story to classic Peter Parker. In *Silk,* released by Marvel in 2015, a radioactive spider bites this version's Peter Parker, giving him his amazing spider abilities. Shortly after biting Peter, the same spider bites the protagonist, Cindy Moon, giving her similar powers. Though Cindy Moon and Spider-Gwen share similar origin stories, the fundamental difference between the characters is that, while Cindy's origin story reflects classic Peter's, Spider-Gwen's is a true subversion. In *Silk,* Spider-Man and Spider-Woman can exist simultaneously within the same universe. Unlike *Silk,* Earth-65 will not tolerate two spider-heroes; Spider-Man cannot co-exist with Spider-Gwen.

Why, then can there be a coexistence between Spider-Man and Cindy Moon's Spider-Woman in *Silk,* but not in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted*? The answer lies in the characters' relationships with each version of Peter Parker. Cindy Moon's narrative is independent of *Silk*'s Peter Parker's narrative. Although Cindy and Peter eventually form a romance, being "Peter Parker's Girlfriend" is not the only identity attributed to Cindy.

Unlike classic Gwen Stacy, Cindy Moon is not a revamp of an old girlfriend. She is, first and foremost, her own character, with no one's story but her own. However, even though Cindy exists as a spider-hero in the same universe as *Silk'*s Peter, her powers are significantly weaker, rendering her truly unequal to this Peter Parker.

The majority of classic Peter Parker's girlfriends tend to, in one way or another, gain some sort of spider-powers. Gwen Stacy and Cindy Moon are not the first of Peter's girlfriends to become Spider-Woman. Mary Jane Watson, whom classic Peter Parker falls in love with after classic Gwen's death, also has a stint as Spider-Woman in an alternate universe comic called *Exiles.* In this version, Mary Jane takes the place of Spider-Man and fights alongside the Avengers. She is also a lesbian, which effectively eliminates Peter Parker as her romantic partner in this universe. Three different girlfriends, with three different sets of spider-powers, in three different universes and *none* of them exist equally, as partners, with Peter Parker. Cindy is significantly weaker, Mary Jane is a lesbian, and as Jason Latour himself said, "[Spider-Gwen] works best in a world without Peter Parker" (Santori-Griffith). This suggests that, no matter what, where, or when in the multi-verses of Marvel, Peter Parker is privileged as the dominant hero (and if not Peter Parker, then a genderswapped Peter Parker). These characters can only be in a relationship with Peter if he is in the position of power as the superhero; he controls the female characters, even if only through his absence from the story.

Though unique in her own right, Spider-Gwen is not the first genderswapped girlfriend of a popular male character. In 2015, Marvel released *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*, a book that is getting mixed reviews from fans and critics. The book takes place shortly after *The Secret Wars*, at the end of which Nick Fury whispers a word (unknown

to the readers at this time) that causes Thor to drop his hammer, Mjölnir. The book opens with Thor desperately trying to pick up Mjölnir, and failing. A new hero comes to take his place, a mysterious woman who refuses to divulge her true identity. She wields the hammer, adopts the moniker "Thor," and tries to be the hero of which the Odinson has somehow become unworthy. She refuses to be called anything but "Thor," believing that worthiness adheres to no gender. Although unknown in the first book, the female Thor has been revealed by Marvel to be the Earth girlfriend of classic Thor, Jane Foster. At the end of *Secret Wars,* Jane is dying of breast cancer, with slim chance of remission. In *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*, Jane is somehow (the exact details of which are as yet unknown) transported to the location of Mjölnir where she picks up the hammer, transforming into a female version of Thor. The male Thor vows to take back Mjölnir from the new Goddess of Thunder. However, he quickly realizes that the hammer has chosen her. In the face of her worthiness, Thor is forced to yield both Mjölnir and his moniker, opting to go by "Odinson" until he earns his status back ("Jane Foster (Earth-616)").

When *Thor: Goddess of Thunder* hit the shelves, Dorian Lynskey of *The Guardian* reported that "some aggrieved male fans accused [Marvel] of pandering to political correctness" (Lynskey). Some of these fans went as far as sending death threats to female writers like G. Willow Wilson and Kelly Sue DeConnick, two female writers of popular comics featuring female superheroes. Wilson responded to the backlash: "I see why they feel threatened. They think that there's a movement afoot to do away with straight, white, male characters all together. Obviously that's not true…all they're saying is that the readership is growing and changing and they want to see their stories

represented as well" (Lynskey). The angry, hate-mail-sending fans seem to be the minority, however, as *Thor: Goddess of Thunder* is outselling her male counterpart's books by 30% (Lynskey).

Although *Thor: Goddess of Thunder* does not necessarily pander to political correctness, as its disgruntled male readers have claimed, it does appear to cater to feminist desires. In the book, the female Thor battles villains as much as misogyny and patriarchy. In one memorable scene, female Thor battles Absorbing Man, who is displeased with his new enemy, saying, "Thor? Are you kidding me? I'm supposed to call you Thor? Damn feminists are ruining everything!" (Aaron 90/1). The female Thor knocks him out with a jaw-breaking punch and thinks, "[t]hat's for saying 'feminist' like it's a four letter word, creep" (Aaron 91/3). Absorbing Man's wife, Titania, chimes in: "Thor? Thor's a woman now? Like the For Real Thor? She ain't called She-Thor or Lady Thunderstrike or nothing like that?" (Aaron 92/2). The female Thor responds simply, "Thor is Thor" (Aaron 92/3). This is one of several instances where the book seeks to make the point that the hammer and accompanying moniker "Thor" belongs to whoever is worthy, the gender of whom is unimportant. Soon after Titania yields to the female Thor, choosing to stand down "out of respect for what you're doing. Can't have been easy for you, hasn't been easy for me, either" (93/3). Out of context, Titania could be speaking as much to the female Thor as she is to females in comics in general. Axel Alonso, Editor In Chief of Marvel Comics told the Huffington Post: "Our catalog is filled with characters that are defined by their actions, not by their gender. [...] These unique women exhibit the same strengths and flaws as their male counterparts" (Roncero-

Menendez). As much as the female Thor fights for the sake of justice, so too does she fight for gender equality.

While *Thor: Goddess of Thunder* is certainly a book that champions feminism, there are more subtle gender nuances happening. There are many similarities between the female Thor/Jane Foster and Earth-65 Gwen Stacy. Both women are revamps of classically refrigerated characters, both have their own new comics where they embody the powers of each of their romantic male love interests, and, most importantly, both take away the powers of their respective love interests. In *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?,* I have established that, because of the canonical romance between their classic counterparts, Spider-Man and Spider-Gwen cannot exist as equals in the same universe. The same can be said of classic Thor and Jane Foster. Although they have their own books, the female Thor and Spider-Gwen are not granted their own set of powers; they instead embody the powers of their male love interests. This stripping of power from the males implies that there is only room in the universe for masculine power, regardless of which gender embodies it. In this regard, the female Thor is as much a genderswapped version of the classic Thor as Spider-Gwen is a genderswapped version of classic Spider-Man.

As explained earlier, genderswapping is the concept of taking a cisgendered character and reconfiguring that character as the opposite gender. Much like Spider-Gwen and classic Spider-Man, Jane assimilates the origin story, powers, and moniker of the character whom she was traditionally in a relationship with. This causes the power dynamic of the characters to shift. Whoever is worthy of the hammer Mjölnir becomes the almighty Thor. What then becomes of the man Thor? In a universe where Jane Foster is the female Thor, and therefore the hero, the male Thor must forfeit both his hammer

and moniker. As he himself says, “there cannot be two Thors” (Aaron 76/1). There is only one hammer, only one Thor. That is to say, neither Thor can exist while the other is in power. While the female Thor wields the hammer, the male Thor is stripped of his identity, his weapon, and his purpose. He becomes less than he was in the face of the female Thor’s triumph. Conversely, without the hammer, the female Thor reverts back to her identity as Jane Foster, where she is weak and dying from cancer.

Although not mentioned on Gail Simone’s original list, Jane Foster certainly meets the criteria of a refrigerated female. Although there are many similarities between Spider-Gwen and Jane Foster, one fundamental difference is that Spider-Gwen is a reimagined character based on her classic counterpart and exists in an entirely different universe from classic Gwen Stacy. The universe in which Jane Foster becomes the female Thor is the same universe she has always been a part of. Unlike classic Gwen Stacy, in *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*, Jane is given the narrative and the agency needed to escape the refrigerator. When Marvel revealed that Jane Foster is the identity of the mysterious new hero, they also leaked that the hammer’s power is not *keeping* Jane from dying, but rather *exacerbating* it. She is not only dying of breast cancer, but the hammer is perhaps stealing her life force as well. The comic panels where Jane is revealed to be the female Thor shows her sitting in a hospital bed, head shaved from her cancer treatments, and a text block saying that she will not stop being Thor, even though it is killing her ("There Was Only One”). Because this issue has not yet been released to the public, writer Jason Aaron was reluctant to discuss it, but did tell IGN that “the idea of showing a woman fighting against breast cancer who can also turn around and pick up a magic hammer and

fight crime I thought was an interesting idea and not something we'd really seen before at Marvel" ("There Was Only One"). However, the extent of this agency is questionable.

Although Odinson bends to Mjölnir's will and accepts that the hammer has chosen the female Thor, he vows to regain use of the hammer and be worthy of his name. Because there is only one hammer and therefore only one Thor, coupled with the fact that this is no alternate universe in which a second Thor can exist alongside with the original, the implication is that the female Thor will eventually have to give the hammer back. Because there can only be one Thor, and the classic characters exist together, Jane's agency as this strong, hammer-wielding, thunder-powered goddess is borrowed; eventually there must be a resolution and either way, one of the characters—probably Jane—will lose.

Nevertheless, the comic book industry is now entering an era in which gender is the trending topic of conversation. More females are reading comics and participating in comic book culture than ever before and the big comic book publishers (like Marvel and DC) are scrambling to accommodate new fan demands. In particular, fans are clamoring for more inclusivity and diversity within comic book line-ups. In response, Marvel and DC are producing more female and multicultural characters, to much fan delight. However, quantity does not always mean quality and the comic book industry has a lot of catching up to do. Critics like Gail Simone have challenged the industry to change its ways, and provide female characters with more agency and respect. Books like *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* and *Thor: Goddess of Thunder*, however, should only be the beginning of this transformative trend in comic book history. Spider-Gwen and female Thor seem to have agency, but a close reading of these characters show that the agency is

not true; rather, the agency is borrowed from their male counterparts. They represent a step forward for positive female representations in comic books, but I question whether the major comic book publishers are truly moving forward or just pasting over the holes. The representation of female comic book heroes has drastically improved over the last decade, but there is a long way to go before true equality is achieved.

CONCLUSION

It should be clear by now that comic books have historically catered to a male audience, with the majority of popular comic books featuring male characters created by male producers. Jacqueline Danziger-Russell points out in her book, *Girls and Their Comics: Finding a Female Voice in Comic Book Narrative*, that "while there have been many positive examples of female characters throughout the history of comics, for many years, the majority of publications have been produced primarily for male consumption and have often shown women and girls in weaker roles than their male counterparts" (1). However, recent years have seen a significant boost in female participation in comic book culture. According to David Barnett, writer for *The Guardian*, "much of the growth in female comic readers can be put down to the fact that there are far more women working in comics these days…and comic books from Marvel and DC featuring women characters are proliferating" (Barnett). The demands for better representation are finally being answered. Comic books such as *PrinceLess: Save Yourself* by Jeremy Whitley and *The Lumberjanes* by Grace Ellis feature strong, independent female characters who are not afraid to be themselves and are certainly not waiting idly by for a man to come change their fates.

What was once perceived as a male-dominated space, regarding characters, producers, and readers, is slowly transitioning to a space that not only promotes strong

female protagonists, but welcomes female writers and readers. However, progress is slow and more research must be done. As I have discussed, there is a gap between how male and female characters are portrayed, both visually and narratively, a gap that may be closing less quickly than we would like. However, as Gail Simone's website, *Women in Refrigerators*, proves, drawing attention to issues can inspire change. With this thesis, I intended to create a dialog on intersectionality (or the study of overlapping or intersecting social identities and related systems of oppression, domination, or discrimination) by providing a critical analysis and close reading of the characters of Kamala Khan, Gwen Stacy, and Jane Foster.

It is clear that the comic book industry is trying to address its own shortcomings in terms of gender with these books; however, more must be done before parity is achieved. Such an intersectional approach also demands that we examine issues of race as well as gender in these texts. Kamala Khan is the first Muslim superhero to headline her own Marvel series, which shows that Marvel can be sensitive to fan demand for inclusivity of minority characters. Despite this, the creators of *Ms. Marvel: No Normal* achieve this inclusivity by whitewashing Kamala's character. Kamala must experience the embodiment of a white American girl in order to self-actualize as a "brown girl" (Wilson 58/2). I have argued that Marvel chose to minimize Kamala's otherness for the sake of appealing to a white audience. Although Kamala is progressive in her own right, my hope is that, by exposing these shortcomings, the comic book industry will not subject the next Muslim character to similar identity crises, but rather allow the character to be who they are throughout the entire book.

Subjected to both racial and gendered othering, Kamala must endure objectification as both a person of color and as a woman. She is one of the first heroes to directly address the impracticalities of female costuming, an issue that feminist comic book critics have objected to for years. Kamala quickly concludes that an overtly sexy costume is neither necessary nor appropriate for a female superhero. This shift in visual semiotics is also seen in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?,* in which Earth-65 Gwen Stacy's wardrobe has been hailed by fans and critics alike.

However, the concept of gender transcends the mere visual representations of femininity via costuming in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?* Gender, as I have discussed, is a fluid concept that has multiple representations. Most theorists agree that gender is *not* a definitive binary of male/female. The subversion of gender roles in *Spider-Gwen: Most Wanted?,* along with *Thor: Goddess of Thunder,* highlights how comic books are reflecting current conversations on gender in American culture. The discussion concerning genderswapping and genderbending, however, is not sufficiently explored in academic literary discourse. Gender theorists who are also interested in popular culture should start paying attention as this phenomenon gains popularity, particularly as it manifests in aspects of fandom culture like fanfiction, fanart, and cosplay.

In the process of this study, I have examined Wonder Woman, Kamala Khan, Carol Danvers, Gwen Stacy, and Jane Foster with the following, overarching question in mind: What version of femininity are these superheroes representing? Of the characters I have addressed, only Carol Danvers and Kamala Khan are currently written by female writers. Future research would benefit from examining how female characters written by female writers compare to female characters written by male writers. Further research

might also consider: What behaviors do these super heroes model for their female readers? How are they functioning as aspirational goals for young women (or for young men)? The most important question, however, is where do we go from here? My research sheds preliminary light on how the comic book world is shifting towards becoming more inclusive to female characters, producers, and readers. Ideally, this transition will be resolved with more leading ladies of color, more leading ladies with true agency, and a balance between male and female representations in comic books.

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