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Media Representations and the Criminalization of Arab Americans and Muslim Americans (2005)

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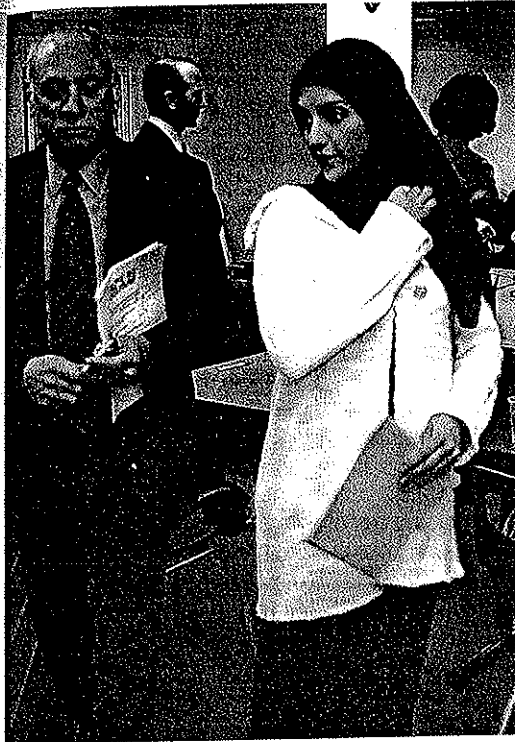
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Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are heterogeneous peoples from all over the world. They come from different countries, have different histories, belong to different cultures, and use different languages. Arabs, for example, are highly diverse, and include large numbers of Christians and Jews who consider themselves Arab. The total world Arab population is over 300 million (Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee 2004). By contrast, there are about 1.3 billion Muslims in the world. The majority of Muslims are neither Arab nor Middle Eastern. Over 50 percent of the world's Muslims are from South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. From the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the overwhelming majority of immigrants to the United States from the Arab region were Christian. It was not until the 1960s and 1970s that Muslim immigrants from the Arab world began to outnumber Christian Arab immigrants. The first Muslims in the United States were African slaves. Estimates indicate that 30 to 40 percent of Muslims in the United States are African American; 25 to 30 percent are South Asian Americans; and 12 to 15 percent are Arab American (Ibish 2002).

Despite this wide diversity, however, U.S. media and popular culture tend to portray Arab Americans and Muslim Americans as if they are

all the same. This erasure of differences makes it easier for government and the wider society to treat them the same and to make them all, collectively, different from "us." The "us" is the West, the United States—that is, the imagined United States, a white Christian nation that does not include Arabs and Muslims. As Nadine Naber (2000) has argued, Islam has been essentialized and racialized in the U.S., particularly in the politics of citizenship. Persons from Muslim countries and U.S. citizens from Muslim regions are represented in terms of their religion before any of their other multiple identities. Their actions are invariably characterized as "Muslim" regardless of their nature and intent. By prioritizing Islam as their overriding identity, the popular media portray every act of violence or incivility committed by a Muslim as a Muslim act.

In our examination of representations of Arab Americans, Muslim Americans, and Muslims in *New York Times* articles from 2000 to 2004, we found a predominantly negative representation of Islam. In article after article, Islam is presented as reactionary, violent, oppressive, anti-American, and incomprehensible to the "Western mind." Muslim leaders are represented as dangerous fanatics rather than respected spiritual leaders, and Muslim places of worship as sites of insurgencies rather than sites of the sacred. One article captured this image explicitly in its headline, "Seeing Islam as 'Evil' Faith, Evangelicals Seek Converts" (Goodstein 2003). Reporter Laurie Goodstein comments, "At the grass roots of evangelical Christianity, many are now absorbing the antipathy for Islam that emerged last year with the incendiary comments of ministers like Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Jerry Vines, the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Franklin Graham called Islam 'a very evil and wicked religion,' and Mr. Vines called Muhammad, Islam's founder and prophet, a 'demon-possessed pedophile'" (Goodstein, 2003, 1).



Samar Kaukab with her ACLU lawyer (see p. 447).

By not questioning these Christian leaders' views of Islam, the reporter, perhaps inadvertently, endorses and reinforces this prevailing negative view.

In the name of the nation and its security, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans have become increasingly racialized and targeted for discriminatory policies and practices by the government. The demonization of Arabs and Muslims reached a new level after 9/11/01 (Abdelkarim 2002, Cainkar 2002, Gonzaga 2002, *Middle East Reports* 2002). The profile of a "terrorist" was made equivalent to "looking" "Middle Eastern" or "Arab" or "Muslim." A U.S. Congressman of Arab background was detained at an airport because he fit this profile (Akram and Johnson 2002). A white, male, Christian U.S. citizen killed a Sikh U.S. citizen because he looked "Arab" or "Muslim," although Sikhs are neither

Arab nor Muslim. Over 1,200 legal residents (mostly Arab and Muslim) were detained without charges or access to attorneys; many were deported without public hearings even though none were found to have direct links with supposedly terrorist organizations (Akram and Johnson 2002, 331). A number of the 5,000 men (mostly Arab and Muslim, 18–33 year olds) were arrested after they responded to an invitation by the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for "voluntary" interviews, despite the fact that their visas were in order and they were living in this country legally.

After the bombing of the U.S. federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, then Attorney General Janet Reno made comments that implied the involvement of Arabs or Muslims in the bombing, as did the media. The FBI focused its investigation on Arabs and Muslims in this country. Congress passed the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act in 1996, which targets Arab and Muslim U.S. and non-U.S. citizens as suspects of terrorism (Akram and Johnson 2002, 346). Hate crimes against Arab and Muslim U.S. citizens continued well after the identification, arrest, and conviction of white, Christian U.S. citizens responsible for the Oklahoma City terrorist attack.

Yet, when a Christian person acts, their action is not represented as "Christian." Timothy McVey, who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City, was not described in media reports as committing a Christian act, even though fundamentalist Christianity was part of his worldview. Immediately after the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center, the Reverend Jerry Falwell commented that the attacks were the wrath of God brought upon us by gays, lesbians, and feminists. Newspaper reports did not refer to these comments as Christian statements even though Reverend Falwell presents himself as speaking in a Christian voice. The killings of the Ku Klux Klan are not described as Christian although the Christian cross is central to their symbolism. When domestic abuse occurs in Christian homes the media do not look to the Bible to explain domestic abuse. Historians do not try to analyze what it is about Christianity that gives rise to dictators and tyrants such as Hitler, Mussolini,

or Franco. In the dominant discourse, however, Muslims are defined by their religion and constructed as "alien," while the normative "we" is defined by economics and politics.

The U.S. government, popular media, TV and radio news, and print journalism often represent Arab Americans and Muslim Americans as uncertain, problematic, or suspect citizens (Joseph 1999). This began long before 9/11/01 (Abraham and Abraham 1983, Aswad 1974, Leonard 2003, Suleiman 1999). In 1914, an immigrant by the name of George Dow was denied U.S. citizenship based on the 1790 statute, which defined citizens as "free white persons" (*Dow v. United States et al.*, No. 1345. 4th Cir. 1915). As a "Syrian of Asiatic birth," (probably a Lebanese Christian), George Dow was not considered to be a "free white person" and therefore ineligible for citizenship. The decision was later appealed and reversed on the basis that Syrians were Semitic, even part Jewish, and therefore white—a clear example of the social construction of race. This case is emblematic of the on-going ambivalence in U.S. citizenship laws and practices towards U.S. citizens of Arab or Muslim origin (Cainkar 1999, Naff 1985, Suleiman 1999). By definition, to be a U.S. citizen was to be white. But, as Mary Ramadan (1996) has pointed out, white was understood to mean not only European but also Christian. Arabs and Muslims are not only "not quite white" as Nadine Naber argued (2000), Muslims are not Christians, and the majority of Arabs are Muslims. Arabs and Muslims are not the same as each other, as argued above, nor with the imagined U.S. white, Christian citizen. Arab and Muslim U.S. citizens embody this contradiction; they continue to be seen as against the grain of the nation (Joseph 1999), as not quite white (Naber 2000, Saliba 1999, Samhan 1999), and, despite legal citizenship, not quite citizens.

Law professors Susan Akram and Kevin Johnson (2002, 337) have observed that "... the current treatment of Arabs and Muslims is more extralegal than the internment" of Japanese Americans during World War II (described in Reading 61).

No Executive Order authorizes the treatment of Arabs and Muslims; nor has there been a formal declaration of war. Moreover, nationality,

which is more objective and easier to apply than religious and racial classifications, is not used as the exclusive basis for the measures. Rather, the scope of the investigation is broad and amorphous enough to potentially include all Arabs and Muslims, who may be natives of [many] countries.

(Akram and Johnson 2002, 337)

However, the government does have plans for detaining Arab Americans in internment camps as exposed in 1991 by Norman Mineta, then a U.S. Representative and later Secretary of Transportation under President George W. Bush. In an article entitled, "Questioning of Arab-Americans Protested" (Mecoy 1991), a story carried in *The Sacramento Bee* but in few other news media, Mineta "pointed to a 1987 contingency plan the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service drew up to detain Arab-Americans at an internment camp in Oakdale, Louisiana, in the event of war with certain Arab states. Mineta said that plan could still be initiated to 'round up' Arab-Americans" (Mecoy 1991). Moreover, during the 1991 Gulf War, many incidents of violence and harassment were committed against Arab and Muslim U.S. citizens by fellow U.S. citizens in various regions of the country.

Postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak showed in her discussion of British rule in India that colonial ideology often seeks to justify colonialist domination as being in the interests of women, constructing imperial intervention in terms of "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 1988, 297). More recently, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that the U.S. war on terrorism has taken on such a tenor. She points out that First Lady Laura Bush's November 17, 2001 address to the nation linked the "fight against terrorism" to the fight for women's rights, and thus "enlisted women to justify American bombing and intervention in Afghanistan and to make a case for the 'War on Terrorism' of which it was allegedly a part" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). Bombing Afghans was thus made to seem as though it was in the service of Muslim women, even though many Afghan women's organizations opposed U.S. intervention. When they cover Arab or Muslim women, U.S. news media tend to represent them as silent, passive, oppressed, inaccessible, and mysterious. The voices of Arab or

Muslim women are rarely represented and most print news sources portray them as in need of rescue. It is inconceivable that women might willingly embrace Islam if one relied on these stories. Abu-Lughod points to the imperial and racist presuppositions of savior discourses: "Projects of saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged" (Abu-Lughod 2002, 789). How do discourses about saving Muslim women support forms of state violence such as war and sexism?

The veil (*burka*, *abayya*) (a pre-Islamic African tradition) and clitoridectomy (a pre-Islamic ritual practiced more in non-Arab than Arab countries and not practiced by the overwhelming majority of Muslims) are pervasively represented as signature Islamic practices in the U.S. press. A *New York Times* article entitled "Behind the Veil: A Muslim Woman Speaks Out" is an example (Simons 2002, A4). The article discusses Ayaan Hirsi Ali's activism against domestic violence, sexual abuse, and genital cutting in Muslim communities in the Netherlands and internationally. The reporter asserts that "[t]he theme of injustice toward Muslim women in Islamic countries has become common in the West." The title of the article stands as a metaphor for practices that the article sympathetically quotes Ali as calling "backwards." According to Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), using the veil as a symbol of sexism elides the complex historical and political dynamics that produce differences amongst women. She stresses that rather than intervene in other communities, it would be better to ask how imperial policies and our social locations as U.S. citizens might contribute to the life conditions of people in other communities and to support demands from within those communities to make women's and men's lives better.

The veil, mobilized as a sign of backwardness or sexism, has underwritten the criminalization of Muslims in the war on terror. In a *New York Times* article entitled "A Little Late, But a Stand Against Hate," Clyde Haberman lauded a group called the Progressive Muslim Union of North America for supposedly acting as a "counterweight to the 'oppressive or dysfunctional practices' that have come to define Islam for many people" (Haberman 2004, B1). "Islam," Haberman asserts, "had become grim, cramped, exclusionary and—no getting

around it—all too often death-embracing." As Haberman reports this group's stand against "treating women as barely human"—implying that sexism is the norm amongst Muslims—he notes: "Not a headscarf or beard was in sight" in the room when he interviewed the group. This narrative implies a link between headscarves, beards, and sexist practices. He also links religiosity to sexism, asserting, "No imam need apply" to this group. Finally, Haberman criticizes the Progressive Muslim Union of North America: "Is it possible to talk about Islam in the post-9/11 world without a single reference to the dread T-word? Nowhere in the group's mission statement or in the members' remarks was terrorism mentioned. Why is that?" For Haberman, whether they are for or against sexism, all Muslims must be suspected of terrorism.

Trinh Minh-ha (1989) has noted that colonialist strategy—through law, policy, military and police activity, and media representations—homogenizes the "other" as a way of creating an oppositional binary that defines the other as enemy. President George W. Bush relied on popularly held stereotypical binaries in his designation of an "axis of evil" which included two Muslim countries, Iraq and Iran, fostering further demonization of Muslims in the U.S. media and popular opinion. The United States is waging a war based on the construction of binary opposites. President Bush's statement, "You are either with us or you are with the terrorists," comes out of a history of control based on the construction of difference.

The impact of the targeting of Arabs and Muslims through media discourse and public policy has been to control both Arab and non-Arab, Muslim and non-Muslim U.S. citizens. Fear mongering has affected the majority of U.S. citizens, particularly people of color, as more repressive measures are implemented in the name of "national security." What is at stake for Arab and Muslim U.S. citizens in the aftermath of 9/11/01 is not simply their home, but the home of all U.S. citizens. The exclusions and inconsistencies of citizenship applied to Arab and Muslim Americans can be used to justify the abuse of the citizenship rights of others. Just as oppression against Native Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans and Latino Americans laid the groundwork for discriminations toward Arab and Muslim Americans, so do the exclusions and inconsistencies practiced toward

Arab and Muslim Americans add bricks to a house heated by fear. Moreover, stereotypical and negative portrayals of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslim Americans in the news media are integral to the construction of these diverse people as intrinsically suspect, a key step in the process of their criminalization.

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