

## **‘A War for a Better Tomorrow’: *Ms. Marvel* fanworks as protest art**

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### **Abstract:**

In January 2017, President Donald Trump signed Executive Order 13769, which suspended immigration and travel to the United States from several Muslim-majority countries for ninety days. In this article, I examine how the *Ms. Marvel* fandom has responded to the immigration ban with protest fanworks. *Ms. Marvel*, re-envisioned in 2014 as the teenage Kamala Khan, is the first South Asian American Muslim superhero to star in a Marvel series. The *Ms. Marvel* comics often promote a model of resistance that emphasizes nonviolent resistance via peaceful protest and direct political action. Following the executive order, both fanfiction and fanart emerged featuring Kamala Khan reacting to the news or protesting the order. Most of these fanworks offered a model of protest similar to that proposed in the *Ms. Marvel* series. In spite of controversy that developed over using fictional characters for political means, the use of Kamala Khan’s image allowed fan activist/artists to protest with built-in support from an established fandom and to extend the reach of their messages to other fans online.

**Keywords:** *Ms. Marvel*, Superheroes, Fandom, Immigration, Politics, Comics, Asian American Muslim literature

### **Introduction**

Executive Order 13769, titled ‘Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,’ was signed by President Trump on January 27th, 2017. For individuals from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen, the order suspended entry into the United States for ninety days. According to the official text, the order was implemented in order to ‘protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States’ (White House 2017a, para. 1). In the immediate aftermath of the

order, travelers and refugees from these seven countries were detained at airports or forced to return home.

The executive order immediately garnered controversy for discriminating against travelers based on religion and national origin. Although a March update to the order proclaims that it 'was not motivated by animus toward any religion,' the ban focused exclusively on Muslim-majority nations (White House 2017b, para. 7). On the same day President Trump signed the order, *New York Times* writer David J. Bier (2017) published an opinion piece titled 'Trump's Immigration Ban is Illegal,' writing that Executive Order 13769 was in violation of The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which 'banned all discrimination against immigrants on the basis of national origin' (para. 4). Social media platforms like Facebook and Tumblr also erupted with discussion on the executive order, with some agreeing with the ban as a safety precaution and others deeming it inherently biased. In response to the ban, thousands gathered at airports and in public spaces worldwide to protest (Doubek 2017).

In addition to these in-person protests, artists and writers began producing creative works resisting the ban. Among these individuals were fan artists who were inspired by Kamala Khan of the *Ms. Marvel* comic books. By using the image of Kamala Khan in their fanworks, fan artist/activists aligned themselves not only with a popular character, but with a method of resistance consistent to that of *Ms. Marvel's* canon, one of nonviolent action and direct political participation.

### **Fandom and Political Resistance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Fan communities, as many scholars have argued, are fertile sites of social action and civic engagement from various locations on the political spectrum (Hinck 2011; Jenkins and Shresthova 2012; Booth et al. 2019). In *Poaching Politics*, Booth et al. (2019) discuss fandom's engagement with the 2016 presidential election, from fans who created YouTube videos about their favorite candidates to online trolls that sowed chaos through memes and conspiracy theories. Ashley Hinck (2011) asserts that in more positive instances of fan activism, 'fan groups can operate in much the same way the Democratic Party might [...] Fandom can function [...] as a way to come to see oneself as a member of the public, capable of civic engagement' (Hinck 2011, para 1.4). Fan organizations like the Harry Potter Alliance, the Rebel Legion, and the 501st Legion use their passion for popular culture to make real changes in the world, including raising money for charities and running book drives (Harry Potter Alliance, n.d.; Rebel Legion, n.d.; 501st Legion 2020). There is a long history of fan activity and popular culture consumption as a conduit to activism, as fan groups' political work often extends far beyond their passion for a piece of media.

Fan activism is especially important in the context of resistance in the twenty-first century. According to Amanda Nell Edgar (2016, 224), it is a difficult time for people to resist oppressive systems, as 'neoliberal political forces have systematically weakened social movement organizing both directly, by forcing protest groups out of public spaces, and ideologically, through the heightened focus on the individual over larger social groups.'

Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1979), along with Amory Starr, Luis A. Fernandez, and Christian Scholl (2011), argue that disruptive resistance achieves change more effectively than organization-building. 'Disruptive' does not necessarily mean violent, but rather rejecting neoliberal power structures, e.g., refusing to go to work. However, I would like to complicate the idea of 'disruptive' and consider for whom it is safe to be physically disruptive. Being able to protest/resist can be dependent on one's class, race, disability status, and financial security, and disruptive resistance is not necessarily safe for all individuals. This can apply especially to youth, a substantial portion of the audience and creators of fanworks. Young people might not have the ability to go out and protest, so fanworks can provide a way for them to resist as well as access information that may be difficult to access via mainstream outlets. Although organization-building or developing public awareness in fans may not be disruptive activities in and of themselves, they can still hold meaning for fandom participants and can eventually inspire people to engage in other forms of resistance.

In addition, online fanworks can inspire smaller, individual changes in participants that can lead to social action both disruptive and non-disruptive. Ramzi Fawaz (2016, 14) writes that 'for a variety of left-wing activists and intellectuals, culture [is] an avenue for performing radicalism during a period of intense political repression.' Literary works, music, visual art – all have the potential to promote resistance. As Mark Bracher (2013) has discussed, the act of reading literature has the power to inspire readers toward social justice action via the promotion of empathy and metacognition regarding personal biases, and this can hold true for fanworks. Slash fiction, for example, often interrogates the heteronormativity of mainstream media, and genderswap fanfiction can push back on sexism and normative gender roles (McClellan 2014; Lothian et al. 2007). Additionally, although achieving change can be difficult when fan groups are working within neoliberal social media sites like YouTube or Tumblr, Edgar (2016, 234) considers the importance of social media as a space of comfort and community for marginalized communities. Social media posts and comments left on them 'may not spark social justice movements or to be engaged by revolutionaries,' but the value of these posts often 'lies in the way they facilitate mourning within a public, institutionally sanctioned space,' which Edgar refers to as 'small acts of discursive resistance' (Edgar 2016, 234). Online fanworks have the potential, although not always realized, to enact changes in participants that can be productive even at the micro level.

### **The Politics of Superhero Comics and Comics Fandom**

The history of comics fandom is a long one, extending at least as far back as the mid-1900s (cp. Costello 2013). However, the internet has provided more access to comics and comic book fan circles and the influx of superhero films of the past several decades has introduced new fans to superhero comics. These factors have helped to precipitate politically motivated fanworks depicting popular superheroes.

Such fanworks are well suited for activism due to the inherently political nature of superhero comics. Fredrik Strömberg (2011, 574) writes that superhero comics ‘act as a mirror of the political and socioeconomic climate in the United States, providing an image that, although distorted by media and genre-specific constraints, is still indicative of the ways in which ideas and ideologies are developed and disseminated in the society within which they are created.’ Ramzi Fawaz (2016, 3) traces a trajectory of superhero comics’ political viewpoints, beginning with Superman as the ‘embodiment of nationalism and patriotic duty’ and ending with the superhero teams that represent ‘a popular fantasy of internationalism and the concept of universal citizenship.’ Superman, despite his status as an immigrant to America (and to Earth), embodied an idealized form of white male American identity and served as ‘*the* paragon of public service to the nation and a broader global community’ (Fawaz 2016, 2, italics in the original). This public service to the United States often functioned as a means of protesting intolerance and expanding the notion of who was considered an American. In the 1940s, for example, artwork of Superman surrounded by a group of adoring children was circulated on schoolbook covers (Sacks 2016). In the illustration, Superman denounces anyone who discriminates against people ‘religion, race or national origin,’ deeming prejudice the true ‘un-American’ quality (Sacks 2016, image 1). The late twentieth-century ushered in an era of superheroes that furthered challenged the status quo:

Where once superheroes were symbols of national strength and paragons of U.S. citizenship, now they were framed as cultural outsiders and biological freaks capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial, gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the image of the ideal U.S. citizen. (Fawaz 2016, 4)

This is especially true in the case of the X-Men, but superhero teams like Justice League and the Fantastic Four similarly emphasize diversity and coalitions. Despite this, superhero comics also have a long history of perpetuating racist and sexist stereotypes, as well as encouraging extreme nationalism and violence, and many of these trends continue today. A study conducted by Garland et al. (2019) shows that superhero comic books, including those published in the past decade, often reinforce pervasive and harmful myths about intimate partner violence, such as the notion that men cannot be victims or that victims are responsible for their partners’ actions. Umme Al-wazedi (2018, 241) discusses ‘the derogatory stereotypes of racial minorities prevalent in the comics and cartoon narratives of World War II and post-45 American culture,’ which often targeted Asian and Asian American characters. In these comics, the ‘artists used certain demeaning stereotypes – in particular, exaggerated physical features and linguistic markers – to depict racial minorities as an enemy of American values and political agendas’ (Al-wazedi 2018, 241). In pre-9/11 comic books, Muslim and Arab characters often played the role of the villain (male) or the sex object (female) (Strömberg 2011, 579). Even when superhero comics speak out against

racism, it is usually depicted as an individual problem rather than systemic. As Rebecca Wanzo argues in an interview with Michael Boyce Gillespie (2020, 50–1), ‘Superheroes occasionally have dealt with racists and with other instances of discrimination (the Black Panther, for example, once fought the Klan), but failures of the nation are treated as missteps and not as a foundational villainy masked by the flag and myths of American exceptionalism.’ Although fans often draw inspiration from superhero comics to support their political beliefs, these fans must contend with the genre’s historical and ongoing problems.

Additionally, fans who have used superheroes as icons for their political movements have been extremely diverse in intentions and beliefs. As Forrest Phillips (2013) points out, the character of Captain America has been used as an icon for groups as dissimilar as the Tea Party and the Occupy movement: ‘Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, serves as the embodiment of traditional American ideals such as liberty, justice, and the pursuit of happiness [...] [The] wide range of political engagement is possible in part because Steve Rogers’s brand of Americanness is broad enough that it encompasses all but the fringes of the American political spectrum’ (para. 1.1). Although fans will often become inspired to activism by a certain superhero, what an individual fan reads into that hero can vary. This is also true for antiheroes like *Watchmen*’s Rorschach, ‘who represents the violent masculine vigilante ideal in its most extremes’ (Miettinen 2014, 104) and villains like D.C.’s Joker, who are often interpreted as role models regardless of the creators’ intentions. All superhero comics are inherently political like any form of media, but how they are adopted for political purposes can be unexpected and differ from the source material. In the case of *Ms. Marvel*, the immigration ban has revealed different ways in which fans have responded to the series’ political viewpoint.

### ***Ms. Marvel***

What is unique about *Ms. Marvel*’s Kamala Khan is that she holds the distinction of being the first South Asian American Muslim to star in a Marvel series. However, although *Ms. Marvel* is ‘a break from tradition’ (Kent 2015, 523) in certain aspects, Kamala is not entirely unprecedented. There have been earlier Muslim characters in Marvel comics, such as the doctor Excalibur from *Captain Britain and the MI*; G.W. Bridge, an African American convert to Islam featured in *The Punisher War Journal*; and *The New X-Men*’s Dust, introduced soon after 9/11, who is a ‘sixteen-year-old refugee from Afghanistan [...] [and] an observant Sunni Muslim’ (Strömberg 2011; Davis and Westerfelhaus 2013, 800). However, many of these Muslim superheroes, although they ‘seem to have been created to resist stereotypical or racist configurations of Arabs and/or Muslims [...] still partake in the Othering of these ethnic and religious groups by reinforcing stereotypes of “the Oriental”’ (Strömberg 2011, 576-77). Additionally, Arab and Muslim people are often conflated in these representations, and Muslim writers and artists have rarely been involved in the process of creating these characters and telling stories about them (Strömberg 2011, 596).

*Ms. Marvel* and the character of Kamala Khan manage to avoid many of these pitfalls. For the first time in Marvel history, a Muslim superhero is the star of her own series rather than a supporting character. Kamala's superhero title itself is a symbol of change, as the first Ms. Marvel was a white woman named Carol Danvers who changed her title to Captain Marvel in 2012. In *Ms. Marvel's* first issue, Kamala Khan receives the power to change her appearance and size after falling unconscious in a mutagenic mist. While Kamala is passed out in the mist, Carol Danvers as Captain Marvel appears to Kamala in a vision, and Kamala adopts Danvers' previous superhero title as her own. The adoption of Carol's former title allows for a 'productive and powerful disidentification [...] Kamala both identifies with this dominant, canonical figure, but adapts and (re) performs it to suit her own subjectivity. Furthermore, although Kamala ostensibly receives her powers from Captain Marvel, she is not written as a mere inheritor' (Landis 2016, 36). Kamala's Ms. Marvel title both harkens back to the Marvel comics of the past and gestures toward a new future, one that may allow for a new type of superhero. In the following issues, Kamala strives to protect the weak with her new powers while juggling the responsibilities as a high school student and a member of a close-knit Muslim family.

Although *Ms. Marvel* is not solely about Kamala Khan's identity as an Asian American Muslim teenager, the series is highly invested in a nuanced depiction of Islam and Pakistani American culture that does not rely on harmful stereotypes. One of the series' first editors, Sana Amanat, is Pakistani American, and G. Willow Wilson, the writer of the comics until 2019, is Muslim (Landis 2016, 3).<sup>1</sup> As Winona Landis (2016, 3) points out, the cultural and religious backgrounds of the *Ms. Marvel* contributors allow them 'to be sensitive, thoughtful, and reflective about [their] representation of a Muslim superhero.' Miriam Kent (2015) praises the *Ms. Marvel* series for its lack of Orientalism, which, as Strömberg demonstrates, occurs frequently in other western comic books with Asian American and/or Muslim superheroes (Kent 2015, 523; Strömberg 2011).

The *Ms. Marvel* comics have been published at a particularly salient moment of increasing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant prejudices in the United States. Although *Ms. Marvel* emphasizes the fact that Kamala Khan is a United States citizen, the series reminds us that prejudice toward Muslims and South Asian Americans prevents Kamala from adopting the role of 'the ideal U.S. citizen,' (Fawaz 2016, 4) especially in the wake of 9/11. Kamala is sixteen years old in the first issue of *Ms. Marvel*, and she would likely have no memory of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, but the repercussions of 9/11 seep through a narrative mostly focusing on comedic superhero action. In Sangita Shresthova's (2016, 153) work on post-9/11 Muslim American cultural production, she describes how Muslims living in the United States after 9/11 found their religious identity to be 'incredibly politicized' whether they liked it or not, and for Kamala Khan, even the smallest of religious and cultural signifiers become points of contention. Landis (2016, 10) writes that 'It is noteworthy that Kamala understands the connotations that surround her identity, the misconceptions, and acts of racism (direct or inadvertent) that may arise.' In the first *Ms. Marvel* comic, a popular girl named Zoe asks if Kamala's friend Nakia, who is Muslim, is

forced to wear a hijab, then asks if Nakia is in danger of ‘honor-killing’ (Wilson et al. 2014, #1, 3)<sup>2</sup>. Later that day at a party, a boy gives Kamala a cup of Vodka-spiked orange juice as a joke, and Zoe complains that Kamala ‘smell[s] like curry’ (Wilson et al. 2014, #1, 11). Although the actions of these teenagers are not physically violent, their views on Islam as an inherently oppressive religion and their intolerance of Kamala and Nakia’s cultures and religious practices demonstrate the microaggressions that thrive in a racist political climate.

Kamala Khan’s experiences with her heritage and religious identity often influence the political message of the *Ms. Marvel* series. Kamala and her role models, most notably her own parents, continuously advocate for justice and equality. Kamala remarks, ‘Ammi and Abu [her parents] taught me to always think about the greater good. To defend people who can’t defend themselves, even if it means putting yourself at risk’ (Wilson et al. 2014, #4, 15). In the first issue of the *Champions* series (2016), in which Ms. Marvel features as a member of a splinter faction of the Avengers team, Kamala makes an impassioned plea about how to fight for social justice in an unjust world:

We see it all around us more and more every day – people with power punching down. Taking lives when they don’t have to. Meeting unarmed perps, even unarmed kids, with lethal firepower. That’s the world we’re inheriting, where violence does all the talking. But we can be better than that. We have to start enforcing justice without unjust force. What happened here today was sickening. And stuff as bad – worse – happens every day in this world. The strong abuse the weak – who have to worry more all the time about who they can trust and who they can’t. You want that to change? Us, too. We’re in a war for a better tomorrow. Join us. Help us to not take the easy road, and I promise we’ll fight every fight they can throw at us. Help us win the hard way – the right way – not with hate, not with retribution, but with wisdom and hope. Help us become champions. (Waid and Ramos 2016, #1, 32-33)

Kamala’s speech focuses on institutional violence (like ‘people with power’ using ‘lethal firepower’ on ‘unarmed kids’). However, *Ms. Marvel*’s method of resistance is not necessarily radical or disruptive. Rather than advocating for a dismantling of the structures that lead to institutional violence, Kamala urges readers to rely on the democratic process to achieve social change.

*Ms. Marvel*’s philosophy of nonviolent, democratic resistance appeared most visibly during the 2016 election season, when Marvel launched a campaign urging Americans to vote using Ms. Marvel as a fictional spokesperson. On the day before Election Day, Marvel’s Twitter account posted an image of Kamala holding the American flag and proclaiming, ‘To the polls!’ (@Marvel, November 7, 2016). *Ms. Marvel* #13, part of which was released early online to reach readers before the election, featured Kamala interviewing different people in Jersey City about their voting plans. When the interviewees express disinterest in the election, Kamala argues passionately for exercising political action: ‘By not voting, you’re

not sending a message – you’re just lumping yourself in with the millions of people who didn’t vote because they don’t know how or they don’t care. Yeah, sometimes [the candidates] are not great. But that’s because democracies are coalitions. The parties all have to compromise in order to govern’ (Wilson et al. 2016, 16). Ms. Marvel’s call to vote condemns both apathy and passive resistance. Working within the system to elect positive leadership is Kamala’s philosophy of social action.

*Ms. Marvel’s* voting message was extremely kairotic due to the nature of the 2016 election. A piece in the *Los Angeles Times* declares, ‘That it’s Ms. Marvel extolling the virtues [of] voting is of particular significance during a presidential race that has been marred with repeated race-based controversies, including verbal sparring between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Gold Star parents Khizr and Ghazala Khan over the candidate’s remarks about Muslim immigration’ (Hill 2016, para. 5). Because of such controversies, having a Muslim American heroine calling on Americans to vote seemed an endorsement of Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton. However, the Twitter post and the comic did not explicitly endorse either candidate and the focus was on getting readers to the polls.

This particular *Ms. Marvel* campaign, although politically motivated, was still intended to sell comics, but the tensions between promotion and civic engagement are common in fan activism. Christopher M. Cox (2017) writes, ‘While it might seem somewhat paradoxical that fans were both compliant with an initiative instigated by Marvel Comics as a promotional vehicle and later repurposed the initiative to assert civic and cultural politics, such paradoxes are often at the heart of translating fan participation into participatory civic politics’ (para. 6.7). It may be possible for this type of commercial self-promotion to coexist with genuine political involvement, and although critics are often quick to dismiss fan activism due to its origins, very real changes can come about from fans’ engagement and consumption of popular media (Hinck 2011).

### ***Ms. Marvel* Fanworks in Response to the Immigration Ban<sup>3</sup>**

Because the *Ms. Marvel* series and fandom are clearly invested in social causes, it is unsurprising that fans of the series would funnel their passions into creating political fanworks. The 2017 immigration ban proved to be the catalyst for a massive influx of *Ms. Marvel* protest art. Fortunately for the *Ms. Marvel* fandom, the *Ms. Marvel* series celebrates and promotes fan culture and transformative works. Kamala Khan herself is an avid fanfiction author who writes ‘epic stuff [. . .] on the internet’ about her favorite superheroes and decorates her bedroom in superhero paraphernalia (Wilson et al. 2014, #1, 6). Through its positive depiction of Kamala as a superhero fangirl, ‘*Ms. Marvel* validates certain fan practices of personal identification, inviting readers to ‘read themselves’ into the comic and the character of Kamala Khan and, more importantly, to reconceive of the character to serve their own experiences,’ (Landis 2016, 3). Unlike authors like Anne Rice, Orson Scott Card, and George R.R. Martin, who have all infamously denounced any fanfiction based on their respective works, the *Ms. Marvel* creators not only tolerate but encourage fanworks, and fans have heartily responded to the invitation. Although Marvel characters who have



appeared in blockbuster films, like Captain America and Wolverine, have a more robust fan base than Kamala Khan, a substantial amount of *Ms. Marvel* fanworks exist on Twitter, Tumblr, and fanfiction websites like Archive of Our Own. As of July 2020, the character tag 'Kamala Khan' appears in nearly 600 fanfiction stories on Archive of Our Own, and there are more than 100 fics listed in the *Ms. Marvel* fandom more specifically. On Tumblr, searching 'Ms. Marvel' or 'Kamala Khan' will result in hundreds of posts, including images from the comics, fanart of the characters, and text posts discussing the original series and related media.

One example of *Ms. Marvel* art protesting the immigration ban comes from French artist Maryne Lahaye, who posted a drawing on Twitter after news of the ban became public. The drawing depicts Kamala Khan in her Ms. Marvel uniform sitting on her bed and crying (@MaryneeLahaye, January 28, 2017b). On the dresser, a television depicts Donald Trump standing in front of a massive American flag and the words 'Breaking News: Muslim Ban Already In [Effect]' (@MaryneeLahaye, January 28, 2017b). Littered throughout the room are superhero fan trinkets: a framed picture of Carol Danvers, an Avengers poster, a discarded comic book, and a stuffed Captain America toy. Lahaye captioned the artwork, 'I can't even find something to say #MuslimBan' (@MaryneeLahaye, January 28, 2017b). The response to Lahaye's art was mixed, with some agreeing with her message, and others denouncing her for using a beloved character for political means. On Twitter, the ratio of replies to retweets and likes often indicates the level of agreement, as those who disagree are more likely to reply to a tweet rather than retweet or like it (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Lahaye's artwork was liked roughly 16,500 times on Twitter and has 176 replies as of September 2020, indicating an overall positive response, and the artist's repost on Tumblr has almost 55,000 notes (likes, comments, and reblogs) as of September 2020 (toodrunktofindaur1 2017). However, there was criticism in the comments, and Lahaye responded by calling on the political history of comics to defend her work: '@ people telling me to stop using fictional characters & especially superheroes to make political statements: have you ever read a comic??' (@MaryneeLahaye, January 28, 2017a). Below, she posted images from classic superhero comics, including Wonder Woman speaking out against racism and religious prejudice and the famous depiction of Captain America punching Adolf Hitler (@MaryneeLahaye 2017a).

In a similar vein to Lahaye's piece, Tumblr artist sambeart posted an image of Ms. Marvel sitting sadly on the ground, newspaper articles about the immigration ban scattered around her (sambeart 2017). The artwork's caption further articulates the meaning of the piece and aligns it with another contentious Trump campaign promise, the border wall: '#NoBanNoWall' (sambeart 2017). Other Tumblr and Twitter artists drew pictures of Ms. Marvel with captions like 'Resist' and 'No ban,' or lines from the comics such as "'Good' is a not a thing that you are. It's a thing you do' (Wilson et al. 2014, #5, 14). Although these pieces are not explicit about how to resist the immigration ban (or the border wall, in the case of sambeart's artwork), they serve to raise awareness and align the values of the *Ms. Marvel* comics against the actions of the Trump administration.

Fanfiction was also an avenue for protesting the immigration ban through *Ms. Marvel*; this genre allowed fan authors to speak out in both the story and the paratextual material. In several fics, Kamala or other Marvel superheroes make speeches against the ban at rallies or discuss the injustices of the ban with each other. In the paratext of these stories (e.g., author's notes, summaries, comments, and tags), authors prompted readers to donate to pro-immigration organizations, or to go out and protest. Many of the fics' readers responded positively in the comments, affirming not only the political salience of these fics but also reminding us of the power of fanworks to bring people together for social causes under the umbrella of fandom (Coker 2012). The work of *Ms. Marvel* fan art protesting the ban therefore serves multiple functions other than swaying the few dissenters who may read/view their work: the first is building community and forming coalitions among *Ms. Marvel* fans, and the second is spurring passive opponents of the immigration ban to action.

These fanworks promote a similar message to *Ms. Marvel's* own: to resist nonviolently by working within the system (e.g., giving speeches and calling politicians), but other *Ms. Marvel* fanworks are more contentious in their mode of resistance. As Catherine Coker (2012, 83) points out, not all fans are eager to work within the confines of the source material: 'when a fan chooses to look at a work as something more than mere entertainment, s/he is ascribing a belief to it – one that the original author may or may not have intended.' One example is a Tumblr artist's refashioning of the Captain America and Hitler artwork so that the figures instead become Ms. Marvel punching Donald Trump. In a more official piece of art, one of the *Champions* artists, Phil Noto, refashioned a *Champions* illustration to depict Kamala Khan tearing up a photograph of Donald Trump's face. Although this artwork inspired real-life reenactments, it has since been deleted (Cox 2018; Romano 2017). These examples of *Ms. Marvel* protest art, while still addressing the immigration ban, are different in tone to some of the other examples I have discussed. Rather than providing a model of protest that works within the democratic system, these artists draw upon the history of older Marvel comics to promote a form of radical resistance, although not without controversy.

Many comments, especially on Twitter, expressed opposing views to those of the fan artists and the official Marvel election art. As of September 2020, there are 7,500 likes on Marvel's 'To the Polls!' election day post and 4,900 retweets/comments (@Marvel, November 7, 2016). The comments section of this tweet shows that users are sharply divided between those praising the image/reiterating the call to vote (although the candidate they support varies), and those criticizing the 'social justice warriors' at Marvel for using a Muslim heroine to advocate for voting. Some commenters have even called Kamala a 'terrorist' or used racist and Islamophobic slurs (@Marvel, November 7, 2016.). Some commenters on Lahaye's tweet and other *Ms. Marvel* fanworks argue that they do not view the immigration ban as inherently anti-Muslim and believe that protesting the ban is counter to Kamala Khan's nonviolent philosophy (@MaryneeLahaye, January 28, 2017b; toodrunktofindaur1 2017; sambear2017). Others still are unhappy about the images of fictional characters being used for political means; following the deluge of *Ms. Marvel*

protest art, one Tumblr user posted an image of Ms. Marvel and Captain America underneath text begging others to stop using superheroes to promote ‘riots.’ This opinion conflates protests and violent ‘riots,’ a term which has been negatively racialized, but the individual insists that they support Ms. Marvel as a character, just not the way other fans have used her image.

Although resistance to fan-made protest art may seem counterproductive to achieving social change, controversy over *Ms. Marvel* fanart protesting the immigration ban demonstrates the diverse audiences that these pieces have reached. As Abigail De Kosnik (2016, 186) writes in *Rouge Archives*:

The fact that some fans strongly oppose or mock social justice fans while others eagerly identify with it makes me optimistic that, at the least, issues of inclusion and difference, and how fans should or should not handle them, are being openly debated on fan sites – as long as these debates continue, questions about race/ethnicity, disability, nonnormative sexualities, and nationality are not being ignored, sidelined, or repressed in fandom.

The debates over *Ms. Marvel* fanworks indicate some fans’ resistance to political activism via popular media, but they could also be taken as a sign of fandom’s increasing engagement with social issues. It is impossible to say how much, if at all, *Ms. Marvel* fanworks influenced the overturn of Executive Order 13769, but they surely gave strength to the voice of the growing community of protesters and acquainted some fans with activist work. In viewing and reading *Ms. Marvel* fanworks, fans may have become more aware of the political world, and those already involved in protesting would have seen that they were not alone in their opposition to the immigration ban.

## **Conclusion**

On March 6th, 2017, Executive Order 13769 was replaced by Executive Order 13780 after judges from Hawaii and Maryland declared the first immigration ban unconstitutional (Ostrom and Maxwell 2017). However, 13780 was just as contentious as the first order. Just as Executive Order 13780 was going to the Supreme Court, ‘President Trump issued a new travel ban, stating that the March 6 Order had expired by its terms. The Supreme Court cancelled oral argument and asked the parties to brief whether the case is now moot [...] However, the new travel ban [Presidential Proclamation 9645] continues to raise many of the same concerns presented in the March 6 Order’ (Ostrom and Maxwell 2017, 20). As of February 2020, Executive Order 13780 has been amended by two Presidential Proclamations, expanding to include countries such as Myanmar and Nigeria (The White House 2020). Although the protests at airports have abated since the spring of 2017, the topics of immigration and the closing of borders have proliferated in the news in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Ms. Marvel* fans continue to produce political artwork and literature; more recent *Ms. Marvel* fanworks have protested the treatment of

undocumented immigrants in detention camps or address the issue of whitewashing in film adaptations of comics.

I will conclude with a quotation from *Ms. Marvel* that expresses the importance of resisting apathy. In this scene, Kamala Khan and her allies have just defeated a scientist intent on enslaving teenagers to use as batteries, a man who relies on the world's perception of teenagers as 'a political burden, a public nuisance. They are not considered worth educating or protecting. They are called parasites, leeches, brats, spawn' (Wilson et al. 2015, #10, 18). Kamala turns to the group of rescued teens and says, 'If we don't stay involved in what's going on in the world, how do we know we're not gonna end up falling for the next evil genius who wants to use us for some crazy scheme?' (Wilson et al. 2015, #11, 21). Involvement, including direct political participation, or even simply staying informed, is *Ms. Marvel's* message of how to fight for social justice. Fan artist/activists on Twitter, Tumblr, and beyond have used their passion for the *Ms. Marvel* comics to express their opposition to the immigration ban, to encourage others to resist, and to find like-minded individuals to build coalitions. Although the original Executive Order has been replaced, the need for resistance has not diminished, and fan artists inspired by *Ms. Marvel* continue to use Kamala Khan as an icon of resistance.

### **Biographical Notes:**

Danielle Hart is a doctoral candidate in English at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio (USA). She is currently working on her dissertation, which examines video games and video game fan cultures through the lens of disability studies. Her research interests include popular culture, fan studies, disability studies, and game studies. Contact: [hartdm2@miamioh.edu](mailto:hartdm2@miamioh.edu).

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Wilson ended her tenure as *Ms. Marvel* writer in 2019. The new *Ms. Marvel* series, *The Magnificent Ms. Marvel*, is written by Saladin Ahmed and illustrated by Minkyu Jung (Holub).

<sup>2</sup> All page numbers from the comics are taken from *Marvel Unlimited*'s digital copies and may differ from print versions.

<sup>3</sup> As per the recommendations of the Organization for Transformative Works, as well as Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson's essay (2012) on the ethics of using fan texts in academic research, I have obtained permission to discuss the works of the fan artists that are directly referenced in this article. There were several fan artists and writers whom I was unable to contact. In these cases, I paraphrase/summarize these works rather than directly quoting them, and I do not provide usernames or direct links in order to protect the privacy of their creators.