

Part 3: Understanding History and Myths

Lesson 3.1

Essential Question

How does history influence the myths that fuel anti-Muslim racism today?

Enduring Understanding

Enduring histories of colonization, anti-Blackness, and Orientalism have shaped contemporary “us versus them” narratives, which characterize Muslims as barbaric, irrational, and dangerous.

Learning Outcomes

Students will know:

- Orientalism has influenced anti-Muslim sentiments long before the September 11, 2001 attacks.
- Orientalist narratives shape our understandings of Muslims, which have real repercussions in people’s everyday lives.

Students will be able to:

- Explain the historical contexts that led to anti-Blackness, Orientalism, and anti-Muslim racism.
- Analyze how historical events fuel modern-day myths, which form the foundation of anti-Muslim narratives.

Standards:

- **SS.H.1.9-12:** Evaluate how historical developments were shaped by time and place as well as broader historical contexts.
- **CCSS.RH.9-10.1:** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

Vocabulary:

- Orientalism
- “The Orient”
- Anti-Blackness
- Anti-Black racism
- (Controlling) Narrative

Time:

50-60 Minutes

Materials:

- Sticky notes
- Bold markers
- Whiteboard/chalkboard/wall space to post myths
- Video on Orientalism
- Modification: large print-outs of video transcript

Procedure:

1. Opener:

- a. Because dangerous and often offensive myths will be discussed during this class, it is worthwhile to begin the class by revisiting classroom discussion ground rules/community standards.

2. Myths Activity (small groups)

- a. Divide students into small groups of four or five.
- b. Ask each group to list myths or commonly held beliefs about Muslims and Islam.
- c. They can write their answers on sticky notes, one belief per note. Hand in to the teacher, who organizes them into common themes.

3. Whole group brainstorm/discussion

- a. Organize the myths on the whiteboard, grouping sticky notes according to their themes. As you arrange the myths on the board, encourage student discussion of the myths, with an emphasis on the origins of these myths.
- b. To tie previous class discussion on forms of institutional and individual racism and violence, create two columns on the board—one for individual harm and one for institutional harm.
 1. Solicit suggestions from students using the probing questions below. If you feel it may be helpful/more productive, students can re-enter into small groups for the brainstorming activity.
 1. What kinds of individual acts of violence do these myths enable? (e.g., verbal attacks, pulling headscarves, attacks on mosques)
 2. What kinds of institutional forms of violence do these myths enable? (e.g., racial profiling, surveillance in mosques, the Muslim Ban)

4. Mini-Lesson: Construction of Narratives, Intro to Orientalism

- a. Introduce concept of the narrative by reframing these myths as controlling narratives.
 1. These myths are actually *stories* we tell in our culture—they are constructed. They also function as *controlling narratives*. We reach for these narratives to make sense of Muslims and Muslim communities. Unfortunately, these controlling narratives reduce Muslims to one-dimensional caricatures.
 2. Recall the myths that students wrote on the sticky notes. Explain that although these myths are culturally constructed, they do not come out of thin air and impact communities directly. These myths have histories or logics that support them—one of these logics being Orientalism.
- b. Show [video on Orientalism](#) by *Al Jazeera English* to students.

1. **Modification:** jigsaw video transcript in small groups or hang up pieces of the transcript (along with corresponding video images) around the classroom for a gallery walk.

5. Group Discussion

- a. After watching the video or completing the gallery walk, students should gather in a circle in the middle of the classroom to face each other (space permitting). Explain the rules of a [Socratic Seminar](#) to students before allowing them to engage in a whole-class discussion.
- b. Use the following probing questions to guide a group discussion on how controlling narratives impact Muslim communities and also formulate the basis of institutional and individual racism:
 1. How have we learned these controlling narratives? What are the institutions and cultural influences/factors that reinforce these narratives?
 2. Do the myths on the board correspond with those told about other groups of people? (common narratives told about Black, Latinx, Indigenous peoples, other groups....)

6. Reflection:

- a. You can ask students to share with the whole class or have them reflect with a Quick Write/Journal Prompt.
 1. *Where do you believe the myths we discussed come from?*

Talking Points:

- The “East” or “the Orient” is not a stable or natural category. Myths about the “East” are culturally-constructed controlling narratives with real-world consequences.
- Orientalism is term that captures how the West views the East in ways that facilitate/justify colonialism. This process never gives the East the opportunity to speak for, and define, itself.
- Impact of these controlling narratives:
 - “All forms of Muslim political activity, religiosity, and life (including the mundane) are viable forms of terrorism and can be coded as such.” This means that controlling narratives justify the treatment of Muslims as potential terrorists.
 - Muslims are portrayed as either agents of oppression or helpless victims of oppression (where Islam is frequently seen as the source of this oppression).
- Scholars have examined how we can use racialized signs other than skin color to determine criminality, from the hoodie to the hijab.
 - Leopold Lambert [reports](#), for example, that “One recent and illustrative example of the use of a piece of clothing as evidence of such an interpretation in a trial was presented during the prosecution of George Zimmerman in July 2013 ([State of Florida v. George Zimmerman](#)). The piece of clothing introduced then was the hoodie that Trayvon Martin was wearing when he got murdered by Zimmerman on February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida. The evidence was used to show where the clothe had been penetrated by the deadly bullet but, more importantly, it was presented to the jury for it to determine if the hoodie — implicitly complemented by Martin’s black body — could present sufficiently suspicious characteristics for Zimmerman to legitimately confront Martin in his claimed expectation that “he was up to no good.””

- These racial optics have been applied to Muslim communities. For example, women who wear *hijab* have been harassed and criminalized as possible terrorists. Both the hoodie and hijab have been used to provide clues about a person's intentions while hiding the role of racism and racism in making that determination.