

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Cultural Politics of Islam in U.S. Reality Television

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*To a limited extent, post-9/11 U.S. media has begun to accommodate Middle Eastern identities that go beyond Orientalist binaries common to American film and television. By exploring 2 reality television shows, All-American Muslim and Shahs of Sunset, this article asks: How can we understand this increase in representations of Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims within U.S. popular culture? Examining how Islam is represented (or not represented) in each show provides a window onto different media representational strategies, highlighting the possibilities and limitations of inclusion afforded by liberal multiculturalism and revealing the still-thorny cultural politics of Islam in a post-9/11 context.*

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There has been a noticeable increase in Middle Eastern Americans on U.S. reality television since 2009. To list just a few: In 2010, Rima Fasih was the first Arab American to win the Miss USA Pageant. She went on to train to be a professional wrestler on the USA network's reality show, *WWE Tough Enough* (McMahon, 2011, season 5), and then appeared on FOX's dating game show, *The Choice* (Smith, Weed, & St. John, 2012, season 1). Sahar Dika was the first Arab American Muslim to be cast on MTV's *The Real World* (Goldschein, French, Johnston, & Murray, 2010, Season 24). Selma Alameri was on the cast of ABC's *The Bachelor* (Fleiss, Levenson, & Gale, 2013, Season 17). And formerly married Paul Nassif and Adrienne Maloof were cast members on Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (Baskin, Rupel, Ross, & Gallagher, 2010–2013, seasons 1–3). In addition to an increase in cast members of Middle Eastern descent on reality television, there has also been an increase in reality television shows that feature Middle Eastern identities. This article focuses on two such shows: TLC's *All-American Muslim* (Mosallam, Emmerson, O'Connell,

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& Peirson, 2011–2012), which chronicled the everyday lives of five middle-class Lebanese Muslim American families in Dearborn, Michigan, and Bravo's *Shahs of Sunset* (Sher, Garnder, Curry, & Seacrest, 2012–present), which follows six affluent Muslim and Jewish Iranian American friends in Beverly Hills, California.

How can we understand this increase in representations of Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims on reality television? For some viewers, the increase is easily read as evidence of greater incorporation and acceptance of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans into the U.S. cultural imaginary. While recognizing the value and, in many cases, good intentions of efforts to increase representations of stigmatized groups, it is important to engage critically with the ways in which reality television shows represent Arabs, Muslims, and Middle Eastern Americans. Specifically, what do the representational strategies of such shows tell us about how and whether these groups are accepted in the vision of a multicultural America? Comparing *All-American Muslim* and *Shahs of Sunset* provides a window onto different representational strategies and reveals, I suggest, the still-thorny cultural politics of Islam in a post-9/11 context and the limits of inclusion afforded by liberal multiculturalism.

The work of scholars like Herman Gray and Stuart Hall has shown that simply including representations of underrepresented groups in the media does not solve the problem of stereotyping. More often than not, underrepresented groups are incorporated through rigid or limited portrayals that erase or minimize difference. Gray (2005) notes that television networks' support of liberal pluralism since the 1980s has had a paradoxical effect: the elimination, repression, or incorporation of difference through co-optation. Similarly, Hall (1992) points out that the spaces "won" for difference are "very carefully policed and regulated . . . [such] that what replaces invisibility is a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility" (p. 24).

On the surface, reality TV appears to be the perfect antidote to stereotyping, given that we are promised "real" people in their "real" lives. Considering the overwhelming Orientalist history of representing Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims through tropes of exoticism, oppression, and violence (Shaheen, 2001), programs that present these identities "as they really are" have the potential to challenge stereotypes and expand the representational field. It has become clear, however, that reality television, like other genres of television, centers around narratives of conflict—both constructed and "real." Far from providing accurate depictions, reality TV offers the kinds of representations and storylines to which audiences are deemed mostly likely to respond—as reflected in three seasons of *Shahs of Sunset* and the one season of *All-American Muslim*.

Both shows have met with criticism for perpetuating stereotypes. The represented communities themselves (Muslims in *All-American Muslim* and Iranians in *Shahs of Sunset*), hungry for representations that finally challenge their negative portrayals as religious extremists and terrorists, have been vocal critics. My focus here is not so much on whether the representation on each show was or is good or bad (though this question has been debated and will be discussed briefly), or even why one show failed while the other was renewed. My focus, rather, is on how each show reveals

different strategies of representing difference and what these strategies tell us about the mechanisms and boundaries of inclusion in liberal multicultural America.

Briefly, I argue that while *All-American Muslim* adopted a strategy of *normalization* that attempted to incorporate Islam into a narrow conception of American patriotism, *Shahs of Sunset* pursues a strategy of *assimilatory exoticization* that celebrates freedom (and all its excesses) and, crucially, decentralizes the question of Islam. Ultimately, I suggest that *All-American Muslim* failed to fit into a liberal multiculturalist framework because it showcased people for whom being Muslim mattered and, in doing so, it ran afoul of liberal multiculturalism's assimilatory expectations. Conversely, *Shahs of Sunset* portrays people who embody relatable, arguably even quintessentially American vices, and is careful to avoid the one form of difference that cannot be assimilated: that of Islam. As such, both shows raise troubling questions about the place of Islam in U.S. liberal multiculturalism and the space afforded, if any, for specific forms of religious diversity within that vision.

In what follows, I provide a brief overview of The Learning Channel (TLC) and Bravo's branding formulas in order to understand how *All-American Muslim* and *Shahs of Sunset* fit within their respective network contexts. I then examine media critics' and viewers' comments and the controversies that developed around each show in order to provide a sense of their reception. Finally, I examine the ways in which Islam is represented (or not represented) in each show in order to unpack how the cultural politics of Islam in the United States play out on reality television.

### The representational landscape of reality TV

*All-American Muslim* (hereafter, *AAM*) was broadcast on TLC, while *Shahs of Sunset* (hereafter, *SOS*) is broadcast on Bravo. Both networks have rebranded themselves over the last few decades. From 2000 to 2005, TLC was known for shows that focused on making over one's home, wardrobe, and fashion sense (e.g., *Trading Spaces* [Folson et al., 2000–2011] and *What Not to Wear* [Hakami, Tranter, Honig, & Vafiadis, 2003–2013]). In 2005, following the success of *Jon & Kate Plus 8* (Hayes, 2007–2009), a show featuring a couple with eight children, TLC rebranded itself by offering family-centered series that focused on atypical families or extreme family situations (Brooks & Marsh, 2003, pp. 777–778). Produced by Dearborn native, Mike Mosallem, *AAM* was part of this larger theme of atypical families, as is its lead-in show, *Sister Wives* (Gibbons, Hayes, Poole, & Streb, 2010–present), which follows a polygamous Mormon family. According to media research company SNL Kagan, TLC now airs in 99 million homes in the United States. The network's key demographic is women aged 18–34 (Douglas, 2012, August 27), and its viewers tend to skew slightly to the right of the political spectrum (Khan, 2010, April 10).

Though some of TLC's shows are critiqued as presenting non-normative people and lifestyles as “freaks,” senior vice president of production and development, Howard Lee, disputes this. He describes the network as “captur[ing] the imagination of our public by showing you how other people live” (Villarreal, 2012, August 29).

Amy Winter, general manager of TLC, in an interview about *AAM*, stated that “TLC has a track record of going into communities that people know very little about and opening them up for our viewers to experience” (Hultgren, 2011, December 20). TLC tried to promote the show as part of a broader strategy supporting marginalized lifestyles, including those of polygamous Mormons (*Sister Wives*), the Amish (*Breaking Amish* [Evangelista & Evangelista, 2012–present]), and people diagnosed with dwarfism (*Little People, Big World* [Rosenthal, Weaver, Freed, Caprio, & Barrosse, 2006–present]). Nonetheless, although *AAM* premiered to 1.7 million viewers, those numbers dropped to 58% (729,000) by the finale. In contrast, *Sister Wives* (Gibbons et al., 2010–present), still airing and now in its sixth season, averages 2.1 million viewers. *AAM* was not renewed for a second season; it lasted for only eight episodes (Rice, 2012, March 7).

If TLC’s shtick is normalizing the “abnormal,” then Bravo’s not-so-subtle strategy is presenting rich and glamorous lifestyles that the audience is often invited to “love to hate.” Today, Bravo’s programming explores five main “branches”: food, fashion, design, lifestyle, and pop culture (Bruce, 2012, January 4). Some of Bravo’s other reality show hits are *Top Chef* (Cutforth, 2006–present) and *The Real Housewives of Orange County* (Ross, Stewart, French, Lee, & Dunlop, 2006–2014). Bravo executives have coined the term “affluencers” to describe their audience (Copple Smith, 2012) and its appetite for elitist characters. The network currently reaches 88 million households, an audience comprised primarily of educated women and gay men with professional success and expensive taste (Copple Smith, 2012, p. 292). Bravo’s audience is among the most educated and affluent in America and they tend to vote Democrat (Becker, 2006, September 30; Bravo, 2011, December 14).

One of Bravo’s promotional strategies is to create like-minded programs that define its brand. We can see this strategy with *Shahs of Sunset*, which follows a very similar theme and format to the *Real Housewives* franchise and other Bravo reality television shows (Copple Smith, 2012). *SOS* is produced by Ryan Seacrest et al., who is known for producing the reality TV hit *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (2007–present) and its spin-off shows and for being the host of *American Idol* (Frot-Coutaz et al., 2002–present). In addition to being compared to Seacrest’s *Kardashian* franchise, *SOS* is also frequently compared to other successful reality shows: *The Real Housewives* franchise and MTV’s *The Jersey Shore* (Salsano, Jeffress, & French, 2009–2012). Brand strategy advisers from Truth Consulting say that *The Real Housewives* franchise is successful because “people want to watch rich girls behaving badly” (Bruce, 2012, January 4). *SOS* appears to be tapping into this audience: At the time of this writing, it has been renewed for a fourth season.

### **All-American Muslim**

Premiering on the TLC network in November 2011, *All-American Muslim* chronicled the everyday lives of five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan. The show was unprecedented in its representation of Muslims on U.S. television, particularly in the

ways it attempted to expand the representation of Muslim identities. For one, it offered the possibility of moving away from representing all Arab and Muslim characters in contexts exclusively focused on terrorism. Second, it portrayed Arabs and Muslims in leading roles, rather than their more frequent supporting or inconsequential roles. Third, it included diverse Muslim identities that ranged from more to less conservative: Two people had tattoos, one was scantily clad while another decided to don the hijab, and one was marrying an Irish-Catholic American.

Almost as soon as it aired, *AAM* kindled unexpected controversy. Many Muslims had criticisms of the show. Some claimed that the cast was not composed of “real Muslims” because some had tattoos. Others claimed the show portrayed one Muslim community (Lebanese Shia) as representative of all Muslims in the United States. One Muslim commenter on the entertainment website *imdb.com* stated that the show “is a joke and utter insult to the diversity that is Islam” and should be renamed “All-Lebanese American Shia Muslim” (Ztlfire, 2011). Such critiques served to highlight the impossible pressure on a single show to undo over a century of stereotypes (Shaheen, 2001). Muslim responses and criticisms of the show, however, did not enter mainstream conversations and remained largely internal to Muslim American communities.

Less surprising were the negative responses from other kinds of viewers. It was precisely the show’s effort to offer a more nuanced and positive picture of Muslims in America that drew the ire of some, most notably the Florida Family Association (FFA) run by David Caton, a rightwing activist normally known more for his antigay agenda. In a strange twist of events, antigay and anti-Muslim organizing converged by targeting the channel Media Studies scholars refer to as “the compulsory heterosexuality channel” (Maher, 2004) for representing heterosexual Muslim families. In December 2011, the FFA organized an e-mail campaign protesting the show’s portrayal of Muslims as “deceptive” and calling on advertisers to withdraw their sponsorship. The FFA’s outrage was sparked because *AAM* dared to portray Muslims outside of the context of terrorism. Because there are no terrorists on the show and Muslims are depicted as ordinary people, Caton charged that it was propaganda “attempting to manipulate Americans into ignoring the threat of jihad” (Tashman, 2011). Soon after the FFA’s campaign, the retailer Lowe’s Home Improvement and the travel website *Kayak.com* pulled their commercials.

Apparently, even this modest expansion in representing Muslims disturbed those who saw the show as denying the essential incompatibility of Islam and America. Even *The Wall Street Journal* faced the wrath of this audience when an article on the controversy described the show as reflecting the reality that “Islam in America today is a story of rapid assimilation and even secularization, not growing radicalism” (Riley, 2012, March 22). Online reader responses to the article included the following:

I will happily sing the praises of middle class American Muslims as soon as middle class American Muslims denounce the jihad their brethren are leading

against the rest of us. Until then, they are suspect. (Chris Henry, Comments on Riley, 2012, March 22)

The Koran is not a book compatible with American middle-class values. Nor is the life of Mohammed. (Stephen Spencer, Comments on Riley, 2012, March 22)

I wonder if the media will ever stop trying to brainwash us. Now, the drumbeat telling us Muslims are just nice American people trying to live normal lives. And we are being unfair ... Sorry, but they are not ordinary Americans. They are engaged in a global religious war against us ... we must be vigilant to not allow them to spread their violent religion and Sharia law in this our great and free nation. (Barbara LeBey, Comments on Riley, 2012, March 22)

Such responses revealed the existence of an audience for whom *any* representational strategy that did not condemn all Muslims as inherently anti-American was unacceptable.

It is important to note, however, that this controversy also generated a sizeable backlash that critiqued Lowe's and Kayak.com for their decision to withdraw sponsorship. A National Lowe's Boycott Campaign was launched and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons offered to purchase any remaining advertising space (Duke, 2011, December 13). Neither the FFA nor the kind of vehemently anti-Muslim viewers described above should be read as representing the American public writ large, but they are, regrettably, part of a spectrum of attitudes in the United States today. To understand the show's reception, in addition to looking at such extreme responses, we need to keep this larger spectrum in view and ask why the representational strategies of *AAM* failed to connect even with more moderate viewers, resulting ultimately in its cancellation.

For all its effort to provide a more nuanced portrayal of Muslims, *AAM* relied in other ways on narrow representational strategies that have become standard fare in TV dramas since 11 September 2001 — namely, the focus on Muslims as patriots and/or victims (Alsultany, 2012). Among the people featured on *AAM* are a police officer, a football coach, a county clerk, and a federal agent, mirroring the now-standard inclusion of “patriotic” American Muslim characters on fictional television shows. These portrayals, while certainly “positive,” reflect the ongoing demand for American Muslims to continually prove their patriotism. Victims also appear on *AAM*, but to a much lesser extent than the trope of patriotism. We witness discrimination and harassment when one of the married couples leaves Dearborn to visit a neighboring town, only to be ignored at a restaurant while other customers are offered seating (Mosallam et al., 2011, November 20), and when high school students recount being called “camel-jockeys” by students at other schools (Mosallam et al., 2011, November 13). The emphasis here is on the innocence of Muslim Americans, thus assuring viewers that not all Muslims are guilty or threatening.

These representations of “patriots” and “victims” are undoubtedly improvements over past images of Muslims and Arabs as terrorists, oil sheiks, belly dancers, and

oppressed, veiled women. Nonetheless, these “improvements” reveal an equally narrow and one-dimensional script of representation. By attempting to make Islam appear less frightening and more familiar through association with occupations and leisure activities that emphasize U.S. citizenship, *AAM* adopts a strategy of *normalization* that distinguishes it from the other portrayals of alternative lifestyles and atypical families on the TLC network—and may help to explain why, in the end, the show failed to attract viewers.

The most obvious comparison is with the show *Sister Wives* (Gibbons et al., 2010–present). In *Sister Wives*, the Brown family members are portrayed as unjust victims of prejudice given the stigmatization of their lifestyle in mainstream society. They cannot legally marry because polygamy is illegal, and they must hide their identity as a polygamous Mormon family from the general public and from the community in which they live. But while the Brown family is burdened to prove that they are simply living a non-normative lifestyle and are not perverted religious fanatics, their religious difference does not demand that they *also* prove their patriotism or citizenship. In contrast, *AAM*’s focus on its cast members’ patriotism marks the show as distinct and reveals that Muslim identity, unlike Mormon identity, necessitates a framework that proves its protagonists are not just unfairly stigmatized, but also really and truly *American*.

To this end, *AAM* features “normal” people living a “normal” middle class life with very little conflict. The ironic result: The show was widely perceived as boring. The “difference” of being Muslim is featured—we see, for example, a 12-year-old girl putting on the hijab for the first time, an Irish-American Catholic converting to Islam for marriage, conflict over having a dog as a domestic animal, and special accommodations at the high school for football training during Ramadan—but these instances of difference are normalized and seemingly neutralized by their familiar, domestic contexts. Discussing the show online, viewers appeared unanimous: Where were the exciting scenes of drunken people and screaming fights that characterized other reality shows? On the *Hollywood Reporter*’s website (O’Connell, 2011, December 14), for example, viewers commented: “watched it once and was bored to death” and “It shows everyday people doing what ... people do everyday. I don’t watch TV for that.”

Arguably, the show’s poor performance could be attributed to this normalcy and lack of melodrama. And if we were comparing *All-American Muslim* only with *Shahs of Sunset* and the kinds of shows featured on Bravo, this argument might make sense. Yet, recall that TLC’s particular reality television brand is not about drunken brawls or narcissists with abundant wealth. Rather, the focus is on marginalized and misunderstood lifestyles, and other TLC reality shows using this formula have been successful, thus the failure of *AAM* remains somewhat puzzling. As reality television excels at selling lifestyles, not citizenship, perhaps *AAM* would have done better to follow the *Sister Wives* model of showcasing a marginalized religion and atypical lifestyle rather than attempting so earnestly to prove patriotic citizenship.

I suggest, however, that the show’s demise followed not only from its failure to titillate and entertain, but also from its insistent linking of American identity and *Islam*.

As the show's title and its portrayal of the protagonists' religious beliefs and practices demonstrated, the inclusion of Muslim Americans that the producers were promoting sought a delicate balancing act that embraced religious difference—specifically, Islam—as normal. While the term “All-American” showcased the producers' efforts to evoke the framework of patriotism, the term “Muslim” dared to foreground, rather than downplay, religious identity. This was, I argue, a risky representational strategy that inadvertently revealed the limits of liberal multiculturalism—an idealized form of inclusion that remains ambivalent, at best, especially when it comes to Islam.

Raka Shome (2012) points out that parts of one's identity that do not conform to the logic of multiculturalism, or shared notions of Americanness, are bracketed out in public discourse “thus disallowing their interruptive political possibilities to emerge” (p. 156). Muslims can be included in liberal multiculturalism if their identities are watered down, hence the emphasis in *AMM* on patriotism. But what happens when Islam is not confined to the private lives of Muslim Americans, but seeps out into public life, such as changing the football team's practice schedule during Ramadan? Might this constitute an interruptive possibility? Whether more critical possibilities could have emerged with a second or third season of *AAM* is unknown, given that the show was cancelled.

### ***Shahs of Sunset***

While *All-American Muslim's* title puts Islam front and center and attempts to announce its incorporation into a multicultural America, *Shahs of Sunset's* title sidesteps Islam and plays into Orientalist discourse by evoking associations with royalty, rather than religion. The names of both shows immediately communicate certain expectations to viewers. In the case of *SOS*, viewers were invited to gaze upon vaguely Oriental others (the relations and distinctions between Arabs, Iranians, and Muslims being lost on most Americans) and provided with a familiar Bravo structure of feeling (characters you “love to hate”) through which to funnel any negative emotions.

*SOS* focuses on six Iranian American friends whose families left Iran after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and moved to Los Angeles, referred to as “Tehrangeles” for its large Iranian population. The cast members, in their mid to late 30s, single, and mostly employed in real estate, met while students at Beverly Hills High School and are portrayed as rich obnoxious narcissists. The Season 1 trailer features GG saying, “There are two things I don't like. I don't like ants, and I don't like ugly people” and Mike saying, “We don't work in buildings, we own them” (Sher et al., 2012). In the Season 1 premier, GG says: “Looking good, and not repeating outfits, is imperative” and “I am a 30-year-old and my only paycheck is from my daddy” (Sher et al., 2012, March 11). Reviews and viewer comments focus on how shallow the show is and how despicable they find the cast, but *SOS* has, nonetheless, been popular. While the *AAM* viewership and ratings did not merit a second season, *SOS* has been renewed for four seasons so far, with viewership consistently between 1 and

2 million (Andreeva, 2012, April 17; Kondolojy, 2013, November 6; Reality Tea, 2012, December 4).

The show has not been without controversy, particularly regarding the extent to which it perpetuates stereotypes about Iranians as rich and materialistic, and whether this stereotype is “better” than that of Iranians as religious fundamentalist terrorists. Some critics say that the focus on rich materialistic people actually normalizes Iranian identity. *The Boston Herald’s* Mark Perigard (2012, March 11) states that the show “proves that materialism is an insidious infection in this nation, vanity crosses every culture and just about everyone behaves like a moron when a camera is pointed in their direction.” Similarly, Pete Vonder Haar (2012, April 4) for *The Houston Press* writes that “the lesson of *Shahs of Sunset*, it would seem, is that the repulsiveness of rich people knows no ethnic or cultural boundaries.”

Whereas these “endorsements” are cynical, the cast members themselves are more optimistic about the show’s portrayal of Iranian Americans. Reza, a gay man from a Muslim and Jewish background, and the most frequently interviewed cast member, states:

I would rather be associated with a stereotype like loving gold, loving Mercedes, loving columns. For me, personally, those things are all true. I don’t want to be associated with a stereotype that I like blowing things up, that I’m a terrorist, that I’m militant, all the stereotypes that most of the United States think we’re associated with. Because we’re not. I love this country. I am so proud to call myself an American. I worship the ground that I walk on here and I don’t take it for granted one minute. If I’m going to personify a stereotype, absolutely let me personify a harmless one that’s accurate as opposed to a toxic one that’s completely false. (Garvey, 2012, April 11)

Still, the most vocal concerns regarding *SOS* have come from the Iranian American community itself. Shortly after the show premiered, petitions began circulating among the Iranian American community to get the show taken off the air. One petition, which collected 500 signatures on Change.org, protested the show’s promotion of racial stereotypes. Jimmy Delshad, an Iranian American and former mayor of Beverly Hills, expressed concern that the show would “take us back and make us look like undesirable people” (“Time for a revolution?,” 2012, April 21). The City of West Hollywood passed a resolution condemning *SOS* for perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Yet, as numerous cultural theorists have pointed out, debating whether one stereotype is better or worse than another is not particularly productive (e.g., Gray, 2005; Shohat, 1989). A negative stereotype is defused not with a “better” stereotype, but with a diverse field of images. For the purposes of this article, the more pertinent question is not so much how *SOS* presents Iranian Americans, but how (or, indeed, whether) *SOS* presents *Muslim* Americans. The answer is complicated and warrants further elaboration, which I provide in the following section. On the one hand, *SOS*

largely avoided the topic of Islam until Season 3; on the other hand, whether avoiding Islam or addressing it directly, the show figures Islam as the binary opposite to American freedom. As a result, the cast of *SOS* is, ironically, read as “more American” than the cast of *All-American Muslim*.

### Freedom (from Islam), individualism, and consumerism

*SOS* is consistent with the “rich bitch” (Lee & Moscovitz, 2012) genre of reality television that focuses on wealthy, narcissistic cast members and invites viewers to judge them. At the same time, the show also surprisingly pushes boundaries with its portrayal of interracial, interfaith, and gay relationships. Asa is dating Jermaine Jackson, Jr. (pop icon Michael Jackson’s nephew) and says that Persians look at her like she is a whore for dating an African American, but she critiques such judgments of two people who love each other (Sher et al., 2012, December 23). Reza is the product of a Muslim-Jewish interfaith marriage; he is also gay and dating a White man. Mike is Jewish and his family expects him to marry an Iranian Jew, yet his girlfriend is Italian-American Catholic and converts to Judaism to be with him. Season 2 ends with Reza saying:

I am so thankful that I am Persian, but American. Picture it, Persian New Year 2023: We’re all sitting around, I’ve got my white husband with me, Mike has got his Italian non-Jewish wife and their kids; Asa’s got Jermaine and their mixed children, and for GG and MJ and for all of us, it’s such a beautiful quilt. Love, family, that’s what makes you who you are. And a Hermes pocket square doesn’t hurt. (Sher et al., 2013, February 10)

In such moments, *SOS* actually connects (albeit with tongue-in-cheek) to the interpersonal struggles—especially around interfaith and interracial relationships—that the cast members face despite their wealth.

But while the show pushes some social boundaries, the one boundary it does not push is that around the cultural politics of Islam. Unlike the people featured in *AAM*, the cast members of *SOS* are not focused on proving their citizenship or patriotism. Nonetheless, other markers are used to provide just such proof—namely, binary discourses about American freedom in comparison to Iran’s lack of freedom. When Asa is about to have her first musical performance, she reflects on the significance of the event happening in the United States, as opposed to Iran:

My mom says, “We left Iran so you can be free and you don’t have to wear chador.” Being free and not wearing a chador has a huge meaning. It’s not just a physical thing you wear. It’s being able to express yourself as being a woman, even being an artist. Being who I am. I couldn’t be me in Iran. Look at me. I would be an entirely different person. (Sher et al., 2013, February 10)

In Season 3, Asa says that you can get killed for being gay in the Middle East (Sher et al., 2013, December 8), and in other episodes she describes being “born Muslim”

as a way to reference not being a practicing Muslim. Like “patriotism” in *AAM*, discourses about “freedom” in *SOS* indirectly and critically reference Islam, and it is this feature of freedom that serves as a proxy for one’s “Americanness.” In this way, *SOS* departs from *AAM*’s strategy of normalization. By seeking not to present its protagonists as “regular people,” but as others who are exoticized as much by their wealth as their ethnicity, *SOS* cast members are assimilated in all the ways that matter—or more accurately, the one way that matters most. This strategy of assimilatory exoticization portrays the cast as exotic in that they sprinkle their English with Farsi words, like *joon* (dear) and *heyvoon bazi* (animal style), but assimilable Others, for whom Islam is not central part of their identity and who are openly critical of Iran.

Instead, extravagant and conspicuous consumption is portrayed as central to the cast members’ identities and lifestyles—a strategy that cultural theorists such as Inderpal Grewal have noted for its ability to produce liberal subjects (2005). Multiculturalism operates as a technology of hegemony, offering opportunities for racialized and gendered subjects to be interpellated into American identity through consumerism and consumer culture’s emphasis on “choices” (Grewal, 2005, p. 200). According to Grewal, American identity, especially notions of the American Dream, are deeply bound to consumer culture. The very phrase “American Dream,” she argues, “connotes much more explicitly the close relationship between American national identity and consumer culture, as well as the ways in which American identity [is] a form of consumer nationalism” (Grewal, 2005, p. 206). In *SOS*, we see the cast members embrace the American Dream and become ideal subjects of U.S. multiculturalism through consumerism, secularism, and disavowal of Islam.

The cast members who are Muslim do not observe Muslim holidays. When it is mentioned, it is part of one’s background or heritage, but not part of their current lives. In contrast, Jewish holidays are observed and viewers have the opportunity to attend Shabbat dinner at Mike’s parents’ house and Reza’s father’s house. Jewishness is normalized (or at least a version of it that involves observing the holidays and a stated same-faith marital preference that is not observed by the cast members), yet there are no parallels with Islam. It is as if the cast members left their “Muslim-ness” in Iran with the revolution. Coming to America is portrayed as the realization of a dream about freedom—the freedom to drink; the freedom to be sexually promiscuous; the freedom to have interfaith, interracial, and gay relationships; the freedom to be a rich consumerist narcissist; and perhaps most importantly, the freedom to practice one’s Muslim faith as one wishes or, better yet, not at all.

Interestingly, despite the show’s efforts to avoid or absent Islam for the first two seasons, some viewers still imposed this lens—with surprising results. The moderator of *barenakedislam.com*, an anti-Islam website whose tagline is, “It isn’t Islamophobia when they REALLY are trying to kill you,” actually defended *SOS*, initiating a debate while arguing that the cast members laudably refer to themselves as American and their Islam is downplayed (Bare Naked Islam, 2012, March 8 and 12):

Yes, most of them are rich and spoiled (like the *Housewives* casts) but you never think of them as Muslims, only Americans of Iranian/Persian descent. The women wear sexy clothes, they play music, dance, sing, have sex, and drink liquor often. The character Reza is gay and one of the women said about him, “If Reza lived in Iran now, they would kill him for being gay.” I said it after I saw the previews of this show and I can confirm it now, if all Muslims in America had the attitudes of these people, blogs like this one would not exist.

Apparently for the moderator, drinking, dancing, having sex, and women wearing provocative clothing signify “American freedom” and thus operate as a proxy for “American patriotism” in the context of Islam. Some members of the site reacted with surprise that the moderator would actually praise a show that contains Muslims:

you cannot trust any muslim and should not affiliate with any of them . . . and all their “places of battle” aka mosques / aka masjids should be razed to the ground in this and every country. let them live in a little sand patch isolated from civilization somewhere where they have no interaction whatsoever to do with any of US. honestly, when i read this article . . . i’m wondering is this site hacked [*sic*]. (Michelle, Comments on Bare Naked Islam, March 8)

The moderator of Bare Naked Islam elaborated on her or his position:

It is a chance to see at least a few Muslims who don’t consider themselves Muslims first and Americans last. They have embraced an American lifestyle where religion doesn’t dictate every move they make. They dress like Americans instead of 7th century throwbacks, they have fun like Americans, and don’t force little girls to cover their heads, or think that the way Americans dress is immoral. And you can bet they have a few pet dogs in the family. I doubt they are demanding special treatment and accommodations for their religious needs from non-Muslims. There’s even a storyline about a romance between a Muslim woman and a Jewish man. If they get serious, I doubt we’ll see the Jewish man converting to Islam. (barenakedislam, Comments on Bare Naked Islam, March 8)

With these implicit references to *All-American Muslim*—which showed, as mentioned earlier, a 12-year-old girl putting on the hijab for the first time, an Irish-American Catholic converting to Islam for marriage, conflict over having a dog as a domestic animal, and special accommodations at the high school for football training during Ramadan—the moderator makes clear that while the cast of *AAM* are a threat to America because they are observant Muslims, the cast of *SOS* are acceptable Americans because Islam is insignificant to their lives.

Such notions reflect contemporary liberalism’s reliance on a basic opposition: “the opposition between those who are ruled by culture, totally determined by the life-world into which they were born, and those who merely ‘enjoy’ their culture, who are elevated above it, free to choose their culture” (Žižek, 2007, p. 1). Žižek (2007) elaborates that in liberalism, culture is privatized, becoming “an expression of personal and private idiosyncrasies” (p. 1). In this way, the individual is prioritized

over the collective. In both *AMM* and *SOS*, cast members negotiate this tension between individual and collective identities and desires. For example, in *AMM*, we watch Shadia's fiancée convert to Islam and in *SOS*, we watch Mike's girlfriend prepare to convert to Judaism. However, in *AMM* religion moves beyond a private idiosyncrasy when the football team's practice schedule changes during Ramadan or when a female cast member is unable to open a nightclub. In contrast, the cast members of *SOS* embrace individualism over the collective and are portrayed as being "above" religion. Indeed, it is possible that *AMM* was not renewed because the cast members, for all their normalcy and patriotism, did not capture the individualist ideals of liberalism by remaining too tied to their families and a collective Muslim community. *SOS* cast members, conversely, embrace consumerism, secularism, and free choice; culture is a vehicle to build a community, but it does not rule their choices or take priority over their individuality.

When *SOS* finally does address Islam explicitly, it does so in ways that reveal its deep ambivalence. This does not happen until Season 3 and is confined to two episodes in which the cast members travel to Turkey (Sher et al., 2014, January 28 and February 4). Most of the cast members have not returned to Iran since they fled the country as children as a result of the 1979 revolution, nor have they traveled to any Muslim country. Each cast member has a different reaction to being in Turkey, seeing women in hijabs and niqabs, and hearing the call to prayer. These episodes finally provide an opening for a conversation about Islam and feature a range of reactions on the part of the cast members. The dominant message, however, remains consistent: Islam is essentially unfree and incompatible with American values.

At one point, the three women cast members are moved when they hear the call to prayer and connect with it as something beautiful (Sher et al., 2014, January 28). MJ says:

When you're a Muslim kid in America and you look like this, you hide it. When I'm asked if I'm Muslim, I respond yes, *but*. I always said yes, *but* I'm not practicing. Yes, *but* I'm not Islamic. Yes, because I'm afraid that I'm gonna be labeled as a terrorist. And for the first time in my life there was no shame attached to being a Muslim.

GG is moved to tears by the call to prayer. She says: "In Iran, everyday you hear that prayer everywhere. And that sound, it knocked the wind out of me." Asa connects deeply with the call to prayer as part of her heritage and the three women stand outside of the mosque together with tears in their eyes.

However, this profound moment of portraying the Muslim call to prayer as beautiful is quickly tempered by Reza and Mike's reactions. Echoing some of the most common, monolithic portrayals of Islam in the United States, Reza reads the call as antigay, while Mike reacts to it as anti-Semitic:

*Reza*: Hearing the call to prayer was jarring. I was worried that I'm a gay man standing outside of a mosque hearing this call to prayer and I'm thinking, if these

people had x-ray vision and knew who I really was, would they start throwing stones at me?

*Mike:* No disrespect to Muslims but it scared the hell out of me. People are just rushing into the mosque. I got this overwhelming feeling inside of me that I couldn't help. I felt like a little kid that had lost his mom and dad and was looking for them. It was really weird. ... At this very given moment, I'm feeling more Jewish than I am feeling Iranian. Because of my religion, I could have left Iran and went to Israel if I chose to because they would have taken me in. My country didn't want me, but my religion does. If I had to fight for one or the other, I would fight for Israel. (Sher et al., 2014, January 28)

Reza's comment underlines the notion that Islam is against freedom and that it is only in the United States that he can be himself as a gay man (putting aside the fact that gay marriage is a highly controversial issue in the United States). Similarly, Mike's comments affirm the idea that the United States and Israel are closely aligned because they share values that are incompatible with "the Muslim world." The United States and Israel thus represent freedom and democracy while the Middle East represents their opposite.

In addition to affirming the notion that Islam is antigay and anti-Semitic, these episodes of *SOS* also affirm Islam as oppressive to women. Asa, MJ, and GG are moved by the call to prayer—until they enter the mosque. There, they respond to gender segregation with disappointment and alienation. The association of Islam with the oppression of women continues during a conversation about the hijab and niqab. Reza states that the niqab freaks him out (Sher et al., 2014, February 4), while GG and Asa try to offer a more nuanced point of view, noting the niqab's cultural significance and critiquing only its mandatory imposition. But Reza remains adamant:

No. I don't like it aesthetically. I don't like it symbolically. I don't like it religiously. I don't like it oppressively. I don't like anything it stands for. It separates people. It's such an in your face: We are this way, you guys are that way. I hate that. (Sher et al., 2014, February 4)

Reza then draws an analogy between the niqab and living one's life in the closet—further conflating Islam with homophobia.

Reza's positionality is important to consider, not least because, as noted above, he is the most frequently interviewed and popular cast member. He also embodies what Jasbir Puar (2013) refers to as homonationalism and what Ali Behdad and Juliet A. Williams (2010) refer to as neo-Orientalism. He produces an ideology within his gay subjectivity that replicates dominant discourses about Islam that justify U.S. intervention and invasion. Given that he is a native informant, his narrative of U.S. progress and modernity in opposition to Iran-Islam, holds "authenticity" or credibility. In this case, Reza, our homontionalist is of Iranian-Muslim descent and his explicit disavowal of Islam is a crucial component in establishing his homonormativity and Americanness. His performance of nationalism positions him as a "real American"

by delineating which kinds of Muslims should and should not be included in the land of the free. The season ends with Reza proposing marriage to his gay partner, the ultimate sign of homonationalism and American freedom (Sher et al., 2014, February 11). Reza embodies Americanness in his affirmation of Orientalist discourses about the backward nature of Islam and his embrace of American sexual freedom and consumerist lifestyle.

It is important to emphasize, however, that what makes SOS both popular and (problematically) powerful is not its overtly anti-Iran/anti-Muslim moments, but its delivery of such sentiments through the discourse of liberal multiculturalism. Shome (2012) writes that a “striking thing about the narrativization of multiculturalism in public discourses in the United States [ . . . ] [is how it] is often used as evidence of its tolerance and openness in relation to many ‘other worlds’ — today, especially Muslim worlds — whose cultures are dismissed as monolithic, rigid, backwards, and closed” (p. 153). Furthermore, both Sara Ahmed and Žižek point out that the logic of multiculturalism allows racism to be articulated under the guise of free speech, as signifying freedom in a democratic system (Ahmed 2008, p. 2; Žižek, 2009, p. 3). Reza and Mike exemplify this double move of multiculturalism. On one hand, they are incorporated into liberal multiculturalism as subjects of difference, epitomizing U.S. multicultural exceptionalism. On the other hand, they represent ideal subjects of liberal multiculturalism through their expression of Islamophobia and disdain of the collective in Islam. As an Iranian-Muslim and Iranian-Jewish other, respectively, their inclusion as acceptable is leveraged against the imagined intolerance of those *other* Iranian/Muslim Others whose identities and affinities challenge the limits and expectations of liberal multiculturalism.

### Reality television and the cultural politics of Islam

In the context of the cultural politics of Islam in the U.S., same-sex, interfaith, and interracial relationships are portrayed as symbols of American freedom and progress in contexts referencing Islam, eliding the contestation of such issues within the United States itself. In a sense, SOS succeeded and AAM did not because of how each engaged with the tension between being Muslim and being American. It appears that Muslims can be included in liberal multiculturalism only when and if Islam is, at minimum, not that important to their identity, and ideally, completely irrelevant. To put it more bluntly, while *All-American Muslim* failed in its attempt to make Islam palatable by wrapping it in a patriotic American flag, *Shahs of Sunset* won viewers and approval by driving away from Islam in a Mercedes Benz.

The very existence of these two reality television shows functions as a signifier of multicultural progress by representing Muslims as Americans during a time when the place of Muslims in the United States remains, in *real* reality, deeply contested. As Shome has written, the logic of multiculturalism in the United States presents itself as a progressive and universal concept for remedying racism worldwide, when it is actually nation- and West-centric (2012, p. 145). Examination of these two shows reveals the limits of liberal multiculturalism. Both series demonstrate, in different ways, the ways

in which multiculturalism tames difference rather than celebrates it, produces consumerism over rights, and operates to promote the United States as exceptional. Just because Muslims are incorporated into reality television does not necessarily signify progress toward racial justice. Ultimately, the shows show the need for a more complicated understanding of representation that goes beyond the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion. American media can now accommodate Middle Eastern Americans and, to some extent, the representations are diversifying, but the boundaries of this newfound “acceptance” remain firmly circumscribed by the cultural politics of Islam in America. Reality television has the potential to make certain lifestyles more acceptable, including that of gays, lesbians, Mormons, and Muslims. And while only one or two shows cannot change a representational field, *AAM* and *SOS* have created important openings for future representations of Islam in the U.S. media, even as they have also raised more troubling questions.

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