They Will Always Hate Us
by Amber Friend

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In America, we tend to demonize those who aren’t like us. Whether the differences are due to gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, religion, or financial class, the dominant society of America has a way of building up a tall and seemingly indestructible wall between “us” and “them.” We are all familiar with “No Irish Need Apply,” Japanese internment, black and white segregation, and social or political movements against specific minority groups. One of the many examples of American prejudice is that against Muslims. A decade after the 9/11 attacks, many Americans still see Muslims as the enemy—the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) states that from 2009 to 2010 alone, anti-Islamic hate crimes spiked by 50% (“FBI”). Another example would be American society’s continued opposition to homosexuality, as illustrated by hate crimes against homosexuals rising significantly since the early 2000s (“LGBT”). Though of different natures, both of these prejudices signify a lasting attitude of hatred that resonates through some Americans’ views of the “other.” Strangely enough, the road that leads away from such hateful behaviors and towards more accepting ones is paved by something not entirely unfamiliar: superheroes. Superheroes, whether in comics, TV shows, or movies, are accepted, revered, and enthusiastically loved by their fans, especially in today’s culture, which produces successful and popular superhero movies on a more-than-annual basis. 2013 witnessed new films starring Iron Man, Superman, Wolverine, and Thor, and eleven new superhero movies featuring Captain America, Spider-Man, and Ant Man, among others, are scheduled to release over the next five years (“Superhero”). Superheroes are characters people care about intensely in today’s society, and they can be put to good use, for superheroes have the ability to embody groups of people that are feared and present them in a positive and heroic light that audiences respond well to. By providing a meaningful and familiar context, superheroes, such as the X-Men and the 99, help give America’s dominant society a humanized view of the “other” by showing the repercussions of their fears about people they don’t understand, and pushing them to eliminate barriers they have built between themselves and those they have marginalized.

Since the 9/11 attacks by the radical Islamic group Al-Qaeda, the path to acceptance for American Muslims has not been a smooth one. As of 2013, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) lists 36 active anti-Muslim groups across 12 states as well as in Washington D.C., with the highest concentrations in New York and California (“Active Anti-Muslim”). These groups, almost all of which arose in response to the 9/11 attacks, paint Muslims as “irrational, intolerant and violent,” and claim Muslims wish to overthrow American democracy through hostile actions (“Anti-Muslim”). However, American anti-Muslim sentiments reach farther than the views of radical hate groups. The New York Police Department held investigations for six years that included “spying on Muslim neighborhoods, eavesdropping on conversations, and cataloguing mosques” as a part of their Demographics Unit (“NYPD”). Such investigations could be tipped off by as little as individuals speaking Urdu or emigrating from certain areas of the Middle Eastern country Lebanon (“NYPD”). As discussed by the Daily News, the NYPD traced Muslim students and sermons and, as reported by CNN, labeled all the city’s mosques as terrorist organizations in order to legally justify keeping an eye and ear out for anything that could hint at possible terrorism under their roofs (“NYPD”, Lean).
According to CNN reporter Nathan Lean, the FBI actively uses such profiling as well. In 2010, the Bureau paid an informant named Craig Monteilh thousands of dollars a month “to disguise himself as a convert to Islam, infiltrate Southern California mosques, and have sex with Muslim women,” all while with trying to coax out information from Muslims by suggesting terrorist topics. The FBI, as well as immigration officials, can also “blacklist” and “flag” the applications of innocent Muslim Americans applying for citizenship because of their name, home country, or travels to watch-list countries, therefore “sidelining their path to nationality for years on end” (Lean). State laws have also been in compliance with recent anti-Muslim sentiments, as shown by the 32 legislators working to ban Islamic “Shariah” law—efforts in which seven states have succeeded—or by the use of zoning, parking, or traffic regulations to fight mosque construction (Lean).

The most remarkable aspect of these government investigations and operations however, is that they largely don’t manage to achieve their intended goals. Six years of the NYPD’s profiling and spying investigations led to zero terrorist leads, and Craig Monteilh, the FBI’s undercover informant, was reported to the FBI by the very people he was trying to trap (Lean). The policy is not only morally wrong, as it implies that an entire group of people is evil based solely on the fact that they share a religion with radical terrorists, but it also doesn’t work. Yet, John Brennan, President Obama’s “top counterterrorism advisor,” stood by operations such as the NYPD investigations, remarking that their efforts were necessary and a model of unity, and that "the success [of the investigations] is in the record, in terms of keeping this city safe" (“NYPD Spying”). Whether it is through hate or fear, distinguishing Muslims as a dangerous “other” has thus far only made it more difficult to heal wounds over a decade old. America desperately needs these wounds to be treated.

Naif Al-Mutawa offered such a treatment. In the early 2000s, Al-Mutawa began working to develop a comic, The 99, that he hoped would

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stop “the nooses tighten[ing]” around those who didn’t think in compliance with dominant ideologies, as well as eliminate the post-9/11 “re-definition of Islam” (Solotaroff). Though there was conflict over blasphemous interpretations of Islam in the comics, The 99 did manage to gain significance and popularity in many Middle Eastern countries fairly early on in its publication. However, there was quite a social backlash against these Islam-based comics in America, especially when the television channel, the Hub, picked up the comic to air as an animated series. Several people, including New York Post columnist Andrea Peyser and blogger Pamela Geller, spoke firmly against the comic and its possible TV adaptation, their arguments relying largely on radical anti-Muslim sentiments. Peyser argued that the show would take advantage of impressionable children in order to make this “posse of righteous, Sharia-compliant Muslim superheroes” appear as “the good guys,” speaking specifically about the dangers of characters such as Jabbar the Powerful and Darr the Afflicter (“Merica,” “99”). Geller said that anything that portrays Islam or Muslims as anything but “misogynistic, violent, and oppressive to non-Muslims” is pure falsity (“99”). While Al-Mutawa has stated that he hopes The 99 can provide “positive role models to all children,” Geller remains fixed in her beliefs, arguing that the comic is “cultural jihad aimed at radicalizing American children” (“99”).

However, such radical claims about a takeover of American culture through Muslim media are absurd. The 99 was created to present a positive image of Muslim heroes for children to look up to. It was written so that each of the characters’ powers represents one of the 99 attributes of Allah. Through this, the comic was built on the hope of bringing readers an understanding of the positive values of Islam, such as wisdom and generosity, which, in reality, run through all religions. It’s a comic built on the ideas of diversity, acceptance, and teamwork. The team members are from all around the world and of all different races, and no nation or skin color takes precedence. They are composed of a fairly wide span of ages, ranging from young teenagers to adults in their early thirties (Al-Mutawa). It is not skin color, economic situation, nationality, age, or religion that binds these characters together. Instead, they are brought together by the power of the Noor stones, which allow them to manifest their specific attribute of Allah (Al-Mutawa).

Even the characters that people like Peyser have denounced as dangerous have a solely positive message. The origin story of Jabbar the Powerful, an enormous, muscular male character, is replete with values such as the importance of family and control over one’s abilities. Darr the Afflicter, a young man with the power to cause pain, was disabled by a drunk driver-inflicted car accident that killed his family, and he devotes his powers to punishing those who commit similar crimes (Al-Mutawa). Yet, even with such a seemingly destructive power, it is this character that, within pages of being introduced, teaches readers the importance of forgiveness and moving forward, as he literally takes back the pain he had inflicted on others. By demonstrating these names, or attributes, of Allah such as power and affliction, these characters provide positive and constructive lessons through an Islamic lens, a context foreign to most American comics. And while the basis of the comic is clearly and intentionally Muslim, its promotion of the need for universal acceptance of diversity is a lesson relevant throughout the entire world. By emphasizing moral values that are present throughout multiple religions, The 99 allows non-Muslim readers to make connections with their own religions and understand that Islam can be quite similar. Such understandings help build tolerance and comprehension of Islam and its followers and help non-Muslim readers see Muslims as they would see those who follow their own religion. In creating The 99, Al-Mutawa was able to create something greater than a mere financial success. He was able to create something that made “an impact culturally and socially,” something that could lead to change on a larger scale (Solotaroff).
But American prejudices are not targeted solely against Muslims. Gay, transgender, and bisexual people also have a significant history of oppression in America, and they are constantly pelted with negativity from social, religious, and government institutions. As with the stigma against Muslims, these reactions and prejudices are prevalent and powerful to this day. According to a study by the SPLC, “homosexuals are far more likely than any other minority group in the United States to be victimized by violent hate crime” (Smith). As shown in another study by the SPLC, there are 34 active anti-gay hate groups in America, spread across 20 states, and the District of Columbia. Anti-gay prejudices are different than anti-Muslim prejudices. While anti-Muslim hate is fueled by a skewed understanding, and therefore fear, of Islam and those who follow it, anti-homosexuality hate is fueled by homophobia, which, as shown in a study by University of Arkansas psychologists, “originates not out of fear or anxiety…but from feelings of disgust” (“Disgust”). The fire that burns at the heart of the anti-gay movement is one of revulsion towards one trait of a group of people that is otherwise very much like them.

Because of these feelings, homosexuals are constantly dehumanized by being labeled as unnatural, or even against the word of God. Groups such as the heavily extremist Westboro Baptist Church, whose official website’s URL is “godhatesfags.com,” attack homosexuals directly and harshly, constantly stating how the Christian God they follow specifically hates them. Even churches that do not preach such extremist and brutally hateful ideas, such as those of the Catholic, Baptist, Mormon, and Methodist denominations, have sided against certain gay rights. As one example, the United Methodist Church has stated in their Book of Discipline—the extensive document that details the law and doctrine of the Methodist church, including its stance on controversial topics such as abortion, gun laws, and gay rights—that they “support laws in civil society that define marriage as the union of one man and one woman” (“Stances”). Methodist ministers are also not allowed to ordain same-sex marriages or be non-celibate homosexuals (“Stances”).

Representatives of the American federal government and many American state governments have fought against gay rights for decades, reinforcing the societal stigma against non-heteronormative sexuality. California’s Proposition 8, passed in 2008, states implicitly “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California” (“Text”). The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), a United States federal law passed in 1996, states that “no State shall be required to accord full faith and credit to a marriage license issued by another State if it relates to a relationship between persons of the same sex” and that “the terms ‘marriage’ and ‘spouse,’ for purposes of federal law only…refer exclusively to relationships between persons of the opposite sex” (“Report”). The latter of these sections, the part dealing with the definition of “marriage” and “spouse,” was declared unconstitutional in 2013 as a result of the court case United States v. Windsor (“United”). Despite this change, American prejudice and marginalization against homosexuals remain significant, and the community continues to face constant attacks from our churches, our government, and our society.

The X-Men, heroes made super by genetic mutations and constantly feared and distrusted by the human populations they try to save, present one of the best metaphors for American othering in comics today. This comic, especially in scenes that refer directly to homosexuality and homophobia, not only offers an introspective outlook on how we think when isolating a group of people through judgment or fear, but also what negative effects those prejudices have on those we are attacking. In Joss Whedon and John Cassaday’s X-Men comic “Gifted,” the X-Men—comprised of Cyclops, Miss Frost, Shadowcat, Wolverine, and Beast—find themselves fighting against both a strange, extra-terrestrial antagonist and humans pushing for a cure for the mutant “disease.” This particular comic deals
very intimately with the harsh reality of being a “mutant.” The developer of the cure, Dr. Rao, is not portrayed as a stereotypical villain, but as an educated and well-meaning scientist with a narrow-minded perception of mutants. As she presents the cure, she refers to mutants with both humanizing phrases—such as when she states that mutants have “committed atrocities and been victim to atrocities” or that they “are people, no better or worse by nature than anyone else”—and demonizing phrases, such as when she states mutants have “been labeled monsters…not without reason” (Whedon). She describes the mutant gene itself as a “disease” and “corruption of healthy cellular cells” (Whedon). Rao does not see mutants as evil, but she does see them as dangerous and a problem to be righted. To her, mutants are simply afflicted humans who need to be saved, and this philanthropic intention blinds her from the social damage she is truly causing. She has turned an entire group of living, thinking, feeling people into a two-dimensional flaw that must be eradicated.

Yet, again, Rao is not evil, and it is because she is not evil that this particular comic is so good at allowing readers to take the story into the realm of the real world and confront their own prejudices. Few people see themselves as flawed or incorrect in their core beliefs. Several religious-based organizations, such as the Presbyterian “OneByOne” program and the Jewish “JONAH” program, actively encourage followers to put homosexuality behind them and adopt heterosexual lifestyles (“OneByOne,” “JONAH”). These groups don’t see their actions as hurtful, isolating, or marginalizing; they believe they are doing God’s work. Usually, people support and feed prejudices not out of pure anger or spite, but because they believe they are adding to a legitimate, greater good. Because Rao is both destructive and well-meaning in her actions, she allows possibly homophobic readers to judge her and the greater issues she embodies fairly; they can see themselves within her and work to face and eliminate their own prejudices, fear-based judgments, and generalizations.

The most monumental success of this comic, as well as the entirety of the X-Men comics, is in allowing readers to humanize and empathize with a feared and misunderstood “other.” At a welcoming ceremony for mutant children at the X-Mansion, Emma Frost sets a surprise simulation of giant robots attacking the assembly room in order to teach the new recruits “the first lesson” (Whedon). Speaking of humans, she tells the students:

They will always hate us. We will never live in a world of peace, which is why control and non-violence are essential. We must prove ourselves a peaceful people. We must give the ordinary humans respect, compliance, and understanding. And we must never mistake that for trust. (Whedon)

In this scene, we get a glimpse of the mutants’ predicament and a sullen example of a solution: they will put constant effort into proving themselves unthreatening, respectful, and utterly human, but at the end of the day they are still alone, misunderstood, feared, and hated. Emma’s beliefs are echoed in the words of Wing, a student with the ability to fly. Wing discusses his love of flying and fear of losing his ability to the cure with Kitty Pryde, also known as Shadowcat. In a genuine attempt at encouragement, Kitty tells Wing that the mutants are “a community” that is stronger than the cure, and that “no one can make [the mutants] be who [the humans] want.” She says that with teamwork and calm thinking, mutants could overcome any struggle. And Wing replies: “Miss Pryde…are you a #&$%ing retard?” (Whedon).

At one point, while confronting Dr. Rao about the cure, Emma furiously asks if Rao plans on “eliminating the gay gene” next. When Rao replies that gays are not a threat to society, Emma snaps back that the two are “clearly watching different televangelists” (Whedon). Neither Emma nor Wing believes in the optimistic sentiments of empowerment and acceptance held by some of
the other X-Men. They see the world for what it really is: largely out to get them. With this outlook, as well as the direct connection between the characters and gay sympathizing, readers are provided with insight into the hatred and isolation the homosexual community feels. They can see how asking gay people to find strength from within only their own communities in order to face the immense amounts of hate that are constantly stampeding them is, as Wing states when later remarking on Kitty’s reassurances, incredibly “patronizing” to homosexuals and the struggles they face on a daily basis (Whedon). When discussing his conversation with Kitty with another student, Wing starts to discuss his anger that Kitty can have these beliefs when she has personally fought against the forces he feels are suffocating his freedom and his safety (Whedon). Unlike Kitty, Wing does not see the mutants’ battle for equality as one that is easily—or even possibly—won. In order to bring about true equality and peace, efforts must be made from more than the mutant—or homosexual—populations. The dominant society, the chief implementers of hate or prejudice, must realize the need for radical changes in, not only personal opinions, but political policy and religious teachings on tolerance, and they must strive to make those changes for the better. The X-Men comics remind us that it is the dominant, and in this case heterosexual, society that must work to alter their views and move towards acceptance, in order to convince those like Emma and Wing that trust is a possibility and that those who are different will not always be hated.

It is true that not all comics speak out for tolerance, acceptance, and diversity. In his article “Who Cares About the Death of a Gay Superhero Anyway?” Perry Moore lists over 60 examples of homosexual superhero characters, including Northstar, Batwing, and Electro, and how they are portrayed negatively in their comics, such as being villains or being graphically tortured or killed (Moore). One character, DC’s Ice, is seen in hell after her death (where many religious groups believe homosexuals belong), and Marvel’s Freedom Ring is killed by being impaled by 28 spikes, one of which shoots “through the groin and protruding from his anus” (Moore). Superheroes can also reinforce the idea of power coming only from the dominant society. Most well-known superheroes, such as Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Iron Man, Captain America, and Hulk—all of whom have been featured in successful and popular films within the past three years—are white, male, heterosexual, and presumably Christian Americans; these heroes are models for the dominant American society in modern popular culture, but they leave audiences that don’t fit into those classifications without superheroes to empathize with. These superheroes also rob audiences of the dominant society of chances to love and understand characters who are largely different from them. Comic books and films, like all mediums of popular culture, reflect the beliefs and perceptions of those creating them and those expected to buy them. While these heroes and their fates and identities reinforce the ideas of the dominant society, they also provide a commentary explaining what that society thinks about those who are not a part of it. They represent the real-world ideas and beliefs that must be changed—the perceptions, assumptions, and judgments that must be eliminated—in order to attain an accepting and tolerant American society.

American dehumanization and phobia about many groups, including Muslims and homosexuals, is a very real and ongoing problem apparent in our daily lives and our government’s policies, as well as in attacks by the truly cruel. In a country built on ideas of diversity and tolerance, it is extremely detrimental to build up walls of misguided and misinformed hate, anger, and fear. Americans are capable of leaving stigmatization and hate behind them, of becoming tolerant, accepting, and loving individuals. Superhero comics can humanize the “other” and create characters that embody the acceptance of a foreign idea,
and they can represent those who are persecuted and despised. Through the superheroes that we love and understand, we are able to grasp the implications and roots of our hate, and are able to move forward and learn about and accept those we don’t fully understand.

Works Cited