Introduction [to] Orientalism

Required Reading

Khalid, H. (1994). *An Introduction to Edward Said's Orientalism*. Retrieved from
http://www.renaissance.com.pk/FebRe2y6.htm
(http://www.renaissance.com.pk/FebRe2y6.htm)

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. (pp.1-8). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Learning Outcomes and Connections to Course Outcomes

After completing this lesson, you will be able to:

- Define Orientalism in relation to both "The Orient" and "The Occident."
- Critically evaluate the obligation we have to understand the world accurately.
- Critique the legacy of colonialism in the creation of racialized stereotypes.
- Identify, examine and construct new perspectives by understanding the limitations interfering with our thinking from cultural influences.
- Analyze how social, political and economic dynamics inform our perceptions of ourselves and other people, both as individuals and as groups.

Main Topics

- Constructing the "Exotic" Other
- Racialized Stereotypes

Introduction

Societies define themselves through an often imagined "Other." In Beverly Tatum's core article for Unit 2, you were introduced to Dominant and Subordinate Cultures. Did you ask yourself how one ethnicity was able to so firmly occupy a position of power, while the other was significantly marginalized? With this article, we will further explore how the legacy of colonization continues to play a significant role in how we see ourselves and how we see others.

Thinking Critically

Let's think about what our eyes have been *taught* to see. What we are told is "normal" or "true" influences how we form opinions and engage in what theorists sometimes call **discourse**. Discourse is a system of communication — conversations and exchanges of information. We share and refer to an organized and organizing body of knowledge that imposes rules and regulations over how we can think, speak and act — these rules and commonplace are what make the realm of discourse. Theorists have begun to explore how our discourse systematically constructs both us and the world of which we speak. For instance, it could argued that there are no criminals except within the realm of human discourse. "Criminals" is not a natural category — it's a human way of talking about people. Our discourse includes all sorts of classifications such as "criminal" and this limits what we can perceive; we may see a person as a criminal without seeing other things about them that might actually be more important.

We can think of a discourse as a set of "social scripts" which we perform, whether consciously or unconsciously. [2] For Michel Foucault it is through discourse (through knowledge) that we are created — there aren't any criminals in the world until our discourse creates criminals. So what happens if our categories are misguided or unfair? You might say that "criminal" is an important or legitimate category, partly because anyone in our society can *become* a criminal, and some people would say that people *choose* to become criminals. But what about being a woman? You might say that that isn't the same as "criminal" — there is a scientific definition of "woman." But what if the scientific part (being

female) is the least important part of the definition of a woman in our culture? What if that definition includes all sorts of other values and connotations that are not so neutral or scientific as sex?

A Matter of Perspective

Have you ever given much thought to maps of the world? In grade school or high school, or even when you logged into Google maps, did the map you referred to most often look something like this?
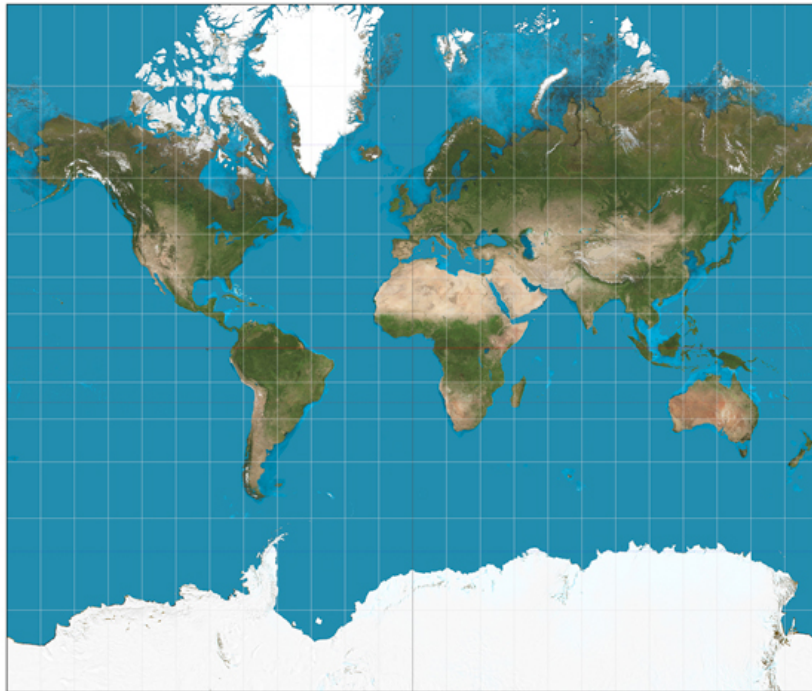
"World on Mercator projection between 82°S and 82°N... Imagery is a derivative of NASA's Blue Marble summer month composite with oceans lightened to enhance legibility and contrast. Image created with the Geocart map projection software" by Strebe.
Source: By Strebe (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AMercator_projection_SW.jpg)

Would it surprise you to know that the previous map is not only inaccurate, but purposefully misleading? A much more accurate global map is called the Gall-Peters projection pictured below—can you spot the differences?
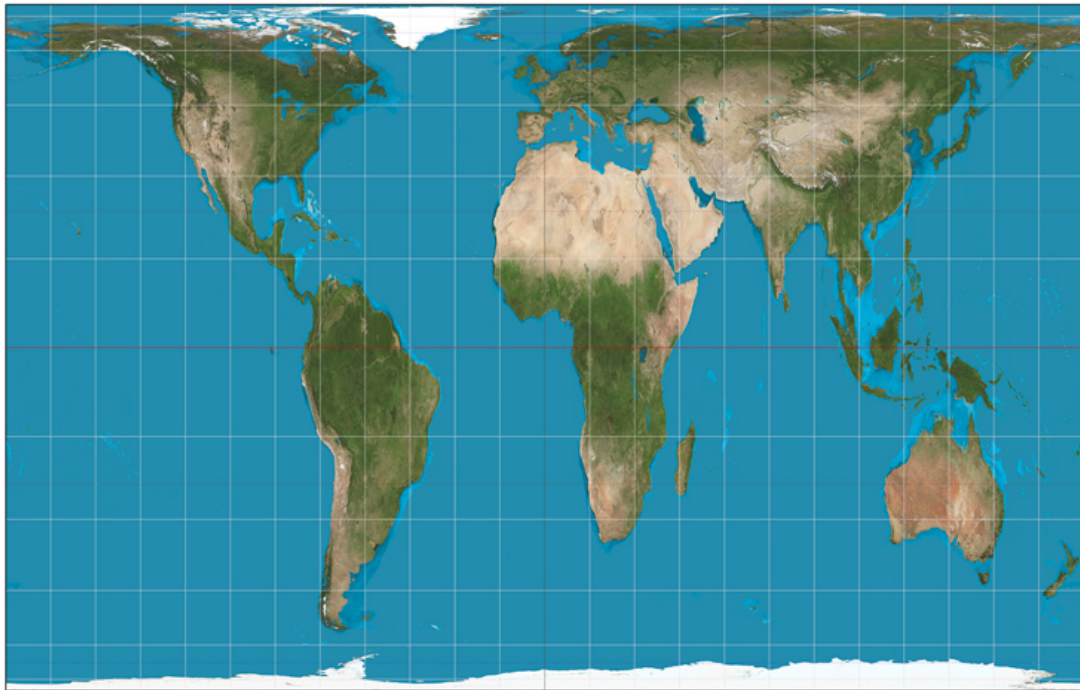
"World on Gall-Peters projection…Imagery is a derivative of NASA's Blue Marble summer month composite with oceans lightened to enhance legibility and contrast. Image created with the Geocard map projection software" by Strebe.
Source: By Strebe (Own work) [CC BY-SA 3.0 (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)], via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AGall%E2%80%93Peters_projection_SW.jpg)

Surprised? Every flat map will clearly have some distortions, but this interactive map will help you to really understand the proper proportions of landmasses.

🌐 Mercator Puzzle (http://gmaps-samples.googlecode.com/svn/trunk/poly/puzzledrag.html)

Thinking Critically

What are some of the most significant misconceptions of the Mercator model? As *The Guardian* points out in the Mercator projection, "North America looks at least as big, if not slightly larger, than Africa. And Greenland also looks of comparable size. But in reality Africa eclipses both." In the Gall-Peters projection map, "you can fit North America into Africa and still have space for India, Argentina, Tunisia and some left over. Greenland, meanwhile, is 1/14th the size of the continent." [3] In the Mercator map, is there any

political significance to Britain and Europe looking like they sit dominantly at the centre of the entire world? Might this be Eurocentrism or an interpretation of the world based on European values?

Orientalism is a term used by cultural critics to talk about the dubious ways in which Europeans divided the world into a "West" and an "East," and assigned values to the two hemispheres. ("East" and "West" are relative terms, not universal ones — they only exist from somewhere on earth.) In many respects, Orientalism is a way of seeing and thinking by Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century European colonial powers that imagined, distorted and exaggerated differences between Europeans and those from the Middle East, North Africa and Asia. [4] Europeans held the conceit that they were the more advanced "race" and that they could study and explain the "Orients" in a way that was deeper and richer than their own sense of self. As H. Khalid notes in the article, although this was an "artificial boundary...Europeans used orientalism to define themselves" as a superior race further justifying colonization on the basis that it was "their duty to civilize the uncivilized world." [5] For example, attributes that were considered positive, like ingenuity, hard work, and civility were qualities Europeans assumed they possessed exclusively, while negative qualities, like barbarism, laziness or corruption, were arbitrarily allotted to the Eastern "Other." To justify an exploitative relationship, a fiction was created about the "Orient" that had lasting social, economic and political ramifications.

A Matter of Perspective

What makes us who we are? What are the socially constructed elements that shape our complex individual, social and national identities? These are the questions upon which you should focus as you read the introduction to Edward Said's *Orientalism*. While not directly

discussed within the article, of particular importance to this topic is the theory of racialization. *Racialization* involves the construction of a specific image based on assumptions or stereotypes. It not only refers to a process of difference-making according to ethnicity, but an imposition of racial character onto a person or action. "Race" is a human invention, and a human category. Depending on what culture you come from, you will have different ideas and assumptions about different races. In a certain important sense, these are the *fantasies* your culture has about race. The races, and the meaning of belonging to a given race, aren't just there in the natural world, we make them up. This is what is meant by the idea of the social *construction* of race. When we see a culture *construct* a racial difference, as happened in Europe during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, it shows how imbalances of power are established in discourse — in culture. Looking at how this happened makes the rationalization of race visible — and exposes the process whereby we make other people *other*. [1] As you read through the article, it may be helpful to consider the following questions:

- In this lesson, carefully consider what stereotypes were established about "the Orient" by "The Occident." How might this have affected the way people live their lives even today in Canada?

- What is an Orientalist? What assumptions did they make about their subjects?

- What is the danger in generalizations or stereotypes?

- Why does Edward Said argue that the "Orient," is not something that one can pinpoint on a map? Can you think of any other "imagined" places that might influence how other cultures have been perceived in the past (or today)? (For example, what about the "Wild West"? Whose voices were dominant in that imaginary frontier and whose were silenced?)
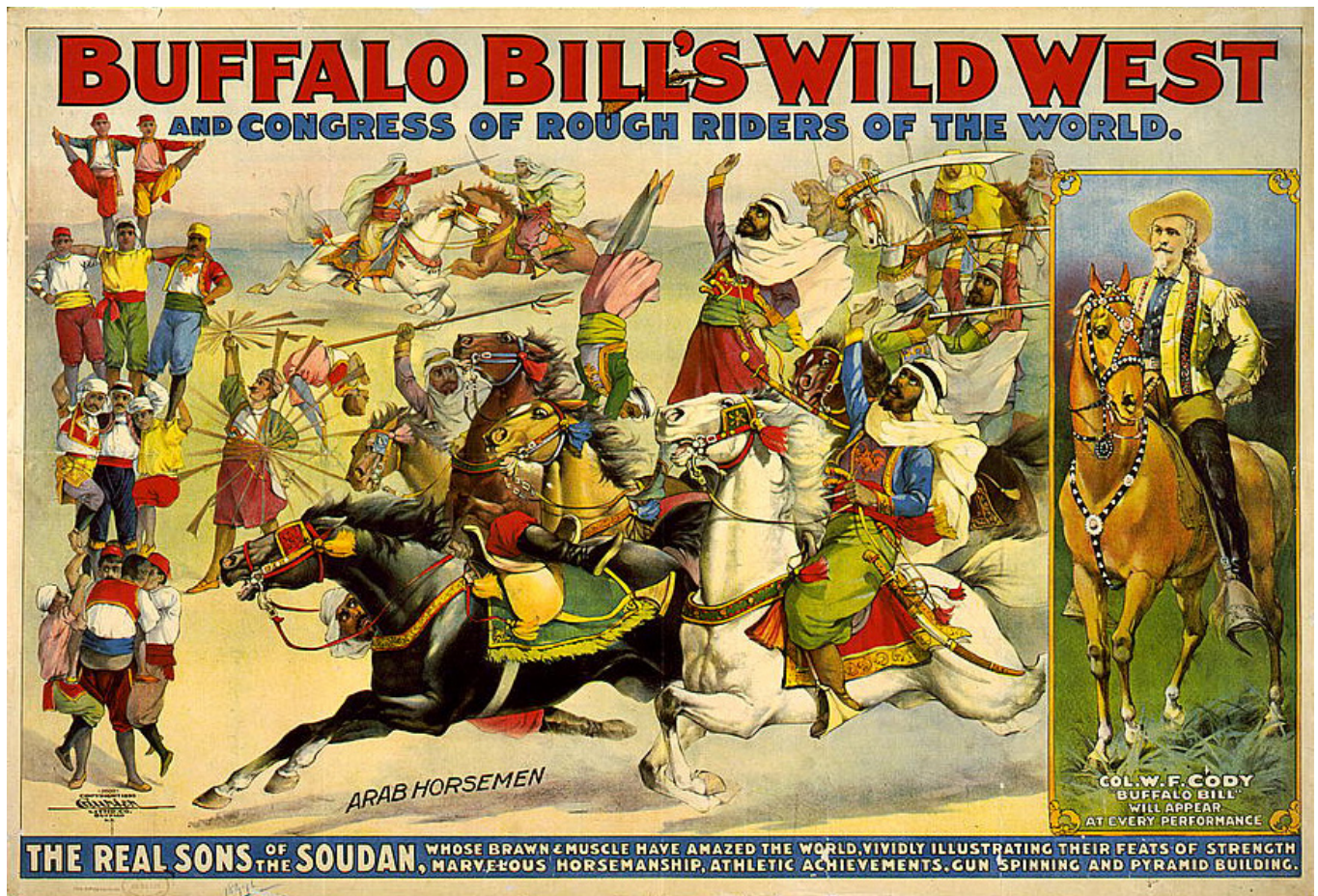
Source: Image courtesy Library of Congress, American Memory, LC-USZC4-3169. (1899). *Arabs* [Colour lithograph, poster], Retrieved from http://buffalobillproject.unl.edu/research/roughriders/posters.php (http://buffalobillproject.unl.edu/research/roughriders/posters.php)

Constructing the "Exotic" Other

In *Orientalism* Said unpacks notions of bias. What does it mean to imagine an "Other"? Most contemporary scholars agree with Susan Smith when she writes that "race is not a biological fact—it exists only as an ideological and historical construction. Separate human races do not exist even if human variation does. Instead race is something created in our language, laws, and science." [6] Racialized stereotypes have a long history, and have much more to do with politics than with science. Since, however, they were (and to some extent still are) repeated in textbooks, art, film, travel stories, music, scientific discourse, and even advertising—they attained a *social reality*. These means that these racialized and often racist stereotypes attained "a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections" [7] — in other words, they were seductive fantasies. People in the West believed them, repeated them, and often failed to question them for decades if not centuries.

For instance, at the turn of the Twentieth Century it was taken for granted by most Europeans (not to mention most Canadians) that the racial hierarchy, which privileged white European ethnicities and marginalized those of Asian or African descent, was "common sense;" "it did not need to be examined or proved, for it was considered self-evident." [8] Unfair? Absolutely. As Said puts it, "in a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand." [9]

A Matter of Perspective

Now consider how this racial hierarchy, based again on pseudo-science and politics rather than any biological fact, might have been used to define laws, or even human rights. How might it have influenced immigration laws? Marriage laws? How neighbours treated each other?

Source: ["Images such as this undated photo of a member of a North African harem often serve to promote stereotypes among Americans about cultures of the Middle East."]. Retrieved from http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/ (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/globalconnections/mideast/questions/types/)

Source: Eugène Delacroix (Painter). (1834). *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment* [Oil on Canvas], Retrieved from ht tps://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WomenofAlgiers.JPG (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:WomenofAlgiers.JPG)

When Europeans classified the new cultures they met as "Exotic" was this meant to be complimentary or was it a criticism? When Anthropologists, scientists, artists, and other travellers reported back their findings to the universities and newspapers of Europe, it was not that camel races, belly dancers, or merchants with tamed monkeys did not exist in "The Orient," it was that these "experts" reflected a version of reality that made it seem that these examples were predominant rather than a small slice of a rich and varied cultural life. In this way, "as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' [East] and 'Occident' [West] are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that had a history and tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it a reality and presence in and for the West." [10] A decadent and even debauched story of this imaginary East unfolded—but this was not an accurate reflection of culture.

It is here that you can also apply "The Looking Glass Theory" from Beverly Tatum's article. If you were from the Middle East and you were to grow up reading books (whether fictional or non-fictional) or viewing art that carried outlandish stories, images or exaggerated "facts" about previous generations of you "race," would you be able to dismiss them, or would you not end up internalizing some these stereotypes, maybe even believe this caricatured representation of your distant relatives, and then wonder where you fit in within this "exotic" spectrum?

Racialized Stereotypes

Now that you know what Orientalism is, have you noticed examples of it within contemporary pop culture in Canada or the United States?

Maybe growing up, you watched the Disney film "Aladdin." Perhaps you were delighted by the silliness of the genie or thrilled by the perils faced by the main characters. Some of you may have even learnt all of the words to the catchy opening song—but as a child, did you actually take the time to look at them closely? The original lyrics from "Arabian Nights" offended many, so much so that the company decided to change them before the film was released on video:

Oh, I come from a land
From a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam.
Where they cut off your ear
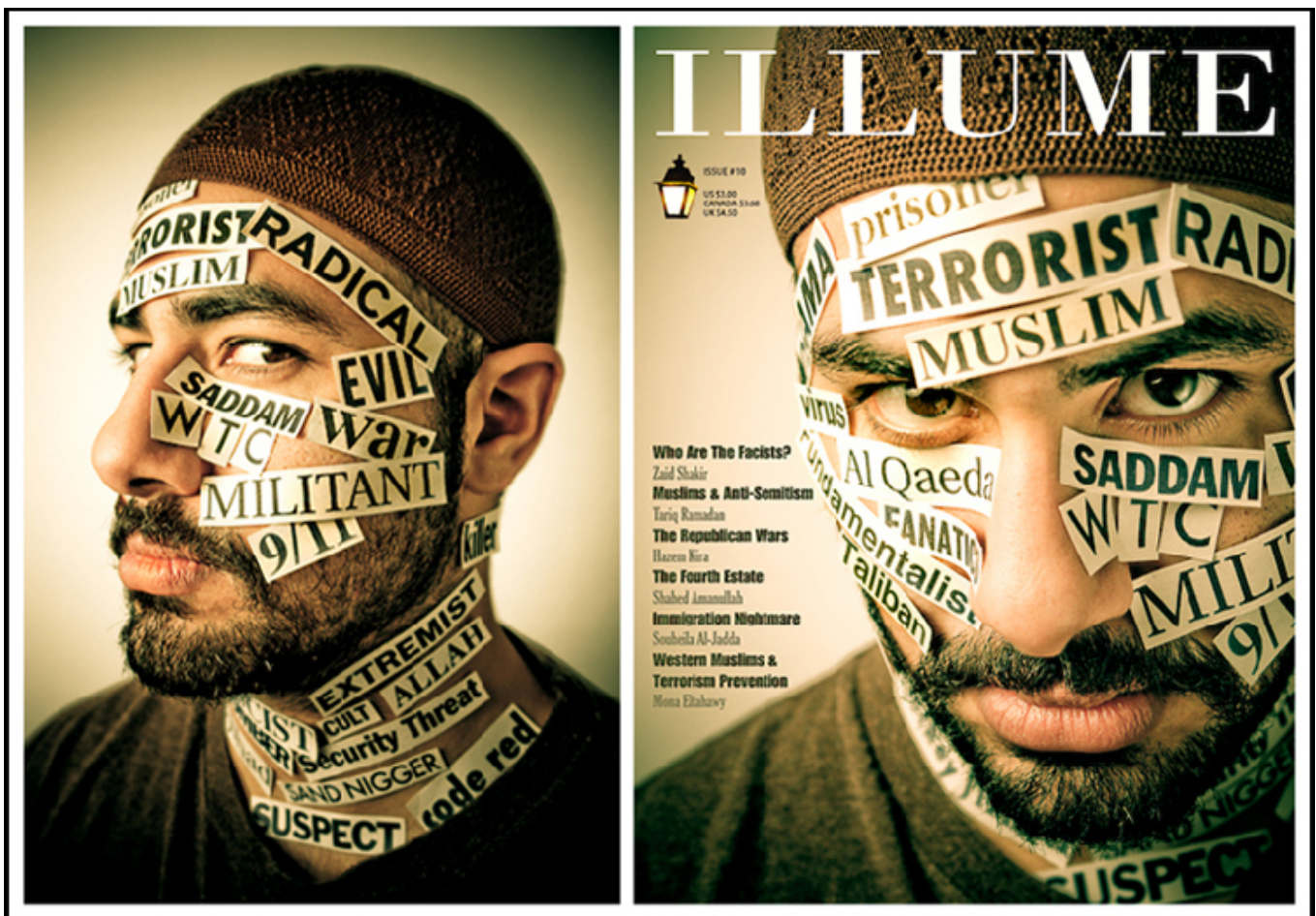If they don't like your face
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home. [11]

Others pointed out that while the heroes of the film—the Genie, Aladdin, Princess Jasmine and even her father all spoke in perfectly annunciated American English, every villain spoke with an accent. Of course, Aladdin is an animated children's film, so some dismissed its importance.

A Matter of Perspective

What do you think? Should we be concerned about the content of children's films and the images or representations they portray? Why or why not? What about action films for adults? Did the Middle Eastern actor in that Hollywood blockbuster play the hero or the villain? Were they depicted as elegant and sophisticated or "barbaric" and silly? Were they reduced to the stereotype of terrorist? Are the women portrayed as independent or submissive? There are of course, exceptions, but which roles come easiest to mind? Ones that are nuanced character studies, or ones that are disappointingly two-dimensional? Once again, it can be pointed out that this is just entertainment—but have you watched the news lately? Arguably, Islamophobia is also an off-shoot of Orientalism.

Source: Ridwan Adhami (Photographer). (2008). [Photograph], Retrieved from http://www.ridzdesign.com/photography/index.html (http://www.ridzdesign.com/photography/index.html)

Please watch a portion of Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people. [Documentary]. (2006). USA: Media Education Foundation. [electronic resource 50 minutes] ⬈ (http://humber.ocls.ca/uhtbin/cgisirsi/x/0/0/5?searchdata1=313993%7bckey%7d#).

NOTE: You will need to log-in with your 13 digit library barcode number and the last four digits of your student number to view the film off-campus. 'Get a Library account⬈ (http://library.humber.ca/get-account)' *if you don't already have one.*

Thinking Critically

Did you find Dr. Jack Shaheen's argument convincing? Why or Why not? How does Said's theory of Orientalism compare with Shaheen's concept of "Arabland"? Can negative stereotypes in pop culture make prejudice seem more natural or acceptable?

📹 Orientalism in Wrestling

So where do we go from here? How can we shed these misguided or misrepresentative representations of "the Orient"? What strategies do you think might work? Why might it be challenging to dismantle this paradigm?

Summary

Source: THE CANADIAN PRESS/Aaron Vincent Elkaim (Artist). (2011). [Image from article *Muslim Canucks deal with stereotypes, examine own religion 10 years after 9-11*], Retrieved from http://www.citynews.ca/2011/09/05/muslim-canucks-deal-with-stereotypes-examine-own-religion-10-years-after-9-11/ (http://www.citynews.ca/2011/09/05/muslim-canucks-deal-with-stereotypes-examine-own-religion-10-years-after-9-11/)

Edward Said provided scholars with a new language and discourse to discuss the far-reaching effects of colonialism. He deftly pinpointed the ways that significant portions of the world were reduced (and to some extent continue to be reduced) to an imagined, "mysterious," "dangerous," and exotic "Other." By dismantling this paradigm, Said encourages us to distinguish between stereotype and lived reality. To consider how power is created, and maintained through myth, and why it is so important to understand the many forces at play in making us who we are and shaping what we believe. These ideas have real and *material effects* on how we understand others and ourselves. The stories that get repeated, and the stereotypes that get reinforced often tell us more about the desires and anxieties of the Colonial power than the actual people and places they were colonizing.

Additional Resources

- 🎥 Said, Edward W. The Myth of 'The Clash of Civilizations': Professor Edward Said in Lecture. Edited by Sanjay Talreja. Media Education Foundation, 2002. [electronic resource 40 minutes] (http://www.mediaed.org/cgi-bin/commerce.cgi?preadd=action&key=404)

- 🔗 Arab American National Museum (2011). Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes. http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism. Retrieved May 5, 2015. (http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism)

References

[1] Lamana, G. (2005). Beyond exotization and likeness: Alterity and the production of sense in a colonial encounter. *Comparative studies in society and history, 47* (01), 4-39. p. 31 and Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Psychology Press. p. 110.

[2] Storey, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Cultural theory and popular culture: A reader*. University of Georgia Press.p. 131.

[3] Wan, J. (2014, April 2). "Why Google Maps gets Africa Wrong. The Guardian. Retrived May 4, 2015, from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/google-maps-gets-africa-wrong (http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/02/google-maps-gets-africa-wrong)

[4] Arab American National Museum (2011). Reclaiming Identity: Dismantling Arab Stereotypes. http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism (http://www.arabstereotypes.org/why-stereotypes/what-orientalism). Retrieved May 5, 2015.

[5] Khalid, H. (1994). *An Introduction to Edward Said's Orientalism*. p.1 Retrived from http://www.renaissance.com.pk/FebRe2y6.htm (http://www.renaissance.com.pk/FebRe2y6.htm)

[6] Smith, S. L. (1995). Whitewashing womanhood: the politics of race in writing women's history. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée, 22*(1), p. 96.

[7] Said in Khalid, 3.

[8] Walker, J. W. S. G. (2006). *"Race," Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies*. Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press. p. 13.

[9] Said in Khalid, 3.

[10] Said in Khalid, 3.

[11] Frook, J. (1993, July 12). ""Aladdin" lyrics altered." *Variety*. http://variety.com/1993/film/news/aladdin-lyrics-altered-108628/ (http://variety.com/1993/film/news/aladdin-lyrics-altered-108628/)