



## OPINION

## The stories we tell in the West have tremendous power – particularly for a group as misrepresented as Arabs

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As Arabs, our identities in Western mainstream text, media and political discourses have been too often homogeneously misdefined, misrepresented and distorted by the stories told about us. They can be troublingly and offensively misrepresentative, dangerous and harmful. Many of these stories are fabricated, and told to serve hegemonic discourses and colonial, imperialist and political Western agendas.

In the West, as in the words of postcolonial Arab scholar Edward Said, Arabs are thought about “as just one large group of screaming fanatics who are practically faceless.” Too often, we are packaged into racist portraits that erase our long and rich history, ones that have pigeonholed Arab identities into narrow cells of hegemonic and noisy discourses. Western representations of Arab identities have succeeded in extracting the human out of our identities and in presenting us as herds of people in urgent need of humanizing. Without falling through the trap of generalization, the truth is that in the West, Arabs are typically stereotyped and

othered to serve the interests of dominant powers. Arab women are often exoticized and eroticized, or represented as oppressed, in need of saving, or silenced and erased, stripped of agency and voice; Arab men are often portrayed as religious zealots, traditional, or as potential terrorists who impose threat to Western civilization.

These stories about Arabs are fixed, told through a colonial lens, and created to advance military schemas and to manufacture the consent of the Western masses, as philosopher Noam Chomsky once suggested. They suggest that our part of the world is uncivilized and vulnerable, and in desperate need of a Western saviour.

To be an Arab in the West is to continuously try to defy and disrupt the misrepresentations – an exhausting task indeed. We reject these stories. They do not represent us as Arabs.

What's frequently left out of them is that Arab civilization dates back to the beginning of history, that the diversity of the Arab world is so vast – including 22 countries that stretch from Western Asia to North Africa to the Horn of Africa, with shorelines that look onto the Atlantic Ocean, the Arabian Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. Within these countries reside hundreds of millions of Arabs who speak an Arabic language made up of countless dialects and accents, who are born to different religions, practise diverse cultural traditions, and whose rich cuisines, music, poetry and literatures are each unique.

So, as we look for ways to disrupt dominant Western representation of Arab identities, and by way of reclaiming our Arab culture, we – the Calgary Arab Arts and Culture Society – will be hosting the Calgary Arab Film Nights Festival for the eighth year. Our hope is that the stories in these films will reconstruct the human in Arab identities and dismantle the deafening dehumanizing representations. We hope that our audience may come to re-examine their pre-existing stances and understanding of Arab identities. We believe this is an opportunity for film and story to offer alternate ways of knowing the Arab subject, and to inform modern Canadian society of our human experiences and lived realities through the Arab-local's, non-Western point of view.

In feature films, shorts and documentaries delivered both in theatre and online, Calgary Arab Film Nights Festival will feature the diversity of Arab-lived realities. This year's festival will feature Alberta-produced Jasmine Road, by Warren Sulatycky, as well as the Lebanese movie 1982 starring Oscar-nominated Nadine Labaki. (All proceeds from that screening will be donated to the Canadian Red Cross in light of the provincial government's announcement that it would match Albertans' donations to explosion relief efforts in Beirut.) The Sudanese

award-winning drama *You Will Die at 20*, the touching Palestinian drama *Between Heaven and Earth*, the powerful Syrian documentary *The Cave* and the festival's first Iraqi film, *Haifa Street*, are among the many other exciting and acclaimed films in the lineup.

Our intent is not to be antagonistic to Western audiences or to over-generalize the West. Nor is it to over-victimize ourselves as Arabs. We hope to disrupt dominant constructions of Arab identities and cultures. This festival is a political statement that seeks to reclaim our identities, interrogate a history of representation and attempt to de-historicize and re-historicize narratives about us, using our own voice, narratives and our understanding of our own shared histories. We hope you'll join us in doing so.

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