

Western Media Representation of the Arabic Language

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I always said watching Netflix pays off. I was on my couch watching the season finale of Arrested Development when Michael Bluth - played by Jason Bateman- told his brother Buster that he was preparing for a flight to Baghdad, Iraq. I perked up at the mention of my hometown, excited to see my country represented. Buster then coughs, and when Michael asks his brother if he was speaking Arabic, Buster responds, "No, I was just cleaning my throat" (Arrested Development).

Like 30 seconds into it, I realized it was going to be a shit show.

The scene suddenly cuts to Michael and Buster in a cab on their way to LAX with a brown man dressed in rags that vaguely resemble Arab clothing. Buster begins arguing with the "Arab" cab driver in a language the subtitles call "Arguing in Arabic," but a native Arab speaker would call hura'a, or bullshit. Later on, the first shot of Baghdad is set in a city center, with people again dressed in rags and old clothing and screaming "Arabic" in protest. The "Arabic" signage on the street is just as gibberish as the screams. The episode eventually concludes with Michael and his brothers (Buster and Gob) cruising around Baghdad on a wagon driven by a man on a bicycle with a Hollywood-like sign in the background, again written in incorrect Arabic. (Arrested Development)

This narrative is not limited to just a Hollywood mainstay; in fact, it has also made its way into video games, comic books, and other mass entertainment media. While we expect the narrative and environment exaggeration from this sort of media, I am puzzled by the fact that producers couldn't be bothered to Google Translate simple signage. This carelessness reflects the lack of interest that these outlets have in representing Arabs and Arabic unless they are using them as props in Western mass entertainment. This shared ignorance has poisoned

the Western social sphere, and the image of Arabic language has become associated with terror. Western media representation of the Arabic language sustains a negative perception of Arab people that encourage the discrimination and alienation of the Arab community in the West.

To understand that alienation, we first have to examine the current Western perception. I found it very difficult to find quality resources that discuss the perception of the Arabic language separately from the perception of Islam. It was also very challenging to find anything that was recent and relevant to current events, so I turned to news stories and online blogs. The news stories, as well as critiques of Media, were of great value to my research. While examining the issue I came across a story published online by WNEP.com, an ABC affiliate, stating how in September of 2016 a box of Arab cookies was left at a gas station in East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania. The box with the foreign inscription was perceived as dangerous and suspicious. Soon, a team of investigators was called to the scene, and a nearby daycare center was shut down. In the end, the box of cookies turned out to be precisely that, and nothing more. However, the fact remains that someone in that gas station saw the same box of cookies and believed it to be a legitimate danger. While I can laugh at the fact that the entire situation was caused by something I grew up eating, I cannot help but feel that my fears are justified when cookies can create a full-scale police response (Mataloni).

On July first, another news story broke out; Cleveland's News 5, another ABC affiliate, released video footage from the body camera of an Avon police officer responding to a call in June of 2016.

The video begins with the Emirati tourist Ahmed Al Menhali being welcomed outside the entrance of his hotel in Avon, Ohio with guns and police cars. An employee of the hotel had called the police because they heard Ahmed speaking Arabic on the phone, and apparently believed that Ahmed was “pledging his allegiance to ISIS.” The woman who reported him didn't speak a word of Arabic and made the assumption based on his language and manner of dress alone. In the video we see Ahmed, who was dressed in his traditional Emirati clothing, being pinned to the ground by police officers in front of the hotel entrance, he is then cuffed and searched; one officer had even thrown Ahmed's phone into some nearby bushes and cracked the screen. Ahmed was forced to watch as the officers went through his personal belongings: his phones, credit cards, and Emirati IDs. After Ahmed was placed in a police car, he asked to call a friend of his who is a police officer in Cleveland. While the policeman was conducting the phone call, Ahmed suffered extreme stress, passed out and was taken to a hospital before the police officers apologized to him. The officer also learned from Ahmed's friend that Ahmed was in the US for treatment since he had recently suffered a stroke. (News 5) However, the Mayor of Avon later publicly apologized to Ahmed. (News 5)

Incidents like this show not only the cultural ignorance of the West but a global division between Arabs and the rest of the world as well. The environment in which the language is placed in the media has pushed its audience to ignorantly associate and discriminate based on the stereotypes they are exposed to. In order to understand the stereotypes associated with the Arabic language in the media, one must examine the outlets that expose Western audiences to these damaging stereotypes in the first place.

Dr. Jack G. Shaheen, an internationally acclaimed author, considered an authority on media representation of Arabs and Muslims in American pop culture. Shaheen had been studying the way image makers projected Arabs on the silver screen. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*; He looked and studied over a thousand films in the course of 30 years. In his books, the period of films ranges from early Hollywood movies to some 2000s movie blockbusters. Shaheen mentions that he believes the pattern of images being portrayed deprive and rob Arabs of their humanity. He mentions that similar techniques were used by the Nazis to dehumanize the Jewish people. He describes the Arabic character in movies as this one image that is copy pasted across different stories and movies. (Shaheen) Examples of the ignorance and the stereotypes are extremely apparent in the documentary as the different racist movies scenes play in the background. It was very clear to see that the history of the issue was very deeply rooted in Hollywood. For the sake of relevancy, I decided to reflect on a contemporary show that for a more accurate understanding of contemporary Hollywood's take on the Arabs and the Arabic language. I decided to discuss the TV show *Homeland*.

Homeland has been notorious since it aired and has been accused of racism by *The Washington Post* before. In her 2014 article outlining the many Islamophobic sins of the show, *The Washington Post* journalist Laura Durkay describes the promotional poster for Season 4 of the show featuring Carrie Mathison, wearing a bright red scarf, among a crowd of black-dressed Arab men, as "a blonde, white Red Riding Hood lost in a forest of faceless Muslim wolves" (Durkay). Looking at the image, it's hard to describe the poster in any other way. Durkay's thesis is that *Homeland*'s structure is "built on mashing

together every manifestation of political Islam, Arabs, Muslims and the whole Middle East into a Frankenstein-monster global terrorist threat that simply doesn't exist." Durkay concludes with the show's overall message about Muslims: "Muslims — be they Arab, Iranian or Pakistani — are brutal terrorists who can't be trusted, and they're all out to get us."

Former Al-Jazeera journalist and Muslim woman Laila al-Arian, writing for Salon, also wrote about the show's Islamophobic themes. "TV's Most Islamophobic Show." Her article unpacks painfully Islamophobic behaviors of the show. First, the premise of the first season revolves around a white, American POW Sergeant Nicholas Brody returning to the United States after being turned into a double agent by the nefarious Islamic villain, Abu Nazir.

Al-Arian writes that it's difficult to understand Brody's motivations, since they seem to change so quickly from one episode to the next; is it because Nazir showed him kindness while his subordinate beat the shit out of him, or is it because of Brody's relationship with a little boy whom he was teaching English before a U.S. drone strike kills him? In one case, Brody is manipulated into becoming a victim of Stockholm syndrome, loving his captor for showing him "mercy"; in another case, Brody's military conditioning after years of killing for his country is finally broken because a politician lies about the drone strike on national television. More consistently, however, Brody is portrayed as having turned traitor because he is now Muslim; his Muslimness "taints" him. This is most evident when Brody's wife discovers him praying in their garage, then grabbing his Quran as she begins to scream about the horrible things that make up Islam. "The Quran, the sacred text of billions of people throughout history, is nothing more or less than terrorism and medieval justice embodied. Brody had it all, his wife implies: white, a hero, a family man, but he threw it all away by becoming a Muslim." (Al-Arian)

The placement and development of Arabic characters is yet another issue. The character Roya Hammad is a beautiful, modern, successful Arab journalist with a degree from Oxford and unprecedented access to top Congressmen and CIA officials. She is also secretly Abu Nazir's loyal lieutenant, and an Islamic fanatic. In Season 1, we also meet quiet academic Raqim Faisal and his white, American wife, both of whom are actually secret Islamic terrorists as well. The Roya and Raqim characters exemplify another of Homeland's core messages: "Muslims, no matter how successful, well-placed and integrated, are a hidden danger to their fellow Americans." (Al-Arian)

While these examples focus on how Islam is portrayed in the show. Islamophobia and the perception of the Arabic language seem to go hand in hand. Just like the many inaccuracies, the show seems to project in regards to religion, the producers have done very little due diligence to accurately represent the Arabic language. For instance, Roya is not an Arabic name, in fact it's Persian name, and Raqim isn't actually a name at all. This negative narrative has caught the attention of Arab artists and designers. In the second episode of the fourth season, series' protagonist Carrie Mathison (white, blonde American actress Claire Danes) is escorted through a Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon by a Hezbollah commander. As they walk, they pass by a wall spray-painted with Arab graffiti. Although the graffiti was originally meant to say something generically pro- Assad, it actually reads, "Homeland is racist." (Izadi). In fact, all of the graffiti in that episode is subversive, including messages like "Homeland is a joke, and it didn't make us laugh;" "Homeland is watermelon;" and "Freedom: Now in 3-D!" Heba Amin, an Egyptian artist based in Berlin and one of the Arab artists hired by Homeland's producers to create the "authentic" graffiti, released a statement where she explained why she and the other artists did what they did:

“...we considered what a moment of intervention could relay about our own and many others' political discontent with the series. It was our moment to make our point by subverting the message using the show itself.” (Amin) It seems the lack of attention and accurate representation has not gone unnoticed by Arabs. Many other Arab artists have taken it into their own hand to fight this war on the language.

The fight has not been restricted to TV screens but has come into reality. August of 2016, a tote bag spotted on Berlin metro went viral on social media. The simple white tote bag houses bold Arabic script, the text on the bag translates to “This text has no meaning except to scare people who don't understand it”. Rock Paper Scissors, a design studio founded by two Palestinian designers, Sana Jammalieh and Haitham Haddad, created the bag. When the designers were asked in an interview with Al Jazeera where this idea came from, Haitham said “It came from our reality because we are Arabs - Palestinians living in Israel. There's sort of a common fear or misunderstanding of the Arabic language here. So it was an in-your-face message to make fun of people who are scared of the Arabic language ... and are afraid of it. Because people who don't think much connect it directly to, you know what [terrorism].” (Wilson). These bags are a symbol of this vicious cycle of how media truly influences our perception. The need to have a statement written truly show the need, it shows the extent of the unexplained fear and hysteria. As an Arab I found the bags to be the perfect item of protest, however, many seem to disagree with me.

While working on this paper, I got a chance to read the comments of users regarding those bags. The response to the tote bag article was mostly negative. Someone had even compared Arabs to Nazis stating that the hate for Arabs deserves to exist just like the hate for the Nazis.

The reaction to a bag that does not advocate against anymore is a little absurd; many have missed the point and genuinely think this is an effort of spreading terror on a bag. Many used the argument “if you know your language looks scary why are you wearing and scaring people”. Like how many things get twisted in today's world, the efforts being made to fight for the preservation and normalization of the Arabic language is being twisted to fit the global stereotype of the bad Arab terrorist as well. The ignorance of Arabic/Islamic culture in general and the language specifically has left very little room for discussion. The dangerous stereotypes that are portrayed seem to have poisoned reality. Many seem to find it impossible that the urban myth of the Arabs wanting to take over the world and cover it in a giant Burqa is simply not true... so where does that leave me as an Arab designer?

Like designing anything, one must first point at the problem in order to solve it; miscommunication and misinformation seem to be at the heart of this bi-worldly conflict. The environment which the language is placed in seems to be playing a part in the perception as well. In my Alternative project I aimed to fight the fear people have of the language by first familiarizing them with it. Second, I wanted to produce this experience in a fun setting that separates the fear from the language.

Inspired by games like Uno and Loteria, I decided to create a card game. The deck of cards contains the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet; each letter is present 4 times in the deck in a different color. The deck is made up of 112 cards in total. The goal of the game is to finish your hand of cards first. Players must group cards of the same letters in a house, or consecutive letter series of 4, which would also be called a house. The packaging on the deck of cards includes instructions on the game.

The design of the cards themselves includes all elements needed to play the game so proficiency in the language is unnecessary. I decided to name the game “Helo” which is Arabic for “sweet”. Winner of the game will shout “Helo” when done. How did you think I was going to end the game? Shouting Allah Akbar?

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