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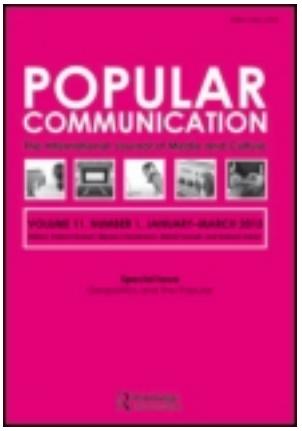

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Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11, by Evelyn Alsultany

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BOOK REVIEW

Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11. By Evelyn Alsultany. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2013, ISBN 9780814707326, 239 pages, $23.00 (paperback); ISBN 9780814707319, 239 pages, $75.00 (hardback).

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In the aftermath of 9/11, the American media was not in fact saturated with the incendiary images of Arab and Muslims that one might have suspected. In a country that has during times of war seen particular migrant populations excessively policed and governed (as in the case of Japanese Americans during the Second World War or Russians during the Cold War), it is perhaps surprising that the American Arab and Muslim communities were not more demonized in the media. On the contrary, there appears to have been a more measured response from both the government and the media who were quick to stress that despite having a handful of terrorists in its midst, the vast majority of Muslim and Arab Americans are peaceful and fully assimilated into the American way of life. Apart from the predictable reactionary response from Fox News and other far right news outlets, there was an attempt, particularly in television popular dramas, to present more measured representations of Arabs and Muslims, or at least more complex narratives that seemed to want to make a point of not tarnishing an entire "race" or religious group as terrorists, as savage or barbaric. For many, this sympathetic portrayal of Arab and Muslim identities represented progress in the United States' troubled relationship with race and racism, even suggesting that it was indicative of a new postrace era, following the election of the first black president.

In *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11,* Evelyn Alsultany interrogates these supposedly more rounded representations through case studies of television dramas such as *24, Sleeper Cell, Law and Order*, news coverage of the War and Terror, particularly relating to domestic affairs, and public service announcements. Coming from a radical cultural studies perspective, Alsultany argues that what appear as positive representations of Arab and Muslim identities in the media obscures the very real instances of racial violence, and civil liberty and human rights violations encountered by Arab and Muslim (and South Asian) in US communities. Alsultany's argument is that these phenomena, rather that appearing to contradict each other, are in fact interconnected. As she states, "government and media discourses" together form a "hegemonic field of meaning" (p. 7); that is, they are inextricably intertwined. As such, the task for Alsultany is to explain how sympathetic representations of Arab and Muslim American identities circulate within this wider field of meaning, and how this particular discursive

formation feeds into government policy. Indeed Alsultany's unique contribution to the expanding field of literature on representations of Islam in the Western media (see also Morey & Yaqin, 2011; Birkenstein, Froula, & Randell, 2010; Poole, 2002) is in treating equally seriously both governmental and media discourses, and the representations of Arab and Muslim identities contained therein. What makes *Arabs and Muslims in the Media* a potentially important intervention is in how it focuses as much on the destruction of civil liberties as it does on textual representations.

Chapters of the book focus on different dimensions of media representations of Muslim and Arab Americans identities, such as the Muslim-as-terrorist stereotype, Arabs and American civil rights, and public service announcements on *American Muslim* (rather than Muslim American) identity and US citizenship. Two of the chapters each examine the specific representation of Muslim/Arab women and men. As stated, Alsultany wants to complicate the idea that the less obvious, more apparently complex narrativization of Muslim and Arab experience in the United States represents progress. She sees this instead as a new mode of racial representation that serves a specific ideological function. For instance, Alsultany is particularly interested in the sympathetic portrayal of Muslim and Arab Americans that feature in contemporary US television drama; her argument is that what once appeared a novel storyline has now become a standardized trope post 9/11. Within this discourse, Arabs and Muslims appear as victims of hate crimes, as oppressed women, or as true patriots (often working for US security agencies). We even find instances where the Islamic terrorist is humanized, or the enemy is flipped, with the former Muslim/Arab/South Asian suspect innocent all along. But rather than representing a more enlightened view of Muslim and Arab Americans identities, Alsultany argues that such a trope has an ideological effect, a way of appearing multiculturalist and sensitive to cultural issues, while the state continues to practise racialist policies. As Alsultany states, what appears as progressive is in fact "a new kind of racism, one that purports to be antiracist while perpetrating and justifying racism" (p. 50).

Alsultany describes how the ideological function of this new representational mode works in two ways. The first is through a discourse of "simplified complexity," which Alsultany describes as signifying "a new era of racial representation" (p. 21). Representations formed within this discourse appear to challenge stereotypes and gross simplifications of Muslim and Arab American identities, but actually produce the effect of reinforcing the Othering of Arabs and Muslims and in turn justifying and legitimating racist policies and practices in real life. For Alsultany, "simplified complex racial representations [. . .] performs the ideological work of producing a post-race moment in which denying the severity of the persistence of institutionalized racism becomes possible" (p. 28). The second way in which the ideological function of this new mode of racial representation operates is through affect. Alsultany explains how the affective responses that representations of "Good Muslim" and "Bad Muslim" evoke are carefully managed and controlled. She is particularly interested in the ideological underpinning to sympathy achieved through "benevolent emotions that connect the viewer's feelings of sympathy, remorse, and mourning to the identity of the nation" (p. 68). For Alsultany feelings of regret over the treatment of Arabs and Muslims produced through television dramas and news coverage operate to relieve viewer-citizens of any blame: viewer-citizens can feel bad, remorseful, and apologetic for the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans while having faith that this moment will eventually pass once the terrorist threat has been eradicated. In other words, through controlling the affective responses to particular storylines and characters, racial profiling is presented as a highly unfortunate *but necessary* policy in these supposedly exceptional times.

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Alsultany provides a highly compelling case for the emergence of a new representational mode post 9/11 that also makes a concerted attempt at unravelling the complex relations between media representations and the actual treatment of Arabic and South Asian minorities in the United States (Muslim or otherwise). The book draws from an impressive range of texts, taking in a variety of media forms, making for a rich and detailed sweep of representations of Arab and Muslim American identities in the North American mediascape post 9/11. But further to its equal emphasis on media representation and government policy, the book's most unique and important contribution to this debate is its stress on the affective responses evoked by the seemingly sympathetic portrayal of Arab and Muslim American identities, and how the pity such images arouse conceals the exclusionary logics that these representations actually in fact produce. This is a convincing argument that provides an original and telling explanation of the apparent contradiction between the "positive" ways in which Arabs and Muslims are represented in the media, and their negative treatment at the hands of the US state in everyday life.

Alsultany to her credit also attempts to engage with the consumption and, to a lesser extent, production dimensions of the politics of representation. However, considering the level of detail entailed in Alsultany's textual work, these two aspects of the argument, perhaps inevitably, feel underdeveloped. For instance, Alsultany analyses online forums in order to examine and interpret audience reactions to particular news stories or television dramas, but there is so only so much space she can afford to this, and these sections can feel a little cursory rather than a key component of the analysis. In addition with regard to questions of production, there are occasional references to how the "simplified complex" representations of Arabs and Muslim Americans are a product of the profit-making imperative of the cultural industries, but these are only ever fleeting. Admittedly focusing on production is not necessarily the author's main concern. However, considering that one of the book's key theoretical touchstones is the work of Herman Gray, whose major contribution to the study of cultural politics is in precisely grounding the analysis of media texts within their institutional as well as social contexts (see Gray, 2004, 2005), adopting a similar approach would allow Alsultany to more effectively unpack the relations between neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism, something that is alluded to but never quite followed through. In the book's epilogue, Alsultany calls for a more progressive cultural/representational politics that decouples Muslim and Arab identities from the War on Terror—something that depicts the complexity and diversity and richness of Muslim American experience—but it is only in paying closer attention to the conditions of cultural production through which representations get made that effective counter-strategies can be conceptualized and then put into practice.

Nonetheless, as a critical account of the ways in which racialized minorities are represented in the Western media in contemporary times, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* is a further valuable contribution to the field. In particular, it provides a vital critique of what appear as "positive" and progressive representations of Arab and Muslim American identities, while exposing the contradictions between media representations and the actual "reality" of Muslim and Arab, and South Asian experience in the United States. Alsultany has produced a detailed yet highly readable and accessible book of value to students and researchers alike, and even general readers interested in the media's implication in the War on Terror.

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