*No Normal-izing*

Before I begin, let me thank both the Religion and Popular Culture Unit and the Study of Islam Unit for electing to host this roundtable on *Muslim Superheroes* today. My thanks also go out to the Ilex Foundation, Mizan, Michael Pregill, my co-editor Martin Lund, and Harvard University Press for their efforts in publishing the collection. Finally, let me express my appreciation to today’s excellent speakers and their commentaries. You’re all too kind.

You are all too kind. This is what I struggled with in crafting this response. I spoke with Martin, now back overseas, about my reservations – about how I felt criticism and engagement with the book should be pushed further. He quipped, “I’m going to leave you to plot our revenge for people's appreciation.”

I also consulted with Rachel Wagner, author of *Godwired* and beautifully, brutally honest in public and scholarly spheres alike. She said, “Maybe there’s something about this topic that makes people be tentative. Is it our political climate making people scared in some way to say something?”

I considered that possibility. My post-mortem of *Muslim Superheroes*, the final column for *Mizan Pop*’s year-long lead-up and coverage of the book, was entitled, “Muslim Superheroes Arrives...in the Age of Trump.” It may have been a long time coming, but there was a distinct shift in the political and cultural landscape of the United States between when Martin and I first envisioned the book and when it was published. It took many of us, perhaps the most privileged of us, greatly by surprise. It took me by surprise.

So, no, I don’t see Elizabeth, Aaron, Mohamed, or Constance as scared, not at all. They were, perhaps, even worse: polite.
The worst thing we could do with *Muslim Superheroes* is accept it outright. Reviews may be positive for it. Some libraries may order it. Conferences such as the American Academy of Religion may address it. All this is to the good.

To leave it as is, however, untroubled and undissected, is as good as burying it – or to put it on the shelf, its spine never cracked. The best way to honor it, I believe, is to test it as fully and as mercilessly as we dare.

First off, too many questions remain unanswered: Why are female bodies the most common carriers for Islam into the superhero genre? Would greater interaction between the contributors during the revision process have benefitted *Muslim Superheroes* in terms of consistency – or might it have homogenized it? Why might our contributors have been particularly reticent to include panels and images from the works analyzed? Why did we need no screen images today? Where are the Muslim creators and professionals for this genre?

Most of all, how can Muslim superheroes and their discussion settle into a comfort zone during a period of extreme political abnormality?

Less than a half-year after the book’s release, it is too soon for Muslim superheroes to feel normalized. Ms. Marvel has been absorbed into the Marvel Comics pantheon at a record speed. You can already play and manipulate her as part of the *Contest of Champions* phone app or the Lego Marvel video game. Simon Baz, likewise, has been dropped into a buddy space-cop series, with nearly all the rough edges of this Green Lantern shaved off of him and streamlined for maximum warp. The 99 have been smothered by Saudi muftis and Qahera has gone silent.

In the conclusion to *Muslim Superheroes*, Martin Lund and I suggest looking at the work overall less as a book and more as a tool. It was meant, as we saw it, as a scholarly and

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pedagogical instrument to open up lanes of discussion, to disentangle confused histories, and to connect wide branches of inquiry across cultures and across disciplines. It was a tool designed for one purpose: to clear a space.

It could be a space for interdisciplinary engagement, a space for irreverence, a space for interfaith pluralistic dialogue, a space for genre-blurring or Islamic intertextuality. We have tried to set a table. Now, who is coming to the feast? And what hot plates are they cooking?

Rachel asked me another question: “What should the future be for criticism of this kind?” It genuinely surprised me how quickly I had an answer, simply “New comics.”

Mohamed asks the same thing, namely, “what’s next?” My personal fear is that ‘what’s next’ is *Muslim Superheroes* being a throw-away citation in various papers and articles over the next decade, a shorthand for saying, “Islam and superheroes? Yeah, it’s already been done.”

What’s next, I hope, is a fight – not a bloody or hostile one, but a game of one-upmanship where bolder and more sophisticated Muslim characters arise in the genre. We need a struggle over what the “Muslim superhero” is, what it can be, and what it should be. Islamic scholars and comics pros need to connect and fuse their respective knowledge into a new wave of unignorable characters. Comics, especially the independent market, remains a cheap, fringe medium, and superheroes are still an all-American fantasy product. To cede this space to Disney, to Warner Brothers, to Hollywood, or to Amazon would be worse than anything Charlie Hebdo ever published.

It is not normal to have Muslim superheroes. That is why they can still have power.
I am not ashamed of *Muslim Superheroes*, and I cannot begrudge my colleagues for being so embracing of it. It is a noble effort. It is a first step. Perhaps it can even be regarded as a foundation or jumping-off point.

It is also a dull tool. A blunt instrument. And we have to sharpen it.