Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for a degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter now, including display on the World Wide Web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis.

Lamija Grbic'   April 5, 2017

Representations of Muslim Women in the Western Imaginary

by

Lamija Grbic'

Noëlle McAfee
Adviser

Department of Philosophy

Noëlle McAfee

Adviser

Dilek Huseyinzadegan

Committee Member

Sabino Kornrich

Committee Member

2017

Representations of Muslim Women in the Western Imaginary

By

Lamija Grbic'

Noëlle McAfee

Adviser

An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Philosophy

2017

Abstract

Representations of Muslim Women in the Western Imaginary
By Lamija Grbic'

I draw upon examples of political discourse in the United States and France in order to investigate how Muslim women are being portrayed and what kinds of stories are being told about them. While employed in differing ways, representations of Muslim women in western political discourse reply upon a presumption of gender oppression tied closely to the hijab and other forms of body coverings. I argue that such a presumption stems from a narrow iteration of feminist thought that ultimately conceals a neocolonial project of enforcing western meanings and values upon cultural "others." An important component of this process is the discursive act of "pointing toward" Muslim women as women who have internalized their own "oppression" and therefore failed to live up to feminist standards. I draw upon several philosophical lenses—phenomenology, post-colonial studies, Islamic feminisms and psychoanalysis—to deconstruct the discursive mechanisms which render such representations intelligible and moving to a western audience. I also attempt to uncover the ways in which our very conception of feminism is structured by our cultural, historical and social positionalities in the West. Rather than ascribing meanings to the experiences of other women, I propose an alternative model of feminist solidarity that relies upon mutual embeddedness, self-critique and a form of letting go of our stakes in the epistemological, cultural and bodily configurations of different groups of women.

Representations of Muslim Women in the Western Imaginary

By

Lamija Grbic'

Noëlle McAfee

Adviser

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements of the degree of
Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Department of Philosophy

2017

Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

Introduction

The hijab is not a neutral image in the western imaginary, and neither are the various other forms of body covering worn by some Muslim women around the globe. The hijab is not merely a religious symbol in the west; it is a site of the Other. This othering process of Muslim hijabi women has often cast them off as oppressed or in need of liberation; indeed, conversations about the hijab and other Islamic body coverings center on concerns about the freedom of Muslim women and the ostensibly oppressive tenants of Islamic tradition. The hijab, then, is construed as an instrument of misogynistic control and an affront to the west's values of liberty and equality. In this project, I contribute to the work of deconstructing this representation of Muslim women, an analysis which leads me to important considerations of feminist solidarity and justice.

How and where do these representations arise? Rather than residing solely in the realm of academic scholarship, interpersonal processes of meaning-making, or even religious texts, predominant representations of Muslim women are constructed and disseminated by public authorities in order to justify or create a perceived need for certain policy measures. In other words, such representations are forged within the realm of political discourse. The meanings that are constructed about our political worlds carry real consequences for people's lives, as they help shape our considerations for what is possible and what is just. Indeed, the examples of Islamophobic discourse I have selected for this project have been utilized either to justify or propose policies that serve to marginalize Muslim communities. By examining instances of such discourse in two western countries—the United States and France—I raise considerations about the relationship between discourse, meaning and the power to shape economic and social realities.

While Islamophobia in the west has a complex history, the recent dramatization of concerns over Muslim immigration to western Europe and the United States imbues this project with a sense of personal and philosophical urgency. But if Muslims, and specifically Muslim hijabi women, are facing a set of discursive and political practices which define them as a threat to western societies, what theoretical recourse do we hold in disrupting these practices?

The first potential framework I consider is liberalism. Many of the concerns articulated by western feminists and other scholars regarding "Islam and women"[1] center on the practice of wearing the hijab, burqa, or other forms of Islamic body covering. It would appear that liberalism's own ideals concerning individual liberty would be sufficient to oppose discourses that represent the hijab as an instrument of gender oppression. Yet this does not seem to be the case. As I hope to demonstrate, the relationship between the state and religion is more nuanced when explored in different national contexts, so that two countries both heavily influenced by liberal political philosophy, such as France and the United States, vary dramatically concerning their legal and cultural approaches toward the issue of Islam and women.

Nor is reliance upon liberal formulations of women's rights necessarily sufficient in order to deconstruct detrimental representations of Muslim women. I address this concern in the first chapter of this project, where I examine Martha C. Nussbaum's reformulation of liberal principles into a universal feminist project. I then analyze Charles Mills' critiques of white liberalism in order to illustrate the limitations of relying solely upon the liberal political tradition (as it now operates) when addressing racial injustice and the repercussions of western colonialism. As Mills argues, this limitation is due in large part to the ways in which racial power has been coded within traditional liberal concepts.

---

[1] Lila Abu-Lughod and Leila Ahmed both cite heightened discourses on the topic of Islam and women following 9/11 (Abu-Lughod 784; Ahmed 194).

In the second chapter, I consider four potential philosophical or theological frameworks for critiquing representations of Muslim women and/or their manners of dress. I begin with a phenomenological analysis of the hijab in French society by explicating the work of Alia Al-Saji. Then, I discuss findings from Chandra Mohanty's analysis of how western feminist scholarship reinforces more mainstream assumptions about non-western women often found in political discourse. I then explain how Muslim women are increasingly mobilizing to enact political change. As discussed by Asma Afsaruddin, Muslim feminists are accomplishing such change not by rejecting Islam as "inherently" oppressive but rather by interpreting the Holy Qur'an in ways that center women's experiences and by critiquing hermeneutical approaches that are used to normalize patriarchal social structures. Finally, I review a psychoanalytic examination of desire and personal choice as discussed by Drucilla Cornell.

There is a considerable amount of overlap between these frameworks; indeed, theorists in each inevitably rely upon findings from other frameworks in order to provide a fuller account of what kinds of processes are at play in the construction of "the oppressed" Muslim woman. In addition, I draw upon these theorists in order to examine their critiques of feminist and popular discourse which validate the experiences of western/white women at the expense of other groups of women. However, each theorist also articulates a vision of feminist struggle that I highlight in my explications. In presenting each of these frameworks, I hope to illustrate the value of employing multiple epistemological lenses in deconstructing a hegemonic representation of Muslim women. Some of the processes I identify in this chapter include collapses in meaning between Islam/gender oppression; reliance upon decontextualized knowledge that elides important differences between women, especially "culturally" western women and non-western women; an assumption that feminism is inherently congruent with western political tradition and

can only be articulated within this framework; and western anxieties about Muslim women's subjectivities and desires.

In the third chapter, I focus specifically on this aforementioned concern with the subjectivity of "the other." I examine accusations against Muslim hijabi women by western feminists which view the former as acting out of an "internalized" gender oppression. I argue that this internalization framework is overly simplistic and encourages women in historical and present positions of power (even if this power is merely epistemic on the basis of their privileged social positionalities as western subjects) to vilify other groups of women as condoning their own oppression.[2] Instead, I draw on Audre Lorde and George Yancy to advocate for an alternative reading of the ways in which our subjectivities are constituted in part through the oppressive social relations we are *embedded* in. I explicate Sara Ahmed's analysis of the will to further explore the ways in which power relations become "embedded" within institutional frameworks, as well as how groups and individuals resist through acts of "willfulness."

Finally, I explore what it means to experience feminist solidarity by integrating views from each of these theorists. I briefly examine the role of theory in feminist praxis as discussed by bell hooks. Ultimately I argue that feminist solidarity remains an open-ended concept that can be broadly understood as nurturing support and mutual well-being among groups of women and men. This does not mean that feminist solidarity should be uncritically accepting; rather, conceptions of feminist justice should remain committed to critiques of western domination and cognizant of the unique struggles that different groups of women face.

---

[2] Such arguments usually do not leave room for nuanced discussions concerning whether the matter of concern is actually interpreted as oppressive by the women affected by it.

Before proceeding, I will offer several points of consideration. I approach this project as a means of understanding anti-hijab political discourse in order to critique it and examine how it functions in relation to broader political and discursive systems of western domination. I do not attempt to offer my own interpretations of how Muslim hijabi women should understand themselves, Islam, the hijab or feminism. Instead, I view this project as a process of *self-critique*[3] of those who understand themselves as operating within western political and philosophical traditions. As such, this project is concerned with problematizing *western understandings* of Islam and envisioning a western feminism that center critiques of white and western supremacy in feminist thought.

While I refer specifically to the hijab, I am aware that various other forms of body coverings worn by Muslim women are subject to the same othering processes. I employ the term *Muslim hijabi women*, to refer specifically to Muslim women who wear the hijab, as opposed to Muslim women who do not. The practice of wearing a hijab is itself a highly contextual act; for instance, some Muslim women wear hijabs in their day-to-day lives while others only wear the hijab to mosques and religious centers. I also recognize that Islamic body coverings vary by region, culture and time period. While I highlight examples of this variation through my explication of anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod, I am not able to provide further detailed historical accounts within the confines of this project (which signifies a critique of western representations of the hijab rather than a study of the cultural and religious meanings of the hijab). Finally, in keeping with Linda Alcoff's call to acknowledge our own positionalities as writers and thinkers, I am a Muslim woman living in the United States who does not wear the hijab.

---

[3] A concept which will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Chapter 1 Secularism and Liberalism in France and the U.S.

In recent years, political discourse in both France and the United States has been concerned with the "question" of Islam. Concerns regarding the relationships between Islam and gender, Islam and immigration and Islam and terror have become problematized in popular and political discourse amidst a background of foreign and domestic policies which have increasingly complicated relations with Muslim countries. The issue of Muslim women is especially emphasized in such discourse. The representation of Muslim women in the predominant political discourse in western countries, even among liberals and feminists, has tended toward a monolithic image of "the" Muslim woman as oppressed and concealed—a bleak state of existence which is reinforced by patriarchal social structures, Islamic tradition, and at times the woman herself.

In arguing against this representation, it is first necessary to give an account of the specific discourses which reinforce this characterization of Muslim women in the west. In this chapter, I provide a brief overview of the legal and political constructs underlying western, liberal democracies and their relationship to religious freedoms. While it is necessary to examine how such constructs are invoked as justifications of policy measures, I realize I am providing a brief summary of the complex historical and political traditions of two distinct countries. Nor do I mean to suggest that political tradition is the sole factor contributing to Islamophobia in western countries.

Instead, I examine these liberal political traditions as a way of exploring to what extent they are interpreted and renegotiated to bolster Islamophobic sentiments. I have chosen to focus on the United States and France given their recent struggles to define their relationships to Muslim immigrants living within their borders, Muslims in other countries and Islam as a

religion. I then review some examples of such discourse among policymakers and public

officials in both the U.S. and France. These examples constitute the point of departure for this

project, as they reflect not only how officials in power choose to portray Muslims and Islam, but

indeed how such discourse might shape the material realities of Muslims living in these

countries.

I explicate Martha C. Nussbaum's work on feminist universals in order to explore more

closely how liberal political theory can be applied to feminist theorizing.[4] I analyze Charles

Mills' critiques of white liberalism and the manner in which this tradition has failed to address

racial injustices in modern, liberal democracies. Ultimately, I argue that the liberal framework is

insufficient in developing a feminist lens through which to examine cultural differences.

State Secularism

Political ideology in both France and the United States is grounded in principles arising

from the Enlightenment; the philosophies of thinkers such as Voltaire and Locke have had

considerable influence in shaping our contemporary, western understandings of what it means to

exist in a political structure as an individual.[5] One of these Enlightenment concepts—liberty of

conscience—is regarded as foundational and, indeed, "the first liberty and the founding rock of

modern democracy."[6] In keeping with this "liberty of conscience" principle, religion has come to

occupy a sphere outside of state control and beyond public concern. Nonetheless, this

Enlightenment concern with state secularism has manifested itself in differing ways for both the

United States and France. Despite these different formulations, Islamophobic discourse has still

managed to emerge, at times embracing the political ideology of state secularism as justification

---

[4] In the following chapter, I offer alternative philosophical frameworks for deconstructing the representation of Muslim hijabi women as oppressed.
[5] Elizabeth Zoller, "Laïcité in the United States or The Separation of Church and State in a Pluralist Society," *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 13 (2006): 564, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/gls.2006.13.2.561.
[6] Ibid.

for such discourse and at times renegotiating its meanings and implications to further anti-Muslim rhetoric.

Laïcité in France

In France, the relationship between government and religious freedom is defined by the principle of *laïcité*. Instated during France's Third Republic in 1905, *laïcité* sought to ensure "the liberty of conscience" to its people.[7] The principle of *laïcité* has developed throughout France's transitions into the Fifth and Sixth Republics, so that it took on the definition of ensuring "the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction to their origin, race, or religion."[8] Yet *laïcité* has often been invoked in justifying anti-hijab legislation, operating under the assumption that any religious markers would compromise this political commitment to secularism.

The Separation of Church and State in the United States

State secularism in the United States is most notably articulated as "the separation of church and state." Codified in the Bill of Rights and elsewhere in the U.S. Constitution, state secularism can be detected in measures prohibiting religious tests as requisites for holding public office (Article VI, Clause 3) and in the First Amendment, which precludes Congress from establishing laws "respecting an establishment of religion" and "prohibiting the free exercise thereof."[9] Considering these dual roles, U.S. legal scholars understand the First Amendment as consisting of the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause, respectively.[10]

---

[7] Robert Zaretsky, "How French Secularism Became Fundamentalist," *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2016, http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/the-battle-for-the-french-secular-soul-laicite-charlie-hebdo/.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Zoller, "Laïcité in the United States," 563-564.
[10] Ibid., 564.

Political Discourse on the Hijab

In the section that follows, I illustrate some instances of Islamophobic discourse and meaning-making from public figures in both France and the United States. While some of these instances of Islamophobia have occurred as simple comments, others have been institutionalized as governmental policy. The historical and political circumstances of France and the United States differ, yet the justifications of public figures in both countries center on the need to curtail the threat of terrorism and extremist forms of Islam. Although these instances are anecdotal, I urge the reader to consider what sorts of repercussions these statements have given that they are sanctioned by public officials.

France

In 2016, Laurence Rossignol, the French minister of women's rights, stated that Muslim women who wear the hijab are comparable to "negroes who accepted slavery."[11] This comment arose from a discussion on fashion targeted toward Muslim women, which Rossignol described as "irresponsible."[12] The comment spurred outrage among French residents, both for its use of a derogatory racial term as well as its implications for Muslim women's freedom and ability to choose their manner of dress.

That summer, police officers patrolled the beaches to enforce the country's "burkini ban," a decree which prohibited Muslim women from wearing modest swimwear in accordance with their religious tradition. The burkini ban had been instated on July 28, 2016 in Cannes, France; proponents of the ban cited the need for increased security measures following the attack in Nice on Bastille Day, in which over eighty people were killed when a man drove a truck into a crowd

---

[11] "French Minister Compares Veil Wearers to 'Negroes Who Accepted Slavery," *BBC News*, March 30, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35927665.
[12] Ibid.

of people.[13] On August 5, the town of Villeneuve-Loubet also implemented the ban. The bans, however, did not directly cite burkinis or other forms of Islamic garb, but instead referred to dress that was not "respectful of good morals and of secularism" as well as "hygiene and security rules."[14]

Although it was meant to be temporary—only spanning until the end of the summer season—the ban in Villeneuve-Loubet was overturned in late August by the Council of State.[15] The Council decreed that the burkini ban infringed upon civil liberties and that claims about the swimwear's threat to "public order" were insufficient to warrant a ban.[16] Yet the status of similar bans in other French municipalities remains uncertain; as reported by the the *New York Times*, "while the decision does not apply directly to the many other French cities and towns that have banned the burkini, it amounts to a warning that their prohibitions are likely to be overturned if challenged."[17] Among those who responded to the court's decision to overturn the ban, former French Prime Minister Manuel Valls argued that "condemning the burkini in no way questions individual liberties."[18] Paralleling Rossignol, Valls had characterized the burkini as the "enslavement" of women.[19] The mayor of Villeneuve-Loubet, Lionnel Luca, expressed condemnation of the court's ruling, stating that "apparently, the terrorist attacks in Nice were not sufficiently traumatic."[20] These recent instances of Islamophobic discourse and policies are

---

[13] Aurelien Breeden and Lilia Blaise, "Court Overturns 'Burkini' Ban in French Town," *The New York Times*, August 26, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/europe/france-burkini-ban.html.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

predated by a history of anti-Muslim legislation in France. In 2004, France prohibited the display of religious symbols by elementary and secondary school students.[21]

United States

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign centered on a white supremacist platform which vilified multiple minority groups, including Latinos, African Americans and Muslims. Following the December 2015 mass shooting by a Muslim couple in San Bernardino, Trump advocated for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States until [the] country's representatives can figure out what the hell is going on."[22] Trump has also argued for heightened monitoring of Muslim American communities, including the surveillance of mosques and the development of a database of Muslims living within the United States.[23] While conceding that "some people are going to be upset about it," Trump claimed "that now everybody is feeling security is going to rule."[24] Trump has since changed his stance on Muslim immigration, stating that the proposal to ban Muslims was "just a suggestion."[25] After Donald Trump was elected as 45th president of the United States, Americans learned that this was not merely a "suggestion." After the first ban (signed January 27, 2017) against accepting

---

[21] Alissa J. Rubin, "French School Deems Teenager's Skirt an Illegal Display of Religion," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/europe/french-school-teenagers-skirt-illegal-display-religion.html.

[22] "Donald Trump Urges Ban on Muslims Coming to U.S.," *BBC News*, December 8, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35035190.

[23] "Donald Trump 'Not Opposed to Muslim Database' in U.S.," *BBC News*, November 19, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34873057.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "U.S. Election 2016: Donald Trump Softens Stance on Muslim Ban," *BBC News*, May 11, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36272236.

immigrants from seven Muslim countries[26] was put on hold by a federal appeals court, Trump

implemented another 90-day ban affecting six countries.[27]

While not explicitly directed toward Muslim women, Trump's Islamophobic rhetoric

carries far-reaching ramifications for Muslim hijabi women's safety. According to the Southern

Poverty Law Center, the FBI witnessed a 67% increase in reported anti-Muslim hate crimes in

2015.[28] Of the thousand hate crimes reported to the Southern Poverty Law Center after Trump's

election to the presidency—between November 9 and December 12, 2016—anti-Muslim hate

crime ranked as the third most reported type.[29] While this surge in Islamophobic hate crimes may

have arisen from a confluence of factors, including the mass attacks by Muslim perpetrators in

the United States and Europe, this does not diminish the influence that Donald Trump's rhetoric

has had in legitimizing and propagating anti-Muslim sentiments. Indeed, Trump's responses to

attacks perpetrated by Muslim offenders have served to create the myth of a monolithic, Islamic

threat. Because their religious identity and affiliation to Islam is immediately perceptible via the

hijab, Muslim hijabi women may be especially vulnerable to these hate crimes.

The history of Islamophobic political discourse in the United States, however, long

precedes Trump. One prominent example is First Lady Laura Bush's speech concerning the U.S.

war in Afghanistan against the Taliban. Leila Ahmed relays an excerpt from the speech:

---

[26] Mark Landler, "Appeals Court Rejects Request to Immediately Restore Travel Ban," *The New York Times*, February 4, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/us/politics/visa-ban-trump-judge-james-robart.html. These countries included Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

[27] Glenn Thrush, "Trump's New Travel Ban Blocks Migrants from Six Nations, Sparing Iraq," *The New York Times*, March 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/us/politics/travel-ban-muslim-trump.html?_r=0.The renewed ban no longer includes Iraq.

[28] Mark Potok, "Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Surged Last Year, Fueled by Hateful Campaign," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 14, 2016, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/14/anti-muslim-hate-crimes-surged-last-year-fueled-hateful-campaign.

[29] "Update: 1,094 Bias-Related Incidents in the Month Following the Election," *Southern Poverty Law Center*, December 16, 2016, https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-1094-bias-related-incidents-month-following-election.

> civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror—not only because our hearts break for the women and children of Afghanistan, but also because in Afghanistan we see the world the terrorists would like to impose on the rest of us...The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women.[30]

By discursively linking women's rights to the war on terror, Bush implies that U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan is a campaign to eradicate an anti-woman way of life that threatens to consume "civilized people" if they are not able to contain it. Ahmed notes other examples of post-9/11 discourse, such as the characterizations of Islam as a "very wicked, evil religion" by right-wing Christian leader Franklin Graham.[31] Both comments were spoken by American conservatives, yet it is interesting that Bush's speech did not rely upon an outright condemnation of Islam but rather on the obligations of heart-broken, "civilized people" to intervene in the dangers propagated by Islamic governments.

Anti-Muslim discourse in France and the United States centers on a preoccupation with security and reveals a collapse in meaning between Islam and terror. Reactions to mass attacks by Muslim perpetrators have been distorted to suggest that Islam is inherently threatening regardless of its manifestation, even if this manifestation is as simple as one's choice of body covering. As I have attempted to demonstrate, these discursive processes carry real consequences for the physical and emotional well-being of individual Muslims, and by extension the vitality of Muslim communities in these countries.

Feminist Universals

Given these examples of Islamophobic political discourse, what theoretical recourse do we have in disrupting or challenging the characterizations that suggest that Islam is oppressive to women? One potential approach involves a feminist reading of liberalism, in such a way that

---

[30] Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 195.
[31] Ibid., 194.

traditional liberal principles are reformulated in order to promote feminist aims. In the remainder

of this chapter, I explore the feminist theory of Martha C. Nussbaum, whom I read as working

within the liberal tradition, in order to explore the possibilities of utilizing liberal (understood to

be culturally western) political philosophy in order to address the concerns of different groups of

women across the globe.

In "Women and Cultural Universals," Martha C. Nussbaum proposes a model of

universal human capabilities that she argues can be applied cross-culturally and serve as a

foundational tool for assessing women's political struggles across the globe. Nussbaum

introduces this model by arguing that "cultural traditions pose obstacles to women's health and

flourishing."[32] According to this stance, "custom and politics" determine women's quality of life

by dictating "who gets access to the education that would open job opportunities" and "who can

go where in what clothing in what company."[33] Her concern is that in both non-western and

western contexts, cultural traditions subjugate women and deprive them of their well-being.[34]

Perhaps even more concerning is that such traditions do not operate unilaterally to suppress

women via institutions or community members but that "the traditions have become so deeply

internalized that…women themselves endorse their own second-class status."[35] The universal

nature of women's oppression, it seems, warrants a universal articulation of the needs and

characteristics of the human that can withstand these oppressive cultural norms.

Nussbaum is careful to address criticisms of a universal stance by individuals she

identifies as "antiessentialists."[36] She acknowledges that "hasty judgments that a tradition in

---

[32] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," in *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen. (Victoria: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 302.
[33] Ibid., 304.
[34] Ibid., 302-303.
[35] Ibid., 302. In chapter 3, I offer an extended analysis of the concept of internalized oppression.
[36] Ibid., 306.

some distant part of the world is morally retrograde are familiar legacies of colonialism and imperialism."[37] In addition to emphasizing that oppressive traditions in both non-western and western context should be critiqued,[38] Nussbaum explains that her model does not seek to advance western political and moral standards at the expense of local cultures.[39] Instead, she argues that it is possible to articulate a set of universal feminist principles which promote "the critical assessment of traditions and political arrangements that is neither do-gooder colonialism or an uncritical validation of the status quo."[40] In either case, Nussbaum defines her position by arguing that we must prioritize action in accordance with feminist justice despite the perils of being perceived as a western universalist or imperialist.[41] While Nussbaum is aware of the risk of reenacting colonial domination by imposing western values or standards on non-western contexts, she nonetheless prioritizes "universal obligations to protect human function and its dignity"[42] over any anti-imperialist or anti-colonial commitments. She argues instead that it is possible to develop a universal model that does not operate according to this historical domination.

Nussbaum then proceeds to explain why other attempts to formally assess women's well-being around the world have proven insufficient. She cites John Rawls' ideas regarding "the just distribution of a small list of basic goods and resources."[43] While Rawls' theory acknowledges that individuals' life choices are socially constructed rather than "simply given," his conceptualization of a "good" is largely based upon "thing-like" goods rather than "capacity-

---

[37] Ibid., 303.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid., 304.
[41] Ibid., 303.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 305.

like" goods.[44] Nussbaum views this emphasis on quantifiable resources as a limitation due to her understanding that individuals' needs often differ as well as the notion that individuals "have different abilities to convert resources into functioning."[45] Seeking to depart from liberal models which are only concerned with the distribution of material resources, Nussbaum argues that the capabilities approach "maintains that resources have no value in themselves, apart from their role in promoting human functioning."[46]

The capabilities approach centers on the following question: "what activities characteristically performed by human beings are so central that they seem definitive of a life that is truly human?"[47] In response to this inquiry, Nussbaum delineates a list of *central human functional capabilities*: life; bodily health and integrity; bodily integrity; sense, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; concern for other species; play; and control over one's environment.[48] She argues that such an approach attempts to be "neither ahistorical nor a priori" but rather inclusive of a range of observable human needs and functioning.[49] In addition, the capabilities approach is evaluative rather than prescriptive; Nussbaum notes that "it can always be contested and remade."[50] As further evidence that the approach does not seek to prescribe western-based norms or expectations, Nussbaum explains that the list of functional capabilities "leave[s] room for plural specification and also for further negotiation."[51]

The significance of the capabilities approach for Nussbaum lies in its focus on

---

[44] Ibid. Nussbaum cites goods such as liberty/opportunity and income/wealth as examples of capacity-like and thing-like goods respectively (Nussbaum 305).
[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid., 306.
[47] Ibid., 309.
[48] Ibid., 310-311.
[49] Ibid., 310.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 311. Nussbaum also explains that the list was constructed in general terms so as to ensure that each capability "can be more concretely specified in accordance with one's origins, religious beliefs, or tastes (Nussbaum 310). Thus, the model is consistent with Rawls' concept of "overlapping consensus" (Nussbaum 310).

developing individuals' capacities for achieving "a good human life" rather than the specific

configurations of this life itself.[52] In other words, Nussbaum is concerned with the extent to

which individuals have "been enabled to perform the central human functions" by their

governments and societies.[53] This distinction is crucial, as the emphasis on developing capacities

rather than nurturing specific functions undergirds the freedom of individuals to exert control

over the specific configurations of their lives.[54] Thus, individuals are not "passive recipients of

social planning;" rather, the capabilities approach seeks to augment the conditions and resources

that individuals require to determine their own life courses, thereby prioritizing "the capacity of

choosing itself."[55]

Throughout her development of the central human functional capabilities, Nussbaum

critiques universalist stances which seek to epitomize western cultural norms as superior

standards of political functioning to which all peoples must subscribe. Indeed, she is highly

critical of culture and tradition, arguing that "cultures are not museum pieces, to be preserved

intact at all costs."[56] Yet she nonetheless argues that a universal articulation of human goods is

not only possible—so long as it strives to be a "metaphysically agnostic, experiential and

historical universalism"[57]—but necessary, insofar as it reflects the moral urgency of combatting

violence perpetuated against women.[58]

Nussbaum's list of the central human functional capabilities represents an endeavor to

reformulate classical liberal theory (particularly the theoretical contributions of Rawls) into an

instrument of feminist policy-making and evaluation. As such, this model demonstrates the

---

[52] Ibid., 310-311.
[53] Ibid., 311.
[54] Ibid., 312.
[55] Ibid., 314-316.
[56] Ibid., 308.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 303.

pliability of the philosophical tradition of liberalism in being redirected toward feminist aims. In order to evaluate Nussbaum's theoretical contributions to feminist theorizing, I will apply her model to the question of Muslim women wearing the hijab and other forms of body coverings.

The third of Nussbaum's central human functional capabilities is the principle of *bodily integrity*. Nussbaum defines this principle as referring to the freedom to move and travel, protections against sexual violence and the ability to make reproductive choices for oneself.[59] When describing the fourth and sixth principles (*senses, imagination, thought* and *practical reason*, respectively), Nussbaum makes reference to traditional liberal concepts such as "freedom of expression" in terms of speech, "freedom of religious exercise" and "liberty of conscience."[60] Given the enumeration of these three principles, it appears that Nussbaum's theoretical stance provides a valuable means of refuting arguments which view the hijab as oppressive to women. Whether conceptualized as a right to religious expression or self-definition, the act of wearing the hijab can be readily theorized as a behavior or "function" that arises from Nussbaum's central human functional capabilities. Coupled with its commitments to individual empowerment via the freedom to choose one's own life course, it would appear that the capabilities approach is sufficient in countering anti-hijab discourse and policies.

Critiques of Liberalism

However, I argue that Nussbaum's approach is insufficient in developing a theoretical framework of women's well-being and feminist political actualization. In addition to arguing that the universalist capabilities approach is still grounded in western cultural traditions despite its attempts to achieve epistemic neutrality, I also draw upon Charles W. Mills to critique aspects of liberal political theory. In explicating Mills' critiques of liberalism, I hope to emphasize some

---

[59] Ibid., 310.
[60] Ibid., 310-311.

fundamental limitations of liberalism beyond Nussbaum's analysis; thus, this section is concerned not only with assessing the limitations of Nussbaum's work in particular but of liberalism as a political tradition.

In "Racial Liberalism," Charles W. Mills analyzes the canon of liberal political theory in order to argue that such theory reflects a "racial liberalism," so that "conceptions of personhood and resulting schedules of rights, duties, and government responsibilities have all been racialized."[61] He begins by analyzing the concept of the social contract, explaining that it calls upon us to envision the construction of "the sociopolitical order" via the contractual agreement of individuals existing "in a prosocial, prepolitical stage of humanity."[62] Two assumptions characterize this prepolitical phase: the notion that socio-political systems are constituted through human action rather than divine power and "that human beings are naturally equal and that this equality in the state of nature should somehow translate into egalitarian sociopolitical institutions."[63]

Yet Mills states that these assumptions about the prepolitical state of nature are defied by the reality that "the personhood of some persons was historically disregarded and their rights disrespected."[64] Mills argues that racial oppression of people of color has "underpinned the liberal framework from the outset,"[65] so that rather than understanding institutions such as racial slavery in the United States as fundamentally incongruent with liberal ideals, this and other practices of racial oppression were "accommodated by suitable discursive shifts and conceptual framings."[66] Mills explains that by defining personhood in terms of white racial identity, liberal

---

[61] Charles W. Mills, "Racial Liberalism," *Modern Language Association* 123 (2008): 1381, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501942.
[62] Ibid. As Mills explains, this "prepolitical stage" is often referred to as "the state of nature" (Mills 1381).
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid., 1382.
[66] Ibid., 1381.

theorists have not only justified racial subjugation but have rendered such subjugation invisible under the principles of egalitarianism.[67] Thus, white supremacy within liberal, democratic states does not represent "an anomaly in an unqualified liberal universalism but [is] generally symbiotically related to a qualified and particularistic liberalism."[68]

In light of both the theoretical and lived reality of racial liberalism, Mills advocates for a "radical rectification" of traditional liberal theory which, regardless of specific type or form,[69] has failed to meaningfully engage with issues of race and racism.[70] Part of this failure has to do with the marginalization of theorists of color from the philosophical canon. Another reason relates to the ways in which "the political history of the West is sanitized, reconstructed as if white racial domination and the oppression of people of color had not been central to that history."[71] A third contributing factor relates to the use of the "ideal theory" frame. Mills explains that while ideal theory is concerned with the experience of justice "in a perfectly just society," nonideal theory addresses the experience of justice "in a society with a history of injustice."[72] This distinction is significant insofar as nonideal theory introduces considerations of *corrective measures* that must be taken to terminate and counteract the longstanding effects of racial oppression.[73] The historical utilization of the ideal theory frame, however, has meant that "white political philosophers are immediately exempted from dealing with the legacy of white supremacy in our actual society."[74]

---

[67] Ibid., 1382.
[68] Ibid. Here Mills cites Mehta and Sala-Molins.
[69] Ibid., 1383. Mills explains that both left- and right-wing liberalism rely upon a racialized understanding of personhood and therefore perpetuate racial liberalism.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 1384.
[72] Ibid., 1384-5.
[73] Ibid., 1385.
[74] Ibid., 1385. Throughout his analysis of liberalism in this article, Mills is primarily concerned with the context of the United States.

In order to reformulate—or "deracialize"—contract theory so as to reflect the realities of racial oppression within liberal political systems, Mills explains that a new conception of the contract is necessary. He explicates Rousseau's critique of the contract; Rousseau conceived of a nonideal society in which a contract formalized the oppressive or tyrannical treatment of individuals. In other words, such an arrangement would amount to "a class contract among the rich," or the *domination contract*, in which those in power establish socio-political conditions so as to ensure the perpetuation of their power.[75] Mills argues that the domination contract is more suitable to understanding the racist origins of modern liberal democracies and therefore enables us to better respond to the contemporary conditions emanating from these origins.[76] Ignoring the U.S. history of racial slavery and genocide against African and Native American peoples in political theory, then, would amount to a "white abstraction."[77]

Rendering the actual historical realities of racial exploitation in the U.S. (and I argue the history of racial colonialism in France) "methodologically central" in political theory would help alleviate the field of white abstraction.[78] Mills clarifies that he does not propose dismissing liberal principles but rather addressing "the mystified individualist social ontology" which conceals the historical and contemporary oppression of people of color.[79] In order to accomplish this, Mills argues that theorists must "recover the past, not merely factually but conceptually and theoretically."[80] This requires an understanding of the ways in which racial oppression "centrally

---

[75] Ibid., 1386.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid., 1387. Mills in particular critiques John Rawls' conception of society *simpliciter* in *A Theory of Justice*, as a social order "designed to advance the good of those taking part in it" (Mills 1387). Mills argues that although Rawls was an American citizen, he failed to engage with the country's history of racial oppression in his political theorizing.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid., 1388.
[80] Ibid.

constitute[s] the social ontology" of these modern states.[81] The lived realities of this oppression cannot be accurately theorized using the purportedly race-neutral (implicitly conceptualized as white) formulations of dominant liberal theory.[82] Rather, Mills argues that liberal theorists should proceed with the understanding of white supremacy as a distinct "political system."[83]

Mills critiques the bases of liberal political theory not only on the grounds that such theory is incongruent with the history of racial oppression in the United States and the west more broadly, but that such theory is methodologically flawed. By attempting to proceed from an ahistorical "state of nature" within the ideal theory framework, dominant liberal theory has produced notions of egalitarian political relations which dangerously neglect the reality of white supremacy in modern states. Interestingly, Mills does not advocate for a denial of liberal theory in its totality, but seems to suggest that de-racializing this philosophical tradition by working within the nonideal theory framework can help us achieve "the promise of a nonracial liberalism."[84]

Analysis

Both Nussbaum and Mills are concerned with assessing the theoretical contributions of liberal political philosophy on issues of racial and gender-based violence and injustice. Perhaps more significantly, they both seek to either extend or critique liberal theory in order to reformulate it in ways consistent with the aims of feminism and racial justice. While Nussbaum's universalist stance seeks to develop a litany of central human capabilities that take cultural differences into account, Mills demonstrates how the realities of racial oppression are inevitably intertwined with liberal theoretical concepts. Without naming these realities and initiating our

---

[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 1391.
[83] Ibid.
[84] Ibid., 1394.

theoretical endeavors with these realities as the bases, liberal theory will continue to elide the unique historical and contemporary realities of peoples of color.

Nussbaum acknowledges that individual needs may vary, yet her discussion of the unique challenges or oppressions facing different groups of women is scarce. Indeed, she seems to reduce the source of women's oppression (regardless of context) to culture and tradition. While her emphasis on respecting cultural variation and local autonomy recognizes the need to avoid western epistemic domination, her analysis nonetheless lacks an evaluation of how histories of white supremacy and western imperialism have shaped women's lives. By neglecting a theoretical discussion concerning the particular histories of colonial oppression in India,[85] Nussbaum implies that "culture" is the sole contributing factor to the oppression of women. Rather than naming the past and taking it up as a *theoretical* concern, as Mills advocates, Nussbaum implies that women around the world are universally mistreated by cultural forces, regardless of the specific configurations these cultures might take. It is this very neglect of racial oppression and colonialism which renders a universal indictment of "culture" possible.

The theoretical elision of white supremacy and colonialism also allows Nussbaum to assume the possibility of a "metaphysically agnostic, experiential and historical universalism."[86] She thus portrays feminist liberalism as a kind of all-encompassing ground on which different cultural pluralities can be maintained. Yet, as Mills argues, such a stance neglects the "nonideal" realities of inequality and oppression. In addition, such a stance is reflective of Mills' concept of white abstraction insofar as Nussbaum's analysis does not account for liberal political theory as a western *cultural tradition*. While she argues that the capabilities approach does not purport to be

---

[85] Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals," 302. Nussbaum examines the experiences of Metha Bai, a widow from Rajasthan, India, throughout her analysis.
[86] Ibid., 308.

an a priori analysis,[87] the application of this approach is nonetheless conducted as if to suggest its

theoretical constructs are derived from a source of human rationality or observation beyond

cultural conditioning. The universalist stance, then, is in actuality a western, liberal view of

universalism; Nussbaum makes a similar observation when she justifies universalist projects on

the grounds that multiple cultural traditions have taken part in developing a conception of the

universal.[88] Yet without reflecting upon how her conception of universalism is a distinctly

western one, Nussbaum inadvertently risks implying that western cultural traditions are capable

of addressing a multitude of political concerns regardless of context. It is not a matter of

choosing between "the 'hell' reserved for alleged Westernizers and imperialists" and inaction or

moral apathy.[89] The perceived threat of western imperialism is not a barrier for solving issues of

gender oppression but might itself represent an issue for different groups of women in non-

western contexts.

Of course, Nussbaum's analysis is evaluative and not critical[90]; instead of attempting to

identify the sources of various problems facing different groups of women, she enumerates a list

of central human capabilities so as to guide policy-makers and citizens in assessing the states of

their political communities. Given the goal of developing a reliable measure of the rather

subjective experience of political and social well-being, it appears that a universalist stance is

appropriate for this task. Nussbaum explains that this conceptual framework can be utilized by

local communities and adopted to the particular needs of such communities.[91] Yet would it not

be more expedient for local communities to develop their own conceptual frameworks for

identifying and evaluating their own living conditions? Nussbaum might argue that cultural

---

[87] Ibid., 310.
[88] Ibid., 308.
[89] Ibid., 303.
[90] Ibid., 309.
[91] Ibid., 311.

norms might render it so that these frameworks inevitably perpetuate the oppression of female

community members. Yet given Mills' critiques of liberalism as perpetuating white supremacy

(by eliding the reality of racial oppression),[92] it appears that a purely oppositional, counter-

hegemonic conceptual framework is not as readily available as it seems. The question then arises

of what the value of a single (no matter how comprehensive) framework is, and especially how

such a framework might resonate with different communities of people on an experiential level.

Despite his criticisms against the political tradition, Mills suggests that liberal theory can

be reformulated so as to reverse its own operations in line with white supremacy and

colonialism. By recognizing the past and present realities of racial oppression in liberal

democracies like the United States, he argues, liberal theorists can work to de-racialize the

constructs and ideals of the tradition and bring it more into line with what he terms a "nonracial

liberalism."[93] It is unclear to me whether Mills believes such as task is completely possible, yet I

argue that the endeavor to de-racialize political theory requires more than assessing this theory

itself. As I hope to explore in later chapters, achieving an epistemic position beyond one's social

and cultural positionality is unlikely if we accept the premise that one's subjectivity is

constituted in relation to one's social, cultural and political environment.[94]

How does this discussion bear on the "issue" of Muslim women as presented in political

discourse in France and the United States? In addressing this question, it is important to keep in

mind that while the political systems of both France and the United States are founded upon

liberal theory, the countries have articulated differing relationships between the state and

religious traditions. While France's *laïcité* represents an endeavor to separate the realms of

public and religious life, the U.S. separation of church and state includes provisions which

---

[92] Mills, "Racial Liberalism," 1381.
[93] Ibid., 1394.
[94] This is an argument I take up in greater detail in the third chapter of this project.

protect individuals' rights to freely practice the religion of their choice. Given these differences, it is not surprising that concern over Muslim women in France has largely centered on the hijab and other body coverings as encroachments upon the secular public space. In the United States, however, representations of Muslim women have been less concerned with rights of Muslim women in the U.S. to wear the hijab and more so with the larger implications of Muslim women living in "oppressive" Muslim societies. Thus, even when legal prohibitions against denying Muslim women the ability to wear the hijab are in place, representations of Muslim women as oppressed still permeate the national discourse on Islam and, by extension, how the nation relates to Muslim countries and peoples within its own borders and beyond.

In discussing two theorists working in the liberal tradition, I have demonstrated that the question of why such representations of Muslim women are so prevalent cannot be addressed within the confines of this tradition alone. This is due to liberalism's historical neglect of racial oppression and colonialism by western powers, even though such theory might espouse a pluralistic and culturally sensitive approach to political life. While Mills' critique of liberalism centers largely on racial violence against African peoples who had been forcibly enslaved and Native American peoples, I argue that this critique can be applied to some Muslim peoples as well. Cainkar traces the racialization of Arab-Americans in the United States, arguing that stereotypes against Arab-Americans were present before 9/11 and evoked images of the group as "a unique set of persons from a specific place of origin who share a cluster of negative traits that promote violence and hatred."[95] While Arab-Americans were once considered white,[96] over time there "emerged an identifiable Arab/Muslim/Middle Eastern phenotype [and] a set of symbolic

---

[95] Louise A. Cainkar, "The Social Construction of the Arab (and Muslim) American," in *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11*, (Russell Sage Foundation, 2009), 72, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447683.7
[96] Ibid., 65.

cues (mode of dress, script, and name)" that defined them as a distinctive racial group.[97] Cainkar explains that "Muslim American experiences bear many similarities to those of Arab Americans, and the stereotypes are nearly identical."[98] While not all Arabs are Muslims or vice versa, these findings suggest that considerations of race and power cannot be separated from a discussion of how Muslim women are represented in western political discourse.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the "issue" of Muslims in the west—most notably typified through the image of the Muslim hijabi women as oppressed. By providing examples of Islamophobic discourses from two western countries, I have attempted to convey both the prevalence of such constructions as well as the ways in which they threaten the well-being and safety of Muslims residing in these countries. Rather than functioning as independent constructs, the representations of Islam and Muslim women in these discourses draw upon political definitions of nationhood (predominantly in France) and arise from contemporaneous world events (predominantly in the U.S.).

Yet the task of deconstructing representations of Muslim women would be incomplete if we were to rely solely upon a liberal paradigm. As Charles Mills demonstrates, this paradigm has functioned to normalizing racial oppression or otherwise exclude it from theoretical consideration. While there is no monolithic cultural or racial identity for Muslim peoples around the world, the *representation* of Muslims is one that increasingly relies upon racialized understandings of Arabs and Muslims as distinct from whiteness. Given these limitations of liberalism, as well as the difficulties of identifying a single framework that can assist in opposing different forms of oppression, it is necessary to consider alternative philosophical frameworks

---

[97] Ibid., 72.
[98] Ibid.

which might elucidate the origins and functions of predominant images of Muslim women in the

west. Exploring such frameworks forms the basis of the following chapter.

Chapter 2 Deconstructing Hegemonic Representations

The proliferation of anti-Muslim legislation and rhetoric in recent years characterizes Islam as inherently oppressive to women and seemingly incongruent with notions of freedom in western liberal traditions. Although this process takes on different forms in France and the United States, the representations of Muslim women have been shaped so as to consistently evoke connotations of oppression and terror. The process of deconstructing these representations can be conducted using several philosophical traditions, or frameworks, which I will explore in this chapter.

I begin the chapter with a phenomenological analysis of the hijab, largely drawing upon the work of Alia Al-Saji. I then examine work by Chandra Mohanty from the post-colonial tradition and examine Lila Abu-Lughod's discussion on cultural relativism. I introduce the ways in which culture and Islam itself provide a framework for feminist theorizing through the work of Asma Afsaruddin and Leila Ahmed. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion on feminist psychoanalysis through the work of Drucilla Cornell.

In studying each of these frameworks, my aim is not to advocate for a hierarchical ordering of their value in absolutist terms. Rather, I seek to evaluate each framework (as presented by the authors whose work I am explicating) in order to demonstrate how each approach might assist westerners in critiquing certain representations which are circulating within our collective cultural understanding. I view each of these frameworks as converging upon a set of themes: collapses in meaning between Islam/gender oppression and Islam/terror; universalizing and reductionist analytic frameworks; an understanding of feminism as distinctly "western;" and concerns over the authenticity of Muslim women's desires. I aim to extend these themes in my analysis and critique iterations of feminist theorizing which are concomitant with

neocolonial projects that seek to perpetuate western epistemic and cultural superiority.

The Representational Structure of the Hijab: A Phenomenological Analysis

Phenomenology provides us with another lens through which to examine the issue of Muslim hijabi women's representations in the western imaginary. Phenomenologist Al-Saji analyzes the significations attached to the hijab in contemporary France, arguing that cultural racism/Islamophobia operates in the name of a liberatory, feminist ideal—an ideal, which, is not only operative in predominant western political thought but also in western feminist theory.[99] As an extension of her argument, I argue that the collapse in meaning that occurs between Islam/gender oppression coexists with a collapse between Islam/terror; these continuous processes seem to contradict one another, yet the notion of Islam acting upon the body of the woman (via the hijab) as an oppressive force functions to position Islam as not only a threat to western life but also to the very peoples that subscribe to the religion.

Drawing specifically on the French context, Alia Al-Saji examines the representational structure of the veil, or hijab, in "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis." She argues that this representational structure equates Islam with gender oppression, thus reflecting "a form of cultural racism that hides itself under the guise of anti-sexist and even feminist liberatory discourse."[100] This process ultimately functions to posit the hijab, and Islamic culture more broadly, as "the foil or negative mirror" through which western norms and ideals regarding gender are legitimized as positive or superior.[101] Western norms and values are thus constructed in part through the denigration of the Muslim Other; what we understand as "the

---

[99] Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ""Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2* 12 (1984): 336, http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-3659%28198421%2F23%2912%3A3%3C333%3AUWEFSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y.

[100] Alia Al-Saji, "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36 (2010): 877, doi: 10.1177/0191453710375589.

[101] Ibid.

West," then, is "an imaginary formation that constitutes itself through representations of its (racialized and gendered) 'others.'"[102]

Al-Saji examines the history of public discourse on the hijab and other forms of Islamic body covering in France. She argues that the principle of *laïcité* is insufficient in accounting for the France's legal prohibitions of the hijab; instead, Al-Saji views the collapsing between the hijab and gender oppression as the crucial component of the legal restrictions against wearing the hijab. She explains that the issue of gender equality become "continuous with *laïcité* and a core French value," as evidenced by the report from the Stasi Commission in 2003.[103] As Al-Saji explains, these processes imbue the veil with meanings and significations far more complex than its religious connotations. The hijab

> metonymically stands in not only for Islam but for the putative gender oppression of that religion – allowing a continual slippage in pro-law arguments between Islam as religion and Islam as essentially oppressive and hence problematic.[104]

By collapsing Islam and gender oppression, those arguing against the hijab understand Muslim hijabi women as having been "de-subjectified" by their religion, while ironically enacting erasure upon Muslim women's perspectives or wishes in the debate.[105] Thus, Muslim hijabi women's choices in wearing the hijab are pre-emptively rejected as the speech of oppressed subjects conditioned by an oppressive religious background.[106]

Al-Saji also attributes this collapse in meaning between Islam and gender oppression as rendering the hijab *conspicuous* in French secular space. Although the principle of *laïcité* is articulated in a way that suggests "that all religious signs are equally foregrounded, and hence

---

[102] Ibid., 878.
[103] Ibid., 880.
[104] Ibid. Here Al-Saji draws on a letter entitled, "Profs, ne capitulons pas!" by Elisabeth Badinter, Regis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elisabeth de Fontenay and Catherine Kintzler.
[105] Ibid. Al-Saji again cites Badinter *et al.*
[106] Ibid.

made visible, against a neutral, secular background from which religion is absent," the hijab is *hypervisible* in French secular space.[107] In order to explain this, Al-Saji argues that this secular space contains traces of France's historically Christian heritage, so that "this space is structured such that certain religious practices can coexist with it, even though they are no longer explicitly inscribed within it."[108] Modern French secular space thus contains the traces of its particular religious traditions and history. Various religious symbols are thus "rendered differentially visible" in this space, and seen as existing on a range from the discreet to the conspicuous.[109] Once the hijab was linked to gender oppression in French political discourse, this secular space was viewed not only as the manifestation of *laïcité* but the principle of gender equality as well. Indeed, French secularism and gender equality were soon regarded as contiguous.[110] In such a space, the hijab became "not merely visible in belonging to a different religion but hypervisible as the symbol of gender oppression of that religion."[111]

Al-Saji also analyzes the function of the representational structure of the hijab in western discourse. She argues that this structure utilizes ostensibly feminist discourse in order to perpetuate cultural racism against Muslims in keeping with the history of colonial/imperialist domination perpetrated by western countries. The racialization of Muslim women, Al-Saji argues, is rendered possible through "the projection of gender oppression onto the veil."[112] In this manner, Al-Saji hopes to draw attention to how race and gender interact to explain the marginalization of Muslim hijabi women in western societies.

Al-Saji explains that the construction of the western woman ideal in opposition to the

---

[107] Ibid., 881-882.
[108] Ibid., 881.
[109] Ibid., 882.
[110] Ibid.
[111] Ibid.
[112] Ibid., 888.

Muslim hijabi woman involves a two-fold process. Firstly, the set of gendered norms and practices enacted by western women are posited as more desirable than or superior to the gendered practices of some Muslim women. In other words, "the ideal of the feminine in a particular western imaginary is negatively reflected in the counter-image of the Muslim woman" as hidden, repressed, invisible or unspeaking.[113] Secondly, the existence of patriarchal structures and institutions in western societies is obfuscated via the projection of gender oppression onto the hijab.[114] Thus, the western woman, and by extension her society, are constructed as "free" in opposition to the image of her veiled Muslim counterpart.[115] Al-Saji contextualizes this oppositional construction of female gender identities as one of the mechanisms through which the "West" is represented as embodying "gender equality, modernity and freedom."[116] The racialization of the hijab via its dual hypervisibility as an Islamic symbol and ostensible marker of gender oppression (a marker the "free" western woman does not bear) ultimately represents a form of cultural racism against Muslims.

Al-Saji understands cultural racism as "continuous with color racism," as both perpetuate violence against certain *bodies* that undergo a process of othering, either via biological/phenotypical characteristics or cultural markers such as body coverings or ornamentation.[117] Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, Al-Saji explains that these cultural markers are instrumental for an individual's "bodily sense of self."[118] She explains that

> Bodily extensions (which include articles of clothing but also tools) become themselves dimensions through which the subject perceives and interacts with the

---

[113] Ibid., 888-889.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid., 889.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid., 890.

world and others (as cited in Merleau-Ponty 143).[119]

Those who would call on Muslim women to cease wearing the hijab thus disregard the ways in which the hijab is not merely an addendum to the underlying, "natural" body[120] but rather a specific way of ordering one's experience of and interaction with the world. Taken in a phenomenological sense, then, western discursive and legal practices which aim to coercively unveil hijabi women may participate in the "bodily disintegration or immobilization" of these women.[121]

Finally, Al-Saji considers the implications of this cultural racism on Muslim hijabi women's subjectivities. Although the view of the hijab as inherently oppressive renders it hypervisible in western societies, this same process has the effect of making hijabi women invisible or de-subjectified.[122] Thus, as Al-Saji points out, Muslim hijabi women's perspectives favoring the hijab are often disregarded entirely or construed as instances of false consciousness.[123] Indeed, the hijabi women is simultaneously regarded as an oppressed victim, devoid of her own subjectivity yet somehow still responsible in part for perpetuating her own oppression.[124] In an endeavor to resist the narrative of the hijab as an instrument of de-subjectification, Al-Saji proposes other sources of meaning-making regarding the hijab, while maintaining that she does not aim to definitively attribute either a liberatory or oppressive valence to it.[125] She explains that Muslim women have constructed meanings around the hijab which have ranged from protection, piety, and political and feminist practice.[126]

Rather than attempting to unilaterally define Muslim veiling practices, Al-Saji explores

---

[119] Ibid. Al-Saji cites Frantz Fanon and Homa Hoodfar's "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads" here.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., 891.
[123] Ibid., 881&891.
[124] Ibid., 892.
[125] Ibid., 893.
[126] Ibid.

how attempts to define these practices in western discourse have revolved around cultural

racism. Understood in this manner, the concerns over the hijab's purported de-subjectifying

capacities reveal an erasure of Muslim hijabi women's subjectivities via the assumption of

western cultural dominance. As Al-Saji has demonstrated, discourse which seeks to "liberate" or

"save" Muslim women from their religious practices is not only racist but ultimately anti-

feminist[127], in that it erases considerations of Muslim hijabi women's perspectives and desires as

subjects.

Having discussed Al-Saji's phenomenological examination of the hijab, I will revisit the

examples of Islamophobic political discourse presented in chapter one. In analyzing these

instances, I hope to explore how Al-Saji theoretical positions can aid in understanding the

rhetorical structures of this divisive and violent discourse. I find that assumptions about the de-

subjectifying qualities of the hijab and narrow conceptions of feminist liberation form the basis

of this discourse, and are thus crucial for understanding how it marginalizes Muslim women and

Islamic cultures more broadly. However, I also hope to indicate ways in which the

aforementioned instances of Islamophobic discourse rely upon meanings and significations not

discussed by Al-Saji.

Rossignol's comparison between Muslim women and African-Americans "who accepted

slavery" illustrates both the collapse in meaning between Islam/gender oppression and the belief

in the hijab's mystical de-subjectifying powers. Through this comment, Rossignol uncritically

assumes a continuity or equivalence between the practice of wearing the hijab and slavery. This

assumption is consistent with Al-Saji's argument about the centrality of the characterization of

Islam as oppressive against women. Furthermore, Rossignol's comment implies that Muslim

hijabi women have accepted or are indifferent to this "slavery." Thus, hijabi women's choices

---

[127] Ibid., 889.

are represented as conditioned under a regime of internalized misogyny, or self-enforced slavery, that fundamentally stems from their religious identity. Rossignol apparently can entertain no other possible explanations for why some Muslim women wear the hijab; the failure to consider such possibilities reveals an adherence to an anti-sexist platform grounded in the white/western woman ideal.

Thus, Muslim women are not viewed by Rossignol as possessing their own subjective realms, in which they can order their lives and the presentation of their bodies in accordance to their own desires. Indeed, Rossignol eliminates any consideration of Muslim hijabi women's ability to claim their desires, a discursive act which ultimately threatens Muslim women's dignity in each sphere of public life. Not only are claims of internalized oppression unfalsifiable given the absence of a global articulation of feminist practice, the very attempt to craft such a global feminism merely reinforces the construction of hegemonic meanings and practices. Given the history of western imperialism, any attempt to unilaterally attribute a cause for hijabi women's cultural or religious practices represents a discursive violence.

Rossignol's statement is also problematic for its flagrant use of a racial slur as well as its assumptions that enslaved African-Americans accepted or were complacent in their oppression. Through this statement, Rossignol links African-Americans under a regime of racial slavery to Muslim women who wear Islamic religious garb. This linkage not only furthers the assumed equivalency between Islam and gender oppression but trivializes the regime of racial oppression perpetrated globally against people of color. There is something to be said about the manner in which Rossignol is able to suggest her condemnation of racial slavery—which was perpetuated through an ideology of biological racism—while simultaneously enacting cultural racism against

Muslims. While Al-Saji argues that cultural racism and racism based on color are continuous,[128] Rossignol's comments seem to resist this continuity. Rossignol's previous collapsing of the hijab and gender oppression reveal how it is that the continuity between biological and cultural racism is obfuscated: as Al-Saji argues, it is the purported anti-sexist motives of western liberals which conceals the racism inherent in a condemnation of Islamic practice.

Arguments in support of the burkini ban reveal the phenomenon of the hijab's hypervisibility. As previously discussed, French laws banning the hijab in educational settings were mandated in accordance with *laïcité*, or more precisely, the maintenance of the French secular space.[129] In the case of the 2016 burkini bans enforced in multiple French towns, the beach too was legally defined as a secular space. In such a space, the burkini served as a sign of Islam and, via the same processes which render the hijab synonymous with gender oppression, became viewed as an affront not only to secularism but to the concomitant French principle of gender equality.

Interestingly, while arguments for the bans also contained elements of the purported concern for "enslaved" hijabi women,[130] many of these arguments also centered on security threats that burkinis might pose. Considering the comments by mayor Lionnel Luca of Villeneuve-Loubet which referred the attacks in Nice,[131] the conflation between an Islamic religious symbolic and terrorism is also an aspect of the representational structure of the hijab. While Al-Saji emphasizes association of Islam with gender oppression as one of the primary sources of marginalization of Muslims in western societies, I argue that the Islam/terror collapse

---

[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid., 881.
[130] Breeden and Blaise, "Court Overturns."
[131] Ibid.

is another element of this marginalization. Although not directly related to the hijab, this association (coupled with the hypervisibility of hijabs as religious symbols) may make Muslim hijabi women especially vulnerable to discursive, political and legal constructions which understand Islam as inherently threatening.

Donald Trump's Islamophobic rhetoric also reflects this conflation between Islam (and any of its symbols or representations) and terror. While not explicitly referencing the hijab, Trump's calls for monitoring both mosques and individual Muslims furthers the marginalization of Muslim communities by suggesting that these communities are latent threats. The proposed ban on Muslim immigration and more precisely, the rejection of thousands of Syrian refugees, also function to represent Islam as an inherently dangerous phenomenon, one which Trump believes Americans should not risk allowing within their borders even if it could provide safety for refugees. In this manner, Trump's comments reveal a disregard for Muslim suffering and the essentialization of Muslims as the source of western suffering in the form of terrorism. Rather than construing these attacks as manifestations of political extremism conducted by individual Muslims who utilize violence to further their political ends, such discursive practices attribute this political violence to the religion itself.

Al-Saji's analysis provides us with a framework to comprehend the operation of Islamophobic political discourse and its implications for Muslim hijabi women's agencies. The erasure of hijabi women's subjectivities and autonomy occurs vis-à-vis the hypervisibility of the hijab and the collapse in meaning between Islam/gender oppression. Another collapse in meaning, between Islam/terror, also serves to marginalize Muslims more broadly, although I argue that due to the hypervisibility of the hijab, hijabi women may be more susceptible to the violent ramifications of this process compared to Muslim men and Muslim women who do not

wear the hijab. Furthermore, the linkage between two marginalized communities in Rossignol's statement suggests the belief in an artificial distinction between oppression on the basis of race compared to oppression on the basis of culture or religion. While French liberal discourse may rightfully condemn slavery and its ideological basis in biological racism, it appears that understanding the violence inhering in cultural racism is more elusive.

Critiques of Western Feminism

This phenomenon of cultural racism as analyzed by Al-Saji brings me to the next framework that can be utilized to examine the representations of Muslim women. Post-colonial studies—sometimes referred to as de-colonial studies—examines the operations of colonialism and imperialism not merely as economic and political state actions but as paradigms which shape our epistemological and ontological relation with others in the world.

While not explicitly working within the field of post-colonial studies, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod addresses "the rhetoric of salvation" in U.S. discourses surrounding the "War on Terrorism." After recounting some observations regarding how the U.S. war in Afghanistan was portrayed, Abu-Lughod asserts that "there was a consistent resort to the cultural, as if knowing something about women and Islam or the meaning of a religious ritual" would provide the key for comprehending the complex history of the country and its relations with the U.S.[132] By prioritizing "cultural" inquiries over "the history of the development of repressive regimes in the region and the U.S. role in this history," such discourses erased considerations of "the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated."[133]

---

[132] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 784.
[133] Ibid.

First Lady Laura Bush's speech in particular illustrates this "cultural mode of explanation."[134] Abu-Lughod argues that Bush's speech evoked images of "the Taliban-and-the-terrorists" as "cultural monsters." [135] Bush equates the war against terrorism with the struggle for women's rights, and implies that such a struggle is fought by "civilized people throughout the world."[136] Abu-Lughod likens this neocolonial discourse to the ceremonial "unveiling" of Algerian women by French colonists, thereby connecting anxieties surrounding the state of Muslim women to the phenomena of "colonial feminism" (Leila Ahmed) and "white men saving brown women from brown men" (Chakravorty Spivak).[137] Abu-Lughod thus illustrates how race and colonial histories are intertwined with modern discourses surrounding the experiences of Muslim women.

Abu-Lughod examines the significance of the burqa in Afghanistan, explaining that while the Taliban enforced the wearing of the burqa during its rule, "the Taliban did not invent the burqa."[138] Rather, the burqa was historically worn by Pashtun women as a way to signify "the symbolic separation of men's and women's spheres" as well as a person's "modesty or respectability."[139] Abu-Lughod explains how burqas served as "mobile homes" which enabled women's mobility through public space.[140] She argues that during Taliban rule, the cultural garb of a particular ethnic group was "imposed on everyone as 'religiously' appropriate."[141] Abu-Lughod thus illustrates the important distinction between wearing the burqa as a socio-cultural practice and the *state imposition* of this practice by the Taliban. Based on this and other examples, Abu-Lughod urges us to resist essentialist interpretations of body coverings as

---

[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid. Abu-Lughod explains that Bush's speech regarded terrorism and the Taliban as interchangeable.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Ibid., 784-5.
[138] Ibid., 785.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid., 786.

oppressive as well as collapsing "the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing."[142]

This analysis leads Abu-Lughod to a discussion of cultural relativism. She acknowledges that while cultural relativism represents "an improvement on ethnocentrism," we must recognize how the circumstances of Muslims "are already products of long histories of interactions" with western nations. For Abu-Lughod, in other words, "it is too late not to interfere."[143] Yet the ways in which we "interfere" and what motivates us to do so should be closely scrutinized; indeed Abu-Lughod states that it would be far more difficult "to mobilize so many…American and European women if it were not a case of Muslim men oppressing Muslim women."[144] Combatting this re-instantiation of neocolonial power relations requires "recognizing and respecting differences…as products of different histories."[145] Indeed, Abu-Lughod argues that this approach toward difference does not imply a kind of relativist apathy toward other people's well-being; rather, she urges us to consider the ways in which our actions (or inaction) have influenced other peoples' well-being.[146] In addition, Abu-Lughod argues that we must abandon the "rhetoric of salvation" so evocative of Christian missionaries and other colonial practices in favor of "a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions and solidarity."[147]

Through her analysis of political discourses on the U.S. war in Afghanistan, Abu-Lughod demonstrates how such discourses are reminiscent of past justifications for western colonialism, but ironically conceal the complex histories of interactions between Muslim countries and

---

[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., 786-7.
[144] Ibid., 787.
[145] Ibid., 787-8. Abu-Lughod explains that this respect for cultural difference does not involve a retreat into cultural relativism but rather the notion that different women "might be called to personhood, so to speak, in a different language (788).
[146] Ibid., 789.
[147] Ibid., 788-9. Abu-Lughod deconstructs this rhetoric of salvation by explaining that it involves a dual movement of "saving from" as well as a "saving to," thereby implying that the western social practices that Afghan women must be "saved to" are culturally superior to the cultures which they must be "saved from."

western countries by relying upon "culture" as the sole explanatory factor for political unrest in the region. Rather than challenging assumptions of Muslim women's victimhood via a lens of cultural relativism, Abu-Lughod seems to suggest that the historical and contemporary legacies of western colonialism render neutral positions untenable; we must indeed interfere, but this interference should be predicated upon "making the world a more just place"[148] through the respect of difference and the critiques of western power, rather than the "rhetoric of salvation."

How is abandoning such rhetoric possible given that our epistemological paradigms in the west are shaped in part by histories of colonialism? In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Mohanty analyzes feminist scholarly articles on "third world women" and uncovers the analytic principles operating in much of western feminist thought on this issue. These principles help create a conception of the "third world women" as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc." while constructing the western women in opposition to this set of characteristic i.e. free, modern, educated.[149] In this manner, the western women are constituted as the referent group or norm.[150] While Mohanty's analysis centers on western feminist perceptions of the "third world woman," this free/victimized dichotomy also pervades popular understandings of Muslim women who wear various forms of body coverings.

One analytic principle that Mohanty discovers involves the assumption of homogeneity among women. Mohanty argues that this homogeneity "is produced not on the basis of biological essentials, but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals."[151] The most salient aspect of these "secondary universals" involves the presumption of "a shared

---

[148] Ibid., 789.
[149] Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 337.
[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid.

oppression."[152] Mohanty explains how "women" as a discursive concept thus stands in for the experiences of actual women "as material subjects of their own history."[153] "Women" is thus constructed as a homogenous, "always-already constituted" universal category. [154] Mohanty explains that rather than attempting to make the case for the universal oppression of women, theorists should analyze how different groups of women may be marginalized according to their specific conditions.[155]

In the western feminist literature that Mohanty analyzes to demonstrate this universalizing phenomenon, various authors characterize non-western women according to their object status, such that the authors portray various groups of women based upon "the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions or systems."[156] The authors that Mohanty critiques portray non-western women as victims, whether of male violence, colonialism, economic development policies or "*the* Islamic code."[157] She argues that this objectification process which portrays non-western women as passively influenced by greater social forces "needs to be both named and challenged."[158]

Mohanty states that violence against women "must be theorized and interpreted within *specific* societies" rather than assuming that there exists an enduring configuration of male violence across time and space.[159] If we understand misogyny and violence against women as localized and historicized, this raises crucial concerns for how it is that women in the west can express genuine solidarity with non-western women without relying upon reductive assumptions

---

[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., 338.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid., 339.

or monolithic conceptions of the "woman."[160] Mohanty argues that such solidarity "cannot be assumed on the basis of gender" but is rather "forged in concrete, historical and political practice and analysis."[161]

While Mohanty is not opposed to "the use of universal groupings for descriptive purposes," she finds that groups designed as "cultural others" are more readily theorized as monolithic or homogenous in western feminist theory.[162] In addition, she argues that this neglect toward historical context also produces theories which portray the world as "always apparently structured by divisions" of male/female, oppressor/victim.[163] Such universalizing tendencies suggests that gender is the sole or primary factor causing women's devaluation.[164] Because such analyses assume that people "are already constituted as sexual-political subjects *prior* to their entry into the arena of social relations," they reinforce the notion of non-western women as passive victims and preclude any examination of how various acts performed by women might be motivated by differing values, meanings and social status.[165]

Non-western women can be objectified insofar as they are portrayed as passive victims of patriarchal families and religious institutions. While examining literature about women in Arab and Muslim communities in particular, Mohanty explains that such literature tends to discuss "*the* patriarchal family or *the* tribal kinship," again eliding differences of culture, status and class as well as the complex ways in which women's roles "as mothers, wives, sisters, etc." emerge from familial and social relations.[166] Similar processes are at play when western academic literature portrays religions, particularly Islam, in a decontextualized manner that suggests the

---

[160] I take up the question of feminist solidarity in the third chapter.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 340.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid.
[166] Ibid., 342.

existence of a unitary version of Islam.[167] Mohanty also cites Mina Moderes' critique of

literature that conceptualizes Islam as a superfluous social phenomenon relegated to the sphere

of mere ideology with no bearing on the political and economic life of a community.[168]

According to Mohanty, these reductive tendencies are what render cross-cultural analyses

"unproblematic" for some western feminists.[169]

Mohanty identifies "the veiled woman" as one of several predominant representations of

non-western women.[170] She explains that some scholars conflate descriptive observations (such

as the prevalence of body coverings in Muslim countries) and "analytic leaps" which equate

these coverings with patriarchal control over women's bodies.[171] She provides examples of the

ways in which the meanings and purposes of veiling differ by context: whereas wearing a veil

signified "an oppositional and revolutionary gesture" for middle class Iranian women during the

Iranian Revolution, veiling in Iran later become mandated by Islamic law.[172] Mohanty advocates

for highly localized analyses which investigate how individuals are constituted within their

surroundings and explore the variation in meanings underlying a single practice.[173] Such an

approach is not only more theoretically valuable but also facilitates meaningful strides toward

political change.[174]

In closing, Mohanty again emphasizes how representations of non-western groups of

women bolster the *self-representation* of western women as "secular, liberated, and having

control over their own lives."[175] It is through the objectification of non-western women as

---

[167] Ibid., 343.
[168] Ibid., 342.
[169] Ibid., 343.
[170] Ibid., 352.
[171] Ibid., 347.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid., 345-7.
[174] Ibid., 347.
[175] Ibid., 351-3.

passive recipients of social forces that "Western feminists alone become the true 'subjects.'"[176]

She introduces the concept of *ethnocentric universality*, a phenomenon made possible when

different groups of women are not seen as emerging from their specific socio-historical

positionalities but are instead considered to be "placed within" their societies (societies

consistently evaluated using western social and political standards).[177] Regarding the

presumption of a universal oppression among women, she notes that

> When the category of "oppressed woman" is generated through an exclusive
> focus on gender difference, "the oppressed third world woman" category has an
> additional attribute—the "third world difference!"[178]

Mohanty thus illustrates how much of western feminist theory is undergirded by an ethnocentric

epistemological frame which objectifies different groups of women, decontextualizes their

experiences and conceives of non-western women as being "just like" western women, excepting

the "third world difference." The effect is that non-western women's oppression via their gender

is accepted as a given insofar as western (and specifically white) women find themselves

oppressed on this basis as well, but that representations of non-western women are overladen

with indictments of their cultural, religious and social identities.

I view Mohanty's analysis as contributing to deconstructing problematic representations

of Muslim women in two ways: firstly, her critique of western feminist theory is not only

valuable in itself but parallels contemporary political discourse about the hijab. Comments such

as those by Rossignol rely heavily upon the trope of *the* hijabi women—or perhaps *the* Muslim

woman—as necessarily oppressed. The universalizing frames which structure an image of a

---

[176] Ibid., 351.
[177] Ibid. Mohanty also traces this *latent ethnocentrism* as operating within humanism (Mohanty 352-353). Abu-Lughod also analyzes secular humanism and draws upon Saba Mahmood when she observes that those who study Islamism are expected to castigate violence perpetuated in the name of Islam, yet scholars of humanism are not expected to criticize its relation to colonialism (Abu-Lughod 788).
[178] Ibid., 351-2.

monolithic Muslim woman's experience thus operate not merely within academic discourses but political and popular ones as well, and this is perhaps not surprising given how our everyday understandings of the world have the potential to prejudice our approach to theoretical concerns. However, I read Mohanty as illustrating not merely that academic feminist literature is infiltrated by crude generalizations of popular discourse, but that this academic literature itself plays a significant role in perpetuating hegemonic representations of non-western groups of women. Such an assertion implies that philosophical and theoretical endeavors must be closely examined and deconstructed themselves, much like in the spirit of Mills' critique of white liberalism. It is not merely neocolonial economic and political arrangements which should concern us but the very ways that knowledge and theory are structured according to neocolonial power relations.

Secondly, Mohanty demonstrates how preoccupation with the veil and other forms of body coverings are part of a broader vein of colonial discourse and western cultural meaning. Mohanty examines "the veiled woman" as just one of many images of non-western women that permeate the western imaginary.[179] The linkage between the hijab and an ostensibly Islamic gender oppression should thus be understood as part of a larger project of asserting western cultural superiority by accusing other cultural traditions of oppressing women. Even if these western discourses are able to concede that not all western women are "free" or that they still struggle against oppressive forces, the "third world difference" renders it so that the assumed global oppression of women is worsened by non-western women's cultural traditions. Mohanty argues that representations of non-western women "exist in universal, ahistorical splendor, setting in motion a colonialist discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third world connections."[180] Representations of Muslim

---

[179] Ibid., 352. Other images include the following: "the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc."
[180] Ibid.

women in the west, then, should be analyzed within the context of this colonial discourse.

Mohanty's emphasis on providing contextualized accounts of women's experiences is made possible by her differentiation between an act and the meaning or value of this act. By attributing one monolithic meaning to a single act—such as wearing the veil—discourses in the west promote the notion that there is only one possible meaning underlying this act; this meaning is *defined by those in the west* as a visible, physical signification of Muslim women's gender oppression. If the hijab is inextricably linked with gender oppression regardless of context, this further contributes to a belief in a single version of Islam that overrides all other types of cultural and social differentiation. Yet by examining the contexts which shape different groups of women's subjectivities and values, Mohanty argues that "meaning" becomes a highly variable phenomenon which resides not in the veil as an object but rather with the different women who wear it. Thus, Mohanty disrupts commonplace understandings of bodily or physical expression as reducible to a single, stabilized meaning that reflect solely a subject's individual choice.

How is it that philosophy (and theory, more broadly) are to proceed, given their reliance on certain ontological categories and universal applications of concepts? Perhaps the work of philosophy can be conceptualized as the work of critiquing and deconstructing our accepted understandings of knowledge in order to historicize such knowledge, often for the purposes of political mobilization. Indeed, Mohanty's aim of analyzing western feminist theory lies in her observation of the connection between such theory "as a mode of intervention" and feminist political action.[181] She states succinctly that "there can…be no apolitical scholarship."[182] Yet surely theory must also develop its own generalized concepts or ontological categories in order to provide an account of how epistemological traditions are shaped by underlying structures of

---

[181] Ibid., 334.
[182] Ibid.

power. Meyda Yeğenoğlu, for instance, explores the tensions of a post-colonial discourse which relies upon an essentialized understanding of the forces of colonial oppression itself.[183] While such tensions are too complex to further discuss for the purposes of this project, it is evident that, however problematic, feminist theorizing is linked to political actions and outcomes—even if in predominantly detrimental ways that further alienate and oppress certain groups of women on the basis of culture or race.[184]

Mohanty's analysis thus contextualizes the hegemonic representations of Muslim hijabi women within a broader neocolonial project. This project assumes a universal gender oppression among women but relies upon an exaggeration of "third world difference" to assert western superiority. These representations are thus not only constructed to justify the contemporary foreign or domestic policies of western countries but are key rhetorical tools used to mobilize a historical colonial project.

Islamic Feminism

Yet another framework for challenging the predominant representations of Muslim women is Islamic theology itself. Muslim women from various cultural traditions are turning toward the Qur'an in order to articulate their own feminist ideals. Given the predominant portrayals of Islam as inherently oppressive to women, the possibility of an Islamic feminism might appear contrived; Abu-Lughod suggests as much when she asks whether such a phenomenon might be interpreted as an oxymoron.[185] However this concept might be perceived

---

[183] Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards A Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 30. Indeed, Mohanty is critical of the ways in which feminist discourse tends to construct binaries such as oppressed/oppressor and female/male (Mohanty 350-1).

[184] I return to some of these considerations in the third chapter when I explore the relationship between theory and practice as discussed by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*.

[185] Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women," 788.

by non-Muslims, Islamic feminism originated in the mid-to-late nineteenth century and had

gained prominence in Muslim countries by the onset of the twenty-first century.[186]

Asma Afsaruddin provides a working definition of Islamic feminism as "feminist

discourses and practices based on a dynamic and critical engagement with the foundational

sources of Islam centered on the key issue of gender egalitarianism."[187] However, Afsaruddin

explains that such practices are carried out in a variety of contexts, so that it is more appropriate

to term this phenomenon Islamic *feminisms*.[188] Islamic feminisms rely upon "scriptural

hermeneutics" in order to provide a framework with which Muslim women can critique their

social and political environments, specifically by "challenging predominantly masculinist

interpretations of…religious texts."[189] In this manner, Islam itself becomes a framework for

feminist theorizing, or rather, the gender equality advocated by Islamic texts is brought to the

forefront via exegesis.

Before proceeding, Afsaruddin addresses why it is that "Muslim women are choosing to

work toward legal equality by resorting to religious arguments rather than modern secular

discourses on human rights."[190] She explains that many western countries associate

secularization and gender equality because this trend reflects their particular histories, yet it is

not the case that secularization necessarily influences gender inequalities. In fact, Afsaruddin

explains that endeavors to implement secular feminism in Turkey and Iran represented "top-

---

[186] Asma Afsaruddin, "Islamic Feminism(s): Promoting Gender Egalitarianism and Challenging Constitutional Constraints," in *Social Difference and Constitutionalism in Pan-Asia*, ed. Susan H. Williams (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 297.
[187] Ibid., 294.
[188] Ibid., 292.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Ibid.

down, statist enterprise[s]" which were unsuccessful in engaging women in activist endeavors.[191]

Unlike other religious traditions which established "highly centralized and authoritarian

institution[s]," Islamic scholarship and schools of law proliferated in a decentralized manner, and

Muslim scholars were historically understood to act as "advocates for the rights of the common

people."[192] Afsaruddin identifies each of these factors as helping explain why Muslim women

are seeking to elucidate their feminist principles through the interpretation of Islamic texts.

Afsaruddin then provides background information on how feminist exegesis is carried out

and by whom. The Qur'an is the central focus of such exegesis, which has predominantly been

performed by educated women with training in either Islamic scholarship or law.[193] She explains

that religious training can allow women to further the practice is Islamic hermeneutics.[194]

Despite the fact that access to religious education and training are key for furthering political

change, Afsaruddin argues that Islamic feminisms possess a "greater chance of effecting

grassroots change." This is due to the reliance upon "commonly shared religious values and

ideals" and the potential for legal reforms to have far-reaching consequences on different groups

of women.[195]

Afsaruddin argues that religious justifications for gender inequality stem from patriarchal

readings of Islamic texts.[196] Islamic feminist Asma Barlas argues that feminist hermeneutics

require challenging interpretations which normalize women's subjugation while advocating for

---

[191] Ibid., 293. Afsaruddin further explains that secularism has been associated with the rise of authoritarian governments following western colonization, so that secular appeals for gender equality would provide little to no rationale for advocacy and organizing.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid., 294. Here Afsaruddin draws a comparison to the "upper middle-class educated women" who were at the forefront of early feminist struggles in the west (Afsaruddin 294).

[194] Ibid., 293-294.

[195] Ibid., 294-5.

[196] Ibid., 295. Afsaruddin also observes that gender inequality has been perpetuated via the emphasis on patriarchal exegeses over the original text of the Qur'an.

"the legitimacy of liberatory readings."[197] Hijabi activist Amina Wadud also states that because traditional approaches to Islamic texts have "been predominantly articulated on the basis of male experiences and through the male psyche," a "female-centered consideration of the Qur'an" is required in order for Muslim women's "distinctiveness" to be fully recognized.[198]

Finally, Afsaruddin examines the concept of modernism in the field of Islamic feminisms. She explains that modernist Muslims "emphasize the inherent adaptability of Islamic principles and thought to modernity."[199] Modernist Muslims prioritize the overarching *objectives* or *maqasid* of Islamic law over any literal interpretations. In addition, modernists tend to view Islamic law as "essentially flexible and invariably just," and recognize that such a system "offers broad guidelines rather than detailed precepts for proper conduct."[200] Perhaps most significantly, modernists differentiate between the law and Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh*, defined as the activities of human interpretation and understanding.[201] Beyond strictly hermeneutical concerns, Heba Rauf and other Muslim feminists have contended that Islamic feminisms might be better equipped to simultaneously address gender inequality in the private and public sphere; equal rights and recognitions are due to both women and men in all social or legal spaces because the Muslim community or *umma* "is a holistic space that does not recognize an artificial public-private divide."[202]

Afsaruddin describes the work of two prominent Islamic feminists. Zainah Anwar and the organization she led named Sisters of Islam conducted educational campaigns based on religious texts in order to promote "equality and justice" and contributed to the successful passage of legal

---

[197] Ibid., 296.
[198] Ibid., 297.
[199] Ibid., 299.
[200] Ibid., 300.
[201] Ibid., 301.
[202] Ibid., 313-4.

reforms surrounding domestic violence in Malaysia.[203] Anwar explains that "the reason [she]

became involved in this movement was just outrage…over injustices perpetrated in the name of

God."[204] Siti Musdah Mulia is a lawyer who worked to reform the Islamic legal code in

Indonesia, an endeavor which was not successful but illustrates her belief in the need "to apply to

society and disseminate Islamic teachings that advocate emancipation."[205]

Through her extensive research on Muslim organizations in the United States, Leila

Ahmed recounts numerous instances of Muslim activists in the United States. She cites Muslim

women such as Laleh Bakhtiar, who was the first Muslim American woman to translate the Holy

Qur'an into English. Bakhtiar explains that in traditional translations "little attention had been

give to the woman's point of view."[206] Commenting on a controversial interpretation of the

Arabic word *daraba* in verse 4:34, Hadia Mubarak, who served as president of the Muslim

Student Association, states that one can "read the Qur'an and see the basic gender paradigm that

ordains mercy and justice between men and women" but that this verse "seems to contradict

everything."[207] The verse appears to condone violence against women, but in Bakhtiar's work,

the word *daraba* was translated into "to leave" rather than the traditional translation "to beat."[208]

While not explicitly focused on the issue of the hijab, Islamic feminist frameworks have

been utilized in different contexts in order to address the social and political challenges that

Muslim women themselves have defined as such. I introduced this framework in order to

demonstrate that Muslim women are exercising their political agency in ways that feminist

scholars in the west might not have anticipated. Rather than relying upon a secularized

---

[203] Ibid., 306-7.
[204] Ibid., 306.
[205] Ibid., 302 & 309.
[206] Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution*, 266.

[207] Ibid., 269-270.
[208] Ibid., 266-270.

understanding of women's rights or the western liberal tradition, Muslim feminists are utilizing

Islamic hermeneutics as a basis for political change. Feminist readings of the Holy Qur'an are

based on the understanding that Islam is inherently egalitarian, but that male-centric

interpretations of these texts have been utilized to justify male-centric social and political

arrangements. By exercising Islamic jurisprudence, or *fiqh*, Muslim feminist scholars are able to

bring these feminist readings of the Qur'an to light.

Exercising Islamic jurisprudence, however, inevitably necessitates thorough education in

Islamic scholarship and law. Perhaps this can be seen as a disadvantage of the Islamic feminisms

Afsaruddin has described. While it is possible that feminist change can reverberate through the

entire socio-political system via reforms in the legal code, it is unclear how feminist

hermeneutics will become accessible to Muslim women not trained in theology or law. I see this

observation, however, as a tension that Muslim women themselves will grapple with and work to

resolve within their own geographic, political and cultural contexts. It should not be assumed that

widespread political change can only occur via one directionality (i.e. top-down or grassroots),

especially given the variation in challenges and resources of Muslim women in different

contexts.

The reason I introduced the framework of Islamic feminism, then, is not to evaluate how

Muslim women are responding to their political worlds but rather to challenge the "oxymoron"

of a feminism rooted firmly in Islamic principles. As Abu-Lughod notes, "one of the things we

have to be most careful about in thinking about Third World feminisms, and feminism in

different parts of the Muslim world, is how not to fall into polarizations that place feminism on

the side of the West."[209] It might be argued that a desire to promote feminist ideals developed

through contact with western cultures; Afsaruddin mentions as much when she states that

---

[209] Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women," 788.

"'feminist consciousness' arose in the context of encounters with modernity and with British colonial occupation."[210] Whatever the case might be, it is telling that Muslim feminists are not turning away from Islam and equating it with gender oppression, as is often done by western feminists. Rather, Muslim feminists view women's rights as rooted in Islamic religious teachings.

Conceptions of Desire and Autonomy from Feminist Psychoanalysis

The final framework which I will consider in helping deconstruct predominant representations of Muslim women is feminist psychoanalysis. While operating on the individual level, questions of desire, choice and agency are valuable avenues to consider in developing a theoretical position which counters the narrative of Muslim women as "accepting" their own oppression or enacting a process of "self-slavery." I draw upon Drucilla Cornell's work on reclaiming desire as a manner of expressing one's dignity, ultimately arguing that this feminist conception of autonomy supports an open-ended process of meaning-making which destabilizes established understandings of subjectivity and autonomy.

In "Autonomy Re-Imagined," Drucilla Cornell evaluates the concepts of dignity and desire through a feminist psychoanalytic perspective. According to Cornell, dignity signifies "the moral mandate in which all of us are viewed as subjects."[211] Because of its relation to our ability to name and pursue our desires, dignity is a foundational concept in political philosophy. Yet traditional understandings of dignity have centered on a particular understanding of what a subject is, such that hegemonic whiteness and patriarchy inhere in our unexamined use of the term "subject." These considerations lead Cornell to expand the conceptualization of dignity in

---

[210] Afsaruddin, "Islamic Feminism(s)," 297. Afsaruddin cites Margot Badran's *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt.*

[211] Drucilla Cornell, "Autonomy Re-Imagined," *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 8 (2003): 144.

feminist terms.

In order to accomplish this, Cornell examines imagination as a source of knowledge and meaning-making. She defines the imaginary domain as "the moral and psychic right to represent and articulate the meaning of our desire and our sexuality within the ethical framework of respect for the dignity of all others."[212] Cornell differentiates between this imaginary domain and the radical imaginary, which refers to the practice of "envision[ing] new worlds." [213] She explains that individuals come to rely upon ego ideals for navigating through the world, and that these ideals result from our ability to imagine ourselves "either through real or imagined others."[214] Cornell claims that ego ideals are created "through our primordial, pre-oedipal identifications," and that for this reason, we cannot give an account of the origin of these ideals.[215] Nor can we evaluate these ideals on any other basis than by relying upon yet another ego ideal. Given these complexities, Cornell argues that if we understand feminism to be such an ego ideal, "it cannot be imposed" upon other women.[216] Because it is grounded in the imagination, an ego ideal is an open-ended conception of how one should live in the world.

Cornell goes on to argue that the tendency to make claims about who or what qualifies as feminist ultimately "undermines the power of feminism as an ego ideal."[217] Instead, Cornell urges us to adopt a conception of feminism that honors its "spirit of generosity" in allowing an individual to "internalize [feminism] as an ideal in her or his own way."[218] Feminist practice, and by extension feminist movements, cannot be definitively articulated in global terms; rather, Cornell advocates for the importance of solidarity with different women as they endeavor to

---

[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Ibid.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Ibid.

utilize their feminism to create political change. Thus, Cornell arrives at the conclusion that "the ultimate ethical law by which feminist political struggles must proceed" is grounded in "the need to respect the dignity of all women."[219]

Cornell then links this conception of feminism as ego ideal to the work of reclaiming one's desires. In keeping with Judith Butler, Cornell explains that our sexual and gender identities arise from our internalization of gender norms as well as our externalization, or enactment, of these roles in our everyday lives. The process of disrupting or distancing ourselves from hegemonic gender norms requires us to "actively assume our desire." [220] Here Cornell understands desire as not only referring to sexual desire but as our general "ability to chart out a life that is our own."[221] For Cornell, this process of reclaiming one's desires allows us to take responsibility in our lives and is closely related to the concepts of dignity and autonomy. Abu-Lughod, too, challenges the notion that all women share the basic goal or desire for "liberation." Drawing upon Saba Mahmood (who argues that desires are "historically situated"), Abu-Lughod argues that different groups of women might be motivated by desires other than "liberation," such as familial bonding or spiritual/religious fulfillment.[222]

Cornell is careful to distinguish between psychoanalytic conceptions of autonomy and the Kantian conception which prioritizes rationality and assumes our ability to "self-legislate" the moral law on this basis.[223] Psychoanalytic conceptions of dignity acknowledge that our formation as subjects depends upon our interactions with "primary others" and the "symbolic order."[224] Although she views desire as "born with our birth as subjects," Cornell seeks to

---

[219] Ibid., 145.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid.
[222] Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women," 788.
[223] Cornell, "Autonomy Re-Imagined," 145.
[224] Ibid.

develop an understanding of human desire and autonomy as socially mediated by these others and the symbolic order which structures our experiences of the world. It follows that while desire inheres in our experience as human beings, it may not be claimed as our own; yet the potentiality of claiming these desires "is the basis for our dignity and our freedom."[225] Rather than basing autonomy and dignity upon the individualistic and rationalistic assumptions of Kantian ethics, Cornell explains that "our freedom is always social and relational." [226] As a result, "the question of the survival of the subject [is] at once ethical and political."[227]

Finally, Cornell considers the implications of this psychoanalytic understanding of desire and autonomy on legal and political change. If we are to understand feminist practice as stemming from our ego ideals, "shaped differently by different women," then we can create political change through a process "overlapping consensus."[228] Alternative models of change, which assume a definitive set of feminist truths, undermine each woman's attempts to claim and reclaim her desires and threaten "to infuse new life into our imperialist legacy."[229] In this manner, Cornell understands the work of feminist practice as the process of "women claiming their desiring subjectivity."[230]

Cornell centers the notion of desire in her analysis of dignity and autonomy. While this presupposition may assist in imagining how a plurality of practices may result from a diverse set of desires among different subjects, Cornell's model risks an essentialization of desire as a foundational aspect of the human experience. Problematizing our conception of desire, or offering alternative ways of conceptualizing the animus "driving" human engagement with the

---

[225] Ibid.
[226] Ibid., 147.
[227] Ibid.
[228] Ibid., 148. Cornell draws upon John Rawls' concept of "overlapping consensus."
[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

world, would be consistent with Cornell's implicit aim of empowering a multiplicity of feminist practices.

However, Cornell's model of the feminist ego ideal is helpful in theorizing the ways in which our ideal, imagined selves (and by extension our ideal feminist practice) is constituted through our relationships with others (and specifically primary others such as parents and early caregivers). Our ideals and practices may stem from the imaginary, yet they are grounded in our early experiences of others in the world. Thus, the feminist ego ideal is not only a product of individual imagination but an expression of our lived experiences. Because the ego ideal is intertwined with the 'others' in our lives, upholding each woman's expression of her feminist ego ideal necessitates a respect for the *communities of meaning* through which this ideal has been shaped.

Cornell too critiques liberal political philosophy concerning what it means to be a free subject in a secular society. She effectively problematizes the commonplace understanding of 'the subject,' arguing that it implicitly signals whiteness and maleness.[231] If the 'subject' and its attendant 'dignity' are pre-determined as white and male in the western cultural imaginary, is it possible to develop *disinterested* legal and political categories i.e. concepts which are not already imbued within the current sociopolitical hierarchy of power but are instead broad enough to encompass a plurality of identities and thus compensate for or eradicate this hierarchy? While this aim may appear desirable, it assumes the possibility of developing these 'pure concepts' untainted by hegemonic social forces such as white supremacy and detached from the social positionality of the thinker of these concepts.

Perhaps it is thus more productive to deconstruct these established political concepts and analyze how hegemonic forces act through them. In the case of Muslim hijabi women, their

---

[231] Charles Mills conducts a similar analysis of white liberalism.

social positionalities may include being female, a diverse set of racial and ethnic backgrounds, varying degrees of comfort with the languages spoken in their countries of residence and varying degrees of legal protection and validation according to immigrant status. Given these identity configurations, Muslim hijabi women are not typically evoked when considering our implicit understanding of the political 'subject.' This exclusion from the implicit visualization of 'the subject' underscore the need to appropriate these concepts while broadening their meaning.[232]

Finally, the preceding discussion on deconstructing political concepts introduces issues of legal definition and accompanying state enforcement. Cornell advocates for each woman to reclaim her desires in accordance with her ego ideals. As this process inspires increasingly diverse (and often contradictory) conceptions of feminist justice, how are we to formulate a feminist legal theory and a feminist jurisprudence? Moreover, the resistance of Cornell's model to a stabilized and universal set of feminist principles raises concerns regarding the role of state apparatuses in prescribing and/or proscribing certain ways of living. Fundamentally, this incongruence reveals the importance of thinking through the role of state power and (as in the case of the United States) the role of state power in the international setting in attempting to advance pro-women aims. Due to its open-ended and situational nature, the feminist ego ideal as Cornell has formulated it is best pursued by unique women in their unique circumstances rather than through the application of top-down, state power. This is not to exclude the possibility that groups of women cannot and should not utilize the apparatuses of state power to achieve their aims and therefore continue to empower themselves.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed four potential frameworks that can be utilized to deconstruct western representations of Muslim women as oppressed and the hijab as an

---

[232] My argument here parallels that of Charles Mills when he discusses the de-racialization of liberalism.

instrument or marker of this gender oppression. Throughout the course of this chapter, I have identified several themes. These include the collapse or slippage in meaning that occurs between Islam and gender oppression as discussed by Al-Saji and, I would argue, a similar slippage that occurs between Islam and terror. Such elisions portray "Islam" firstly as a hypervisible, monolithic force and secondly one that terrorizes not only western peoples and traditions but also the very women who are part of this religion. Such conceptions are buttressed by a broader colonial discourse that presents universalized oversimplifications of multiple non-western cultures, not just Islamic ones. As Mohanty argues, representations of non-western women (the hijabi woman being just one such image) help construct western female *self-representations* that reflect modernity and freedom. These discursive processes have become so commonplace not merely in feminist academic writing but in our everyday political discourse, that the very notion of an Islamic feminism appears contrived, although Muslim feminists are turning toward the Qur'an as a source of inspiration for feminist struggle. Finally, Cornell's discussion on respecting women's ability to reclaim their desires undercuts political discourses which seek to infantilize Muslim women for choosing whether or not to wear the hijab.

Yet is the argument that each woman must reclaim her desires sufficient? One impediment to the argument that women should be empowered to identify and work toward their own feminist ideals involves the question of internalized oppression, often expressed as "false consciousness" in feminist writings. Although Cornell argues for a new route to conceptualizing autonomy and dignity, proponents of the false consciousness view might understand certain women's subjectivities to be compromised or "tainted" by the oppressive structures and meanings they have been inundated with. In the final chapter, I begin with a discussion of this issue and attempt to conceptualize a more egalitarian manner of understanding our relations as

individuals to structure and power.

Much of the work in this chapter has also been concerned with critiquing or deconstructing western attributions of meaning surrounding Muslim women and the hijab. In the last section of the third chapter, I draw upon several theorists to develop a vision of feminist solidarity and grapple with the difficult realities of how such a solidarity might proceed given the histories of western colonialism and white supremacy.

Chapter 3 Toward a Vision of Feminist Solidarity

For many feminists in the west, the hijab is a marker of gender oppression. The practice of veiling is assumed to be a sexist practice imposed upon Muslim women not only by the men in their lives but by the very religion to which they subscribe. Throughout the course of this paper, I have demonstrated that such arguments on the hijab arise from a western colonial project that seeks to vilify Islamic cultures and practices via a purported concern for Muslim women's rights. Equating Islam with gender oppression promotes political discourse (and informs policy measures) in which western powers mobilize to "liberate" Muslim women. Yet how do such discourses justify the need to intervene on the behalf of Muslim women?

In this chapter, I will grapple with another theme that undergirds the othering discourse surrounding the veil: the issue of internalized oppression. I critique the notion of internalized oppression and offer alternative ways of conceptualizing our relation to hegemonic expectations even as we work in political opposition to them. I argue that the concept of internalization is insufficient in accounting for the complex processes in which individuals are simultaneously constituted by and resist hegemony in the form of racism, heterosexism, etc. Instead, I draw upon Audre Lorde and George Yancy to propose an alternative conception of complicity/resistance that acknowledges our embeddedness within these power dynamics. The second half of the chapter introduces Sara Ahmed's examination of the will and her concept of "willfulness" as an approach to political resistance. I find Ahmed's discussion of willfulness appropriate given this chapter's primary concern with questioning our commonplace understandings of human subjectivities as fully transparent phenomena.

In the final section of this chapter, I bring together the aforementioned theorists in an endeavor to contribute to on-going theorizing on feminist justice and solidarity. Finally, I

consider the roles and limitations of theory within a conception of feminist praxis, as well as the value of social critique as self-directed critique. My aim in arguing for an alternative framework of understanding oppression—which I refer to as the embeddedness framework—is not to imply that the hijab is a form of oppression; the hijab is what Muslim hijabi women define it as. It follows that the hijab is not a static and enduring representation of any one concept across time and space, but that the meanings of any number of bodily coverings are contingent upon the persons, histories, cultures and circumstances from which they arise. I hope to propose this alternative framework as a way of illustrating that our very understanding of oppression is still developing. Rather than operating as if there were a dichotomy of liberated/(self) oppressed of women, I advocate for a feminist solidarity model as a form of letting go or relinquishing control and having faith in fellow women to define and act upon their own experiences.

Questions of Complicity: Finding Ourselves as Antagonists in our own Homes

The question of internalized oppression—or false consciousness—is one that introduces uncertainties and ambiguities about what it means to possess a feminist consciousness, and indeed, to *be* a feminist. Internalized oppression suggests that our life experiences may be guided by deeply ingrained, dominant power structures, even within the context of an intentionally articulated feminist politics. The notion of internalization upsets the presumption of a linear, agentic causal pattern between our beliefs and political actions. This notion also jeopardizes the potential for a purely oppositional, non-hegemonic articulation of feminism and tempts us to make distinctions between women regarding who counts as the "true," or fully "liberated" feminist.

In this manner, the possibility of internalization threatens our recourse to a coherent feminist theory beyond the very hegemonic power differentials such theory seeks to expose and

resist. Internalization conceals our very ability to know with certainty and to decide freely according to this knowledge. Yet a critical investigation of this concept also reveals that the charge of internalization itself is symptomatic of a tendency to impose significations and meanings onto others. It is as if in the very process of identifying potential internalizations of oppression, one demonstrates the tenacity of these oppressive patterns in structuring thought and behavior. I do not mean to contest that hegemonic power relations, including racism and heterosexism, do indeed exert influence on feminist theory and politics; rather, I suggest that the model of internalization as it has been conceptualized by predominantly white, western-centered feminists establishes a hierarchy of liberated/(internally) oppressed women.

This conceptualization is especially prevalent in some western women's assumptions about the oppressive nature of the hijab. For instance, Rossignol's comment comparing Muslim hijabi women to African-Americans who "accepted" slavery illustrates this framework. The issue of acceptance is the key operating term; it implies that Rossignol is capable of peering into the minds of both Muslim hijabi women and enslaved African individuals and viewing this purported "acceptance" as a sort of confusion or childlike ignorance regarding one's own best interests or perhaps even the willful[233] acquiescence of one's own power. Thus, Rossignol attempts to unilaterally trace the origins of gender oppression to the subjectivities[234] of Muslim hijabi women; it is as if she is *pointing toward* a discrete or "visible" part of Muslim hijabi women's subjectivities which ultimately renders them (self) oppressed. Indeed, Rossignol is pointing toward the hijab, perhaps what she might deem as the external representation of this internalized acceptance of gender oppression.

---

[233] I will further explore the implications of this term later in this chapter in my explication of Sara Ahmed's *Willful Subjects*.
[234] By subjectivities, I refer to the combinations of agency, affect and perception which underlie human responsiveness and decision-making.

What are 'the Master's Tools'?

In her critique of a conference that excluded the perspectives of women of color and lesbian theorists, Audre Lorde asks the audience, "what does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy?"[235] She goes on to explain that relying upon "the master's tools" for feminist struggle will only allow for superficial political change[236], and that what is necessary for true change involves a reconceptualization of how we relate to difference.[237] Lorde argues that "our future survival is predicated upon our ability to relate within equality."[238] Thus, our current manners of relating to other women rely upon the master's racist and patriarchal tools which "distort"[239] our differences and place valuations on human beings to the extent that they embody the "mythical norm," which includes "white thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian and financially secure."[240] In order to address this, Lorde argues that we must critically examine our reliance upon these tools and create new ways of relating to each other:

> For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. As Paulo Freire shows so well in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* the true focus of revolutionary change is never merely the oppressive situations which we seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors' tactics, the oppressors' relationships.[241]

---

[235] Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110.

[236] Ibid., 112.

[237] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 122. In both of the essays which I examine here, Lorde argues for a critical reconceptualization of human difference, especially differences among women, in ways that do not replicate hierarchical power relations. She states that "it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (Lorde 115).

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid., 115.

[240] Ibid., 116.

[241] Ibid., 123.

I discern two different metaphors of oppression operating in this passage. The first image implies searching for an implicitly foreign set of ideas/practices "planted deep within" a core of the self. The former image suggests a conceptualization of human subjectivity as an enclosed interiority tainted by the presence of a "piece of the oppressor."[242] Based upon this metaphor, it appears that this internalized piece must be excised or expelled in order to regain ourselves and further revolutionary change.[243] I argue that Lorde's latter metaphor of the master's house, however, is more useful in conceptualizing our complex relationships to oppressive forces. The imagery of the house emphasizes both the structural and socially constructed nature of oppression. This metaphor suggests that oppressive systems are systemic and internally coherent in the sense that each part or piece supports another. "The house" did not simply appear in a person's subjectivity but was built over time using the master's tools; it has a history, a location in time and space. Although it may provide a type of "shelter," it is not the case that the house (and the oppression which the metaphor of the house represents) becomes essentialized as a crucial aspect of one's subjectivity. Rather, human subjects exist *in relation* to this house as an external phenomenon which nonetheless exerts considerable influence on the conditions of their survival and existence.

Lorde explains that the principle of abandoning the master's tools "is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."[244] For instance, she discusses how "for white women, there is a wider range of pretended choices and rewards for identifying with patriarchal power and its tools."[245] The metaphor of the house is compelling as it allows us to visual different women's relations or proximity to such a structure, as well as

---

[242] Ibid.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 112.
[245] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 119.

accounting for the possibility of "leaving" or even dismantling such a house. Even the "old blueprints of expectation and response"[246] which help shape our subjective experiences of others echoes the metaphor of the house. Perhaps most significantly, Lorde is concerned with developing new ways of relating to difference beyond these "blueprints;" unlike Rossignol's comment suggests, Lorde is not attempting to attribute a certain group of women's practices to an internalized oppression but is rather acknowledging the ways in which all of our lives have been shaped by the master's tools, albeit in differing ways.

Yet what were the tools utilized to build this structure that Lorde warns us will never be sufficient to dismantle it? To argue that force is one such tool seems readily apparent. Yet what sorts of processes underlie the use of force by one group of people over another? The application of force suggests the imposition of one individual/group's interests over another in a way that structures material rewards in the direction of the force-wielding group. Force represents a way of being in the world (in phenomenological terms) that seeks to secure a certain space or arena for itself first by obliterating or suppressing other positions and second by restructuring this arena in a manner that conceals its violent origins and normalizes its presence. It may be tacit or explicit, but force is always violent and it sets the stage for its own arrival. This space, or "stage," may operate on the environmental, bodily, political or epistemological levels.

It is this epistemological valence of force that I find most pertinent to the case of western women interpreting Muslim hijabi women as oppressed. By attributing gender oppression to the practice of wearing the hijab, western feminists seek to lay a claim on the meanings, affects and beliefs that different Muslim women may hold in wearing the hijab and other body coverings. The argument of gender oppression is only made possible by an assumption of the universal validity of western conceptions of what oppression and/or freedom mean and *look like*. The

---

[246] Ibid., 123.

claim that one has internalized or embraced one's own oppression (an argument which already presumes the hijab as an article of oppression), seeks to import or transfer the meanings of a western model of feminism onto Muslim women from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Force can be conceptualized as the project of clearing a space for oneself and seeking to normalize this space as internally coherent (and therefore unquestionable) and ahistorical (or "eternal"). If force has been utilized to build the house of gender oppression, why do some feminists attempt to lay claim to Muslim hijabi women's subjective experiences using epistemological force?

Embeddedness/Suspension

As an alternative to the internalization framework, I argue that a model of embeddedness is more fruitful for understanding the enigma of an individual ostensibly acting against their own interests or furthering their own oppression. In developing this model, I draw upon George Yancy's work in order to argue that each of our actions have the potential to be co-constituted by oppressive forces; we are suspended in a set of historical, political and economic relations that precede us in time yet structure our beliefs and actions. Given our inability to disentangle ourselves from these oppressive relations, we should resist attempts to attribute other's action to an internalized oppression (i.e. as a fundamental component of who they are) and, perhaps more radically, be cautious about what we define as oppressive and for whom. In line with this argument, I advocate for a permeable understanding of subjectivity rather than a notion of the unperturbed "core" of self.

Numerous theorists have critiqued the notion of an atomized, internally coherent and impermeable conception of subjectivity. Psychoanalysis is predicated upon the notion of subconscious or repressed traumas, stemming from events in our lives which may have been long forgotten but continue to structure our conscious behavior. More contemporary theorists

such as Foucault have sought to demonstrate the link between subjectivity and power, arguing

that external power relations become internalized and dictate our behavior from within.[247] In

these and other ways, more contemporary philosophy has departed from Cartesian

understandings of the self—as purely rational and disembodied—to an appreciation of "the self"

as socially constituted and embedded within particular social and cultural positionalities.[248]

     George Yancy discusses the role of philosopher as cultural critic. Drawing on events such

as 9/11, he challenges philosophers to "use their critical imaginations to speak to spheres of

concern that do not *simply* repeat the traditional problems and solutions of philosophy."[249] The

philosopher can perhaps be more accurately described as the "activist philosopher" or

"philosopher-citizen."[250] Yet given the crises and violence of modern, political life, one might

argue that seeking to delineate the philosopher's role within this turmoil—turning "inward" as it

were—is yet "another move toward abstraction, denial, and obfuscation."[251]

     Yancy counters this charge by explaining that examining ourselves in relation to our own

knowledge and theorizing does not represent an "turn inward" per se; because the philosopher is

"always already a deeply politically engaged self," this "turn inward" to examine our selves truly

represents an examination of the sociopolitical forces which have shaped and hence limited our

sense of self. [252] He goes on to explain that

> The self is always already linked to a web of significant and meaningful
> contingent relations that precede its constitution. Hence, the self is created vis-à-
> vis the existence of others. The self is shaped within a dynamic, transactional
> space of alterity. In short, then, exploring the self inevitably involves exploring
> the self-with-others...The self is not simply *in* time, space, and history, something

---

[247] Michel Foucault, "Discipline and Punish," in *Social Theory Re-Wired*, ed. Wesley Longhofer and Daniel Winchester (New York: Routledge, 2012), 303.

[249] George Yancy, introduction to *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), xi.
[250] Ibid., x-xi.
[251] Ibid., xii.
[252] Ibid.

simply objectively present; rather, the self exists *as* spatialized, temporalized, and historicalized.[253]

Thus, "the self" is not a stable core of affect, thought and behavior that develops according to a pre-determined, inner logic, impervious to the influence of space and time. The self arises, rather, as a result of the historical configurations of time and space that precede us and into which our lives inevitably flow. In other words, our lives are such that "anonymous others have already established social, political, and ethical normative webs of meaning within which we move."[254] Understanding the self, then, requires an understanding of the world and others in it, or perhaps more specifically, how our subjectivities are mediated by historical and cultural circumstance.

Yancy's understanding of the self "*as* spatialized, temporalized, and historicalized" informs questions of complicity/resistance when thinking about how it is that we relate to oppressive structures and discourses. If we, as subjects, are embedded within "webs" of discursive meanings, our beliefs and actions are structured at least in part by meanings that do not arise from "within" but instead represent our intimate ties to social structures.[255] These sociopolitical relations may be oppressive or violent in the sense that they normalize the suppression or obliteration of certain subjects for the sake of upholding a hegemonic norm of what it means to be a valuable human being. However, these historical sociopolitical relations also contain oppositional or counter-hegemonic strains which seek to interrupt the aforementioned set of relations in order to establish new norms and ideals in line with principles such as justice and equity. There is indeed a historical trend of counter-hegemonic practices in

---

[253] Ibid., xiii.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid., xii.

which the "anonymous others" who have preceded us have attempted to define their lives in opposition to the violence of racism, heterosexism and other forms of oppression.

To be thus embedded implies that the self is diffuse and perhaps not altogether "present" to itself. At any given moment, our actions may be constituted in accordance with or in opposition to hegemonic forces, or in ways which mix and obfuscate both forms of social influence. My decision to get married, as a hypothetical example, presupposes an understanding of what marriage *is* in my historical and cultural context as well as the various expectations, values and taboos surrounding marital life. My decision to marry—indeed my very consideration of marriage as an appealing life choice—might reflect my society's beliefs about partnership, sex, and family that I have normalized as part of the narrative of my own life and what I deem as necessary for fulfillment. Yet this decision might just as well represent a genuine desire to establish a bond with another individual, in which I can re-negotiate the dominant expectations of married life in conversation with my partner and import new beliefs about the purposes or value of marriage. I chose this example because of the dominant ways in which heteronormative monogamy defines acceptable or worthwhile romantic and sexual relations among people in western societies, but also because it is a common decision facing many individuals in such societies.

How, then, am I to disentangle the various strands of influence which may result in my decision to marry, or indeed pursue any line of action at all? If the complexity of this task is daunting, and if I find it daunting to clarify the "authenticity" of my decisions for myself, then how could I possibly expect to perform this task for another? Perhaps most challenging of all is my inability to firmly grasp what marriage signifies; while it remains the dominant logic ordering our romantic and sexual interactions with others, different dyads will inevitably hold

their own understandings of what marriage means for them. Thus, the very act which I seek to analyze becomes de-stabilized when I attempt to categorize it as a solely hegemonic endeavor that overrides the possibility of new meaning-making and liberatory practice.

This example—the decision to marry—represents just one act over the course of an individual's lifetime, albeit a significant one (or is our understanding of marriage as a formative life event also beginning to shift?). Not only is it difficult to parcel out the various factors which influence any given action, it is possible that our actions are constituted by differing processes. It may not be the case, for instance, that we are always acting in accordance with one set of principles, so that our life choices and acts do not fall neatly into a set of behaviors that can be causally traced to a single corpus of articulated beliefs. That discursive—and indeed narrative[256]—inner core that we attribute to "self" is delicately strung together as a series of acts, a notion which is in line with Butler's notion of performativity.[257] No single act is comprehensive enough to preserve a sense of self. The embeddedness framework thus grants us a way of speaking about how broader social, cultural and political forces work through us, ordering our actions in line with their inner logics, as well as how it is that we are able to question, disrupt and subvert hegemonic forces by discontinuing certain practices, forming new ones and recreating old practices to hold new meanings.

What changes if we adopt one framework rather than the other? Ultimately, I argue that the embeddedness framework affords us the possibility of examining the complexities of our own sociopolitical positionalities without being tempted to create an artificial bifurcation between "liberated" and internally "oppressed" women. The internalization model is predicated

---

[256] Ibid., ix.
[257] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 34.

upon a "self-enclosed" and "objectively present" self in that it identifies the monolithic construction of "oppression" as belonging to certain women or inhering in their subjectivities. [258] This leaves no room for considering how ostensibly "liberated" women interact with and perhaps reiterate the complex histories of their subjugation and it most definitely overlooks how "oppressed" women make choices and life practices which allow them to exert agency.

Rather than understanding oppression as "residing with" certain groups of women as integral parts of the subjectivities that must be excised via an outside force or other subject who can identify this oppression, our relationships to hegemonic structures, ideas and discourses can perhaps better be conceptualized as the result of our embeddedness with them. Following this second framework, the question of acting in accordance with one's oppression (and against one's interests) becomes quite complex as we come to understand different subjects as immersed within unique historical and social conditions which shape behavior, values and norms— including norms about what freedom is and what it looks like.

Willing and Willfulness

In *Willful Subjects*, Sara Ahmed traces the philosophical concept of "will" and explores the connections between "willfulness," subjectivity and resistance. She explains that "willfulness" describes "subjects who not only insist on their way" but "whose will is in accordance with their own desire."[259] Ahmed explains that the concept of the will has traditionally been overladen with moral judgments, such that "the acquisition of good will…becomes a way of creating social harmony."[260] Defiance to the "good" will, or willfulness, is perceived as "ill will" or "a will that is in agreement only with itself."[261] The notion of will is

---

[258] Yancy, introduction to *The Philosophical I*, xiii.
[259] Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 85.
[260] Ibid., 95.
[261] Ibid.

thus viewed as central to morality, and subjects who exhibit a "willfulness" that questions or subverts the commonly agreed upon aims are not viewed as subscribing to a "good will."

Ahmed argues that attributions regarding who possesses a "good" or "ill" will reflect socio-political power. Rather than understanding morality as arising from a rationally determined, moral law,[262] our conceptions of morality and good will are based on a fundamentally "social distinction."[263] For instance, Ahmed reviews Kant's writing on the alleged moral differences between Europeans and "savage nations," in which he attributes a heightened capriciousness to the latter.[264] Ahmed argues that this charge of non-Europeans possessing greater impulsiveness is consistent with the notion of "willfulness" often attributed to those who do not conform to the "good will."[265] Ahmed thus seeks to argue that "the diagnosis of willfulness allows the good will to appear as if it is a universal will."[266] The universalization of western or upper-class norms as moral givens does not occur merely through the power to ascribe meanings and enact sanctions. As Ahmed demonstrates, this universalization necessitates the stigmatization and othering of certain groups in order to maintain legitimacy.[267] That this othering process occurs in part through attributing "ill" or capricious *will* to certain groups illustrates how the subjectivities of individual members of such groups are regarded as suspect, so that acts arising from such subject's own agency are presumed to be inherently misguided given that they originate from this "ill will."

Ahmed then examines the concept of the general will.[268] She explains that the general

---

[262] Ibid. Ahmed critiques Kant's notion of practical reason throughout this chapter.
[263] Ibid., 94-95.
[264] Ibid., 94.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid., 95.
[267] Ibid.
[268] Ahmed discusses the notion of the general will as theorized by Rousseau and Pascal, while acknowledging that the concept has a long history in political philosophical thought. In particular, she draws attention to the following excerpt from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*: "Whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be constrained to do

will describes the will of "the whole body;"[269] this distinction between whole and part is crucial

for her analysis of willfulness as the refusal of a given part (generally conceptualized as parts of

the body) to align its will with the will of the whole (body). While Ahmed is careful not to imply

a direct comparison between parts of the body and individuals in a given society,[270] she utilizes

the metaphor of the body and its parts when examining undervalued groups such as workers and

colonized peoples. She explains that "given that the social is imagined as a body with parts, then

some bodies more than others will be thought of as the limbs of the social body."[271] In this

manner, the role of the worker becomes reduced to the *willing* hands or arms of society.[272]

The significance of the whole/part distinction lies in Ahmed's aforementioned relationship

between capacity and possibility; as she explains when discussing colonized subjects who are

forced to embody the "laboring parts" of colonial society, the power of dominant groups to

exercise the general will freely necessitates the existence of classes of people who are retained as

supportive parts.[273]

Any willfulness exhibited by such supportive parts ultimately threatens the perpetuation

of the whole. Ahmed draws upon the notion of "wandering," especially as it pertains to

wandering away from one's duty, to explore how willfulness becomes evident through queer

sexuality. She explains that "to break the bond of marriage and family is not only to cause

unhappiness, but is read as a form of self-regard, as putting yourself before others," a

characterization in line with the concept of willfulness.[274] Thus, queer sexualities (and perhaps

---

so by the whole body, which means nothing else than that he shall be forced to be free" (Ahmed 97). Regarding
Pascal, she notes his idea that "the will *should tend* toward the general" or "acquire a general tendency" that often
contradicts the "natural tendency of will" (Ahmed 99).
[269] Ibid., 97.
[270] Ibid., 98.
[271] Ibid., 106.
[272] Ibid., 106 & 108.
[273] Ibid., 112.
[274] Ibid., 116.

any sexual desire which precludes the general will of the body[275]) are willful insofar as they question "the reproductive will" of the body as a whole.[276] Thus, by refusing "to reproduce the whole body,"[277] willful parts threaten the general will and endanger the reproduction of entire systems of meaning. Ahmed's conception of queer feminism is based upon "parts that *in willing* are *not willing* to reproduce the whole."[278] In response to the charge of queer self-regard, Ahmed critiques the apparent disinterestedness of the general will, arguing that "the self-regard of heterosexuality is concealed under the sign of the general will."[279] Thus, the general will does not represent an amalgamation of particular interests nor the overarching aims that deliver benefits to society as a whole, but rather the will of the dominant groups which have "receded" into the background of what we consider "normal" life.[280]

Ahmed then turns to an analysis of citizenship and the notion of "willful strangers." She proposes that "to become a member is to be willing to participate in a whole."[281] Newcomers, or "strangers," who are not member parts of the body politic thus represent foreign entities that "endanger" the social body, especially if these parts refuse to assimilate properly into the established general will.[282] Ahmed analyzes anti-immigrant rhetoric, and specifically the image of the immigrant who refuses to assimilate, in order to argue that the charge of willfulness represents "a crucial mechanism for reproducing the national body."[283] The key distinction for Ahmed lies not in a dichotomy between citizens and foreigners or immigrants but rather "between those differences [of the immigrant] that can be assimilated into the national body and

---

[275] Ibid., 119. Ahmed discusses St. Augustine's characterization of sexuality as "an unwanted intruder."
[276] Ibid., 119.
[277] Ibid.
[278] Ibid., 121.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid., 123.
[282] Ibid., 124 &128.
[283] Ibid., 128.

those that cannot."[284] This distinction is made possible by the notion of citizenship as an

invitation extended to foreign parts to assume the general will.[285] It is not the case that foreign

"parts" are unequivocally dismissed or rejected; rather, their membership in the national body is

contingent on their alignment with the general will. In other words, "citizenship is becoming

part."[286]

This element of Ahmed's analysis is especially pertinent for Muslim immigrants residing

in western countries. In the previous section, I discussed how Rossignol's statement referring to

hijabi women and African-American slaves involved a form of *pointing toward* a purported

fragment of oppression that the subject has internalized into their own consciousness. This very

act of pointing represents an accusation against an unacceptable difference, indeed a difference

that the one pointing toward regards as incongruent with the national body. If the invitation of

citizenship is to be fully extended, the immigrant must relinquish or discard that part of

themselves that the one pointing toward has identified as unwelcome. The invitation, it seems,

only applies to the "uncovered" body of the woman, to that part of the woman that most

replicates western norms in terms of her dress and appearance. The hijab and, crucially, any

cultural, affective or religious commitments which a hijabi woman might hold in wearing the

hijab, are not deemed suitable for participation in the public body of the nation. Efforts to force

hijabi women to remove their hijabs in France signals the highly contingent nature of the

invitation to citizenship.

Finally, Ahmed considers how willfulness can be "claimed" as a tool of political praxis

or "a style of politics."[287] She first relates willfulness to disobedience[288] of the sovereign or the

---

[284] Ibid.
[285] Ibid., 126-7.
[286] Ibid., 127.
[287] Ibid., 133.

tyrant, explaining that the "sovereign will" involves the power "to determine whose wills are the willful wills."[289] This statement refers to the ways in which power consolidates itself by attempting to vilify or delegitimize the dissenting wills of other subjects as troublesome or impetuous. One strategy of resistance involves exposing the sovereign will itself as capricious and self-interested, or in other words, as "willful."[290] Yet how is it that an unjust tyrant is able to grasp power in the first place? Ahmed critiques the notion that subjects unilaterally secede power to a tyrant or that they are "willing to be subjected."[291] Rather than understanding power as retractable from an unjust tyrant through a reverse of the will of the people (and thereby implicating the subjected as ultimately responsible for their own subjugation), Ahmed explains that "power can be precisely what makes yes seem necessary for survival" and that "a subject can be willing in order to avoid being forced."[292] Ahmed presents a nuanced understanding of power and force as constricting the possibilities for action among the subjugated, thus complicating the notion that power can be reclaimed from the sovereign if only the will of the people were directed at this aim. As she explains throughout her final chapter, it is the very charge of willfulness—of violating the assumed collective will as embodied by the norms and practices of the present social structure—that allows the powerful to dismiss the needs of those who express incongruent wills.[293]

Power and force, by this account, are not simply phenomena that reside in a single sovereign's hierarchical relation to other subjects but represents the ability of certain wills to

---

[288] Ibid., 134.
[289] Ibid., 136.
[290] Ibid.
[291] Ibid., 139. Ahmed articulates this liberal model of power structures as the notion that "power 'over you' can only take place 'through you'" (Ahmed 139).
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid., 133.

shape worlds. Drawing upon Hegel's notion of habituation,[294] Ahmed argues that power does not result from a contest of the primacy or greater force of various wills.[295] Rather "the will of those whose precedence is assumed becomes embedded in the materiality of worlds; this will is worlding."[296] Ahmed draws upon her own experiences with diversity work in the university setting as a way of demonstrating how certain bodies are read as "getting in the way" in worlds that have been crafted according to the wills of those in power.[297] The memory or trace of a particular will is thus underwritten in the very space of the institution, both in terms of what it deems possible and whom it deems as belonging in it.[298]

Yet recovering collective memory also appears to be a foundational tool for political labor.[299] She conceptualizes the act of willfulness via a refusal to obey as a "memory project" in in which one regains a sense of one's own will that the general will has attempted to eradicate,[300] in a way that is perhaps reminiscent of Drucilla Cornell's call to reclaim one's desires.[301] Ahmed conceives of this process as involving the "recovery of a collective," insofar as "willfulness becomes a vital and shared inheritance" as well as a manner of "reaching…back in time."[302]

---

[294] Ibid., 146. Hegel argues that habits represent "a continuous will" that has over time been cemented into a habit. The implication here is that although habits may not involve a conscious or intentional act of willing they nonetheless enact (and reenact) a certain will. Willing, thus, can be expressed through habituation and does not necessarily presuppose "an individual act of volition" (Ahmed 146).

[295] Ibid., 147.

[296] Ibid., 146.

[297] Ibid., 147.

[298] Ibid. Ahmed draws upon several interesting metaphors when discussing the issue of how wills that enact exclusion on people of color or queer people shape institutional practices through habituation. She likens the institution to "an old garment" in that "it acquires the shape of those who tend to wear it, such that it becomes easier to wear if you have that shape" (147). She also utilizes the image of a house when explaining that subjects for whom they institution was not built must *accommodate* this institutional space by altering their behaviors (Ahmed 146-7).

[299] Ibid., 142, 149, 161. Ahmed recounts several ways that subjects have historically utilized "willfulness" as a means of political labor and resistance; among these are refusing to be moved (in relation to Rosa Parks), insistence and transforming the body into a "blockage point" (as might occur during a strike).

[300] Ibid., 140.

[301] Cornell, "Autonomy Re-Imagined," 148.

[302] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 140. It is not clear to me whether Ahmed here proposes developing a genealogical account of a shared cultural or historical will among a group of people or "reaching" toward the past to discover the ways in which the present circumstances are historically conditioned so that the shape of future values and practices is malleable and open to transformation. Judith Butler critiques our ability to give an account of the world "before"

Ahmed again emphasizes the collective nature of willfulness when she describes the concept of a "willful gift." The willful gift involves a "passing of will from one to another," so that willfulness takes on the form of "a relation to others, those who come before, those who come after."[303] Political resistance takes on a collective valence which is grounded in an understanding of the past.

Speaking specifically on the case of Muslim women wearing the hijab, Ahmed explains that the hijab might appear as a "willful part," or as she describes, "a stubborn attachment to an inassimilable difference."[304] While it is tempting to assume that the issue of wearing or not wearing the hijab is a matter of individualism,[305] Ahmed complicates this notion by explaining how an otherwise ordinary action becomes a willful one: "willfulness can be required in order to persist not only as an individual but in one's very loyalty to a culture whose existence is deemed a threat."[306] Thus it is the perception of Islam as a threat which renders the hijab a "stubborn" or willful sign of the outsider. This charge of willfulness (of the hijab) creates the conditions in which Muslim hijabi women must *become willful* in order to persist in wearing the hijab; thus, "you have to become what you are judged as being."[307]

Ahmed's analysis of will and willfulness is insightful for the present inquiry in that it provides another manner of conceptualizing our embeddedness within the socio-historical conditions from which we develop our values, practices and epistemologies. Ahmed's discussion of the "worlding" capabilities of certain wills demonstrates how even institutions and spaces

---

or "beyond" the law (Butler 76). In any case, this characterization of willfulness as "opening up of the body to what came before" is significant for Ahmed in that it allows her to develop a conception of willfulness which acknowledges resistance as process, as "the labor required to reach no" rather than an outright and spontaneous declaration of refusal (Ahmed 140-1).
[303] Ibid., 143.
[304] Ibid., 128.
[305] Ibid., 151.
[306] Ibid.
[307] Ibid., 144 & 151.

which actively seek to support multiple perspectives or interests are inevitably structured by the particular wills of the dominant group. Ahmed's analysis also relates to Al-Saji's discussion of the secular, public space in France, and how the specific cultural characteristics of this space are concealed under the aim of preserving all-encompassing, areligious space.[308] This worlding process, as Ahmed alludes to, it not a matter of the mere primacy of some wills over others in terms of time order,[309] but requires the ongoing reinforcement of historical power arrangements via habituation. Far from being expressed as an explicit decree, the general will shapes material reality regarding the priorities and norms of our public spaces as well as what and who we deem as existing *in line with* these priorities.

What, then, is the significance of overtly discriminatory political discourse against Muslims if the "worlding" which prioritizes whiteness and Christianity in the west has already taken place? What additional harm could such discourse enact given that public spaces in the west are shaped by a general will which regards Muslims as the outsiders? An underlying theme in Ahmed's analysis is the manner in which the general will or hegemonic power relations become invisible and appear to take on a neutral character, so that "we do not tend to notice the assistance given to those whose residence is assumed."[310] I argue that blatantly discriminatory policies immediately harm groups of people and can be understood as a continuation of the worlding process insofar as the historical domination of certain groups is reinforced via present discourse and policy measures. Anti-hijab policies in France are instances of such a continuation.

One might argue that Muslims are perceived as "foreigners" in France and the United States because many Muslims have indeed immigrated to these countries and must establish new lives in cultures that both find them unfamiliar and that are unfamiliar to them. Given this stance,

---

[308] Al-Saji, "The Racialization of Muslim Veils," 881.
[309] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 147.
[310] Ibid., 149.

the charge of willfulness against an immigrant who refuses to assimilate to the dominant culture appears justifiable; after all, why would a Muslim person immigrate to a western country and not expect to try to fit in? If western countries no longer wish to make the claim that western ideals should be applied universally, can they at least claim that these ideals should be applied (and preserved) in the homeland?

In approaching this argument, it is worthwhile to consider the circumstances under which many (but not all) immigrants arrive in western countries. For instance, how much choice is afforded to Muslims who have immigrated under pressures to escape war or political unrest in their home countries? What changes in the configuration of the home might be possible when the invited "guest" is a refugee, a person who has no other home to turn toward? What are the implications if this home was historically constructed according to the will of those who exploited the labor and resources of the peoples who are now in need of new homes? Finally, if this home is needed to house both the citizens and the invited guests (albeit in differing ways), what room exists for modifying this home? What room exists for willfulness?

What is Feminist Solidarity?

Rather than opening up a theoretical space for analyzing how each of us is ultimately shaped by hegemonic norms and expectations, accusations of internalized oppression set up artificial hierarchies between women who seem to have accepted these norms and women who are nominally operating beyond them. As a result, western-centric, feminist theorizing demonstrates the tenacity of hegemonic discourse/meaning-making in its very effort to identify it in others. How is feminist political praxis to proceed given these accusations of false consciousness between different types of women?

In asking this question, I take as my point of departure the othering discourses which some white, western women (and men) adopt when ascribing reasons for Muslim hijabi women's wearing of the hijab. However, this question is applicable to other communities of women and therefore constitutes an urgent issue in feminist theorizing: how can we build trust and solidarity across communities of women? If we understand feminist struggle to be localized and highly unique to specific groups of women in specific sociohistorical and political contexts,[311] what possibilities exist for genuine solidarity and to what extent is such solidarity necessary? In other words, is it enough for more privileged women to stop attempting to universalize our own experiences into a hegemonic feminist theory, or should we develop an informed, critical and active solidarity across different groups of people?

The accusation of internalized oppression is one of many impediments to actualizing a vision of feminist solidarity that acknowledges differing struggles between women and seeks to unite feminist ideals with antiracist and anticolonial political projects. By thinking through these two frameworks—one based strictly on a model of oppression as lodged in an otherwise free subject and the other based on the idea that all subjects are embedded and thereby influenced by their unique histories—I have attempted to show that it is not the question of whether or how oppressive ideas structure our lives that matters but rather who is able to attribute and ascribe such meanings to the behavior of themselves and others. My analysis has largely focused on deconstructing ostensibly pro-woman arguments which obfuscate a broader colonial agenda. As a final aim of this project, I will explore the possibilities of a feminist solidarity that seeks to not only disrupt colonial power structures but also to envision new strategies of resistance and support.

---

[311] Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 345.

By challenging universalist assumptions about feminist liberation, I do not mean to argue that feminism does not or should not uphold certain values and norms—or to condone the idea that "anything goes." Rather, I have attempted to complicate the very notion of "liberation" by advocating for a framework which acknowledges different groups' embeddedness within unique social and historical circumstances. Such a model prioritizes localized transformation and by extension the subjectivities and agencies of the women affected by their particular socio-historical configurations. [312] Perhaps even more significantly, a framework based on socio-historical embeddedness in *local* conditions precludes feminist theorizing from attempting to reach a purported sphere of ultimate principles or prescriptive practices that operates beyond history and circumstance. By critiquing anti-hijab sentiments among western liberals, I have demonstrated that implicit colonial projects are not merely conducted in the name of feminism but that these colonial histories have ultimately shaped the iteration of feminism in the west. If accusations of internalized oppression and "willfulness" are attempts to consolidate a hegemonic form of feminism (and indeed one can ask whether such a form can be considered to be a feminism at all), how can women in the west express solidarity with Muslim hijabi women and other groups of women who have been oppressed by imperialism and racism?

While this a complex question demanding insight from multiple avenues, my suggestion regarding this issue calls on western women to engage with a receptivity to fellow women's declarations of meaning and a critical stance toward our own epistemological and historical positionality. Rather than attempting to assign meanings to the experiences of other groups of women, women in the west can take measures to withdraw or retract our own epistemological dominance and practice a form of "letting go" of (at least enough to be able to critically examine) our assumptions about what feminism should do. For Ahmed, willfulness represents "a

---

[312] Ibid.

necessary horizon *for* politics,"[313] suggesting that willful feminist struggle does not represent a place or state of being but rather a sort of striving toward feminist ideals. Indeed, Ahmed states that "willfulness is not a side: one that we can simply be on or stay on"[314] but that social change necessitates the recognition that "we too can be the problem" in other people's lives.[315] Thus, Ahmed acknowledges that willfulness is not a matter of taking up a particular stance or achieving a certain level of expertise regarding one's feminist and/or political practice. Rather, willfulness appears to be a phenomenon that is available to us insofar as we are willing to disrupt the worlding effects of the general will in order "to enact the world we are aiming for."[316] This enactment is indeed another worlding process, one that is conducted so as to counter the hegemonic precepts of the status quo. Drawing upon Fanon, Ahmed explains that willfulness involves rejecting "the old directives" in order to will a new world into existence.[317]

Lorde's vision of feminist solidarity acknowledges the interdependency between groups of women. She states that this interdependency "is the way to a freedom which allows the I to be, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative."[318] A recurring theme for Lorde is the importance of acknowledging difference in ways that depart from the hegemonic constructs which value some differences over others; indeed, she explains that "difference is that raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged."[319] And while Lorde states that "without community there is no liberation,"[320] it is clear that forming such communities would be to no avail without a radical reconceptualization of how we think about and approach the

---

[313] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 165.

[314] Ibid., 168.
[315] Ibid., 170.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Ibid., 141.
[318] Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 111.
[319] Ibid., 112.
[320] Ibid.

differences among us. Lorde urges us to "reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside [ourselves] and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears."[321] Thus, while Lorde's theorizing on feminist solidarity echoes Ahmed's in terms of her emphasis on collectivity, Lorde emphasizes the crucial nature of acknowledging difference and critiquing how such differences have been "ignor[ed] and misname[ed]"[322] when developing her understanding of women's interdependency.

Ahmed is careful to discuss instances where expressions of willfulness in actuality represent a hegemonic will of a different sort. She specifically recalls tensions between white queer communities and Muslim communities, so that "what is assumed as a willful queerness can be a willing whiteness."[323] In addition, she advocates for a model of political change that "works[s] from behind to challenge the front," thus critiquing past attempts at social change which have prioritized those at the "front" as the primary agents and leaders of social transformation. [324] Instead, Ahmed argues that "those deemed behind, as lagging behind in the history of becoming modern, can rewrite that history from this view."[325] In this manner, Ahmed critiques conceptions of willfulness which might assume that a certain intellectual elite is required to lead the way. Indeed, it appears that willfulness as such cannot be consolidated and "contained" within a given group or individual; rather, Ahmed discusses the concept as a relational and fluid phenomenon which may provide us with a way to craft new possibilities for the future but which may also challenge the varying ways with which our own interests are enacted by the general will. Willfulness is not a status or possession but rather a way of relating

---

[321] Ibid., 113.
[322] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 122.
[323] Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, 167. Here Ahmed cites Jin Haritaworn's work on gay imperialism; Haritaworn deconstructs the phenomenon of queer "kiss-ins" in front of mosques as a manner of asserting white/western supremacy under the guise of gay rights. Ahmed explains that "traveling under the queer sign becomes a way of occupying political space and of claiming territory as one's own residence or home" (Ahmed 166).
[324] Ibid., 171.
[325] Ibid.

to others by opposing a hegemonic general will.

As a way of further unraveling our commitments to a sense of the self as fully cogent and self-knowing, Yancy's critique of whiteness demonstrates how white supremacy can be understood in part as a form of white suturing, in the imagery of being "invulnerable," "untouched," and "complete."[326] Suturing represents an approach to oneself (as well as an approach to the world) that embodies the attempts of hegemonic whiteness to "close [itself] off" from its own heteronomous construction (i.e. its embeddedness) and present itself as "absolute autonomy."[327] Yancy explains that the reality of this heteronomous construction "is too threatening as it renders visible the historically contingent struts of white normative and institutional power" thereby revealing the illusion of the "grand gesture of white self-creation."[328] He also traces the notion of "the white self as a site of self-possession" to the concept of suturing;[329] by seeking to obscure the ways in which white subjects are constructed via their socio-historical embeddedness, hegemonic whiteness seeks to project an image of white subjectivity as neutral, objective, self-legislating and "in absolute control of its own meaning."[330]

Unsuturing, then, represents a process through which white people attempt to unravel our purported self-mastery by recognizing that our "embodied existence and embodied identities are always already inextricably linked to a larger white racist social integument or skin which envelops who and what [we] are."[331] In keeping with the imagery of suturing, unsuturing represents a sort of epistemic undoing or "the practice of remaining with the opened wound

---

[326] George Yancy, introduction to *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel To Be a White Problem?* (Lexington Books, 2014), xv.
[327] Ibid., xvi.
[328] Ibid.
[329] Ibid., xv.
[330] Ibid., xv-xvi.
[331] Ibid., xvii.

itself, of tarrying with the pain of the opening itself, the incision, as it were."[332] Thus it is not the case that white racism may be "excised" from white subjectivities but that the process of unsuturing reveals—and often in painful and disturbing ways—how it is that whites are inextricably connected to a historical and current system of white hegemony. In Yancy's conceptualization, these connections act as a sort of "skin" which conceal how white subjectivities are shaped in part through the operations of such a system.

Finally, Yancy considers how the white subject finds him or herself "at a great distance," due to the notion that whites "do not recognize the various ways that they have been constituted as white," so that they must "move far outside of what they know themselves to be in order to be aware of who they are as white and as a problem."[333] Thus, rather than being a task of introspection of internal inventory, the search for self for whites involves locating oneself among "history, white power, white epistemic regimes…white modes of being-in-the-world," etc.[334] It is for this reason that "the white self…outstrips introspection."[335] By illustrating how white subjectivities are fashioned by socio-historical conditions which shape norms, practices, epistemologies and "modes of being," Yancy calls into question methods of intervention at the level of the individual. Rather, he seeks to demonstrate how it is that the very critique of racist white subjectivities implicates a racist social structure and vice versa.

Both Ahmed and Yancy seek to illustrate how white supremacy and/or neocolonialism attempt to conceal their hegemonic natures while simultaneously shaping the very ways we organize and understand the world around us. For Ahmed, this hegemony conceals a general will that shapes structure and institutions while vilifying dissenting perspectives with the accusation

---

[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid., xxii-xxiii.
[334] Ibid., xxiii.
[335] Ibid.

of willfulness. Similarly, Yancy conceptualizes the notion of white suturing as the attempt to extricate white subjectivity (and subsequently dominance) from the reality of its own heteronomy and elevate it to the realm of a mere "fact" of life. While employing differing imagery and methods of conceptualizing power, both of these theorists demonstrate that hegemony attempts to preserve itself by rendering itself less visible, and thus more normalized and commonplace.

While I am tempted to argue that feminist solidarity (although precarious given the domination of western and white meaning-making) would be fulfilled if western women adopted the critical practices of unsuturing and "letting go" of hegemonic epistemological assumptions, even this proposition appears somewhat prescriptive and unilaterally imposed on a group of women, albeit a historically and presently privileged group of women.[336]

This leads me to a recurring tension between theory and praxis. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks argues that feminist theory is crucial for feminist praxis, although hegemonic feminist theory has centered less on developing new meanings for feminist practice than on gaining access to predominantly white, male academic institutions.[337] hooks explains that such theory risks slipping into a "kind of narcissistic, self-indulgent practice that most seeks to create a gap between theory and practice so as to perpetuate class elitism."[338] The issue, then, is not that theory itself is removed from "lived experience" but that feminist theory is susceptible to mimicking the very hegemonic power structures it seeks to critique.

If we consider our epistemological traditions to be self-enclosed and preserved by an internal logic, and if we accept our own subjectivities as arising out of our embeddedness in a certain epistemological tradition (i.e. western-centric thought, whiteness, patriarchy, etc. as

---

[336] This issue is referenced in the conclusion.

[337] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 63.

[338] Ibid., 64.

discussed by Ahmed and Yancy), then it is perhaps more helpful to ask of ourselves to critically disrupt the perceived normalcy of our knowledge and meaning rather than to severe ourselves from them and operate independently of them. Of course, it may be the case that in any given culture or community, there exists multiple or competing epistemological traditions; such traditions may blend or produce tensions along which new practices can emerge. In any case, the embeddedness framework may help us acknowledge how it is that such epistemologies continue to shape our thinking and manners of relation even as we critique them; in fact, our very ability to critique such epistemologies may arise from these epistemologies themselves.

In closing, I argue that feminism resides largely "on the ground," not just among activists and organizers but in the everyday lives and interactions among women and men. Feminist solidarity is what feminist solidarity does; solidarity may manifest itself in an infinite array of permutations, but it fundamentally serves to heighten the subjective feelings of well-being, dignity and agency as defined by women themselves. If feminist solidarity is lived out through the course of everyday life as a highly experiential and subjective sense, then I view the work of theory as interpreting the tensions of such experiences by critiquing our presumptions and tracing the harmful repercussions of such presumptions back to how they may affect the lived experiences of different groups of women. Of course, the act of theorizing is an integral part of our "lived experiences" and should not be considered to be removed from our lives.[339] Rather, theory should be critiqued in order to investigate how it replicates and consolidates hegemonic power structures such as white supremacy and colonialism.

Conclusion

This chapter has primarily been concerned with deconstructing the assumptions which

---

[339] Ibid., 61. hooks argues that "theory is not inherently healing, liberatory, or revolutionary" but can only become so if we "direct our theorizing toward this end."

allow some feminists—typically those based in western cultural traditions—to point toward

Muslim hijabi women and designate them as (self)oppressed. In an endeavor to complicate this

unilateral model of the "liberated" pointing toward those they deem responsible for their own

oppression (or simply for the experiences that this former group defines as oppressive). In its

place, I have drawn on theory which reflects an understanding of human subjectivity as

embedded within a varying array of power relations that are continuous with and ultimately

grounded upon history, time and space.

One of the major themes throughout this chapter is the imagery of house and home. I find

such imagery to be especially compelling given the questions it raises about who resides in such

homes—who is allowed and who is merely an invited guest in the home of the nation, a home

which has been constructed according to "the master's tools"? In addressing this question,

theorists such as Sara Ahmed have endeavored to establish the link between structural

inequalities/hegemonic power differentials which seem to perpetuate themselves and the general

will, a concept typically associated with individual subjectivities. Audre Lorde argues for the

importance of revitalizing the ways we think about our differences at the same time that we work

toward altering the lived experiences of oppression. Yancy, too, discusses how white

subjectivities have been shaped by the historical and present-day material realities of white

supremacy. Ultimately, I view these theorists as seeking to provide an integrated account of

human subjectivity and social and political systems which perpetuate violence. Thus,

investigations of oppressive systems fuse with critiques of the self—both our assumptions of

what "self" means and how it is that this self is stabilized by the same "tools" which have

validated oppressive systems.

It is in this manner that the act of pointing toward others, and thereby furthering their

signification as "other," can be redirected toward tracing the highly interconnected networks of ideas, practices, policy measures and discourses which render it so that some women's words and meanings are prioritized over other women's practices. This process of analyzing the systems in which our lives are embedded and expounding the functioning of such systems requires a different form of intellectual and emotional work from that of developing feminist solidarity. My understanding of feminist solidarity is predicated upon supporting the well-being and meaning-making power of different groups of women, whatever form this may take in the realm of lived experience. Whereas the former requires a critical examination of power in regard to race, gender, class and sexuality, the latter is based on a spirit of allowing fellow women to construct and live out their own meanings. For women who identify as being culturally western, this implies allowing Muslim hijabi women to enter the national home on their own terms.

Conclusion

When hegemonic representations of Muslim women are mobilized in the arena of political discourse, they bring with them a vast repertoire of western colonial meaning and power. Yet the neocolonial project underlying these representations is refigured as a concern for Muslim women. Throughout this project, I have drawn upon several contemporary political and feminist theorists to illustrate the myriad ways that this hegemonic representation operates. This primarily deconstructive concern has led me to consider whether feminist solidarity is possible in a world configured according to the wills of colonial domination. Is solidarity simply a matter of shifting from one framework into another? Of shifting from the act of pointing toward those who we deem incomprehensible and instead relinquishing our endeavors to structure the worlds of others according to our own wills and desires?

This project began as an endeavor to deconstruct the arcs of meaning underlying a very specific set of political discourses surrounding Muslim women. In performing such an analysis, I have found that the theorists explicated throughout this paper have displayed recurring preoccupations with themes such as context, the past, and "space" as conceptualized in institutional, national and subjective terms (i.e. the "space" of the subject's desires, will, etc.). Perhaps most significantly, these theorists trace crucial continuities across such spaces, so that what we commonly consider the sphere of individual or subjective experience is theorized as continuous with spaces such as the national home or the histories of white supremacist and colonial violence.

In closing, I will consider some limitations and potential future extensions of this project. The vision of feminist solidarity I developed here is a distinctly western one; it draws predominantly on theorists residing within western cultural and philosophical traditions. I see

this as appropriate, insofar as my aim in this project was to inquire as to how aspiring feminists who identify culturally with the west can reconfigure their feminisms so as to remain critical of neocolonial projects. The feminist theories discussed here were inevitably shaped and constrained by the cultures, histories and very languages of the theorists. Indeed, a significant part of this project has involved acknowledging the ways in which any iteration of feminism that western feminists conceptualize will necessarily be "western," (i.e. as arising from a specific cultural and historical frame) although with important distinctions according to race and class. This should not be considered a source of error but rather an important qualification of our own socio-historical positionalities.

Furthermore, feminists who identify as culturally western do not face the challenge of disseminating feminist knowledge or principles to Muslim women who wear the veil, or indeed any woman. Instead, I view the task as one of confronting how our own oppositional ideologies have been supported or structured by white supremacy and the infamies of imperialism which have helped develop many of the cultures and nations that we find ourselves in, as well as the multiple processes which work to conceal this colonial sub-structure of feminist discourse in the west.

In the course of writing the third chapter, I was struck by a certain form of circularity in my argument. I contemplated whether my critique of western feminists who accuse Muslim women of internalized oppression did not in itself replicate and re-enact this "pointing toward" other women in order to discount their beliefs? In other words, might the process of western self-critique morph into a process whereby some women act as spokespersons for "misunderstood" communities? If one takes up a subtler role of authority as interlocutor between two or more arguments, frameworks, or communities, what room exists for genuine self-critique? And how is

this issue further complicated by an understanding of self-critique as inextricably linked to a critique of social and political structures?

I see this tension as especially pronounced for Muslim women residing in the west who experience varied degrees of familiarity and comfort with their racial, cultural, familial and lingual identities, either as a result of an immigration experience or to the rigid dichotomies which continue to structure normative identity categories. I realize that in approaching this project I risked once again eliding the perspectives of Muslim hijabi women concerning how and why they wear the hijab and other forms of body coverings. I reconciled this tension with the understanding that this project would serve as a critique of western representations of Islam, yet this articulation relies upon deep-seated assumptions regarding the discrete spheres of "western" v. "Islamic" culture and thought that must be more rigorously deconstructed.

How can we critically theorize the specific challenges facing women who see their identities as existing between Muslim and western? In addition, more attention needs to be brought to the ways in "western" identity is constructed as implicitly white, so that occupying a western socio-historical positionality varies in crucial ways according to race and class. An interesting direction of inquiry for future research would be to consider to what extent colonialism/post-colonial studies is a relevant framework for those who view themselves as operating between cultural traditions or epistemological frameworks.

Bibliography

"Donald Trump Urges Ban on Muslims Coming to U.S." *BBC News*, December 8, 2015.

      http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-35035190.

"French Minister Compares Veil Wearers to 'Negroes Who Accepted Slavery.'" *BBC News*,

      March 30, 2016. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35927665.

"Donald Trump 'Not Opposed to Muslim Database' in U.S." *BBC News*, November 19,

      2015. http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34873057.

"U.S. Election 2016: Donald Trump Softens Stance on Muslim Ban." *BBC News*, May 11, 2016.

      http://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-36272236.

"Update: 1,094 Bias-Related Incidents in the Month Following the Election." *Southern*

      Poverty Law Center, December 16, 2016.

      https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/12/16/update-1094-bias-related-

      incidents-month-following-election.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on

      Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (2002): 783-790.

Afsaruddin, Asma. "Islamic Feminism(s): Promoting Gender Egalitarianism and Challenging

      Constitutional Constraints." In *Social Difference and Constitutionalism in Pan-Asia*,

      edited by Susan H. Williams, 292- 315. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Ahmed, Leila. *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*.

      New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Ahmed, Sara. *Willful Subjects*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

Al-Saji, Alia. "The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A Philosophical Analysis." *Philosophy and*

      Social Criticism 36 (2010): 875-902. doi: 10.1177/0191453710375589.

Breeden, Aurelien, and Lilia Blaise. "Court Overturns 'Burkini' Ban in French Town."

    The New York Times, August 26, 2016.

    https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/27/world/europe/france-burkini-ban.html.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Cainkar, Louise A. "The Social Construction of the Arab (and Muslim) American." In *Homeland*

    Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience After 9/11, 64-109.

    Russell Sage Foundation, 2009. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/9781610447683.7

Cornell, Drucilla. "Autonomy Re-Imagined." *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and*

    Society 8 (2003): 144-149.

Foucault, Michel. "Discipline and Punish." In *Social Theory Re-Wired*, edited by Wesley

    Longhofer and Daniel Winchester, 299-309. New York: Routledge, 2012.

hooks, bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York:

    Routledge, 1994.

Landler, Mark. "Appeals Court Rejects Request to Immediately Restore Travel Ban." *The*

    New York Times, February 4, 2017.

    https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/04/us/politics/visa-ban-trump-judge-james-

    robart.html.

Lorde, Audre. "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference." In *Sister Outsider*,

    114-123. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007.

Lorde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In *Sister*

    Outsider, 110-113. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007.

Mills, Charles W. "Racial Liberalism." *Modern Language Association* 123 (2008): 1380-1397.

    http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501942.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial

> Discourses." *boundary 2* 12 (1984): 333-358. http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0190-

> 3659%28198421%2F23%2912%3A3%3C333%3AUWEFSA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-Y.

Nussbaum, Martha C. "Women and Cultural Universals." In *Feminist Theory: A Philosophical*

> *Anthology*, edited by Ann E. Cudd and Robin O. Andreasen, 302-324. Victoria:

> Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

Potok, Mark. "Anti-Muslim Hate Crimes Surged Last Year, Fueled by Hateful

> Campaign." *Southern Poverty Law Center*, November 14, 2016.

> https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2016/11/14/anti-muslim-hate-crimes-surged-

> last-year-fueled-hateful-campaign.

Rubin, Alissa J. "French School Deems Teenager's Skirt an Illegal Display of Religion."

> *The New York Times*, April 29, 2015.

> https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/30/world/europe/french-school-teenagers-skirt-

> illegal-display-religion.html.

Thrush, Glenn. "Trump's New Travel Ban Blocks Migrants from Six Nations, Sparing

> Iraq." *The New York Times*, March 6, 2017.

> https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/06/us/politics/travel-ban-muslim-

> trump.html?_r=0.

Yancy, George. Introduction to *The Philosophical I: Personal Reflections on Life in Philosophy*,

> ix-xxix. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

Yancy, George. Introduction to *White Self-Criticality Beyond Anti-Racism: How Does It Feel To*

> *Be a White Problem?*, xi-xxvii. Lexington Books, 2014.

Yeğenoğlu, Meyda. *Colonial Fantasies: Towards A Feminist Reading of Orientalism*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Zaretsky, Robert. "How French Secularism Became Fundamentalist." *Foreign Policy*, April 7, 2016. http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/07/the-battle-for-the-french-secular-soul-laicite-charlie-hebdo/.

Zoller, Elizabeth. "Laïcité in the United States or The Separation of Church and State in a Pluralist Society." *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 13 (2006): 561-594. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/gls.2006.13.2.561.