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### Can the Veil be Naturalized? An Extra-Philosophical Response to Al-Saji

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In "The Racialization of Muslim Veils," Alia Al-Saji stands in the shadow of Said's *Orientalism* when she writes,

...western representations of veiled Muslim women are not simply *about* Muslim women themselves. Rather than *representing* Muslim women, these images...provide the foil or negative mirror in which western constructions of identity and gender can be positively *reflected*. It is by means of the projection of gender oppression onto Islam, specifically onto the bodies of veiled women, that such mirroring takes place. (Al-Saji 2010, 877)

Al-Saji argues, in addition, that gender oppression has been *naturalized* to the bodies of veiled women, or perhaps more specifically to the veils themselves, by the western gaze. The veil, like skin color or female breasts, becomes the visible marker of the purported inferiority of Muslim culture. Noting the extent to which public discourses against the veil in France and elsewhere have used

a concern for the liberation of women to cloak anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment, Al-Saji concludes,

What is at stake here is a form of cultural racism that hides itself under the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse. The naturalization of gender oppression to veiled Muslim women thus permits the norm of western womanhood to be constituted as 'free' of such oppression, as the only imaginable mode of female subjectivity. (ibid.)

The first part of Al-Saji's argument – that the veil serves as a screen onto which a certain understanding of the west is projected – is familiar from the work of Said and others. Joan Scott effectively deploys a version of it in her well-known book, *Politics of the Veil*. Scott's interest is "in the way the veil became a screen onto which were projected images of strangeness and fantasies of danger – danger to the fabric of French society and to the future of the republican nation." (Scott 2007, 10) Scott, like Al-Saji, remarks that the French debates on the veil construed the oppression of women as if it were a uniquely Muslim phenomenon, when it is patently the case that women are sexually objectified in both non-Muslim French and French Muslim communities: "Ironically, Islamic theory puts sex out there as a problem for all to see by conspicuously covering the body, while the French call for a conspicuous display of bodies in order to deny the problem that sex poses for republican political theory." (Scott 2007, 167)

The second part of Al-Saji's argument, that a form of *cultural* racism is at work in the various headscarf affairs, has likewise been noted by many. Karen Wren, for example, has shown that cultural racism in Denmark is alive and well, and busy employing the rhetoric of liberal democratic values as a justification for negative views of Muslim and refugee communities. Wren defines the essence of cultural racism as the view that "Europeans are not *racially*, but *culturally* superior." (Wren 2001, 143) She traces the theory to Fanon, like Al-Saji, and astutely notes that whereas biological racism was used to justify the forced *inclusion* of colonized populations in the workforce under exploitative conditions, cultural racism is used to justify the civil and political *exclusion* of formerly colonized peoples on the grounds that they are too "culturally different." (Wren 2001, 144) Arguing that cultural racism is on the rise throughout Europe, Wren nonetheless

maintains that the forms it takes are place-specific. In Denmark, the history of Danish nationalism and the forms of its celebration, the role of the far-right and the media in sustaining certain forms of nationalism, and the lack of significant representation of ethnic minorities in the media and in local politics contribute in unique ways to a situation in which the majority of Danes have come to accept "that social inequalities between themselves and the 'other' are due to cultural factors that make it impossible for ethnic minorities to adapt." (Wren 2001, 159)

One of the strengths of Al-Saji's intervention is the manner in which she ties cultural racism back to biological racism by considering the role of the body in the former and not only the latter. Indeed, though Al-Saji doesn't make this point explicitly, her work points to the way in which cultural racism derives an unearned benefit, if you will, from overtly denying its link to biological racism, even as it creates and exploits a bodily marker of cultural inferiority. And it is precisely this overt distance from biologically racist discourses that permits cultural racism to employ the language of French republican values such as liberty, equality, or secularity in the construction of the inferiority of "other" communities or cultures. But even as I'm deeply appreciative of this aspect of Al-Saji's work, I have hesitations about the claim that gender oppression is "naturalized to the veil." In the first place, the idiom here is a bit hard to untangle. Is the claim that when "westerners" see the veil they somehow *see* gender oppression just as obviously or "naturally" as seeing leaves swirling outside is *seeing* the wind? Or is the idea, in theoretical terms, that the veil is socially constructed to serve as a marker of gender oppression and cultural inferiority and that this construction masks its own operation by portraying the veil as naturally oppressive?

In either case, the veil seems an unlikely candidate for a univocal or naturalized meaning: as a volatile and mobile symbol, the veil seems more likely to contest than to succumb to a single meaning. Moreover, the multiple meanings of the veil and veiling have been at the heart of European debates and certainly French debates have been no exception in this regard. That various parties have pushed for the dominance of one meaning over others – the veil as symbol of religious piety and modesty, the veil as symbol of women's exclusion from the public sphere – is undoubtedly true, but since the debate, at least in part, is a debate over *which* meaning(s) will prevail, it is hard

to accept that "westerners" see the veil only as naturally oppressive and don't see its multiple meanings.

Moreover, it is unclear who gets to count as a "westerner" here. Are French women from Muslim communities who advocated for the ban on the veil *not* western? Or are they perhaps *too* western? Or duped somehow by the west? The notion of a "western" perception – even with the caveat that the very notion of the 'West' is an "imaginary formation" (Al-Saji 2010, 878) and a "complex discursive field" (Al-Saji 2010, 895n.12) – is as potentially reductive as any supposed naturalization of the veil, and may impede rather than further our understanding of the various phenomena associated with the debates over veiling in France. I want to look at one instance in which I think the phenomenological tendency to look for essences is at work in an ultimately unproductive way in Al-Saji's text and then to suggest that an understanding of cultural racism in the French case, as in the Danish case, is better served by a more context and place sensitive transnational feminist perspective.

To be clear, my worry is not at all that Al-Saji doesn't recognize the multiple meanings of veiling. Indeed, more than once, Al-Saji notes the historical, geographic, and culturally specific forms that veiling takes and the multiplicity of meanings associated with veiling in Muslim cultures past and present. Further, there is an implicit nod to the idea of place-specific forms of cultural racism insofar as Al-Saji limits the focus of her essay to France. And certainly the *affaire du foulard* is but poorly understood outside the context of French republicanism (France's unique brand of nationalism) and the history of French colonialism and post-colonialism. Nonetheless, there are discernible moments when Al-Saji seems to want her analysis to apply more broadly, perhaps even universally, to "western" representations of veiled Muslim women. (Al-Saji 2010, 877) The universal tendency comes to the fore especially, it seems to me, in the discussion of clothing and the body. Following phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, Al-Saji suggests that clothing forms an "integrated part" of one's body schema and that it is an "extension that cannot be removed without transforming one's bodily sense of self." (Al-Saji 2010, 890) "Crucial for my argument," writes Al-Saji, is the idea that "extensions [such as veils] affectively and kinaesthetically transform and recast one's sense of bodily space (as well as one's body image)" (ibid.). Thus, veiling on Al-Saji's view can be formative of the subject

to the extent that “unveiling is experienced as bodily disintegration or immobilization” (ibid.).

No doubt this last claim will be true in some cases, but it is just as likely to be false in different contexts. It does not take much to imagine that women who have veiled for a lifetime would experience unveiling in public, especially if forced, and especially if unveiled women are not the norm, as a violation of their bodily integrity akin to other forms of sexual violence. But it is just as likely that veiling, especially where it is forced and not the norm, could be experienced as a violent imposition upon the body and a harmful constriction of body schema and one’s sense of bodily space. Indeed, Iris Marion Young’s work on throwing like a girl and breasted experience might well be used to suggest that women who veil have an unfairly limited or amputated body schema and a more constricted spatial sense than they might otherwise have and than is enjoyed by men in their culture. In other words, even if Al-Saji is right that clothing can be seen universally as an extension of body schema, just *how* clothing will affect body schema will be a function of historical, cultural, geographic, and individual circumstances.

A salient point in the French case is the way the wearing of headscarves has changed not just generically over time, but quite specifically with the circumstances of succeeding generations. The headscarf was not uncommon for the first wave of Muslim women emigrating to France from Northern Africa (and coming there under newly liberal policies permitting immigration for family unification); it was much less common for their children and subsequent generations, but has been on the rise in the last decade or longer. To understand these shifts as well as reactions to them both inside and outside the French Muslim community, one needs to look at the history of French immigration and labor policies (including especially the feminization of immigration in the early 1970s); at French economic and unemployment crises in both the early seventies and the early nineties; at government policies governing the funding and formation of social organizations; and at the way in which the very idea of a French Muslim community is itself arguably an invention of the French state and its policies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On this last point, see especially Geisser and Zemouri (2010) who argue that French government policies have kept Muslim communities and their state appointed representatives highly visible in order to “manage, control, and

Returning to the headscarf affairs more directly, the first such affair that roiled France in 1989 concerned that second-generation children of immigrants; though many women at that time, and especially women of Maghrebian origin, did not veil, they supported the young girls from Creil who were at the center of the first *affaire*, signing petitions insisting on the girls’ *right* to express their cultural and religious values as they chose and, importantly, claiming that these values were *part of* a new French culture, not something outside it. It was this second generation – educated and raised in France – who took up the language of French republican values and used it in new ways to defend cultural rights and to condemn anti-Muslim racism. It was also this second generation who benefitted from a 1981 reversal that permitted social organizations headed by foreigners to receive state funding. *SOS Racisme* was one such organization that rose to prominence and helped orchestrate the 1983 *Marche des beurs*.

Some of these same women, who initially supported the headscarf and whose initial fight was against the racism directed at their community from a wider French culture, found themselves on the opposite side of the issue during the more recent headscarf affairs. Fadela Amara, an activist with *SOS Racisme* in her twenties and an activist and founding member of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* in her forties, explains the shift in her attitudes toward the veil this way:

You have to understand that the mentality is different [now] than it was in ’89, when girls wore the veil as a cultural claim. [Then] It was about belonging to a certain identity category, even perhaps a civilization. Up against an extremely difficult context of racism, infringement, exclusion, etcetera, this identity was carried like a banner. It was an affirmation for recognition of a certain identity, and most of all, it was affirmed with a certain dignity. Then something unexpected happened. On top of the mass unemployment that affected the *quartiers*, on top of exclusion from a Republic that didn’t want to recognize all its children...there was

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surveil” them. For a brief overview of how these factors came together to position Muslim women in France in a specific way, see the introduction to *Taking French Feminism to the Streets: Fadela Amara and the Rise of Ni Putes Ni Soumises* (Murray and Perpich 2011).

also the creation and implantation of Islamist sects that took off at this particular time. From then on, this communitarian system influenced by religious extremism pulled the rug out from under the French secular republican system. (Murray and Perpich 2011, 149)

For Amara, it is effectively the prolonged and unaddressed racism of French society that created fertile conditions for the rise of fundamentalist movements that pushed an agenda that included rolling back women's rights under the guise of fighting for cultural rights or the right to "traditional" cultural forms. For the activists of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, their fight has to be waged on two fronts at once: against the sexism that persists in their communities of origin, on the one hand, and against the racism of wider French society, on the other. Moreover, there is a direct acknowledgement in the actions of the movement that Muslim communities, too, have race problems (that often surface as anti-Semitism) and that French culture is no stranger to sexism.

To choose one side or the other in the headscarf affair thus landed Amara and her organization in uncomfortable company. To fight for the right to wear the headscarf in public schools meant being allied with the Islamist right, whose views about the exclusion of women from the public sphere clash with the discourse of equal rights and opportunities that Amara values in her French culture (even if such rights and opportunities are, admittedly, imperfectly realized there). To fight for the ban on headscarves – the side Amara chose – put her uncomfortably in alliance with the center and extreme right in France, both of which were using the discourse of French republican values to further an agenda that was anti-immigration and anti-Muslim. Amara was accused by conservative and fundamentalist sectors of French Muslim communities of selling out when she testified to the Stasi commission. She was likewise lambasted by Christine Delphy and other feminists for whom multiculturalism was a rallying cry. It is worth noting that some of these multicultural feminists were Muslim women as well. Houria Bouteldja, who has worked closely with Delphy, is a founding member of the group *Indigènes de la République*; this group, which is led by women who are a generation later than Amara, and who are feminists of a different stripe again, advocated vocally against the ban on the veil calling it a return to colonial policies of forced assimilation.

No analysis that is abstracted from the cultural, political, historical, geographic, and individual complexities of Muslim women in France adequately captures the headscarf affair or the cultural racism that surfaced in the affaire. Further, if we assume that there are two recognizable groups called "Muslim women" and "westerners," we cannot at all do justice to the untenable position occupied specifically by Muslim women in France, both when they agreed with anti-veiling movements but equally when they disagreed. Muslim women – caught between a French nationalist right-wing that appeals to feminism to promote a racist agenda, and an Islamist right-wing that stokes racism to promote a sexist agenda – had nowhere to stand, nowhere from which to voice their views without becoming allied and entangled with the right-wing agenda of one group or the other. Al-Saji seems quite aware of this in the instance of non-Muslim feminists like Christine Delphy who opposed the ban on the veil, but seems less receptive to seeing that Muslim feminists supporting the ban were in the same position, if on the other side of it. (And it bears remembering that the ban was supported by strong majorities of men and women in both Muslim and non-Muslim French communities). Feminists on both sides of the issue were effectively caught between a rock and a hard place.

Even if we restrict ourselves to the case of France, can we really speak so sanguinely of "western" projections onto the veil? The Muslim women's voices that were most vocal in the debates around the Stasi commission and the law to ban "conspicuous" religious symbols were those of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* and the *Indigènes de la République*. Both groups were largely made up of women born in France, thus French citizens, raised in French schools and speaking French as natives, though they were also the children of immigrants from North Africa and France's former colonies. Are we so ready to say that these women are not westerners? Or is it that they projected their own western identity onto the screen of the veiled bodies of their sisters and cousins? The latter claim may actually have some validity and a discussion of it would be very interesting, but it goes unnoticed and undiscussed in Al-Saji's essay which perhaps too readily embraces the current phenomenological language of "Same" and "Other" or, as here, "Western" and "Other."

I would contend that "western" versus "non-western" misses almost entirely the complexity of the French terrain on which the headscarf affair was fought, at least as that terrain was understood by many of

the vocal Muslim women who participated in the debates. As Said noted in his famous work on *Orientalism*, "...the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America', 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse... must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power" (Said 1979, xxiii). In this respect, the works of Frantz Fanon and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which may well have represented cutting edge thinking about race and politics during the Algerian war of independence, do not necessarily serve us well when we turn to what is ostensibly better understood in a *transnational* feminist perspective which neither theorist represents.

Fanon, for example, is well aware of the ways in which French colonizers exploited colonized women's bodies, both in rape fantasies and actual rapes, and as a tool for the demoralization of Algerian men and the destruction of the fabric of Algerian family life. He is also well aware of the ways in which women in Algeria who had long abandoned the traditional *haik* came to don it again in the face of this attack. Thus, in discussing women's role in the Algerian war of independence, Fanon is sensitive to the transnational dimension of their action. But it would be difficult to suggest that his essay is in any way *feminist*. His discussions of "the" Algerian woman – as if their lives were uniform, as if there were no divisions among them and no dissent from the patriarchal structure of Algerian life at the time – would benefit from a more nuanced perspective. He also records, without comment, the fact that Algerian women were denied formal education; that veiled women were largely rendered invisible to Algerian men by the veil (and thus relegated to the margins of Algerian political and economic life); and that unveiled women revolutionaries were thereby rendered hyper-visible to Algerian men and boys, and thus subject to abuse by young men whom Fanon casually describes as being abusive in the same way as "young men all over the world" (Fanon 1969, 175-76).

This is not to say that Fanon's analyses are without use in today's world. Far from it. But they cannot be imported lock, stock, and barrel from the struggles of one generation to those that follow it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bronwyn Winter, for example, convincingly argues that caution is needed before we too readily or too easily assimilate the story of French Algeria and Algerians in France to the hijab debate. See Winter 2008, 103 and following.

There can be little doubt that the ban on headscarves in French public schools has roots in the forced unveiling of Algerian women during colonization. It would be naïve or worse to deny the historical connection, but it may be equally naïve to see a direct continuity from one instance to the other. In particular, moving from Fanon's essay to the present day misses crucial moments in the history of immigration in France and the history of immigrant activism.

So, in the final analysis, what changes about our understanding of the headscarf affair if we approach it from a transnational feminist perspective rather than a phenomenological or philosophical one? I will note only two points here. First, from a transnational perspective it is easier to see and give credence to the complex and rocky terrain on which France's Muslim feminists stand. In the first place, we can acknowledge that they are genuinely caught between the proverbial rock and hard place and that their interventions in debate are more than likely to be coopted by more than one side. Acknowledging this also allows us not to reduce all Muslim feminists to a single kind, any more than white or dominant group feminists in France are all of a single kind (despite the homogenizing presentation of "French feminism" in the English speaking academic world). That different Muslim women are addressing the interconnection of racism, sexism, and the history of colonization and immigration in different ways and with different strategic interests will no longer surprise us when the terrain on which they operate is presented in a more complex way. And this brings us to a second gain to be had from a transnational feminist perspective. Women's activism can be seen as an expression of choices made in a local and generationally, historically and geographically specific set of circumstances rather than as the expression of adherence to a philosophical principle. Certainly a weakness of feminist theory as it is practiced in the academy is its failure to take activism into account. Amara's commitments, which changed over the course of two decades, are not the expression of a change in principle, but a change in strategy. Her bet, if you will, was that the ban on the headscarf in school would do more to further the autonomy and equality of young women than would a growing fundamentalist movement. Only time will tell whether the bet paid off, but in fact it is arguable that the debate in

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Winter's study of *Hijab and the Republic* is a model of a nuanced, transnational feminist analysis.

France is better off for the voices of all Muslim women, speaking on all sides of the issue, rather than their having no voice at all or speaking only in a single voice. In introducing a transnationalist feminist perspective that frames the issue in a more contextualist way, not only do we create the possibility for more *theoretical* solidarity among feminists with different ideological commitments, we also turn attention back to where it needs to be, away from theory and back towards the women whose lives are lived not just thinking about but concretely negotiating the tensions between solidarity with their communities of origin and their desire, as women, for the full range of human rights and full social and political standing.

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