

Reflecting on the punch line: Muslim men, white women, and the 'War on Terror' in American television comedy

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American popular comedy culture is a significant arena for the cultivation of a complex post 9/11 discourse precisely because social/political anxieties, ambivalences and maladies are its main fodder. In their representation of Muslim men, the television sitcoms 30 Rock and Aliens in America illustrate how white middle class women are centrally incorporated into national discourse in the 'War on Terror' context. Portrayed in their interactions with Muslim men is a public accounting of the unease that accompanies the consumption of a dual rhetoric that espouses moral superiority while contending with the material motivations for and consequences of the American military invasion of Iraq. Depicted here are acknowledgements of the fear that permeates post 9/11 U.S. politics and culture and a simultaneous questioning of 'War on Terror' policies. In the midst of this uncertainty, representations of Muslim men function as opportunities to make statements on the nature of political identity for white middle class women in the U.S. today.

Comedic cultural products in the United States that concern themselves with the 'War on Terror' provide opportunities for more complex and ambivalent threads of national discourse on the 'War on Terror' to surface in the mainstream. For this reason, an analysis of comedy allows us to examine more closely some of the specific uncertainties and confrontations that characterize the American experience of the 'War on Terror'. No representations bear out these complexities more so than the depiction of the interaction between American middle class white women and foreign Muslim men in comedic contexts. These contexts, or 'situations' are characterized by miscommunications and misrecognitions. Middle class white women have come to occupy a significant position in discourse on the 'War on Terror' primarily because of how they figure into two of the most significant public discussions to take place in the U.S. related to the 'War on Terror': using the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban to justify the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, and the production and dissemination of images of amused white women torturing Iraqi men at Abu-Ghraib prison in 2004. Public discussion of both issues in news media as well as in academic circles filtered through into popular culture, and the comedies I am examining here are not only examples of how those discussions have been taken up in mainstream culture but also illustrate the specific role white women occupy in the domestic discourse on the 'War on Terror'.

Because comedy news shows, variety shows and situation comedies (sitcoms) are not required to give the appearance of abiding by the rule of impartiality, it is an arena ripe for a more complex and critical discourse on the 'War on Terror.' This assertion is made with the acknowledgement that these criticisms are not entirely unconstrained given the reliance of these comedic productions on corporate/advertising support. Still, comedy is much more so a venue for expressing ambivalence and criticism than mainstream journalism, and in fact appears to be compensating for a lack in mainstream

journalism. The popularity and influence of comedy journalism on television with the 18-34 demographic has even prompted reconsideration of the rules and regulations of mainstream news production by news organizations that face drops in ratings¹ (Feldman, 2007).

Here, I examine two television shows produced since the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the declaration of the 'War on Terror' to consider how comedy functions as a refracting mechanism for the pre-occupations of political discourse. The Emmy award winning *30 Rock* and the comedic experiment *Aliens in America* tackle the 'War on Terror' from distinct narrative perspectives and yet both rely on the dynamic between white middle class women and foreign Muslim men to anchor the narrative of the clash of civilizations. Each show centers on the experiences of a white woman living in the U.S. facing the reality constructed in political discourse on the 'War on Terror.' One woman is a single career oriented left liberal urbanite living in New York City who is a failure at relationships; the other is the staunch and controlling housewife and mother, caretaker to a nuclear suburban family in the Mid-West. Cultural products telling the stories of men's experiences with the 'War on Terror' are most often told in the context of military exploits (*The Hurt Locker*, *Generation Kill*) or intelligence operations (*24*, *Sleeper Cell*). These stories address the ambiguities and anxieties of the experience of the 'War on Terror' in the field of war, through the lens of the confusion and inevitable moral compromise of war. But, the purview of these women's stories is the home front. The comedic context provides the venue for addressing the ambiguities and anxieties of 'War on Terror' in the everyday lives of Americans who are not directly involved in military campaigns, or with institutions fighting the 'War on Terror.' The turn towards the impact of the 'War on Terror' on the home front in cultural products is due in large part to a growing pre-occupation in political discourse with 'homegrown terrorism' and the circulation of rhetoric about the potential infiltration of terrorists in urban and suburban living spaces throughout the U.S. Immigrant communities in particular have been labeled suspect, but in these comedies the potential threat emerges as a neighbour in Liz Lemon's apartment building, and in the case of *Aliens*, a young Muslim man who resides within their home. The women interact with the men in the context of their own lives, and the men are detached from the cultural context whose norms they adhere to making them appear all the more 'alien'.

Besides the association with women and the home front, there are also specific histories of representation that make the dynamic of a white middle class woman's interactions with a Muslim man a compelling angle from which to gauge the contemporary moment in the 'War on Terror.' The study of images of Muslims in American news and entertainment media before and after the 'War on Terror' reveals a historical impetus to characterize Muslims in terms of sexual and social extremes. Muslim men are often depicted as obscenely wealthy, or abjectly poor (in either case, almost totally ignorant and barbaric) and sexually voracious or completely repressed. Muslim women are most often seen as passive, harem bound victims, or hyper sexualized succubuses. Rescue narratives focused on releasing Muslim women from the influence of Muslim men abound in contemporary cultural discourse, (Abu-Lughod, 2002; McAlister, 2005; Macdonald, 2006; Stabile & Kumar, 2004; Said, 1981; Shaheen, 1984 & Wilkins, 1995). This inherent logic, commonly referred to as Orientalism, continues to underscore contemporary depictions of Muslims in media today, but contemporary depictions are not

exact replications of historical Orientalist representations. Melanie McAlister cautions against the overuse of Orientalist characterizations, arguing that the ‘particular logic of Orientalism: binary, feminizing, and citational’ (2005:12) needs to be present in addition to stereotyping, exoticization, and racism. Notions of femininity and masculinity permeate the logic of Orientalism - its fundamental expression is in the representation of an oppositional binary between a domineering, masculinized West and a passive, femininized East (Said, 1978). Orientalist endeavors have been beneficial to white European/North American women historically, as their access to private, domestic spaces in Muslim societies provided them with the ability to gather specialized knowledge their male counterparts could not (Lewis, 1996).

The cultural production of Orientalist tropes often corresponds to the occurrence of political, social, and/or economic events involving the U.S. and the Middle East, which apparently necessitate the construction of narratives about the practice of Islam as it pertains to relations between men and women in Muslim societies. Jack Shaheen locates the rise of the ‘hedonistic oil sheik’ on American television to fears of oil shortages, price inflation and the perception of Arab purchases of American real estate in the 70’s and 80’s, which he calls ‘the era of the Arab joke’ (1984: 13, 55).

As part of its weekly comedic commentary *Saturday Night Live (SNL)* picked up these tropes in skits like ‘The Bel - Airabs’ a take on the popular television *The Beverly Hillbillies*, featuring this theme song,

Come and listen to my story,
 ‘Bout a man named Abdul
 A poor Bedouin barely kept his family fed,
 And then one day he was shootin’ at some Jews
 And up through the sand came a bubblin’ crude
 Oil that is.
 Persian Perrier.
 Kuwait Kool-Aid.
 Saudi Soda.

The skit shows the family moving to Beverly Hills on a camel after discovering oil on their land. The women wear *abayas*, and the son, ‘Mudhat,’ paints pubic hair on statues outside their house, (Shaheen, 1984: 60).

This tradition was easily re-animated post 9/11 with skits like ‘Osama Pep Talk’ which aired on December 1st, 2001, in which white comedian Will Farrell plays Osama Bin Laden attempting to uplift defeated Taliban forces; the skit portrays the Taliban fighters as hypocritical (they want to watch *Harry Potter* and drink beer), money hungry (they are willing to betray Bin Laden for the \$25 million dollar bounty on his head) and as ignorant goat herders. Most importantly, they are portrayed as lacking any legitimate purpose, political perspective or context for their actions, and are mocked, as was the Ayatollah. The September 11, 2001 attacks on the U.S. granted *SNL* and other comedy shows license to unleash derogatory representations of Arabs as terrorists as the Iran hostage crisis had decades earlier, all the more damaging as they constitute the majority of representations of Middle Eastern men. And yet as the ‘War on Terror’ drags on, American leaders and war policies are just as likely, if not more so, to receive harsh

criticism on these same comedy shows. Facing the lack of a decisive military victory in Afghanistan or Iraq, the public de-bunking of the moral rhetoric justifying military actionⁱⁱ and a consistent stream of criticism coming from inside and outside of the U.S., a discursive space has been cultivated. In this space the critical voice of comedy can be blatantly cynical about the use of fear to encourage support among Americans for ‘War on Terror’ policies.

Producing Ambivalent Comedic Discourse Post 9/11

These comedies illustrate what happens when writers, performers and producers are in good position to make timely commentary on the ‘War on Terror’ because they have access to the material means of production. This access is due to the pre-existing relationships these writers, performers and producers enjoy with each other and with television networks. Tina Fey made the jump to creator, writer, producer, and star of the weekly sitcom *30 Rock* following a seven year stint as *Saturday Night Live*’s first female head writer. Fey was employed initially as a writer and transitioned to on-air talent in 2000 after she lost thirty pounds. Since then she has become one of the most visible faces of popular comedyⁱⁱⁱ (Witchel, 2001). She received a significant boost in visibility due to her impressions of Vice Presidential candidate Governor Sarah Palin during and following the 2008 presidential election. As a *Weekend Update* anchor at the time of the attacks on the World Trade Center and as head writer for the show, Fey played an integral part in re-introducing the show to the airwaves a mere 18 days after the attack. The season premiere featured then New York City mayor, and archconservative, Rudolph Giuliani playing father figure, reassuring the production crew and the audience that humor is once again permitted^{iv}. At the time, Fey is herself dealing with the changes brought about with the attacks, ‘Everything is so different now,’ she said. ‘I mean, did you ever think there’d come a day when everyone loved Giuliani? But he showed his mettle and now we love him’ (Witchel, 2001). This wonder is part of the new reality Fey accepts for herself and likeminded liberals who in a post 9/11 world must reconcile their principled disagreement with Giuliani’s right wing policies and the desire to feel protected. A line in an episode of *30 Rock* has Fey’s character, Liz Lemon, making the admission, ‘There is an 80 percent chance (that I will) tell all my friends I’m voting for Barack Obama, but I will secretly vote for John McCain.’ When asked, Fey describes the statement as ‘...semi-autobiographical, a way of ‘admitting I have a lot of liberal feelings, but I also live in New York, and I want to feel safe, and I secretly kind of want Giuliani’ (Steinberg, 2007).

Fey’s tenure as co-anchor of *Weekend Update* also gave her the opportunity to express a liberal feminist viewpoint on air, including her adoption of the women’s rights discourse advocating the liberation of Afghan women from the oppression of the Taliban. In two particular jokes, the first of which aired on December 1, 2001, Fey addresses the issue directly:

Zohra Daoud, the only woman ever to hold the title Miss Afghanistan, spoke at a conference in New York this week on the future of Afghan women. She addressed the crowd only briefly, saying, ‘My name is Zohra Daoud, I’m from Mazar-i-Sharif, and I believe all woman should be able to read a book without having a rock thrown at them!’ (*Weekend Update*).

The second joke aired the next week: ‘An interim government has been set up in Afghanistan, which includes two women, one of whom will be Minister of Women’s Affairs. Man, who’d she have to show her ankle to get that job?’ (*Weekend Update*, December 8, 2001). The airing of the jokes less than four months after the World Trade Center attacks and eight weeks into the invasion of Afghanistan illustrates how quickly the narrative of oppressed Muslim women was conjured up and became entrenched in mainstream American popular culture. Fey adopts a reasonable position in opposition to the oppression of women by the Taliban (but not necessarily an expression of solidarity with Afghan women) based on a historically circumvented narrative of the oppression women face there. She is compelled to use her nationally televised voice and skill as a comedian to tell jokes that invite the audience to laugh with her at the absurd restrictions on Afghan women’s participation in public spaces; jokes that would not be complete without reference to forced covering and the burqa. Her incorporation of the jokes assists in the substantiation of a rescue narrative in which military invasion elevates the standard of living for Muslim women.

Fey returned to host the first episode of *SNL* following the 2007-2008 Writers Guild of America strike on February 23rd 2008, in the thick of the U.S. Republican and Democratic presidential primaries she used the opportunity to make an impassioned monologue as a guest on *Weekend Update* in favor of Senator Hilary Clinton (part of a larger report on ‘women’s news’) whose campaign looked to be falling victim to the rise in popularity of Senator Barack Obama.

Maybe what bothers me the most is that people say that Hillary is a bitch. Let me say something about that: Yeah, she is. So am I, and so is this one. [Points to Amy Poehler]. You know what, bitches get stuff done. That’s why Catholic schools use nuns as teachers and not priests. Those nuns are mean old clams and they sleep on cots and they’re allowed to hit you. And at the end of the school year you hated those bitches but you knew the capital of Vermont. So, I’m saying it’s not too late Texas and Ohio, bitch is the new black! (Seelye, 2008)

With this short speech, Fey sparked a moment of cultural re-invigoration for Clinton’s campaign as ‘Bitch is the new Black’ became something of a slogan and Fey’s monologue became a viral video on Youtube.com. She even prompted a response from fellow *30 Rock* star and *SNL* alumni Tracy Morgan who did his own guest spot on *Weekend Update* the next week to respond to Fey and to play advocate for Obama, declaring, ‘Black in the new president, bitch.’^v

Fey’s affiliation with *SNL* did not end when she moved on to produce her own show, she remains on the National Broadcast Company network (NBC) and *SNL* executive producers Lorne Michaels and Marci Klein also produce *30 Rock*. It is in the historical context of *SNL*’s participation in the popular comedic discourse on Muslims and Arabs as well as Fey’s own statements post 9/11 within and outside of the content she produces for both shows that I want to closely examine episode 6 of the second season of *30 Rock* called, ‘Somebody to Love.’ Airing November 15, 2007, and written by Fey and Kay Cannon, the show’s synopsis reads, ‘Jack has a one night stand with a Democrat who is campaigning against one of NBC’s sister companies, Liz suspects her neighbor is a terrorist, and Kenneth tries to raise money to buy Jack a pair of pants’. Only one of three main storylines for this episode, Liz Lemon’s suspicion of her neighbour and her subsequent reporting of him to the Department of Homeland Security warrants a brief

mention in the synopsis, but clearly illustrated in this mini-narrative are the anxieties Fey expressed in interviews regarding what it means to be a woman like her, a white liberal feminist in the United States, during the 'War on Terror'. Fey is in a particularly good position to express these anxieties and their accompanying dilemmas as a writer and known on-air talent, who is also creator and executive producer for her own show, all of which is a result of her employment with NBC and producers Lorne Michaels and Marci Klein.

Similarly, the sitcom *Aliens in America* is the brainchild of veteran television producers, David Guarascio and Moses Port, who have both previously worked as writers and producers on long running sitcoms *Mad About You* (NBC, 1992-9) and *Just Shoot Me* (NBC, 1997-2003). The producers offered the project to NBC but eventually landed at the CW Network (the name refers to the partnership of CBS and Warner Brothers). A relatively new network, the CW is skewed entirely to a pre-teen and teen demographic. The show was conceptualized as a classic high school situation comedy with a twist on the concept of social alienation, (Ali, 2007). It is the first American sitcom to be based on or around a Muslim character, illustrating the unintentional cultural effects of the post 9/11 pre-occupation with Muslims and Islam. Without the 'War on Terror' this premise would not have been of interest to the networks, but in the current geo-political climate it makes sense as a cultural site for controversy and conflict to emerge. If the show had been a success, it would have been an effective means of commodifying fear through a comedic acknowledgement of the 'new' post 9/11 world. News of detentions, disappearances, racism, make this representation of a Muslim Pakistani high school student a high stakes endeavor, and potentially open to criticism from Muslim and American audiences alike.

As it happens the show has received praise from critics and Muslim organizations for providing a nuanced portrait of how the 'War on Terror' has impacted life in the American suburb. This praise is primarily for the show's exceedingly positive portrait of a young Muslim man who is respectful (to men and women alike), conscientious, and infallibly moral, and whose religious belief is a source of strength of character, not the springboard to a reactionary fundamentalism. Jack Shaheen praises the show for using comedy as a way of getting American audiences to laugh with Muslims, not at them, (Reddy, 2007). It seems clear that this is a conscious project on the part of the producers, writers and performers, and therefore it is all the more important to understand why it is that the show seeks to do this by focusing on the relationship between the matriarch of this suburban family and their unwelcome guest in the form of a Pakistani exchange student. This mother's journey from suspicion to acceptance and finally even love, mirrors the purpose of the show itself and suggests the journey the audience might also make as they come to know this Muslim man, the ultimate object of difference and suspicion in the 'War on Terror,' in the context of a fictional situation comedy.

Defending the Home Front

Neither Liz Lemon nor Franny Tolchuk needs to enter the theatre of war to experience the 'War on Terror'. These sitcoms provide a conceit in which the 'War on Terror' comes to them. As a resident of New York City who undoubtedly was present during the 9/11 attacks, the threat of an assault is quite real for Lemon. Her interactions

with the man she will eventually accuse of planning a terrorist attack is precipitated by the episode's opening sequence that suggests the lingering effects of this experience. While Liz is on a three way call with her errant star, Jordan, and her boss, NBC executive Jack Donaghy the overwhelming smell of maple syrup coats the air in New York City and New Jersey. As Jordan's character is a parody of the over sexed, drugged up, black male comedy star, Donaghy (played by Alec Baldwin) is a parody of the white middle aged corporate executive with enormous control over creative content, whose conflicted priorities are evident in his title, 'Head of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming.' The dichotomy between the wealthy and ultra conservative, Donaghy and Lemon is the basis for much of the humour in *30 Rock*. Despite this, the show depicts a sincere affection between the characters. In this instance, Lemon relies on Donaghy's access to privileged information suggesting a Northrax (a chemical weapon developed by the United States that smells like maple syrup) attack is underway. He explains to Lemon that the American government sold Northrax to 'the Saudis' in the 1980's. Inherent in the character's explanation of the attack is a criticism of Reagan era foreign policy and an acknowledgement of the long-term involvement of the U.S. in funding, training and arming various entities all over the world. Simultaneously it conflates the Middle East into a singular entity by identifying 'the Saudis' as the potential source of a terrorist attack, when the Saudi government is a long standing ally of the U.S.

Once Lemon's suspicions are aroused, she encounters messages all around her environment suggesting she ought to act on these suspicions. She encounters 'If You See Something, Say Something' posters which are part of a Metropolitan Transportation Authority PR campaign that has become omnipresent in New York City since 9/11. This campaign urges New Yorkers to monitor one another for suspicious activity and report on one another. There is an obvious absence of imagery in the posters, and yet the 'who' and 'what' that comprise the pool of suspicion are never in question. The show takes pains to point out the oppressive nature of these posters, even showing a poster sponsored by fictional corporate giant and NBC parent, The Sheinhart Wig Company, who is trying to distract attention from their current public relations fiasco.

Lemon first meets her neighbour while returning a package that was accidentally delivered to her. Liz follows the social conventions of good neighbouring, only to be met with hostility; Raheem (played by *SNL* cast member Fred Armisen^{vi}), refuses to shake Lemon's hand and stares at her sternly, un-smiling. He rebuffs her friendly overtures, takes the package and slams the door in her face. Ominous music plays as Lemon gets a momentary glance into his apartment and sees large maps covering the walls, red tacks dotted across them, obviously depicting an intricate project or plans in progress. Though he says very little, the character of Raheem is overtly racialized and ethnically coded through his name (Lemon nervously jokes, 'Raheem, that's my mother's name, just kidding'), accent and humorless demeanor. At the very least he is foreign, but all indications point to a vague Middle Eastern ethnicity (though the absence of any specification around him means he could be Pakistani, or Persian, or Arab). There is no female counterpart to Raheem, he is only ever seen with another man who resembles him in skin color and with whom he shares an accent. Lemon assumes this sole relationship she observes must be that of colluders, but she along with the rest of the audience later learns he is Raheem's brother.

It is significant that the handshake is the first ‘red flag’ Lemon identifies because she attributes his impoliteness to misogyny declaring, ‘I think he’s weird...he wouldn’t shake my hand and I think it’s because I’m a woman’. This perceived slight sets the tone for her future interactions with her neighbour, and per the historical discourse of Orientalism the connection is explicit between Muslim sexuality and gender oppression in Muslim societies, and terrorism. The punch line is that Raheem’s refusal to shake her hand stems from the fact that he is trying to avoid getting sick while training for the *Amazing Race*. Though this punch line does not address the additional misperception inherent in the connections Liz makes between Raheem’s unwillingness to shake her hand, Islamic practice and misogyny. As a left leaning liberal feminist, Lemon’s awareness of the plight of women living in oppressive Muslim societies and her rejection of misogynistic values is in line with her perception of her own political identity. The association of Raheem with misogyny – though in and of itself does not suggest terrorist activity- justifies her worries that he is a fundamentalist.

The Tolchuks, a typical, nuclear family unit made up of Franny (played by veteran television actress Amy Pietz), Gary and their children Justin and Claire, live in the suburbs. Their interaction also begins with a gesture of good will; the Tolchuks decide to take in a foreign exchange student. They hope it will boost the social standing of their sixteen-year-old son (to whom the first ‘alien’ experience is assigned when the ridicule he is subjected to on his first day of school is the series’ opening sequence). The family have a brochure fantasy of the kind of exchange student, a ‘handsome blond white kid,’ who can elevate their own son’s social standing. They are shocked to find out they will be taking in Raja Musharaff, (played by the South African born and British raised Adhir Kalyan) a Pakistani boy from an unnamed village instead. Pleasant and positive from the outset, Raja has no qualms about the Tolchuks and appears to be complete naïve of what their suspicion could mean for him. The Tolchuk family’s immediate reaction is to reject him. Justin’s voiceover declares the only thing that could possibly lessen his popularity would be to go to school with a Muslim, and in fact he stays home sick, with Franny’s blessing, on Raja’s first day to avoid being affiliated with him. The rest of the family’s reaction to him is ranges from ignoring him entirely to the recognition that Raja’s cultural attitudes towards showing elders respect could be a source of free labour.

Franny reacts viscerally to Raja's presence, and with much more suspicion than anyone else. Though Raja is the other to the character of Justin, it is ultimately the Tolchuk matriarch against whom Raja is positioned in the house and to whom he must prove himself in order to keep his place in their home. Franny is the family member who first brings up the question of terrorism, which is dismissed outright by other family members, but she insists, ‘they come here as students, Bill O’Reilly says so’. Franny’s self-proclaimed affiliation with the right wing FOX News network pundit allows the viewing audience to position her within a pre-existing, well understood identification with popular neo-conservatism. Mainstream perceptions of the range of political identifications available to white American women, are encompassed by Lemon and Franny. Franny’s experience as homemaker, suburbanite, mother and conservative, positions her in binary opposition to the cynical, liberal, urbanite Liz Lemon. Yet in both situations it is the relation between either white female and Muslim male character that drives the narrative tension and makes it rife for potential comedic and dramatic scenarios. Franny’s desire to ‘return’ Raja reaches a fevered pitch once she discovers her

son praying with him. Hysterical, she makes arrangements to fly him home. The plan to erase his presence finally slows when feeling slightly guilty she suggests his parents will be happy to have him home only to learn that he is an orphan.

Nurturing and Understanding

Raja's orphan status has a transformative effect on Franny, evoking a maternal compulsion that overrides her fear of the alien. The protective urge she experiences for her family that once motivated her to expel him from her house turns to embrace him, and she decides he will stay. With the wisdom of the omnipotent observer, Justin tells the audience, 'though she had called him 'that boy' many times, this was the first time she actually saw him as one,' (*Aliens in America*, Pilot, October 1, 2007). From this point on Franny takes on something of a surrogate mother role for Raja, but it is not without its complications as they are still strangers at cultural and religious odds. In a twist to the typical narrative arc of the sitcom, Raja's superior moral sense positions him as an equal, and in some senses superior. His observations of them forces Franny to re-examine consumerist values. In the episode titled 'Church' (December 10, 2007) Raja's observation that the family has transferred their spiritual needs to the shopping mall experience motivates Franny to insist they begin attending the local mega-church, which the show wryly points out has its own mall like qualities. Ultimately the family is not indoctrinated into the church experience, but Franny recognizes Raja's spiritual faith as something that is lacking in her own life.

When the realities of the 'War on Terror' threaten to cause division between Raja and the family, they are able to overcome through the act of nurturing and the family as demonstrated in the episode, 'One Hundred Thousand Miles' (March 23, 2008) At the airport Raja's alien status is apparent and the associations with terrorism erupt quickly. Raja, refusing to exchange his shalwar for American clothing unfurls his prayer mat and attempts to begin praying which immediately creates anxiety. He does not comply with Airport Security's attempts to stop him, prompting the security guard to declare a 'situation' is in progress. When the incident gets them banned from the flight and forces the cancellation of their trip, the family lashes out at Raja for standing up for his religious freedom, rather than directing their anger towards the security protocol at the airport. The family implores him to 'blend in better' or else they will suffer the consequences. Raja's response is that he cannot 'uneducate [him]self, become lazy, and not be startled by women who dress like strumpets'.

Hurt by the Tolchuk's the lack of concern, Raja decides to leave the family and be with people more like him. The Tolchuks are in turn forced to go to the mosque (which they call 'mosque church') to look for him. Upon entering Franny says, 'This isn't scary at all, that mosque in *Terror Cell* gave me the willies' and the family are immediately confronted with segregated spaces, and dress requirements for men and women. In order to enter the two women must wear the hijab, and the act of donning the scarf is an opportunity for humour. The Tolchuks soon encounter the Muslim counterpart of their own family in the mosque, who have a German exchange student, Silvio. Each mother fantasizes about the ease with which the other's student would assimilate into their family's lives. Racial differences are ignored in favor of a conversation about cultural and religious difference but the assumed proximity of European culture to American culture

underlies this longing. Raja returns home to find that Franny has enlisted her Muslim counterpart, Dalwa, to cook a traditional Pakistani dinner and invited friends from the local Muslim community to eat at their house. The episode ends with Franny welcoming him home. David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' plays over the heartwarming scene^{vii}.

Raja's return to the home signals a new turning point in the understanding between himself and Franny, though the narrative drops any further discussion of the airport incident. This new understanding does not necessarily require discussion of the racist security policies in American airports or anywhere else. It is presented as comical, but the anxiety of being targeted by airport security invokes fears of indefinite imprisonment, the suspension of basic civil rights, and torture that has come to characterize U.S. policy on terror suspects. A series about a young Pakistani man in America post 9/11 cannot avoid commenting on it, though they ultimately choose to focus on tackling personal prejudices. This is a distinct departure from the *30 Rock* episode where the focus is on the interplay between institutional fears and prejudices and the individual. Fey's exploration of the perceived dilemma the 'War on Terror' presents for white liberal feminists forces her to directly address the policy of torture, rendition and disappearing to unknown prison locations for interrogation. As the show's creator, her uncertainty is displayed in her comedic representation of the potential harm that might arise when you 'see something and say something.'

Suspicion, Insecure politics & Insecure femininity

There is an overt understanding displayed in *30 Rock* of the flimsy logic on which Lemon's suspicions are based when Lemon is compelled to proclaim she is not racist, but both the character and the writer voice their doubts about this by making the self-conscious declaration. Moments after denying her racism her roommate mentions Raheem re-wired the toaster and showed him a 'back way' to the airport, and she concludes 'that pita pocket might be a terrorist'. Fey delivers these lines with conviction and surprise at her own reaction, she feels the need to legitimate her fears as beyond race, but in her insistence she gives away her acknowledgement that post 9/11 fears of terrorist attacks are always bound and defined by race.

The portrayal of Lemon's articulation of her dilemma to Donaghy finds the show grappling with the flimsy power of political correctness in the post 9/11, 'War on Terror', American culture. Lemon initially expresses her fears in front of Donaghy's non-specifically brown assistant Jonathan, and Donaghy is quick to respond with a pat statement, 'That's ridiculous Lemon, some of our greatest patriots have been of Middle Eastern descent, and I am appalled to hear you engaging in racial profiling like that'. When a satisfied Jonathan leaves the room a moment later, he turns, 'I'm kidding, be an American, call it in'. When Lemon voices her uncertainty and suggests her own paranoia, Donaghy is quick to dismiss her, 'If a bleeding heart liberal like you has any suspicion...' to which she replies, 'I know, right'? Faced with her political opposite, whose status and access to power far supercedes her own, Lemon lends credence to her suspicions by claiming the rationality of liberal politics to protect herself from acknowledging the racial stereotyping that underlies her suspicions, and particularly from accusations of racism – which Donaghy implies in his initial response to her. More importantly, the self-assurance she demonstrates when she agrees with Donaghy, that as a bleeding heart

liberal her fears must relate to something substantive, is derived from her constitution as a liberal feminist subject. The critical voice of feminism permeates Liz Lemon's political viewpoints and surely this, more than anything else, ought to protect her from being caught up in the fervor of the construction of a new 'enemy'. It is important to keep in mind that Fey not only participates in this exchange, she wrote it. In doing so, she has already implied the slippery slope of Lemon's position and the inherent lack of safety she experiences as a liberal feminist from the culture of fear that permeates the U. S. post 9/11 and the potential that her own political ideals will be compromised.

Lemon does make the call to Homeland Security^{viii} and while out on the town with Pete, Raheem is picked up by 'some dudes' and disappeared. Pete confronts her, shocked that she would do such a thing, but Lemon quickly cows him by threatening to call him in as well. The ability to report is now a source of power for Lemon and she wastes no time wielding it. A short time later she receives a videotape from Raheem, in what appears to be another confirmation of her suspicions, and she goes to view the tape fully expecting to see a declaration of jihad or the last statements of a suicide bomber. Instead, it is an audition tape for the American reality competition show, *The Amazing Race*. This is the punch line for the long running joke. Lemon's own logic and rationale collapse in on her and she is mortified at the grave mistake she has made. The power she experiences as government informant justified by the threat of terrorism now reveals itself as the corruption of her own ideals and resolve not to harm others.

Thankfully, for Raheem and for herself, the issue is resolved quickly when he returns home a week later (only minutes for the viewer). She flags him down, calling him 'buddy' and he tells her, 'They put electrodes on my testicles, Liz, America's government shocked my nuts' to which she replies that she is sure they aren't allowed to do that. He describes being questioned about each of her concerns, handshaking, playground training and airport surveillance, each of which he explains is preparation for *The Amazing Race*. He makes zapping noises and says 'under panties'. Lemon is primarily concerned with whether or not he knows who turned him in, but he doesn't. He ends their conversation with this, 'I have so much anger inside, I want to do something spectacular with it' which re-invigorates her fear of him while simultaneously commenting on the consequences of the persecution of Muslim men by the U.S. government. In the episode's final gag, she smells maple syrup at Raheem's door and is on her way to make another phone call to Homeland Security, when her roommate Pete comes into the hallway with a plate of waffles. 'Thank God!' she exclaims, safe from attack and absolved from having to shoulder the burden of being the informant and putting her own politics under scrutiny again.

Lemon's reliance on Donaghy in this and other instances is a convention that originated in the 1970's and 80's where, '...feminist' (television texts) redirect independent, assertive, female characters into safely traditional female categories'. The overt insecurity displayed by Lemon about the situation is part of a narrative where '...central female characters must be returned ultimately to the conventional narrative structures of family melodrama and heterosexual romance; critics have demonstrated that a woman's position can only be inscribed narratively in relationship to male prerogatives' (Rabinovitz, 1989: 3). Lauren Rabinovitz points out television's adoption of the 'ubiquitous' liberal feminist subject is bound by material constraints, particularly the

reality of advertising support that relies on women's insecurities to cultivate its consumer base (ibid, 1989).

Rabinovitz uses the example of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, a show that Fey has mentioned as the model for her own^{ix}, to illustrate how a sitcom based on an independent single woman still produces staid gender roles where the workplace comes to substitute for the traditional setting of family and domestic household. Moore fulfills a 'noble femininity' by nurturing male co-workers and allowing those characters to shape her dilemmas (Rabinovitz, 1989). A plot point that anchors the story of *30 Rock* is the lack of Lemon's social/family life and the ways in which the shenanigans, needs and wants of both Jordan and Donaghy, continually impose upon her. Fey's portrayal of Lemon is of a single, thirty-something woman, who despite the leadership position she occupies in the workplace is generally hapless, especially so when it comes to issues of romance or finance (her main catchphrase is 'blurgh') and her missteps are comic fodder for the show. At the same time, Lemon is intelligent, articulate and funny, managing to stand up for herself when it counts, and most importantly she has a clear political identity that often puts her at odds with Donaghy, while she simultaneously feels his influence. It is Donaghy's quick determination that she should call his contact at the Department of Homeland Security that puts in motion the next series of events.

Conclusion

Both shows attempt to engage in a more nuanced discourse about the 'War on Terror' and both succeed in illustrating the effects of the mediated flow of information about Muslims and Islam on Americans, but are they strictly Orientalist or are they better characterized as the post-Orientalist cultural products McAlister describes? Are they binary, feminizing and citational? In many ways it is Franny and Liz who represent the binary, they occupy opposing political positions (FOX conservative and liberal feminist), career status (involved homemaker and successful writer) and domestic status (married with children and childless single) and they inhabit opposing environments (sheltered mid-western suburbia and cosmopolitan urban landscape). Neither Muslim character is portrayed as strictly in opposition to American culture and values, in fact Raheem hopes to join the cult of American reality television and *Aliens* often emphasizes the ways in which Raja's values are similar to those of the Americans. It is true that the representations of both men serve the function of revealing more about Americans post 9/11 than Muslims, but they do so critically, revealing how conservative suburbanites and urban sophisticates participate in creating and reifying racist stereotypes of Muslims. Their representations chip away at the supposed inherent superiority of the West depicted in traditional Orientalism.

The question of whether the Muslims are feminized is more complex. What is evident is that in their relation to these Muslim men, both Liz and Franny experience access to a thread of masculinist power supported by the framework of American institutions and authorities. Liz, empowered by her reporting of Raheem to Homeland Security, adopts a 'tough bitch' persona, which Franny echoes in her resolute desire to see Raja expelled from her home. Both Raja and Raheem are at the mercy of these women at different points signaling their weakness, but they are not overtly feminized in appearance or action. There in fact appears to be a righteous justification that women get

to determine their fate because of the general attitudes Muslim men are thought to have towards women, exemplified for American audiences in images of veiled Muslim women. Liz and Franny's ability to report or deport is a demonstration of the liberated womanhood available to American women. This is not a simple process of the appropriation of masculine power, but the expression of a specific kind of power available to white middle class American women as long as Muslim men are the enemy.

McAlister argues that in the wake of the rise of popular feminism in the U.S. a backlash occurred in which popular culture gravitated towards depictions of overt militarized masculinity resulting from the vulnerability experienced by the culture at large as feminism called into question the basic social structure, (2005). 9/11 created another kind of vulnerability in the U. S., and depicted in these shows is how a culture that has incorporated some level of empowerment for women, and rhetorically at least some liberal feminist principles, includes white women as allies rather than opponents in this vulnerability. Strategies of empowerment are then further complicated by traditional notions of ideal or noble femininity, which valorize compassion, nurturing and passivity. Liz questions her fears because of her own cynicism as a liberal feminist, worrying over how to handle the situation, and when realizing her mistake she is profoundly guilty. Franny's role as nurturing mother bonds her to Raja, allowing her to see him as a human being. Their interactions with these men have everything to do with their specific identities as women, particularly when each calls the prevailing logic of suspicion into question.

In their assumptions about Raja and Raheem Liz and Franny reference Orientalist characterizations of barbarous, violent, Muslim men. Both women are on the look out for the aggressive nature of Muslim men, violent or misogynistic tendencies. The victimized Muslim woman is absent physically, but knowledge of her existence is part of the framework that prepares each woman to regard these men suspiciously. In this respect, these characterizations do cite Orientalist logic, but the source of that logic is the women themselves and the burden of proof is not met as the Muslim male characters surprise them with their magnanimity. Raheem is afraid of getting sick and that is why he refuses to shake Liz's hand and Raja continually articulates the need to show Franny and other women respect, particularly in the realm of sexuality and social interaction, and he is quick to do domestic work in the home. The revelation of Raheem's audition for the *The Amazing Race* conjures all the misunderstandings Liz experienced throughout the episode, and her observations and conclusions about Raheem are revealed to be based in narrow-minded perception, hysteria and existing knowledge of Orientalist stereotypes, suggesting the futility of this perspective.

Both women are forced to reconsider their initial perceptions and to partially deconstruct the Orientalist characterization of Muslim men. It seems that in a post 9/11 world the Orientalist depiction of Muslims is further complicated by a cynicism that permeates areas of mainstream American cultural production towards the methods and aims of the 'War on Terror' and the ease with which a new enemy can be constructed and latched on to. As women who are others in the domestic order of the U. S., both Franny and Liz personify the ambivalence of what it means to be a nation that wields its military power to dominate other nations and people with little regard for the consequences those others' experience. This is partly because the political identity of each woman is rather porous despite the use of known, acceptable categories of 'conservative' and 'liberal'.

Ultimately, these labels do not predict how these women will react, or their capacity for overcoming the rhetoric of fear and suspicion, when presented with the ambivalences of the 'War on Terror.'

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ⁱ The Pew Research Center for People and the Press conducted a survey in 2004 that reported 21 percent of 18-34 yr olds received their information about the election from *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*, a significant increase from the 9 percent who

did in 2000. 23 percent reported getting information from network news, a drop from 2000 of 10 percent, (Feldman, 2007: 406).

ⁱⁱ The Bush administration made a case for the invasion of Iraq by suggesting a link between the nation's government, specifically President Saddam Hussein, and Al-Qaeda the terrorist group claiming responsibility for the 9/11 attacks and the development by President Hussein of Weapons of Mass Destruction. Both claims were discredited by U.S. intelligence after the invasion, (Jehl, 2004; Shenon & Marquis, 2004).

ⁱⁱⁱ Fey appeared on the cover of Rolling Stone's golden age of comedy cover and Time Out New York Magazine's cover in September 2008.

^{iv} Rudolph Giuliani experienced a surge of popularity in New York City and around the country after the attacks of September 11, 2001. His quick response in getting the city running again and the appearance of control he maintained publicly reassured the public tracking the proceedings through newspapers, magazines, newspapers and online.

Dubbed 'America's Mayor' Giuliani, formerly a candidate for President, is set to give the keynote speech at the 2008 Republican Convention, (Bai, 2007; Wheaton, 2008).

^v In his monologue Morgan brings up the inherent prejudice Senator Obama faces as an African-American man running for President in the United States. His response to Fey in this venue echoes his function on Fey's show, *30 Rock*, where his presence as an erratic, somewhat stereotypical and then altogether atypical, out of control black male movie star is the foil to Fey's uptight politically correct character. Sample jokes include, 'Affirmative action was designed to keep women and minorities in competition with each other to distract us while white dudes inject AIDS into our chicken nuggets,' and 'I can't be normal. If I'm normal, I'm boring. If I'm boring, I'm not a movie star. If I'm not a

movie star, I'm poor! And poor people can't afford to pay back the \$75,000 in cash they owe Quincy Jones!'

^{vi} Armisen is of Venezuelan and Japanese descent and he is the second Latin American and Asian American actor to perform on *SNL*. Armisen mines his racial ambiguity to play characters across racial, ethnic and cultural boundaries. His characters have included a Native American comedian, a Venezuelan nightclub owner, and a Jewish adult education student. His impressions include Barack Obama, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (portrayed as obviously homosexual), former Mexican President Vincente Fox, the singer Prince and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez as well as various Taliban members, Iraqis and Pakistanis.

^{vii} The show's theme song is a cover of Nick Lowe's 1970's song 'What's so funny 'bout peace, love and understanding?' popularized in the 1980's by Elvis Costello.

^{viii} When she makes the call, there is no greeting on the other end, only a voice that says, 'who is he and where can we find him?'

^{ix} Discussing her transition to writing for the sitcom genre, Fey tells the NY Times she studied DVDs of classic 70's sitcoms, particularly *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, It is no coincidence that *Mary Tyler Moore* like *30 Rock* revolved around an unmarried woman working in television with a gruff but loveable boss and a clueless star. "We talked about the show a lot," Ms. Fey said, "as a template, obviously, of a great show, but also a show that is all about the relationships in the workplace..." (Steinberg, 2007).