



‘Not A Terrorist’: The Representational Alternative of Reality TV in *All-American Muslim*

Nolwenn Anne Mingant

University Paris 3-sorbonne nouvelle, nmingant@univ-paris3.fr

Volume 3.1 (2013) | ISSN 2158-8724 (online) | DOI 10.5195/cinej.2013.74 | <http://cinej.pitt.edu>

Abstract

The reality TV show All-American Muslim depicts the lives of five Muslim families of Lebanese descent in Dearborn. Although the project was conceived as mainstream entertainment and not as a political statement, it led to a controversy over the representation of ‘true’ Muslims. Indeed the interest of the show lies in the fact that it offers its participants an opportunity to express themselves in an otherwise hostile media environment. The reality TV format seems particularly apt at providing a different vision of American Muslim, a vision clashing with images usually conveyed by TV news and Hollywood films. The show proposes a radical shift in the representational paradigm by making the Muslim families typical representatives of the U.S.A.

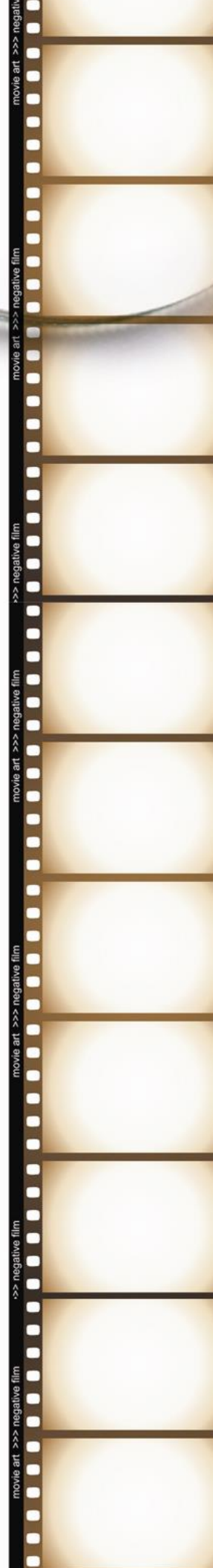
Keywords: Reality TV, Muslims, film, stereotypes, media



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the [University Library System](#) of the [University of Pittsburgh](#) as part of its [D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program](#) and is cosponsored by the [University of Pittsburgh Press](#).



‘Not A Terrorist’: The Representational Alternative of Reality TV in *All-American Muslim*

Nolwenn Anne Mingant

All-American Muslim is an 8-episode reality TV show aired on The Learning Channel in 2011-2012. It depicts the lives of five Muslim families of Lebanese descent in Dearborn, Michigan, the U.S. city with the highest proportion of Muslims. The show gave rise to a strong controversy after the conservative Florida Family Association denounced it as propaganda, and home-improvement chain Lowe's withdrew its advertising. American-Arab associations and media celebrities responded by launching a boycott on Lowe's. Audience rating regularly declined and the show was cancelled at the end of the first season. The aim of this paper is not to describe this controversy but to analyze the significance of the show in the media context of post-9/11 USA. It will explore how *All-American Muslim* battles the predominant media representation through the choice of an original media form and how it offers the viewer a radical shift in perspective.

Gaining a Voice in a Hostile Media Environment

In his review of *All-American Muslim*, journalist Ali Wajahat notes that 60% of Americans do not personally know any Muslim and that the “No 1 source of information about Muslims for Americans is the media”¹. Yet the media have predominantly depicted Muslims and Arabs in a negative way. Wajahat notably refers to “the terrorist stereotype familiar to most American audiences thanks to mainstream Hollywood depictions and sensationalized news headlines.”² Negative representations have indeed spanned over all the popular media. Analyzing the representation of Arabs on American television in the 1970s and 1980s, Jack

Shaheen identified basic myths: Arabs are shown as “fabulously wealthy,” “barbaric and uncultured,” “sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery,” and “revel(ing) in acts of terrorism.”³ More recently, Shaheen has shown that a new stereotype has emerged after 9/11: “the Arab-American Neighbor as Terrorist,⁴” a stereotype which presents people of Arab origin and Muslims as “perfidious and traitorous citizens”⁵ ready to wage a holy war on the USA. For example, three out of the six *24* seasons center on Jack Bauer chasing and stopping Arab-American and Muslim-American villains⁶ On big screens Arab and Muslim characters fare little better and according to Shaheen, “Arabs are the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood.”⁷ Here also, he identifies four recurrent stereotypes: villains (notably terrorists), “wealthy and slothful” Sheikhs, Maidens (represented either as erotic belly-dancers or as covered and mute “Bundles in Black”) and “ignorant, superstitious, and two-timing Egyptians”.⁸ According to different studies, all areas of popular culture, from songs to cartoon to comics convey such negative representations⁹. Ronald Stockton, for example, compared the visual treatment of Arabs in caricatures to the treatment of Blacks, Japanese and Jews as savage, inferior and subhuman¹⁰. Negative representations in the news have especially been traced back to the 1967 Israeli-Arab war, a conflict in which the U.S. government –and the U.S. media – unequivocally sided with Israel. Hence a black-and-white depiction of the conflict and a presentation of Arabs as “weak, incompetent, backward, and morally undeserving of controlling their own destiny.”¹¹ Post-9/11 news programs have also been “invariably focusing on violence” in the Middle-East, such as suicide bombings, hostage beheading or missiles attacks on Israel¹².

This representational paradigm can be considered both as selective and essentializing. It is selective as it represents only one aspect of reality. Louise Cainkar thus explains Edward Said's 1996 concept of “covering Islam”:

Muslims who opposed or threatened American interests received substantial press, film, and literary coverage, while all else related to Muslims became somewhat invisible¹³

Another example of imbalance is linked to gender, with the total invisibility of Arab-American women.¹⁴ All notions of diversity, whether in the Arab or in the Muslims communities are thus ignored. By showing only one portion of the Arab/Muslim reality¹⁵, the media offers an essentialized image of Arabs. Individuality is denied as Arabs are seen only through “notions of collective sameness”¹⁶ and homogeneity. This essentialization is also racialized with one “phenotype” dominating popular images:

*Males with swarthy complexions, dark hair, and hook noses, wearing turbans and scarves and carrying swords reminiscent of ears long past by ever-present to the unchanging Arab.*¹⁷

Alternative images are thus banned from the media, and, after 1967,

stories of everyday Arab life revolving around birth, death, love, marriage, family, health, work, sports, or leisure would become unmarketable in the United States, unless they could be used to demonstrate the theme of Arab difference.¹⁸

All those who do not correspond to the stereotype are thus left aside, unheard and unrepresented. Louise Cainkar records this experience of “political exclusion” and this “sense of voicelessness in American society”.¹⁹

It is this very feeling of invisibility and voicelessness which seems to have motivated the participants in the *All-American Muslims* TV series. Two women are particularly vocal, Suehaila and Shadia Amen. The first is an activist and the series follows her as she participates in roundtables and TV interviews (episodes 5, 7). The other is more provocative. In episode 7,

for example, she wears a T-shirt with the inscription “Not a terrorist” it while visiting the site of Ground Zero. Such provocation is meant to invite discussion. Shadia explains it as her “way of getting the word out,” of squashing the stereotypes because she “loves when people come and ask questions.” (episode 7) Even more conservative and discrete participants share that motivation, such as Samira Amen who, when she decides to put on the hijab, confides: “that’s something I look forward to actually explain to people.” (Episode 3) What is at stake for them here is thus the opportunity to be heard. It is all the more striking, as the more visible proponent are Arab women, a group particularly denied any expression in U.S. media.

This insistence on being heard is reinforced by the fact that the participants speak almost exclusively in English. Arabic is very rarely heard, which is not what the general audience might have expected from a program focused on Muslims of Lebanese descent. The participants are thus asserting a voice of their own, in a language common with the rest of the American population, but with words radically different from what is usually presented in the media. Moreover, they place themselves not only in opposition to the images shown in the U.S. TV news programs, but also to the images circulated by Islamic terrorists. In the episode dedicated to 9/11 (episode 7, 9:42), Nina for example protests against the fact that Bin Laden “wanted to speak on behalf of all Muslims in the world.” The show could thus hold a specific place in the existing us vs. them discourse.

This does not entail however that the series is a sort of ‘passion project’ from a politically-committed producer. This is how Shed Media US (Warner Bros.) describes its show:

Throughout the series, viewers will see these families through some of life’s biggest events and challenges—from getting married and the birth of a first baby, to juggling busy careers while raising a family, to managing sibling dynamics and finding “Mr. or Ms. Right”. ALL-AMERICAN MUSLIM shows how these individuals negotiate universal family issues while

remaining loyal to the traditions and beliefs of their religious faith-and how they simultaneously defy the assumptions and stereotypes prevalent in today's society²⁰.

While the presentation does refer to defying stereotypes, it mostly concentrates on the universal and human topics that could attract the viewer. This is in line with the channel on which the series was broadcast: The Learning Channel. Although TLC (Discovery Communications) was originally founded as an educational network in 1972, it turned to more entertaining programs in the 1990s, notably reality-TV shows²¹. Nowadays, TLC presents itself as a channel that “celebrates extraordinary people and relatable life moments through innovative nonfiction programming”²². Its core audience is 18 to 49 year old women²³. Besides the producing team behind the show are experts in reality television, not committed documentaries, with previous experience ranging from *The Real Housewives of New York City* (Bravo TV, 2008-) to *It's me of the Dog* (Animal Planet, 2008-), from *Ice Road Truckers* (History Channel, 2007-) to *24 Hour Restaurant Battle* (CBS, 2010-). Although TLC did mean to offer a different view of Muslim Americans²⁴, the series seems not to have been meant for controversy²⁵, but to be part of a lineup centered on “telling compelling stories about real families.”²⁶ The choice of the Muslim topic might be understood in the context of a new attitude on the part of the American population. Shocked by the violence of attacks against Arabs and Muslims in the USA, many Americans apparently craved to know more about them²⁷, thus creating a potentially lucrative market for the media²⁸. *All-American Muslim* can thus be viewed as an attempt to tap into this trend. By focusing on a culturally-charged topic, this show broadcasted on a formerly-educational now entertainment-oriented channel, thus appears as a multi-faceted program.

Reality TV: a New Format for a New Voice

All-American Muslim's format is what makes it particularly apt at shifting the lines of the current representational paradigm. Reality TV can be characterized by “the fusions of popular entertainment with a self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real.”²⁹ It covers genres as diverse as gamedocs such as *Big Brother* or talent contests such as *American Idol*. *All-American Muslim* can be defined as a docusoap, as it combines “many of the textual and aesthetics characteristics of direct cinema (handheld camera, synch sound, focus on everyday activity) with the overt structuring devices of a soap operas (short narrative sequences, intercuts of multiple plots, mini cliff-hangers, use of a musical soundtrack, and a focus on character personality).”³⁰ Besides the series is based on what John Corner identifies as a “communicational mix”³¹. There are three modes of narration. First, the series features many ‘fly-on-the-wall’ or observational sequences. Cameras, set in the participants’ homes or following them, record every moment, event, habit and conversation. The second type of sequences is of the ‘confessional’ type, with one participant confiding his or her feelings to the camera. A third type of sequence shows half-a-dozen participants sitting on two couches and discussing specific points of Muslim life, in what can be compared to mini-roundtables. While the observational and the confessional sequences are characteristic of reality TV, the roundtables adopt a talk show format. These three modes of narration entail for the audience a type of experience that is very different from other media.

First, the interplay between observational sequences, confessional sessions and roundtable debate enable the program to expose the viewer to a large variety of images and points of view. The series constantly moves from intimate and personal moments to theoretical

discussions, showing, telling and discussing each event. For example, in episode 6, Nawal Aoude shakes a man's hand. We first see her shaking hands, then there are confessional sessions in which she explains that she should not have done so and she explains why it bothers her, then there is a roundtable on why Muslim women are not allowed to shake hand with men. This process shows the diversity of points of views possible on this issue, from Nawal who decides to tell her husband because she is worried, to her husband saying it is not important because it was not intentional, to the man she shook hand with saying he appreciate her effort to make a step toward other culture, to the roundtable participating discussing their various feelings about the issue. Importantly, most of the comments emanate from the Muslim community. The variety and nature of voices are the first key element that differentiates this reality TV series. Indeed other media formats tend to present a point of view that is both one-sided and exterior to the Muslim community. Television news thus relies on the authoritative narration of the anchorperson. Films tend to privilege an omniscient point of view, which remains exterior to personal feelings, with the development of the action being often more important than the characterization. When a point of view is adopted, it is the point of view of the white American male at the center of the story. Little space is thus left for alternative standpoints.

That these alternative voices can be fully developed is the consequence of a second characteristic: time. TV news and films are confined to a short duration, a few seconds for the former, about two hours for the latter. They thus have to rely on images that are immediately recognizable. In the film format, characters have to be identified quickly so as not to slow the narration. Stereotypes are narrative shortcuts which are quite necessary for narrative efficiency. *All-American Muslims*, on the other hand, ran for eight hours. It thus had ample time to develop

the individual personality and psychological profile of each participant. Each action and habit could be shown, explained, deconstructed and analyzed at leisure, a lengthy operation impossible to other formats. It also leaves time for people to change and evolve. John McMurria notes this phenomenon with the short-lived reality series *Profiles from the Front Line* (ABC, 2003), which followed the lives of U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan. Over a few episodes, the program notably shows how one of the participants “softened his Manichean perspectives toward the Afghan people in his personal encounters.”³² In the same way, *All-American Muslim* allows its characters to grow, to change their minds, to hesitate, such as Samira. In episode 2, Samira expresses her distress at not having children after several years of marriage. After consulting the local imam, she decides to wear the hijab, hoping this sign of religious obedience will bless her. In the last episode however, she confides, “If it doesn't happen, my next step is science.” (Episode 8) The series' duration is not only a space for the participant to evolve but also for the viewer. Just as the viewers of *Profiles from the Front Line* might be influenced by the participant's new vision, the viewers of *All-American Muslim* might find themselves having a different feeling towards Muslim by the end of the first season. Contrary to the quick encounters proposed by TV news and films, the reality TV series offers a lengthy stay in the participants' homes.

The last characteristic of the docusoap format is indeed to offer the viewer the opportunity to enter the participant's private sphere. It corresponds to reality TV's “original promise to provide direct access to the experience of the observed subject.”³³ The moments of “participant self-reflection and commentary” (the roundtables, the confessions) created a feeling of “empathy”³⁴ in the viewer, but the impression of being invited in is particularly accentuated by the observational filming. The scenes usually present the characters in everyday

spaces: restaurants, gardens, and living rooms. These spaces usually give a feeling of enclosure, of intimate places and moments, such as the garages, presented recurrently as the men's "dens" or "cave" (4). The framing accentuates that feeling, with the characters being shot in medium shots (episode 8). The sound strategy is also important. Subtitles appear on screen not only on the rare occasions when the participants speak Arabic, but also when their conversations are not clearly comprehensible (either because they do not speak loud enough or because they have a strong accents), a technique which is in line with other reality shows. The viewer must be able to see and hear everything. This formal choices contrast with filmic choices in which Muslim characters tend to be seen in long shots with a view to favor action of characterization³⁵, and in which their Arabic dialogues are generally not subtitled³⁶. Whereas in films, it is usually not necessary to understand what the Muslim characters say, it is central to the docusoap³⁷. Here, two different narrative logics separate the two formats: the spectacular vs. the personal. Similarly, this emphasis on the intimate is what differentiates the docusoap from TV news. This is very striking is episode 6, in which a young Muslim man is shot in the neighborhood. The episode features actual archive footage from Fox 2. The TV news images use mostly long shot depicting the crime scene, identifiable by the presence of the police and the yellow crime scene tape. One frame shows a group of people. Filmed in a long shot, they long far away, bundled together in an indistinguishable mass. The only two individuals presented are, first, the picture of the dead young man, and second the interview of a witness. The latter simply relates what happened. The extract is accompanied by a voice-over from the journalist. Visually, these extracts present the exteriority typical of TV news. In order to counterbalance this vision, the episode actually intersperse archives images with confessional sequences in which the participant explains, in close-up, their reaction to the tragedy. There is

thus a play between the two modes of discourse, with on the one hand the TV news concerned with facts and immediate sensationalism³⁸, on the other hand, the docusoap, focusing on feelings and on the far-reaching consequences of the tragedy for the Dearborn community; with on the one hand, the authoritative and exterior voice of the TV journalist, on the other hand, the multiple and intimate expressions of grief from the Muslim participants.

Diversity of voices, time and access to the private sphere are the three characteristics that thus differentiate reality TV from films and TV news. They are also the elements with offer the possibility of a different type of representation. Indeed the cultural consequences of the use of the reality TV format are a rehumanization and a de-essentialization of Muslims. Because the program opens up to the viewer the participant's private sphere, it repeatedly foregrounds the value of family³⁹. Adults are shown as respectful towards their old parents and caring for their children. The viewer is made to feel the importance of this value by the addition of many different images throughout the series: expecting parents preparing the baby's room (episode 1), mothers worrying about their children's first day at school (episode 5), children rushing to their mothers' arms after opening Eid presents (episode 6)⁴⁰, families having dinner together⁴¹. Not only are the participants presented as deeply human, they are also individualized, most notably though the confessional and roundtable sessions in which different views appear. In episode 2, for example, Fouad, the coach, decides to move the soccer practice to nighttime during the Ramadan so the young players can eat and drink while practicing. Some of the participants, like Nader feel he is right, while others, like Mike find it absurd (episode 4). In a sense the series contrast the more traditional Zaban family, with the ardently religious coach and his veiled wife and daughters, and the more progressive Jaafar family, featuring Mike and his non-hijabed career woman. Another example is the way the show goes counter to the

“bundle in black” stereotype of Muslim women. The show actually presents very varied types of women from the conservative and hijabed Zaynad Zaban and Samira Amen, to the independent and single hijabed Suehaila Amen, to working mum Angela Jaafar, to tattooed rock rebel Shadia Amen, to businesswoman and bimbo-looking Nina Bazy. None of these Muslim women are similar. The insistence that, by getting closer, the viewer can no longer have a monolithic view of the Muslim community goes counter to the essentializing view conveyed by other media.

A prudential remark that is often expressed about the mechanisms of reality television is the fact that it cannot truly record reality, as participants are always aware of the presence of the camera. In the context of post-9/11 USA, this is however one more aspect that makes it a very interesting format. One could actually argue that the Muslim population has been the object of constant surveillance over the past decade, notably after the passage of the USA PATRIOT Act in 2001. This surveillance has been officially carried out, through mass arrests, FBI interviews and ethnic profiling⁴². It has also been informal, with the idea that “Arabs and Muslims in the United States should be closely observed and their seemingly normal activities should be treated as suspect,” not only by the state, but also by every citizen⁴³. These communities “were to be placed under a microscope by their non-Arab or non-Muslim neighbor.”⁴⁴ As a consequence, the Arabs and Muslims have tended to develop what Louise Cainkar calls “Round-the-clock double consciousness,”⁴⁵ that is the fact that they view themselves “through the eyes of others.”⁴⁶ One can thus draw a strong parallel between the “panoptical world”⁴⁷ that the USA has become for Arabs and Muslims and the “panoptic vision” of reality TV⁴⁸. The difference however is that, in *All-American Muslim*, the surveillance is not endured, but invited. Again, it is the participants who confide to the camera

in the confessional moment. It is Samira who leaves the bathroom door open so that the viewer can see her put on her veil. It is Nawal's sister who provides homevideo images of the night her sister had her baby. In a society in which surveillance and self-surveillance have been normalized⁴⁹, the Muslim participants of this program turn this to their own advantage. Through the reality TV format, they subvert the existing surveillance paradigm and use it not only to gain a new voice, but actually to reconstruct a vision of society.

Changing the Viewer's Bearings for a New Vision of Society

For law specialist Bill Ong Hing, Arab and Muslim Americans were de-Americanized, that is ostracized from the American community, after 9/11, through a combination of “the actions of private individuals” and “official government-sanctioned actions.”⁵⁰ This exclusionary logic meant Arab and Muslim Americans were considered as perpetual foreigners devoid of any loyalty towards the US⁵¹. According to a 2006 Gallup poll, 5 percent of Americans “believed that Muslims are not loyal to the United States, and 25 percent said that they would not want a Muslim neighbor.”⁵² The cultural agenda of *All-American Muslim* is clearly to fight this logic of exclusion, first through a process of re-Americanizing. Here the choice of participants plays a crucial role: many hold a job that actually makes them a representative of the U.S. state. Mike Jaafar is a deputy sheriff, Nader Aoude a federal agent, Suehaila Amen a court clerk. Mike is notably recurrently shown in position of authority, such as when he organizes the sheriff office troops to protect a religious event (episode 2). *When* interviewed on his feeling on 9/11, he views the events from the standpoint of the police forces: “you think about your guys that work for you <sigh / silence> going into a building and not

coming out <voice breaking>" (episode 7). Other characters can be considered as stereotypical of American traits. Nawal Aoude is a self-proclaimed fashionista (episode 8). A quick image showing the large number of shoes in her wardrobe (episode 8) echoes similar images in U.S. films and TV series celebrating the consumer society, such as *Sex in the City* and *Desperate Housewives*. Nina Bazzzy, the blond who wants to open a club in the Muslim neighborhood, represents the spirit of the entrepreneur. She is recurrently described as a strong-minded person with guts. She is symbolic of the American Dream. This is all the more striking, as she is a woman, a group who has been particularly ostracized. One character in particular encapsulates this reclaiming of Americanness: Fouad Zaban. Fouad is the head of the Fodson high school football team. Shots of football games and practices abound in all the episodes, thus linking the community to this typically American sport. Visually, the shots often include an American flag. In terms of personality, Fouad is presented as dedicated to the community. In episode 3, we are repeatedly told he has never missed practice in 17 years episode 3. He is also a man of belief and tradition. As Mike, the deputy sheriff, he is shown in position of authority, either shouting instructions on the field, or advising parents (episode 2). In order to affirm his value and representativeness as an American citizen, episode 3 shows him invited by the U.S. President to the White House Iftar dinner.

The show does not however simply foreground the Americanness of its participant in order to counter the accusations of foreignness, it also subverts the predominant logic of inclusion and exclusion. In the series, the outsiders are not the Muslims, but the non-Muslims. The series does not however give a reverse 'us vs. them' vision. On the contrary, it emphasizes situations of communication and exchange. As we have seen, many participants are eager to invite discussion from non-Muslim. In return, the series shows many non-Muslims curious to

know more about this community. The questions they ask reveal the gap to be crossed. Mixing an essentializing standpoint and a desire for exchange, a woman for example takes the opportunity created by the show to satisfy her curiosity when she asks a newly-veiled colleague Samira: “I am out shopping all the time and I see you guys with a scarf, and I see them at Victoria's secret, I see what they're picking up and they're looking at, when are they wearing this stuff?” (episode 3) Moments of the series turn into sometimes naive ‘Everything you always wanted to know about Muslims (but were afraid to ask)’ sessions. If this gives the Muslim participants opportunities to explain, it is important to notice that they are always movements from the non-Muslim outsiders towards the Muslim insiders. Non-Muslims do not simply want inside information, they also want in. This is symbolized through one of the most sensational storylines centered on the experience of Jeff. Jeff McDermott is a young man of Irish Catholic origin who is engaged to one of the rebellious girls of the Muslim community, Shadia Amen. In the first episode, Jeff converts to Islam in order to be able to marry Shadia. It is thus Jeff who has to prove he is worthy of joining the Muslim community. One scene shows him put to the test by Shadia's brother, Bilal, who wants to evaluate the reality of his conversion (episode 3). Jeff makes sacrifices, such as giving up alcohol or fasting during Ramadan, to deserve being part of the community. In the first episode, he explains: “It's not my family by blood but I want them to accept me.” A sign of his being accepted is that, from episode 3, Jeff is part of the roundtables, sitting on the couches with his fellow Muslims. Beyond the personal storyline, Jeff is, culturally and narratively, important as he plays the role of the innocent in a strange land. He becomes a point of identification for the non-Muslim viewer, who feels for him when he tries to fast for Ramadan or when he is asked to give up his dog. Through this identification process, the outside viewer is thus made to feel as an insider,

as Jeff becomes more accepted and involved in the community. The mechanism of the series thus makes the non-Muslim viewers lose their bearings, by changing the logics of exclusion and inclusion and redefining what an average American can be.

This journey is played on the conscious and intellectual level, with the moments of dialogues, explanations and discussion, but also on a more unconscious level. An example of the way the show make the viewers unconsciously assimilate elements that might have been unfamiliar to them before is the choice of images for the short transition sequences. Between two sequences appear second-long shots which usually feature veiled women, walking in the street with children, running, skating. At first, these images seem to play into the usual stereotype of the hijabed Muslim women, of Shaheen's "bundles in black" By the final episode, however, these images have become unsurprising for the viewer. What appeared as exceptional, strange, maybe suspicious, for the exterior viewer, unconsciously becomes common. This redefinition of the banal for non-Muslim viewers might be one of the most important impacts of the series in the sense that the show is actually injecting into the collective unconscious new images, a process which can in turn change future perception. The way the series presents alternative images to dominant media is particularly striking when it comes to religion. Episode 1 established the pattern of representation for the whole series. About seven minutes from the beginning, the episode shows Muslims praying. The first images are typical of other media presentations: a long shot of the mosque with chanting as soundtrack. Then a high-angle medium shot showing the back of an indistinguishable group of kneeling men. But this pattern is immediately broken by the new series of shots: a long shot of the Amen house, a close-up on Bilal praying in his living room, a close-up of his father praying in his garden. The voice-over here is Bilal explaining how praying is a sign of respect for God. These images

displace the vision from the formal space of the mosque to the intimate and familiar spaces of family life. Jeff's conversion, for example, takes place in the private space of the Amen living room, just as a Protestant wedding might. Religion is then constantly linked with everyday life and shown in non-dramatic situations: the private prayer of a couple hoping for a child (episode 2), the prayer of a nervous father waiting for his baby to be born (episode 3), the group prayer of the football team before a game (episodes 6, 8). The tone of these religious moments is also of importance. Far from the frowning imams calling to war⁵³, the series presents an imam who jokes and laughs, rejoicing with the family on the occasion of Jeff's conversion (episode 1). Far from a religion linked to violence and confrontation, the series present families hugging at religious occasion (episode 1, 6) and Muslims participating to ecumenical events (episodes 4, 7, 8). The very quality of voice marks a contrast to usual images conveyed by the media. Here, the prayers are not the howled imprecations of a terrorist; they are fervent murmurs, such as Nader chanting a ritual prayer in his newborn baby's ear.

The show forces the viewers to lose their bearings, in order to reconfigure their vision of society. By showing the Muslim participants, from the inside, as responsible, patriotic, religious family people, the show attempts to establish what David and Jalbert call “equivalency (or just-like-us-ness between Arab Americans, Muslims Americans, and mainstream Americans.”⁵⁴ The concluding sentence is in that very striking. After Bilal goodheartedly explained that during his pilgrimage to the Kaaba, he prayed for his team to reach the SuperBowl, Nawal concludes: “There's your American Muslim: football and the Kaaba.” (episode 8) But it might be less through the discourse of the participants that through the many images instilled through the series of a familiar, intimate and peaceful religion that the series

subverts the predominant discourse on Muslims and makes its mark on the spectators unconscious.

Conclusion

Countering the image of the “the Arab-American Neighbor as Terrorist,” *All-American Muslim* presents the image of the Arab-American neighbor as just another American neighbor. Nevertheless, the show has been attacked on all sides for not representing what a 'real' Muslim is. The conservative Florida Family Association attacked the series as “propaganda,” because it featured “only Muslims that appeared to be ordinary folks while excluding many Islamic believers whose agenda poses a clear and present danger to liberties and traditional values that the majority of Americans cherish.”⁵⁵ On the other hand, Muslims also complained that “the show solely focuses on one niche religious, ethnic community (Lebanese Shiite in Dearborn, Michigan) and leaves out the majority of American Muslim communities, such as African Americans, South Asians, Sunnis and those from the low-income middle class.”⁵⁶ If the show appears as flawed in terms of representing reality, one could argue that it is also the case in terms of entertainment. Indeed, the lives of the participants lack the sensationalist potential to keep the audience on the edge of their seats. The producers created fake suspense for each episode which feel very artificial: will the coach miss practice to go to the White House dinner (episode 3), will the football team lose the game played during Ramadan (episode 4), will Nader be angry because his wife shook a man's hand (episode 6), will Jeff get rid of his dog to save his marriage (episode 5)? One can perceive here a clash between the series' nature and its

cultural agenda, between reality TV's demand for sensationalism and *All-American Muslim's* insistence on showing its participants as unthreatening and banal. Beyond the cultural debate, this might very well explain the channel's decision to end the series after 8 episodes. Finally, this presentation has tended to show how reality TV can proposer alternative representation that could influence the way Americans view Muslims. One should not however overestimate the impact of this short-lived series, which was not broadcast on a major channel, at 10 p.m. (Eastern Time) on Sunday nights⁵⁷, and was apparently not broadcast internationally. One should especially note that the target audience, mostly 18 to 49 year old women, is not the same audience as other media that convey stereotypical view of Muslims. We can notably contrast it with the 12-25 year old males targeted by Hollywood action films. In that sense, *All-American Muslims'* ability to make the representational paradigm drastically change is quite limited. The series might however be considered as an interesting experiment in offering alternative images and might lead the way for further programs in which the audience will be presented Muslim and Arab-American “women and men doing what other Americans do in successful show (...) – going out on picnics, dating, reading the newspaper, having coffee, rushing off to work, embracing one another, being in families,”⁵⁸ thus lastingly influencing the U.S. national unconscious.

REFERENCES

- Florida Family, "The Learning Channel officially cancels All-American Muslim Supporters, emails to advertisers made the difference.", March 2012. Accessed May 2, 2013.
http://floridafamily.org/full_article.php?article_no=108
- Kamalipour, Yahya R. "The TV Terrorist: Media Images of Middle Easterners." *Global Dialogue*, 2(4) (2000) : 88-96.
- David, Gary C., and Paul L. Jalbert. "Undoing Degradation: The Attempted 'Rehumanization' of Arab and Muslim Americans." *Ethnographic Studies* 10 (2008): 23-47.
- Cainkar, Louise A. *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009.
- Discovery Corporate website, "TLC." Accessed May 2, 2013.
<http://corporate.discovery.com/brands/us/tlc/>
- Kaleem, Jaweed "Muslim Reality Show, 'All-American Muslim,' To Premier on TLC." *The Huffington Post*, October 21, 2011, accessed May 2, 2013,
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/21/muslim-reality-show-all-american-muslim_n_1024101.html
- Laurence, Robert P. "Cable Guise: Channels built on arts, education and high culture now go low cheesy programming." *UT San Diego*, August 15, 2005. Accessed May 2, 2013.
http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050815/news_1c15bravo.html
- Murray, Susan, and Laurie Ouellette *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Shaheen, Jack G. *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2008.
- Shaheen, Jack G. *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2009 [2001].
- ShedMedia US official website. Accessed May 2, 2013.
<http://shedmediaus.com/program/574/AllAmerican-Muslim.aspx>
- "TLC filming new reality show 'All American Muslim' in Dearborn." *The Arab American News.com*, July 29, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2013.
<http://www.arabamericannews.com/news/index.php?mod=article&cat=Community&article=4546>
- Wajahat, Ali, "The Reality of the 'All-American Muslim' reality TV show,." *Guardian.co.uk*, November 17, 2011. Accessed May 2, 2013.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/nov/17/reality-all-american-muslim-reality-tv>

¹ Ali Wajahat, “The Reality of the ‘All-American Muslim’ reality TV show,” *Guardian.co.uk*, November 17, 2011, accessed May 2, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/nov/17/reality-all-american-muslim-reality-tv>

² Wajahat, “The Reality of the ‘All-American Muslim’ reality TV show.”

³ Jack G. Shaheen, *The TV Arab* (1984) summarized in Jack Shaheen, *Guilty : Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton : Olive Branch Press, 2008), 45.

⁴ Shaheen, *Guilty*, 47.

⁵ Shaheen, *Guilty*, 46.

⁶ They also include “US government officials spewing out anti-Arab and anti-Muslim slurs, which were uncontested.” Shaheen, *Guilty*, 49.

⁷ Shaheen, *Guilty*, xi.

⁸ Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs : How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton : Olive Branch Press, 2009 [2001]), 20-31.

⁹ Laurence Michalak, “Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in American Popular Culture,” (Washington, D.C.: ADC Research Institute, 1983), quoted in Louise A. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 89.

¹⁰ Ronald Stockton, “Ethnic Archetypes and the Arab Image,” in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), quoted in Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 89.

¹¹ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 85.

¹² Shaheen, *Guilty*, 44.

¹³ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 107

¹⁴ Shaheen remarks that they “almost never appear on TV, and when they do they are usually silent and submissive.” Shaheen, *Guilty*, 46.

¹⁵ Shaheen notes how Arabs and Muslims are often viewed as one category, which does not take into account either the presence of other religions in the Arab world, or the presence of Islam outside this geographical area. Shaheen, *Guilty*, xiii.

¹⁶ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 87.

¹⁷ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 89.

¹⁸ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 87.

¹⁹ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 93.

²⁰ ShedMedia US official website, accessed May 2, 2012,

<http://shedmediaus.com/program/574/AllAmerican-Muslim.aspx>

²¹ Robert P. Laurence, “Cable Guise: Channels built on arts, education and high culture now go low cheesy programming,” *UT San Diego*, August 15, 2005, accessed May 2, 2013,

http://www.utsandiego.com/uniontrib/20050815/news_1c15bravo.html

²² 'TLC', Discovery Corporate website

<http://corporate.discovery.com/brands/us/tlc/>

²³ Discovery Corporate website, “TLC,” accessed May 2, 2013,

<http://corporate.discovery.com/brands/us/tlc/>

²⁴ ““We wanted to show there was diversity even within the Muslim community,” said TLC General Manager Amy Winter. “These are families that might have beliefs that are different than yours, but we are all living similar daily lives and hopefully we will bring that to light.”” Quoted in “TLC filming new reality show ‘All American Muslim’ in Dearborn,” *The Arab American News.com*, July 29, 2011, accessed May 2, 2013,

<http://www.arabamericannews.com/news/index.php?mod=article&cat=Community&article=4546>

²⁵ “In an interview led while the series was being shot, T.C General Manager Amy Winter explained: “We usually find with TLC that the backlash occurs as soon as we start marketing something and once viewers experience the show, we get a far different response.”” Quoted in “TLC filming new reality show”

²⁶ Alan Orstein, TLC's vice-president of Production and Development, quoted in Ali Wajahat, “The Reality of the ‘All-American Muslim’ reality TV show.”

²⁷ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 189.

²⁸ This in turn could be leading to an evolution in media attitudes. Cainkar notes that “[s]ensing a new market, or seeking to enrich it, newspapers, magazines, and television shows began reporting on a broader range of aspects of Arab culture.” Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 156.

²⁹ Susan MURRAY, and Laurie Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture* (New York, NY University Press, 2009), 3.

³⁰ This is how Susan Murray summarized Stella Bruzzi's definition of docusoap, in Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 67.

³¹ Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 46.

³² John, McMurria, "Global TV Realities: International Markets, Geopolitics, and the Transcultural Contexts of Reality TV," in Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 192.

³³ Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 7.

³⁴ John Corner, "Performing the Real: Documentary Diversions (with Afterword)," in Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 51.

³⁵ One can think for example of *Black Hawk Down* (R.Scott, 2001).

³⁶ In terms of sound strategy, the artificiality of the post-synchronized sound of the film can be opposed to the 'authentic' synchronized sound of reality TV.

³⁷ We should note however, that, since the mid-2000s, some Hollywood films such as *Syriana* (S. Gaghan, 2005) or *Green Zone* (P. Greengrass, 2010) have started to present a slightly more personal and nuanced vision of Arab characters.

³⁸ Kamalipour note the way the media favour sensationalism over contextualized explanations in their depiction of the Middle-East. Yahya Kamalipour, "The TV Terrorist : Media Images of Middle Easterners," *Global Dialogue*, 2(4) (2000) : 88-96.

³⁹ In their article on recent attempt to rehumanize Arab and Muslim American in the U.S. media, David and Jalbert have pointed out how "having a family" is considered a "positive behavior." The idea of family is linked to "a sense of civic responsibility:" "Family men are not conventionally the kind of men who engage in activities related to terrorism." Gary C. David, and Paul L. Jalbert. "Undoing Degradation: The Attempted 'Rehumanization' of Arab and Muslim Americans." *Ethnographic Studies* 10 (2008), 30, 32.

- ⁴⁰ Cainkar notes that one stereotype is that Arab people do not hold their children and that this lack of warmth is one explanation for terrorism. Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 154.
- ⁴¹ The series also humorously plays on gender differences, as in a scene in episode 8, which opposes women gathered in the kitchen and men gathered in the garage. Women discuss issues of losing weight and bonding with their husbands. Men discuss ...sex.
- ⁴² Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 119-139.
- ⁴³ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 110.
- ⁴⁴ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 110.
- ⁴⁵ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 145.
- ⁴⁶ W.E.B Du Bois, quoted in Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 144.
- ⁴⁷ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 110.
- ⁴⁸ Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 8.
- ⁴⁹ Murray and Ouellette, *Reality TV*, 8.
- ⁵⁰ Bill Ong Hing, "Vigilante Racism: The De-Americanization of Immigrant America," *Michigan Journal of Race and Law* 7(2) (2002), 4, quoted in Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 232.
- ⁵¹ Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 232.
- ⁵² Quoted in Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 273.
- ⁵³ Such as at the beginning of *Body of lies* (R. Scott, 2008) or in the mosque scene of *My Name is Khan* (K.Johar, 2010).
- ⁵⁴ David, and Jalbert, "Undoing Degradation," 30.
- ⁵⁵ Florida Family, "The Learning Channel officially cancels All-American Muslim Supporters' emails to advertisers made the difference," March 2012, accessed May 2, 2013, http://floridafamily.org/full_article.php?article_no=108
- ⁵⁶ Ali Wajahat, "The Reality of the 'All-American Muslim' reality TV show."
- ⁵⁷ Jaweed Kaleem, "Muslim Reality Show, 'All-American Muslim,' To Premier on TLC," *The Huffington Post*, October 21, 2011, accessed May 2, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/10/21/muslim-reality-show-all-american-muslim_n_1024101.html
- ⁵⁸ Shaheen, *Guilty*, p.47. Cainkar makes a similar remark in Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity*, 87.