

Sydney College of the Arts
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IMAGE AND VOICE: MUSLIM WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

August 2015

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, Tom Loveday, for his patient optimism, encouragement and thought provoking discussion in all stages of the Master of Fine Arts post-graduate degree. I am very grateful for Fiona McGregor who took the time to edit this paper with an acute attention to detail and probing, salient questions. I have been blessed to have so many friends to support me through this period of writing. John Von Sturmer, Liz Whitby, Margot, Arzu Ates, Marion Moore, Anna Crane, Akin Sevinc, Peter Politis, Aggie Tyson, Monica, Madeline Oliver and Jonathan McBurnie; I absolutely cherish your friendship, support and encouragement. Jane, Reubeen, Michael, Pieter, Belinda, Carrie, Saffaa, and Ken, thanks for hearing me through all sorts of struggles. Thank you to my mum and dad, my sister Oznur Aydemir, and her children Seyma and Yakub Tanrisever.

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Western image of the Muslim woman in the context of contemporary art. Through my art practice I use the veiled woman cipher to reflect on personal experiences whilst broadening definitions and displacing hegemonic representations of veiling and Muslim women in an Australian cultural context. These are exemplified through autobiographical elements, parody in the Extremist Activity series, performative interventions illustrating the concept of the body as an occupied site and architectural devices that (re)create notions of inclusion, exclusion and otherness in space. From loquacious and overbearing noblewomen to helpless harem slaves awaiting rescue by her Orientalist saviours, an analysis of the development of the Muslim woman's image throughout history reveals the shifting and contingent nature of her role in the Western imagination. Finally, an examination of current representations of Muslim women in Australian contemporary art demonstrates how these images often repeat and reinforce, rather than depart from, Orientalist and neo-Orientalist constructs.

Introduction

I am a tall, blonde-haired, green-eyed, and freckled Muslim woman. Apart from my unusual sounding name, people I meet are generally surprised to hear that I am Muslim - 'when did you convert?' is a familiar response. I was born into a Muslim family with Turkish immigrant parents in Sydney, Australia. I chose¹ to start wearing the veil² in public when I was 10 years old and stopped wearing it when I was 20. I was educated in a variety of private Muslim and public secular schools. Being identifiable as Muslim from a very young age and for such a long period of time has become the cornerstone to my identity formation over the years, and unpacking its significance – both personally and politically - has become the major project of my artistic practice today.

Far from being another piece of cloth, a religious accoutrement much like the crucifix pendant, the veil is a complex and loaded sign, overburdened with competing symbolism. It is also a historically constructed and artificial site, often used by people and institutions from all sides of political debate to dress borders and create hierarchies, despite the growing scholarly consensus that acknowledges the veil's polysemy in a variety of public settings.

I use the term 'veil' when referring to the shared site it occupies in Western discourse, though certainly not to reinforce the often reductive nature of its use in this context. As Myra McDonald writes, "The single item of clothing identified as "the veil" obscures diversity in body-covering practices and brings both the loose head-scarf and the all-encompassing burqa in to a

¹ 'Insisted' to be more accurate.

² I use the term 'veil' to refer to the Muslim veiling practice of covering the head whilst revealing the face. The Arabic translation of 'hijab' is the term most commonly associated with this type of veiling practice. In Turkish it is referred to as 'basortu'.

singular discursive frame.”³ I use relatively specific cultural terminology whenever it is relevant and possible, for example I refer to the all-encompassing veil in the Extremist Activity series as the niqab in Chapter One, although this comes at a cost. Different cultures often have different words to refer to the more common types of veiling practices, and Arabic translations are often privileged in Western contexts. For example the common type of veil that covers the head while revealing the face is referred to as hijab in Arabic, and basortu (literally meaning ‘headscarf’) in Turkish, while the less common yet widely recognised veil that covers the whole body with only an opening for the eyes is referred to as niqab in Arabic and pece in Turkish.

Similarly, I am aware that terms such as ‘West’ or ‘Western’ are contested for their historically entrenched nature and their perceived cultural and civilizational associations with the “developed” world. For this reason ‘Euro-American’ has been the more widely used alternative in contemporary scholarship.⁴ It is not within the purview of this study to explore the philosophical accuracy of such terms, though I see them as useful in referring to a particular set of cultural understandings that are common to Europe, America and Australia. Therefore, the terms ‘West’, ‘Western’ and ‘Euro-American’ have been used interchangeably throughout this paper when referring to the collective set of related cultures and values, especially in relation to the veil and Muslim women.

I have chosen to focus on Western representations of Muslim women and the veil, as it is the society that I inhabit, that my work often responds to and that I see as most relevant to the Australian context in the present moment. This often leads to viewers of my work claiming that I am somehow ignorant and sheltered from the real oppression faced by women in Islam,

³ Myra Macdonald, “Muslim Women And The Veil: Problems of image and voice in media representations,” *Feminist Media Studies* 6:1 (2006): 8.

⁴ See Arif Dirlik. 1994. "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in The Age of Global Capitalism." *Critical Inquiry* 20(2): 328-356. Or Amina Mama. 1984. "Black Women, the Economic Crisis and the British State." *Feminist Review* 17: 21-35

and that if I read (insert any number of Orientalist texts) I would understand/be concerned. This desire to educate me on the “real” suffering of Muslim women reflects the very gesture that constructs the Western subject as “knowing”, “liberated” and “benevolent”. Furthermore, inherent in this remark is the unspoken assumption that Orientalist hegemony and patriarchal domination in Islamic societies are two separate issues, that by focusing on one I am ignoring the other, when in fact they are both intertwined. Meyda Yegenoglu writes, “To pose the “truth” of the Orient as distinct from the Orientalist discourse and to construct a nativist position outside Orientalism is indeed to reproduce the division imposed by Orientalism.”⁵ As I will demonstrate in Chapter Two, discourses of feminism played an important role in colonial expansion throughout Islamic societies and continue to play a part in the justification for war today⁶. Imperialist and Anti-imperialist struggles were/are often debated on/through Muslim women’s bodies, eclipsing “women’s own diversity of voice and self-definition.”⁷

My interest in race studies and the wealth of knowledge produced by black feminist writers including Bell Hooks, Audre Lorde, and Angela Davis to name but a few, stems not only from my personal identification with their struggles but also from the reality that Muslims are a highly racialised group in Australia. Paradoxically, topics around Muslim women and the veil are all too often relegated to monolithic conceptions of Islam, despite their social, economic, political, as well as religious heterogeneities. In view of this, I ground my research and practice in social and political engagement, rather than in Islamic scripture. This is not to downgrade the role of such texts in women’s lives, but to acknowledge the complexities that are all too often missed in mainstream conceptions.

In charting this space between the personal and collective I begin by exploring the ideas that underpin my art practice in Chapter One. These

⁵ Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 122.

⁶ Zillah Eisenstein, “Burqas and empire, again,” *Aljazeera*, 10 August, 2013. Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2013/08/20138613132865234.html>

⁷ Macdonald, “Muslim Women And The Veil,” 7.

include autobiography, colonial fantasies, parody, Otherness in the construction of space and Guillermo Gomez-Pena's notion of bodies as occupied territories. In Chapter Two, I look at the development of Western discourse on Muslim women and the veil, highlighting the shifting and contingent nature of her role in the Western imagination. From the relatively global and historical to the local and present, in Chapter Three I examine images of Muslim women in Australian contemporary art, looking particularly at Muslim women themed exhibitions and the depiction of veiling as a condensed signifier. In doing so, I critically engage with current trends of "Muslim art" (or art with a visibly Muslim inflection) in light of historical narratives, examining their role in current representations. I contend that Australian cultural elite discourse on "Muslim Art" produced after the Cronulla riots preserved a patriarchal view of contemporary Australian Islamic culture while representations of Muslim women's subjectivity remained limited or absent.

From Effacement to Extremes

Chapter 1

“What we are assigned as... often becomes our assignment”

Sara N. Ahmed⁸

“Like a welcome summer rain, humour may suddenly cleanse and cool the
earth, the air and you”

Langston Hughes

To date, my artistic practice has been characterized by a preoccupation with the veil as both a culturally constructed site and as material realization. I use the veiled woman cipher to reflect on personal experiences, whilst exploring and responding to dominant discourse on the Muslim woman in a Western context. My interest lies in broadening definitions and displacing hegemonic representations whilst bridging the gap between personal experience and the veil’s complex and contested status in a variety of public settings.

In this chapter I will examine two main bodies of work to trace the significant themes, events and artists that have driven my practice. First I will look at the role of the autobiographical as an underlying aspect of my work. This is particularly foregrounded in my earliest works, *Effacement*, 2009 and *Hair/Veil*, 2011, which reflect on experiences of veiling, unveiling and (symbolically) re-veiling. I then look at the *Extremist Activity* and *Site Occupied* series in relation to Guillermo Gomez-Pena’s notion of bodies as occupied territories, parody, Otherness in the construction of space and

⁸ Sara N. Ahmed, Twitter, 21/01/2014.

colonial fantasies as elucidated through Meyda Yegenoglu's seminal book *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a feminist reading of Orientalism*.⁹

Veiling / Unveiling / Re-veiling

Whilst being a Muslim woman is only one of a number of governing narratives that have formed and continue to form my identity, it is the one in which experiences have most profoundly shaped the way I think and feel about society today. In saying this, I use autobiography to promote a postmodern understanding of identities as continually in process, knowledge as fragmented and partial, and critique as committed to resisting closure¹⁰. I am interested in a post-structuralist approach to autobiography as explained by Ursula A. Kelly:

A notion of auto/biography as readings of selves positioned within a larger textuality insists that this larger textuality be interrogated for ways in which we read and are (culturally) read to, for the ways in which we have learned to look and the ways in which we are looked at.¹¹

I explore and draw upon subjective experiences as potential sites for knowing, living and becoming in the world, rather than to assert any essentialist idea of what a Muslim woman thinks, or to replace stereotypes with a cohesive centred self. It is merely an account, adding to the multifarious experiences of Muslim women that differ according to geographic, temporal and cultural contexts. Becky Thompson and Sangeeta Tyagi suggest that "autobiography illustrates why racial identity formation occurs at the intersection of a person's subject memory of trauma and

⁹ Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*.

¹⁰ Carl Leggo, "Tangled Lines: On Autobiography and Poetic Knowing," in *Provoked by art: Theorizing arts-informed research*, ed. A. L. Cole et al. (Halifax: Backalong Books, 2004), 19.

¹¹ Ursula A. Kelly. *Schooling Desire: Literacy, Cultural Politics, and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 66-67.

collective remembrance of histories of domination.”¹² Likewise, it is in these intricate interstices between the personal and the collective that form and inform my art-making practice today. Two of my earliest exhibited works that prominently reference autobiographical elements are *Effacement* (2009) and *Hair/Veil* (2011).

As loaded a sign as the veil was in wearing it on a day-to-day basis, taking it off was an equally loaded and significant act. Much like drawing negative space, observing its absence and the responses it elicited provided as much information and was as important to understanding the whole as the constructed site of the veil itself. This experience of unveiling and the concept of negative space was explored in a life-size photographic self-portrait – *Effacement* (2009) (fig. 1). The photograph juxtaposed two inverted images of myself – one in a white veil and the other with a round piece of white cloth only covering my face. It represented the two important parts of my experience in relation to my Muslim identity, as symbolically veiled and unveiled, each experience equally important to how I conceived of myself in the present. It also represented a disjunction, each image allowing only partial access to parts of my body, neither allowing full disclosure. This problematises the dominant discourse of the veil in Western contexts, namely that it is inherently oppressive, wearing it entails the loss of one’s ‘identity’, and taking it off is an act of liberation.

Effacement was produced six years after I had stopped wearing the veil and reflected on feelings of exposure and invisibility outside of the Muslim community. One of the immediate physical effects of ceasing to wear the veil involved feelings of nakedness and exposure - I could suddenly feel the wind on my scalp and neck, which not only felt cold, but uncomfortable and foreign. It wasn’t the smooth, shampoo commercial type of experience that Muslim detractors and some that claimed to be feminists had proffered it to be. Likewise in the photograph, the image of my unveiled self is depicted as exposed and “blind-folded” so to speak.

¹² Kenneth Surin, *Autobiography and Black Identity Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 10.



Figure 1: Effacement, 2009. Digital print on archival paper, 58 x 133 cm.

Effacement is also about invisibility. In some ways the act of unveiling had operated as an erasure, no longer being identifiable as a Muslim woman. People I had just met (after unveiling) had felt comfortable enough with the ambiguity of my appearance to recount their prejudices towards Muslim women, if not Muslims in general. The extent to which these prejudices were entrenched and prevalent quickly became apparent. This experience of invisibility stood in stark contrast to the popular perception of the veil as erasing a woman's individuality. This notion presupposes a hegemonic viewer that "knows" the Muslim woman and the degree in which she is, or isn't, an individual, itself an impossible task and a key element in orientalist thinking. *Effacement* was about disrupting this dialectic of knowledge and power.

Another early work that uses the autobiographical and that I see as pivotal to the development of my practice and area of interest, is the performance based, video installation, *Hair/Veil* (2011) (fig. 2). In the performance I gradually cut my long hair, offering each severed clump to the viewer before it fell to the ground. I then spread the pile of hair on the ground into a square shape, the shape of a veil that I used to wear (also known as the hijab). I then wore this "veil" and looked back at the viewer. In the exhibition setting, the video of the performance was projected above a platform on which the material that is both my hair and my veil sat.

The veil, in this performance, operates not only as a sign but contains my DNA, a symbolic umbilical cord of sorts, resonating with Yegenoglu's articulation of the veil's relationship to the wearer's body:

In the ambiguous position it occupies, the veil is not outside the woman's body. Nor is she the interior that needs to be protected or penetrated. *Her body is not simply the inside of the veil: it is of it; "she" is constituted in (and by) the fabric-ation of the veil.*¹³

¹³ Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 119.



Figure 2: Hair/Veil, 2011. Installation view, Artist's own hair, 1 x 1 m, and Single Channel video with sound, 12 min 21 sec.

Produced in 2011, it was an attempt at naming and making visible my identity as a Muslim woman, or rather visualizing the inextricability of the veil from my concept of myself, despite the seemingly self-contradictory nature of not wearing the veil in my day-to-day life. *Hair/Veil* was also an attempt at resisting erasure, and constructing/asserting subjectivity. Chris Weedon defines 'Subjectivity' as "the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world" and that "(P)ost-structuralism proposes a subjectivity which is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being constituted in discourse each time we think or speak."¹⁴ In this sense, *Hair/Veil* can be read as a post-structuralist approach to constructing subjectivity whilst displacing dominant discourse, by blurring the boundaries and thus dominant order of what is considered private/public, inside/outside, and Islam/West.

Embracing the Extreme

The *Extremist Activity* series (fig. 3 & 4) is an ongoing project that presents a self-ironic look at the stereotype of Muslim extremeness. Everyday forms worn on the body create and exaggerate voids whilst parodying the proper concealment, or disclosure, of that space. *Extremist Activity* was originally conceived of as a response to the notion of the niqab being a security threat. This was demonstrated in a community debate¹⁵ held in response to calls for a ban on the Burqa, brought to the fore by the anti-Burqa mural¹⁶ in the neighbouring suburb of Newtown. During question time Robert Hunt dressed in a niqab, walked up to the podium, and took off the niqab to demonstrate that if he could hide himself in it then anything could be

¹⁴ Chris Weedon. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 1987), 32-33.

¹⁵ Peter Boyle, "Mainstream media: promoting the voice of hate," *Greenleft Weekly*, November 27, 2010. <https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/46223> accessed May 2, 2015.

¹⁶ Josephine Tovey, "Complaint lodged over burqa mural," *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 26, 2010.

hidden, that it was a security threat. This was certainly not the first instance where the veil had posed a threat to the viewer from a Western cultural context.

There is a long discursive history amongst Euro-American colonialists and imperialists of the desire to “unveil” alien cultures, to “lay them bare” and bring “them into conformity with the ideological norms of the dominating power.”¹⁷ Yet this was not a simple or straightforward exercise, in fact it frustrated the coloniser. Veiled women’s refusal to unveil and offer themselves produced a reversal of the coloniser’s anticipation of spectatorship, to being the spectacle. Algerian women in the 1920s, for example, posed a threat to French soldiers for their ability to see without being seen with their haik¹⁸ being likened to the camera’s lens and their gaze as mimicking the photographer’s power. Malek Alloula writes, “concentrated by a tiny orifice made for the eye, this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of the camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything.”¹⁹ The distorted niqab in *Extremist Activity* playfully embodies and mirrors this threat in size and shape.

The series began with a custom-made niqab that stretched to cover an open umbrella held above the head, conjuring images of the Frilled Neck Lizard. Titled *Extremist Activity (stroll)* (fig. 3), it consisted of video documentation of my walking with the outfit through Erskineville and Newtown, the areas where the mural and community debate had first occurred. It also documented various reactions from the public, ranging from amused and curious to embarrassed, hesitant and repelled with one interjection from a passer-by claiming that it was “un-Australian”.

¹⁷ Macdonald, “Muslim Women And The Veil,” 9.

¹⁸ A type of veiling practice associated with Muslim women in Algeria.

¹⁹ Malek Alloula quoted in Mcdonald, “Muslim Women and the Veil,” 9.



Figure 3: *Extremist Activity (stroll)*, 2011. Video still.

Videography: Renee Falez



Figure 4: *Extremist Activity (shop #1)*, 2012. Lambda print mounted on wood. 73 x 48.5 cm. Photograph: Marion Moore

Subsequent incarnations involved walking through a supermarket with the niqab covering the shopping trolley (*shop*) (fig. 4), standing on a very large piece of playground equipment with the niqab draped to the floor (*mount*), and riding a niqab-covered rickshaw where audiences were invited to sit inside and be driven around Newtown (*ride*). In all these instances, the choice of using opaque black stretch-fabric simultaneously covered the body and forms from view whilst enabling both to be easily identified and recognized through contour and shape. In this way, the *Extremist Activity* performances parody the fantasy of the veil as hiding something dangerous, or otherwise mysterious and erotic, by revealing what is underneath as banal. These ideas are also explored in my 2013 performance-based video, *Bombshell*.

The *Site Occupied* series ran alongside *Extremist Activity* and extended the physical reach of the niqab to greater heights and lengths, enabling further explorations of the veil through the architectural. In *Site Occupied* (2011) (fig. 5), a niqab worn by the performer standing in the centre of the room covered the entire gallery floor space. This work was inspired by the practice and writings of performance artist Guillermo Gomez-Pena who views the body as a metaphor for the larger socio-political body and performance as a tool for decolonizing this space. He writes:

Our bodies are also occupied territories. Perhaps the ultimate goal of performance... is to decolonize our bodies and make these decolonizing mechanisms apparent to our audience in the hope that they will get inspired to do the same with their own.²⁰

²⁰ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 24.



Figure 5: *Site Occupied*, 2011. Alpha Gallery, Erskineville. Installation view.

Site Occupied draws a connection to the concept of a Muslim woman's body being an occupied site. The fixation with veiling or unveiling, as a way of resisting or enforcing colonisation, respectfully, has inhibited the analysis of Muslim women's social, economic, and political positioning within very different regimes.²¹ This dual occupancy has often led to women being forced to veil or unveil or otherwise be overburdened with competing symbolism when they choose to do so. Debates around whether the "burqa" should be banned in Australia exemplify the fixation, eclipsing Muslim women's own diversity of voice. This work sought to recreate this limited access to body-space for the viewer, through restricting their access to the gallery space. It recreated visceral experiences of "exclusion" and "restriction" through the use of fabric as an architectural element. As Bradley Quinn writes, "(t)he construction of both garments and architecture creates spaces that are denied from sight, generating fantasies of inclusion and exclusion."²² As viewers approached the gallery, it quickly became apparent that they were denied access and left to only peer in through the outside. This exclusion was intensified by the cold weather outside, with the installation occurring in the middle of winter.

In *Site Occupied 2* (2012) (fig. 6), the void represented by the woman's body is distorted and amplified, with the niqab stretching to enclose a 25 metre-long building structure. The performer sat above the entrance with only her eyes visible, much like the head covering of a niqab. A fabric tunnel running in between the work allowed audiences to effectively "walk through" the overbearing structure. Yet viewers who ventured in could easily find themselves lost in the darkness, or void of the woman's body, with only a bit of light at the end of the tunnel guiding them through (some referred to this as the birthing canal) (fig. 7).

²¹ Macdonald, "Muslim Women And The Veil," 7.

²² Bradley Quinn, *The Fashion of Architecture* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), 64.



Figure 6: *Site Occupied 2*, 2012. Carriageworks, Sydney. Installation view.
Photograph: Alex Wisser



Figure 7: *Site Occupied 2*, 2012. Carriageworks, Sydney. Installation view.
Photograph: Alex Wisser

The veil, in its everyday use by some Muslim women, demarcates the line between public and private space, yet in the *Site Occupied* works, this line is manipulated to create notions of the Other in space. The veil, in these works, resists colonial discourse of the woman's body as symbolizing territory to be conquered, subdued and controlled.²³ Instead, the veiled woman takes up space, reclaiming voice, subjectivity and visibility.

The three bodies of work I have examined in this chapter illustrate the role of the autobiographical and the present day discursive power of the veil, in the development of my practice as an artist. I reflect on experiences of veiling, unveiling, and (symbolically) revealing, to engage with, and displace, dominant discourse of the veil in a largely Western cultural context. Parody is used in the *Extremist Activity* series to demystify the veil and what is *imagined* to be hiding behind it, a legacy from the harem of the Euro-American imaginary and colonial contact as exemplified in French-controlled Algeria in the 1920's. In *Site Occupied* the veil is used as an architectural medium to (re)create notions of inclusion, exclusion and otherness in space. In both these series, performative interventions act as a decolonizing mechanism, illustrating the concept of the body as an occupied site, especially where representations of the veil eclipse women's own experiences and diversity of voice. Yet rather than point to the item of clothing as a means to signify an all-encompassing Muslim alterity, these works offer readings of the veil as an artificially constructed site, simultaneously fixed and eternally malleable.

²³ Jananne Al-Ani, "Acting Out," in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, ed. David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros (London: Iniva, 2003), 100.

A Brief History of the Western Image of the Muslim Woman

Chapter 2

Euro-American representations of Muslim women as oppressed became entrenched in, and central to, the discourse on Islam during the colonial period. Yet it is intriguing to look back further, to when the “West” was becoming the West, and interactions with the Muslim world were limited, to understand the shifting and contingent nature of Muslim women’s role in the Western imagination. I will begin by looking at some of these depictions that unsettle the seemingly natural and uniform image of the subjugated Muslim woman throughout history, as demonstrated through Mohja Kahf’s renowned book *Western Representations of The Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque*.²⁴ I will then turn to the colonial period in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and its corollary Orientalism as the turning point in Western perceptions of Muslim women and Islamic societies. It is in this period that a system of knowledge is created about the Orient, one that is based on and made to reinforce Western cultural hegemony over this part of the world. Crucial to understandings of Muslim women in this period are the co-option of feminism as an imperialist strategy and the ‘scopic regime of modernity.’²⁵ These elements reified the veil, as seen in the present, as a loaded symbol connoting unbridgeable cultural difference and inferiority.

There is something “too much” about the Muslim woman in medieval literature, although her role is smaller and less central in comparison to material from the nineteenth century.²⁶ Typically she is the power wielding

²⁴ Mohja Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman: from termagant to odalisque* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1999).

²⁵ Yegenoglu, *Colonial fantasies*, 12.

²⁶ Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 4.

queen or noblewoman who falls in love with a Christian man imprisoned by her father or husband. After an ensuing battle between Christians and Muslims, she rescues him and converts to Christianity, hands over her family treasures, embraces a more passive and subdued femininity and becomes part of the European world.²⁷

In these theatrical romance narratives the Muslim woman appears as larger in stature and/or social rank in comparison to both European men and women, reflecting the earthly might of Islamic civilization at the time. She is also loquacious, overbearing or forward in personality and transgresses the bounds of traditional femininity, unlike Orientalist depictions that tend to feminize the Orient in relation to a dominant Europe. Her exuberance is sometimes manifested through physical size and in other instances as “wanton” or intimidating sexuality. Just one example could be seen in the character of “Barrok, the bolde”, the giantess Muslim woman in *The Romance of the Sowdone of Babylone*²⁸. In this narrative, Barrok is the wife of a tollman who is killed while refusing to allow Christian soldiers to pass over a bridge. She then rages forth “like a develle of helle”²⁹ killing many Christian soldiers before “King Charles bashes her brains out of her head”³⁰. The following lines narrate: “Many a man hade she there slayn, / Might she never aftyr ete more brede!”³¹ In all these texts, the task is to reduce her “too-muchness” to manageable proportions and therefore to subdue rather than liberate her,³² as is the case in Orientalist texts.

The Renaissance marks a brief period of transition in the power and influence acquired by the West, particularly of Italy, on the world stage. With the levelling out of standards of living between East and West, and increased interactions due to commercial expansion, there is a brief equilibrium in

²⁷ Ibid., 5.

²⁸ (Babylon was another name for Medieval Cairo).

²⁹ Hausknecht, Emil, ed. *The Romances of Sowdone of Babylone*, 1969, *The English Charlemagne Romances. Part 5. The Early English Text Society*, 1881. Reprint (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 1. 2948 in Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 36.

³⁰ Ibid., 36.

³¹ Ibid., 36.

³² Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 4.

representations of Muslims, who could now be considered as people like any others. The Muslim woman in texts of this period can be seen as in between myths, showing features of the “wanton” queen of the medieval period, and the helpless damsel-in-distress, which emerges in eighteenth century domestic fiction. More broadly “she is constituted by rather the same gender constraints as her Western counterparts, functioning in a field of similarity and “indifference” rather than one of “Otherness” .”³³

It is only in the seventeenth century that the veil and harem enter the European vocabulary, sewing the seeds for the image of the oppressed Muslim woman that becomes so ubiquitous from the eighteenth century onwards. In this period the Muslim woman’s “feminization” continues as she is increasingly portrayed as helpless and passive.³⁴ Due to widespread practices of veiling at the time, the veil is yet to be identified solely with Muslim women. Yet in the eighteenth century it begins to slip into place as a defining metaphor largely due to its association with the harem as depicted in French theatre. In this restrictive setting, the Muslim woman becomes its definitive inmate and is teasingly concealed and revealed, “both delaying and heightening the male gaze through narrative technique.”³⁵ In this way the veil is also ascribed its erotic component, and the Muslim woman is portrayed as receptively seductive, rather than actively seducing as seen in medieval literature.

Notions of liberty and sexuality cannot be isolated from the social mores and ideological developments of the time. As Mohja Kahf writes, “(t)he beginning of the question of liberty for Muslim women coincides with the beginning of the whole question of liberty in Western political discourse.”³⁶ As Europe veered towards revolution from the Enlightenment onwards, the harem became “a metaphor for injustice in civil society and the state and

³³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴ Ibid., 112.

³⁵ Ibid., 113.

³⁶ Ibid., 7.

arbitrary government.”³⁷ In his preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre also points to the relationship between the formation of Euro-American ideals of humanism and the perception of its cultural others as predicated on a racist gesture, “there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters.”³⁸ Through the creation of a universal humanist ideal, Europe was not able to proclaim its humanity but laid the groundwork for “the civilizing mission of colonial power”³⁹ that would be actualized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Discourse on the harem served another purpose before the advent of colonialism, as the necessary backdrop upon which new cultural norms of femininity and gender as well as new forms of desire could be constructed. Like the out-dated image of the aristocratic woman, the Muslim woman of the eighteenth century was assigned traits such as: being skilled in cosmetic self-display, engaged in frivolous amusements, flaunting her sexuality, instigating corrupt desires in men and functioning as the object of male gaze.⁴⁰ With the added advantage of being safely foreign, the Islamic harem served as the necessary negative ideal to middle-class female domesticity, an image that disparate groups within changing European societies could agree to disparage.⁴¹ Both these examples demonstrate how the construction of the Muslim woman in the Western imagination served to reinforce ideals of humanity and female sexuality. In essence formulating a “cultural representation of the West to *itself* by way of a detour through the other,”⁴² while creating the necessary supporting structure for colonialism and its discourses of domination.

³⁷ Billie Melman, *Women’s Orients: English Women and the Middle East, 1718-1918: Sexuality, Religion and Work* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1992), 60. Quoted in Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 113.

³⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Preface,” in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 1viii.

³⁹ Yegenoglu, *Colonial fantasies*, 95.

⁴⁰ Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 116.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴² Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 1.

It is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Europeans establish themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries, when the narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman most familiar with the West today emerges. In this period the Muslim woman becomes the overarching concern of the discourse on Islam.⁴³ Far from the exuberant noblewoman of the Middle Ages, her character is presented as an abject harem slave, a victim of absolute despotism⁴⁴ only to be rescued by her Romantic European hero. It is in this period that "[t]he recurrent drama of incipient colonization, that of a heroic male conquest of a feminized Oriental land, is played out in literature upon the inert body of the Muslim woman,"⁴⁵ as seen in the prominent writings of George Gordon Byron (1788 – 1824) and Victor Hugo (1802 – 1855). For example, in Byron's *Don Juan* (1821-1823), a harem beauty by the name of Dudu is described as:

...a soft Landscape of mild Earth,
Where all was harmony and calm and quiet,
Luxuriant, budding...⁴⁶

The enduring and pervasive nature of this discourse attests to the fact that it was often deployed in quite sophisticated ways. Edward Said, in his seminal account of Orientalism, describes it as, "a created body of theory and practice, ... a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness."⁴⁷ Yegenoglu, in her feminist reading of Orientalism, comments on the lack of attention given to fantasy in Said's critique, claiming that the Orient is a fantasy built upon sexual difference. She demonstrates how the figure of the "veiled Oriental woman" not only signifies the Oriental woman as mysterious and exotic, but signifies the orient as "feminine, always veiled, seductive and dangerous."⁴⁸

⁴³ Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim woman*, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁶ Lord (George Gordon) Byron in "Byron's *Don Juan*" Truman Guy Steffan and Willis W. Pratt ed. (Austin:University of Texas Press, 1957), VI.53. Found in Kahf, *Western Representations of the Muslim woman*, 154.

⁴⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 6.

⁴⁸ Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 11.

When the desire to subjugate the Muslim world moved from theatre to reality, the alleged mistreatment of women through the cultural practices and religious customs of Oriental societies became a keystone in the ideological justification of colonial culture.⁴⁹ In this way, the language of feminism was appropriated in the service of imperialist strategies, even though feminism on the home front and feminism directed against white men were actively resisted and suppressed.⁵⁰ This is best exemplified by the conduct and rhetoric of Lord Cromer, British consul general in Egypt from 1883 to 1907. Cromer was convinced of the inferiority of Islamic society, and was vocal in condemning Islam's degradation of women, which he saw as evident through the practices of veiling and segregation. Cromer saw these practices as "the fatal obstacle" to the Egyptian's "attainment of that elevation of thought and character which should accompany the introduction of Western civilization."⁵¹ In delivering these views, Cromer simultaneously pursued policies in Egypt that held back girls' education and discouraged women from being trained as doctors.⁵² On the home front as well, he founded and presided over the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage, which aimed to prevent women from being able to vote.⁵³

Others besides colonial patriarchs promoted and buttressed these views, including missionaries and feminists. For them, too, the issue of Islam and Oriental cultures as inherently oppressive to women justified the need for colonial subjugation. For missionaries, as for Cromer, "women were the key to converting backward Muslim societies into civilized Christian ones."⁵⁴ European feminists, on the other hand, saw the removal of the veil as the essential first step towards female liberation, and actively inducted young Muslim women into this European understanding of the veil. As women were assigned the metonymic association with the Orient, the veil came to

⁴⁹ Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 98.

⁵⁰ Leila Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil" in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, ed. David A Bailey et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press; inIVA, 2003), 46.

⁵¹ Earl of Cromer, *Modern Egypt*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1908), 538-39. Quoted in Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil", 43.

⁵² Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil", 46.

⁵³ Katharine Viner, "Feminism as Imperialism," *Guardian* 21 September 2002

⁵⁴ Ahmed, "The Discourse of the Veil", 46.

symbolize “the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire tradition of Islam and Oriental cultures and by extension it [was] used as a proof of oppression of women in these societies.”⁵⁵

Yegenoglu posits the Western woman’s necessity for the veil’s moral condemnation in the construction of the modern female self. As Western feminists began to deconstruct phallogocentric claims of neutrality and universality, products of the Enlightenment, women began to claim their own subject position by simulating this masculinist discourse in relation to cultural Others.⁵⁶ Through privileging sexual difference over other forms of difference, feminist theory in the colonial period (or colonial feminist discourse) remained blind to the imperialist and ethnocentric bind of their own gesture. As Yegenoglu writes, “it is in the East that Western woman was able to become a full individual.”⁵⁷

To better understand the colonial feminist discourse and the willingness of European women to accept this limited and oversimplified understanding of the veil, it is important to look at broader reasons for why the veil might have been anathema to the Western eye. The colonial desire to unveil the Muslim woman’s body is not only linked with the discourse of Enlightenment, but coincides with the emergence of the “scopic regime of modernity.”⁵⁸ That is, the veil was seen as not only as an impediment to progress, modernity and emancipation, but frustrated the coloniser’s gaze in terms of negating and rejecting his desire, particularly in Algeria where women wearing the haik⁵⁹ could see without being seen. Yegenoglu characterizes this regime as “a desire to master, control, and reshape the body of the subjects by making them visible. Since the veil prevents the colonial gaze from attaining such a visibility and hence mastery, it’s lifting becomes essential.”⁶⁰ Martin Jay, in his extensive study *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century thought* (1993) agrees that

⁵⁵ Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 99.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁹ A type of veiling practice associated with Muslim women in Algeria.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

modernity is considered to be “resolutely ocular centric”. He traces the development and criticism of the scopic drive from Plato to Roland Barthes, among many others, highlighting the primacy of the scopic drive in Western philosophy. This can be seen, for example, in the dependence on occluded visual metaphors e.g. “I see” as a synonym for “I know”. He also identifies photography and cinema – “the greatest technological extensions of visual experience in the modern world”⁶¹ – as instrumental in furthering this scopic drive for knowledge. Seen as evidence of reality, factuality and objectivity, photography “transformed the power of knowing into a rationalised, observable truth.”⁶² Ocular centrism, in summary, frustrated and intensified the gaze of the coloniser, producing Muslims as sub-humans that could be “dissected, fragmented and possessed through scopophilic representation.”⁶³

The periods explored in this chapter destabilize the image of the subjugated Muslim woman that seems natural today. As Mohja Kahf writes, “there is nothing essential or timeless behind Western representations of the Muslim woman; they are products of specific moments and developments in culture.”⁶⁴ Throughout these periods, the Muslim woman is portrayed in varying, unlikely and sometimes contradictory ways to how she is portrayed today. From the exuberant, forward and loquacious noblewoman to one that is portrayed as indifferent, to the helpless and passive harem slave that is rescued by her European male hero, the Muslim woman character in Medieval to Romantic literature undergoes several considerable changes. As Western powers establish themselves in Muslim lands, Muslim women become the negative ideal of Western middle-class female domesticity and centrepiece of the discourse on Islam. As the veil trope is congealed into the quintessential symbol of civilisational backwardness and oppression, unveiling becomes a sign of progress and emancipation. The desire to unveil the Muslim woman is driven not only by colonial patriarchs, in their fantasies of invasion and sexual conquest, but also by missionaries and feminists.

⁶¹ Ibid., 434.

⁶² Jananne Al-Ani, “Acting Out” in *Veil: Veiling, Representation and Contemporary Art*, ed. David A Bailey et al. (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: The MIT Press; inIVA), 90.

⁶³ Kahf, *Western representations of the Muslim woman*, 53.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 2.

Colonial feminist discourse reveals the European female desire to attain a universal subject position at the expense of cultural Others. The “scopic regime of modernity” also demonstrates why the veil might have been, and indeed continues to be, anathema to the Western eye. In the colonial period, as in the present, the Muslim woman’s body continues to be a site on which broader socio-political struggles are debated and reformulated.⁶⁵ In the following chapter I will examine the representations of Muslim women in Australian contemporary art to ascertain their connectedness to, or departure from, these colonial constructs.

⁶⁵ Yegenoglu refers to Lata Mani’s analysis of debates on the sati in colonial India. Lata Mani writes, “women... became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. Thus, what was at stake was not women but tradition” Lata Mani, “The Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,” *Cultural Critique*, 7 (Fall 1987), 151. Quoted in Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 100.

Images of Muslim women in Australian Contemporary Art

Chapter 3

“Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernisation.”⁶⁶

Gayatri Spivak

The current visibility of Muslims in contemporary Australian art might suggest more nuanced conceptions of the veil and Muslim women, rather than those rooted in the colonial era. Indeed much has changed between Edward Said’s seminal account of Orientalism and our present day post-9/11 and post-Cronulla-riot predicament. Theoretical frameworks used to discuss issues pertaining to the Other have also altered, allowing for more fluid boundaries around what can be spoken of and by whom. In the wake of the Cronulla riots we saw an increase in works produced by male artists of Muslim descent, exhibitions centred on the theme of Muslim women (*Faith, Fashion, Fusion, No Added Sugar, Burqas, Veils and Hoodies*), and depictions of the veil as a condensed signifier (*Women in Shadow* – as just one example of many). Informed by both post-colonial and feminist theories, I contend that Australian cultural elite discourse on “Muslim Art” (or art with a visibly Muslim inflection) produced after 9/11, and particularly after the Cronulla riots, preserved a male-centric view of contemporary Australian Islamic culture, enabling discourses on Australian Muslim women to remain in the sphere of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist constructs.

⁶⁶ Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 306.

The Update:

It is now almost 40 years since Edward Said published *Orientalism*, a text that paved the way for post-colonial theory and studies. Drawing on the theoretical work of Foucault and Gramsci, Said critiqued the West's historical, cultural and political perceptions of the Middle East and Muslims, demonstrating how "knowledge" created about the "Orient" was linked to, and complicit with, the subjugation of those lands. This brought awareness to the discursive underpinnings of the West's enduring powers of representation and normative agency over the "Orient". It also posed the question of how representations might elude such a discourse, and therefore avoid perpetuating barriers and hierarchies. Said writes "[p]erhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or a nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective"⁶⁷ and then acknowledges that this would involve a rethinking of "the complex problem of knowledge and power."⁶⁸ In light of this we might ask: How are representations of veiled Muslim women in contemporary art perpetuating hierarchies of Islam/West, if at all? And what are accurate or authentic representations?

Said was also a dedicated humanist, believing in the essential notion of unitary human needs, which often translated to the privileging of certain (European, male) needs over others. But for Said, humanism and democratic criticism were integral to his vision of cultural coexistence without coercion.⁶⁹ Said attempts to salvage (European) humanism and for this reason his work is criticised and undermined. Humanism, along with the Enlightenment project, functioned to legitimise the civilising mission of colonial power.⁷⁰ Both humanism and the Enlightenment manufactured a European sovereign subject that was universal, progressive and modern, and hence created its

⁶⁷ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1979), 24.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁹ Emily S. Apter, "Saidian Humanism," *Boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 35-53

⁷⁰ Yegenoglu, *Colonial fantasies*, 95.

others as backward, traditional and unequal (inferior). Gayatri Spivak also points to the affinity between imperialism and humanism as sharing the sovereign subject status of authorship, authority, and legitimacy.⁷¹ For Spivak and the subaltern studies group, restoring the subaltern's subject position is crucial, but how must this happen? 'Can the subaltern [even] speak?' Her answer is a resounding, and debilitating, no.

If the subaltern's capacity to speak is contingent upon an ability to enter into the paradigm of the colonial oppressor, which they are structurally excluded from, then the subaltern cannot speak. If a European researcher is unable to hear the subaltern, then the European subject cannot speak about the subaltern. She does more than dismantle the sovereign subject on its home turf – the colonial site – but critiques European post-structuralists as preserving the subject status of the West whilst creating knowledge that valorises the concrete experiences of the other. In other words, European post-structuralists inaugurate a Subject position in the process of criticising it.⁷²

Spivak's essay created a so-called 'crisis of the subject', whilst confronting European post-colonialists with their theoretical blind spots and empowering those with the "thrice-silenced conjugation of being poor, black and female."⁷³ For Hamid Dabashi this held the key, along with Edward Said's critical examination of the knowledge/power nexus apparent in Orientalism, to conceptualise a new mode of counter-knowledge production in a "time of terror". In his book, *Post-orientalism*, Dabashi identifies both Spivak's and Said's (amongst others) modes of attaining agential autonomy, as "being fixed on the revolutionary cause but mobile in [their] discursive articulation of it."⁷⁴ In a globalised world where centres and peripheries are blurred, and imperialism is no longer based on a sustained hegemony, post-orientalism calls for an implosion of the European sovereign subject through

⁷¹ Ibid., 95.

⁷² Hamid Dabashi, *Post-Orientalism: Knowledge and Power in a Time of Terror* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009), 127.

⁷³ Ibid., 127

⁷⁴ Ibid., xvi.

a critical voice that is able to be politically engaged, and a subaltern that is able “to produce knowledge about the world without being implicated in the so called crisis of the subject.”⁷⁵ Ella Shohat is another author who provides practical means of avoiding essentialist traps whilst remaining critically and politically engaged. She describes a multicultural feminist project as working “through a politics whereby the decentering of identities, and the celebration of hybridities does not also mean that it is no longer possible to draw boundaries between privilege and disenfranchisement.”⁷⁶ It is with these valuable insights that I hope to examine key representations of Muslim women in Australian contemporary art.

The map

The post-9-11 security frenzy and ensuing xenophobia towards Middle-Easterners and Muslims produced a dilemma for liberal American cultural elites. In her incisive essay *The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror*, Jessica Winegar writes,

Many were horrified by the events of that day and expressed concern over the growth of radical Islamic movements. Yet they were also uncomfortable with the increase in negative stereotypes of Muslims and Middle Easterners, and with the growing discursive division of the world into civilized “us” and barbaric “them.”⁷⁷

The solution came in the form of the arts event seen as an effective “bridge of understanding” that alleviated such concerns, whilst attracting new audiences eager to see “another side” of the Middle East.⁷⁸ Winegar argues that the selection, marketing and consumption of particular kinds of Middle Eastern art produced an American cultural elite discourse on such art, which

⁷⁵ Ibid., xiv.

⁷⁶ Ella Shohat, *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 6.

⁷⁷ Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81.3 (2008): 652.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 652.

corresponded to that of the “War on Terror.”⁷⁹ Whilst a similar trajectory can be traced in the Australian art context post 9/11, the result here can be seen to be further tinged by the Cronulla riots. This event was much closer to home, of a different nature (although the racial/religious identity of actors could be seen as the same), and sparked a unique set of responses, as distinct from that of the U.S. and the “War on Terror.”

The Cronulla riots occurred in December 2005 at the Sydney beachside suburb of Cronulla and were instigated by a conflict between four young men of Lebanese background and 3 off-duty male surf lifesavers. Within a week of their conflict and with the aid of talkback radio, tensions quickly escalated to that of a riot, as a “show of force”⁸⁰ to Middle Eastern/Lebanese/Muslim men from Western Sydney. While responses to the event swung between denial and justification, with Prime Minister John Howard insistently denying any claims of underlying racism, newspaper front-pages painted another picture. Headlines such as “Racist riots explode,” (fig. 8) “RACE HATE: A shameful day for our nation,” (fig. 9) “OUR DISGRACE,” (fig. 10) and images depicting aggressive white male youths in the midst of attacking a cultural Other, it was clear that racism was a key motivating factor, and that the events were a source of embarrassment for leaders rather than aggression, as seen in the 9/11 attacks. Less clear were the implications of gender; the language of feminism being used to condemn Middle Eastern/Lebanese/Muslim men in their treatment of Caucasian women despite the increasing abuses that veiled Muslim women were facing, exacerbated by 9/11. Instead, women’s bodies were used, as they often are in negotiating broader socio-political struggles, to convey a discourse of “the good nation.” Images of Australia’s first veiled surf lifesaver and women in burqini’s⁸¹ diverted attention, alleviated concerns, and presented an image of Australia as devoid of racism.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 651.

⁸⁰ Kiran Grewal, “The ‘Young Muslim Man’ in Australian public discourse,” *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 2.1 (2009): 121.

⁸¹ Danielle Teutsch, “Tide has turned as Muslim lifesavers start training in burqinis,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 12, 2006. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/tide-has-turned-as-muslim-lifesavers-start-training-in-burqinis/2006/11/11/1162661949135.html> accessed 6 May 2015.

The Sydney Morning Herald

Monday December 12, 2005

DAY OF SHAME

First published 1831 No. \$1.20 (inc GST)

● Violence hits six suburbs ● Mob bashes scapegoats ● Thousands chant slurs

Race riots explode



Riotous assembly... a mob smashes a man with beer bottles at North Cronulla yesterday. Hoodlums yelling racial insults targeted anyone they believed to be of Middle Eastern background. Photo: Andrew Meares

Les Kennedy, Damien Murphy, Malcolm Brown and Tim Colquhoun

RACIAL violence erupted in several Sydney suburbs last night in apparent retaliation for a rampage by thousands of young residents through Cronulla that turned the seaside suburb into a battlefield. Political, community and religious leaders joined stunned locals to condemn an afternoon of violence by a crowd that turned on people of Middle Eastern appearance and those trying to protect them, with police and ambulance officers also attacked.

An influx of non-locals after 8pm, AAP reported that up to 50 vehicles with passengers armed with baseball bats, pieces of wood and stakes had 'flamed every single car' in some streets. In Rockdale, police gathered in riot gear following reports of youths armed with crowbars near the train station after 10pm, a car driver trying to run down a police officer, and items being thrown at police cars in Bay Street, Brighton-le-Sands. The street was blocked off. There was also a report of a stabbing at Wooloware late last night.

Around North Cronulla beach and the surrounding streets, drunk teenagers communicated with each other on walkie-talkies about rumored sightings of Lebanese gangs. At least 13 people were injured during the earlier violence - in-

cluding five police - and 12 people had been arrested last night. The Premier, Morris Iemma, led a chorus of condemnation of the Cronulla attacks. "These hoodlums have brought shame upon themselves," he said. "Some today tried to hide behind the Australian flag. The Australia that I know, and intend to preserve as Premier, does not support the sort of behaviour that we saw today."

The Police Commissioner, Ken Moroney, said the rioters - many of them carrying the national flag and even singing the anthem - were "clearly un-Australian". "I'm ashamed as a man and as the Commissioner of Police," he said. "Never have I seen a mob turn like they have today, particularly on... women and... the NSW Ambulance Service. That has brought a higher level of shame to those involved."

There had "clearly... been a level of racial vilification... and those who are found to behave this way will be prosecuted". One bashing victim, 19-year-old Mustafa, said at Sutherland Hospital: "They threw bottles, broken bottles, food, anything they could get their hands on. And what were we doing? We were there for a swim."

Another victim, who gave his name only as Moez, said: "We are going to have the last laugh. I got beaten up by 50 people. I am half Lebanese, part Aboriginal. I am more Australian than the Anglos."

The Assistant Commissioner, Mark Goodwin, who co-ordinated the riot response, said he would establish a taskforce to review video footage of the riot. The violence followed a week of simmering tension after an attack the previous Sunday on two lifesavers. Appeals by text Continued Page 4

COLUMN 8 - Page 20
The King Max Street controversy is kicking along nicely but there are still a lot more questions. Find out more in today's column.

WEATHER Details - Page 18

ESB 0118315

9 770312 831018

- Sydney city sunny 15°-26°
Tomorrow showers 18°-23°
- Liverpool sunny 13°-20°
Tomorrow showers 16°-25°
- Perth sunny 13°-30°
Tomorrow showers 16°-25°
- Newcastle fine 15°-28°
Tomorrow showers 17°-23°

SPORT MONDAY

'I'VE GOT ALL THE SHOTS'

Allenby's historic hat-trick

Widening of nurses' role wins state backing

Ruth Pollard
Health Reporter

THE NSW Health Minister, John Hatzigeorgis, is backing a push for radical change in hospitals that would include nurses and other health workers taking on some roles performed by doctors.

Let me be clear about this: it is a new coalition of more than 70 senior doctors and nurses - is arguing for a re-examination of

reclassification of emergency departments at smaller hospitals. Emergency department admissions are going up 8 to 9 per cent per year," he said.

The demand is not going away - if you close emergency departments, these people have to be treated somewhere."

small emergency departments, saying low staffing levels and an absence of specialists make many dysfunctional and unsafe.

They argue that more health care could be provided if some departments became walk-in centres that treated low-level illness and injury, while the larger departments concentrated on more acute patients.

They say if the country is to address the worsening staff shortages and drag its hospital system into the 21st century, it must break down the traditional divide between medical and nursing roles.

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Figure 8: Front page, Sydney Morning Herald, December 12, 2005

VCE RESULTS GUIDE 2005
OPEN SESAME
No amount of your
time will be paid...

VCE

RESULTS GUIDE

24-PAGE
LIFTOUT



▶ WHAT YOUR SCORES MEAN ▶ NEXT STEP

RACE HATE

A shameful day for our nation



Mob rule: rufers attack a man of foreign appearance who was saved by police using capsicum spray



Bashed: an injured man is helped



Frenzy: a mob surrounds and smashes a passing car

**Kara Lawrence and
Luke McIveen**

ANGRY crowds singled out and bashed people of Middle Eastern appearance at one of Australia's iconic beaches as racial tensions boiled over into mob violence.

Police were powerless to quell the violence, resorting to batons and capsicum spray to rescue people fleeing packs of attackers.

An ambulance called to the scene to treat five bashing victims was pelted with beer bottles and rocks, smashing its windows.

Several men of Middle Eastern appearance were bashed and left bleeding. One was trapped against the back of a ute and punched repeatedly by several thugs before a police officer stepped in.

Two Middle Eastern girls were also pushed to the ground — this time by a group of teenage girls — and pelted with beer bottles as police tried to rescue them.

At least 5000 people converged on Sydney's Cronulla beach yesterday, after simmering anger between beach regulars flared last week.

As the crowd surged along the beach, one man on the back of a ute began to shout "No more Lebs" — a chant picked up by the group around him.

Others in the crowd, carrying Australian flags and dressed in Australian shirts, yelled "Aussie, Aussie, Aussie ... Oi, Oi, Oi!"

Authorities had expected trouble after two violent incidents last week — an attack on two lifeguards and a brawl in which youths turned on media.

A series of text messages then began circulating, encouraging two rival groups to attack each other.

One urged "Aussies" to take revenge against "Lebs and



Train attack: rivals clash

Herald Sun

THIS is not the Australian way of life.

Gangs hurting racist abuse. Mobs viciously attacking innocent bystanders who look different.

Yesterday's rioting at Sydney's iconic Cronulla beach shames our nation.

We are a great nation because people of all nationalities and faiths make it so.

Our leaders must act to ensure community frustrations and fears are not allowed to boil over into this disgrace again.

Editorial, Page 18

wogs": another urged locals to rally at a point on the beach yesterday to retaliate against "Middle Eastern" gangs.

Continued, Page 4
Reports & pictures: P4-5

12DEC

TRIPLE CROWN: ALLENBY WINS GOLF THRILLER — SPORT

Figure 9: Front page, Herald Sun, December 12, 2005

Beach race riots shame Australia's values

OUR DISGRACE



Unbridled hate . . . mobs viciously assault men of Middle Eastern descent on a train at Cronulla station (top) and on a beachside street (inset) yesterday. Pictures: CRAIG GREENHILL and ADAM WARD

By LUKE McILVEEN and KARALAWRENCE

SYDNEY'S Eastern Suburbs erupted in violence and vandalism last night after gangs of youths of Middle Eastern descent retaliated against a day of racist hatred at Cronulla.

Rampaging thugs at Cronulla, fuelled by alcohol and fury after last week's attack on lifesavers, had earlier bashed men and women of Middle Eastern descent on the beach suburb's streets and at its train station.

Then last night, carloads of young people drove into Maroubra to take revenge for the Cronulla violence, damaging 100

cars, breaking their windows and throwing molotov cocktails.

During the afternoon at Cronulla, police struggled to control 5000 rioters yelling racist chants and "Aussie, Aussie Aussie, Oi, Oi, Oi", with many carrying Australian flags in Sydney's worst ever race riots.

There was also evidence that extreme right-wing groups had infiltrated the crowd. "It's time for a war, so join the army of hardcore," one man said.

At least 12 people were arrested and two paramedics were injured in the melee.

Police were pelted with beer bottles and had to use capsicum spray and batons. "I'm ashamed as a man and as the commissioner of police," Police Commissioner Ken Moroney said.

MORE REPORTS, PICTURES: Pages 2,3,4,5,6,20,21

5000 hoodlums in Cronulla rampage

One man stabbed, dozens beaten up

Carloads of thugs attack Maroubra

Figure 10: Front page, *Daily Telegraph*, December 12, 2005

The post-Cronulla riot art landscape saw a renewed interest in the topic of Australian identity and the Middle Eastern/Muslim artist. This often translated to an increased visibility of Arab artists and male artists of Muslim descent (as the artistic voices of contemporary Islam),⁸² although notable exceptions include Shirin Neshat (AGNSW, 2006) and Shahzia Sikander (MCA, 2008). Whilst artists have gone a long way towards dismantling racist stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims more broadly, representations of Muslim women's subjectivity, that challenge (rather than reinforce) mainstream perceptions of Muslim women and the veil remain limited. Valerie Behiery rightly foregrounds the importance of veiled Muslim subjects/agents or veiled Muslim subjectivity in artworks for their capacity to "dislocate dominant discourse on the veil by engaging the viewer in a subject-to-subject relationship and consequently prompting his or her identification with a marginalised figure."⁸³ And whilst identification is an important persuasive agent, it also carries an ethical responsibility. As originally put forward by Gayatri Spivak in 1988, and reinforced by Anthony Gardner in 2010, maintaining "an ethics of alterity rather than a politics of identity remains as crucial now as it was in decades past."⁸⁴

In the following case studies I will examine representations of Muslim women and Muslim veiling practices in Australian contemporary art to understand their connectedness to, or departure from, Orientalist and neo-Orientalist constructs as well as the effect these might have on flesh-and-blood Muslim women living in Australia. Neil MacMaster and Toni Lewis make important distinctions between 'classic' Orientalist representations of the veil and its post-colonial variety, underscoring their continuity as "ideological fabrications."⁸⁵ They identify the former as centred on erotic

⁸² See works from Khaled Sabsabi, Abdul Abdullah, Khadim Ali, Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, Omar Chowdhury, Jamil Yamani, Abdullah M.I. Syed.

⁸³ Valerie Behiery, "Alternative Narratives of the Veil in Contemporary Art," *Comparative Studies of South-Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32.1 (2012): 142.

⁸⁴ Anthony Gardner, "Whither the Postcolonial? Three Responses from Australia". *Global Art and the Museum*, October (2010). Last modified September 2, 2013, http://www.globalartmuseum.de/site/guest_author/236.

⁸⁵ Neil MacMaster and Toni Lewis, "Orientalism: from unveiling to hyperveiling," *European Studies*, xxviii (1998): 132.

images of “unveiling as a metaphor for colonial domination,”⁸⁶ and the latter as focused on radical hyperveiling, or images of the most extreme types of veiling practices, “as a marker of political and cultural danger.”⁸⁷

The Muslim woman themed exhibition

There were two exhibitions in 2012, *Faith, Fashion, Fusion* and *No Added Sugar: Engagement and Self-determination*, which aimed to highlight Muslim women’s subjectivity and diversity of voice. The former was exhibited at the Powerhouse Museum and documented veiled Muslim women’s dress choices from fashion and faith based perspectives. And the latter, an exhibition of works by Australian Muslim women artists held at the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. Due to the focus of this essay being contemporary art, I will be focusing on the *No Added Sugar* exhibition, even though *Faith, Fashion, Fusion* is an arts based event that provided positive grounds for audiences to engage with Muslim women on a subject-to-subject level. *No Added Sugar* received considerable attention presenting works that were nuanced and professionally realised. The (Muslim) woman-only show enveloped the Arts Centre in what Catriona Moore calls a tried-and-true feminist aesthetic with a “look of listening.”⁸⁸

Artists in the exhibition focused on topics such as faith, the refugee experience and issues within Muslim communities amongst others. None of the artworks reflected “racism, fear or phobia of Muslims”⁸⁹ which the curator saw as “mainstream ideas normally associated with Muslims,”⁹⁰ despite evidence showing that experiences of racism are “far greater for Australian women of Arab and Muslim backgrounds.”⁹¹ Instead, artists were

⁸⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 132.

⁸⁸ Catriona Moore and Kelly Doley, “Contemporary Australia: Feminism.” In *SEXES*, curated by Deborah Kelly, Bec Dean and Jeff Khan, (Sydney, Performance Space, 2012), 13. Exhibition catalog.

⁸⁹ Andrew Taylor, “Crossroads of East and West: culture,” *The Sun Herald*, May 6, 2012, 14.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 14.

⁹¹ Scott Poynting and Greg Noble, “Isma report,” Accessed April 23, 2015, <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/isma-listen-independent-research>

encouraged to push “the boundaries of what may be presumed as typical art by Muslims.”⁹² While the curator saw the exhibition as revealing a “rawness”, art writers described it as “reflecting the rich complexity of the Australian Muslim experience,”⁹³ exploring “issues of being Australian, of being of Muslim faith and of being female.”⁹⁴ Most writers foregrounded the funding it had received from the Australian Human Rights Commission and the fact that it was a culmination of cultural development workshops with Muslim women aimed at building “self-esteem and capacity.”⁹⁵ This prompted one critic to write, “a first for Australian Muslim women artists but the exhibition is not about being Muslim.”⁹⁶

In *No Added Sugar*, as in *Faith, Fashion Fusion*, audiences are presented with Islam’s non-threatening side - its women. Both exhibitions aimed at debunking stereotypes and presenting cultural sensibilities essential to a diverse range of Australian Muslim women. It is difficult to disentangle the language of benevolence used in the press from orientalist discourse that presents the Muslim woman as in need of rescue by her Orientalist saviours. As artistic expressions, works in the *No Added Sugar* exhibition were notably depoliticised with regards to race and religious tensions/relations and this was seen as source of value. This leads us to question how the metonymic function of Muslim women (as the essence of Islamic culture) and their sublimated depiction, may be used to reinforce an image of Australia (for Australians) that is devoid of such uncomfortable and underlying issues, or at least prevent a critical engagement with it.

There is the strong case that Muslim artists are often forced into being political in Western cultural contexts, regardless of whether they choose to be or not. Indeed, artists in the exhibition may have simply chosen not to explore such topics. This paper is not about scrutinising their choices of

⁹² Samina Yasmeen and Nina Markovic, *Muslim Citizens in the West: spaces and agents of inclusion and exclusion* (Dorchester: Ashgate, 2014), 215.

⁹³ Jan Jones, “Muslim women artists to the fore,” *Art Monthly* 226 (2013): 54.

⁹⁴ Julie Lien, “No Added Sugar: Engagement and Self-Determination,” *Artlink* 32.3 (2012): 87.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹⁶ Melissa Matheson, “It’s state of the art for Muslim women,” *The Daily Telegraph* May 7, 2012: 26.

subject matter (though it is not surprising, given the highly charged nature of the veiled Muslim woman's image to both colonial and anti-colonial pursuits, that so few Muslim women choose to engage with race and religion based politics through art). Rather it is to look at the situation as one would look at a Barbara Hepworth sculpture (also used by Henry Moore), where the "holes" are just as important to how we see the whole. Issues of race and Islamophobia are just as important to the other issues that Muslim women face and this is what makes a "richly complex" view of Australian Muslim women's experience. And further, the sheer lack of Muslim women's subjectivity in contemporary Australian art since 9/11 and the Cronulla Riots, demonstrates that Muslim women who discuss issues of race and Islamophobia through art are anything but "typical".

Burqas, Veils and Hoodies: Identity and Representation was an exhibition aimed at engaging with the Muslim community that formed a large part of the area in which the gallery was located (Dandenong, Victoria). Admittedly I was invited to participate in this exhibition but refused on the grounds that it was misleading – I was to be the token Muslim artist in a show that on surface level appeared to be largely about Muslim veiling practices. In its realisation, none of the works depicted burqas despite the naming of the title – whether in the culturally specific meaning of the term, as a garment worn by women in Afghanistan, or in its "Western" translation, as a type of Muslim veil that covers everything but the eyes. In this case, 'burqa' is not only misleading, but operates as a condensed signifier, just as the veil had in the colonial period, of the "entire social, political and cultural order"⁹⁷ of Islam. Although the curator's statement is dense in analysis and pays particular attention to the trope of the veil, and there appears to be more artists of non-European descent, only one work in the show depicts a Muslim veil (again as a condensed signifier, to critique politics in Iran) and that is Nasim Nasr's *Women in Shadow* (2011). This work has been widely publicised and exhibited and deserves critical examination in its own right.

⁹⁷ Macmaster and Lewis, "Orientalism: from unveiling to hyperveiling," *European Studies* xxviii (1998): 128.

The veil as condensed signifier

In *Women in Shadow* (2011), Nasr presents a fashion parade where female models are displayed in various forms of Muslim dress and undress. In its first stage the models are wearing chadors, a type of Islamic veil worn by women in Iran, and gesturing in different ways as the MC describes the designer outfits they are wearing underneath. In the second stage, the models appear with their elegant makeup smudged in what looks like black tears running down their faces (fig. 11). The models in this segment face-off the audience that are segregated by gender, “as they are in Iran.”⁹⁸ In the third stage the models faces are cleared and they are each holding a goldfish swimming in a clear bag of water, the transparency of which is starkly contrasted to the opaque chador they are wearing. Before leaving the runway, they lift the chador slightly to reveal what they are wearing underneath (fig. 12). Before the final sequence we see a video performance of Nasr’s eyes, staring unblinkingly until she sheds a tear. She then wipes her eyes with wet hands to recreate the black tears we saw on the models in the second stage until they are gradually cleaned. In their final parade, the models with clear faces walk without the chador, revealing the outfits they were covering earlier.

Black tears on abject Muslim women’s bodies. Veiled Muslim women as shadows of themselves. Hope in the form of a Western power (transparent in contrast to the shrouded East). Unveiling. Rebirth (a baptism of sorts). Liberation. If at first sight *Women in Shadow* seems to hark back to an older tradition of orientalist discourse, framing of the work confirms this stance, even as it claims to do the opposite.

⁹⁸ Anne Marsh, “Relations: Video/Performance/Document,” in *Video Void*, ed. Matthew Perkins (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2014), 129.



Figure 11: Nasim Nasr, *Women in Shadow* performance series, 2011.
Australian Experimental Art Foundation. Accessed 7 May, 2015.

www.nasimnasr.com



Figure 12: Nasim Nasr, *Women in Shadow* performance series, 2011.

Australian Experimental Art Foundation. Accessed 7 May, 2015.

www.nasimnasr.com

In Adam Geczy's essay 'Symbols of Rebirth'⁹⁹ the work is framed as post-Orientalist, though he fails to provide evidence of how it fits this criteria. "Full hijab" and "burka" are used interchangeably in place of the Iranian chador. For Geczy, her choice of using goldfish instead of the female form, to signify escape is a show of respect for Muslim women "who cherish hijab as central to their faith."¹⁰⁰ And yet he makes no mention of the final stage of the performance in which models parade without black tears or chadors, or as Anne Marsh calls it "liberated women" wearing "sexy and designer outfits."¹⁰¹

Selective writing and listening are not new concepts to Western representations of Muslim and Middle Eastern culture. In Anne Marsh's more recent article 'Nasim Nasr: the language behind the veil'¹⁰² we are given a feminist take on the work. Marsh flags that Nasr's critique is directed at both East and West before stating that the East is worse off, lest there be any room for confusion;

"In Iran and elsewhere mothers, and other familial women, constrain their daughters in traditional roles thus perpetuating the cycle of oppression. In the West this process is less widespread"

"Western women rebelled against their mothers and fathers, the Church and the State from the 1950s onwards and gained some equality with men, but in Iran the situation is dire for women."¹⁰³

In one broad stroke, Marsh erases Muslim women's histories of resistance, whilst enacting the familiar imperial feminist and masculine¹⁰⁴ gesture of constructing a universal subject position by comparing and distinguishing 'Western women' from a cultural other. Marsh claims that Nasr is critiquing "the image of the veiled woman... by destabilizing the

⁹⁹ Adam Geczy, "Nasim Nasr: Symbols of Rebirth," *Eyeline: Contemporary Visual Arts* 77 (2012): 52-57.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰¹ Marsh, "Relations: Video/Performance/Document," 130.

¹⁰² Anne Marsh, "Nasim Nasr: The Language Behind the Veil," *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Art and Culture* 44.1 (2015): 40-43.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁰⁴ Yegenoglu writes, "Western women, as the excluded other of Western men, nevertheless occupy a masculine position in relation to Oriental women." in Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 12.

stereotype”¹⁰⁵ but only explains how the work challenges the objectification of women. In privileging sexual difference over other forms of difference, Marsh remains blind to the ethnocentric nature of her argument.

Catalogue essays to the ‘Women in Shadow’ solo exhibition appear saturated with Orientalist and neo-Orientalist discourse. Catherine Speck describes the Iranian chador as a “restrictive dress code” which “fundamentally disempowers women” leading to a “loss of freedom, loss of identity and loss of corporeal presence.”¹⁰⁶ She laments over “other Muslim countries” that assist in the Iranian “condition” by producing underwear and bathing suits suitable for veiled women.¹⁰⁷ In a moment of blatant Islamophobia she writes, “It is becoming clear that the rise of Islamist oppression of women is a feature of a ‘global’ world, and contemporary art ... is struggling to critique and contain this phenomenon.”¹⁰⁸ Alan Cruikshank describes Iran as an “oppressive rule” with “ultimate intolerance”, Iranian women as “disempowered, veiled and erased of identity” and Nasr as “unveiled, liberated.”¹⁰⁹ In addition to Cruikshank’s repetitive framing of her work as courageous for its Iranian/Muslim transgression,¹¹⁰ Nasr herself traffics in classic Orientalism through the use of professional models and through their gradual unveiling. In an ABC news segment Nasr relates her distaste for the chador for covering women’s beauties.¹¹¹ In this way she epitomizes a “sign of advancement”, as put forward by imperial feminists of the colonial era, for her conviction of the necessity to abandon traditional dress. This was fundamental for colonialists as it not only ensured that the desired change of unveiling would be achieved, but also bestowed an illusive agency on the native herself “making her the agent of her own subjection to

¹⁰⁵ Marsh, “Relations: Video/Performance/Document,” 129 and Marsh, “Nasim Nasr: The Language Behind the Veil,” 42.

¹⁰⁶ Catherine Speck. “Women in Shadow,” in Nasim Nasr: Women in Shadow. (Adelaide: Australian Experimental Art Foundation, 2011), 9. Exhibition catalog.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 9-11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁰⁹ Alan Cruikshank. “Introduction,” in Nasim Nasr: Women in Shadow. (Adelaide: Australian Experimental Art Foundation, 2011), 7.

¹¹⁰ Alan Cruikshank. “Introduction,” 5 and Rebecca Brice, “Cultural Rebirth,” *7:30 report ABC South Australia*, 15 July, 2011.

¹¹¹ Brice, “Cultural Rebirth,” 15 July, 2011.

Western norms of progress.”¹¹² It should be noted that there are numerous and divergent examples of artists representing the veiled Muslim figure in their works, and that a critical engagement with all of these instances falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

Concluding thoughts

The events of 9/11 and the Cronulla riots spurred an interest in contemporary Arab and Muslim art in an effort to debunk stereotypes and produce alternative images other than those emanating from talkback radio and mass media. These often translated to a proliferation of work from Arab artists and Male artists of Muslim descent, yet the presence of veiled Muslim women subjects/agents in these works were limited or absent. Exhibitions themed around Muslim women could be seen to be bridging this gap. *Faith, Fashion, Fusion*, although largely a fashion-based museum exhibit, provided practical opportunities for audiences to engage with prominent and everyday Muslim women on a subject-to-subject level. *No Added Sugar* was the culmination of a number of cultural development workshops with Muslim women artists across Australia and a positive approach to addressing the lack of Muslim women’s voices in contemporary art. Works in the show were notably depoliticised with regards to race and Islamophobia, which the curator saw as a source of value, while writers framed the exhibition as representing the essence of Muslim women’s experiences. *Burqas, Veils and Hoodies* sought to attract audiences both from the nearby Muslim community as well as other art audiences, by appearing to present Muslim-specific themes, though their engagement remained on a superficial level presenting only marginal and vague references to Muslim women’s subjectivity. And finally, the presentation and interpretation of Nasim Nasr’s ‘*Women in Shadow*’ series demonstrates how use of the veil to critique Iranian politics in an Australian context, while failing to consider cross-cultural (mis)translation, repeats and reinforces mainstream perceptions of the veil and their harmful

¹¹² Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies*, 101.

subtexts, rather than challenges them as some art critics seem to think. Whether as discreet observers of faith or rebellious renegades riding on Orientalist constructs, representations of Muslim women (in their metonymic function of representing Muslim culture) have often responded to the shifting needs and requirements of Australian hegemonic structures. Since 9/11 and the Cronulla Riots these have included the denial of issues relating to racism and Islamophobia and neo-orientalist constructs that distance Muslim veiling practices, presenting them as threats to the Australian 'way of life'.

The length and scope of this essay has not permitted an equally thorough examination of works produced by a number of Australian artists using the image of the veiled Muslim women in their artworks.¹¹³ Indeed, we have clearly seen that curators and other leaders of Australian contemporary art have no qualms presenting Muslim women's voices, so long as they are either depoliticised and discreet or abject and angry, angry at the Islamic world that is. Eschewing a nativist view of the production of such imagery, this paper has demonstrated that veiled Muslim women's subjectivity presented with an ethics of alterity has not only been limited in the sphere of contemporary art, but that narratives repeating and reinforcing tropes of the veil in the Australian context, even as they claim to do the opposite, have taken precedence. In effect, the subject of Muslim women overshadows, and erases, the Muslim woman as subject. The problem is far deeper than a seeming lack of Muslim women artists who are interested in making politically and socially engaged work, for which young female Muslim student would want to engage with a discipline that valorises her victimhood and enables her silence? And just whose interests are at stake in representations of such imagery?

¹¹³ Examples include; Fabian Muir, *Blue Burqa in a Sunburnt Country* (2014); Phillip George, *New World Order* (2005); Victoria Cattoni, *What if I want to water-ski? And other questions* (2010); Fiona Foley, *Nulla 4 Eva* (2009), Anne Zahalka, *The girls #2, Cronulla Beach* (2007); Penny Byrne, *Swat* (2010), John Ogden, *West Meets East* (2005); Yiorgos Zafirou, *Drown My Sorrows* (2012).

Conclusion

“How do you represent the unrepresentable, unrepresentable due to over exposure or lack of exposure? How do you represent that which has been drained of meaning, misrepresented to the point of over saturation, yet under appreciated and neglected to the point of absurdity? Is it even futile to attempt such an endeavour... maybe, it is advisable, perhaps not.”¹¹⁴

Jayce Salloum

The question of Muslim women’s representation in Australian discourse and contemporary art has been the overarching concern of this paper and my practice for a number of years. The entrenched nature of views that produce the Muslim other as violent, barbaric and civilisationally backward and the Muslim woman as oppressed, voiceless and lacking individuality has often led me to produce work addressing these issues and present-day realities before fully grasping their historical roots. This illustrates why I found it necessary to begin this paper by looking at my art practice, examining key themes and motivations, before delving into historical and discursive narratives and the implications these have on contemporary art practice.

In the first chapter I examined three bodies of work that were pivotal in the development of my practice, underscoring the role of the autobiographical in my work. *Effacement* (2009) and *Hair/Veil* (2011) reflect on experiences of veiling, unveiling and (symbolically) re-veiling, challenging the trope of the veil as erasing a woman’s identity. The *Extremist Activity* series, on the other hand, used parody to respond to debates about the

¹¹⁴ Jayce Salloum, *Intangible Cartographies: New Arab Video*, exhibition catalogue, Worldwide Video Festival, 2001.

niqab being a security threat. Objects simultaneously concealed and revealed within the niqab demystified the veil and what was *imagined* to be hiding beneath it. In the *Site Occupied* series the fabric of the veil was manipulated as an architectural medium to (re)create notions of inclusion, exclusion and otherness in space. In both series performative interventions were used as a decolonizing mechanism, highlighting the body as an occupied site.

Chapter two brought historical relevance to the ideas and issues being discussed above. The research in this section revealed the Muslim woman's image as contingent upon time, place and culture, upending the seemingly timeless nature of her depiction as subjugated and powerless in the West. In medieval literature, for instance, she is depicted as a forward and loquacious noble woman, while in the renaissance she is presented, albeit briefly, as indifferent to the other characters in the storyline. When Europeans established themselves as colonial powers in Muslim countries, the Muslim woman's image became the negative ideal of Western middle-class domesticity and central to the Western discourse on Islam. With the aid of ocular centrism in the nineteenth century and the construction of the European female self, the veil was congealed into the quintessential symbol of civilisational backwardness and oppression while unveiling symbolised progress, and liberation, in addition to European masculine fantasies of invasion and sexual conquest.

In the third chapter, representations of Muslims, and particularly Muslim women, were examined in the context of post-9/11 and post-Cronulla riot Australian contemporary art. These sought to reveal "another side" of Muslim culture to counter the disparaging stereotypes routinely used in talkback radio and mass media. In the wake of the Cronulla Riots, the increase in work produced by male artists of Muslim descent, whilst effective in confronting racial and religious tensions, did not necessarily equate to an equal presentation of female Muslim subjectivity. In attempting to bridge this gap, a number of exhibitions were curated on the theme of Muslim women while some artists used the veil sign as a condensed signifier. This revealed

an Australian cultural elite preference for male-centric views of contemporary Australian Muslim culture, enabling discourses of Australian Muslim women, often depicted as either depoliticised and discreet or abject and angry (at the Muslim world), to remain in the sphere of Orientalist and neo-Orientalist constructs. This moment of “homosocial patriarchal bonding” is neither rare nor new. Bell Hooks writes about the business of talking race (and I will add - religious difference) being presumed as “down and dirty stuff, and therefore like all male locker rooms, spaces no real woman would want to enter.”¹¹⁵ It is my hope that through this paper and my continuing practice as an artist I have been able to demonstrate that female participation in discussions of race and Islamophobia through the potentially transformative quality of art is not only necessary but also a path worth taking. It is important to acknowledge the value of the way art can represent and avail an experience of multiple and seemingly conflicting perspectives without necessarily wholly inhabiting any particular perspective.

“Dialogue” and the “dismantling of stereotypes” are aims that are often cited alongside the presentation of Muslim imagery, and with good reason. For a nation still struggling to come to terms with its Muslim other, that still frequently summons the veiled Muslim figure to debate broader socio-political struggles, creating alternative images and opportunities for transcultural literacy are crucial to creating a context for transformation. Yet “Dialogue” and the “dismantling of stereotypes” are not the natural products of contemporary imagery associated with veiled Muslim women, and claims of such should not be confused with Orientalist discourses that are masked as transgressive and revolutionary.

Even as I write this conclusion, an artwork depicting a mannequin wearing a niqab-like face covering over a wedding gown is pulled from an arts festival in Wollongong for being “inappropriate” while an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* frames the work as “controversial”. The drama is relayed between artist, Richard Perin, Wollongong council and festival

¹¹⁵ Bell Hooks, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Holt, 1995), 2.

organisers, along with debates around censorship, the freedom of artistic expression, and the injustice brought to “intelligent, rational viewers of engaging with ‘difficult art’.”¹¹⁶ The sanctioning of art in an Australian context for the mere presence of veiled Muslim women or worse still, sanctioning as a result of the work’s (real or imagined) Muslim transgression (itself reminiscent of colonialist discourse), presents significant questions for debate. Questioning these images and their sanctioning as critical works of art, whilst opening space for creative expression and experimentation with the post-colonial realities faced by flesh-and-blood Muslim women, remains as pressing an issue now as it has ever been.

¹¹⁶ Angela Thompson, “Richard Perin’s controversial niqab bride banned from art festival,” Sydney Morning Herald, March 20, 2015. Accessed May 1, 2015. <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/richard-perins-controversial-niqab-bride-banned-from-art-festival-20150320-1m3knc.html>

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