

Reel African American Muslims: The Complicated Portrayals on Film and TV

This is in the very beginning stages of something that is a recent interest. My project found inspiration from Jeremy Stolow's article *Religion and/as Media* that discusses the confluence of media and religion in the popular imagination. This project will use as background sociologist Nafisah Hankins's (my daughter) conception of the term *double marginality*. She notes that within the African American community, African American Muslims are marginalized because they are not Christian. Equally within the Muslim community, African American Muslims are marginalized because they are not South Asian or Middle Eastern. Since African American Muslims experience marginalization within two marginal groups she describes them as being *double marginalized*. What we see coming out of Hollywood studios reinforces these ideas. This essay will also build on the work of Communication scholar Dr. Jack G. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* and *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* that discuss the stereotyping and damaging depictions of Arabs within the movie and TV industry.

What prompted this change from what I initially started work on (Islamic science fiction) was viewing the new TV program *American Crime* that features the actress Regina King portraying an African American Muslim woman who embodies that double marginality. The TV shows and film often create African American Muslim characters as outside of mainstream Islam and outside of mainstream African American lived experiences, thus illustrating a double marginality. Moreover, too often there are problematic tropes in these depictions, such as domineering men, convicts, polygamy, anti-Semitism, hatred of whites, segregated communities, hidden desires for the white female, hypocrisy, abuse, etc., many represented in *American Crime*. I am considering focusing on a careful selection of TV programs—*American Crime*, *Empire*, *Oz*, *The Wire*, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*—and films—*Mooz-lum*, *Malcolm X*, *Two Men in Town*, *School Daze*, and *Ali*. It must be noted that some of these representations of African American Islam are complex and complicate my study. Often there is no formal

acknowledgement of their Muslim faith, sometimes there is this connection by a vaguely sounding Muslim name, or the individuals are depicted as a convergence of mainstream Islam with a Nation of Islam persona. How do these representations inform the public's understanding of African American Muslims' within the larger Islamic faith?