Haqq & Hollywood:

Illuminating 100 years of Muslim Tropes and How to Transform Them

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Haqq ~ "truth" in Arabic

ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MAYTHA ALHASSEN, PhD

Maytha Alhassen, PhD is a journalist, poet, and scholar. Her work bridges the worlds of social justice, academic research, media engagement, and artistic expression. In Fall 2017, she was awarded a Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellowship to lead a project to create and popularize authentic narratives for Muslims in popular culture.

Alhassen wrote for and performed in the internationally touring play *Hijabi Monologues* (composed of experiences by Muslim women) and worked with the arts-based social justice organization Blackout Arts Collective facilitating creative literacy workshops with incarcerated youth at Rikers Island in New York City, assisting in organizing a Hip Hop Film Festival in the prison's high school, and writing an introduction for an anthology of the youth's poetry and visual art. As a poet, actress, and speaker, Alhassen has performed at the Kennedy Center, Shrine Auditorium, on the TED stage, at South by Southwest in 2010 and 2012, and at many universities.

In 2015, Alhassen established and designed the Social Justice Institute, in collaboration with the Office of Student Affairs at Occidental College, to train fellows in social justice practice. Previously, she served as a 2014 core steering committee member of Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC). In 2018, she began leading a campaign with three other Muslim women scholars to mobilize the Muslim community around ending mass incarceration and money bail called Believers Bail Out; the initiative was profiled by *Chicago Tribune* and *Teen Vogue*.

For the last four years, Alhassen has worked with refugee populations from Turkey to Greece as a journalist, translator, and healer. In October 2017, she piloted "Yoga to the Displaced People," a trauma-informed yoga intervention, with a population of refugee women in Greece. In June 2017, she completed a TED residency that culminated in a performance of a poem she wrote for her ancestral homeland of Syria out of a desire to refute popular conceptions of Syria as a "geography of violence."

Alhassen has written for *CNN*, *Boston Review, The Huffington Post, Mic, The Baffler, La Vanguardia, Feminist.com,* and *Counterpunch*. As a commentator, she has been featured on *CNN*, *BET*, *Al-Jazeera*, *Fusion*, *HuffPost Live*, *The Young Turks*, *NPR*, *CBC*, *Pivot, ATTN*, *WNYC*'s "The Brian Lehrer Show," *Power106*'s "Knowledge Is Power," *Splinter,* and *KPFK*. She appears regularly as a guest co-

host and digital producer for *Al-Jazeera English*'s current-events program "The Stream," and guest co-hosting *The Young Turks'* main hour. Previously, she co-hosted an Arab-American TV variety show on *ART* called "What's Happening." Her work has been profiled by *The Nation*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Miami Herald*, *Vox*, *The Intercept*, and *Social Text,* and featured in a number of academic articles and books.

She is a co-editor of *Demanding Dignity: Young Voices from the Front Lines of the Arab Revolutions* (2012). She serves as a member of the editorial board of the electronic version of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*.

Alhassen also consults on the depiction of Arabs and Muslims for documentaries, major studio films, and TV shows. She lectures nationally on college campuses on Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs and Muslims, tying pop-culture representations of these communities to prevailing political narratives and U.S. foreign policy.

Maytha Alhassen received her PhD in American Studies and Ethnicity from the University of Southern California in December 2017. While a doctoral student at USC, she assisted in the launch of the Middle East Studies Program (now a department). She received a bachelor's degree in Political Science and Arabic and Islamic studies from UCLA in 2004 and a master's in Anthropology from Columbia University in 2008.

ABOUT THE POP CULTURE COLLABORATIVE

Established in 2016, the Pop Culture Collaborative is a philanthropic resource and funder learning community that uses grantmaking, convening, narrative strategy, and research to transform the narrative landscape around people of color, immigrants and refugees, Muslims, and indigenous people, especially those who are women, queer, transgender, and disabled. The Collaborative believes there is an opportunity—and that philanthropy has a responsibility—to build a field capable of shaping popular culture to reflect the complexity of the American people and make a just and pluralistic future feel real, desirable, and inevitable. By harnessing the influence of pop culture, the Collaborative believes social justice activists, philanthropists, and entertainment storytellers can encourage mass audiences to reckon with the past and rewrite the story of our nation's future.

Founded by a Managing Partner network of social justice funders and led by a team of culture-change thought leaders, the Collaborative pursues narrative change through four interlinking strategies:

- Design of a pop culture narrative system that can activate millions of people with a vision of our nation's pluralist future;
- Strategic grantmaking to build the needed infrastructure, pipelines, experiments, and expertise to create change at this scale;
- Research, knowledge exchange, and relationship building to seed collaboration between the social change and pop culture sectors; and
- Funder education to increase investment in—and replication of—this work.

The Pop Culture Collaborative is a project of Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. Managing partners include Unbound Philanthropy, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the JPB Foundation, the General Service Foundation, the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, NoVo Foundation, and an anonymous donor.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Hollywood has a decision to make.

Will this multibillion-dollar industry continue its decades-long habit of characterizing members of the Muslim community as The Terrorist, The Lech, or oppressed figures in need of saving? Or will the industry embrace the momentum brought on by years of authentic storytelling by artists, and advocacy by activists, to change the types of stories about and portrayals of Muslims in pop culture?

Throughout cinema and television history, American pop culture has never reflected the diversity, richness, and humanity of Muslim communities, which include more than 3.45 million people in the U.S.[1][2] and more than 1.8 billion people globally[3] according to the Pew Research Center's 2017 estimates. Instead, political, entertainment, and media storytellers have promoted false portrayals, often legitimizing or advancing dangerous policies that harm Muslim people.

Researched and written by Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow Maytha Alhassen, PhD*, Haqq and Hollywood: Illuminating 100 years of Muslim Tropes and How To Transform Them*, synthesizes decades of scholarship and cultural criticism to shine a light on the myriad ways Muslim people's identities, needs, and experiences have been distorted in television and film over the last century. This is why the choice for the report title, *Haqq and Hollywood* is so apt, as haqq translates to truth in Arabic.

Dr. Alhassen takes readers through a history of pop culture's evolving characterization of Muslim people, with relevant historical and political context, and provides readers with an analysis of the most common tropes in Hollywood about Muslims. She contends, "the Muslim community's representation on big and small screens has been driven primarily by Orientalism, anti-Blackness, anti-Muslim racism, patriarchy, and imperialism." Yet, despite how narrowly and monolithically they are portrayed in mass media, Muslim identities are expressed in multilayered religious, ethnic, racial,

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[1]http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/03/new-estimates-show-u-s-muslim-population-continues-to-grow/
[2] Given that the U.S. Census Bureau does not ask questions about religion, it is difficult to have an accurate count of how many Muslim actually live in the United States.
[3]http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group/

geographic, and gender orientations. Though often portrayed as just a singular, monolithic religious group, Muslim communities encompass a broad range of personal beliefs and practices, as well as incredible racial diversity.

As a guide for those in entertainment, social movements, and philanthropy who—like us—want to help pop culture narratives break away from the tropes and traps of old, the report also cites promising examples of artists seizing opportunities to use Hollywood's tools and resources to tell their own stories—to tens of millions of people.

To help advance transformative narrative change, Dr. Alhassen, the Pop Culture Collaborative, and special partners the Pillars Fund, worked with input and feedback from organizers and artists in the field including screenwriter Sameer Gardezi, Harness Executive Director Marya Bangee, and Zaheer Ali, director of the public history project *Muslims in Brooklyn* to identify the following recommendations for stakeholders in entertainment, philanthropy, and the Muslim social justice community.

1. **Understand the diversity of Muslim communities—and frontline both their participation in and ownership of the creative process.**

2. **Build and expand creative and career pipelines for Muslim artists within the entertainment industry.**

3. **Invest in the Muslim communities' ability to advance long-term narrative change and participate in pop culture for social change field.**

More specific ideas and examples for each of these recommendations are detailed in the report's Recommendations section, which begins on page 39.

As part of its mission to transform the narrative environment around people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and indigenous people through partnerships between the entertainment industry and the social justice movement, the Pop Culture Collaborative is proud to support the groundbreaking work of Dr. Alhassen on critical report. Likewise, the Pillars Fund, which works to amplify the leadership, narratives, and talents of American Muslims, recognizes that one of the ways to empower community members to create more authentic and realistic stories--and to access different audiences—is through the creation of a long-term narrative strategy. This is

best accomplished through partnerships in entertainment. The Pop Culture Collaborative and Pillars Fund are pleased to be working together on multiple projects that support this groundbreaking pop culture change work.

We believe this report and accompanying visual guide are critical to reimagining a just future for American Muslims, and society as a whole.

Sincerely,

Tracy Van Slyke
Strategy Director
Pop Culture Collaborative

Kashif Shaikh
Executive Director
Pillars Fund

Kalia Abiade
Director of Programs
Pillars Fund

INTRODUCTION

On November 25, 1992, a film opened with these lyrics, carried by a haunting melody:

> *Oh, I come from a land*
> *From a faraway place*
> *Where the caravan camels roam.*
> *Where they cut off your ear*
> *If they don't like your face*
> *It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.*

This animated Disney film, *Aladdin,* was the highest-grossing film of the year, netting over half a billion dollars at the box office. While these lyrics were changed in the film's 1993 VHS release as a result of efforts by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) to "Where it's flat and immense / and the heat is intense / it's barbaric, but hey it's home," many scholars and Arab and Muslim community members continued to point to the movie's rampant stereotypes. The summer before the VHS release, the president of the Los Angeles chapter of the ADC, Don Bustany, said, "Can an Arab-American child feel good after seeing *Aladdin*? The answer is no." He added, "There was no consideration given to how this would affect people of Arab origin." (See case study *Swords, Sorcerers, Sensuality, and Silence in 1992's* Aladdin, beginning on page 20, for more on this movie.)

One week earlier, on November 18, 1992, producer and director Spike Lee released a film that changed the discourse on Muslims and Islam: *Malcolm X*. Islam, at least in the Black American Muslim experience, was recast as a source of social good and moral uplift. *Malcolm X,* at the time of its release, was one of the few positive portrayals of Muslims and Islam in American cinema. Sourced from what historian Zaheer Ali describes as an "intimate knowledge of Black life," *Malcolm X* and other (mostly independent) Black-produced films in the early '90s wrote Muslim characters into ensemble storytelling projects as community Redeemers.

With increased energy since the 2016 election, and in the context of Hollywood's dawning realization to abandon "terror genre" storylines on popular network series, an emerging group of Muslim filmmakers, actors, comedians, and screenwriters now have an expanded opening to shape and make their own stories in the entertainment industry. In the last few years there have been a few Muslim additions to ensemble casts like *Legends of Tomorrow,* in part as a cultural response to President Trump's travel ban on several African and Arab countries, also known as the Muslim ban.

But these recent changes are up against negative and false portrayals and storylines reinforced through over a century of movies and television—from

early Hollywood cinema in which whites played Arabs, like Rudolph Valentino's 1921 *The Sheik,* to mostly erasing or demonizing Black Muslims, as Mike Wallace and Black American journalist Louis Lomax did in *The Hate That Hate Produced* (1959)—all the way to the 2018 Sundance premiere of the film *Beirut*. More jarringly, some of the most insidious portrayals of the Muslim community have been in cartoons consumed heavily by American children, including *Looney Tunes*, *Richie Rich*, *Popeye*, and Bugs Bunny (in "Ali Baba Bunny").
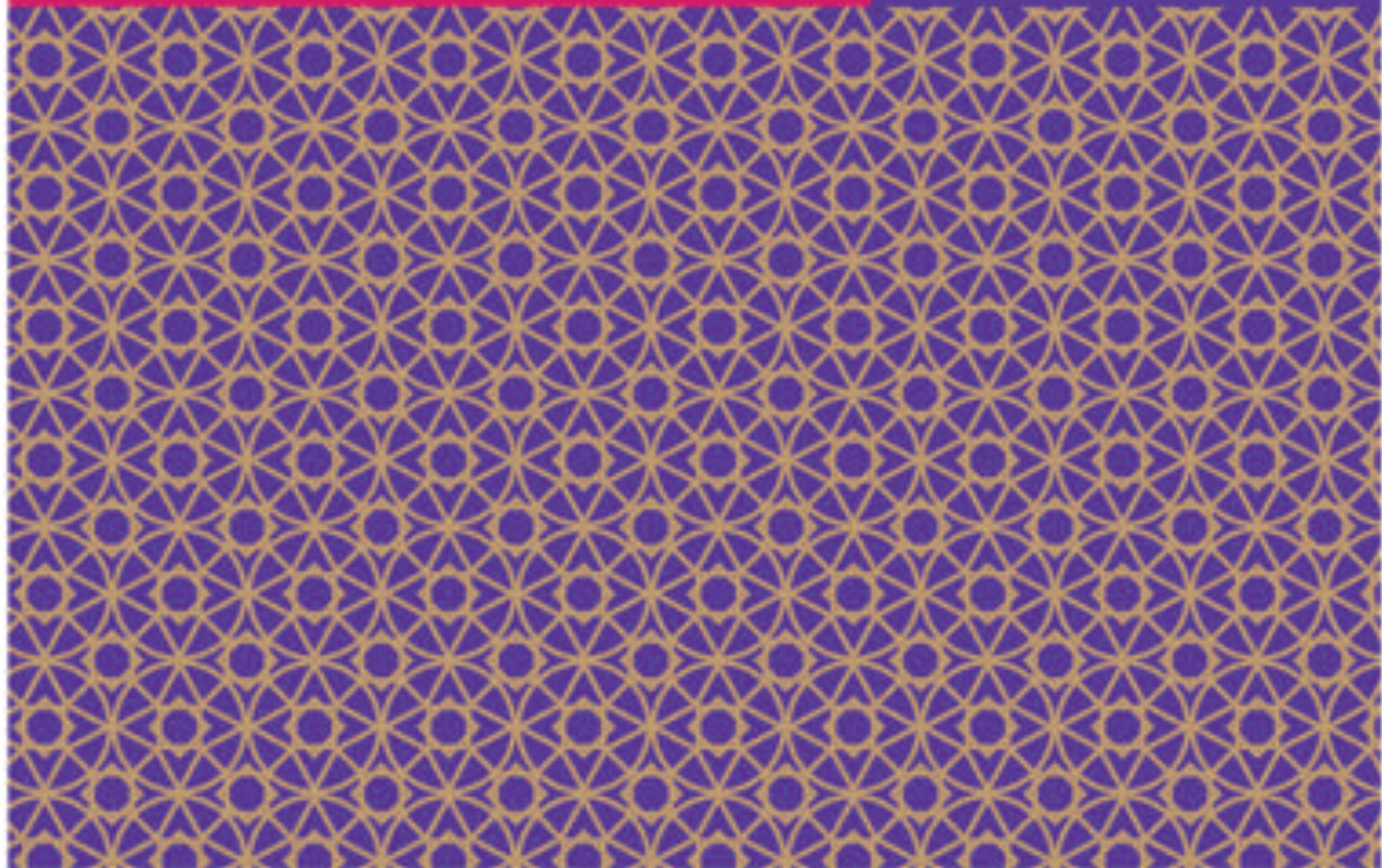
In a 2006 documentary film based on his 2001 book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, media studies scholar Jack Shaheen succinctly describes the pop-cultural portrayal of Arabs as "a one-dimensional caricature, a cartoon cut-out, used by filmmakers as stick villains and as comic relief." He came to this assessment after watching a thousand films made between 1896 and 2000 portraying Arab and Muslim characters. Of those films, Shaheen concluded that 12 were positive depictions, 52 were evenhanded, and the rest, more than 900, were negative.

The Muslim community's representation on big and small screens has been driven primarily by Orientalism, anti-Blackness, anti-Muslim racism, patriarchy, and imperialism. One of the anchor stereotypes is "the Arab and Iranian as Untermensch," that is, someone considered racially or socially inferior. This trope is reproduced in counterterrorism thrillers that feature rabid hijackers and half-wit bombers, in comedies with bumbling sheikhs, and many more.

This report focuses on the portrayal of Muslims through the racial and ethnic categories of Black Americans, Arabs, Iranians, and South Asians, as well as the ways Muslims are gendered in film and television. To understand and disrupt the use of these tropes is to break a centuries-old narrative choke hold.

I invite you—artists, producers, philanthropists, and community members—to let this report inform and inspire you to create more nuanced stories rooted in intimate knowledge and authentic Muslim experience in America.

A Brief History of American Orientalism

Early days

Many of the last century's big- and small-screen stereotypes about the Muslim community stem from Orientalism, a postcolonial concept introduced in scholar Edward W. Said's book of the same name in 1978. Orientalism contrasts "the Orient" (what Europeans called the Middle East and Africa) to "the West" and finds it oversexed, indulgently sensual, queer, psychologically weak, barbaric, and inferior. This imaginary "Orient" also worked to eradicate a long history of Islamic contribution to Europe, concealing breakthroughs in science, medicine, literature, translation, and philosophy made by Moors.

Similar to the American cowboys and Indians framework, Orientalism revolves on the axes of contempt *and* fascination, fetishizing an Orientalist perception of "the mystical Moor" just as early America romanticized the Indian as a "noble savage." This "mystical Moor" delivered practices and poetry revered by Masonic groups (such as the Shriners) and escapist *1,001 Arabian Nights*–inspired fantasy desert lands brought to life by magical genies (or jinns), flying carpets, and harem sensuality.

As evidenced in the images in *The Arab Sage*, a late 19th-century painting by Austrian Rudolf Ernst, this "mystical Moor" not only occupies a fantasy landscape for Europeans but also constitutes a racialized identity that codes the Moor as Black and Arab in the European imagination (or nightmare!). This "Moor" is a Black/Arab Muslim from Africa, feared by Europe, undergirding the framework of Orientalism, and then exported to United States by settler colonialists and converted into American Orientalism.

In the early 20th century, the Orient as an oasis of escapism and biblical (and even Islamic) revivalism roared through the United States. California's Coachella Valley was transformed into an "Arab-land," with imported date palms planted in the desert, and the town of Walters renamed Mecca. Along with neighboring San Bernardino and Imperial Counties, Riverside's Coachella Valley—these days the site of a popular music festival—served as locations for Hollywood films such as the Marx Brothers' *A Night in Casablanca* (1946) and, incidentally, for U.S. war-making. United States Marine Corps base 29 Palms, in San Bernardino County and bordering Joshua Tree National Park, developed the fictional Iraqi village "Wadi al-Sahara," including 500 Iraqi role-players, as combat simulation for "Operation Mojave Viper" for military campaigns in Iraq.[4]

Speaking of "Saharas" and "role players," one of the earliest uses of the Desert Training Center (DTC) in Death Valley's Mojave desert was for preparing troops for the North African campaign during World War II; another was as a source for extras and equipment in *Sahara*,[5] a 1943 film starring Humphrey Bogart.

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[4] https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=9573747
[5] http://www.evesmag.com/bogart.htm

Silent films such as one of the earliest Aladdin films (*Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, 1917) and the later "talkies," including the many cinematic iterations of Sinbad from 1958 to the present, extended this fascination with the Orient, conjuring up a "holy land" with white leads and a repetition of *1,001* Orientalist stereotypes.

Conversely, in the Jim Crow period (from the end of Reconstruction in 1877 to 1954), we see, for Black Americans, a desire to connect to a Moorish identity as a way of transcending American racial constrictions and as a bridge to pre-slavery selfhood. While the American establishment supported Hollywood in its quest to recreate the Orient, it did something entirely different for Black American overtures to the East. The portrayal of Black Muslims in the 20th century is detailed later (page 21).

Whitewashing the Orient

Hollywood has a long history of casting white actors in stories about ancient Egypt and the Orient, from Rudolph Valentino as *The Sheik* in 1921, Charlton Heston as Moses in *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and Elizabeth Taylor as *Cleopatra* (1963) through the 2000s, when whitewashed belly dancers, jinns, and mystics graced popular films and TV shows.

For example, from 1965 to 1970, *I Dream of Jeannie* portrayed Barbara Eden as a "slave" to U.S. astronaut Captain Tony Nelson.

She fulfills a patriarchal Orientalist fantasy by eventually falling in love with her "master" (as she calls him).

Even as late as 2014, we see this whitewashed Orientalism explicitly practiced in *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, starring Christian Bale and Ben Kingsley.

20th-Century Muslim Tropes: Terrorists, Sheiks, Killer Kids and more

The Arab and the Iranian as the 'Untermensch'

In the 1970s, dramas and TV programming were catalyzed by the U.S. media's presentation of the Middle East as a geography of violence. Beginning in 1967, the public was barraged with front-page updates of Arab-Israeli wars, long lines outside gas stations due to the 1973 OPEC embargo, the Iranian hostage crisis, keffiyeh-wearing Palestinians rising up against occupation, the Persian Gulf War and sanctions on Iraq, and much more. Politics and the media positioned the Middle East against a backdrop of terror, sexual greed, and oil wealth. Hollywood repackaged those stories, and continues to, as clash-of-civilizations thrillers (also repackaging the European Orientalist binary of the West vs. the Orient).

In particular, the 1973 OPEC oil embargo intensified the American Orientalist "oversexed oil sheikhs lusting after white women" stereotype by emphasizing and fixating on Persian Gulf Arabs' lavish spending, portraying them as childlike imbeciles too uncivilized to know how to responsibly use the black gold under their tribal barbarian feet.

In the late 20th century, various tropes of the Arab and Iranian as the "Untermensch," or the inferior, have taken multiple different forms in Hollywood, especially in the film industry.

Common Tropes and Traps

Violent Terrorist, Angry Hijacker

As a result of U.S. foreign policy being "at war" with Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Iran, and OPEC member countries,[6] the Middle Eastern emerges as Stock Terrorist #1. Chuck Norris as Major Scott McCoy in *The Delta Force* (1986), Arnold Schwarzenegger as Harry Tasker in *True Lies* (1994), and Kurt Russell as David Grant and Steven Seagal as Lt. Colonel Austin Travis in 1996's *Executive Decision* battle Arab terrorists who either hijack planes or possess nuclear weapons. Not only are the terrorists genocidal barbarians, they're inept fools who accidentally blow themselves up in *True Lies* and bring a sword to a gun battle with Indiana Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981).

Arabs also regularly played cameo roles that are completely unrelated to the overall themes of the films they were written into. In 1985's *Back to the Future*, Libyans armed to the nines and shouting gibberish find and violently shoot up the character Doc Brown in their quest for nuclear material.

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[6] During the October 1973-March 1974 oil embargo, those countries included Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Algeria, Nigeria, Libya, Venezuela, Qatar, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates.

"Cruel and Barbaric"

Northwestern University communications professor Hamid Naficy, who studies Iranian and Middle Eastern cinema, wrote of pre-9/11 portrayals of Iranians in U.S. film, including the thriller *Hitman* (1991) and comedies *Into the Night* (1985), *Down and Out in Beverly Hills* (1986), and *Madhouse* (1990).

> *[These films] hammer home the notion that Iranians are terrifying, alien, irrational, cruel, barbaric people who threaten our national economy and our very safety in the United States.*
>
> —Hamid Naficy
> *"Mediating the Other: American Pop Culture Representation of Postrevolutionary Iran: Image and Perception,"* 1997

The Sheikh

For decades, TV shows from every genre emphasized the trope of the Arab Sheikh. It shows up in television series like *Cagney & Lacey* (1981–88) and *Bionic Woman* (1976–78), and in children's cartoons and family programming like *Fantasy Island* (1978–84), *Richie Rich* (1980–84), *Popeye the Sailor* ("A Wolf in Sheikh's Clothing" (1948)), and Bugs Bunny in the short "Ali Baba Bunny" (1957). Two sub-themes include The Lecher + His Harem and Wealthy, Childlike, Bumbling Fool. These 20th century renderings of hook-nosed, money-hungry Arab Muslim Sheikhs, Violent Terrorists, and Angry Hijackers eerily resemble imagery from anti-Semitic cartoons and Nazi films.

The Lecher and His Harem
Animated films such as *1001 Arabian Nights* (1959) demonstrate this old Orientalist trope, recycled for the big-hair, heavy-mustache, post-OPEC boycott '80s.

For example, Kathleen Turner's Joan Wilder is manipulated into coming to Arabland in *Jewel of the Nile* (1985), and Sunny Ann Davis (played by Goldie Hawn) is the object of an emir's infatuation in *Protocol* (1984). In the same year, Brooke Shields as Dale is sold into sexual slavery and bought by lascivious Arabs in *Sahara* (1983), and Kim Basinger's "Bond girl," Domino Petachi, is abducted by Arab terrorists who sell her stripped-down body on an auction block in *Never Say Never Again* (1983).

In *Cannonball II* (1984), Jamie Farr plays a wealthy oil sheikh—"The Great Prince Abdul Bin Falafel, Master of all deserts, Prince of Princes"—who recklessly spends his money, yelling, "Twelve suites! Better yet, the whole floor!" while lusting over white women.

<u>Wealthy, Childlike, Bumbling Fool</u>
This sheikh-like caricature is swimming in wealth from petro-economies, recklessly spending like a child driven by impetuous desires.

In the acclaimed movie *Network* (1976), unhinged TV anchor Howard Beale, as part of his uncensored "truth-telling," feeds an Arab-takeover phobia by "revealing" that the Arabs "have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back!... They're buying it for the Saudi Arabian investment corporation! They're buying it for the Arabs!... Listen to me, God dammit! The Arabs are simply buying us! There's only one thing that can stop them! You!" Here Western audiences are being told to fear the viral spreading of Arab culture and lifestyle.

The character of Mr. Habib in *Father of the Bride II* (1996) embodies all these tropes at once. Portrayed by a non-Arab actor speaking in faux-Arabic gibberish, Mr. Habib is irrationally angry, swimming in misguided use of his wealth ("See, I demolish house, put two in its place"). He is disrespectful to his Arab wife (silencing her) and litters the environment (crushing his cigarette on the ground). Most importantly, this is an unnecessary cameo that plays no essential role in the plot of the film, except to bash Arabs.

Killer Kids

Portraying Muslim children as the enemy was a particularly pernicious and dangerous trope introduced in the last few decades.

In *Rules of Engagement* (2000), a little girl, a victim of Marines shooting at demonstrators, is revealed as an "unsuspecting" shooter who had shot at the Marines. In this case, [reactions to the movie reverberated around the world, from Arabs in the U.S. to people in Yemen.](#) The Yemeni ambassador to the United States, Abdulwahhab Alhajri, said, "A little girl shooting at Marines! Can you believe it?" adding that "the movie reaches millions of people. It's ruining our image."[7]

This trope is seamlessly reappropriated in the post-9/11 moment in films like *American Sniper* (2014). In one scene, an Iraqi child is handed a grenade by his mother and runs toward the American convoy. The lead role, Chris Kyle is played by Bradley Cooper.

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[7] Khaled Almahdi, "FILMS: Yemenis, Arabs Find 'Rules of Engagement' Anything But Engaging," Inter Press Service, May 2, 2000, http://www.ipsnews.net/2000/05/films-yemenis-arabs-find-rules-of-engagement-anything-but-engaging/

> *Chris Kyle:* I got a woman and a kid about 200 yards out moving towards the convoy. Her arms aren't swinging. She's carrying something. She's got a grenade... she's handing it to the kid.
> *[Child is shot by Kyle.]*
> *Other sniper with Kyle:* F*ck, that was gnarly.
> *[Mother grabs grenade and tries to throw it at the sniper, but is shot by Kyle.]*
> *Other sniper:* F*cking evil bitch.

In this scene the mother, who hands her son a military-grade weapon, does not take even a moment to mourn his loss, instead resuming the assault. It presents the Killer Kid trope as an origin story of the Violent Terrorist, normalizing the notion that "hate" is generationally handed down by mothers, and not the result of violent occupying forces that wage wars on land, resources, and people.

Muslim Women: Sirens or Silent

The Muslim woman exists in a familiar patriarchal binary of saint/sinner—transformed by Orientalism into subjugated/subordinate. She is both silent and overexposed, invisible and hyper-visible, a perpetual handmaiden serving the violent agenda of her oppressive untermensch partner — "Bundles of Black," as Shaheen calls them in *Reel Bad Arabs*. Films like *Protocol* (1984) and *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), he says, demonstrate the invisibility of women literally cloaked by the veils that suggest cultural subordination by Muslim men. Meanwhile, the harem member is an overly sexualized belly-dancing prop.[8]

In 1966's *Cast A Giant Shadow,* the viewer is presented with an undulating, voluptuous belly-dancer whose head is cut off by the frame for the entire tent scene. Two decades later we see a similar portrayal in *Head* (1968), featuring the rock group the Monkees. These belly-dancing (or Balady dancing) sequences conflate brown women's dances, from Africa to the Middle East to India—and almost all feature white women.

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[8]Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001, pp. 22

Swords, Sorcerers, Sensuality, and Silence in Disney's 1992 *Aladdin*

Aladdin, the protagonist, who is after the heart of an independence-loving Princess Jasmine, might appear to represent a departure from the tropes we've examined. However, in many ways this Aladdin continues a Hollywood legacy of representing the Arab or Iranian as Untermensch on screen, and reproduces almost all of its key caricatures.

For example, lead characters are whitewashed, with anglicized versions of Arabic names and Western European (though brown-skinned) facial features. They speak with American accents. The villains, Jafar and the palace guards, are darker, swarthy, with undereye circles, hooked noses, black beards, and pronounced Arabic and British accents. (Research by sociolinguists suggests a correlation between non-American accents and villain status for cartoon characters.) The film critic Roger Ebert took note of the awkward contrast, saying "Wouldn't it be reasonable that if all the characters in this movie come from the same genetic stock, they should resemble one another?"

Other stereotypes include:

Wealthy, Childlike, Bumbling Fool Sheikh
Jasmine's father, "the Sultan of Agrabah," is flush with money; a childish, naive ruler seen stacking animal toys, who is easily manipulated by his Royal Vizier, Jafar.

Lecherous Arab
The queering of Jafar codes him as a nefarious descendant of the Orient, which is explicitly contrasted with Aladdin's Robin Hood cowboy ideal. Jafar's queer sexual desire for Jasmine is coded as perverted, while Aladdin's is seen as wholesome and worth rooting for.

Violent, Irrationally Angry Arab
Shopkeepers and palace guards yell, "I'll have your head for a trophy, street rat!" and they threaten to chop of the hands of those who offer an apple to the hungry.

Overly Sexualized Siren and Silent Woman
This trope is embodied by Jasmine and women in song "One Jump Ahead." All the women, with the exception of Jasmine, have limited speech in the film.

The 1992 *Aladdin* demonstrates the staying power of Orientalist tropes and the impact they have not only on Arabs but on the imaginations of those who make and watch films like this.

Black Muslims: Haters or Redeemers

Black Muslims, who make up fully half of Muslims whose families have been in the United States for at least three generations (51%),[9] have a centuries-long history in constructing American Muslim cultures. However, Black Muslims are either erased as part of Islam's history in the U.S. or, if accounted for, considered heretical, unorthodox, anti-American separatists.

But Black filmmakers attuned to intimate knowledge of Black life have seen the history of American Islam through the Black Muslim experience as a tradition that traveled from West Africa on transatlantic slave ships to Southern plantations, to Maroon (escaped slave) communities in the Sea Islands, to Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple (founded 1913), Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, W. D. Muhammad's World Community of Al-Islam, and beyond. This history is important in understanding how Black American Muslims are portrayed by Black filmmakers as communal uplifters, or Redeemers, and why some segments of non-Black American mainstream media (from TV news to film) consider Black Muslims to be part of a "hate group."

Anti-American Hate

As early as the 1930s, the FBI opened case files on leaders in Black Muslim organizations, including the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam (which FBI documents referred to as "The Muslim Cult of Islam"). This fear of the Nation of Islam became a phenomenon in 1959 when journalists Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax presented a multi-part TV documentary series titled *The Hate that Hate Produced*. However, the publication of Malcolm X's autobiography, shortly after his assassination in 1965, transformed this narrative of Black Islam as did Black Muslim athletes such as Muhammad Ali.

That is, until they protested U.S. militarism and challenged blind patriotism. From the late 1960s until now, athletes have paid a professional price for questioning allegiance to U.S. empire. In 1967, Muhammad Ali was arrested for refusing to be inducted into the Army during the Vietnam War. He famously explained, "My conscience won't let me shoot my brother or some darker people... for big, powerful America. For what? They never called me n*****. They never lynched me. They never put dogs on me... How can I shoot them poor people? Just take me to jail."

During the 1995–96 NBA season, Denver Nuggets guard Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf objected to praising the U.S. flag, which he said stood for "tyranny and oppression" globally. He refused to stand for the national anthem

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[9] "Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans," from *U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream*, Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017, http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/

(foreshadowing Colin Kaepernick's #TakeAKnee protest in 2016). With the NBA players' union supporting him (having first fined him), a compromise was reached according to which he could pray during the pregame rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." But like Kaepernick, by season end, he was persona non grata and was traded to the Sacramento Kings, but played little playing. Abdul-Rauf relocated abroad to continue playing basketball.

Redeemers

These examples of Black Muslim athletes taking a political stance, and in many cases sacrificing years of social and financial capital, demonstrate both the power and cost of critiquing U.S. foreign policy and racial and social inequities. They are seen as heroes, "redeemers," for opposing the U.S. war machine. This "redemptive" view of Islam informed representations of Muslims in Black-produced films. As political beings, characters in these films illuminate the moral conscience of a community and offer an admirable template for Muslim and American identities.

The acclaimed and record-breaking 1977 TV mini-series *Roots*, adapted for ABC from Alex Haley's 1976 novel, features hybridized Islamic traditions from lead character Kunta Kinte's (played by LeVar Burton) Mandinka culture.
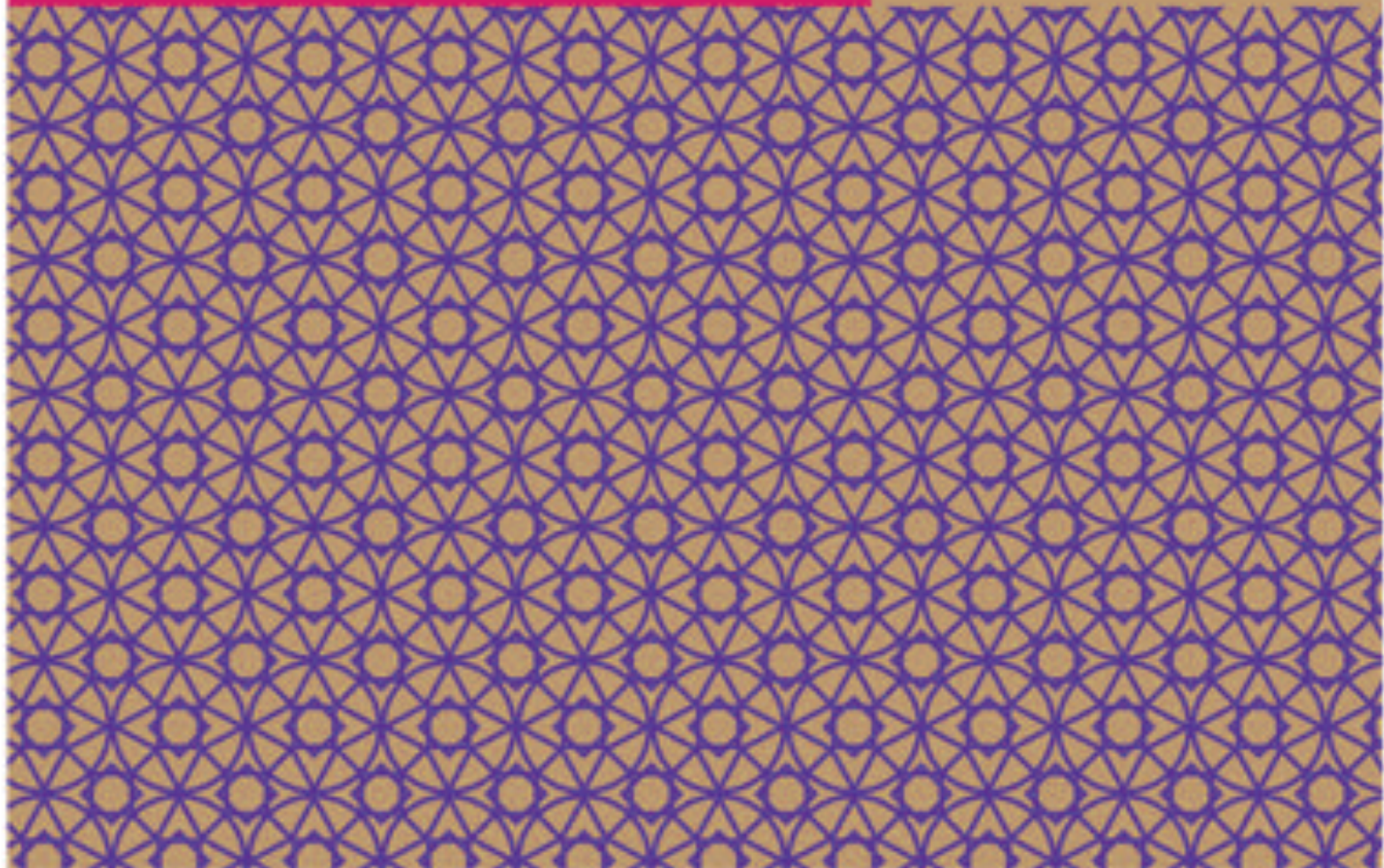
In the 1980s and 1990s, propelled by Black power and Afro-centrist movements from earlier decades, hip-hop artists sampled Malcolm X's speeches and were inspired and intrigued by (and in some cases joined) Louis Farrakhan's revived Nation of Islam in 1981[10]. And Black filmmakers as well included these various visions of Islam in their films. For example, Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* follows the journey of a bus ride to Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March in Washington, D.C., and the Hughes brothers fashioned Sharif as the moral compass in *Menace II Society*. Not only does Lee's 1992 *Malcolm X* revive the legacy of the human rights icon and transform perceptions of Muslims (in some cases inspiring conversions to Islam), it offers a portrayal of a powerful Black Muslim woman in Angela Bassett's Betty Shabazz.

This inclusion of Muslim characters and Islamic retentions also dovetailed with Black and African filmmakers as in Julie Dash's 1991 *Daughters of the Dust* (St. Helena Island elder Bilal Muhammad: "If you wan' know about them Africa people, you need to talk to Bilal") and Haile Gerima's 1993 *Sankofa* (transformed Maroon Noble Ali) exploration of pre-slavery connections to West Africa[11]. Black filmmakers in the '90s created much more nuanced stories of Black American Muslim-ness, ones that both displayed the centuries-old roots of Islam in the U.S. and routed them through an African consciousness.

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[10] Elijah Muhammad's son Wallace converted Nation of Islam members to Sunni Orthodox Islam after his father's death in 1975.
[11] A West Africa significantly influenced by Islamic traditions and practices, and the hybridization of those practices with other African spiritual and religious traditions

Post 9/11: Good Muslim vs Bad Muslim Dominates

The origin of 'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

Late 20th century tropes laid a foundation for false perceptions and beliefs about the culture, needs, and wants of Muslim communities in the 21st century.

On September 11, 2001, two passenger aircrafts crashed into and instigated the collapse of the North and South Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. A third aircraft crashed into the Pentagon, near Washington D.C. Shortly after the crashes, the FBI linked al-Qaeda to the attacks, even though members of President George W. Bush's National Security Council—including Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his deputy, Paul Wolfowitz— persistently argued that Saddam Hussein was behind the attacks and insisted that going to war in Iraq was a necessary response to 9/11.

As rapidly collective national mourning arose, so did the upsurge in hate crimes toward Muslims and Muslim-perceived communities. Political framing by then-President George W. Bush exacerbated an "us versus them" narrative.

A week and a half after the September 11 attacks, President Bush, in his nationally televised address to a joint session of Congress, said, "I want to speak directly to Muslims throughout the world. We respect your faith. It's practiced freely by many millions of Americans and by millions more in countries America counts as friends. Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme the name of Allah."[12]

Days later, the President again addressed a joint session of Congress saying, "They hate [us for] our freedoms."

This period saw a steep rise in anti-Muslim hate crimes and damaging concealed policies, such as the National Security Entry-Exit Registration System (NSEERS) (a registration program mostly aimed at citizens of Muslim countries), the detention and torture at Guantanamo Bay of suspected terrorists, and drone strikes on Muslim-majority lands.

Additionally, on domestic soil, reports of "Muslim-perceived" Sikh men with turbans (despite Sikhs not being Muslims). For example, Sikh-Arizona gas station owner Balbir Singh Sodhi was murdered by Frank Roque four days after 9/11. On 9/11, Roque explicitly stated his intention of killing an Arab (using a slur for Arab) to a waiter at Applebee's, asserting, "I'm going to go out and shoot some towel heads," and, evoking the last-century "killer kids" trope, explained, "We should kill their children, too, because they'll grow up to be like their parents."[13]

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[12] http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript/
[13] https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-23/his-brother-was-murdered-wearing-turban-after-911-last-week-he-spoke-killer

Hate crimes against Muslim women in headscarves and arson attacks on and vandalism to mosques in the U.S. have soared in numbers since 9/11.

With all this as backdrop, the 'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim binary emerged.

'Good' Muslims are often secular assimilationists, defenders of U.S. imperialism, or submissive Muslim women in need of being "saved" by the West from "evil, oppressive" Muslim men. The "Good Muslim" is coded as a brown, foreign other, or a Black Muslim who expresses patriotism, operates as an agent of the state, and volunteers as a martyr *for* American militarism. Each of these types, such as secular assimilationists and defenders of imperialism, are described more fully below.

The **'Bad' Muslim** signifies a "traitor," one who is critical of U.S. foreign policy and/or American militarism —a critique usually decontextualized from a rarely acknowledged anger in response to the destruction caused by our foreign and domestic wars on Muslim populations.

Network hits such as *24* and *Homeland* initially played up the conventional cowboy-and-Indian script, dressed in Orientalist tropes. But later seasons attempted to "flip the script" by introducing the "Good Muslim," usually a supporting character who operates as a spy or CIA agent serving the white man or woman's ultimate mission of decapitating a global terrorist network. Films that portrayed Muslims (primarily Iranian and Arab characters) in a counterterrorism framework or on a battlefield at war with the U.S. have been well regarded by the Hollywood establishment—*United 93* (2006)*, The Hurt Locker (*2008), *Argo* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014). All were nominated for or received top prizes, including Oscars.

Riz Ahmed: In His Own Words

As a minority, no sooner do you learn to polish and cherish one chip on your shoulder than it's taken off you and swapped for another. The jewelry of your struggles is forever on loan, like the Koh-i-Noor diamond in the crown jewels. You are intermittently handed a necklace of labels to hang around your neck, neither of your choosing nor making, both constricting and decorative.

Part of the reason I became an actor was the promise that I might be able to help stretch these necklaces, and that the teenage version of myself might breathe a little easier as a result.

If the films I re-enacted as a kid could humanise mutants and aliens, maybe there was hope for us. But portrayals of ethnic minorities worked in stages, I realized, so I'd have to strap in for a long ride.

Stage one is the two-dimensional stereotype—the minicab driver/terrorist/cornershop owner. It tightens the necklace.

Stage two is the subversive portrayal, taking place on "ethnic" terrain but aiming to challenge existing stereotypes. It loosens the necklace.

And stage three is the Promised Land, where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. There, I am not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. There, my name might even be Dave. In this place, there is no necklace.

I started acting professionally during the post-9/11 boom for stage-one stereotypes, but I avoided them at the behest of my 18-year-old self. Luckily, there was also a tiny speck of stage two stuff taking shape, subverting those same stereotypes, and I managed to get in on the act...

But they involved the experience of being typecast, and when that happens enough, you internalise the role written for you by others. Now, like an overeager method actor, I was struggling to break character.

I tried not to ingest all the signs telling me I was a suspect. I tried not to buy into the story world of this "protocol" or its stage-one stereotype of who I was. But when you have always moulded your identity to your environment and had your necklace picked out by others, it's not easy. I couldn't see myself as "just a bloke." I failed at every single audition I went up for.

Black Muslims in 'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

Black Americans are the largest group of Muslims in the U.S., accounting for a third of Islam's practitioners here. Yet mainstream media representation—from news stories featuring "Muslim experts" to TV and cinematic portrayals—have been generally limited to the "Brown Muslim Foreign Other." While the '90s produced many reminders of the vibrant presence and rich history of the Black American Muslim experience, its storytellers have been neglected, locked out of opportunities to produce projects, and in some cases even have had their "Muslim-ness" called into question. Margari Hill of the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC) calls this "racial hierarchy framework," which delegitimizes Black Muslims, "Islam Noir."

When 'Good' Muslims *have* been portrayed, it has been in much the same way that roles such as cop or detective for Black Americans on TV dramas became a signifier for "good American" and deserving of dignity. Black Muslims can be "good at their faith" and "good at being a patriot"—but only if they are agents of the state. For example:

- In *Sleeper Cell* (2005), Los Angeles–based undercover FBI agent Darwyn Al-Sayeed (Michael Ealy) joins a cell containing "unlikely" white Muslims (and the Arab head terrorist) to foil a terrorist plot.
- In *Five Fingers* (2006), Laurence Fishburne, a U.S. agent, operates in the guise of Moroccan-Muslim chemist Ahmat to extract information from Martijn (Ryan Phillippe), a Dutch banker who is planning to set up a "food program" in Morocco. Martijn, we later learn, is a white Muslim convert who is part of a Dutch terrorist cell Ahmat is investigating.
- In *The Kingdom* (2007), Jamie Foxx plays Ronald Fleury, a member of a U.S. government bomb squad sent to Saudi Arabia to investigate a bombing at an ARAMCO compound.
- In *Traitor* (2008), Don Cheadle plays Samir Horn, an undercover FBI agent born to a Sudanese-Muslim father, who travels the world to gather information and break up a worldwide terrorist cell.
- In *Unthinkable* (2010), Samuel L. Jackson as Henry Herald "H" Humphries is a special agent who tortures a white Muslim suspected of terrorist activity to coerce information out of him.

Black Muslim as Domestic Terrorists

The imprisoned Black Muslim straddles the moral line between community and criminality, as seen in TV dramas *Oz* (1997–2003), *The Wire* (2002–08), and *Prison Break* (2005–17). *The Wire* and *Prison Break* aired with the backdrop of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Government Affairs, which organized hearings and reports on "prison radicalization" that specifically targeted Black conversion to Islam as a leading "domestic terrorism" threat.

Iranians in 'Good' Muslim vs. 'Bad' Muslim

Almost four decades after the fact, big studio productions continue to ensure Americans don't forget to associate Iran with the hostage crisis. *Argo* (2012), winner of the 2013 Oscar for Best Film, and based on the 1979–81 hostage crisis, revives this narrative thread and trope of Iranians as barbaric people, the essence of the 'Bad' Muslim.

Portrayals of Iranians post-9/11 focus on the Iran with nuclear capabilities, a political talking point. However, there are 'Good Muslim' Iranians, portrayals that water down the Islamic/Muslim identity of Iranians in shows such as the reality-based series *Shahs of Sunset* (2012–present) on Bravo which follows the lives of a religiously diverse group of Los Angeles–based Persians[14] who live in upscale, luxury-obsessed Beverly Hills. This is a life alluded to by the character Cher in *Clueless* (1995): "That's the Persian Mafia—you can't hang out with them unless you own a BMW."

Saving Muslim Women

An ironic twist to this Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim paradigm is centered on the Muslim woman. After centuries of being bundled in black, hypersexualized, and anglicized, she was now to be "saved" from the Muslim man's towering oppression. This notion of "saving Muslim women" (from child marriage, forced marriage, clothing oppression, genital mutilation, lack of education, acid attacks, stoning, etc.) emerged from a specific historical moment: then-First Lady Laura Bush's 2001 speech.

In addressing Afghan women two months after the start of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Laura Bush declared, "The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."[15] Immediately after her speech, the State Department released an 11-page report on the Taliban's "War Against Women." Hollywood took note of the white feminist "saving Muslim women" trope, which also obsessed over Muslim women's sexuality.

In the closing scene of *Sex in the City 2*, which takes place in a Hollywood version of a souq in Abu Dhabi, Samantha (played by Kim Cattrall) drops her bag full of condoms and is aggressively condemned by Arab men who encircle her, shouting, "Haram!" (roughly: "shameful") while Samantha makes sexual gestures and points a middle finger at them, yelling back, "This is for sex."

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[14] For political, religious, cultural reasons, some people from Iran refer to themselves as Iranian and others as Persian. Some characters like Neelufar Seyed "Lilly" Ghalichi and Golnesa "GG" Gharachedaghi on *Shahs of Sunset* are Muslim (and even some identify as nominal Muslims) while others have a more complicated background like Reza Farahan, whose father is Jewish and mother is Muslim.
[15] Transcript of Laura Bush speech, *Washington Post*, November 17, 2001, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html

James MacIntyre in the *New Statesmen* expounds on this final scene: "[A]t the conclusion of the film, some women in *burqas* reveal that they, too, wear fashionable items underneath their *burqas* and that they are all reading the same trashy beauty book as one of the stars, as if Muslim women are actually OK because they can lower themselves to superficial Western standards."[16] This is after two-plus hours of abundant visual and verbal references to the burqa, and the consistent thread throughout the film of Arab men "made out to be savages,"[17] making clear that Western values save Arab and Muslim women from misogynistic and barbaric Arab and Muslim men.

The fascination with rescuing the Muslim woman from the clutches of Muslim men—which is an old trope, transferred from rescuing white women from Arab/Muslim clutches to rescuing Muslim women—was paired with the assimilation of the headscarf-wearing Muslim woman into American pop culture (or at least giving her a cameo). As early as December 2001, [*7th Heaven* show writer and producer Brenda Hampton](https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/public-accounts/2010/07/160-sex-city-women-arab-film) responded to the post-9/11 murder of Sikh gas station owner Balbir Singh Sodhi in Mesa, AZ, by introducing a Muslim storyline featuring bullied ten-year-old Yasmine Halawi (who wears a headscarf and appeared in two episodes in 2002; she was played by a Muslim actress named Ashley Solomon).

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[16] James MacIntyre, "Racism and the City: the ghastliness of Carrie and her gang," *New Statesman*, July 1, 2010, https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/public-accounts/2010/07/160-sex-city-women-arab-film

[17] James MacIntyre

Indie Films: Muslim Artists Busting Tropes

For years, while mainstream Hollywood continued to recycle simple, and sometimes dangerous tropes, Muslim artists from around the world successfully told authentic stories about the complex global Muslim community, including:

- Palestinian Hany Abu-Assad's Global Globe-winner and Oscar-nominee (with much controversy over "country") *Paradise Now* (2005). The film centers around two Palestinian childhood friends recruited for a suicide attack in Tel Aviv, and vividly demonstrates the conditions of occupation that render suicide attractive.

- Both films of Palestinian-American filmmaker Cherien Dabis, who has also worked on TV series *Empire* and *Quantico*, screened at Sundance. *Amreeka* (2009) is an Arab-American coming-of -age story set during the first Persian Gulf War, and *May in the Summer* (2013) is a romantic comedy starring Dabis as a Palestinian-American New Yorker traveling to Jordan to marry her fiancé. *Amreeka* won the Fipresci Prize at Sundance.

- Black Muslims Sultan Sharrief's *Bilal's Stand* (which was accepted into Sundance when he was twenty-five years old) and Qasim Q Basir's *Mooz-lum* documented the lives of young Black college-bound Muslims Bilal and Tareq, respectively, navigating family dynamics and outside social pressures in post-9/11 Michigan (both 2010).

- Syrian-American Eyad Zahra's screen adaptation of Michael Muhammad Knight's Muslim punk scene novel *Taqwacores* screened at Sundance in 2010.

- Kashmiri-American Musa Syeed's *Valley of the Saints* won the Sundance Film Festival's World Dramatic Audience Award and tied for the Alfred P. Sloan prize in 2012.

- At the 2015 Cannes Film Festival, Lebanese-American producer Mike Mosallam showed his narrative short *Breaking Fast* (which is being transformed into a full-length feature film), about a queer Muslim, set during Ramadan in Los Angeles.

- *The Square*, Egyptian filmmaker Jehane Noujaim's Netflix documentary about the Egyptian uprising, was nominated in the documentary category at the 2013 Oscars. (It was the first Oscar nomination for Netflix).

Post-2016: Hollywood Reckons, Muslims Artists on the Rise

Hollywood reacts to the 2016 election

As Donald Trump's campaign for the U.S. presidency began in 2015, with a call for a Muslim registry reminiscent of Japanese incarceration during WWII, the entertainment industry had a moment of reckoning. Between 2016 and 2017, assaults on Muslims in the U.S. surpassed 2001 numbers, corresponding directly to the emergence of Trump's hate speech.[18] Were they, and the long portrayal of Muslims as "Brown foreign others" belonging to hate group cults, terrorists, criminals, lecherous sheikhs, and silent, repressed bundles of black, partly responsible for fomenting the anti-Muslim racism that popularized extreme right-wing nativism and populism?

In response to increasing anti-Blackness, xenophobia, nativism, and anti-Muslim racism, peddled by then-candidate Trump and culminating in his election, entertainment networks, showrunners, and film companies began to reckon with their role in portrayals of and narratives about the Muslim community.

[New York Times writer Melena Ryzik](#) wondered if this could mean a breakthrough from hyper visible terrorist tropes and outright erasure, or, "Will it be more difficult than ever?" Less than two weeks after Election Day, she gathered five showrunners in New York to discuss the representation of Muslims on TV. These TV bigwigs included *24* and *Homeland* showrunner and executive producer Howard Gordon, *Quantico* creator Joshua Safran, former *Daily Show* correspondent and creator of *Halal in the Family* Aasif Mandvi, Zarqa Narwas of the Canadian series *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, and Cherien Dabis of *Amreeka* (also a writer for *Quantico* and *Empire*).

> *Ryzik: The F.B.I. has said that attacks against Muslims were up 67 percent last year. Do you have any anxiety about your shows being fodder for that?*
>
> *Gordon: The short answer is, absolutely, yes.*

One immediate outcome: Safran worked with the writers of *Quantico* to abandon its terrorism storyline. Muslim characters were added to the ensemble casts of shows such as *Legends of the Tomorrow* around the same time as there were activist pushback on calls for a Muslim registry and the passage of Executive Order 13769, *Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States,* more popularly known as the Muslim travel ban.

And since the 2016 election, more authentic stories of the Muslim community and experience have been created by Muslim artists, especially in the television industry; for instance:

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[18] http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/11/15/assaults-against-muslims-in-u-s-surpass-2001-level/

- Salt Lake City resident and upstate New York–raised Black Muslim Ayana Ife became the first Muslim to make the finals of *Project Runway* (season 16, 2017), wowing judges with her modest style.

- In 2017, Indian-American Hasan Minhaj—a correspondent for Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*—released a comedy special for Netflix entitled *Homecoming King*, less than a month after he hosted the White House Correspondents' Dinner (the first one during Trump's presidency, which the President and most of his administration refused to attend).

- On May 2, 2018, Hulu announced they had ordered a season of *Ramy,* an original series created by comedian Ramy Youssef (*See Dad Run* and *Mr. Robot*), which follows the social, cultural, political, and spiritual journey of a young Egyptian Muslim man from New Jersey.

- The love story of Black American Muslims and real-life showrunning and producing couple Mara Brock Akil (née Ali) and Salim Akil (*Girlfriends*, *The Game*, and *Being Mary Jane*) is captured in the 2018 OWN series *Love Is ___* (created and executive produced by the Akils).

- New web series created by Muslims and featuring Muslim storylines included: *Brown Girls* (2017, acquired by HBO after its first season), *Unfair and Ugly* (2018), and *East of La Brea* (2018).

- Other new regular or recurring characters on ensemble TV series included Zari Adrianna Tomaz on *Legends of Tomorrow*, Adena El-Amin on *The Bold Type*, Dahlia Qadri on *Grey's Anatomy*, and Alison Abdullah on *Orange Is the New Black*.
  - Muslim computer hacker Zari Adrianna Tomaz (played by Iranian actress Tala Ashe) was added to CW's superhero series *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* by the production team in response to the 2016 election. "You might have heard there was this election," said Marc Guggenheim at a 2017 Television Critics Association press tour. "Not to get political, but something that we all gravitated toward in the writers' room was making this character Muslim."

- Emmy Award–winning streaming documentary series *The Secret Life of Muslims* returned for a second season.

Hollywood films created by Muslim artists are also on the rise, including:

- *Jinn*, written by American Black Muslim Nijla Baseema Mu'min (2018 winner of SXSW's special Jury Recognition for writing)—a coming-of-

age story told from the POV of a seventeen-year-old Black girl named Summer, who becomes attracted to the notion of "jinns" after her mother converts to Islam. Orion Classics has acquired the rights to Mu'min's film, with a theatrical release date of November 15, 2018. "I am making this film," Mu'min said, "because I am tired of seeing the same old recycled images of Muslims when I turn the TV on. . . . None of those Muslims reflect the ones I know or grew up with. When a group of people are routinely painted with one sinister brush, it becomes okay to dehumanize them and strip them of their rights. I am not okay with that." Mu'min also recently joined the all-women-director lineup for season 3 of OWN's drama *Queen Sugar*.

● Indian-American Muslim filmmaker Lena Khan's feature *The Tiger Hunter* (2017), featuring Danny Pudi (*Community).*

Ramy Youssef: In His Own Words

*Comedian Ramy Youssef, (writer/*See Dad Run*, actor/*Mr. Robot*) spoke with Dr. Alhassen about his trajectory in Hollywood as a Muslim artist and what he's trying to do with his upcoming show* Ramy *(interview edited for clarity):*

Usually we are portrayed as victims of hate crimes, terrorists, or very religious folks that just become the butt of all jokes. We're misunderstood because of the people who hijacked our religion, shouting at a mountaintop or typing fervently into Twitter.

I entered Hollywood with the spiritual backbone of being a practicing Muslim. For me, being a Muslim is about understanding myself, and having this outlet has helped me navigate life in Hollywood, which can be very unstable. It's also opened up some cool, personal conversations where people ask me about the way I practice my beliefs, including through prayer and not drinking alcohol.

The work I want to do is based in my point of view. I'm trying to make great things that are vulnerable and self-examining. Life is not really comfortable. I'm not trying to change the rules of the religion, but I am trying to change the way we engage in conversation around it.

I'm really fortunate to live and work in an era where being Muslim is something Hollywood wants to talk about and engage in. Hollywood wants to be on the right side of issues, and I've felt that people are very receptive to hearing about my experience as a Muslim and curious about how I practice my faith. That's the gift of this time. This kind of conversation leads to some really cool stuff, in a way that you wouldn't expect; it's kind of like punk rock... rebellious in a way and fun to explore because it makes people the right kind of nervous.

I'm working on a show about the most human family I could possibly show that is Muslim, an Egyptian family in New Jersey. The characters are doing what most people are doing—trying to be good. They are wrestling with their faith,

with what they actually believe in, and the things they actually do. I'm trying to show that in a really honest way. The characters have religious clarity on some level and have religion in their lives, but they are also grappling with the present moment and things happening in front of them that present contradictions. This has been the experience of my life. I'm aiming for a nuanced representation I haven't really seen before. I'm working on a show about the most human family I could possibly show that is Muslim, an Egyptian family in New Jersey. The characters are doing what most people are doing—trying to be good. They are wrestling with their faith, with what they actually believe in, and the things they actually do. I'm trying to show that in a really honest way. The characters have religious clarity on some level and have religion in their lives, but they are also grappling with the present moment and things happening in front of them that present contradictions. This has been the experience of my life. I'm aiming for a nuanced representation I haven't really seen before.

The show will be the first time we see an Egyptian-Arab family on television. A lot of times people don't know who Arabs are. And people don't necessarily recognize Arabs in everyday life, unless someone is wearing a headscarf or there is some indicator of an accent. It's great to be able to frame what an Arab is through this show and bring in my own connections to Egypt—to both my countries, Egypt and America. And do to this for each of the characters, including parents who gave up everything in Egypt to come here for what they believed would be a better life for their kids. And now also having their own identity crisis where they've been in America longer than they ever were in Egypt. They are American in Egypt and Egyptian in America. Very common for any immigrant experience. Getting to show this through the lives of an Arab family is really exciting.

The political climate is what sparks people's curiosity, but rather than focusing directly on the political backdrop, my work is more personal. I think it's important to create characters and themes that are both universal and specific and to strike a good balance between curiosity and relatability. Be wary of creating work that just rests on the headlines.

It's important for the work to be personal and vulnerable. You should never be doing what is just easy. If you are putting yourself on the line and revealing something, that's a good sign.

Behind the Scenes: *East of La Brea*

In 2017, anti-racism organizer Margari Hill of the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC) teamed with award-winning screenwriter Sameer Gardezi (*Aliens in America*, *Modern Family*) to design and create an experimental writers' room–style incubator called "Break the Room." The Pop Culture Collaborative supported this week-long incubator, which filled the room with new and emerging Muslim writers. The result: the first season of the digital series, *East of La Brea*, which focuses on a young Black Muslim woman and her community in East Los Angeles.

The project embedded commitments to anti-racism and inclusion into its design and execution, from story concept to writer selection to daily agenda which included trainings provided by Hill and her team. Gardezi identified up-and-coming writers through social media channels and official callouts. The project received over 100 applications, and the Break the Room team selected writers Halima Lucas, Thandisizwe Chimurenga, Nia Malika Dixon, and Tanha Dill.

East of La Brea is executive produced by Paul Feig's digital production company, Powderkeg.

> *Participating in the* Break The Room *initiative was phenomenal. As an established independent filmmaker, even I have experienced barriers to creating authentic Muslim-American content. When it comes to the bottom line, i.e. money, funders, network executives interested in my content, even name actors who want to come on board to produce fall under the spell of our societal mythology that Muslim in America looks like one thing, and that it only includes immigrant Muslims. Having the opportunity to work with other professionals with the same mission—inclusive content—showed me that it's not a dream I hold but a solid reality. We can create authentic Muslim-American narratives that are inclusive and reflect the richness of our diverse communities, especially here in Los Angeles. Then, to receive the positive feedback from my followers and fans on social media in response to just an announcement of the project just galvanized the demand for what we created. Audiences are hungry for our authentic narrative, and they want it now. I'm all in, and I believe we are giving the audiences what they want.*
>
> -Nia Malika Dixon, writer East of La Brea

Trope Exposed: Muslims as Especially Homophobic

Love is Love

Although a number of Muslim-American organizations and religious leaders issued statements of condemnation (and the Florida chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) asked its members to donate blood to hospitalized victims), anti-Muslim fear-mongers exploited the 2016 Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, to launch assaults on Islam. Real Time host Bill Maher, a member of a New Atheist movement that includes scientists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and others, used the tragedy to argue that Islam is uniquely intolerant and homophobic. Here, liberals and right-wing Republicans find common ground: uniting in anti-Muslim hate.

For example, in legislation such as the first iteration of the Muslim Ban: "The United States should not admit those who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred (including "honor" killings, other forms of violence against women, or the persecution of those who practice religions different from their own) or those who would oppress Americans of any race, gender, or sexual orientation." Ironically, homophobic laws in Muslim-dominant countries are actually legacies left by their European colonizers.

> ❝ Furthermore, not only are Muslims predominantly "accepting of homosexuality," they are engaging in queer Muslim storytelling as writers, producers, and actors. ❞

"Five Islamic countries with no anti-homosexual laws on the books were those never colonized by the British. Article 534 in Lebanon, which criminalizes 'sexual intercourse contrary to nature,' was derived from the French colonial Mandate period," French studies professor Mehammed Mack, author of *Sexagon: Muslims, France and the Sexualization of National Culture* (2017), pointed out in a *Newsweek* article "What does the Koran say about being Gay?" "From the earliest contact points between the Christian and Muslim civilizations, Muslims were faulted not so much for their sexual intolerance as they were for their sexual permissiveness. Orientalism and colonialism both presented Muslims as perverts, prone to bisexuality, and were thought to have untamable sex drives."

However, a July 2017 Pew Forum poll found a majority of Muslim Americans "accepting of homosexuality." Furthermore, not only are Muslims predominantly "accepting of homosexuality," they are engaging in queer Muslim storytelling as writers, producers, and actors. Of note is that women in these stories fall in love with other women of color. Some examples:
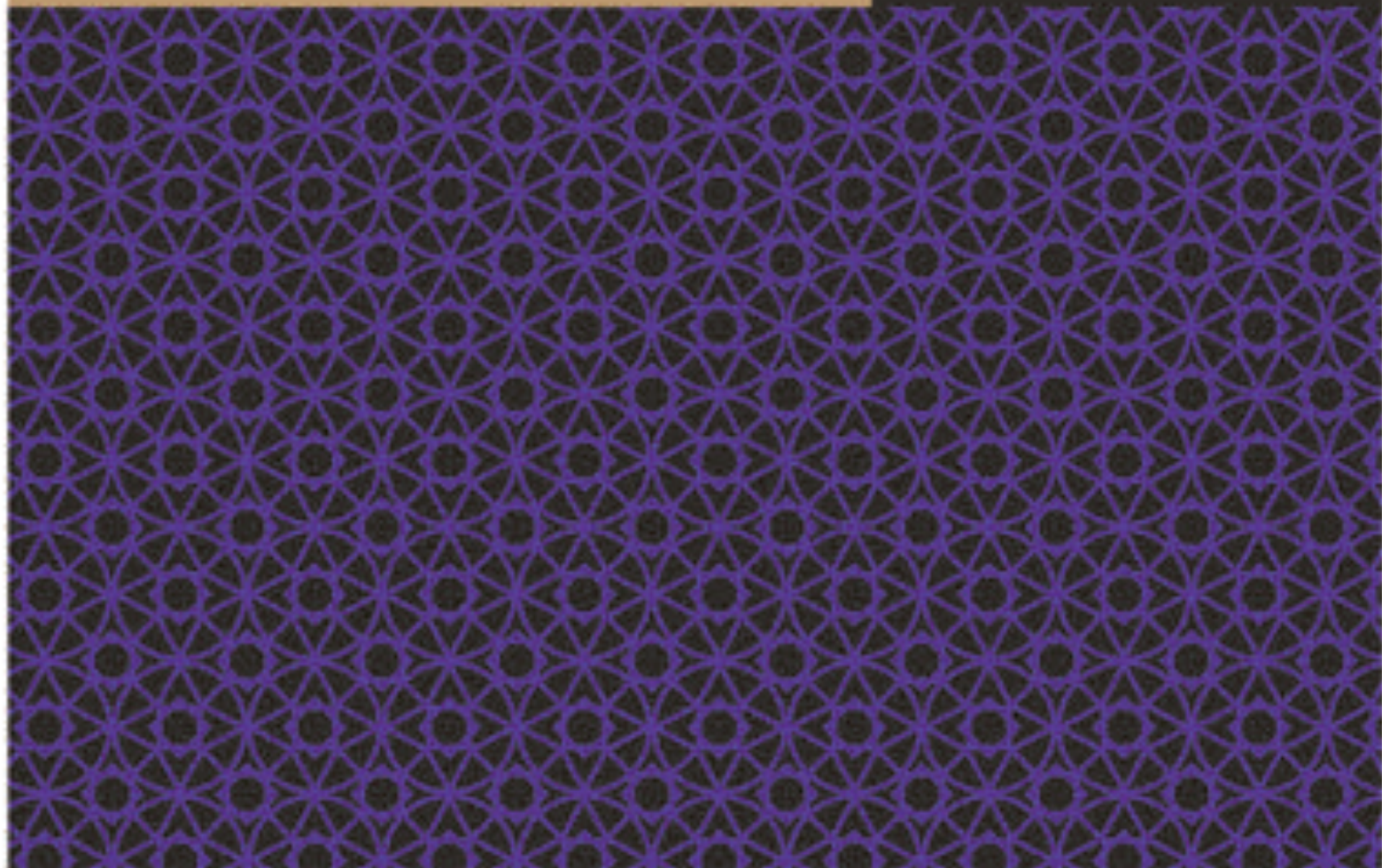
- *Brown Girls* is a 2017 web series co-created by Fatimah Asghar and Samantha Bailey for OpenTV. It features the friendship of queer South Asian writer Leila and Patricia,

a young Black "sex positive musician" in Chicago, and is being adapted by HBO.

- *Signature Move* (2017) by Pakistani actor and writer Fawzia Mirza focuses on a lesbian love story between a South Asian-Muslim lawyer and a Mexican-American book store owner.

- Queer Iranian artist Adena El-Amin (played by Iranian actress Nikohl Boosheri), a supporting character on FreeForm's *The Bold Type,* forges a romantic relationship with a Black woman, the social media director of *Scarlet* magazine.

In contrast with the trend in portraying queer Muslims as "brown women falling for other women of color," there is a rise in stories of South Asian Muslim men loving or courting white women. These include Aziz Ansari's Netflix series, *Master of None* (2015–present), Kumail Nanjiani's *The Big Sick* (2017), and Hasan Minhaj's *Homecoming King* (2017). Ansari and Nanjiani also reflect a secular Muslim identity, a version of the 'Good' Muslim.

Recommendations

Harve Bennett, producer of *Bionic Woman* and *The Six Million Dollar Man,* explained that stereotyping spares writers "the ultimate discomfort of having to think." For Americans, this uncomfortable thinking would entail facing a centuries-long history of U.S. and European empire—colonizers who forcibly enslaved Africans, many of whom (estimated at 15 to 30 percent) were Muslims,[19] occupied Arab, African, and South Asian lands, and continue to occupy through military interventions and bases from Senegal to Indonesia. These same colonizers imprison the Muslim community in prisons in the U.S., black sites (secret CIA-controlled facilities used to unlawfully detain people), and in Guantanamo.

Given how pervasive tropes about Muslims are, and how damaging they are to both Muslims and non-Muslim viewers, it's time to sustain and advance the burgeoning swell of Muslim voices and authentic storytelling within Hollywood, and to create new, authentic stories for mass audiences.

Dr. Alhassen, the Pop Culture Collaborative and its special partner, the Pillars Fund, gathered input from organizers and artists in the field including screenwriter and producer Sameer Gardezi, Harness executive director Marya Bangee, and Zaheer Ali, director of the public history project *Muslims in Brooklyn*. Collectively, these recommendations are for stakeholders in entertainment, philanthropy, and the Muslim social justice community. Please note that while these recommendations are centered on the Muslim community, many are valuable to any marginalized community.

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[19] https://www.theroot.com/african-slaves-were-the-1st-to-celebrate-ramadan-in-ame-1790876253

1. Understand the diversity of Muslim communities—and frontline their participation in, and ownership of, the creative process.

> *"There is no one way that people identify as Muslim. There is no one way to be a Muslim."*
>
> —Kashif Shaikh, Pillars Fund

Muslims are not a homogenous group. Women, men, gender non-conforming, queer, secular, faith-based, African, Arab, Black, South Asian and much, much more—the American Muslim community is incredibly diverse. To understand this complexity, and for authentic storytelling to flourish:

- **Don't wait until the end.** Writers, showrunners, and producers working in Hollywood and Muslim-community organizations—such as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Pillars Fund, Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC), MPOWER Change, MOST, Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), and more—should be included as partners in story creation on an ongoing basis instead of being brought in as consultants after the concept, script, casting, set design, etc. have already mostly been developed and determined.

- **Gain "intimate knowledge."** Both Muslim and non-Muslim artists should engage with source material such as oral histories and first-person narratives to inform plotlines and portrayals. Advisors are abundant: Zaheer Ali at the Brooklyn Historical Society; director of research Dalia Mogahed from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding; Sapelo Square founder Su'ad Abdul-Khabeer; MuslimARC managing director Margari Hill at ReThink Media; Sahar Ullah of *Hijabi Monologues*; Hussein Rashid; *The Secret Life of Muslims*; and more.

> *A lot of times, people will say, "we're just taking our stories from the headlines." We have to create accessible opportunities for people to go beyond headlines. And we have to tap people with intimate knowledge, not just those with representative or authentic knowledge, to tell the stories. "Intimate" implies a relationship with the community, a knowing, familiarity, going beyond the superficial.*
>
> —Zaheer Ali, Brooklyn Historical Society

- **Reimagine the story development processes**. Open up opportunities for established and emerging Muslim artists to develop the authentic stories they want to tell, grounded in their own experiences and communities. For example, with targeted support, philanthropy and entertainment studios can build new writers'-room models that can create multifaceted content appealing to mass audiences, such as *East of La Brea.*

> *You aren't doing us a favor. It's to your benefit to get the story right and to tell the authentic story that the audience wants.*
>
> —Kalia Abiade, Pillars Fund

2. Build and expand creative and career pipelines for Muslim artists within the entertainment industry.

> *Hollywood is doing a decent job with the entry level, but we need a middle tier of Muslim writers who can be decision makers and have power. There's currently nowhere for them to go. In this bottom-heavy industry with a pyramid structure, lots of entry-level people will be pushed out. How do we make sure that the artists who are breaking in now have 20+-year careers in the industry?*
>
> —Sameer Gardezi, screenwriter and producer

Philanthropists and the entertainment industry can make substantial, ongoing investments in all stages of the pipeline for Muslim creatives, starting at points of entry and continuing through a long-term career trajectory.

- **Map the access points.** Develop, update, and share tools that map available resources, fellowships, and diversity programs to help more emerging Muslim creatives know about and have access to entry-level creative and executive opportunities—and make these tools available to Muslim-serving organizations and Muslim artist collectives involved in theater, fine arts, authors and more.

- **Redesign pipelines, support long-term career trajectories.** Traditional diversity fellowships offer an important foot in the door to writers'

rooms for some aspiring writers and executives. However, these fellowships can fall short of influencing the overall power dynamic within the industry in terms of who is creating and greenlighting content. Also, fellowships aren't setting up enough individuals to have long-term, sustainable careers in the entertainment industry.

To address this problem, many entertainment artists are developing their own pipeline models to focus on artists of color, women, Muslims and more such as [Color Creative](#) and [ARRAY Alliance](#). [BoomGen Studios](#)—is exploring the design of a content incubator that supports emerging artists to develop work and pitch it for television or film while gaining the tools and relationships to navigate and negotiate the business aspects of the entertainment industry.

Look to these companies and projects as potential partners and/or inspirational models.

3. Invest in Muslim communities' ability to advance long-term narrative change and participate in the pop culture for social change field.

We need to build our capacity for coordinated responses around important political moments and *pop culture moments, and we need to build the infrastructure for a long-term, multifaceted narrative inclusive of the diversity of Muslim communities. This includes pipelines for talent to break into the entertainment industry, support with how to navigate it and go-to relationships between Muslim community leaders, Muslim artists and entertainment industry leaders such that the right people are tapped and hired when opportunities arise.*

-Marya Bangee, Executive Director, Harness

The emerging pop-culture-for-social-change field is made up of a growing, networked group of artists, academics, nonprofit organizations, production companies, and philanthropic institutions. In parallel, an ecosystem of Muslim-community organizations, strategists, artists, academics and philanthropists need the capacity and support to move from reaction to proactive narrative change. Philanthropy can support Muslim community stakeholders to:

- **Design a transformative narrative; engage in long-term pop culture change strategies.** Muslim-community social justice organizations, artists, strategists and philanthropy can come together to design and invest in a long-term narrative vision. Currently, the Pop Culture Collaborative and the Pillars Fund are partnering to create the

American Muslim Pop Culture Cohort—a group of individuals and organizations from social movements, entertainment, the arts, advertising, and academia, as well as other Muslim stakeholders—to design a long-term narrative vision and culture change strategy for and by the Muslim community.

Culture change strategies are multi-faceted, and include the ability to:

- **Build pop campaign power**. Muslim-community social justice organizations can build power by mounting campaigns at important pop-cultural moments, whether to advance a narrative strategy and vision (e.g. National Domestic Workers Alliance's *The Help* campaign) or to hold pop culture content accountable for advancing false stereotypes (e.g. Color of Change's *Cops* campaign).

- **Learn how to navigate, and partner, with the entertainment industry**. Support the thoughtful work and deep expertise it takes for Muslim-community stakeholders to build partnerships with artists and entertainment executives, and to become effective advisors on scripts, casting, and production. Muslim-focused organizations ready to engage in this deep partnership building need mentorship from individuals, organizations, and networks rooted in social justice communities who are already working closely with writers' rooms and production companies. Examples of these existing narrative-strategy experts: Storyline Partners, Define American, ACLU, Color of Change, Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC), Harness, MOST of Unity Film Productions, SILA Consulting, and the report's author Dr. Maytha Alhassen.

  Muslim-serving community organizations and networks can learn from these existing models and/or partner with these organizations to effectively navigate and build relationships in the entertainment industry. Philanthropy can support both mentorship as well as learning and partnership development.

KEY TERMS:
DEFINITIONS FOR KEY TERMS USED THROUGHOUT *HAAQ AND HOLLYWOOD*

Narrative

"A narrative is a story people already know (i.e., a story template or archetype running through one's culture that is already a common reference point for the creation of meaning, usually in a moral and/or behavioral framework).

In the context of social movements, a narrative is a tool for restructuring how people think, feel, and respond to the world around them."

—Ryan Senser
It's Not Safe Out Here / Pop Culture Collaborative Senior Fellow

Pop(ular) Culture

The conversations, big ideas, major narratives, and immersive stories—films, TV shows, music, books, games, and more—experienced by mass audiences of millions of people every day.

—Pop Culture Collaborative

Culture Change

"Culture change strategy is a long-term, multilayered approach designed to use immersive story experiences to shift people's cultural narratives, rules, values, beliefs, and behaviors. Often conducted in the realm of pop culture, this strategic practice seeks not simply to raise awareness of critical issues but to fundamentally alter the mental models, assumptions, and behaviors of mass audiences in relationship to entrenched social issues."

—Bridgit Antoinette Evans
Fuel | We Power Change / Pop Culture Collaborative

Muslim

A person who spiritually, religiously, culturally, and/or politically identifies as a practitioner or a cultural adherent of the faith tradition known as Islam.

Anti-Muslim racism

Instead of the more mainstream "Islamophobia," "anti-Muslim racism" conveys the race dimension as it operates interpersonally, socially, and institutionally (through people, practices, policies, and power).

Black Muslim

Anthropologist and Sapelo Square founder Su'ad Abdul Khabeer says, "I use that term "Black Islam" to talk about all the different and diverse movements of Black people who engage Islam as a religious and spiritual tradition. So, I'm talking about the Moorish Science Temple, Ahmadiyya Community, The Five Percent Nation of Gods and Earths, Sunni, Shi'a, Nation of Islam, a really broad range." https://sapelosquare.com/2016/12/21/to-be-muslim-and-cool/

Arab

The Arab League includes as its 22 members: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
The term "Arab" has shifted in meaning over the centuries. At times, it described Bedouin tribes originating from southern Arabia. For more of its history, it was a linguistic marker, applied to anyone who spoke Arabic. In its most recent iteration, it refers to nationalistic and ethnic kinship. This report treats it as an expansive category that includes all those who identify as "Arab."

South Asian

A term used to denote people of South Asian ethnic origin, with roots in the modern-day nations of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Those with roots in Afghanistan, Guyana, Mauritius, Seychelles, Suriname, and Trinidad are also sometimes included. South Asian is more a contemporary and political term that has replaced "East Indian."

Iranian

A person originating from Iran, with Iranian citizenship, and/or self-identifying as from or connected to the nation of Iran. For political, religious, and cultural reasons, some people from Iran refer to themselves as Iranian and others as Persian.

Anti-Blackness

A term used until recently by scholars in a field called "Afro-Pessimism" to theorize "Black social death" in the afterlife of slavery. The Movement for Black Lives cites the Council for Democratizing Education's definition of anti-Blackness "as being a two-part formation that both voids Blackness of value, while systematically marginalizing Black people and their issues." https://policy.m4bl.org/glossary/ .

Orientalism

A postcolonial concept introduced in Comparative Literature scholar Edward W. Said's book of the same name in 1978. Orientalism is a mode of discourse, a system of knowledge that constructs "the Orient" (what Europeans called the Middle East and Africa) through images and

clichés that contrasted to "the West," and thus underlies colonialism and imperialism. The West is constructed as superior to a barbaric Orient.

Nation of Islam

Nation of Islam (NOI) was founded in 1930 by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad in Detroit. Later led in 1934 by Elijah Muhammad after Fard's disappearance, the group expanded to include temples, businesses, schools, farms, newspapers, books, and real estate. After Elijah's death in 1975, his son Warith Deen Mohammed renamed the organization "World Community of Islam in the West," orienting towards Sunni Islam. Longtime NOI minister Louis Farrakhan rejected the shift and revived the Nation of Islam in 1977. Past members include Malcolm X, Betty Shabazz, and Muhammad Ali.

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