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Christopher D. Stonebanks

Özlem Sensoy

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Did We Miss the Joke Again? The Cultural Learnings of Two Middle East Professors for Make Benefit Insights on the Glorious West

Christopher D. Stonebanks & Özlem Sensoy

This is Natalya. [*He kisses her passionately*] She is my sister. She is number-four prostitute in whole of Kazakhstan.

May George Bush drink the blood of every man, woman, and child in Iraq!

Introduction

Both the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) and its creator, writer, lead actor, and producer Sacha Baron Cohen have received an amazing degree of attention. While the film's humour has been praised for its skilled unmasking of all "isms" in America, its box-office and mainstream success is testimony of its broad-based appeal. By its 16th week, *Borat* had raked in nearly \$250 million dollars in worldwide box-office sales (\$130 of it domestic U.S.).¹ Why?

Is it because there is a hunger in North America for critically-conscious social commentary in film? Certainly, *Borat*'s domestic sales do show it on par with other heavyweight films, recognized for their social consciousness, such as *Erin Brockovich*, *Good Morning Vietnam*, *Traffic*, and *The Truman Show*. If box office revenues are any indicator of success and acknowledgment of excellence, then certainly *Borat* finds itself in this category. If, rather, peer review and critical acclaim are the indicators of success, then Cohen's 2007 *Golden Globe* for Best Actor in a Film Comedy, his Best Film nomination at the *Golden Globes*, and a Best Adapted Screenplay nomination for the *Oscars* should all be evidence that this is a great film, worth seeing. Adding to all of these arguments are the critics' reviews that note the movie's deep provocation of dialogue about social issues. In a recent *Rolling Stone* article in support of many of the accolades of Cohen, Strauss (2006) pondered a scene from Cohen's television program, *The Ali G Show* (from which the character Borat was born). The scene is set in a country and western bar in which

Borat encourages patrons to sing along to a song called, 'Throw the Jew Down the Well.' Strauss writes, "Did it reveal that they were anti-Semitic? Perhaps. But maybe it just revealed that they were indifferent to anti-Semitism." Strauss's not-so-subtle applause for Cohen's skill at revealing such indifference is evidence that there is a hunger for socially-relevant artistic production in the North American context.

This exposure of mainstream ideologies is nothing new to those who live in other parts of the world, although it is an aspect of artistic production that is less widely accessed in current mainstream American culture. Thus we can agree that filmmakers such as Cohen should be applauded for their efforts to reveal insidious indifferences toward anti-Semitism, and toward other marginalized social groups. However, an important aspect of just how this revelation occurs (and for whom it occurs) has been absent from the discussions we have witnessed. The characters, settings, situations, and revelations of all -isms (revelations that are explained to be social commentary) depend upon a purposeful articulation of all things expressed as opposite to "America." What we will argue is that unlike the humour tropes that have made *Borat* as profitable as other films utilizing sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism as comedic devices (films like *Dumb and Dumber* or *Wayne's World*), *Borat* overwhelmingly depends on the central character's embodiment of Muslim-Eastern stereotypes, embodiments that we read as xenophobic cinematic Islamophobia. What "we" ultimately laugh at is that which simultaneously reviles us. In this article, we will describe how the discourses that *Borat*'s humour and social commentary rely upon continue to marginalize those who embody the non-White, non-Christian, non-heterosexual, non-male body, and argue that if the racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia in North America were *truly* taken up in cinematic critique, the box office, mainstream distribution, and attention toward this film might look quite different.

Why Study Borat?

With the ascent of courses in North America's teacher education programs that require increased knowledge about race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and other socially-constructed categories of difference, courses such as "Multiculturalism" or "Media Awareness" in current university curricula are common. Given this attention, one might fairly expect there would be significant attention and discussion about the "desert minstrel" (Steinberg, 2004) characterization that *Borat* portrays. Surely, in our Canadian context, from Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau's 1971 commencement of the *Multiculturalism Act* to our current deliberations on how we can best prepare our citizens to participate in a multicultural community, *Borat* himself as a stereotype ought to be as central to conversations about the film as *Borat*'s prejudice towards others is. But, once again, this critique is absent from mainstream, public discussion. Despite the torrent of accolades heaped upon Cohen's

creation, whether purposeful or not, Borat represents another illustration of what it means *to be* of the continued stereotyped nefarious Muslim Other.

If You're Not in It, You're out of It

Clearly, a quick read of the positive reviews of *Borat* reveals to the viewer that there is a higher understanding of the content, and that if you missed "it," it likely indicates a deficiency on your part; perhaps comedic, perhaps social. The prevailing arguments of support are best summed up by the late, great Joey Ramone, "If you're not in it, you're out of it." A kind of "academic-hipster" challenge, if you will. A challenge that silences you for fear that you might seem at once uncool, unsophisticated, and dumb. Art/film critics like Lepage (2006) state that "...Cohen is the *Sex Pistols* of humour" (P. H. 7), Goodman (2006) quotes a comedian and founder of the comedy club *Yuk-Yuks*, Mark Breslin's assertion "(t)he kind of people who would go see an independent comedy are smart enough to get the joke" (P. D. 10), and Groen simply states "*Borat* at its best is pure satiric genius ..." (P. R. 7). So all of these accolades do leave us wondering if, as was the case with so many Western media caricatures of everything that is associated with the Middle East, West Asia, Islam, and Muslims in general, we have once again "missed the joke." Are we, "out of 'it'?"

To better comprehend the responses to *Borat* within the United States, Canadian, and United Kingdom markets, we began with a simple request to our research assistant, Patrick Boisvert: 15 "online" hours to amass as much information as possible regarding critical reviews of *Borat*. Through his searches he perused at least 26 major Canadian television, news, and magazine sources, 23 American television, news, and magazine sources, and 17 British television, news, and magazine sources. The end result of the 15 hours (plus) in front of his computer: 53 positive (to glowing) reviews, 16 somewhat ambiguous assessments, and only six negative critiques. Of the positive reviews, much was said of the film being an insight into the "American Psyche," revealing "... America as it is, not as it imagines itself to be" (Monk, 2007, B. 1), noting its social contributions of revealing the many "isms" of North America and the "genius" of both the film and Cohen himself (Mallick, 2006). Of the positive reviews we accessed, nothing was mentioned of the racism associated with the Borat character. Curiously, Borat is often referred to as a being to "itself"; an actual person altogether separate from Cohen, compounded by Cohen's reluctance to market his film out of character. For instance, when Borat initiates racist and sexist conversations, it is portrayed as if it is a natural conversation, as opposed to one of the participants having a script and the other simply responding to the words. What is lost is the understanding that there is no Borat. Cohen exists and the words spoken by the character Borat are Cohen's. To our recollection, the only spontaneous racist statement that came from the non-acting participants was the cowboy/general manager of the rodeo, Bobby Rowe, who spoke about Muslims

and terrorists and cautioned the Borat character that he “looked like one of them” (following this up with a healthy dose of homophobia).

Herein is the overwhelmingly overlooked element of *Borat*; that the film is heavily reliant on the West’s fear, and sentiments of superiority over the East and Islam. It is through the ignorance, backwardness, oppressive normalcy of Borat the character that the humour plays out. His ignorance is positioned as opposite to the audience’s (West’s) enlightenment, modernity, and stance of liberty and equality. These are among the oldest tropes of Orientalist rhetoric, namely to position the Other as something that both reviles and appeals to “us” (Said, 1978). It (the Orient and those who represent it) is both exotic and inferior.

Absent from the Debate

Much of the North American discourses in regard to multicultural issues, in cinema and otherwise, are still predominantly dominated by power bloc voices (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). “Sikhs carrying Kirpans,” “Filipinos eating rice with spoons,” and “the problem” of “Muslim girls wearing hejabs” in school are all subjects of news headlines and 24-hour news punditry debates. Recent North American politicians’ offhand comments like “les yeux bridés,” “Paki,” or “Ma-caca” are, to a greater and lesser extent, examined and explained by those who have uttered the words, rather than those to whom the words are aimed. Much is the same in the Borat discussion; amongst the multitude of accolades showered upon Cohen is the small minority of voices that question the nobility of Cohen’s film. Specifically absent are the voices of Kazakhs, and all those who are implicated with the stereotypes that Cohen has evoked. Again, those who are not the targets of the offense tell all of us what is and is not offensive and racist. Like the character Borat, “we” who are the Oriental other are too backward to understand the significant contributions this film makes as social commentary, contributions that outweigh any offense we may feel. Few have asked, what might the character mean for those it names as representing?

In one of Edward Said’s (2002) last writings, he reflected that some forms of speaking on behalf of certain ethnic/racial groups by Occidental (Western) researchers are now considered inappropriate. Purposefully using the word “Negro” to demonstrate what not so long ago was acceptable public vocabulary, Said wrote “... it has now become inappropriate to speak on behalf of ‘Negroes’ ...” (p. 71). While many in the power blocks now shake their head in public disapproval to speech that is now reserved for private conversations, xenophobic and paternalistic statements and sentiments still permeate North American discourse. For example, the overwhelming multitude of non-Muslim men and women who define what a hejab signifies to Muslim women in public spaces exists alongside popularly-expressed sentiments to “help” those Muslim women. This discourse of aid depends upon a deeply-embedded way of knowing the Muslim woman as inherently oppressed.

Going further, to know the *non*-Muslim woman as liberated is dependent upon knowing the Muslim woman as oppressed. Sally Field, playing Betty Mahmoody (not her birth surname), in the popular film, *Not Without my Daughter*, was a powerful illustration of this sentiment. A non-Muslim woman who is presented as knowing “both sides.”

Cinema does not differ greatly from popular sentiment, since any popular media representation depends upon a discourse the audience is already familiar with to tell its story. The hero overcoming unanticipated obstacles story, the unrequited lovers story, the road trip story are all formulas that movie-going audiences are familiar with. Just saying “unrequited lovers story” serves as a short-hand vocabulary for all the meanings, plot turns, likely scenarios, scenes that the audience can expect to encounter. The many racisms perpetuated in film have, over time, undergone transformation. Bogle’s (1995) *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks* chronicles the beginning of racist/stereotyped portrayals of African Americans in film and the changes that have occurred over time. Comparatively, and in no way suggesting that those of African diaspora are now free from Hollywood’s stereotypes for we would argue that the oppression of people of Black heritage has gotten more complex rather than been “resolved,” a peruse of Shaheen’s (2001) tome chronicling ethno-racial stereotypes about Arabs (Iranians, Muslims, and the Middle East in general) in cinema reveals that there has been little to no change in their treatment. Why?

A familiar tool in the medium of film is the need for the Other to propel the storyline, to assure a “they” in comparison to “us.” The movie medium has run through their ethnic, religious, and ideological characters to act as foils, sidekicks, clowns, or some other prop against the Hollywood archetypes of “good.” Jews, Communists, Irish, Native Indians, African Americans, Africans, Aborigines, Asians, etc ... have all had their share at playing the role of antagonist or supporting role to the West’s White protagonist. Where some groups, the Irish for example, have managed to break away from the monolith stereotypes of Hollywood, often by just fading into Whiteness, or fading out of view altogether, others like the West’s image of the “Middle-Eastern Muslim” retain the status of terrifying villain, backward buffoon, or oppressed victim, often in need of salvation from their own ethnic and/or religious tyranny. *Borat*, with its reliance on the primitive buffoonery of the main character, sets out on a quest to gain knowledge from the wise West. And whether intentionally or not, its impact is part of a familiar pattern of stereotypes about people of the Muslim East and needs to be understood for the stark similarities this representation has to minstrel-like characteristics.

Desert Minstrels and Brownface

Before we risk being perceived as oversensitive killjoys, and for the sake of clarity, yes, we understand the humour. We comprehend the comedic devices and the ridiculousness of the contexts and how the movie’s message relies heavily on

the over-the-top ignorance of Borat, the shock of his targets, and that this makes the situations funny. What we are attempting to do in this article is to unravel that rather than a novelty and bravery of social commentary, Borat parallels a typical, familiar, historical pattern of minstrel-like portrayals of Muslims, Middle-Easterners, East Asians, South-East Asians and the generalized Eastern Other in cinema—whether it falls into the category of a continued acceptance of “brownface,” from Sam Jaffe in *Gunga Din* (1939), Peter Sellers in *The Party* (1968) to Will Ferrell in *Austin Powers* (1997), that has been used to represent “the East” or whether it is something altogether different.¹ We also question, whether Borat is being perceived by audiences and critics as a satire in the same manner of Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled* (2000), demanding its audience to question the morality of enjoying overt racial stereotypes, or falling into the same ethical dangers that comedian Dave Chapelle warned in response to his now infamous “*Pixie Sketch*”; whether the audience is laughing at the satirical elements or at the stereotypes themselves. Just as movie stories depend upon a short-hand plot signal (such as “the love story”) to tell their stories, we believe *Borat* uses the short-hand vocabulary that “Eastern Muslim foreigner” offers (via its tools like dark moustachioed men, brown skin, ‘funny’ clothes, and the thick non-descript accents) to tell its story.

In using Steinberg’s (2004) term “desert-minstrel” in reference to Muslim-Eastern characters, we are offering two thoughts: first, that there is a Muslim-Easterner equivalent, in film, to the slow-witted, lazy, superstitious jester that stereotyped African Americans for decades; and, second, that in using “brownface,” modified from “blackface”—a term associated with minstrel shows, we are suggesting that the prevailing characteristics of the Muslim-Easterner in popular film is a creation of those who wield power, as opposed to those that such images represent, even when played by actors who are of Muslim-Eastern origin. While the blackface image and discourses embedded in it may have gone underground (only to be revealed in unguarded moments by men like Michael Richards or Don Imus), we believe the colonialist roots and contemporary political and military social discourses in the West continue to uphold the brownface stereotypes upon which films like *Borat* rely.

On the subject of brownface, Stephen Colbert, in his usual earnest yet deadpan style, noted the futility of his guest, Iranian actor/comedian Maz Jobrani’s, stance that he would no longer audition for stereotypical terrorist roles and said, “...would you be willing to see White actors in Arab-face?” (October, 2006). Of course, as far as we are concerned these brownface roles *have* been played by White actors, and the stories of the Muslim Middle East have been told by non-Muslims and non-Middle Easterners for centuries. Perhaps, one might be led to believe that there is something altogether acceptable about brownface, if you agree that it exists at all. Consider Will Ferrell’s character of Mustaffa, the assassin, in *Austin Powers*. A quick internet search for the character’s image and you will have to decide for yourself: either Ferrell spent quite an extreme amount of time and energy tanning, or someone applied brown pancake makeup to assure that the audience not

be confused about what “Mustaffa” ought to look like. If the second is the case, brownface exists. As to whether brownface is acceptable, then the consideration must be made as to whether or not it serves to benefit or detract from the peoples it represents, and perhaps that answer can be found in those actors of Muslim and/or Eastern decent that have played these roles.

Actor/comedian Omid Djalili, of Middle-Eastern origin, describes the recurring jobs he was offered as the “Arab-scumbag” (2001) roles. His own way of handling the humiliation of the stereotyped acting work was by adding more comedy to the part. Despite this, in his 2003 National Public Radio interview, the actor/comedian begins to further reveal the degrading nature of these characters.

NPR: ... in the lavish adventure movie *The Mummy* Djalili played a “greasy” Egyptian prison warden.

Djalili: Really, a “filthy Arab” ... just the butt of all the jokes. And I slide down a rope and John Hannah says, “What’s that awful smell?” and my buttocks comes into view and it’s all that stuff (laughs).

Although there are connections Djalili (2001) makes with his acting predecessors who endured similar ethnic stereotyping, such as Nadim Sawahla and Burt Kwouk, “... who always performed with gusto, but also seemed to do it with an ironic twinkle in their eye,” one has to wonder whether or not other film viewers pick up on such subtleties. In essence, as Dave Chapelle pondered, are they laughing with or at the stereotyped characters?

Are You Laughing at Borat or with Borat?

Part of the process of analyzing whether or not the humour in *Borat* is based on Islamophobia or racialized Islam is to determine whether or not Borat is seen by the audience as a Muslim. From our searches we can not comment on Cohen’s intent because, as to date, he has not directly addressed the race, ethnicity, or religious aspect of his Borat character, or for that matter his Ali G character. What we can discuss is the seemingly purposeful ambiguity that Cohen utilizes in regard to religion and race and the perceptions it evokes in scenes with everyday Americans, and with viewers. Although the responses of film-goers to the Islamophobia elicited by the Borat character are ignored by the majority of film critics who positively reviewed the film, they were major considerations for those who found the film to be utilizing a “baser” comedic approach.

Although rarely using the term “brownface,” some authors referred to the “blackface” nature of Cohen’s characters, noting earlier work with Ali G elicited this response in viewers. Not really disapproving of Cohen’s work, in Yakasai’s (2003) review he quotes a 19-year-old London resident, originally from Mali, who notes that he can see “... a similarity between him and the old comedians wearing shoe polish as black” and continues with his “man on the street” examination conclud-

ing from various sources that he should not be taken "...too seriously..." and that ultimately, he is "...a novelty..." Fast forward to 2006 and Cohen's character is smashing attendance records and reaching a wide audience. In another positive review of *Borat*, Rich Cohen (2006) noted that Baron Cohen was met with accusations of racism earlier in his career:

He's been criticized for performing a variation of the minstrel show: a Jewish boy in blackface. When he went to promote his first movie, *Ali G Indahouse*, he was met by protestors, some carrying signs that said, AL JOLSON, GO HOME.

Although he does describe *Borat* as a "...perfect mirror of the age," Rich Cohen also raises Sacha Baron Cohen's often cited graduate thesis on "Jews in civil-rights movements" stating, "In fact, every article about the comedian mentions Cambridge (look, I just did it myself) because, I'm convinced, it makes the more disturbing parts of his act less unacceptable." In discussing Sacha Baron Cohen's international ascendance from the British cable market, where his act had lost its edge, to the United States, Rich Cohen wrote, "... so he came to America, which offered the same shot it offers all pilgrims—the dream, the hills and prairies, but mostly a chance to start over, and a whole nation of fresh marks." Perhaps, what Rich Cohen did not intend in the analogy, is that the pilgrims received all their bounty at the expense of another. In Sacha Baron Cohen's case, part of his success comes from not only revealing America's trouble with racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, etc..., but does so at the expense of its accepted perceptions of the stereotyped Muslim and Middle-Easterner. But there is no suggestion that Borat is Muslim; his only religion seems to be anti-Semitism (Hoberman, 2006).

Certainly, there is not part of the film where Cohen scripts Borat to state explicitly that he is Muslim. Even if we analyze the major religions of Kazakhstan it would not reveal as much as the choice of using Kazakhstan as Borat's place of birth because it evokes so much of the "one of those 'stan' countries", much like the "Iraq, Iran ... *whatever!*" mentalities in the viewer. As Drummond (2006) observes, "... 'Borat' resonates so much with audiences because of the West's unease about Muslim cultural attitudes. (...) Borat's blend of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and general backwardness all carefully correspond with American stereotypes of Islam." Drummond further remarks that these are very specific stereotypes that the West has imposed upon the "Muslim culture." Similarly, Tierney (2006) writes, "What bothers me most about the movie is its premise: that villagers who have not embraced Western values are violently anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic and misogynistic. Borat is an absurd caricature, but we wouldn't laugh if we didn't think there was some truth to the stereotype of the morally backward peasant" (Tierney, 2006, P. A 15).

"Are you laughing *with* Borat or *at* Borat?" is an important question. Cohen's character, as Drummond points out, is more than just a "generic Third Worlder who did not remind audiences of a Muslim in any way whatsoever." In trying to uncover

hidden racisms, Cohen has chosen a character that represents racist stereotypes and a stereotype that one is “free” to exploit. Quite frankly, no Muslim group would have received any attention from the media or moviegoers in general, because, as Drummond sums up, whereas Americans may have felt guilty at laughing at an “African tribesman,” they “... felt no guilt in laughing at Borat.” As the majority of reviewers praise Cohen and his valour, very few note this aspect and ask “why are we laughing?” or at the very least say, yes, you may have laughed, but “(j)ust don’t call it politically courageous satire” (Boler, 2006).

Conclusion:

We May Have Missed the Joke, but Here’s What We Didn’t Miss

We didn’t miss that Borat depends upon a classical, gendered Orientalist discourse to tell the story of a backward Muslim man, oppressing Muslim women. But this time, the Muslim woman’s oppression is not marked by her veil, it is marked by her villiager-body, whorish allusion, and willingness to have sex with anybody willing to take her. Although a familiar sexist stereotype of old-school Western sexism, this Madonna/whore binary is not unknown in Western representations of Muslim women. In a brilliant critique of *National Geographic*’s representation of the Arab world and Muslim women, Steet (2000) writes that Muslim women have been the object of the Western male gaze, and their bodies displayed and presented as an accessible soft-core porn for over a century. In fact, the belly-dancing seductress is a common representation of all that is sexual, yet exoticized enough to allude to a perverse fetishism of the Muslim woman’s body. By representing Muslim women’s oppression as the same as Western women’s (i.e., both are fetishized and sexualized objects), Borat as a character is brought closer to its mainstream audience: presumably “men” (i.e., all “normal” heterosexual men) who share the fetishized, sexualized fantasies about women’s bodies. As evident in the film, Borat’s ability to befriend and ally himself with American men depends upon a narrative of classic sexism.

We didn’t miss that this gendered Orientalist discourse, establishing a binary within a binary (male/ female, liberated/ oppressed), is simultaneously tapping in to heterosexist norms in mainstream Western culture. In a critique of the masculinist, homophobic discourses in pro-wrestling, Jhally & Katz (2000) argue that the creation of an heroic, masculine body whose very body and essence is a spectacle of heteronormativity, depends upon the creation of a feminized body against which the masculinity is on display. In describing the relationship between the hyper-masculinity on display in pro-wrestling, and its relation to homophobia, they write, “The hyper-masculine wrestling subculture is also deeply infused with homophobic anxiety. Macho posturing and insults...can barely mask the fear of feminization that is always present in the homoerotic entanglement of male bodies.” It is hard to argue that a very real pro-wrestling *Smackdown* style homoerotic entanglement of male bodies does not take place in *Borat*. Once again, *Borat* embodies traditional

mainstream White male heteronormative fears and fascinations. This is further evidenced by the way in which Borat is welcomed into the fold of traditional White male collegiality. Many of the film's "real life" men express a liking for Borat, and many in fact give Borat tips on how to take his overt sexism and homophobia underground (rodeo official advises: *shave the moustache*; car dealer nodding his head in understanding as Borat says, *When I uh, buy my wife, she was, cook good, her vagine work well and she strong on plough. But after three years when she was, uh, fifteen, then she become weak, her voice become deep*, etc). We believe this affinity is a glorification of nothing other than a traditional "old boys club" fraternity. Borat embodies all of the sexist, homophobic, xenophobic sentiments that mainstream "old boys" can no longer express in public.

We also did not miss that Borat depends on a *class*-narrative to set up the jokes. Social class is an undeniable organizer of social life in the United States. How is Borat different from the "White trash" on display in any classist depiction of poverty in rural United States? He has poor manners, speaks with a drawl, is at times incoherent, travels with a chicken, has sex with his cousin, dresses in clothing that is out of style and too big for him, he does not know "big city" ways, has never been in a "fancy" elevator, and on and on it goes. How different is Borat from the Hillbillies on their way to Beverly Hills?

To us, it really is not so funny. In fact, for both of us of who come from Middle Eastern heritage, this film was difficult to watch. Although yes, to some degree, it could be argued that it has evoked a debate on its social commentary. Rather than brilliant social critique, the comment we heard was this: mainstream middle-America is racist, sexist, heterosexist, ableist, classist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic—although we suspect that if you spoke to anyone on the growing margins of middle-America, you would find few surprised faces to this comment. What *is* significant is that liberal North Americans and those who would describe themselves as progressive and who are most likely to find this film appealing and powerful, fall into the same myopic views that further continue to oppress others, which is now articulated within a global, colonialist vocabulary of difference.

Notes

¹ <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=borat.htm>

² Of interest is that Rich Cohen (2006) notes that Sacha Baron Cohen's hero is Peter Sellers and that he is friends with Will Ferrell.

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Christopher D. Stonebanks is an associate professor at Bishops University and Özlem Sensoy is an assistant professor at Simon Fraser University.