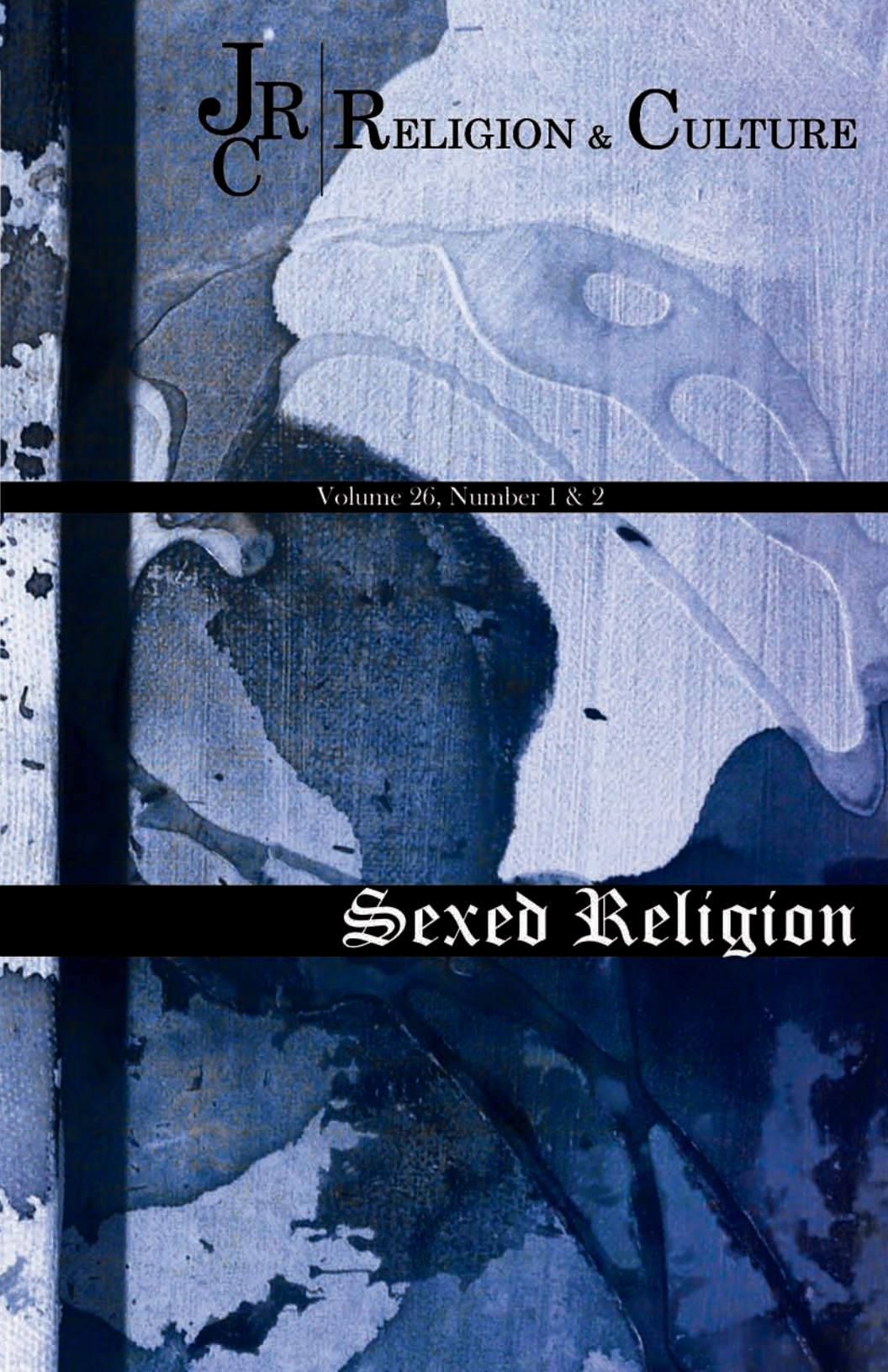
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Muslims in the Western Imagination

Sophia Rose Arjana. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
280 p. $29.95 CND (Hardcover).

In her book *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, Islamic Studies scholar Sophia Rose Arjana, studies the anti-Muslim rhetoric which portrays the construction of Muslims as a frightening and monstrous "Other" among Western Christians. While the book mainly focuses on Muslims, it furthermore explores how Jews, women, homosexuals, Mexicans, Indigenous people, African Americans, and the Irish have also been classified as other by dominant Western Christian discourse.

In the introductory chapter, "The Muslim Monster," Arjana draws on Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) and his post-colonial framework to genealogically study the dehumanization of Muslims through Western art, literature, and film, and also to elaborate on how Muslims have been discursively constructed as terrifying and disgusting imaginary "Others" in the Western imagination since the Middle Ages. In the second chapter, "Medieval Muslim Monster," Arjana examines how blood-sucking vampires and demons—such as Zofloya and Dracula, who reflect old Western phantasms of race and foreign bodies—were deployed in the Gothic era to portray Muslims as terrifying monsters. This racial representation typifies the Gothic genre as "marked by racism, chauvinism, and misogyny. Its monsters are typically non-white-oriental […] or otherwise non-European—creatures that pose a threat to Western masculinity" (105). In the third chapter, "Turkish Monsters," Arjana studies the emergence of Turkish "monsters" in the Western imagination as a result of the Ottoman Empire's rise to power in thirteenth century. As a close neighbor to Europe, Western anxieties rose regarding the Ottomans' power, which was considered a threat to European boarders. In chapters four and five, Arjana discusses modern constructions of Muslims in the West, constructions in which Muslims are presented as an external threat to "American dreams." She also analyses Hollywood movies such as *300* and *Star Wars*, in which Muslims are characterized as savage warriors. Chapter six, "Monsters of September 11," mainly discusses the bodies of Muslim men in the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo prisons. In doing so, she notes how Muslim terrorists are not depicted as humans, but rather as de-humanized monsters; how these real, living Muslim bodies are linked to all the aforementioned phantasms, and represented as sinister, cruel, and sexual monsters.

The book is an interesting read, and contributes to general understandings of how the imaginary and distorted ideas associated with Islam do not necessarily correspond with reality. This being said, the author does adopt an overly excessive and subjective analysis, which compromises and jeopardizes the representationality of her research. Several theories, films, literatures, and illustrations indeed feature presumptuous racism and xenophobic discourses one way or another; nevertheless, it is crucial for readers to critically assess the dominance of such features in the political and social realms of each era. Is it one discourse among many, or is it the dominant discourse in each era of the long history of Christianity, from the Medieval era until now? It seems the latter is more representative of her view. However, "monsters" change over time—they change based on the geopolitics of the region, for instance. According to Arjana, for a long while Europe was not challenged by foreign races but rather insider enemies. This includes conflicts with the Roman empire, clashes between the Eastern and Western churches, and, later, the emergence of Reformist movements inside Christianity. The monster of the Western church, in fact, was the Eastern church and vice versa. Yet, there is no mention of such inner conflicts in this book.

As well, the value, authenticity, and validity of the sources utilized are not clear. Why these sources and not other ones? Examples of subjective analysis are numerous: the author persistently argues in several chapters that vampires and zombies in movies and literature appear dark-skinned with hooked noses in attempts to represent Muslims or Turks. One might simply argue that the darkness of monsters, which Arjana links to Middle Eastern identity, can be read in an alternative way. For instance, there is a great deal of literature regarding zombies and Dracula in anti-imperialist and leftist traditions which interpret zombies and other imaginary figures in a way that demonstrates the imperial West's inner anxiety linked to class struggles. Thus, it suggests a self-reflection, as opposed to projecting its conflicts towards the other.

Moreover, the shadow of essentialist understandings of the West is prevalently seen in this book. Arjana's loose and vague use of key terms throughout the book—such as: "West," "Western imagination," "Christianity," "American imaginary," and "European fantasies"—demonstrates some subtle "Occidentalism" or, put differently, "Orientalism in-reverse." This lumps together all Westerners, Christians, and Europeans as a single mass of people who all think and behave similarly. Evidently, this history is filled

with polemical and theological conflicts among Christians and Muslims. More importantly, media propaganda fiercely produces fear to pour oil on troubled water, and in general generates a monstrous portrayal of Muslims. However, the current dominant discourse does not warrant one to generalize the present situation with the entire relationship of Christianity and Islam (as well as the West and the East). The problematic nature of narrating the entire history of the West as a monster-making process is that, as a result, Muslims and the Middle East are routinely and consistently represented as passive and silent vis-à-vis the imperial and strong West. Ideally, post-colonial researchers should be trying to break this silence, to provoke texts and resources in an attempt to allow the Orient's voice to be heard. However, rather than doing this, Arjana's book seems to further this silence by making a monolith and seamless monster of the Occident (whose work has been monster-making throughout all these centuries).

After reading the final chapter on Abu Ghraib prison, the reader is left with the essentialist and generalized idea that all these processes—from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, to pre and post 9/11 up to the Bush administration—are the natural product of an almost irresistible Western determination to misrepresent, distort, and dehumanize the realities of other cultures, races, and people: specifically, Muslims. Apart from the general shortcomings that I have outlined, the book is well written and accessible for both university students and general readers. Its wide use of popular culture makes it an interesting read for people in a variety of disciplines.

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