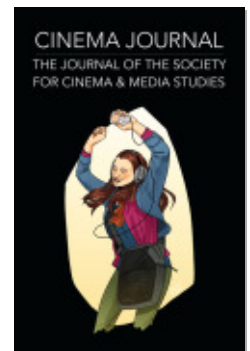# Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11 by Evelyn Alsultany (review)

Tarik Ahmed Elseewi

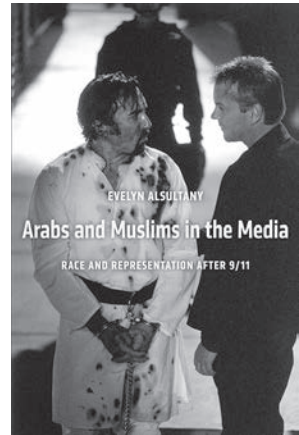# Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11

by Evelyn Alsultany. New York University Press. 2012. $23.00 paper; $9.99 e-book. 240 pages.

reviewed by Tarik Ahmed Elseewi

I n *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, Evelyn Alsultany provides a useful resource for those who are interested in thinking through our "postracial" social moment generally and in the representational strategies deployed against Arabs and Muslims specifically.[1] An accessible yet theoretically sound work, this book was very well received by my students at Whitman College who were studying representations of the Middle East, and it provided substantial material examples, theoretical grounding, and room for productive discussion.

It is commonly held (at least among scholars) that the image of the Arab and/or Muslim has been rendered as distorted and monstrous in the affective wake of September 11, 2001. The most cursory of inquiries can confirm this belief. From the Islamic terrorists who stalk *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) to the comparison of Ebola to Islamic terrorism on Fox News in October 2014, the association of Muslims and Arabs with social dysfunction, irrational violence, disease, and illogical political extremes is right there on the surface of everyday culture.[2] September 11, we've been repeatedly told, has changed *everything*.

However, for many scholars who work in fields that have been touched by the aftermath of this date (which very might well be *all* scholars), the notion that 9/11 was a transformative event is problematic. This "problem" is not that 9/11 *didn't* change culture but that 9/11 is used to *limit* discussion of historical transformation. Those who are interested in the Middle East or interested in race and representation in the American media (especially the representation of Arabs and Muslims) know well that the representations that dominate our contemporary public life have long taproots in the history of the American

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1   Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

2   "RPT: ISIS Eyeing Ebola as Biological Weapon," *FOX News Insider*, November 16, 2014, http://insider.foxnews.com/2014/10/31/rpt-isis-eyeing-ebola-biological-weapon.

twentieth century. The political, social, diplomatic, cultural, and emotional problems that "9/11" is used to describe existed before September 11, 2001. An insistence on the primacy of 9/11 is also an insistence on a limited historical analysis, one that begins in 2001 and runs until the present: one that forgets a century of American involvement in the region and a century of negative stereotyping in our media, literature, and art.

If, in other words, 9/11 changed everything in terms of the representation of Arabs and Muslims, then what was Edward Said writing about in his (pre-9/11) *Orientalism*?[3] What kinds of problems was Jack Shaheen discussing in *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*?, originally published in 2001 *before* 9/11.[4] It is this tradition of solid description and substantive, relevant theorizing of the troubled representational relationships between East and West that Evelyn Alsultany enters with her book *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*. Although Alsultany explores representations *after* 9/11, her critical nuance makes clear that, while 9/11 names a transformative moment in portrayals of Arabs and Muslims, it is neither the beginning nor the grounding cause of these portrayals.

While the reactionary, right-wing attacks against Arabs and Muslims by Fox News and its ilk—and the reactionary, liberal attacks on the same by figures such as Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher—are glaringly obvious and gather much of the scant public attention directed toward the representations of these groups, Alsultany chooses to begin in a different and much more interesting place: "positive" representations. Alsultany asks, in the face of a rising tide of overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims, in the face of a toxic cultural environment in which the simple existence of Muslims and Arabs in an American political context is problematized, how do we grapple with the seemingly positive representations that populate so much of our dramatic televisual output? The too-easy answer is to assume that these seemingly positive portrayals balance out the negative ones and ultimately leave our society in a position of equality and fairness.

In a similar way to how critical feminist theorists react toward (unfounded) claims of a "postfeminist" society in which feminism can be valorized only after it is pronounced dead, so too we recognize the frustration of critical race scholars who try to point out the injustice of representations in a "postracial" society where race can be discussed only in the context of its contemporary irrelevance.[5] This is the frustration born from trying to analyze a systemic demonization of Arabs and Muslims (or other racial, ethnic, and/or religious groups), only to be confronted with a handful of seemingly complex and robust "proper" representations.

In fact, as Alsultany convincingly shows, "the production and circulation of 'positive' representations of the (Arab and Muslim) 'enemy' has become essential to projecting the United States as benevolent, especially in its declaration of war and official support of racist policies. TV dramas have become essential, though often

3 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

4 Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, 3rd ed. (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2014).

5 Angela McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," *Feminist Media Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 255–264.

unwitting, collaborators in the forming of a new post-race racism."[6] She describes sympathetic images of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 as working to give the impression that racism is not tolerated in the United States despite the numerous policies that have targeted and disproportionately affected Arabs and Muslims.[7] This, in turn, helps to support a new kind of racism that decries racism outwardly but produces the logic and facts necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices.

Theoretically, Alsultany assails these seemingly positive portrayals with her explanation of what she calls "simplified complex representations."[8] These are depictions that appear to challenge existing stereotypes and in doing so contribute to the multicultural, postracial moment we all supposedly inhabit. And yet, as she argues, most of these shows do this while maintaining representational strategies that legitimize racist policies and practices such as torture, incarceration, and accusation. She lists various modes of this "simplified complex representation": inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans into the story; sympathizing with the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans after 9/11; challenging the Arab-Muslim conflation with diverse Muslim identities; flipping the enemy (i.e., pretending the enemy is Arab or Muslim until the final reveal, when it is shown to be someone from a mainstream group); humanizing the terrorist; projecting a multicultural US society; and fictionalizing the Middle Eastern or Muslim country.

For Alsultany, this new form of representing "terrorism" stems from a growing cultural sensitivity to the negative impact of stereotyping. Programs go out of their way to point out that not all Arabs are terrorists and not all terrorists are Muslims. Yet these programs maintain a context in which the representation of Arabs and Muslims is forever associated with terrorism. Even if, Alsultany argues, the individual characters represented are not themselves involved in terrorism, their existence is invoked in an exploration of terrorism.

A particularly salient example for Alsultany was the dramatic series *24* (Fox, 2001–2010). She argues that the show provided a platform through which to legitimize the efficacy of torture and helped paint Arabs and Muslims as associated with terrorism. By humanizing the terrorists or using patriotic Arab or Muslim characters, shows such as *24* co-opt multiculturalist discourse and produce an image of seeming social complexity. This represents the US government and military as anti-racist even though the very framing logic of such shows legitimizes torture and incarceration substantially on the basis of racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation. Above all, what shows like *24* and others that depict Arabs and Muslims in a troubled light do is articulate a nation in constant danger. This, in turn, helps to create a citizenry accustomed to war, fear of the ethnic or religious other, and ultimately willing to sacrifice democratic ideals to an ever more powerful surveillance state.

After introducing her argument and theoretical description, Alsultany goes into specific details. She does a wonderful job of grounding her potentially abstract arguments in the particulars of specific representations using a number of contemporary televisual examples. Of particular interest is her discussion of the Western penchant

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6 Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, 7.

7 Ibid., 15.

8 Ibid., 21.

for wanting to save Muslim women from Muslim men and the tendency in American representations to regulate and vent away sympathy for Arab men.

In short, Alsultany's book is of great value to those interested in contemporary cultural studies, politics, race and ethnic studies, or feminist representational analysis. It is straightforward and capable of supplying both the details and the larger principles to those interested in investigating our "postracial" social moment.   ✳

TV Milestones Series

Batman
by Matt Yockey. Wayne State University Press.
2014. $15.64 paper; $9.99 e-book. 160 pages.

Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In
by Ken Feil. Wayne State University Press.
2014. $15.99 paper; $9.99 e-book. 168 pages.

24
by John McCullough. Wayne State University Press.
2014. $15.99 paper; $9.99 e-book. 144 pages.

The L Word
By Margaret T. McFadden. Wayne State
University Press.
2014. $15.99 paper; $9.99 e-book. 152 pages.

reviewed by DEREK KOMPARE

Short monographs based on single films, TV series, or video games have been a prominent format in media studies for the past decade or so. They're popular with publishers and scholars, though for different reasons. Publishers can build a potentially long-running series around a particular medium or genre, and scholars can carry out a relatively deep, multifaceted analysis on a single text. That said, as a form longer than an article but shorter than a traditional book, they also have their own potential pitfalls. While the singular focus has its advantages, the format certainly isn't boundless. The word count of thirty-five thousand provides enough room to develop multiple points but not enough to dig *too* deeply or *too* broadly. Similarly, the understandable remit from publishers to be widely accessible (to undergraduates as well as interested fans of the text) necessitates clearer writing, including the brief treatment of theoretical