

***From Moorish-Indios to Park 51:  
A Brief History of Islamophobia in the United States***

Dr. Sophia Rose Shafi © 2011

I begin my reflections on the rise of Islamophobia in America over the past decade by pointing out an often-neglected fact: the fear and hatred directed against Muslims we have seen since 9/11 is nothing new.

Anxiety surrounding Islam in the New World dates to the conquest of the Americas by European explorers. The specter of Islam was so powerful in the minds of the conquistadors that they identified much of what they witnessed in the Western Hemisphere with their continued obsession with the Moors. Anouar Majid has documented this fixation in his work, which I quote here,

So interchangeable were Muslims and Indians in the conquistador's minds that they called Indians 'Muslims' and Indian temples 'mosques.' At one time, according to Bernal Diaz's account, the Spaniards even considered naming the first city they saw Great Cairo. Aztecs were often associated with the Moors, so much so that when battling the Indians, 'the Spaniards often invoked the aid of holy figures such as the Virgin Mary or St. James, known in Spanish as Santiago Matamoros, patron saint of Spain against the Moors' (rechristened Mata-indios to better suit his new or renewed role).<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note that Europeans have long characterized Muslims as having bodily, racial, and moral differences. The history of Islamophobia is connected to the ways Europeans, and then Americans, have struggled to understand and accept those who do not qualify as White, Christian, and Western. In the Middle Ages, we see this in the ways that Saracens were conflated with Jews and Ethiopians, perhaps most famously in the monster of the Black Saracen, often portrayed as harming or killing Christ or one of the saints. These characterizations, of course, were stimulated and intensified by the Crusades. Jews and Saracens were, at times, misidentified

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<sup>1</sup> Anouar Majid, *Freedom and Orthodoxy: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 49. Also, see Ronald Wright, *Stolen Continents: 500 Years of Conquest and Resistance in the Americas* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005), 21, 36, and Barbara Fuchs, *Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 74-5.

and confused, a result of the idea that they were in a grand conspiracy against Christianity, a myth that continued for centuries and that only abated with the unfortunate birth of Orientalism. Thus, the identification of Native Americans as Moors was not really much of a leap. Much like the medieval fantasies about Jews, Muslims, and Africans, Native Americans were imagined as Amazons, giants, and *cynocephali* (dog-headed monsters, another popular Jewish and Muslim boogeyman).

“New World” medieval and Plinian monsters largely disappeared by the eighteenth century, although the barbaric treatment of Native Americans, and of course Africans, continued unabated. And there was a new Muslim monster to replace the old—the African Muslim from the Barbary coast, described as grotesque, deviant, horrifying, and bloodthirsty. Barbary captivity stories described Muslim men as “monsters,” and fascination with the “Monsters of Africa” reached every part of American popular culture. As Paul Baepler writes, Barbary Muslims became a popular icon, found in novels, plays, and movies; there was even a board game, the “Pirates of the Barbary Coast.”<sup>2</sup>

These Muslim “Monsters of Africa,” popular in American cinema, are found in films such as the 1975 *The Wind and the Lion*, a fictionalization of the 1904 kidnapping of Jon Perdicaris and his father-in-law. In the film, Perdicaris is portrayed as a female played by a blonde, virginal, Candice Bergen, who is threatened by her captors. In reality, Perdicaris’s captor was described as “a tribal gentleman of the old school” who housed his captives in a magnificent tent and dined with them each evening.<sup>3</sup> *The Wind and the Lion* is one of many examples of the kidnapping-rape-rescue fantasies that have dominated many Hollywood films featuring Muslim villains, from the sheik subgenre to terrorist films like *True Lies*, a film that completely

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Baepler, “The Barbary Captivity Narrative in American Culture,” *Early American Literature* 39, no. 2 (1994): 220.

<sup>3</sup> L. Carl Brown, “The United States and the Maghrib,” *The Middle East Journal* 30, no. 3 (1976): 282.

dehumanizes Arabs. Former Israeli commando Avi Neshet, a consultant on many Hollywood films, so “incensed by the sick humor of a scene in which an Uzi tossed down a flight of stairs inadvertently mows down a roomful of Arabs,” that he remarked, “You were supposed to laugh? I fought Arabs and I had Arab friends, but this was completely dehumanizing a group.”<sup>4</sup>

Imaginary Barbary monsters are but one example of the racist and dehumanized caricatures of Muslims found in film. Scholars such as Jack Sheehan, John Eisele, and Ella Shohat have documented Muslim men portrayed in cinema as kidnappers, rapists, and murderers, often by utilizing the “rescue trope,” where a White man, or men, rescue women of all colors from the clutches of menacing, evil Muslims.<sup>5</sup> These narratives function as cultural polemics about West vs. the East, Whiteness vs. Otherness, and Christianity vs. Islam. If we jump forward from Valentino films like *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* (1921 and 1926) to the film *300* (2006), it is obvious that little has changed. Hollywood is still in the business of producing films that vilify and dehumanize Muslims, even when they are disguised as ancient Persians. In *300*, the high civilization of the ancient Persians is transformed into an assemblage of sexual deviants, filthy animals, and monsters, even featuring a Black Persian/Saracen and a hunchback with filed teeth. One film critic described the Persians in this way:

Lesbians. Disfigured lesbians. Ten-foot-tall giants with filed teeth and lobster claws. Elephants and rhinos (filthy creatures both). The Persian commander, the god-king Xerxes (Rodrigo Santoro) is a towering, bald club fag with facial piercings, kohl-rimmed eyes, and a disturbing predilection for making people kneel before him.<sup>6</sup>

Popular culture is, of course, but one source of Islamophobic representation in American society. Journalism has also contributed to the overall idea about Muslims—that they are, in

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<sup>4</sup> *Jerusalem Report*, October 17, 1996, quoted in “Hollywood’s Muslim Arabs,” *The Muslim World* 90, no. 1/2 (2000): 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 156.

<sup>6</sup> Dana Stephens, “A Movie Only a Spartan Could Love,” *Slate*, March 8, 2007.

Edward Said's words, "camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers."<sup>7</sup> In the 1980s the news media generated the monster of the fanatical Iranian. This construction was inspired by a failure to understand the Iranian Revolution (a people's revolution) and worsened by U.S. support for Saddam Hussein's regime in the Iran-Iraq War, during which the tropes of Iranian zombies with plastic keys to paradise ran across minefields and chador-clad women were ready to fight to the death for their Supreme Leader. Later, the ally became the villain, with Saddam Hussein taking on the role of the new, scary, Muslim man, a monster who gassed his own people, even women and children (while a friend of the U.S.). The stereotype of fat, lazy oil sheiks with lascivious sexual appetites has populated political cartoons, as well as films that portray Arab sheiks purchasing White women. A recent example is found in the Showtime thriller *Homeland*, in which a line of braless, young, American women are given interviews and physically examined (use your imagination here) as part of a job interview to join a Saudi man's traveling harem.

The attacks that took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, as well as the subsequent attacks in Madrid and London, cannot be discounted as excuses for Islamophobia, but they are not the match that lit the fire; rather, these tragedies only served to stoke the flames of American Islamophobia that have been burning since the era of the conquistador when Native Amerindians—Moors in disguise for some—were murdered in mass numbers. Perhaps one way we can understand this history is to think about Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which he described as, "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*."<sup>8</sup> Clearly, the

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978; reprint, New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 108. Emphasis added is mine.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 76.

past has a mighty grip; and as the anti-Park 51 and Burn-A-Quran-Day movements have shown us, some Americans are shackled to the idea that Muslim men and women are unlike “us” in every imaginable way.

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