Evelyn Alsultany / Arab and Muslim stereotypes influence thought, policies

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Every week, I read about yet another hate crime or act of discrimination against Arabs or Muslims in the United States. Over a single month earlier this summer, a mosque was burned down in Stockton, Calif.; a Muslim woman who wears a headscarf lost her job at Air France in North Carolina; and Newt Gingrich compared Muslims to Nazis during a GOP debate.

Certainly there is greater fear and suspicion of Arabs and Muslims since 9/11, but given that we live in a society that has made great strides in disavowing racism and harmful stereotypes, why are Arab and Muslim Americans still the targets of bias and negative perceptions? Why does it make headlines when a cable television channel decides to focus its new reality series on five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan?

I believe the answers can be found in the history of stereotypical imagery in U.S. popular culture. Over the last century, Arabs and Muslims have been portrayed as sheiks, belly dancers, oppressed veiled women and terrorists. These images have appeared in everything from Halloween costumes and comic books to scores of Hollywood films.

All are welcome to learn more about this issue by visiting the Arab American National Museum's online exhibit, "Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes" at www.arabstereotypes.org. In addition, throughout the month of July, Turner Classic Movies is airing a month-long movie series, Race & Hollywood: Arab Images on Film, screening films from the 1920s to the present with expert commentary by noted media critic Dr. Jack Shaheen.

The museum exhibit features images of Arabs and Muslims in sheet music, men's magazines, detective novels, children's toys, advertisements, movie posters, pulp fiction, and many other artifacts of American pop culture from the late 1800s to the present. It contrasts how Arabs and Muslims have been narrowly portrayed with who they are in real life: a diverse group of people.

The exhibit shows these images as part of the history of Orientalism, a term coined by the late scholar Edward Said which refers to a lens, akin to putting on a pair of glasses, that skews one's vision. We have been primed for decades to see Arabs and Muslims as exotic or dangerous.

Many of us know that such images are make-believe, but we need to confront the reality that stereotyping has a significant impact. On a mundane level, it influences everyday interactions. How many Arab and Muslim American women have been asked if they are oppressed or if they are now liberated since they live in the United States? On a more significant level, stereotyping a diverse group of people can influence government policies and even support war initiatives.

Arabs and Muslims are not the only groups that have been "othered." Portraying African Americans as an inferior race provided the necessary logic to justify slavery and later segregation during the Jim Crow era. Japanese Americans were portrayed as disloyal to justify their internment during World War II.

It's time to acknowledge the power of popular culture. With greater awareness we can prevent these images from influencing policies and impacting human lives.

Evelyn Alsultany teaches at the University of Michigan. She is the co-editor of the book, "Arab and Arab American Feminisms" and guest curator of "Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes."

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