Inducing a Global Phantasm: The Case of the Veiled Presence of Islam in *The 99* or the 'Islamic' Comic Superheroes

Lorna Quejong Israel
Asian Center, University of the Philippines-Diliman, Philippines.

Abstract: Using the concept of phantasm, this article examines the media stories by Naif Al-Mutawa, the creator of The 99, which is touted as the first 'Islamic' cartoon superheroes. His stories attempt to globalize The 99, but in a manner that veils Islam. His global phantasm, therefore, upholds the visual policy of Islam, but it also makes The 99 no longer Islamic. This is how the global phantasm is induced—by making in/visible Islam but makes questionable the super-heroic status of The 99.

Keywords*:* cartoon, comic superheroes, Islam, Naif Al-Mutawa, phantasm

I. INTRODUCTION

In defining cartooning not as a method of drawing, but "a way of seeing," McCloud is drawing attention to its "special power:" magnifying an idea by stripping it of details. In short, simplifying by amplifying (1994, 31). Strictly speaking, a cartoon drawing is empty, but the emptiness "draws our identities and awareness," thus filling it up with ideas or concepts (Ibid. 36). This became the situation of *The 99*, the first comic cartoon to feature Muslim superhero characters that represent The 99 virtues of Allah. Its creator, the Kuwaiti Muslim Naif Al-Mutawa, constructed a simplified narrative to magnify what *The 99* is all about.

Al-Mutawa engaged in what Mamdani calls 'culture talk,' a kind of rhetoric that makes culture the explanation of an event, thus stripping it of historical and political underpinning (2004, 17). He traces its foundation from the intellectual works of Bernard Lewis's *Roots of Muslim Rage* and Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, which had long prepared the Western public to equate Islam and terrorism as one and the same. Culture talk promoted the idea that the Green Peril was more dangerous than the Communist Red (Ibid., 25).

Having studied in the US and openly acknowledging his identification with American values (PRI 2014), Al-Mutawa's engagement with culture talk is understandable. His own kind of culture talk is to personalize the anxiety toward Islam that such talk had elicited. As Santo points out, "the story of *The 99* is almost always also the story" of Al-Mutawa rather than about the comic's content (2014, 686). Indeed, Saint-Louis (2011) questions the legitimacy of *The 99* as a comic book. It earned a publishing award from UNESCO and praises from influential organizations like TED Talk despite 'little proof of influence and literary value.' *The 99* became valuable, not for any result, but for its "potentials" (Ibid.).

Al-Mutawa has explained these potentials to the media as stories. These stories came in the form of interviews and media coverage in 2010-2011 when *The 99* entered the US's comic market through a 'crossover' team-up with DC Comics. International media, whose self-identity is global and having understood *The 99* as 'Muslim' tagged it as 'global' and 'Islamic.' Al-Mutawa's expressed goal is to use the comic cartoon as a

medium for 'correcting the negative perception of Islam/Muslim among Muslim themselves. His 'corrective goal' provides the context for his stories about *The 99*, which he constructed as a phantasm to underscore what makes *The 99* global, but not Islamic.

II. STORIES AS PHANTASM

Fox Harrell points out that human condition or that which we accept as reality is 'partly the result of imagination.' Imagining is made experiential by "broader stories" conveyed by different media like film, television, photography or books. These media convey a phantasm, which provides the audience a sensory experience by watching images that also contained ideas or ideas that also suggest an image. Those images and ideas are filled up by our "subjective, emotional and intellectual impressions," hence the notion of phantasm as imagined and experienced by our senses. The diagram below represents how phantasm is constructed according to Fox Harrel (2013, 11-12).

Phantasm (space) is drawn from a cultural worldview, which is basically a source of one's knowledge, beliefs, and values. As such, it also functions as a knowledge domain where one can propose an epistemic space or a shortened version of worldview. Also known as a conceptual space, the epistemic space is framed by arranging ideas or information about the recent event. These sensory images inserted into epistemic space results in the creation of a phantasm. What we see is the phantasm, but not the cultural worldview from which it is derived. By examining these sensory and ideas, one can expose the worldviews being upheld or challenged by that phantasm. Al-Mutawa provides an interesting angle to Fox-Harrel's phantasm revealed; Al-Mutawa hides as much as he reveals.

III. THE COMIC SUPERHERO AS PHANTASM: 9/11 VS THE 99

The comic superhero is a medium of phantasm. Superheroes, then and now, basically performs the same function: to impart a worldview, an epistemic understanding, of a world has gone awry (Robb 2014, 360).

> Ancient myths and legends are littered with 'supermen', gifted by gods with extraordinary powers. They offered explanations of why things were as they were, explaining customs, civilization's institutions, and origins of their specific taboos. From the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, through the Indian's *Mahabharata*, to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, right up to the Virgil's *Aeneid*, the epic tale took shape and proved to be a major influence on the creation and evolution of later superhero stories (Ibid., 20-25).

Superheroes are particularly popular during bad times or moments of social unrest and political upheavals, which generate a corpus of explanations from politicians, activists, intellectuals, media organizations and the popular culture industry. These bad times are actually good for the creators of superheroes. The economic boom of the Clinton years bankrupted the Marvel Comic Group, but the Bush/Blair war on terror was profitable for superheroes' writers (DiPaolo 2011, 1). After 9/11, the "villainous Arabs and Muslims" that serve as backdrops to American superheroes "reached a critical mass," thus creating a "market for the increasingly curious" (Phillips and Strobl 2013, 59). Though the 9/11 event "minted" new heroes from the first responders who assisted the victims and survivors, which suggests the notion that the fictional superheroes have nothing to do anymore, the "villainization of the Arab and Muslim continued" (Ibid.). Al-Mutawa has made such villainization the primary target of his phantasm.

Though 9/11 made it possible to imagine the Islamic world as a phantom or a specter, it also iconized anyone who looks like an Arab as both a "Muslim" and a "terrorist." Thus, the phantom is also a phantasm that can be corrected by a worldview of progress, modernity, and secularism. In recent years, the image (pictorial) and the imagery (idea conveyed), the Muslims have sharpened the profile of the terrorists as they started identifying themselves as Muslims (Shyrock 2010, 1). This also strengthened Al-Mutawa's belief that the prevailing Islamophobia is the fault of the Muslims themselves.

The 99 was launched in Kuwait in 2006 or five years after the 9/11 event. Al-Mutawa's initial epistemic domain is the conflation of 99/11 with 99 by a simple mathematical equation. In an open letter to his son he wrote for the BBC website (2009), Al-Mutawa addresses the third one and recounts how he figured *The 99*.

> Khalid, you were born in New York City, shortly after 9/11. I had already made a decision that I needed to find a way to take back Islam from its hostage takers, but I did not know

> how. The answer was staring me in the face. It was simple, and as difficult, as the multiplication of 9 by 11:99.

The mathematics appears simplistic but the outcome appears smart. By equating 9/11 with his 99 comic cartoon project, Al-Mutawa created the figure of the victim—Islam—and the villain—the Muslim themselves. He recalls a pre-9/11 incident in an article he wrote for the CNN (2010). He further describes his action as "a point of intellectual critical mass where my love for religion overwhelmed my sitting in silence any longer."

> Fifteen years ago I walked out of a mosque in silent protest of the imam's sermon. The imam was railing against the foreign enemies of Islam and the sinners within. With every genocidal rant came an "amen" from the congregation. As I stood up, I stared at the imam to make sure he knew that at least one person would no longer accept the recipe of his revenge.

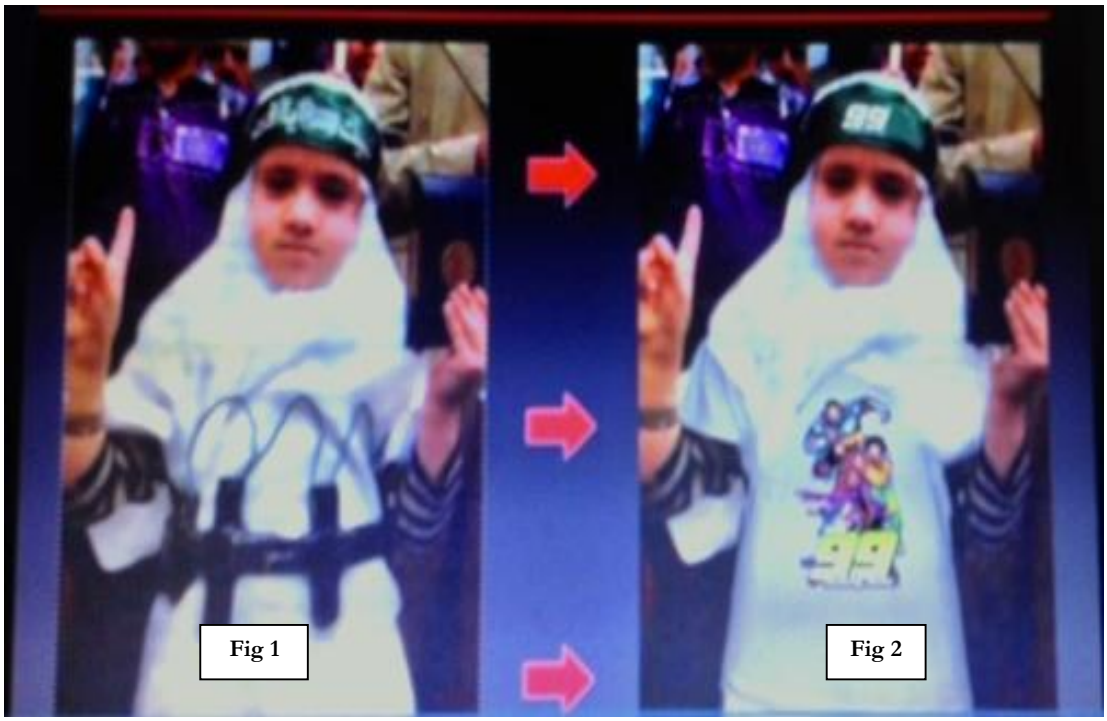
Al-Mutawa's is concerned about the image of Islam, of how it is being "manipulated even within my extended family" and how Muslims "see themselves in my part of the world." (Ibid.). He expresses "alarm at how Islam is being seen in the West" after the 9/11 event but stresses 'it is more important how Islam sees itself.' As a licensed psychologist and a father, he thinks children will get "fixated on bad things" (Rogers 2010). In other words, Muslim children might play the role of the villain, which has already been rendered visually.

Upon learning the circulation of children's stickers "glorifying suicide bombers," Al-Mutawa promptly "put his clinical psychology practice on hold" to raise the capital for "heroes the Muslim world could be proud of" (Brittan 2006). The powers and characteristics of a superhero, however, are also "the characteristic of a villain." True villains regard themselves as a superhero and just like the superhero, the villains also regard themselves as the "representative of the values of their society (Fingeroth 2014, 16). But in Al-Mutawa's epistemic domain, such figure of the villain-as-also-hero will have no space.

IV. THE ABSENT MUSLIM SUPERHERO AS PHANTASM SPACE

A moderate, Al-Mutawa considers suicide bombers neither honorable nor heroic-- though they convey the heroic image of self-sacrifice in the name of communal interest (Hassan 2009). As far as he is concerned, it is an expression of violent extremism from which Muslim children needed the figure of a superhero, which Al-Mutawa regards as absent on his side of the world. He points out that superheroes were defending North America and Japan (Macmillan 2008). "But where were the superheroes for children in the Islamic world?" (Haggman 2012). In finding none, Al-Mutawa had created the absent superhero. This absence provides the phantasm space for *The 99*, which Al-Mutawa imagined as fighting, not some actual invaders or oppressors, but ostensibly the perpetrators of Islam's negative image—the Muslims themselves.

Such perceptions have been strongly conveyed by "guns, bombs, and war," which Al-Mutawa believes can only be countered by "crowding them out," that is to present something stronger than "bombs, guns, and war." To a Western audience, these are iconizing acts that picture Islam/Muslim as extremists. Al-Mutawa tells his interviewer "how you compete with that?" Apparently, the approach is not to compete, which is more the language of crowding them out. Thus, in the same interview, Al-Mutawa shifts from crowding them out to "averaging it out" (Ellliman 2012). In other words, make it even. Al-Mutawa demonstrates his averaging-it-out approach by flashing this picture to his audience at his TED Talk (2010). He used this picture to "shock into action" prospective investors of *The 99*. For Al-Mutawa, this picture, which was selling millions, promotes a "culture of violence and death" and needs a counter-image to "save children from embracing" such a culture (Boustany 2006).



Al-Mutawa annotates this picture by calmly pointing out to an audience that is all too familiar with the sign of the cross and the horror of the swastika symbol: "you know there's a big parallel between bending the crucifix out of shape and creating the swastika." He draws a parallel between the Qur'an being twisted into a suicide bombing belt around a child's body. He informs his audience that there are parents and relatives who find this picture "cute." For Al-Mutawa, Fig 1 is neither cute nor heroic; it is a negative image. He tells his audience that by "linking enough positive things to the Qur'an, then one day we can move this child from being proud in the way they're proud there (Fig 1) to that (Fig 2)."

For Al-Mutawa, Fig.1, which he notes as a source of 'less pride,' spreads hate and must be "named and shamed." Al-Mutawa himself seems to hate and ashamed of what Fig.1 stands for. In an article he wrote, he reveals an affinity with the serial killer *Dexter*, an American television series about a man who witnessed the bloody murder of his parents as a child and grew up to become a serial murderer. Dexter, however, only kills those who deserved to die like his own fellow criminal. Al-Mutawa does not find Dexter problematic; he does not deserve to be caught, unlike 'Muslim protagonists who harm the innocents' (Al-Mutawa, 2015a).

Fig.1 is also very personal to Al-Mutawa. Consistent with his belief in the power of the image is the belief that his sons might become the very image he is trying to counteract. Upon the birth of his fifth son, a relative remarked he had enough "boys to liberate Palestine." He did not want to know if the relative was serious, but "offering my sons as cannon fodder to kill other children in a futile war was not how I wanted to spend my first day with my newborn." Since a war to liberate Palestine is 'futile,' he would rather that his boys win a basketball game (Al-Mutawa, 2015b). Al-Mutawa explains why fighting for Palestinian liberation is futile and won't provide a heroic figure worth emulating:

> One thing that kept popping into my mind was the lack of real, proper modern day role models and heroes in our part of the world. Historical figures as role models have issues; it depends on what side you belong. You know the whole George Washington conundrum…to American he's a political hero, to the British he's a political terrorist. So that's the problem with historical figures in Islamic society as well. Except with the prophet (pbuh), there are few people on whom everyone would agree as their hero (Mujtaba 2008).

Al-Mutawa's aversion to the political is evident when he turns into a humorous anecdote an incident he recalls to his TED Talk audience. As an undergraduate student at Tufts University, he distributed free falafel during the school's Middle East Day. A woman, who had just attended an Amnesty International Meeting, approached him and asked, "Who's Falafel?" With the audience laughing, Al-Mutawa emphasizes that misunderstanding due to 'twisting of religion' can be rectified by Superman and *The 99*.

Religion is central to Al-Mutawa's phantasm because it is "prone to misappropriations," particularly Islam. He promptly adds, however, that the West is also prone to use 'good books' to violent ends. His favorite example is Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, which he thinks was misappropriated by Chapman (John Lennon's killer) and Hinckley (Reagan's failed assassin) (PRI 2014). So why did not Al-Mutawa end up murderous despite being "enamored" with the author that he also read his other novels? He tried to seek the answer by rereading *Catcher in the Rye* for clues on why he himself did not have the urge to shoot somebody. But he "found nothing, "despite the personal effect on him of the author's words. Citing the millions of copies sold and linking the two violent incidents to this novel, Al-Mutawa concludes, "Clearly the fault is that of the reader" (Ibid.).

He had said the same of the readers of the Qur'an, "The problem with what's going on in this part of the world is not the Qur'an. It's the reader. It's not the book." Al-Mutawa portrays that reader as closed-minded and carries in its head 'burning thoughts of hatred' (Solotaroff 2002-2011). Coming from a licensed psychologist, Al-Mutawa's diagnosis of 'bad reader' of a 'good book' sounds simplistic. But it resonates with a public that would find it easy to explain away a murderer as psychotic. For what is a psychotic but a shortened explanation of the political, cultural, and moral ramifications of a violent act? Al-Mutawa labels those who literally venerate the Qur'an and disregard its literary 'depth and meaning' as 'shameful' and those not open to outside ideas as having a 'diseased intellect.' He calls the Kuwait court that was about to issue a verdict if he had indeed 'insulted' Islam by creating *The 99* "the dumb fish in the desert" (Al-Mutawa 2015a).

Responding to media's call for Muslims to apologize for the terroristic killing at *Charlie Hebdo*, which published a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammed, Al-Mutawa put himself on both sides of the clearly divisive situation. Siding with Islam's graphic policy, he considered the magazine's "content as heinous and hateful." But he won't apologize for acts inspired by "illiterate imams who spew hatred in their pulpits" and carried out by the "deranged, the ill-informed and the uneducated" (Al-Mutawa 2015b). His unapologetic statement further underscores his mission to 'correct' the image of Islam among Muslim themselves (Ahmad 2010). As proof the power of imagery, he cites the American television show *The Cosby Show* and how it "changed African American view of themselves" (Al-Mutawa 2015c). He likes to mention that the show did not make any reference to racial inequality at all, "just positive representation" (Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2011).

Associating one with the other is Al-Mutawa's phantasmic space because he believes in 'learning by association' as he tells his TED Talk audience. Through learning by association, he has effectively made the audience see the link between religion and superheroes.

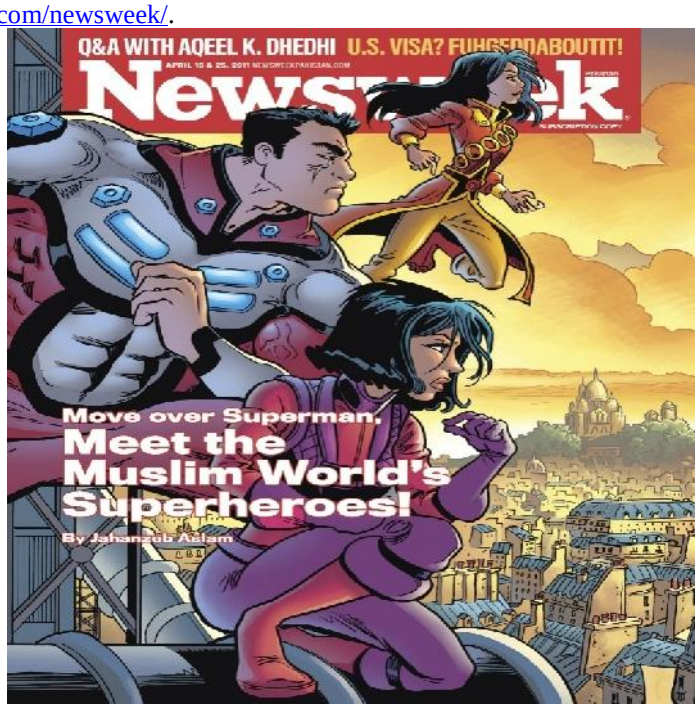
V. RELIGION AS THE EPISTEMIC DOMAIN OF SUPERHEROES

Al-Mutawa is not exactly introducing a new meaning about religion, but he is posing an epistemic space where the Islamic superheroes can be easily inserted into the existing worldview or knowledge about the superheroes. As he likes to emphasize, Western superheroes are also affiliated with a religion. Moreover, Islam and Christianity "were born in the same neighborhood under similar conditions" (Al-Mutawa 2010). Jewish writers created Batman and Superman based on the Bible (Haggman 2012). Superheroes, "like the prophets," have missing parents and received a message "from above just like the prophets." Superman was sent to earth "in a pod much like Moses" and his father, Jor-el, tells earth, "I have sent to you my only son" (Al-Mutawa 2010).

In another simple but informative observation, Al-Mutawa points out that, though god-descended, these superheroes are not religious, for instance, they do not pray (Rogers 2010). Al-Mutawa likes to stress that it is their non-religiosity that makes them universally acceptable, which could be applied to *The 99:* "The premise is that I've secularized the content and archetypes from the Qur'an so the storyline is universal and applicable to everybody" (Kennedy 2011). In interview after interview, Al-Mutawa would draw attention to this premise. He would tell his prospective investors that 'western comics books were based on Biblical archetypes" so why not a comic book based on Islamic archetypes (KUNA 2013). He also likes to tell his audience that Pokemon is based Japanese values that also achieved a global following.

Pokemon is also something close and personal to Al-Mutawa because he got the idea of The 99 attributes from Pokemon's 300 attributes. "Pokémon spurred the idea for *The 99* and if I was going to write something, it would have to be something that has the potential of Pokémon," (Kennedy, Ibid.) If such a recognizably Japanese name made it to the global, then it could be done to something unmistakably Islamic. Indeed, the media bannered *The 99* as "Islamic" in headline after headline. Al-Mutawa prominently displays some of these on *The 99* page of his website with Newsweek giving it a full cover treatment. A click of this

photograph leads the reader, not to the full article, but to an enlarged version of the same photograph http://www.al-mutawa.com/newsweek/.



This web page is consistent with Al-Mutawa's concerned with dissociating Islam from *The 99*. Initially, the only apparent Muslim in the Newsweek cover is the word Muslim although the characters are not immediately recognizable as Muslim or Arabic. But there, in the far right corner of the cover, is a mosque or rather what looks like a mosque. One could easily mistake it for a castle or a palace, which is just as well. Al-Mutawa would like to see the day when children will not recognize it as a mosque, but identity it according to their cultural terms. A child calling the mosque a temple or a church is for Al-Mutawa mission accomplished. As proof that this is possible, he cites his Irish Catholic teacher who thought that Muslims "were all Irish Catholic!" (Kennedy 2011).

VI. THE DISSOCIATED ISLAM FROM THE 99 AS PHANTASM

Al-Mutawa's technique of associating *The 99* with the universal, and therefore, its global character, is also his technique of dissociating it from Islam. He has assembled his own version of the news about *The 99* not only to emphasize the magnitude of media attention it generated but also to de-emphasize their emphasis.

In Al-Mutawa's version of media coverage, *The 99* is emphasized as global (East and West) with such attributes as 'working together,' eschewing 'hatred and selfishness,' inspiring for its 'cultural, historical, and philosophical values,' and 'secular yet spiritual.' In contrast, the stress in the original news article is on the religious affiliation of *The 99:* Islamic, Muslim, Qur'an, and 'terrorist.' Al-Mutawa's version is consistent with his goal of secularizing Islam through *The 99*.

As a medium of 'secularized Islam,' Al-Mutawa explains that *The 99* is "inspired by Islam," but "it is not Islamic" (Moulthrop 2012). Al-Mutawa emphasizes that though the characters 'personify the attributes of God,' they do not pray (Boustany 2006), go to the mosque or talk about Islam (Hagmann 2012). The editor of *The 99*, Marie Javins, echoes Al-Mutawa's definition of a secularized Islam, "they are *not* Muslim superheroes--we don't identify them as religious or not religious" (Moore, n.d.). Asked if "Islam is invisible" in *The 99*, Al-Mutawa replies "No, it's subtle...Islam as a religion is not in there."

Making Islam not obvious in *The 99* is, for Al-Mutawa, to "beat" religious extremism. To demonstrate how this will happen, Al-Mutawa another association: how art and culture prevailed over medieval Europe during the Reformation and Renaissance, and adds "that's what has to happen in the Muslim world" (Ibid.). The association, however, is meant to detach Islam from *The 99* as Al-Mutawa positioned it in the realm of art and culture. In that realm, the task of *The 99* is not religious but to "bring back wisdom and reason back to the world" (Ibid.). Al-Mutawa explains the "essence of *The 99*:"

> The concept of *The 99* doesn't directly incorporate Islam. It's only about its positive values. When you read the comic, there's no mention of Allah or the Prophet (pbuh).

> Nobody is praying, nobody is reading the Qur'an. There's no religion in the book. It's based on the basic human values that well share, the real virtues of Islam, the attributes of Allah...generosity, strength, wisdom, foresight, and mercy. This is the essence of *The 99* (Mujtaba 2008).

The translation of *The 99's* essence is built around the formula of a group of young male and female heroes who are given 99 stones that contain The 99 attributes of Allah. The stones contained the preserved knowledge of the great library of Baghdad prior to its destruction by the Mongols in 1258. These stones have been dispersed in 99 countries, hence, *The 99* characters are also drawn from different countries, both Islamic and non-Islamic, East and West. Al-Mutawa considers The 99 dispersed stones as the 'personification of the modern Islamic diaspora' (Ibid.).

Diaspora is another familiar term and strongly associated with the Jews and the imagery of forced displacement. Al-Mutawa seems to be forcing the same for the Muslims, but this for the purpose of underscoring his idea that "there is nothing fundamentally different between Islam and any other belief on Earth or any other way of being human." Thus, when asked if the characters in *The 99* are meant to be Muslim since Islam is not mentioned, Al-Mutawa says "we don't say...The 99 attributes of Allah are attributed that not only Muslims value but humanity values." These values, if detached from religion 'would bring us together' (Solotaroff, 2002-2011).

For Al-Mutawa, the Muslims are not together—with the rest of the world. Unlike minorities whose culture has already been integrated (Jewish Hannukah now scheduled during Christmas), Muslims (considering their large number in across different parts of the world), according to Al-Mutawa, have 'isolated themselves' (Ibid.). Al-Mutawa's solution is not to mention the word Muslim or Islam. This solution has been achieved by not hiring Arab or Muslim talent for *The 99* (Santo 2014, 686). One of *The 99's* talents who wrote for the series Batman and Superman stressed the no-difference approach, "Honestly, the only difference is in the specifics. It's the exact same thing. There's virtually no difference at all" (Cadwalladr 2010). This clearly creates a blank in the mind of the audience.

To what form then can *The 99* become visually appealing? Al-Mutawa admitted that "I knew from the beginning that I wanted *The 99* to look like an American comic book" (Vazquez, n.d.). So why not go straight to creating an American cartoon? "I am not naive. If it were the 98 superheroes, or the 101, no one would be interested in the stories" (Zekri 2007).

VII. ISLAMIC ARCHETYPES/STEREOTYPES AS EPISTEMIC SPACE

The different specifics that did not make any difference at all are the "Islamic archetypes," said Al-Mutawa who further explains that he did not want a "Middle Eastern style or invent anything new or unusual' (Vazquez, n.d.). With his archetype in mind, Al-Mutawa admits "always having to correct people" who have stereotyped *The 99* as Islamic: "It's not Islamic. It's inspired by Islam. It is inspired by Islam in the way that so many American comics are inspired by Judeo-Christian archetypes" (Ibid.).

When asked what are the archetypes in *The 99*, Al-Mutawa cites a) the Noor stones containing the "wisdom of the ages," which has a self-updating mechanism so that knowledge is not frozen in the past; b) characters work in groups of three young people, which make the stone more effective than if they were old; and c) the stones are subject to misuse. His basic premise is that if religion is used for the wrong reason, "you get to blow yourself up. That's where I'm coming from" (Ibid.). To his interviewer (Vazquez) Al-Mutawa's archetypes appear more symbolic rather than Islamic. He asked what exactly makes them Islamic. Al-Mutawa's answers by reverting to what he has already denied or rather what he specifically said as 'we don't say.'

> Well, for one thing, all of the characters' powers are based on the attributes of God. But also the main bad guy's name is Rughal. And as any Muslim child can tell you, Abu Rughal is the name of the one who gave directions to King Abraha's army, which was marching on the Kaaba to destroy it the year the Prophet was born. It's known as the Year of the Elephant, because there were elephants in Abraham's army. Now in the Qur'an,…

In the course of the interview, Vazquez politely told him, "it just seemed interesting to fight stereotypes with things that are sort of blank." Al-Mutawa conceded that to a non-Muslim, *The 99* are simply good stories, but Muslims would know that these stories are from the Qur'an (Santo, Ibid.). Clements and Gauvin (2014) find that Kuwaiti students recognized Islam in *The 99* despite non-reference to Islam. Some of them agreed with the principle of *jihad* as a "defensive force" and the absence of graphic violence (42). Clements and Gauvin,

however, note that none of them sensed the "revolutionary implication" of *The 99*: that the young are the most appropriate bearer of Islam's virtues (58). They rationalize this by pointing out the Kuwaitis are generally happy with their political leaders and value the 'wisdom of their elders' that having the youth take on a leadership role is one "particular idea not consonant with Islam" (58).

Al-Mutawa, however, might disagree with their observation that attempts to link Islam and *The 99*. In another radio interview, he was asked again why the characters are "not overtly religious?" He emphatically underscores that the "keyword is not Islam, it is humanity."

> I am not interested in spreading Islam. Put human values, that's what human being can agree on. When you put on religion or behavior [such as praying], people will disagree (Radio Netherlands Worldwide, 2011).

In another interview, he calls *The 99* as a way of saying "Hey, this is how I personally choose to portray Islam." He hopes that someone would respond by saying "Hey, this is how I portray it" (Musaji 2011). Someone did and led *The 99* to the *Justice League of America*. Once again, Al-Mutawa's 'learning by association' did the trick. Obama had publicly praised Al-Mutawa at the 2010 Presidential Summit on Entrepreneurship for "spreading tolerance and *The 99* as "most innovative for capturing the imagination young people" (Walid 2011). Having already established a personal connection with DC Comics, Al-Mutawa prompted them to put *The 99*, in the same way, Marvel did it to Obama upon his historic election as president.

For Al-Mutawa, Marvel had "pulled a cheap shot" when Obama became president, but DC Comics "has the opportunity to fulfill Obama's vision" (Rogers 2010). Needless to say, it was also Al-Mutawa's vision, but once hidden and revealed by the prestige and stature of an American president. Indeed, the entry of Obama has been noted as 'legitimizing' *The 99* (Ibid.).

VIII. THE DIMINISHING PHANTASM SPACE OF THE 99

The 'fulfilled vision' was the 'crossover' of *The 99* and the *Justice League of America* (JLA) composed of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman. The idea of crossover is an epistemic space. Not only is it a 'rare' feat for two sets of superheroes teaming up to battle bad and evil forces, it also serves as a 'corrective' for the 'Arabs evils' that have been beaten by Batman, Superman, and Wonder (Cadwalladr 2010). As a phantasm, the crossover becomes a shared space for the meeting of "East and West," which is another shortened version of imagining the Islamic world with the rest of the world. Such a shared phantasmic space, explains DC's Fabian Nicieza, involves a "combination of seasoned veterans (JLA) and young, idealistic heroes (*The 99*). He tries to force an image of fun by making "odd combinations" like the friendship of Women Woman and "the cute" eight-year-old Samda the Invulnerable (Rogers 2010).

The DC expressed support of "The 99's mission of universal peace and brotherhood," but it is a qualified "brotherhood." The *Justice League* has full command of all situation, but "*The* 99 have to work in little ways" to assist civilians and "also" in solving problems peacefully. And this exactly what is visualized in the six crossover issues of *The 99*/*JLA*. The old, veteran, and professional superheroes have been endowed with command and control, thus, diminishing the presence of *The 99*. This is apparent in the crossover covers of Issues 1-5.

The cover of Issue no.1 introduces both world's superheroes with the *JLA* assuming the role of the 'greatest' and *The 99* as the 'newest.' The teaser conveys the idea that the *JLA* has 'joined' *The 99* to create unbeatable "super-powered beings." The word is double-edged for it implies the union of equal while also suggesting that *The 99* needs the other for its super-power qualities. This is represented by the most familiar image of Superman and Batman enclosing *The 99's* characters, particularly the women.

The seemingly questionable super-power of *The 99* becomes clearer in the cover teaser of Issue no.2. It actually asks "how can *The 99* hope to stop an out-of-control Superman?" It gives a tentative answer: 'perhaps with the help of Batman and Wonder Woman, *The 99* can make a difference.' But the help simply underscores the uncertainty of *The 99's* power.

The cover of Issue no.3 poses the same question (Can Hafiz harness the stone's power) as JLA's Hawkman is made to "join" three members of *The 99* in earthquake-devastated Brazil thus conveying the idea that without the *JLA*, *The 99* is inadequately super though they are given prominence in the cover.

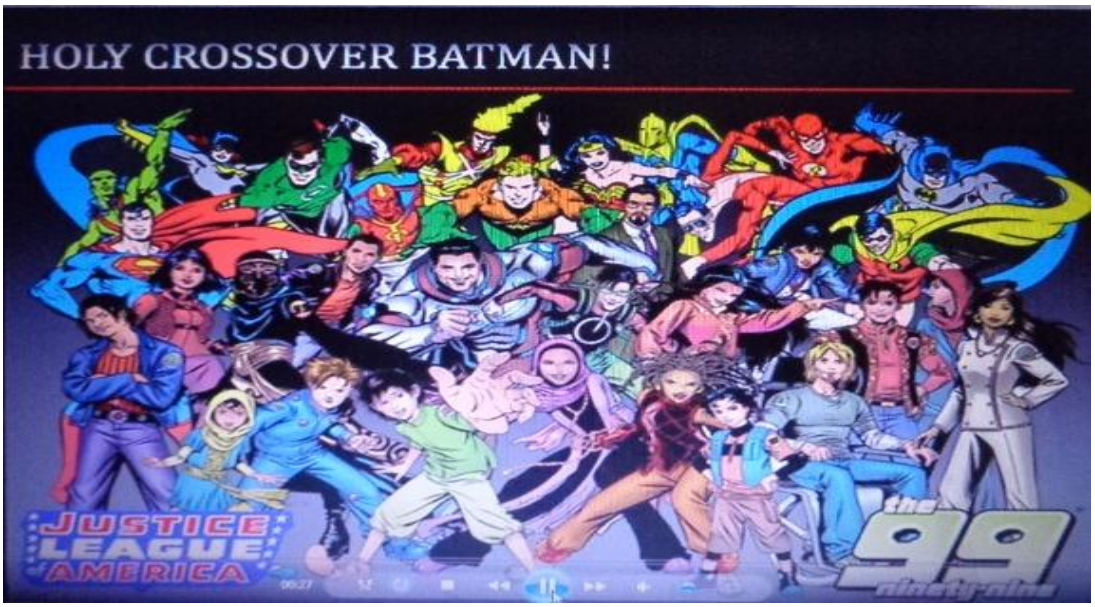
Issue no. 4 attempts to even it out between *JLA* and *The 99* as shared the 'strain of dealing with an alien invasion.' However, it is up to *JLA's* Batman to find the one item that would save the "two venerable superhero

team." Thus, the visualization of this issue's cover prominently projects an unassailable Batman in contrast to the struggling characters of *The 99.*

Issue no.5 repeats the prominence of *The 99* on the cover. The teaser, however, puts into question the integrity of their team-up with the *JLA.* "Can the united 99 and the JLA" saved Dr. Ramzi's vision of global harmony? They did, proving that the two "disparate teams" can pull themselves together (Issue no. 6). But the final issue of the crossover, however, bows to the veterans and the old, or more precisely, the young literally bowing down to the upright positioning of the old and the veteran *JLA.*

IX. CONCLUSION: PICTURING THE BLANK OR THE IN/VISIBLE

The *JL/The 99*crossover issues did not deviate from Al-Mutawa's vision, which he first presented during his 2010 TED Talk. Understandably playing into his American audience's cultural sensitivity, Al-Mutawa first flashed the picture of the *JLA* followed by *The 99*.



Note that the title of Al-Mutawa's slide makes an explicit reference to the Holy Cross while he completely omits Islamic references to The 99's characters as he introduces some of them to his audience. He has maintained the same position of muting or making invisible the Islamic derivation of *The 99.* No doubt, Al-Mutawa will always be asked on what makes it Islamic-inspired to an audience curious or unfamiliar with it and he will provide the same answer—of leaving one's imagination blank until he fills it up with information and icons that are already global, and therefore shared, in the first place.

Al-Mutawa's phantasmic stories, which literally cover-up the Islamic in *The 99* are also a screen against picturing it as Islamic or Arabic, which is a seeming conformity with Islam's visual policy on its god. Its global rendition by DC comics effectively makes it in/visible. It is there, but it is not immediately seen as Islam-inspired unless Al-Mutawa explains. In other words, it is global because it is not Islamic.

In another interview, Al-Mutawa is asked to choose between the power of flight and the power of invisibility. He chooses invisibility because it "takes the pressure off" (Burney 2011). Without Al-Mutawa's stories, the pressure of being Islamic/Muslim is divested from *The 99.* But his phantasmic stories also create the same effect—of making Islam dis/appear—into the heroic prestige of Superman et.al. If such is the case, *The 99* are neither super nor heroes. They are basically an empty cartoon from which a phantasm can be drawn.

REFERENCES

[1] McCloud, Scott, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994).

[2] Mamdani, Mahmood,*Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

[3] PRI. "A Saudi Fatwa Shuns the First Comic Book to Feature Muslim Superheroes." March 29, 2014. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-03-28/saudi-fatwa-shuns-first-comic-book-feature-muslim-superheroes

[4] Santo, Avi. ""Is It a Camel? Is It a Turban? No, It's The 99": Branding Islamic Superheroes as Authentic Global Cultural Commodities." *Television New Media 15 (2014*): 679-695. 2014 15: 679 http://tvn.sagepub.com/content/15/7/679

[5] Fox Harrell, D., *Phantasmal Media: An Approach to Imagination, Computation, and Expression* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2013).

[6] Robb, Brian J., *A Brief History of Superheroes* (Philadelphia: Running Press Book Publishers, 2014).

[7] DiPaolo, Marc, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film.* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2011).

[8] Phillips, Nickie D., and Staci Strobl, *Comic Book Crime: Truth, Justice, and the American Way* (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

[9] Shryock, Andrew, ed., *Islamophobia/Islamophilia : Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

[10] Al-Mutawa, Naif.. "Why I based Superheroes on Islam." July 2, 2009. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8127699.stm

[11] _____. "Islam-inspired Comic Superheroes Fight for Peace." *CNN*, August 22, 2010. Accessed October 23, 2015. http://edition.cnn.com/2010/OPINION/08/22/al-mutawa.islamic.superheroes/

[12] Rogers, Vaneta. "Islamic Archetypes: The 99 Meet DC's Justice League." August 23, 2010. Accessed 17 November 2015. http://www.newsarama.com/5945-islamic-archetypes-the-99-meet-dc-s-justice-league-in-oct.html

[13] Brittan, David. "Why Can't a Comic Be Islamic." 2006. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://www.tufts.edu/alumni/magazine/summer2006/departments/alumniNewsmakers.html

[14] Elliman, Henry. "Haverford Conversation: Dr. Naif-Al Mutawa." February 20, 2012. Accessed November 15, 2015. https://www.haverford.edu/college-communications/news/haverford-conversation-dr-naif-al-mutawa

[15] Fingeroth, Danny. *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and our Society.* New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2004.

[16] Hasan, Riaz. "What Motivates the Suicide Bombers? Study of A Comprehensive Database Gives a Surprising Answer." September 3, 2009. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/what-motivates-suicide-bombers-0

[17] MacMillan, Leslie. "Profile: Naif Al-Mutawa." January 21, 2008. Accessed November 5, 2015. http://www.tufts.edu/home/feature/?p=99

[18] Hagmann, Jannis."The 99" Cartoons Islamic Super-Heroes." August 27, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. https://en.qantara.de/content/the-99-cartoons-islamic-super-heroes

[19] Elliman, Henry. "Haverford Conversation: Dr. Naif-Al Mutawa." February 20, 2012. Accessed November 15, 2015. https://www.haverford.edu/college-communications/news/haverford-conversation-dr-naif-al-mutawa

[20] Al-Mutawa, Naif. "Superheroes inspired by Islam." *Ted Talk*, July 2010. Accessed November 15, 2010. http://www.ted.com/talks/naif_al_mutawa_superheroes_inspired_by_islam

[21] Hasan, Riaz. "What Motivates the Suicide Bombers? Study of A Comprehensive Database Gives a Surprising Answer." September 3, 2009. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/content/what-motivates-suicide-bombers-0

[22] Hagmann, Jannis."The 99" Cartoons Islamic Super-Heroes." August 27, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. https://en.qantara.de/content/the-99-cartoons-islamic-super-heroes

[23] Boustany, Nora. "Superheroes Powered on Islam." *Washington Post*, February 8, 2006. Accessed November 10, 2015. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/02/07/AR2006020702034_pf.html

[24]Al-Mutawa, Naif (a). "The Dumb Fish in the Desert." 2015. Accessed November 20, 2015. http://www.al-mutawa.com/articles/the-dumb-fish-in-the-desert/

[25] Al-Mutawa, Naif. (b). "A Tale of 4 Emails." 2015. Accessed November 20, 2015. http://www.al-mutawa.com/articles/a-tale-of-4-emails/

[26] Mujtaba, Syed Ali. "The 99'—A World Class Brand with Muslim Values." *Dinar Standard*, May 28, 2008. Accessed October 15, 2015. http://dinarstandard.com/marketing/the-99-a-world-class-brand-withmuslim-values/

[27] Solotaroff, Isaac. "Interview: Naif Al-Mutawa." 2002-2011. Accessed 10 November 2015. http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/kuwait605/creator.html

[28]Ahmad, Zeeshan. "The 99: Superheroes turn to Islam." August 20, 2011. Accessed 20 November 2015. http://tribune.com.pk/story/235834/the-99-superheroes-turn-to-islam/

[29]Al-Mutawa, Naif (c). "Cheering a Muslim as we do a murderer." 2015. Acccessed November 20, 2015. http://www.al-mutawa.com/articles/cheering-a-muslim-as-we-do-a-murderer/

[30] Hagmann, Jannis."The 99" Cartoons Islamic Super-Heroes." August 27, 2012. Accessed November 12, 2015. https://en.qantara.de/content/the-99-cartoons-islamic-super-heroes

[31] Rogers, Vaneta. "Islamic Archetypes: The 99 Meet DC's Justice League." August 23, 2010. Accessed 17 November 2015. http://www.newsarama.com/5945-islamic-archetypes-the-99-meet-dc-s-justice-league-in-oct.html

[32] Kennedy, Channing. "Comic Artist Re-Draws Islam with Secular Superheroes in "The 99." October 14, 2011. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://www.colorlines.com/articles/comic-artist-re-draws-islam-secular-superheroes-99

[33] KUNA . "Pop-culture: Kuwait's Passport to the World." *Kuwaiti Times*, August 24, 2013. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://news.kuwaittimes.net/pop-culture-kuwaits-passport-world/

[34] Moulthrop, Daniel. "Which Is Scarier: Terrorists or Superheroes?" *HuffPost Impact*, July 3, 2012. Accessed November 15, 2015 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-moulthrop/the-99-comic-book_b_1474430.html

[35] Moore, Peter. "Talks to Marie Javins, How I Help Create International Superheroes." n.d. Accessed November 6, 2015.http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/magazine/articles/interviews/marie-javins-the-99-international-superheroes?page=all#

[36] Cadwalladr, Carole. "The 99: the Islamic Superheroes Fighting Side by Side with Batman." October 24, 210. Accessed August 9, 2015. http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/oct/24/99-islamic-heroes-batman-superman

[37] Vasquez, Michael C. "Best Dad Ever." Bidoun, Issue 23. n.d. Accessed November 15, 2015. http://www.bidoun.org/magazine/23-squares/best-dad-ever-by-michael-c-vazquez/

[38] Zekri, Sonja. "Muslim Superheroes: The Arab Hulks." December 14, 2007. Accessed November 20, 2011. https://en.qantara.de/content/muslim-superheroes-the-arab-hulks

[39] Clements, James., and Richard Gauvain. "The Marvel of Islam: Reconciling Muslim Epistemologies through a New Islamic Origin Saga in Naif al-Mutawa's The 99." *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*26: *1, Spring (2014):* 36-70. doi:10.3138/jrpc.26.1.36

[40] Radio Netherlands Worldwide. "Image busting: The State We're In." May 28, 211. Accessed 22 November 2015. http://www.rnw.nl/english/radioshow/image-busting

[41] Musaji, Sheila. "The 99 Superheroes." October 26, 2011. Accessed 22 November 2015. http://theamericanmuslim.org/tam.php/features/articles/the-99-superheroes

[42] Walid, Tamara. "Islam-Inspired Comic Superheroes, Lauded by Obama, Head to U.S."October 3, 2011. Accessed November 17, 2011. http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2011-10-02/islam-inspired-comic-superheroes-lauded-by-obama-head-to-u-s-

[43] http://comicvine.gamespot.com/the-99/4060-57699/

[44] Burney, Bushra. Interview: Dr. Naif Al-Mutawa, Creator of the Comic Book The 99. October 9, 2011. Accessed August 23, 2015. http://caffeinatedmuslim.com/2011/10/09/interview-dr-naif-al-mutawa-creator-of-the-comic-book-the-99/