

Schooling Identity: Constructing Knowledge About Islam, Muslims and People of the Middle East in Canadian Schools

by
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This essay examines some of the master narratives about Islam and the Middle East, about those who are (or are perceived to be) Muslims and Middle Easterners. Using the conceptual strategy of “counterstory,” the authors consider how narratives about these groups that widely circulate in mainstream society and wider popular culture are reinforced in Canadian schooling.

Personal identities are constituted by the complex interaction of narratives from a first-, second-, and third-person perspective that create an understanding of who someone is. Many of the stories that constitute the identity from each of these perspectives are master narratives and fragments of master narratives – stories, drawn from the cultural store, that circulate widely within a society and embody its shared understandings. Some fragments of master narratives that constitute personal identities are stock *characters*. Others are the well-known *plot templates* that are associated with these characters. When we identify someone in terms of a familiar character, they become intelligible to us because we’ve seen that sort of character before; similarly, we infer from our knowledge of a stock plot how someone of that sort can be expected to (or is supposed to) behave... Many master narratives are benign...others are morally compromised or flat-out evil, because they unfairly depict particular social groups as lacking in virtue or as existing merely to serve others’ ends.

— Hilde Lindemann Nelson *Damaged Identities: Narrative Repair*, p. 152
[emphasis in original]

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Introduction

In this article, we name and examine the master narratives about Islam and the Middle East, about those who are (or are perceived to be) Muslims and Middle Easterners. In this context, our definition of “Middle Easterners” includes all of the ethnicities and cultures that are folded in to this category in the post 9/11 era through miseducation (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004) and misinformation (Stonebanks, 2004). We examine how the narratives about these groups, which widely circulate in mainstream Canadian society and popular culture, are reinforced in Canadian schooling (Sensoy & Stonebanks, 2009).

The quote from Nelson (2001) above captures the conceptual stance this article takes. As Nelson explains, identities (defined as the interaction between one’s self-concept and the conceptions others have) are constituted via the interplay of stories in which characters and plot serve to uphold privilege and oppression. Nelson refers to this interplay as master narratives, while others, like Lyotard (1979), describe them as grand narratives and Kincheloe and Steinberg (1997) as dominant memory. Whatever the nuance of the terminology holds, what is clear from a Middle Eastern experience of growing up in Canada and the wider North American context is that the “stories” that circulate in mainstream society about us are typically ones not of our telling nor of our control. The prevalent socially circulated master narratives (and the discourses embedded within them) are in service of those who compose those stories and who are also in position to benefit from those narratives. We, as people from the “East,” clearly have not benefited. The challenge of identity construction in the context of assimilationist master narratives is not an unfamiliar one. In educational theory alone, scholars have written about the relationship between the school curriculum and its role in reproducing mainstream narratives that are frequently related to other forms of ideological power and control (c.f. Apple, 1993; Kincheloe, 2008).

For both of us, as children of immigrant families from the Middle East, the school curriculum was a key way in which our identities as Canadians, as well as our identities as Muslim- or Middle Eastern-Canadians, were shaped. While our religious and cultural identities were wonderfully diverse, nuanced and at the same time invisible within the contexts of our home and familial circles, they became what were *most* visible in shaping our identities outside the home. That visibility in the public spaces was defined not by what we knew, but rather what we were told. And much of this “master narrative telling” went on in schools.

As young students in Canada’s public schools – one of us in British Columbia (Özlem) and the other in Quebec (Christopher) – it was not uncommon for us to have to answer to the expectations others had of us. We did not fit the stock characters nor the plot templates that were imposed upon us by the master narratives our teachers, classmates, and other “everyday” Canadians had of us. To look at Özlem would have been to see another White girl who looked nothing like what a Muslim girl from the Middle East ought to look like (brown and veiled, perhaps

like Sharbat Gula, *National Geographic*'s infamous "green-eyed girl"), while to hear or read "Christopher" as a name and then to face his ethnicity would rouse a set of narratives to "make sense of" the contradictions that for most did not belong together or could only belong together in some kind of "Ellis Island" name change to accommodate English speakers. All of this, of course, becomes contradictory, unexpected, and potentially problematic elements of assigned identities (how others see and make sense of us) since in the Middle East, and among the Muslim community, the diversity among Muslims is historical, and unremarkably normal (Lapidus, 1998).

Schools, from primary to higher education, continue to be a source where our sense of self must be negotiated with the master narrative. Is it a coincidence that although we live in cities that are over four and half thousand kilometers apart, we both share so many experiences about being "the other" in schools from our lives as students to professors? Our stories, among the many narratives, involve teachers who never saw the need to understand who we were, student-teachers who were confused or angry about the knowledge we brought to class, and colleagues who framed the Middle Eastern experience as a problem "over there" and expect a "thank you" for the civility they have provided to us "over here." Certainly, these common narratives also include the teachers that whisper words of comfort to encourage, pre-service teachers who have thanked us for what they learned, and colleagues who, simply put, "get it." The temptation of the non-Muslim, non-Middle Eastern reader may be to conclude that many people within the field of education share some of these experiences. What differentiates our experiences from the powerblocs (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997) is that we begin the story, the narrative, the show, the play, the movie, the performance, already cast in a role more often than not of being "flat-out evil" (Nelson, p. 152).

While the contemporary demographics of Canada at large have become more diverse, making it likely that the stories we have shared might occur less frequently, we want to argue that the normative discourses that gave rise to our specific stories are still an active part of Canadian culture and schooling. In the remainder of this piece, we examine the most widely circulating narratives about Islam, Muslims and those from the Middle East to do two things: first, to both name these narratives and unravel their roles in the process by which persons from the Middle East and acculturated Muslims are known by mainstream school-based discourses, and second in "talking back" and "talking to" these narratives, begin the process by which "counterstories" (Nelson, 2001) – stories that resist the master narratives about Islam and Muslims – are voiced.

Counterstories

Whose stories will we tell? Who are our storytellers?

— Denzin, 2008, p. 21.

In the spirit of Denzin, we now move to a performative counterstory text, in which you the reader are asked to read our two counterstories aloud. Two short narratives follow from each author and each takes his/her own artistic license in the form of a very brief type of performance autoethnography (Denzin, 2003) with a counter-narrative positioning to capture “true” moments in our own lives. Denzin notes that “(a)s praxis, performance ethnography is a way of acting on the world in order to change it” (p. 262). In this case, “performance,” in an artistic sense, is not required. Rather, we are asking you to simply commit to the counterstories in a deeper way than one would when reading silently to oneself. With the words vocalized, spoken, uttered, they (our counter-narratives) will be “out there” and the reader, depending who s/he is, is called to not simply read but also *listen*. In this way, the reader is asked to make a stronger commitment to the text than scanning. Our challenge to each other was to write about anything that would allow the reader a glimpse into the life of living as the Middle-Eastern “Other.” For Christopher, the counterstory takes the form of trying to reflect around a common occurrence and a single incident in a voice that was sincere to his childhood. For Özlem, it is a series of photoscapes, a collage of many moments that while individually minute, together shape her experience.

Christopher’s story

“Paki” was the racial slur directed most often to me in my childhood to early adulthood. Paki. Paki was a word that was used a lot in my school and you could certainly say Paki without getting in trouble. It took me a few years to connect it to an actual country but the manner in which the “P” was punctuated with such visceral hatred, the “puh” sound so accentuated, I could tell, from an early age, it was bad. The word was not unfamiliar to my parents, having met in the UK where it was all the rage, but it genuinely confused them as to why I was being called Paki. We were not Pakis. My father was half English, half Italian and born in Egypt; he wasn’t a Paki. My mother was Iranian; she wasn’t a Paki. My father looked confused when I would cry that I had been called Paki at school, maybe spat at or beaten up at the same time. My mother would look contemptuous that I was being called a Paki and sometimes she would comment that Canadians were stupid and didn’t know their geography. It never occurred to me to tell these tormentors that I wasn’t from Pakistan. I didn’t know anyone from Pakistan, so it seemed rude to disconnect myself. What if they were really nice? I was nice. One time, three older local boys really gave me a hard time at the school yard park. They called me Paki lots that time and the biggest of the three pushed me around. I went home in tears and my dad, when hearing what had happened, angrily went to the Atlas section of our encyclopedia in our bookshelf and said he was going to put an end to this “Paki nonsense.” We walked to the park and found the three boys sitting on the grass. My father towered over them and opened the Atlas. “Here,” he pointed at the map of Asia, “is Pakistan... and here,” he moved his

finger a millimeter to the left, "is Iran. They are not the same country!" Despite the fear of my father's size, the boys smiled at each other. I thought to myself, "Dad, you're not helping."

Özlem's story

Blink. It's time for roll call. Pause. Stomach tight. Explain again... pronounce again. They'll never get it. And they won't try to get it either. Blink. Time for music recital. "You've never heard of Jingle Bells?!" Blink. Mighty Mouse save the Harlem girl from the evil Sultan! Cue, I dream of Jeannie theme song [daa-dum, dum-dum, da-dum-dum...]. "Does your mom dress like that?" Blink. "Are Turkish prisons really that bad?" I am 8. What's prison? Blink. News time: "The PLO is a terrorist organization..." I thought liberation was a good thing. Blink. Blink. The Ottoman Empire is the Sick Man of Europe. But those were my grandfathers and grandmothers that fought "the allies." Time for a part time job. Manager: "It's those Muslims I worry about..." Blink. Blink. Sigh. Will I ever have a birthday in November that is X-mas-less? Blink. Meeting time. Pass the muffins and coffee. "You don't want a muffin?" It's Ramadan. Munch munch. Blank stare. Let's start the meeting. "We're all for diversity!" Blink. 9/11. Blink. Faster. Blink. Blink. Surveillance resumes. "It's those Muslims I worry about." Job year 1. Should we ask our pre-service teachers to reconsider the day-long snack table routine during Ramadan so they can engage with the problematics of normative classroom rituals? Blank stares. Blink. Job year 2. Should we ask our pre-service teachers to reconsider the snack routine during Ramadan so that maybe they could better understand how norms are cultural? Blank stares. Eyes roll. Job year 3. Under breath, "Here she comes again with her agenda." Pseudo-silent sighs pre-empt, "If we accommodate them, where does it end?" Blink. Where does it end?

It isn't that any one of these moments in and of itself crushed either of us and prevented us from becoming successful adults. Our academic and professional titles demonstrate that. However, as can be read from both counterstories, similar conditions in childhood and adulthood surface. The persuasion for many are that the injustices of childhood are common, a kind of "if they didn't make fun of you for your skin color, they would do so about someone else's name or clothes" mentality. Perhaps some may also indulge in a kind of *Lord of the Flies* perspective of children who when, left to their own devices, can be cruel. A kind of rationalization that may tempt the opinion that some of the revelation exposed in these counterstories can be written off. But, of course the children in the context Christopher experienced were not marooned on a desert island, so what of the complicit adults who governed the children, the parents, the administrators, the teachers, the universities that provided education to the pre-service teachers, and on and on that Özlem's narrative evokes? The essential elements to the above counterstories do not end with childhood, but continue into adult life into the

worlds that these adults of privilege preside over and continue to, on many different levels of consciousness, oppress others.

While our academic and professional titles do demonstrate that we have achieved a degree of success, there is an ever-present limit to the influence we may hold within our field of Education and we are perpetually aware of the constraints in place around our academic success. The metaphor for our experience is inspired by Bannerji's (2000) discussion of the paradox of belonging while not-belonging. Writing about the context of structural oppression as a minoritized woman of color in Canada, she says, "Living in a nation does not, by definition, provide one with the prerogative to 'imagine' it" (p. 66). In a similar way, we feel that our membership in academic and professional circles does not necessarily give us the franchise of influence over its ideological form and content.

How the story goes

On May 19th, 2006 a news article appeared in Canada's *National Post* newspaper titled, "A color code for Iran's 'infidels'," in which Teheri, an expatriate of Iran and a member of the "unrepentant right of the neo-conservative camp in the United States" (Porteous, 2006, P. A. 17) writes that Iran is preparing a new law that mandates all non-Muslims wear visible identifiers that note they are infidels. Taheri, according to Lobe (2006), "is a member of Benador Associates, a public relations firm that lists a large number of leading neo-conservatives, including American Enterprise Institute (AEI) associates Richard Perle, David Frum, Michael Ledeen, Michael Rubin, and Joshua Muravchik among its clients. Major boosters of the war with Iraq, ... (they) ... have also called for the Bush administration to take a hard line against Iran" (P. A. 13). Evoking the Frum-like "axis of evil," Straussian-like comparisons, Taheri "reports":

The law mandates the government to make sure that all Iranians wear "standard Islamic garments" designed to remove ethnic and class distinctions reflected in clothing, and to eliminate "the influence of the infidel" on the way Iranians, especially, the young dress. It also envisages separate dress codes for religious minorities, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, who will have to adopt distinct color schemes to make them identifiable in public. The new codes would enable Muslims to easily recognize non-Muslims so that they can avoid shaking hands with them by mistake, and thus becoming najis (unclean). (Taheri, 2006, P.A. 19)

Accompanying the text is an image of a "middle-class businessman in Berlin in 1935, with a yellow star on his overcoat to indicate he is a Jew" (description from *National Post*) and an invitation, in case the parallels have not been made clear enough, to share your opinion online with the topic headline "Is Iran turning into the new Nazi Germany?" Panetta (2006) then writes on May 19th, the same day the story is released, that Prime Minister Stephen Harper immediately jumped on the news report confirming that Iran "was capable of such actions and compared them to Nazi practices" (p. 15). Harper is quoted as saying:

“Unfortunately, we’ve seen enough already from the Iranian regime to suggest that it is very capable of this kind of action,” Harper said. “We’ve seen a number of things from the Iranian regime that are along these lines. ... It boggles the mind that any regime on the face of the Earth would want to do anything that could remind people of Nazi Germany.” (Ibid)

Even as Harper was speaking these words, according to the doubt raised in Panetta’s article, there was no independent confirmation of the information, something we would expect, given the gravity of the accusation, the leader of one of the world’s wealthiest (aspiring, self-claimed) democracies would seek out, and have access to. By the time Panetta’s article is printed on May 20th, the “color code for infidels” story is already falling apart, given the scrutiny provided to it due to its severe ramifications. Lobe (2006) quotes Juan Cole, past-president of the U.S. Middle East Studies Association, as stating that the “Taheri article and its appearance first in Canada’s *Post* as “typical of black psychological operations campaigns” (P.A. 13). In this regard, it is very successful if its purpose is to disseminate misinformation and prepare the North American public for a righteous conflict. What better way to continue the line of “Iraq is Nazi Germany” than “Iran is Nazi Germany?”

When does misinformation work? It works *when it plays to existing prejudices and assumptions* and when it is broadcast loudly and widely enough. Then it will do its pernicious work however strenuously the lies and distortions are subsequently denied and exposed. (Porteous, 2006, P.A. 17, emphasis ours)

The *National Post* on May 24th, 2006 issues an apology and states, “it is the corporate policy for all of CanWest’s media holdings to face up to their mistakes in an honest, open fashion” (Kelly, P.A. 2).

However commendable their apology may be, the misinformation has already spread and we are compelled to consider the ramifications when political leaders at the rank of Prime Minister are so quick to find logic in this type of evidencing. The stage has been set and characters have been cast; people of the Middle East, until such time that you can be “saved,” you are evil. As for the heroes, (North America – but not Mexico – and White masculinist European West’s power blocs), they are also suffering from being typecast. You are the good guy. So good, in fact, that when less than flattering stories surface, they are never representative of the power blocs as a whole. Consider the fairly gentle responses from Canada’s media and leadership to the Quebec town of Hérouxville’s view on Islam and immigrants in general in the form of their published town standards to which immigrants are asked to comply. The rules such as, “*to draw away from religious influences or orientation no “prayer room” is made available for prayer or any other form of incantation*”¹ were positioned as a comical oddity rather than hateful speech (Sensoy, 2009a). No Prime Minister’s mind was

1. <http://municipalite.herouxville.qc.ca/Standards.pdf>

boggled. Yes, there was criticism, but hardly the harsh comparisons to history's textbook-worthy examples of intolerance. So why not? We believe the answer lies somewhere near the ways in which, historically, the West has canonized a particular way of looking at, understanding, and knowing those from the Muslim Middle East.

The story: Then... and now...

The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience...Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident" ...Thus...the basic distinction between East and West [is accepted as] the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on.

— Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p 2

One of the most stable narratives about Islam, Muslims, and peoples of the Middle East is the discourse of other. In most textbooks, the only part of the world that is in a chapter of its own, and in most news stories, the only community referred to within an interplanetary discourse is the Muslim world. Do we need a spaceship to get to this Muslim world and can we even breathe their air (Stonebanks, 2004)? This discourse is part of a binary construct in which the stability of both sides is needed in order to uphold certain master narratives that are connected to, in turn, upholding systems of power by justifying the surveillance and supervision of "the East" by those in "the West." As Edward Said popularly conceptualized in *Orientalism* (c1978), there exist sets of interdependent Occidental (European/Western) institutions, scholarship, and vocabulary whose subject is the Orient (Arab/African). This Occident/Orient binary framework was solidified in the nineteenth century via practices and knowledge that produced particular ideas about the Orient. As Said explains, the Orient was recognized as the source of European progress, language, art, and civilization. However, this recognition of source also positioned the Orient as a place perpetually set in the past, historicized, and therefore backward and behind. A set of academic traditions (including linguistics, history, anthropology, and art) began the process by which European institutions created a doctrine, collected artifacts, and developed a methodology by which the Orient became known.

This process of knowing necessarily manifested an objectification of the Orient – and particularly those of the Orient. One need only look to the genre of painting Odalisques (or the character of the harem slave girls) by Western painters including Renoir, Matisse, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, and Jean-Leon Gerome (whose *Serpent Charmer* was made famous on the cover of Said's book *Orientalism*) to see how a *particular* way of looking at "those" characters, and telling a very specific story, is both familiarized and canonized. The characters and plots conveyed by these paintings emerge in other forms, and variations, de-

livering the same message through modern multimedia, flooding us with images from 24 hour news media, video games and film. The institutional authority that is given this manner of looking also sanctions it, sustaining a set of normative ways of looking at those (in this case women) of the Muslim Middle East (Steet, 2000; Sensoy, 2010).

Backwards Muslims: Do they belong in the future?

In discussing the challenges to social studies curriculum, one of them being “(w) hose voices are heard” (Kirman, 2004, p. 10), Kirman (2004) writes that the act of teaching in the twenty-first century should be a vision quest of sorts. Thinking about humanity’s seemingly limitless ability to develop technology, he advocates an exploration of one’s own dreams of what could be – perhaps a colonizing of the solar system, faster-than-light travel, and “Star Trek transporter” and other technologies (p. 12). In his brief description, he is excited by such possibilities, yet mindful that ethics must be at the forefront of vigilance in balancing such technological “progresses.” We notice that when reading Kirman’s text, many undergraduate students are somewhat surprised that *their* vision of what humanity will or should be, is at all relevant. This tension captures a challenge many educators encounter in teaching social studies (and any subject for that matter): avoiding a simple reproduction of current knowledge, values or norms, and encouraging critical perspective-taking, comparisons of divergent perspectives, and informed criticality. What we are trying to convey is that alongside the very particular experiences that Muslim and Middle Eastern Canadians experience in mainstream schooling, there are the broader dimensions of normative education that intersect and, in many ways, shape the ways in which marginalized experiences are canonized and transmitted. The social studies curriculum and the tension of transmission and critical agency is an example of such a shaping.

In reading Kirman, it is hard not to get excited about the possibilities of what *could be*, but at the same time, the simple reference of *Star Trek* is to delve into a vision of the future that does not include all voices in ways that are disconnected from the ways some have historically be narrated. To be certain, Kirman’s mention of *Star Trek* technology can in no way be read as his advocating for, or promotion of, a Roddenberry-esque future. We hope Kirman forgives us for a diversion from his intended meaning as we construct *Star Trek* as a voice and a vision of a very particular future. A Roddenberry vision of the future has, since its inception, been a beacon of hope for a future where people have resolved their differences and learned to work together. However, even within this progressive, and hugely successful, science fiction vision it must be stated that it is overwhelmingly White and that, despite its secular humanist undertones, the only “major” Earth religion ever mentioned by primary characters in a significant way, be it however slight, is Christianity.

Although Roddenberry, the creator of the series, is applauded for having included cultural and ethnic groups that had never been seen on television before, most of the main, supporting and background characters are White, giving the impression that the Earth's population in the future is not bright for People of Color. With China and India representing the largest percentage of the Earth's population now, what can be said of their relative scarcity in the *Star Trek* universe? Moreover, some, like people of the Middle East, seem almost on the verge of extinction, save one character that was developed in the latter half of the *Star Trek* franchise: colon Dr. Julian Bashir, played by actor Siddig el Fadil. Although he stands as the sole Middle Eastern character of note in the series, it should be mentioned that part of the plotline for Dr. Bashir is that his intelligence was genetically upgraded because, as a child, he could not keep up with the rest of his peers. Even in the utopia of the *Star Trek* universe, the only person with any kind of mention of being from the Middle East cannot keep up with the rest of humanity. Moreover, we see characters of European origin carry names like "Jean-Luc," "James" and "Jonathan" and the notable original *Star Trek* characters of famed diversity have first names like "Pavel," "Nyota" and "Hikaru." The Bashir character had the first name "Julian"; apparently even in the future those pesky Middle-Eastern names are hard to pronounce. Moreover, where other characters "wax poetically" about Scotland, Russia, Iowa or France, we never (to our recollection) remember a moment where our Middle-Eastern character speaks fondly of a great restaurant he knows in Cairo or a beautiful garden in which he remembers reading a book in Isfahan.

Upon completing this article we could not submit it without making note of the new chapter in the *Star Trek* movie franchise, simply referred to as "Star Trek" (2009). In this new re-imagined prequel, the film begins with the father of the soon to be born iconic James T. Kirk, George Samuel Kirk, on the USS Kelvin. Captaining the spaceship is Richard Robau, played by the American actor of Pakistani origin, Faran Tahir. Speaking on the creation of the character, co-writer and executive producer Roberto Orci reveals:

(T)he captain of that ship, Richard Robau, is named after my uncle, who was born in Cuba. One of the things we talked about early on, was where was Uhura born? Does Sulu have to be Japanese? And it occurred to us that, in the future, the borders that exist now won't exist then. So you can be born somewhere, and raised somewhere else, and live somewhere else, and even sometimes off Earth. So I always imagined that Capt. Robau was born in Cuba, but then grew up in the Middle-East. (Pascale, 2008, ¶12)

In reality the new movie does little to sway us from the already established ethnic and racial histories of its main characters. "Sulu" is still Roddenberry's imagination of a "pan-Asian" character (Simpson, 2008), "Scotty" is still Scottish and in the case of Chekov, he is referred to as the "Russian whiz kid" (although we must note that *Star Trek* establishes that computers from the future cannot

comprehend accented English). Of interest is that Kirk's character is now born in space, but still raised in Iowa. Captain Robau may be portrayed by an actor of Pakistani descent but we have no on-screen clues of a background that places his history and/or identity in the Middle-East. What we do know about him is that he has enough sense to recognize that George Kirk should replace him after he dutifully goes to the villain's ship to save his own, and dies in the first seven minutes, demonstrating none of the physical heroic prowess of other Starfleet captains, somewhat falling into Edward Said's observation about caricatures from popular media culture: "... Arabs ... don't know how to fight" (Jhally, c1998).

The only other "character" in the future who survives is the familiar belly-dancing seductress of Orientalist images described above. Those of you who have seen the various series of the show may be familiar with the Orion species, most notably the Orion animal women². These are women of Color (green, mind you, but with dark brown/black hair), who are seductresses whose desires no humanoid man can resist (the context is exclusively heteronormative). Whenever the Orion animal women (sometimes called the Orion slave women) appear on the show - *Star Trek*, *Deep Space Nine*, or *Enterprise* - they perform a futuristic belly dance to begin the spell they will cast over the (overwhelmingly) White male audience who watches them. Sometimes, these animal women are supervised by villainous "owners," likely members of the Orion Syndicate - an organized crime syndicate in the future who cause trouble for our *Star Trek* heroes. Of course, the Federation's (good guys) arch enemies are the Klingons (at least in the original series), incompetent, ruthless, backwards, brown-skinned men with unruly eyebrows and black hair and goatees who speak in a throaty language, and only become allies once the superiority of the "good guys" is established. We are not the first to notice the lack of meaningful representation of Middle Eastern people in *Star Trek*. Type in the words "Arab" or "Iranian" and "Star Trek" in any Internet search engine and, in short time, you will come across this joke:

A Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the UN has just finished giving a speech, and walks out into the lobby where he meets his American counterpart. They shake hands and as they walk the Arab says, "You know, I have just one question about what I have seen in America." The American says "Well, anything I can do to help you I will do." The Arab whispers "My son watches this show 'Star Trek' and in it there are Russians and Blacks and Asians, but never any Arabs. He is very upset. He doesn't understand why there are never any Arabs in Star Trek." The American laughs and leans over. "That's because it takes place in the future."

While it is not surprising to us, the relevant aspects of this discussion are twofold; first, the endurance of the historical and present-day discourses about many of the stereotypes of Muslims and the Middle East that plays out in popular forms of media: the dumb man, the seductress harem girl, and the evil problem-causing backwards brown men and the reach of this story and characters into our imagin-

2. www.startrek.com

ings of a centuries-distant future; and second, that these media-based, perhaps humorous, perhaps trivial characters and stories are a powerful enduring education about the Middle East, even within an altruistic setting like *Star Trek*. Further, we would argue that the story of a problem-causing and backwards Middle East that is represented in media is there in the school curriculum as well. In the *Star Trek* world, the future is bright and noble; they have “evolved” past the former barbaric pettiness that caused so much pain. There is a unification of humanity. Given another popular characteristic of Muslims and people of the Middle East as being “backwards” this perspective of us not existing in the far-off progressive future, of course, makes sense. Earth has evolved beyond its uncivilized past, therefore, we are not there, and (in the minds of the “designers” of the ideal future) we simply do not exist in any meaningful way.

Backwards Muslims: Do they belong in the modern world...?

“This is Natalya. [*He kisses her passionately*]. She is my sister. She is number-four prostitute in whole of Kazakhstan.”

“May George Bush drink the blood of every man, woman and child in Iraq!”
— Borat, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006)

The “Backwards Muslim” character and story is replete through the media, but nowhere, in our opinion, has it played out in such a successful and un-criticized way as with the blockbuster *Borat*. We like Borat because he represents, in very stark ways, one of the most enduring characters and narratives about Islam: the backward Muslim (Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2007). Despite the torrent of accolades heaped upon Sacha Baron Cohen’s creation, whether purposeful or not, Borat represents another aspect of what it means *to be* of the continued stereotyped nefarious Muslim Other. To better comprehend the responses to *Borat* within the United States, Canadian and United Kingdom markets, we examined critical reviews of the film in Canadian, US, and British media. Among the reviews we accessed, nothing was mentioned of the racism associated with the Borat character. One of the most memorable scenes is when the cowboy/general manager of the rodeo, Bobby Rowe, speaks about Muslims and terrorists and cautions Borat that he “looked like one of them” (following this up with a healthy dose of homophobia). Herein lies the overwhelmingly overlooked element of *Borat*; that the film is heavily reliant on the West’s fear and sentiments of superiority of the East and of Islam. It is through the ignorance, backwardness, oppressive normalcy of Borat the character that the humor plays out. His ignorance is positioned as opposite to the West’s (in this case US) enlightenment, modernity, and stance of liberty and equality. These are among the oldest tropes of Orientalist rhetoric, namely to position the other as something that both reviles and appeals to “us” (Said, c1978). It (the Orient and those who represent it) is both exotic and inferior. Returning

to Nelson (2001), a counterstory, namely a story (character or plot) that challenges the mainstream, is only able to do so when it *resists* rather than reproduces mainstream discourses about others. While *Borat* in popular media and among neoliberal-minded audiences has been hailed as a brilliant critique of mainstream America (Mallick, 2006), it isn't difficult to see how such critique depends upon the reproduction of a very familiar backward Muslim character and plots associated with him. Borat is both exotic and inferior.

Much of the North American discourses in regard to multicultural issues, in cinema and otherwise, echo these exotic and inferior refrains. "Sikhs carrying Kirpans," "Filipinos eating rice with spoons" and "the problem" of "Muslim girls wearing hejabs" in school are all subjects of news headlines and twenty-four hour news punditry debates. Recent North American politicians' offhand comments like "les yeux bridés," "Paki" or "Macaca" are, to a greater and lesser extent, examined and explained (away) by those who have uttered the words, rather than by those towards whom the words are aimed. Among the multitude of accolades showered upon Cohen is the small minority of voices that question the nobility of his film. Specifically absent are the voices of Kazakhs, and all those who are implicated with the stereotypes that Cohen has evoked. Again, those who are not the targets of the offense tell all of us what is and is not offensive and racist. Like the character Borat, "we" who are the Oriental other, are too backward to understand the significant contributions this film makes as social commentary, contributions that outweigh any offense we may feel. Few have asked, what might the character mean for those it names as representing?

Certainly, there is no part of the film where Cohen scripts Borat to state explicitly that he is Muslim. Even if we analyze the major religions of Kazakhstan it would not reveal as much as the choice of using Kazakhstan as Borat's place of birth because it evokes so much of the "one of those "stan" countries," much like the "Iraq, Iran ... *whatever!*" mentalities in the viewer and found within Christopher's counterstory. As Drummond (2006) observes, " 'Borat' resonates so much with audiences because of the West's unease about Muslim cultural attitudes. ... Borat's blend of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and general backwardness all carefully correspond with American stereotypes of Islam." Drummond further remarks that these are very specific stereotypes that the West has imposed upon the "Muslim culture." Similarly, Tierney (2006) writes, "What bothers me most about the movie is its premise: that villagers who have not embraced Western values are violently anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic and misogynistic. Borat is an absurd caricature, but we wouldn't laugh if we didn't think there was some truth to the stereotype of the morally backward peasant" (Tierney, 2006, P. A. 15).

Borat depends upon a classic, gendered Orientalist discourse to (re)tell the story of a backward Muslim man, oppressing Muslim women. Borat has poor manners, speaks with a thick accent, is incoherent at times, travels with a chicken, has sex with his cousin, dresses in clothing that is out of style and too big for him, doesn't know about "modern" inventions like the toilet, has never been in an

elevator before, requires constant supervision (often kindly offered by White men in the film), and on and on it goes. How different is Borat from the Clampetts on their way to Beverly Hills? Along gender, ethnicity, culture, and class, Borat reproduces every discourse at play regarding Islam. Can we imagine the Borat-like Muslim surviving to exist in a Star Trek future? Or are we mockingly viewing, using a smug voyeuristic gaze to witness the last breaths of a culture that will soon be swallowed by the West's modernity?

Conclusion: Who will tell our stories and our future?

So how do such depictions of characters and plots in popular culture play out in school contexts? In informal ways, they play out in expectations that teachers have for Muslim and Middle Eastern heritage students. We can individually recall many instances from childhood when we were asked if at home, our families ate with our hands, whether our moms walked behind our dads, along with the surprise that is still expressed when I (Özlem) refer to “modernities” such as cell phone and computer use while in Turkey, or the bank machines on the corners of streets in Istanbul, or when I (Christopher) in my youth had to convince adults that yes indeed, there were clean toilets in Iran. This is not surprising, since much of the school curriculum does not represent these images of “modernity” in the Middle East. For example, in examining visual representations of Arabs and Muslims in high school world history textbooks, Sensoy (2004, 2009b) found that images of Arabs and Muslims rarely showed them doing anything requiring tools except when they were shown interacting with officials (government or military) from the West. Workers were frequently shown in traditional jobs – farming, weaving, fishing – and few people seemed to be working hard at all. The sedentary nature of life among Arabs and Muslims as depicted in the images students see in textbooks is another way in which the backward Muslim story plays out. “Rolling up one’s sleeves” to “get down to work” and “hammer out agreements” are more than just metaphors (Dyer, 1993). They are core elements to explaining Western mainstream experiences of advancement, progress, and modernity. The perceived absence of “hard work” among Arab and Muslim citizens and governments upholds a very deliberative story about who, globally, works hard and thus deserves the rewards of that labor. The backward Muslim is, thus, a necessary character in upholding Western narratives of meritocracy, advancement, and progress.

It has long been an observation that Canadian education, especially Social Studies, has followed themes and issues in the United States curriculum (Clark, 2004). Although curriculum guidelines have, in our own lifetime, come from provincial sources, the issues of content and process in Social Studies have almost inescapably been influenced by the way our “cousins” to the south perceive the world. Consciously or not, teachers are consumers of the messages they see and hear and many mainstream US ideologies are reproduced. As pre-service and in-service teachers hit the internet for curriculum they will unavoidably have to

wade their way through a multitude of pre-packaged lesson plans, ready-made for a “diverse” teaching context. Our colleague from the US, Carolyne Ali-Khan (2010), while searching the internet for Social Studies lesson plans on Pakistan came across a “complete” unit titled “Pakistan: On the brink?” (2001, updated 2007) on sale from \$29.95 to \$24.95 found on a curriculum website³ with more than 3700 users per month, in which this information was prominently presented:

The Islamic Bomb

Pakistan is the only Islamic country that has nuclear weapons. (Performance Education, c2008, p. 2)

What, one must wonder, is an *Islamic* bomb? Does it condemn the people incinerated to “infidel hell,” and immediately convert the survivors to Islam in the same manner of the popular powerbloc narrative of “spreading Islam by the sword?” Perhaps most importantly, how does it compare, religiously, to for example the mass weapons stockpiled in the US, France and the UK? The idea that a nuclear weapon could be defined with a religion boggles our minds and begs the questioning to return to the first nuclear weapons ever used. Of what religious persuasion were the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Given that Albert Einstein and Robert Oppenheimer are popularly considered the “fathers of the atom bomb,” can we assume that “Fat Man” and “Little Boy” were born Jewish, but perhaps converted to Christianity just before they exploded, letting some evangelical vision of Jesus into their little atom hearts, thereby assuring their place in heaven? What about Catholic Napalm or Protestant cluster bombs? Insulting suggestions? Ridiculous? Exactly. But these are the kinds of curriculum that Muslim and Middle Eastern people are faced with on a regular basis.

From the time I first came to Chicago to the present day, I have seen Arabs and Muslims made the targets of unrestrained persecution, especially among the Straussians. At School, Straussian students told me that Arabs were dirty, they were animals, they were vermin. Now I read in Straussian books and articles, in editorials and postings on websites that Arabs are violent, they are barbarous, they are enemies of civilization, they are Nazis. (Norton, 2004, p. 210-211)

The Western master narrative of misconceptions, misrepresentations and dehumanization of Muslims and people of the Middle East has created what The Canadian Islamic Congress (2005) referred to as “image distortion disorder” for our youth. This disorder was formulated by physician LeNoir to explain how damaged identities are formed when “most of the images that one ethnic group has of another are developed by the media” (LeNoir as cited in Solomon, 2002). In non-formal education settings, Steinberg (2004) writes of Muslims being Hollywood’s enduring “desert minstrels,” relegated to film characters that are either

3. performance-education.com

ignorant, scheming, violent or silent and notes the profound influence that media has on shaping perspectives and consciousness. Inside our schools, Moore (2005) remarks that the teaching of Islam and Muslims has been portrayed in the Western context within politically motivated narratives that can be generally defined with "... distortions, omissions, textbook inaccuracies..." (p. 160). While a fact of life in a post-nine-eleven world, this type of distorted storytelling has been the case for decades (Alami, 1957; Jarrar, 1976; NAAA, 1980; al-Qazzaz, 1975, 1983; Suleiman, 1977, 1983). What we have tried to argue is that to understand how we as Canadians are schooled about Muslims and about those from the Middle East, we must engage with the interplay between the formal structures of schooling practices, and the stories about us that are circulated more widely in mainstream western, Canadian societies.

Schools seem to be stuck in a "I ♥ Diversity" (Stonebanks & Stonebanks, 2009) mindset in classrooms and in teacher education programs, where so-called "academic" multiculturalism courses, students claim, terrify pre-service and neophyte teachers of making a mistake and so-called "real-world" staffroom conversations bombarding the same people with either a "white man's burden" or a "our schools are mostly white and Christian" frame of mind. Somehow lost are the lessons we, as a field of study, should have learned from teachers like Jane Elliot, who saw the need to teach her predominantly (if not all) White, Christian elementary students about the nature of prejudice and racism after the death of Martin Luther King Jr. Watching the video *The Eye of the Storm* (1970), we see a teacher taking risks, probably making mistakes, but at all times remaining accountable and transparent about her teaching, bringing to mind an anti-racism "Ms. Frizzle" where a teacher should "take chances, make mistakes and get messy" and strive for an accountable transformative classroom. Whereas words like accountability for both schools and academia become conversations overwhelmed with such things as lesson plan formulas, end-result testing and lesson delivery, issues relating to challenging the reproduced normative injustices in schools and in pre-service education receive the eye-rolling and blank-stares that are too often and have for too long been a part of our story.

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