In the comic “Nothing but You on My Mind,” a therapy patient distraught over the events of September 11, 2001 demands to know “Why do they hate us so much?” (Brooks and Acuna 140). The depiction of this question emphasizes the word “they.” In doing so, it points towards the underlying question: who exactly are “they?” This question became a common one in the aftermath of 9/11, as a very shaken America sought to understand the identities of the people now labeled the “enemy.” Answering this question was literally a matter of life and death. The Islamic Other “they” had attacked “us” as Americans, but America was also preparing a counterattack.

Focusing on Islamic and Arab individuals and cultures as the “responsible” parties in 9/11, Islamophobic concepts of the Islamic and Arab Other began to pervade American culture at every level. As a temporally unique level of American culture, comics provide an ideal opportunity to explore the cultural constructions of the Islamic Other in the post-9/11 period. Examining comic anthologies compiled directly after 9/11 reveals Islamophobic identity constructions at a time when grief turned into anger and commemoration began to pave the way for attack. The process of justifying these attacks, and the targets chosen for attack, is reflected in these comics. These comics reveal what was being said and what was being assumed about the supposed enemy of post-9/11 America.
This paper will address three comic anthologies released in January 2002: *9-11: Artists Respond* published by DC Comics’ subsidiary Dark Horse Comics, *9-11: September 11th 2001* published by DC Comics, and *9-11: Emergency Relief* published by Alternative Comics. By virtue of their collective nature as anthologies, these works bring together a wide variety of constructions of the Islamic Other. In many of these comics, the Islamic Other is created as a stereotypical figure adopted into a message of patriotism and multiculturalism, as a victim of continuing racism, or as a symbol of evil. These portrayals of the Islamic Other are, for the most part, simplistic depictions of an exotic Other and a traditional American self, and often rest on stereotypes and narratives that reveal an inherent Islamophobia in American culture at this time, as well as an incorrect belief in an identified enemy.

The term “Islamophobia” is verbal shorthand for a wide range of beliefs, speech acts, policies, and actions. While it is not specifically synonymous with racism, xenophobia, or religious intolerance, it is composed of elements from all of these concepts. As defined by Peter Gottschalk and Gabriel Greenberg, it is an “‘anxiety of Islam’… a social anxiety towards Islam and Muslim cultures that is largely unexamined by, yet deeply ingrained into, Americans” (5).² Both conscious and unconscious forms of Islamophobia have a considerable effect on the lives of Muslim individuals at the political, cultural, and personal level.

Comics such as these inhabit a unique temporal position in the realm of cultural commemoration, as Henry Jenkins points out: “Slower and more reflexive than CNN… quicker in their turnaround than television drama or Hollywood movies, comic books offered a useful

---

¹ For the sake of brevity, hereafter I will refer to these works by shortened titles. *9-11: Artists Respond* will be referred to as *Artists Respond*, *9-11: September 11, 2001* as *9-11: September 11th* and *9-11: Emergency Relief* as *Emergency Relief*.

² The term “Islamophobia” does not refer exclusively to an American ideology, as is reflected in its use by European author Liz Fekete (Fekete 9). However, this paper is focused on Islamophobia in the context of the United States, and the theorists cited in this work and the majority of the graphic novel authors and artists under discussion will reflect this focus.
testing ground for strategies by which popular culture could respond to this tragedy” (68). These anthologies were created at a midpoint between the instantaneous responses to 9/11 created by news outlets or even newspaper cartoons and the more slowly constructed responses of film and literature. In light of the large undertakings of collaboration and organization that each anthology represents, these comic collections were produced remarkably quickly following 9/11—all three were published in January 2002. At the time these works were solicited and collected, comic creators were no longer dealing with the immediate impact of 9/11, but were still responding and commemorating while the effects of the event were still fresh. Thus the constructions of the Islamic Other in these comics are the result of the discourses of the Islamic Other that had taken place in American culture in this specific period.

**Misguided Multiculturalism**

In the post-9/11 period, dialogues that intended to prevent hatred towards the Islamic Other focused on the discourses of American identity and multiculturalism, emphasizing the universal humanity of all people, showing that “even” Muslims are “just like us,” patriotic lovers of America. However, as Stephen Sheehi notes, “liberal circles still rely on Islamophobic stereotypes and misrepresentations as foils for their own particular views” (30). Comics that intend to present the “good” Islamic Other are as liable as those creating the enemy Islamic Other to use Islamophobic stereotypes in their representations. Paradoxically it is the attempt to prove the similarities between the individuals in the “them” of the Islamic Other and the “us” of American citizens that most clearly delineates the differences between “them” and “us.” Intentionally drawing attention to the place of the Islamic Other as components of American patriotism requires a reduction in identity to the easily recognizable Islamic Other. The inclusion of the Islamic Other simply for its own sake does not support diversity, but instead only
highlights the Islamic Other’s usual exclusion from conceptions of American identity. And, as can be seen in these comics, the token inclusion of the Islamic Other relies on a host of Islamophobic stereotypes to mark the existence of the “different” Islamic Other in supposedly liberal discourses. The Islamic Other is so unfamiliar to both author and reader that the inclusion of this Other must be emphasized in order to be recognized, disallowing a subtle depiction of the Islamic Other.

The simultaneous adoption and definition of the Islamic Other can best be seen in an untitled comic by Paul Pope in 9-11: September 11th. In this comic, a Muslim woman holds groceries while waiting at a street corner. She wears a black hijab with only her hands and a triangle of her face showing, and also wears a pin reading “I (heart) NY” (Pope 141). This image combines stereotypes of “exotic” Muslim women with American domesticity and New York-centric patriotism. She is an average New York woman performing her chores, and showing solidarity with her city in the wake of a tragedy. But she is also the veiled Muslim woman, the Islamic Other. Gottschalk and Greenberg point out that women are rarely used to visually represent Islam, but that when they do represent the religion, they are “almost always depicted as veiled and oppressed” (54). Thus in order to depict a “good” Muslim who loves New York, Pope utilizes an image that American culture associates with the oppression inherent in the Muslim religion. She is not granted an individual identity but is present simply to be a Muslim, and carries with her the expectations that Americans hold regarding Muslim womanhood, including the assumption that they go about life veiled and oppressed.

Working under his own prejudices as well as the stereotypes prevalent in the American culture, Pope does not create a Muslim woman who is a happy representative of her religion. She does not smile and her headscarf partially obscures her face. Her bleak features are a stark
counterpoint to the yellow smiley faces that adorn her grocery sacks (Pope 141). She is literally overburdened between her heavy clothing and numerous bags (Pope 141). There is no text in this comic to help grant this woman an identity. We do not know if she is an immigrant embracing her new country, or a United States citizen adhering to her religion. Instead she is a nameless, nearly faceless Islamic Other, supporting New York City yet oppressed by her religion. The reader is invited to empathize with this woman and her burdens, and yet condemn her religion as one of her burdens. She, like the city that she loves, is a victim of Islam even as she represents it as an Islamic Other.

**Remembering Race**

A handful of comics manage to positively depict the Islamic Other without falling into the trap of Islamophobic stereotypes. They largely accomplish this by drawing attention to an aspect of Islamophobic discourse that is also frequently ignored, the preexistence of Islamophobia and stereotypes of the Islamic Other before 9/11. Sheehi describes this preexisting discourse and explains what truly changed about the discourse after 9/11: “September 11th created nothing new. It did not create Islamophobia or increase US designs on the Middle East. It did, however, unchain the paradigms, hate-speech, hate-acts, and political programs and policies that were hinged by political latches and filters” (41). As Sheehi describes and as these comics depict, racism, misguided paranoia and hate, and Islamophobic depictions of the Islamic Other existed prior to the events of 9/11. 9/11 simply made it more acceptable to express them. Focusing on the racial tensions that existed before 9/11 allows these comics to present conceptions of the Islamic Other as conceptions, emphasizing the artificial nature of emotion-laden racial definitions. These comics include both words and images, so rather than allow the reader to come away with a simplistic message influenced by stereotypes, these comics force the
reader to engage intellectually as well, complicating depictions of the Islamic Other with a discussion of tolerance.

Keith Knight complicates his depiction of the Islamic Other by initially refusing to depict an Other, encapsulating the disappearance and reappearance of the marker of race following 9/11 in his untitled contribution to *Emergency Relief*. Using visual depictions and a discussion of race as a stand-in for both racial and cultural differences, he depicts simplistic figures roughly differentiated by differences in hair or clothing. These figures are without skin color, the “ash grey” that he describes being the result of the falling towers obscuring personal markers.

Describing the immediate aftermath, he explains, “Suddenly there was no race. There were no differences. Just people helping people” (Knight 166, original emphasis). This period of universality and goodwill emphasizes the potential for an American culture not defined by race or hatred. Yet as the literal and metaphorical ash is washed away, Knight describes differentiations of race reappearing, and the beginning of violence against Muslims and Arab Americans, whom he describes as “innocent people” (Knight 166). In the last panel, he implores those committing the violence to “show the same restraint you displayed toward white Americans when Timothy McVeigh bombed Oklahoma City not too long ago…” (Knight 166, original emphasis). In this final panel, skin color is finally depicted as a white figure becomes the object of paranoia for a figure with darkly shaded skin who stares at the white figure with fear, thinking “Wait a second… That guy’s white, this guy is white. He must be in on it!!” (Knight 166, original emphasis). It can be assumed that this dark skinned figure is Muslim and/or Arab based on the context of the comic, but it is not made clear, so the figure cannot be definitively labeled as an Islamic Other. Both praising the lack of racism during the events of the 9/11 rescues and condemning the racist violence that followed, Knight manages to depict his figures
without depending on Islamophobic symbolism, merely the same grayscale techniques he employs throughout the drawing. Additionally, he draws attention to an aspect of the American definition of, and response to, terrorism that receives little attention in Islamophobic discourses: the lack of racial violence following the actions of the white American terrorist, Timothy McVeigh. In fact, as Jasbir K. Puar points out, Timothy McVeigh is often left out of the definition of “terrorism” entirely, in favor of a focus on religious extremists (55-56). By pointing out the disparity in violent reactions to McVeigh’s bombing and the 9/11 attacks, Knight asks readers to question the supposedly “logical” connection between the actions of the 9/11 hijackers and their race and religion, and thus question the automatic assumption that connects the Islamic Other to terrorism.

The Evil Other

Unfortunately, in further study of these anthologies the association between terrorism and the Islamic Other is shown to not only survive but also to thrive in the post-9/11 period, and is even aided by other more positive attempts to engage with the Islamic Other. The comics in these anthologies and the American culture they represent are well prepared to provide the context necessary for an understanding of a vague and yet evil Islamic Other. As deliberately vague concepts of the Islamic Other, the images and ideas associated with the American and multicultural Islamic Other can be easily adapted into discourses of an evil Islamic Other, building upon notions already held about the Islamic Other as terrorist. These evil Islamic Others are the true enemy, the “they” that are responsible for the events of 9/11. Through demonization of the Islamic Other, including dehumanization and repeated comparisons to other culturally accepted figures of evil, these comics and America at large are able to create a definite enemy on whom all of the misfortunes of 9/11 can be blamed. This makes the Islamic Other easier to hate,
and American culture easier to perceive as blameless. Sheehi asserts that, “The demonization of Muslims and Arabs is a process of deflection as much as justification, preventing many Americans from digesting the unfortunate realities of American Empire or at least preventing them from recognizing the humanity of those who are the victims of Empire” (38). By making the 9/11 attackers inhuman or fundamentally evil, the creators of these comics, and the American culture they take part in, are able to avoid a contemplation of the role of American policy and American Empire in the attack. In order to retain a sense of the innocent victim and justified avenger, America cannot afford a consideration of America’s culpability in creating the circumstances that led to 9/11. Instead there must be what Sheehi calls “Muslim rage,” a convenient, non-investigative reason for anger attributed to Muslims that allows Americans to dismiss “resentment toward the United States as an inherently visceral hate of the West; an irrational reaction that stems from culturally determined short-comings of their religion and society” (68). If there is a monstrous and irrational Islamic Other, there is no need to look beyond this Other and the culture the Other represents for a reason for a hatred of the West. By creating a demonized Islamic Other in these comics, both the creators and their country are able to avoid any self-blame in a response to the question, “why do they hate us?”

This demonization can occur at the simplest level, drawing on almost primal concepts of evil to depict the literal inhumanity of the Islamic Other. In an untitled page from Artists Respond, author and artist Mark Martin depicts “Americans” as simplistic, pastel-colored smiling frog-like creatures frolicking in a meadow, where they come upon the “terrorist,” a snaggle-toothed, red-eyed wolf creature with a forked tongue. The wolf creature tricks the frog creatures by posing as one of them, causing an explosion that sends the frog creatures to heaven and the wolf creature to hell. The creature futilely protests his hellish torments with “but…
but…” while holding a paper that proclaims, “Get into heaven free!” (Martin 32). With the exception of the final panels, this comic exists entirely in the realm of the image. Yet the distinctions created between the innocent “us” of Americans and the inhuman, deceptive, evil “them” of the Islamic Other terrorist, believing (falsely) that he will get into heaven for his actions, could not be clearer. While both the Americans and the Islamic Other are made into creatures, the Islamic Other becomes a creature of nightmare, detailed in its hideousness compared to the simple creatures representing Americans. The American creatures are innocents, while the Islamic Other creature is a wolf, a predator. He is a representative of a false religion, one that has lied to him about the concepts of heaven and hell, and unleashed this misguided predator on the world. This comic also indirectly comments on the depictions of “acceptable” Islamic Others such as that by Pope. It reflects a cultural paranoia, suggesting that “acceptable” Islamic Others only appear to be similar to Americans, but are in fact deceiving through their supposed similarity, and are simply biding their time before they strike. Under this attitude, any and all Islamic Others are suspect, potential enemies lying in wait.

The comic “There Were Tears in Her Eyes” by Sam Glanzman continues the demonization of the Islamic Other by comparing Muslims to individuals who are understood to be quintessential evil enemies. This story juxtaposes an old man in the woods with his grandson against the increasingly violent direction of the old man’s thoughts as he considers the 9/11 attacks. The elderly narrator begins the story by explaining “I watched in disbelief the cowardly attacks by these uncivilized loathsome creatures” (Glanzman 207). Through an act of hyperbole, the individuals behind the attacks are stripped of their humanity, reduced to “loathsome creatures” that perform “cowardly attacks.” After the man’s grandchild asks “what kind of people do these things” the man turns mentally to a story of Vlad Tepes, commonly known as
Dracula, and his death at the hands of the Turks. While displaying a reproduction of a woodcut of Tepes’ torturous acts, including impalement, the grandfather narrates these acts, specifically those performed against the Turks, before relating that Tepes fell in battle against the Turks only to have his head sent back to the Sultan in a jar of honey (Glanzman 208). It is not clear whether the reader is meant to associate the 9/11 attackers with Tepes himself and thus with his brutality, as emphasized by the images, or with the Turkish Empire that was powerful enough to defeat Tepes and take his head, as emphasized by the text. Either way, the comparison is a rather monstrous one, and carries implications that the Islamic Others who have attacked the United States have a history of vicious actions that date to the fifteenth century. The options presented leave no room for a good Islamic Other, and instead leave the reader judging the correct identification of the Islamic Other based on different evil merits.

On the next page, the grandfather turns to the bombing of Hiroshima. Text boxes detail his argument against a stark black and white background of a mushroom cloud, with the grandfather justifying the use of nuclear weapons as “a necessary means to correct an injustice” and to “end a war” and spare “not thousands but perhaps millions of American and Japanese lives” before asking “And now will we wait? Before acting?” (Glanzman 209). The possible consequences of this theoretical inaction are presented on the next page, with another black and white image from World War Two, this time of a mass grave of Holocaust victims. The text hovers in the sky, above a camp and amongst the smoke from ovens, while a pile of contorted, emaciated bodies dominates the bottom of the frame. The grandfather explains that he believes that earlier intervention could have stopped “Hitler and his butchers” (Glanzman 210). One line of text bisects overlapping frames of the mass grave and the Statue of Liberty, asking again “Will we wait? Until it is too late?” (Glanzman 210).
These two pages combined perform a number of ideological maneuvers. First, by conflating the relation between the contemporary United States and the 9/11 attackers with the United States and Germany of WWII, the comic is framing the current situation as the equivalent of a war against an enemy definitively categorized as evil. Second, the pages imply that the enemy the United States faces in this conflict is both defined and a superpower, with the 9/11 hijackers simply a minor part of a larger structure. Since the hijackers came from a variety of Middle Eastern countries, the suggested superpower in question is most likely the religion of Islam itself, as the overarching connection between the individual actors. Using both explicit text and shocking images, Glanzman definitively links the Islamic Other with the Japanese and German forces from WWII. Though this comic is the creation of Glanzman’s own prejudices, it also reflects the discourses of the Islamic Other prevalent in American culture at this time. In fact it is a moment of seeming precognition, anticipating President Bush’s eventual inclusion of the Islamic Middle Eastern countries of Iran and Iraq in a new “Axis of Evil” (Gottschalk and Greenberg 94). The new, if not entirely clear enemy of the Islamic Other is compared to the former Axis powers, the last “great” enemies of the United States, enemies encountered in a specifically declared war. Finally, these pages are representative of the turn from grief to anger, as they seem to condone a militaristic action on the behalf of the United States as a combination of a return volley and a preemptive strike. The repetition of the question “Will we wait?” in combination with the images of destruction suggest that it is in fact a moral responsibility to act with violence before the inhuman “they” of Muslim terrorists cause more destruction. Not only must Americans be unaware of their role as an imperial power in the time leading to 9/11, but they must also embrace imperial power to destroy the enemy Islamic Other.

What These Comics Show (and Tell) Us
These comics, due to their unique temporal position and their heavy reliance on images to display personal and cultural beliefs, represent a snapshot of American culture in transition. Without the full retrospective of a book or the constantly renewed reality of daily television news, these comics represent the largely instinctive but also culturally mediated feelings of their creators as they attempted to engage with an Islamic Other that had become highly relevant. American culture at the time of these comics’ publications was no longer dealing with the specific realities of the 9/11 attacks themselves, such as the actual rescue of individuals from the site of the World Trade Center, but with the symbolic ramifications of the attacks as they concerned both culture and politics. What we find in the culture represented by these comics is not only a nation attempting to come to grips with a traumatic and destabilizing event, but also a nation paving the way for an increasingly militaristic future.

As we examine these constructions of the Islamic Other created directly after 9/11, it becomes easier to see how America as a nation moved from the grief of 9/11 to the invasion of two separate Islamic Middle Eastern countries, wholly unrelated to one another and largely unrelated to 9/11 itself. With the occasional exception of contributions such as those by Knight, these comics, and the American mindsets that they represent, reveal only the most cursory interest in truly defining who “they” are in the post-9/11 period. They present stereotypes and conjecture, and rely on a cultural Islamophobia shared by both creators and readers. These comics represent a culture at a time in which attempts at positive depictions of the Islamic Other rested firmly on stereotypical assumptions of who “they” were, and resulted in constructions of the Islamic Other that were easily absorbed into more violent discourses. These constructions could be applied at will to any Islamic individual or country, and the average American citizen, the American media, and the American government did not need to attempt to differentiate
between the various people and nations that match the description of the stereotypical Islamic Other.

These comics represent a culture that did not truly understand the “they” of the Islamic Other, but that dangerously believed that it did. An assumed knowledge of the Islamic Other could obscure a multitude of sins as America engaged with those “known” to be the enemy. By associating certain stereotypical characteristics to a definition of the evil Islamic Other without introducing concepts such as personal identity or individual will, the terrorist Islamic Other identity could be ascribed to all possessors of these characteristics. Rationale for attack could rest largely on shared status as the Islamic Other, and thus shared status as assumed terrorists.

The Islamic Other was construed as “they,” the enemy responsible for 9/11, and thus 9/11 became a justification for violence against all who could be labeled the Islamic Other. Iraq and Afghanistan were both countries full of the Islamic Other, just as Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein were both Islamic Other political leaders. Attempts to complicate these simplistic and incorrect associations were quickly overpowered by the collective weight of American cultural assumptions and a political administration intent on war. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, the various individuals and cultures labeled as the Islamic Other were said to have attacked us because they were evil, and were proven to be evil because they attacked us, but the “they” that attacked us and the “they” that we punished were only assumed to be the same. In these comics, we see a reflection of an American culture all too willing to believe the worst of the Islamic Other, and willing to assume the roles of both victim and aggressor. The question “why do they hate us?” was never truly answered, because as soon as a belief took hold that “they” were identified, America prepared to attack.
Works Cited


