

# Critical Education

Volume 7 Number 16 December 15, 2016 ISSN 1920-4125

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## *Angry Muslim Men Neo-orientalism and the Pop Culture Curriculum*

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Citation: Sensoy, Ö. (2016). Angry Muslim men: Neo-orientalism and the pop culture curriculum. *Critical Education*, 7(16). Retrieved from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186189>

### **Abstract**

*This paper traces the discourse of "angry Muslim men" in popular culture, and examines the pedagogical work of the neocolonial project underlying that discourse. In so doing, the paper considers how public discourse about the Middle East and Islam have historically been organized, presented, and understood in Western colonial ideology.*



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*Critical Education*. *Critical Education* is published by the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia. Articles are indexed by EBSCO Education Research Complete and Directory of Open Access Journals.

## Introduction: Angry Muslim Men

In September 2012, *Newsweek* magazine published a story titled, “Muslim Rage: How I survived it, how we can end it” (Figure 1). The story was featured on the magazine’s cover under the headline, “Muslim Rage” and was accompanied by a photo of a crowd of bearded, Brown men, faces caught in various stages of shouting, fists curled, arms entwined, reaching, grabbing – these men were angry, a mob that seemed out of control and dangerous.



Figure 1. *Newsweek* cover, September 2012.

The cover was among other similar stories and images circulating in mainstream news media at that time in what was the wake of the release of a trailer and clip from a low-budget anti-Islam film produced in California (2012). The release of the trailer had quickly been followed by demonstrations in Cairo, Egypt and Benghazi, Libya, which turned violent, resulting in the deaths of 4 US diplomatic servants.

The violence and deaths that resulted were condemned both outside of and from within the Middle East. But what is most compelling about this event, and what will be taken up in this paper, is the familiar deployment of the “stock” characters, plots, and imagery in the curriculum of popular culture about Islam in general and about Muslim/ Middle Eastern men specifically.

It is hard not to notice that popular culture is full of “Angry Muslim Men” (read: Brown, bearded, “foreign”) behaving in “raging” ways (fists, frenzy, mouths open in screams, furrowed

brows). Consider the effects of seeing these images repeatedly over time. In fact, it seems cliché yet still all too often media represent Middle Eastern Muslim men as evil, cruel, or dangerous (Sensoy, 2010a, 2012; Shaheen, 2001; Stonebanks, 2008). Consider conversely, how often (if ever) you have seen representations of Middle Eastern Muslim men as rational, witty, or kind? Why are there so many representations of the former sort, and so few of the latter?

One view would be that there are no (or very “few”) Muslim men who *are* rational, witty, or kind – and that mainstream media images simply reflect that reality. A different view is that the repetition of the Angry Muslim Man character and accompanying plots has more to do with the history and circulation of that character than with a unilateral “truth” about it. In other words, the character seems true and common because it is presented to us so frequently.

Further, the character serves another purpose related to wider discourses sustaining the *East* and *West* binary. One might ask, who benefits from representations of Muslims and the Middle East as a backwards place, full of angry and mean men, and the poor, stupid women they oppress (Sensoy, 2010a, 2012, 2014; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006)? Well, if *they* are evil, then *we* must be good; if they are mean, we must be righteous and benevolent; and if they are stupid, we must be wise and knowing. The “logic” of colonialism, empire and a civilized “us,” the justification for economic and ideological exploitation, and drone attacks killing thousands of un-remarkable, interchangeable, and backwards “them” can be normalized via these repeated messages (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004).

It is important to examine the media and pop culture character of the “angry Muslim man” and the visual discourses that surround him, given the historical roots of this character (extending well before 9/11), as well as his ongoing currency. The discourse of the angry Muslim man works as part of a constellation of images and plots that, through repetition over time, make him and accompanying stories familiar and seemingly universally real and true; And in doing so, reinforce wider messages circulating in society at large about Islam, the Middle East as compared to (and indeed in opposition to) Western Colonial powers (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006).

In this paper, my project is to offer a genealogy of the image of the angry Muslim man in order to reveal the neo-Orientalist discourses embedded in the societal curriculum about Middle Eastern and Muslim bodies. To do so, I draw on examples from popular culture, news, magazines, and television shows, to first examine how the discourse of the angry Muslim man is rooted in characters and plots that can be traced back to the tropes of Orientalism; Next, I explore how the “angry Muslim man” discourse is relationally constructed with the “oppressed Muslim woman” discourse; And finally, I examine how agency and counter-narratives can and do emerge, and the role of media literacy and facilitating these counter-narratives.

### **Neo-Orientalism: Tracking the Angry Muslim Man Discourse**

While the character of the angry Muslim man has been in frequent circulation since September 11 2001, this character is connected to historical Western discourses about a

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backwards/ barbaric/ Islamic “East” in relation to a modern/civilized/Christian “West.” Edward Said most famously named the representations of this relational discourse *Orientalism* (Said, 1978).

Referring primarily to the activities of European artists, authors, and academics during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Said described Orientalism as the systematic organization of the “uncivilized East” discourse, by the West. This organization served to uphold Western power, codifying the idea that the East could be regarded with a set of *essential* characteristics that were fundamentally opposite to the West: where the West was civilized, refined, and marked by modernity, the East was uncivilized, backwards, and marked by barbarism (Said, 1978; Yeğenoğlu, 1998). As such, the cultures of the East, while they may have made originating contributions *in the distant past* of antiquity, were all but irrelevant to contemporary modernity and civilization, which was considered to be cultivated and flourishing in the West alone.

Orientalism as a concept, named this strategy of textual representation that ultimately served as a Western strategy for dominating, restructuring, and controlling the East (Said, 1994; Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006). *Neo-Orientalism* is a neologism given to contemporary manifestations of these classic Orientalist representations.

According to Said (1994), Orientalist representations depict Muslim and Arab peoples as fundamentally and essentially primitive, “prisoners of their emotions, trapped in a patriarchal vise, and locked into ‘jihad’” (p. 3). Representations of Middle Eastern, Arab and Muslim men today are very closely in line with classic Orientalist tropes of centuries ago. In his own study of contemporary media representations of Islam (in his book *Covering Islam*), Said wrote, “much of what one reads and sees in the media about Islam represents the aggression as coming from Islam because that is what ‘Islam’ is...what Muslims and Arabs by their very flawed nature *are*.” (p. xxii)

This story of a naturalized scary, backwards Muslim Middle East place and people has been a central trope of Western cultural production for centuries. The Orientalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whose texts were academic books, letters, accounts of travelers, paintings, and stories of literature has, in the twenty-first century, expanded to include new media texts. In this manner, the project of Orientalism and its discourses has been revived and re-circulated via new media networks.

One could argue that the image and story of a backwards Middle East/Islam in popular Western cultural productions about Islam and the Middle East has been around for centuries. According to this discourse, the East is constructed as a backwards place that is devoid of civilization and modernity; this lack of civilization and modernity can, to some degree, be linked with the people who live *there* – people who are fundamentally flawed, who are guided by their emotions rather than their intellect, who are locked in a primitive “jihad” they cannot escape. If the East (the Muslim Middle East in particular) and people who live there are constructed in this manner, it follows, then, that they are people who the West ought to be cautious about, if not outright fearful of. A Western fear that can be described as *Islamophobia* (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006; López, 2011).

Yet Islamophobia too is not simply the product of a post 9/11 world. While I have written about Islamophobia and the real or perceived threat of Muslim bodies at length elsewhere (Sensoy, 2014), it may be useful to connect the at-times covert discourses of Orientalism with the overt aspects of Islamophobia. As Fernando López (2011) explains, historically *Islamophobia* as an idea emerges in the late nineteenth/ early twentieth century. In essence it describes an emerging attitude in Europe at the time, wherein Islam was perceived to be the image of the enemy.

As López explains, “Islamophobia described a hostile attitude towards Islam and Muslims based on the image of Islam as an enemy, as a threat to ‘our’ well-being and even to ‘our’ survival. Islamophobia... [is] a representation that embodies every threat to “our” survival.” (p. 569). In other words, Islam and Muslims are the face of all that is a threat to “our” way of life and being, and the word *Islamophobia* is the name we give to this threat. And indeed, we can trace the history of Western colonial “othering” of non-Christian others, particularly, Muslim peoples, to the fifteenth century and early periods of European colonial expansion (Grosfoguel & Mielants, 2006).

Scholars have noted how these othering colonial discourses of prior centuries, particularly discourse of raging, angry men has been escalating in tandem with the global War on Terror. In a content analysis of the *New York Times* coverage of stories related to Muslim men and women, Smeeta Mishra (2007) writes that among other elements, “*The New York Times* coverage of Muslim men primarily included stories about violence, terrorism, Islamic resurgence and illegal immigration...” (n.p.). Similarly, in a 2005 article, Yasmin Jiwani notes that the *Globe and Mail* coverage presents Muslim men in Afghanistan as angry men from the desert, as ruthless, terrorizing, violent, and devious, “Muslim men in Afghanistan are portrayed as ‘angry men from the desert,’ but also as being ruthless, devious, and opportunistic.” (p. 63).

The “angry Muslim men” discourse also derives its signifying power from “victimized Muslim women” (Grewal, 2003; Jiwani, 2005; Sensoy, 2010b). As Mishra (2007) explains, “Coverage of Muslim women frequently portrayed them as victims of violence and oppressed by Islamic practice.” (n.p.). While Jiwani in a later project published in 2011 writes, “The figure of mute, oppressed and victimized Muslim women, veiled and subjected to patriarchal violence through Islam, serves to legitimize the rescue project—what Gayatri Spivak (1988) has aptly phrased as the “white men rescuing brown women from brown men.” (p 25). As such, “angry Muslim men” are discursively constructed only not just in relation to a “civilized, modern, and free West,” but to the “victimized and vulnerable Muslim women” they oppress.

### **Angry Muslim Men Oppress Vulnerable Muslim Women**

Much research including my own has investigated mainstream popular culture representations of Middle Eastern women’s (real and imagined) oppression. The discourse of angry Muslim men gains part of its signifying power from the discourse of the “oppressed/victimized Muslim woman.” In other words, *his* rage explains *her* oppression, and her oppression is evidence of his rage.

There has been a long familiar narrative in popular culture about the Muslim woman: Long under the oppression of the backward Arab/Muslim male, the Muslim woman has had to

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endure the primitive conditions of her life, and backwards practices (such as veiling) that have resulted in the unequivocal limiting of her physical and psychological rights and freedoms. If she refuses to veil, the story goes, she will be subjected to various degrees of humiliation, punishment, torture, and possibly an honour-demanded death. All Arab/Muslim women are mistreated by violent Arab/Muslim men, and women in the Arab and Muslim world are in general being abused (Shaheen, 2001).

This story, with minor variations, has been a dominant element of Western knowledge about the status of Muslim women since the eighteenth century (Kahf, 1999) and a prominent discourse in Hollywood representations of Muslim women (Shohat, 1990; Kamal-Eldin, 1999). Ironically, parallel to this story of oppression is a story of hyper-sexuality and eroticism associated with Arab and Muslim women (Steet, 2000; Kamal-Eldin, 1999).

Images of Afghani women in *burqas* and belly dancing seductresses co-exist (characters like Jeannie from *I Dream of Jeannie*, and the harem girl mouse from *Mighty Mouse* cartoons, as well as “real life” Middle Eastern women like Sharbat Gula (*National Geographic’s* “green-eyed girl”), each encapsulate this paradoxical yet parallel narrative. Muslim women are both seductresses, glancing or gazing deeply, overtly and covertly sexual beings – while they are also in need of rescue, protection, or supervision.



Figure 2. *The Dance of the Almeh (The Belly Dancer)* by Gérôme (1863). Dayton Art Institute, Ohio, 63 x 84.5 cm.<sup>1</sup>

One can see elements of this paradoxical oppressed/seductress Muslim woman discourse in the paintings of some of the most famous artists of the Orientalist Western tradition who are studied even today, such as Gérôme’s “Dance of the Almeh” in Figure 2. Artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme, Henri Matisse, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who each have many paintings devoted to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.opaintings.com/artists/gerome/reproduction/2721/the-dance-of-the-almeh-the-belly-dancer.html> [retrieved May, 2008]

the subject of an “exotic” girl – the belly dancer, the odalisque, the harem slave girl. In many of these depictions of the Muslim woman, she is at the mercy of a master, or controlling Muslim man whom she serves or is subservient to. This woman was also often an object of desire, a seductress, an overtly or covertly sexual/ized being. This idea of a vulnerable and victimized Muslim/Middle Eastern woman (whether covered by a niqab or completely – or partially – nude) was a common element of European artistic production about “the Orient” during the period of colonial expansion.

From this period, the characters of Orientalist era paintings migrated to the pages of popular culture in sources such as the *National Geographic* magazine. Linda Steet’s (2000) study of 100 years of the magazine’s coverage of Arab and Muslim culture describes how the *National Geographic*’s narratives accompanying the images allowed it to further legitimize the cultural “facts” via a discourse of scientific facts and anthropological explanations. Quoting the explanatory text accompanying an image called “An Arab Shod with Fire” (1917), “She is a dancer of Algeria and the slow, throbbing music of the Orient is just as necessary...as the jewels and coins with which she adorns herself.”

Thus, via both the legitimacy afforded by artists and painters who were studied in museums and universities, as well as the pseudo-objective descriptions afforded their lives via scientific and anthropological discourses, Muslim women of the Middle East were legitimized as both the objects of at times vile and sordid bodily pleasure, as well as a source of enjoyment and fascination – both of the backwards and uncivilized men who created these conditions, as well as the gaze of the painters and other cultural producers in the West.

Contemporary popular Western cultural productions draw on these earlier Orientalist era images (at minimum *visually*, if not substantively in other ways). And in doing so, the linked representations of *angry Muslim men* and *oppressed Muslim women* circulate in mainstream outlets, building on cultural clues and legitimized evidence such as classic paintings and well-regarded news and cultural magazines like *The Atlantic* (founded 1857), and *National Geographic* (founded in 1888). From these authoritative texts the discourses also make their way to newer magazine and newspaper outlets as well as the new media of television and film, and are revived in these current spaces. Let’s briefly consider two examples from popular culture: *Star Trek* and Bugs Bunny.

### *The Star Trek Curriculum and Neo-Orientalism*

In all of its series, the Star Trek franchise has had a race of beings called the Orion colony, who run a syndicate of enslaved women called the Orion slave women, sometimes referred to as the Orion animal women. These are green women with dark brown/black hair, who are seductresses. They are seemingly powerless (both as slaves and as women in a patriarchal, women-oppressing society), yet in “reality” their “power” is in seducing men – men cannot resist their sexuality nor advances. Whenever the Orion animal women appear in the series, they perform a futuristic “belly dance” to rhythms that are in line with Eastern melodies while Middle Eastern themed musicians accompany them in the background. This dance begins the spell they cast on the male audience.

These animal women are always supervised by villainous Orion “owners” who are members of the Orion Syndicate – an organized crime group in the future who cause trouble for our *Star Trek* heroes.

Representations like *Star Trek* matter because these iconic fictional texts are influenced by, and themselves influence the most popular character-types, story elements, and plots related to the Middle East – serving as a type of shorthand. Want an evil villain? A violent and backwards society? Cast the Muslims! Let’s go to the Middle East! Did you know that before they were part of the *Star Trek* federation of allies, the Klingons of *Star Trek* were a super-warrior race of bronze-faced, mustached villains and that their guttural language could be argued as drawing on orientalist tropes against Arab culture. Read this out loud: “*Heghlu'meH QaQ jajvam.*”<sup>2</sup> Does it sound like Arabic? Klingon? Both?



Figure 3. Orion slave women. *Star Trek* original series.<sup>3</sup>

Not only do these fictional character types from the past build on one another, but the thin line between fact and fiction is blurred when fictional representations seem to draw on (or be “inspired by”) actual elements of a culture and are so overwhelmingly consistent (across genres and over time) that they seem true. For example, Klingons carry a type of weapon called a *bat’leth* – a curved long sword, which has elements resembling the curved blade of the “real world” Arab scimitar.

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<sup>2</sup> Translation: “Today is a good day to die.”

<sup>3</sup> Source:

[http://img3.wikia.nocookie.net/\\_cb20081206022335/memoryalpha/en/images/7/71/Orion\\_colony.jpg](http://img3.wikia.nocookie.net/_cb20081206022335/memoryalpha/en/images/7/71/Orion_colony.jpg)



Figure 4. *A Tale of 1001 Nights* by Gustave Boulanger (1873), oil on canvas, 48 x 70.8 cm.<sup>4</sup>

The scimitar is a common “prop” signaling villainous Middle Eastern/ Muslim men in both pop culture texts today but they draw on Orientalist representations of the nineteenth century (Figure 4). We can even trace elements of the angry Muslim man to classic cartoons for children, such as Bugs Bunny, wherein a new generation of Western audiences learn the discourses of Orientalism.

#### *The Bugs Bunny Curriculum and Neo-Orientalism*

There are at least five Bugs Bunny short films that are set in the Middle East, featuring Arab and/or Islamic themes. The earliest, in 1948, was *A Lad in his Lamp*<sup>5</sup>.

The basic plot involves Bugs inadvertently coming upon Aladdin’s magic lamp. He shines it up to use as “an ashtray or something” and as he rubs it, a genie appears. Bugs thinks the genie is a phony. But in the course of events, he inadvertently makes a wish. Then, *whoosh!* we are transported to Baghdad and the royal palace of the caliph which we are informed was built on a GI Loan (a mortgage guaranteed by the U.S. government to veterans) – and this detail becomes significant in relaying to the audience that the caliph is lazy. We see him reclined upon a stack of giant pillows, smoking a water pipe blowing smoke rings when Bugs drops in to his lap.

When he discovers that Bugs has Aladdin’s magic lamp, the caliph greedily pursues our hero. Apparently, for something as trivial to our hero Bugs as a lamp that he would have used as an ashtray, this lazy caliph pursues it in a most ferocious manner. The caliph emits little more

<sup>4</sup> Wikimedia Commons

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Boulanger\\_Gustave\\_Clarence\\_Rodolphe\\_A\\_Tale\\_of\\_1001\\_Nights.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Boulanger_Gustave_Clarence_Rodolphe_A_Tale_of_1001_Nights.jpg)

<sup>5</sup> *A Lad in his Lamp* (1948) Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0vd4askdXk>

than a primitive “Mwaaaaaahhhrrrrr!!!” preceding his arrival on the scene, often brandishing a scimitar.



Figure 5. Screen capture from *A Lad in his Lamp* (1948).

1955’s *Sahara Hare*<sup>6</sup> is another example of an angry Middle Eastern man. But this time one that is known to Bugs Bunny fans: Yosemite Sam. Bugs calls him “Mr. Aay-rabb.” Mr. Arab wears “a dress” and a towel on his head (a *ghutra* that literally becomes a towel in one scene when Bugs uses it to mop up and dry his face). Our villain rides a direction-challenged camel through the Sahara Desert (marked by a sign of jibberish script standing in for Arabic).

Once again, Bugs is chased through the Sahara by the angry Mr. Arab for leaving footprints in the sand. As mad/evil/girly/Mr. Arab puts it, “a trespasser getting footy-prints all over my desert!” The irrationality of this accusation reinforces ideas about the irrationality of Middle Eastern/Arab/Muslim men’s rationality and emotions. Our hero is, of course, able to outsmart Mr. Arab quite easily and escapes unscathed.

In 1959’s *Hare-Abian Nights*,<sup>7</sup> the villain Yosemite Sam returns, this time as a Sultan. He is sitting in a lavish palace where a series of entertainers are performing for his pleasure. The Sultan is indiscriminate with the punishment he doles out for performances that he finds displeasing. Bugs inadvertently comes to the palace, thinking it’s a theatre, and is instructed by the guard to “perform!” for the sultan. As the Sultan’s vizier warns him, “Make your storytelling entertaining to the Sultan, oh long-eared one. Or it’s the crocodile pit for you!” Once again the indiscriminate and violent responses to something as seemingly trivial as singing a bad song or telling a bad story is rationalized by the *context* and *characters*.

It is important not to write off Star Trek, Bugs Bunny, or the multitude of other pop culture representations of angry Muslim men as either relics of a distant past, historical

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<sup>6</sup> *Sahara Hare* (1955) Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PeeO8ltmE8>

<sup>7</sup> *Hare-Abian Nights* (1959) Online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPKvbkcZ-lg>

anomalies, or as mere entertainment. What may be fictional characters and storylines are intimately connected to mainstream narratives about the Middle East and Islamic cultures.

Specifically in these texts we can see many examples of Muslim, Middle Eastern men as scary. They often furrow their brows, they are often large, posture intimidation, carry menacing weapons, are prone to indiscriminate violence and have irrational impulses. Often this violence is beyond the scope of the “crime” (such as leaving footprints on the sand or singing a song off key, which are both grounds for death).

In this pop culture curriculum, we see many angry Middle Eastern men who (when not angered into irrational impulses) are lazy, lie around to be entertained (often by “harems” of belly dancers), they are often undesirable as leaders or even as pals. They have no smarts, no rationality, no kindness. They have no families. Some have a harem, or camels, but evidently no friends.

Consider how our ideas about scary and angry Muslim or Middle Eastern men (real or perceived) play into these characters and plots. While many might know about powerful Middle Eastern men such as former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, his enthusiasm for developing Iran’s nuclear energy programs, and questionable knowledge on social issues, fewer know that Ahmadinejad has a PhD in Civil Engineering and was a professor at a university specializing in science and technology. Whether one agrees with his policies and ideologies or not, if this information is new to you, does knowing it make him seem less “mad,” irrational, and uninformed? The irrational, raging madness in much of the popular discourse about Middle Eastern and Muslim men is in line with general popular stereotypes about the Middle East and predominantly Muslim societies. The logic is: because Muslims/Middle Easterners live in a backward society, they don’t have the rewards of civilized culture.

Try this quick thought experiment: when was the last time you saw a media representation of a major urban centre in the Middle East (such as Cairo, Istanbul, or Tehran) in all of its mundane urban glory? Can you picture in your mind’s eye Cairenes texting on their smartphones or getting cash from a bank machine? Istanbulites hailing taxis on their way to a rock concert? Tehranians joining friends for dinner out or a football match?

Our capacity to simply *imagine* the range of mundane life experiences of various groups is in part determined by the scripts and characters that we are socialized, through repetition, to see as *normal*. The repetition of the Orientalist curricula about the Middle East over centuries, in both its near-uniform consistency as well as the legitimacy afforded it via the institutions of arts, literature, and social sciences, has resulted in these discourses *seeming* to be real. For how could the images and ideas associated with them be everywhere and so consistent, and *not* be real and true?

### **Reading Back: A Non-Neutral Act**

You may be thinking that yes these images are out there, but how one reads the images and makes sense of them might be different. Indeed, this essay is not meant to suggest that there is a seamless indoctrination at work, nor that there exists a “correct” interpretation of these texts and discourses. Individuals can, and do, have agency and push against these characters and plots.

That said, there are many reasons why it is important for consumers of these texts (and for educators especially) to study representations of the past and trace the historical roots of contemporary discourses. One reason is that to understand the origins of these discourses is to rid them of any presumed originality, specificity, and contextuality. Instead, they can be better understood as part of an ongoing, deeply organized, inter-generational manner of representing, seeing, and understanding people of Muslim and Middle Eastern ancestry.

A second reason is that, without active analytic interventions, the relentless repetition of these discourses (which have little to no dependence on being “true” or “false”), there is a covert pedagogical effect that educators and other folks working with youth especially cannot leave unaddressed. Let me offer some specific examples of the effects these discourses may have on teachers, Muslim students, and non-Muslim peoples.

As part of a research project on education about the Middle East and Islam, preservice teachers were invited to share their views on a series of photographs showing more and less familiar representations of Islam and people of Middle East heritage (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2006).



Figure 6. From *Saudi Aramco* magazine (2002).

In response to this photo (Figure 6), one teacher, “Wendy,” said the following:

I shouldn’t be surprised to see an American flag in the hands of a boy with that coloring. But it does [surprise me]. And I’m instantly looking at him, and instantly thinking that this is foreign country and he’s holding an American flag. So what is the context behind that? Why’s he holding an American flag?<sup>8</sup>

What’s clear in Wendy’s response is how immediately her assessment distances this Arab boy from things that allow her to relate to him. He is *instantly* a foreigner, and someone to be

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<sup>8</sup> Name of teacher is a pseudonym. The research from which this quote is derived was approved by the University’s research ethics board.

suspicious of – she wonders, *why would he be holding a US flag*. To this teacher, he cannot be *both Arab/Brown/presumed-Muslim, and belong in the United States*.

Similarly, in a book I co-edited called *Muslim Voices in School* (2009), one of the contributors tells the story of a narrative project with elementary students. Among the accounts is Adam's story. Writing about his life in school, Adam a sixth grader at the time he wrote:

In the first grade, I was not a person who spoke English that well. I spoke my native language, Somalian. In my class, I was the only person that was from Africa. I did not want people to dislike me because of the country I was from or because of my religion, so I did not say anything. The fear of being an outcast was overwhelming. One day, I thought that enough was enough. I announced it to everyone in my class. I told them that I was a Somalian and a Muslim and that I was proud of it. Some kids did not know what a Muslim or a Somalian was, due to their limited knowledge of the world. I want people to say, "I don't care what you say or where you're from because I will still love you. (p. 10)

Adam's fear of being without close friends and generally disliked because he is Muslim and Somali could negatively impact his school performance, his inability to make and maintain friends, and build relationships with his classmates and teachers.

What these examples suggest is that the experiences of Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim boys in schools is to some extent at least, influenced by the popular discourses about the Middle East and Islam that classmates and teachers bring to bear in interactions with them.

### **Conclusion: Looking Forward/ Looking Back**

The day after the 2012 massacre in Milwaukee that left six dead in a Sikh gurdwara, Chicago's *RedEye* – a journal affiliated with the *Chicago Tribune* - printed a "Turban Primer," -- a guide on arbitrary cultural/religious distinctions between Brown, Middle Eastern, and West Asian men (Figure 7).



Figure 7. From RedEye (2012).<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the goal of the piece was to remind readers how mistaken identity between Taliban terrorists and Sikh worshippers could be made (such as that made by White supremacist Wade Michael Page who perpetrated the attacks, possibly mistaking Sikh worshippers for Muslims).

Sadly, this primer on mistaken identity of the *actual* enemy is not far removed from old-school racial classifications. Such as a popular *Time* magazine article<sup>10</sup> from 1941 (after the Pearl Harbor attack), called “How to tell your friends from the Japs [sic]” which offers pseudo-scientific facts such as “Japanese walk stiffly, Chinese more relaxed” and that telling them apart is tricky, even for an anthropologist with tools and time to measure heads, shoulders, hips (1941).

And of course these contemporary classification tables build upon even older, eugenics-based racial classification systems such as “race type” classifications, which were common in the formal school curriculum during the period of eugenics, such as 1906’s textbook called *New Complete Geography* (Figure 8).

<sup>9</sup> Online source: <http://chicagomonitor.com/2012/08/redeyes-turban-primer-enables-racist-attitudes-to-persist/>

<sup>10</sup> Online source: <http://www.lawyersgunsmoneyblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/1941-time-magazine-infoblurb-showing-how-to-tell-2904-1286480607-82.jpg>



Figure 8. From *New Complete Geography* (1906).

What these reveal is that the manner in which the public discourse about the Middle East and Islam, as well as other racialized groups, has been organized, presented, represented, and studied in Western institutions has not changed much in centuries. The case study of the angry Muslim man discourse that has been presented in this paper, is merely one aspect of a wider story about racialized representations in the popular curriculum. To break down the Orientalist and racist discourses of the past, those of us who teach for social betterment and justice must view and treat these materials of the past as more than artifacts, but as templates that have reached into the contemporary landscape of representation.

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ISSN 1920-4175

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