Arabizing Obama: Media's Racial Pathologies and the Rise of Postmodern Racism

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Abstract

The media's power to shape our views of reality, our socialization, and our politics is indisputable. As we increasingly discover and interpret the world through the screen of our TVs, media narratives and images construct for us confusing representations of reality. In the process, our ability to experience the real is reduced along with our commitment to engage with political and social problems. Confusion blurs our vision. Our rational capacities and certainties appear to have vanished. In the midst of this confusion, this article explains how the media have transformed identity politics in the United States by setting up Arab and Muslim American communities as the enemy within and institutionalized a new discourse of discrimination that relies on racial microaggression. Operating through Arabization, racial scapegoating, and misrepresentation, this discourse is similar to what sociologist Ramón Flecha calls postmodern racism in Europe. The article further argues that this discourse is used to question President Obama's decisions, his ostensibly suppressed Muslim identity, and his patriotism.

Introduction

In the winter of 2010, a homemade YouTube video captured three-year-old Cody sobbing over the teen star Justin Bieber. Young, adorable, and surprisingly articulate for her age, Cody could barely stop crying over her love for Bieber and her inability to watch the singer all day long. Her palpable sadness resulted in the video going viral. Late night TV host Jimmy Kimmel was so captivated that he arranged for the toddler to meet her idol on his show. Viewers shared the extraordinary moments of Cody's happiness, yet should wonder how this experience will affect her future ability to

discern what is real. The authority of the media, particularly television, and its power to shape values and invent meaning is uncontested. Sut Jhally, in his discussion of media and their role in constructing meaning, argues that television dominates earlier institutions of cultural forms such as family, community, school, and religion (Jhally, 1990); trumps their influence; and asserts its hegemony as an agent of cultural production and socialization, and mediator of political reality. We still think of our values as "natural," with identities grounded in common sense, human experience, and intellectual wisdom. However, our cultural norms are now sophisticatedly manufactured through careful selection of images, sound bites, special effects, and entertaining stories by a powerful elite and their corporate watchdogs.

The fragmentation of mass audiences, including children, into different groups of consumers is increasingly transforming certain cultural norms and practices. "The notion of the vulnerable child in need of protection from the dangers of the media, an assumption on which media education is frequently based, is steadily giving way to the notion of the child as a sovereign consumer. Young people are increasingly addressed not as delicate young minds in need of careful nurture, but as lively, streetwise, and self-possessed" (Buckingham, 2003) which is rarely the case. Their exposure to such narratives, beginning at ages even younger than Cody's, informs them of the "real" world and conveys cultural values and societal responsibilities. "Media images," asserts Douglas Kellner, "help shape our view of the world and our deepest values: what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil" (p.9, 2003). For most Americans, such images and fragmented information bites subsequently become solid reference points for life-changing decisions. We see the images, internalize the messages, and systematically act upon them. Meanwhile, we are entertained under the heavy hypnotic doses of what Noam Chomsky calls "necessary illusions."

Entertainment programming has become so profitable, popular, and dominant that it invented its own brand of Reality TV. Critics and viewers alike know that such programming is incredibly misleading; identities are artificially tailored for the participants selected and events are carefully scripted and edited. Nonetheless, even

"savvy viewers who realize that their favorite reality shows are cast, contrived, and edited to be dramatic may have no idea how brazen the fudging can be. Quotes are manufactured, crushes and feuds constructed out of whole cloth, episodes planned in multi-act 'storyboards' before taping, scenes stitched together out of footage shot days apart" (Poniewozik, 2006).

We consume everything entertainment programming has to offer. We watch recreations of investigative reporting with suspended disbelief. We eagerly follow the dramatic stories of *Undercover Boss,* immune to a sub-narrative that aims to reburnish the tarnished image of CEOs in the wake of the Wall Street meltdown and ignores the continuing degradation of the disempowered, overworked, and underpaid workforce. Our therapeutic insights come from Dr. Phil, who is not a real doctor. As viewers, we are challenged to separate the real from its representation. We're no different than Beavis and Butthead, Homer Simpson, or the Family Guy. Just like them, we find comfort in recognizing our world through the mythologies of the television set. Indeed, these mythologies also impact print media and the way we discuss complex topics of race relations, the ordinary day-to-day racial microaggressions[1], and other emerging forms of discrimination in our society.

In November 2008, the election of the first African-American president marked a moment of historic magnitude in the United States. It also put the issue of race on the table, forcing us to entertain any problem-solving measures including fictional possibilities. Consequently, many expressed the need for "a cultural translator" between blacks and whites. Some trying to grasp the election compared Barack Obama to Mr. Spock, a character from the mid-1960s *Star Trek* science fiction TV series. Journalist and author Jeff Greenwald observes "Spock has been on many minds lately [...]. Big thinkers in both print media and the blogosphere — from New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd to MIT media moguls — have referenced the

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[1] The concept of racial microaggressions was introduced by psychiatrist Chester Pierce and entails "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. Perpetrators of microaggressions are often unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities" (Sue, et al. 2007). For example when Arab-Americans are asked why gas prices fluctuate, told fasting during the month of Ramadan is unhealthy for them, or worse if they know any terrorists.

Enterprise's science officer in recent months, drawing parallels between the dependably logical half-Vulcan and another mixed-race icon: Barack Obama" (2009). In a backhanded manner, these "big thinkers" may have been praising President Obama by alluding to Mr. Spock's charismatic qualities and rational skills. Though the intention may have been transferring public empathy from Spock to Obama, this is imbued with a degree of racial microaggression; if Americans could only imagine him as an extra-terrestrial they could more easily overcome their "visceral response" and irrational fear of blackness. Racial discourse thus reaches such an impasse that fictionalized representation become plausible; an example of fictional racial harmony, a mission the Enterprise community seems to have accomplished, becomes very desirable.

President Obama as Mr. Spock (Greenwald, 2009)

Thesis

In seeking to understand how race is actively and inadvertently reconstructed in real life along the lines of stereotypes and identities shaped by the artificial world of televised illusions, which Baudrillard describes as "a real without origin or reality" (p.3), I will start by examining how the media parade racial harmony in the U.S., an illusion that enables a new form of discrimination. The election of this nation's first self-identified black president has led some to claim the nation is "post-racial."

"Believers of post-racial ideology espouse that racism is a thing of the past – that we have moved beyond racism and achieved equality" (Esposito, 2012). Quite to the contrary, I argue that this new discrimination apparatus which includes Arabization, racial scapegoating, and misrepresentation has been employed by the entertainment and news media to question President Obama's decisions and loyalty. Once labeled as Arab/Muslim, I further argue, the president assumed these characteristics in the American imagination. In turn, this led to the discourse of uncertainty about his behavior and intentions. By connecting intellectual concepts of the real and the imaginary with current theories of identity politics, specifically the deployment of ambiguous images and notions of race, my final goal is to explain the institutionalizing of an ideological economy of words and meaning binaries for the exclusion of Arab/Muslim American communities. In this article, it will be referred to as postmodern racism[2].

Media Samples & Methodology of Analysis

For this article, I have selected examples from TV shows, broadcast coverage, print reporting, and recent political events to analyze how the imagery and biased information have been used against the president and to buttress the discourse of uncertainty. Much of this coverage which dates back to his presidential campaign contains subtly embedded racial microaggressions and coded messages that play to the emotion of fear and deliberately distort the president's identity. The inherent biases of such messages are difficult to determine with certainty making the racist intent more difficult to question.

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[2]Racism is founded on the ideological construction of race and a distinction between superior and inferior races based on biological or cultural attributes. Postmodern racism, as used throughout the article, is more fluid. It implies the transformation of racism into covert forms of discrimination that are more ambiguous, codified, technologically sophisticated (detectible but often invisible, and highly invested in racial microaggressions). Beyond race, it incorporates ideologies such as nationalism, social phobias, and exaggerated threats to sustain racial hierarchy and blur the distinction between discriminatory and nondiscriminatory practices. Postmodern racism relies also on unintentional public complicity, indifference concerning illegal practices such as racial profiling, and the liquidation of anti-racist activism.

Thus, I have chosen to examine an array of narratives that define popular conceptions of race in "real" life. Real here means social consciousness drawn from the human experience and collective consensus that uses sensory abilities to connect with the environment, and requires learning about others through socialization rather than from the limited TV culture. Often, the latter narratives form the mental construct of race by compiling stereotypical details and conventions, dictating the way Americans perceive and discuss race. These perceptions sustain a dominant discourse or established habits, which produce ideas that resonate with existing cultural beliefs. Positions on race are developed based on those beliefs.

The validity and credibility of stories attributing particular characteristics to a specific race, to an extent relies on a level of intertextuality between different media sources. Organized around the exchange of ideas, shared details and swapped images, they confirm the claims of one another and methodically present race with a familiarity to viewers and readers. For example, "Dixon's (2007) work illustrates, consuming the persistent overrepresentation of black males in crime-related news stories strengthens the cognitive association between blacks and criminality in the mind of consumers such that the connection (i.e., blacks and crime) becomes chronically accessible for use in race-related evaluations" (Mastro et al., 2009). The intertextuality also works on the level of knowledge the public has now acquired and "[a]ny text, whether a presidential address or a film is necessarily read in relationship to others [so that . . .] a range of textual knowledges is brought to bear upon it. When experiencing a text, these intertextual knowledges—what Fiske refers to as a culture's "image-bank"— "'pre-orient' readers and allow them to make meanings;" to read and therefore respond to texts in certain ways rather than others (Veeren, 2009).

This does not imply that audiences are empty vessels or passive absorbers of televisual content (Newcomb, p.421, 2000), but rather emphasizes that basic media literacy is no longer enough. Viewers who learn about everyday life and the outside world through television programming require more analytical and critical context, since they are more likely to accept illusions as facts, outrageous behavior as

justifiable, and treachery as a strategy for success[3]. My position does not consider the media "as consciousness industries" inexorably imposing false ideologies or cultural values on passive audiences" (Buckingham, 2003), but rather examines the outstanding technological sophistication they have reached making the information (the visual texts and images) chosen and transmitted often cryptic, the need to decode it much greater, and the "textual analysis that takes place without examining the institutional, cultural, and economic conditions in which texts are produced and understood […] necessarily limited" (p.441, 2000).

In order to engage these aspects of textual analysis, it is necessary to define postmodern racism and explain its modes of operation. Starting with print media, I discuss three areas in which these modes enable the framing of difference in new and ambiguous terms. Print reporting often provides the content and story that make the work of visual media (images and narratives) and the production of ambiguous notions possible. This has less to do with a deliberate conspiracy and more with capturing "hot" and controversial stories for ratings. In this sense, different media categories inform one another. Of particular interest will be the article entitled "Hillary's team has questions about Obama's Muslim background" that allegedly started the "accusation" about Obama's Muslim heritage, and the subsequent media spin. Next, looking at the articulation of difference within this context of Islamization and the perpetuation of stereotypes, I examine a pattern of print misinformation and visual productions already skewed by bias embedded in entertainment TV and shows like *24*; the pattern is used to draw the line of differentiation between readers/viewers ('normal' subject) and those whose difference is displayed and watched (object of the

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[3] As entertainment and reality TV have gained in popularity, the rules of production are changing our understanding of life's journey into a game to be played and won, of relationships plagued with competition instead of cooperation, and reiterating coercive behavioral patterns of socialization we normally do not condone but in the spirit of competitiveness accept without resistance. A show like *Survivor* frames reality as a game without the fun of playing and people as contestants competing for a prize not as individuals cooperating to survive. Personal growth, change, and development of one's character, and bonding with others occur through conspiracy and the exposure to "the human tools of trickery, manipulation, deception, and betrayal as justifiable means to a superlative end" (Roth, 2003). Tribal mentality becomes the norm and the fragmentation between individuals, groups, and races increasingly problematic.

gaze). Last, I focus on the forces of exclusion that result from the absence of positive images of Arab/Muslim communities, representations imbued with binary meanings validating their inferiority by making difference and un-Americanness synonymous, and how such forces have been mobilized against President Obama.

Media and Postmodern Racism

This media induced postmodern racism capitalizes on crafted representations of difference that are collectively assigned to certain ethnicities: Arab, Black, and Hispanic. In this sense, postmodern racism entails manufacturing layers of meaning through a collage of images, fragment selection, sound bites, confusing narratives, and subliminal messages[4] making scapegoating easily accessible and available in times of crises. "Historians have argued that racial scapegoating was crucial to the consolidation of the American nation-state, since intra-white conflict was often resolved by institutionalizing common prejudice against blacks" (Aidi, 2005). In the post September 11 United States, the racial scapegoating targeting Arabs, Muslims, Arab Americans, and Middle Eastern looking ethnicities serves the same purpose, continuing to sustain the illusion of racial harmony and reconciliation particularly between black and white Americas. "If, historically, as Toni Morrison once argued, the assimilation of immigrants was achieved and America was kept united only after the 'racial estrangement [of blacks] is learned,' today it appears that assimilation and unity are achieved by 'learning' the estrangement and ideological exclusion of the Arab/Muslim" (ibid). In addition to the idea of uncertainty, exclusion and forced invisibility constitute the backbone of American postmodern racism.

My analysis builds on postmodern racism theory postulated by the sociologist Ramón Flecha. Flecha examines the persistence of racial discrimination embedded in European school policies and their ethnocentric pedagogies of multiculturalism. He points out the differences between modern racism which grounds its theories in ethnocentricity and the inequality of races and postmodern racism that validates the

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[4]Bill Maher discussed many images and titles with racially loaded content targeting President Obama and his family; for example a Drudge Report headline, Maher points out, reads "POLL HELL: OBAMA NEGS RISE", (Baker, 2009). NEGS here is meant to be an abbreviation for negatives. Recently, racial attacks are more daring. A bumper sticker stating: "*Don't Re-nig in 2012*" (Goodwin, 2012) appeared in June 2012 and was widely circulated.

articulation of cultural difference and opposes the argument of superior and inferior races. Interestingly, postmodern racists seem to embrace the idea of difference to justify their discriminatory agendas and policies. "Focusing on difference and diversity," he states, "while excluding the idea of equality obscures the possibility of solidarity and masks the possibility of people's living together in the same space and sharing the same educational institutions" (Flecha, 1999).

Further stressing the significance of equality, Flecha explains the constraints of misinterpreting difference by referencing the relativist approach derived from the work of post-structuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jack Derrida and the ample possibilities of the dialogic approach of Paulo Friere and Jürgen Habermas. With astute analysis, he strongly advocates the dialogic approach because it "fosters different people's living together according to rules agreed upon by all through free and egalitarian dialogue. In contrast, the relativistic approach rejects such rules with the argument that they eliminate the identities and differences of oppressed people" (p.151). Felcha continues, noting that "difference without equality can deconstruct the possibility of dialogue among different cultures. Where there is difference without equality, cultures can only be understood within themselves and any intermingling represents a loss of identity" (p.160). Using the case of Gypsies and Arab children in Spain, whose achievements are interlocked with the presumptions about the inferiority of their cultural background, Flecha explains how these communities are expected to adhere to lower standards than European children. Their poor performance is not attributed to their limited cultural and political capital but to their presumably inherited poor intellect. Since difference without cultural power is irrelevant, the dialogic approach is meaningless unless communities participating in dialogue share equal positions of power. Deprived of all enabling means of empowerment and agency, these communities find themselves trapped in this thing called cultural difference, consistently subjects to racial microaggressions and misinformation, and with very little resources to respond. In the United States, two factors have been significantly powerful in the question of misrepresentation: deliberate mistakes that cause panic and an error/correction approach, which is a deliberate act of spreading misinformation by making unfounded claims and then refuting them. Both have been used in the perpetuation of misinformation about the president.

The Deliberate Mistakes of Print Reporting

The demonizing of Obama's heritage, and thus his patriotism, appears to have begun during the presidential campaign with an unsubstantiated article posted on *InSight.com*, the now defunct conservative website owned by Unification Church founder Reverend Sun Myung Moon. The piece, "Hillary's team has questions about Obama's Muslim background," claimed that researchers from her presidential campaign staff discovered Obama attended a *madrassa* for his schooling while growing up in Indonesia. Although the story of his schooling was discredited, as well as Clinton staffers' role in the "discovery," the smear campaign spread like wild fire. Conservative political pundits used it as a platform for raising doubts, and giving fuel to latent racist fantasy of making the Islamization of Obama an opportunity for a legitimate act of symbolic lynching. Portraying Obama as a Muslim is an act of scapegoating that allows for a postmodern racist assault without any repercussions. Rather than attack him for his blackness, projecting on him the image of the eternal enemy is more effective and less risky.

Journalism scholars Aisha Tariq and Mia Moody analyzed the media's depiction of the Arab and Muslim communities in "Barak Hussein Obama: Campaigning while (Allegedly) Muslim" (Tariq & Moody, 2009). They discussed the curse of "Arabizing/Islamizing" Obama at a time when Islamophobia in the United States had been at record high. Their critique examines the significance of the *InSight* article on Obama's political campaign and "how the media have fused Arab ethnicity, Islamic faith, and the evils of terrorism and war post-September 11 so that association with one of these factors inevitably leads to implication in the others" (ibid). Of course, the goal of making the claim in Hillary's name was to transfer negative stereotypes, feeling of resentments, and distrust to then Sen. Barak Obama and jeopardize his bid for the presidency. The clandestine Muslim allegation became the grounds to question his loyalty and political intentions. Today, almost four years into his presidency, the rumor of his foreignness has yet to lose momentum. Never has the emotive connotation between Muslim and foreign been so strong, further obscuring the media's ability to see Muslims as part of the American collective identity. Tariq and

Moody's study also highlights American mainstream media's conformity in producing relatively the same racial discourse. Despite differences in approaches, positive representation of Arab/Muslim communities is taboo[5]. Conversely, they note that Obama distanced himself from the allegation without a single gesture in the defense of Arabs or Muslims.

More than a decade after September 11, Arabization/Islamization has become the central racial marker of postmodern racism in the United States. A recent survey concerning the Ground Zero project "revealed that many Americans harbor lingering animosity against Muslims. Twenty-eight percent of voters do not believe Muslims should be eligible to sit on the U.S. Supreme Court. Nearly one-third of the country thinks adherents of Islam should be barred from running for President — a slightly higher percentage than the 24% who mistakenly believe the current occupant of the Oval Office is himself a Muslim. In all, just 47% of respondents believe Obama is a Christian; 24% declined to respond to the question or said they were unsure, and 5% believe he is neither Christian nor Muslim" (Altman, 2010). Initiatives taken by the Arab/Muslim communities to bring about change to overt public hostility have been strongly resisted. The debate about the proposed Ground Zero Islamic Center[6] in New York City is a case in point. Flecha's argument about excluding "the idea of equality" is particularly relevant here, since by denying these communities any visible

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[5] Last year, the reality TV show *All-American Muslim* premiered in November 2011 on TLC. This show follows the daily routine of five Arab-American families. Born and raised in the US, they have no doubts about their sense of belonging; they eat cheese burgers, like tattoos, play football, and believe in the American dream. The show debunks the monolithic view of Arab/Muslim American communities, humanizes them, and reveals a sense of great diversity of life styles, opinions, political positions, conflicting perspectives on religion and practices, and cross-generational gaps. The show came under attack by David Caton, a former pornography-addict, born-again Christian, and leader of a fundamentalist group called the Florida Family Foundation. Caton led a fierce campaign against the show calling it […] a front for an Islamic takeover of America and pressured advertisers to pull their commercials" (Freedman, 2011). At the end of its first season, the show was canceled.

[6] The Ground Zero project is a "cultural center that includes a swimming pool, gym and basketball court, a 500-seat auditorium, a restaurant and culinary school, a library and art studios" (Farley, 2010). This is clearly a mall project driven by the American capitalist spirit, with its interest in entertainment and consumerism. Only here it is propelled by Arab and Muslim Americans therefore it has always been called a mosque. "Organizers say the center would be open to all New Yorkers, regardless of faith, and would promote cultural diversity. The center would also be geared toward "engaging New York's many and diverse Muslim communities and promoting empowerment and compassion for all" (Altman, 2010).

institutions, presence, and identity markers it becomes virtually impossible for Americans to think of Arab/Muslim American communities as part of the social fabric of American society. They can coexist with others as long as they are mute; their practices, cultures, and symbols are contained; and their impact on American culture and popular discourse meaningless. This is another form of exclusion that, in a different context, Žižek called "an explicit elevation of hypocrisy into a social principle" (Žižek, 1997). If Americans pretend Arab/Muslims are not Americans, are not equal, do not deserve the same rights, and do not exist, then they "effectively" do not exist.

Aside from this forced invisibility, the "sinister accusation" of what it means to be Arab/Muslim could not be so alarmingly convincing to average Americans without entertainment TV's complicity in constructing "enemy images". In a related study, Debra Merskin addresses how the spread of false information contributes to the process of "enemy image construction." Merskin cites film and media, in addition to government authorities, as the parties responsible for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims among the public" (p.162, 2004). Because of these constructions, her critique documents disturbing animosity and frightening embedded hatred so deeply rooted in the American imagination towards the Arab/Muslim American communities. Arguing along the same line of thought, Peter Morey identifies exclusion as the common theme of so many TV dramas (*24*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *Spooks*) and films (*The Siege* and *The Kingdom*) which center on framing Muslims as a threat to the nation. These productions, he argues, "have been involved in the process of reinforcing a sense of national solidarity in the face of a threat. Most often they do so by positioning those Muslims represented outside the discursive boundaries of the nation" (p.252, 2010). For example Fox's TV thriller/drama *24* (2001-2010) was heavily invested in using the process of differentiation to distort our views of reality by creating recognizable essentialist categories assigned to certain ethnicities in this case black and Arab and sets the standard on their treatment.

The Pathologies of Race between Reality and the Imaginary

The popular drama *24*, which *Time* named one of the "best television events of the decade" with its "real time" format, attracted viewers by evoking the deepest and

darkest fears and public phobias fusing together reality, politics, and fiction. "From assassination attempts and germ warfare to horrific terrorist plots" (MacMillan, 2007), the show makes the United States the most vulnerable and threatened place on earth where extreme measures have to be taken every day to save lives. While endorsing the myth of terrorism as a threat that can never be fully contained, the status of the conventional Hollywood white male hero as inherently and unconditionally the ultimate patriot and national savior is renewed; all American hero Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland) is given license to defend and protect the nation by whatever means possible including murder. The inaugural season was first broadcast when the idea of an African-American president was considered simply Hollywood casting. The black/white dichotomy was built on the premise of the two main characters' conflicting personalities. When observed through the postmodern racism lens, Jack Bauer appears as tough, strong and charmingly cocky and Senator David Palmer (Dennis Haysbert), a presidential candidate, is seen as fragile, less confident and undecided. As president, Palmer never takes matters in his own hands. He is undermined by his own staff but does not seem to get it. He cautiously consults with Bauer and others and makes decisions based on certainty and reason versus speculations. He stays calm and composed despite the pressure of ticking bombs that would anger and agitate the temper of the wisest leaders. He seems very uncomfortable with the idea of war while in real life Americans tell Gallup they want a strong president "who has strong leadership skills above all else" (Jones, 2007). Interestingly, in the first few months of his presidency Obama runs into similar problems and accusation of weakness. Palmer's behavior is certainly at odds with Hollywood's representation of American presidents and their leadership skills, ranging from Bill Pullman's diplomacy in *Independence Day* (1996), where he manages to bring "all mankind" and their war planes under his command to Harrison Ford's *Air Force One* (1997), where he fist fights terrorists and throws them off the plane. Bauer is the one who sets the events in motion and establishes the terms of their relationship by saving Palmer's life and losing his own wife in the process. These details preserve the classic racial hierarchy of black/white by placing an African-American in a position of leadership yet portraying him as a subordinate. "As the softer, more diplomatic face of the nation, Palmer acts as a dramatic foil whose

predicament permits the necessary excesses of agents such as Jack Bauer" (Morey, 2010).

Viewers of *24* are introduced to the new reality imposed by the threat of terrorism while the idea of a flawed black leadership is reinforced. Early in the second season, retired Jack Bauer is called by the Los Angeles based Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU) to help locate a nuclear bomb in LA and track down the Muslim terrorist cell behind it. Still mourning the death of his wife, a depressed Bauer refuses to return to CTU until Palmer, now the president, calls him and personally solicits his help. Bauer saves the day and uncovers the involvement of three unnamed Middle Eastern nations although the information could not be confirmed. For this reason, Palmer refuses to take military action against these nations triggering serious anger and disappointment within his own administration. Palmer's powerful opponents consider him weak, liberally biased, unable to make a decision, and thus incapable of properly protecting the United States. Perceived unfit for the presidency his cabinet votes to have him removed and appoints the Vice President.

The show legitimizes counter-terrorism initiatives of bending rules, breaking laws, torturing, and committing murder. Bauer's moral bankruptcy and violations are rewarded with triumph. "Bauer does not confine himself to the rules of the government; instead, he adopts the warfare tactics of the terrorists. He interrogates and tortures, he threatens family members, and he executes suspects because as he would say "I feel in my gut" that they are guilty. There is no question that these techniques are effective, but could we view them as morally justified if Bauer wasn't protected by the identity of the hero" (Peacock, 2007) and the need to balance the weakness of the president in the face of terror? Certainly not.

By its fourth season, *24* had totally dissolved most foundational moral distinctions that inform the laws and habits of civilization in our society. Differences between hero and villain, moral and profane, legal and illegal, murder and self-defense, honesty and deceit, reality and hyper-reality, truth and representation were completely eliminated. Political and social orders are absent, morality and laws are meaningless, and the belligerent behavior of a self-centered emotionally driven narcissist is glorified. Bauer's America had become a place where democracy and the totalitarian

mindset intersect, where gruesome scenes of torture and violence make clear the rule of law has no standing with (fictional) circumstances of urgency, all set against the background of ticking bombs and rapidly elapsing time.

Although racially charged, *24* did not intend to invoke treacherous Arab/Muslim terrorist imagery. Its danger lies in its overt tendentiousness condoning racial profiling, physical harm, torture, vengeance, and hostility towards the Arab/Muslim American communities. Though he strongly believes in the public's ability to separate reality from fiction, executive producer Howard Gordon expressed concern about the show's impact on these communities. In season two, one of the stories involved a Muslim American family. The father, the mother and the son were party to a terror plot. Shortly after the story aired, Gordon admitted seeing the effect of his fictional show reflected in real life in a giant electronic billboard on the 405 freeway stating: "They could be next door" (Aleaziz, 2011).

Unlike conventional TV productions, *24*'s intense narrative arcs required viewers to fully engage all of their senses as they watched Jack Bauer's investigations and his legal transgressions. Events would rapidly evolve and allowed viewers no time for criticism or analytical reflection as they repeatedly witnessed recurring images of Arab/Muslim Americans portrayed as aliens and potential suicide bombers; Mory refers to this representation as the "post Huntington stereotype" (p.254, 2010) where the Arab/Muslim is always suspect and incapable of belonging or assimilating. The stylistic techniques of dramatization, fictionalizing of real world events, the exaggeration for shock effect, and the unpredictability of Bauer's behavior made *24* a great example of a creative and exceptionally innovative TV drama production and contributed to its market share success. For this reason, the same techniques began to be seen in programs like the news where dramatization and shock are not as easily constructed. But, television viewers still consider the news as sacrosanct programming that truthfully informs them about real events in real time. The inception of reality television, with its constant staging, heavy editing, and endless presentation of simulated reality as truth has quietly penetrated the newsroom. Producers eager to retain audiences have introduced simulations and interpretations,

transforming veracity into pliable information fragments subject to multiple interpretations.

The Error Correction Approach

The error/correction style of reporting has also contributed to making the grammar of media content lamentably odd and truth of some events or political initiatives harder to discern. Misinformation is no longer accidental. Rather, it is part of the process of producing a representation of reality. Many of President Obama's early decisions and economic initiatives were disputed in this manner. His White House has been implicated by endless rumors, similar to those faced by *24*'s fictional black President David Palmer and the claims about his weakness in addressing homeland security concerns. In real life, Republican aligned pundits repeatedly complained of the same. Appearing on radio with Frank Gaffney, Congressman Trent Franks critiqued Obama for not doing "what is necessary to protect this country" (Colmes, 2011). When Obama announced his early economic initiatives, the Mercatus Center, a right wing think tank funded mostly by the Koch brothers, deliberately released a false report claiming that stimulus money "had been directed disproportionately toward Democratic districts." Although the report was later retracted, Rush Limbaugh cited the paper as he labeled the stimulus "a slush fund" (Meyer, 2010).

While the repetition of this assertion on Fox News and other conservative news outlets may appear to have been fiscally focused only, such inaccurate claims criticizing President Obama have digressed from attacking his policies to attacking his race. Relying often on symbolic content, many critics began to speak about the President's "strange behavior." Right wing pundit Dinesh D'Souza, capitalizing on the idea of the enemy within and the complexity of difference, conjured up the issue of Africa ("black" and foreign Africa) by calling his position "anti-colonial" and stating "[t]he President's actions are so bizarre that they mystify his critics and supporters alike" (D'Souza, 2010). However, many of the initiatives D'Souza attributes to Obama were actually set in motion under President Bush. Newt Gingrich, who has suggested that Arab/Muslim Americans should take a loyalty test, likewise pondered whether the president "is outside our comprehension." D'Souza's argument, echoed by Gingrich, acts as a racial "dog whistle." The argument "only succeeds if

one first views Obama through the prism of race and then applies D'Souza's examples to bolster preexisting notions" (The Fourth Branch, 2010).

Looking back at the 2010 Senate election, voters appeared to cast their ballots based on propagandist racist rhetoric, inadequate information, or lack of knowledge of the political process. One Pew survey on the health care reform vote found that only a third of Americans (32%) knew that no Republican senators voted for health care reform (Walker, 2010). The U.S. viewing audience, bombarded with unsubstantiated news stories about the political and economic hardships, was understandably uninformed. News reports had exacerbated other fears, such as the loss of homes, jobs, and retirement benefits. Indeed, they blurred the lines between existent political and economic issues that required long–term planning and game show like quick rewards, heightened the emotions of an already frightened and economically insecure populace.

Since most voters are removed from the world of politics and are informed about the president's competency by media that manufacture uncertainty their participation in the electoral process consequently was based on "gut instinct". Many "voted in fear that the government was becoming too big just as the Republicans had been claiming during the two years of the Obama's presidency" (Thomas, 2010). The early initiatives to fund healthcare reform, provide stimulus money to the automobile industry, and support jobs creation appeared to confirm uncontrolled government growth. And media stories continued to express uncertainty about his decisions. For example, one year into his presidency, CBS featured an interview between President Obama and Katie Couric on the topic, "Do Americans Know Where Obama Stands?" Despite having given more than 160 interviews and participated in more than two dozen town meetings in his first year in office, during which he addressed the issues that proceeded his tenure and his steps to resolve various crises, polling revealed the public believes his goals are vague and directives undefined. Within this convoluted space of confusing misinformation, doubt serves as camouflage for the racially tinged perceptions of a black president and eventually go unexamined. Doubt lends credibility to the discussion of his "foreignness" when in reality the issue is his blackness. That Americans think Obama, just like Arabs and Muslims, must not be

trusted can be analyzed by understanding how the media framed the allegation about his Muslim origin in order to capture already internalized and legitimized racist feelings against the Arab/Muslim.

The Language of Postmodern Racism

Long before the invasion of Iraq and the tensions between the United States and the Middle East, the populist image of the Arab/Muslim was shaped by the narrative of *Orientalism.* This lens produced a tarnished image based on Western imagination, fantasies, fears and cultural biases. Distorted visual representation flooded the big screen. Starting in the early 1900s with such films as *The Sheik* and *The Garden of Allah*, Hollywood productions characterized Arabs "as peddlers and beggars, […and] soon became the villains of choice for the motion picture industry (Shaheen, 2001)" (cited in Aisha and Moody p.5). Framed by such images, a way of thinking and language developed that negatively interpreted alleged oddities and behavior and set the stage to disempower and exclude. In the same way, for centuries the status of a black male was reduced to "boy," implying the impossibility of reaching maturity or independence, signaling a morally underdeveloped character and the need to monitor and domesticate him, and therefore never granted the chance to be considered equal. The Arab/Muslim, like the black male, is construed as a suspicious foreigner with innate violent tendencies.

After the terrible events of September 11, a linguistic repertoire of words such as *jihad, shahid, kuffar, madrassa, Shariah,* and *Hussein* have become coded expressions of postmodern racism in American vernacular. When a newscaster or politician adds in Barak Obama's middle name of *Hussein*, for example, the speaker intends to employ what Lemke calls the "orientational" aspect of language defined as "the construction of our orientational stance toward present and potential addressees and audiences, and toward the presentational content of our discourse, in respect of social relations and evaluations from a particular viewpoint, across meaningful stretches of text and from text to text (p. 35, 1995). Thus, the use of *Hussein* serves to orientate the reader/viewer to see the information through what Fiske calls a culture's "image-bank" by invoking immediately the multiple layers of signification that the name entails, namely: *Saddam*/Arab/Muslim/desert-nigger/villain/enemy/foreign/terrorist.

In this sense, uttering the word *Hussein,* is not simply stating a name but using shorthand to convey a particular ideological and political bias that helps the speaker bond with constituents and audience. As the rumor of Obama's Islamization unfolded, "*Hussein*" embodied the sense of political loss and cultural fundamentalism. This loss is seen in the threatening and unprecedented birth of non-Western entities that distorted the core structure of social hierarchy and gained political agency traditionally reserved for white Anglo-Saxons. On the other hand, cultural fundamentalism is articulated by making *Hussein* the postmodern neoliberal misappropriation of an ethnic identity considered foreign. Obama's presidency has disrupted a long held racial hierarchy, by embracing difference and placing traditionally marginal groups (black, Arab, Hispanic) in equal positions within the center. For many cultural ethnocentrists, conventional racists and conservative political figures, the idea is unconceivable; the reality of a black man occupying the White House is intolerable. Thus, the pathological belief of a foreign entity has hijacked the Oval Office, the "conspiracy theory that American Muslims are plotting to replace the Constitution with Taliban-style Islamic law remains" (Serwer, 2011), and the need to take America back has emerged.

Despite the presence of Arab/Muslim communities and their contributions to the United States over so many generations, their cultural isolation and their political positioning as enemies still dominates popular beliefs. Republican Peter King's vulgar anti-Muslim hearings[7] are "…a reminder that even as homegrown terrorism is on the wane, suspicion of Muslims endures" (Serwer, 2011). They are filled with political theater and aimed to revitalize the depiction of the Arab/Muslim as the eternal enemy. Many in Congress wondered "why the investigations didn't have a wider scope to

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[7]Congressman Peter King, Republican from New York and House Homeland Security Committee Chairman organized hearings on the threat of homegrown Islamic terrorism in the United States. Despite clear evidence and current research that proves the opposite (Serwer, 2012), King insisted radicalized Muslims constitute a major threat to the security of the nation. The fifth and last hearing that took place on June 20, 2012 was absurdly titled "The American Muslim Response to Hearings on Radicalization within their Community". King supported the invasion of Iraq, opposed the ending of torture, and rejected Obama's decision to close Guantanamo. Once "a fervent supporter of terrorist group, the Irish Republican Army" (Shane, 2011), he must stay in the spotlight in order to retain the sponsorship of his funders. According to OpenSecrets.com, his 2010 re-election campaign included war profiteers General Dynamics, Boeing, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Honeywell International.

include militia groups and other non-Muslim extremist groups. After all, since 9/11, there have been more terrorist plots from non-Muslim extremists than from Muslims" (Khan, 2011).

King's message required that its racist meaning remain publicly unacknowledged. Rendering it public would make irrelevant the Arab/Muslim as a permanent enemy that holds that contemporary American society has overcome its racist past. The Arab/Muslim American communities are trapped into a double bind. They are both essential and the un-American enemy within, making possible the illusion of America's accomplished racial harmony. Consequently, even the act of condemning hostility towards these communities becomes not only undesirable but a liability. No mainstream media, public figures, or experts would ever challenge this kind of bold hostility, point out its state-sanctioned authority, or even broker a space where discrimination is acknowledged and denounced. This exclusion is fortified with forced invisibility.

Obama at the Center of Racial Politics

The televised attacks on President Obama reflect the depth and breadth of this phenomenon. When TV personality Donald Trump joined in the fray of the "birther" movement to question the president's citizenship, he joined in a larger movement that went beyond political posturing. He sought to discredit the president's credentials as a "real" American, not so subtly insinuating that someone who is half-black, half-white, half-African, half-Muslim, and half-Catholic has too many competing loyalties and thus not up to the task of leading the country. It wasn't until Obama trumped The Donald's assertions at the White House Correspondents' Dinner, using Trump's own TV show format to expose the billionaire's rhetoric, that those attacks were temporarily silenced. Nevertheless, the endless debates over Obama's birthplace forced him to make his birth certificate a matter of public record. Trump's posturing should not be excused as arrogance or racial ignorance, nor should the media attention to the birther movement be considered as normal interest in a hot news story. The problem is much larger, a reflection of the deteriorating conditions of race relations.

Right wing media have downplayed the racial question to insulate their coverage from being bluntly racist while constructing demeaning images. In addition to using Obama's middle name of *Hussein*, several televised news subjected the president to a linguistic assault grounded in offensive word play. For example, a Fox news outlet ran the story "Obama Bin Laden Died," mixing up the two names. The repeated substitution of the name "Obama" for "Osama" with such unusual frequency is not "unintended" (Powers, 2011) but possibly an indication of the normative consistency of a conventional supremacist mentality that views non-whites collectively and monolithically as one and the same. The tautology goes that Obama and Osama are both Negros, both inferior, both hated for their blackness, both Muslim (read here criminals), and both equally guilty.

Frantz Fanon and Chester Himes, among many others, examined this phenomenon of the failure to distinguish among natives, Africans, and Arabs. "Fanon's account of fascist attacks on black men in public with white women and a South American "riddled with bullets" because he "looked like a North African (Fanon, 1988)" (cited in Thomas, p.226) is evidence of such visceral attitude. "Black and living on or near a predominantly Arab street in Paris, Himes knew this fury intimately" (ibid). As verbal attacks by pundits and politicians against President Obama continue, the media oscillate between different narratives while manufacturing the illusion of a dialogue. For Right wing believers, particularly those who lean towards white supremacy, the president's race and religion are as much points of contention as his political stance. If the United States truly were a secular democratic nation, Obama's faith and name would not be an issue.

How Postmodern Racism Works: Arabization of the Villain

During a 2008 campaign rally, McCain volunteer Gayle Quinnell anxiously asked Senator McCain the pointed question: "I do not believe in, I can't trust Obama. I have read about him and he is not. He is an Arab. He is not?" As the crowd laughed, the senator responded: "No ma'am, no ma'am. He is a decent family man citizen that I happen to have disagreements with on fundamental issues and that is what this

campaign is all about. He is not. Thank you"[8]. Rather than counter negative perceptions of an Arab identity, he chose to assure his supporter that Obama is simply "a decent person". Aware of how a racially biased response could damage his campaign and reputation, McCain skirts her question. "To counter the woman's claim, McCain did not state that Obama was of Caucasian and African heritage. Nor did he address the implicit allegation in the comment–that as an Arab, Obama must also be a Muslim–by informing her that Obama was a Christian and a longtime member of the United Church of Christ" (Aisha & Moody, p.2).

The postmodern racist mentality enables people like Quinnell to attack Obama as Arab and grants McCain permission to be protected from being labeled a postmodern racist in his response. If Flecha's dialogic approach, which centers on the possibility of "free and egalitarian dialogue", could be applied, McCain could have explained that the Arab/Muslim communities are part of the hyphenated American social fabric and that the U.S. laws prohibit discrimination so Obama's race or country of origin would and should have no bearing on his candidacy.

Conclusion

I have argued that the media's manipulation of information to serve the interests of the elite and the power of television to shape culture and social behavior have distanced American viewers from reality. The techniques of drama, fiction, and reality productions have overwhelmed televised programming including news reporting. As a result, cultural values have shifted dramatically and so did our ability and determination to engage with the political system, complex social problems, and racial microaggressions while the practice of postmodern racism goes unnoticed. As stereotypical representations and the language of discrimination have taken more covert forms of essentialism, mainstream media are providing the platform where the

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[8] John McCain supporter and campaign volunteer Gayle Quinnell of Shakopee, Minnesota, told Sen. John McCain that Sen. Barack Obama is an Arab. Quinnell cited the local library and a flyer circulating at McCain's local HQ as the sources of her information ("McCain Counters Obama 'Arab' Question"). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrnRU3ocIH4

vilification of Muslims is produced and all categories of identification are eliminated; Arab, black, Muslim, and those accused of being undercover Muslims are all equally subject to the assault of postmodern racists.

If *24* challenged our belief in the rule of law, condoned torture shamelessly, and set the norm as to how a black president should be treated, the aggression of spectacles orchestrated by King's hearings are evidence of a discourse that officially sanctions the exclusion of the Arab/Muslim American communities. Despite their different methods, both sustain the continuity of postmodern racism and keep its hateful messages immune from public outrage. The assumption that postmodern racism, like racial profiling, can be tolerated because it targets only Arabs and Muslims is no longer valid; the case of Obama is now evidence that its violations are reaching others without cultural fallout or political backlash.

Alas, accepting stereotypes and racial prejudice at face value obliterates the essence of difference and makes the celebration of our rich diversity shallow and unproductive. In this kind of environment, it is unlikely that Flecha's dialogical approach, which could lead to a new understanding of difference based on equality, will find a place in American media, particularly when networks and publishers are under pressure from fundamentalist conservative forces. The likelihood of discovering shared values and common ground, particularly through televised images, so far, remains unimaginable.

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