The Veiled Muslim Woman as Subject in Contemporary Art: The Role of Location, Autobiography, and the Documentary Image

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Abstract
That the veil sign often operates to deny both veiled and unveiled Muslim women their status as subjects implies that references to veiled subjectivity propose an alternative vision. This article examines representations of the veil in contemporary art that displace Western mainstream perceptions by effectively portraying veiled Muslim women as subjects, therefore laying claim to the transformative capacity of selfhood and image. These representations are intimately linked to the phenomenon of globalization in that their recent visibility is due both to artists looking and working through another gaze/cultural screen and to a shift in the Western art apparatus that now exhibits their work. While they relate to other types of images of the veil in contemporary art in that they implicitly contextualize the veil and challenge the stereotypes surrounding it, they differ in that they are neither nostalgic nor contestatory. Rather, the art works discussed, relating to location, autobiography and the desire to document, are rooted in daily life and memory. Their pictorial language is not alien to Western visual culture, making their novel depictions of veiled women, and thus by extension their and the veil’s diversity, more salient.

Keywords
the veil in contemporary art, representation of Muslims, self-representation of Muslims, Muslim women, postcolonial art, art and difference

It thus remains a matter of political and cultural urgency to reconceptualize the economy of multiple gazes that filter through, slide off and remake the veil. (Lewis 2003, 14)
Introduction: Representing veiled Muslim women as subjects

This article addresses three types of art works (there are undoubtedly others) that portray veiled Muslim women as subjects: those that emerge from contexts in which veiling is not unusual, those rooted in the personal narratives of artists of Muslim descent living in the West, and those consisting of photojournalistic images presented as art in either museums or galleries. It rests upon three central postulates. First, it claims the transformative potential of the image in its capacity to alter dominant social attitudes and viewers’ perceptions. Second, it proposes that representations of subjects can engage the viewer in a subject-to-subject relationship by providing the viewer with the opportunity to identify with those represented and thus to recognize their equal status as selves. This is particularly important for marginalized figures, such as veiled Muslim women, explaining why, like Silverman, I am arguing for the increased production and circulation of “aesthetic works,” allowing us “to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate” (Silverman 1995, 2). Third, it posits that a Western conferral of self-hood onto the visibly Muslim female “other” possesses radical implications by redefining simultaneously both Muslim and Western self-identities. The construction of Western modern collective identity has been premised, amongst other things, on its self-designated distinction from, and superiority to, other cultures. Recognising cultural others as subjects, and therefore as equals, requires disavowing such claims of exclusivity and reimagining the relationship with both them and ourselves. The tenacity of the veil sign to constitute a form of erasure and de-subjectification of Muslim women, while obviously related to ambivalent attitudes towards Islam and Muslims, is also explained by its connection to these deeper issues of identity.

Art—and the image more generally—possesses “the power to re-educate the look” (Silverman 1998, 5). Looking at art is, however, a dialectical process, involving both image and viewer. While the works presented here have all been produced by artists for whom veiled Muslim women are nei-

1. For other discussions on alternative images of the veil, see Behiery (2012a, 2012b).
2. Many postcolonial critics in fact qualify the lived experience (rather than denial) of alterity as the condition necessary to the dismantlement of colonialism and Eurocentrism. Yeğenoğlu stresses the necessary relinquishment of a widespread conception of self, in favour of a plural subjectivity reconfigured through alterity: “The aim of shaking the structure itself is possible only when the other and otherness is located in the heart of the subject. In other words, displacement is the move by which the desire for a sovereign, possessive, and unitary position is itself interrupted.” (Yeğenoğlu. 1998, 8).

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ther alien nor exotic, they cannot fully escape the fact that the veil, regardless of its reformulation, may be filtered through a given set of assumptions. Historically embedded in the Western imaginary, the garment symbolizes not only the powerless, victimized, and selfless Muslim woman, but also Islam’s alleged (and unfortunately sometimes real, in practice) misogyny, violence, and incompatibility with democracy. One cannot presuppose that all viewers will see the Muslim women portrayed rather than project their assumptions onto them (explaining why seemingly innocuous images of veiled women still accompany newspaper articles on the dangers of immigration). This reality does not dispute the now indisputable power of images in actively shaping vision. Rather, it underlines that vision is an interpretive rather than physiological process and is therefore capable of change, suggesting that the repetition and proliferation of depictions of veiled Muslim women as subjects will, and indeed already have, begun to shift attitudes. This is corroborated by the fact that the many artists of Muslim origin who produce work showing veiled subjects are now widely exhibited, and often well received, in the West.

Before turning to the analysis of images, two ideas deserve mention, in order to better situate the discussion. First, an increase in representations of veiled subjects in the West appears inevitable, due to new media technologies, the growing visibility of Islam in Europe and North America, immigration and global politics. This type of image has in fact begun, albeit slowly, to surface in mainstream media. An early example is a large colour photograph of Dr. Heba Kotb accompanying an article about her in a 2006 issue of Toronto’s well-known newspaper The Globe and Mail. The Egyptian doctor’s hijab neither constitutes the topic of the discussion nor serves to symbolize religious victimization or violence, although the very first sentence describes her as “a conservative Muslim, who wears an Islamic headscarf” (Abou El-Magd 2006, A18). In addition, the interest shown towards Kotb is not due to her work as a professor of forensic medicine at Cairo University, but to her successful sex education television

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3. Sometimes it occurs in paradoxical and horrible circumstances. U.S. military attacks on Iraq led to the daily images of bloodshed on television, in which the viewer was confronted with Iraqi hospital scenes showing veiled women doctors treating the wounded—challenging the idea that Muslim women are excluded from higher education and forced to stay at home.

4. This type of representation is obviously found in Muslim media both here and abroad, for example in the American progressive Muslim woman’s magazine Azizah, whose covers generally feature a veiled Muslim personality. See www.azizahmagazine.com.
show, a first in the Arab World. Nonetheless, despite the fact that the author feels compelled to mention the veil and reproduces the colonial interest in Middle Eastern sexuality, Dr. Kotb has been granted agency and voice. The veil has taken on a new signification: no longer a sign of oppression, it now relates to a contemporary, Muslim, articulate and active female self.\(^5\)

In seeming contradiction, such alternative representations, I contend, will meet much opposition in mainstream public arenas (media, social debates, advertising, and the art world), precisely because of the (recognized) tremendous power of images in producing political positions, societal attitudes and norms, as well as national and other types of collective identities. Culture, which obviously includes visual culture, is used in part, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1979, 4) argue, as a form of power to simultaneously “impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate,” and mask “the power relations which are at the basis of its force”. Similarly, Wallerstein (1991, 166), identifying culture as “the key ideological battleground,” stresses how it conceals both its ideological subtexts and its link to the inequities of the global economic system. The point is not to engage in conspiracy theories, but to acknowledge the reality that the cultural ideologies, underwriting both vision and visual culture, define, consciously or not, which texts, narratives and subjects are considered normative or, on the contrary, abject. Positioning representations of marginalized selves within current “culture wars” and, more specifically, “image wars,” only further underscores what is at stake in their demarginalization.\(^6\)

5. Another example appears in *Ms.* magazine, in an article on Sharla Musabih, an American woman who opened up a women’s shelter in the U.A.E. where she now lives. The accompanying photograph shows Musabih talking on a cell phone wearing the traditional Emirati black *‘abaya* and *hijab* (Soussi 2007, 29).

6. The persistent framing of the veil as “threat” proves the connection between representation, ideology and identity. The Québécois populist francophone media, constantly reiterating how society is losing its identity by accommodating immigrants and religious communities, brandishes the *hijab* as the instrument of a future (forced) Islamicization. The Anglophone press, traditionally supportive of multiculturalism, is not immune from such views. A letter to a Montreal newspaper, *The Gazette*, signed Clara Groulx, congratulates a provincial town (with no Muslims) for adopting a code of behaviour forbidding the stoning of women, the burning of women with acid, and the wearing of the *niqab*: “Where is the mea-culpa going to lead us? Once the Islamic minority becomes the majority—and that could be sooner than we think—we will all be wearing the hijab. That will be the end of us and our inferiority complex. We deserve that, but our children don’t.” The *Gazette*, Wednesday, January 31, 2007, p. A18. Statistics suggest that Muslims form only 1 to 1.5 percent of the Quebec population, and also that 85 percent of Québécois Muslim women do not veil.
Locating the veil

The idea underlying this section is exceptionally straightforward, especially as the works are self-evident in their exposition of the continuing relevance of place on perception and representation, and thus on identity and self. De Souza (2003, 20) sums up the link clearly: “the self is constructed from where one is and from where one sees, and also from where one is not and what one fails to see.” If the artist and critic is discussing location in its widest sense and referring essentially to the diasporic self, location here is defined geographically. The art analysed will demonstrate how the veil, when a sign linked to (Muslim) culture as a sited phenomenon, offers up alternative meanings to those of mainstream Western media.

Khosrow Hassanzadeh’s series known as Early Paintings (1988–1998), depicts the artist’s “immediate relatives in their unassuming surroundings” (Mahdavi 2007, 124). Produced before he began exhibiting internationally, early on in his career when he was still selling fruit by day and painting by night, it expresses, unlike his Terrorist series, no confrontation with or refutation of the Western gaze. Mother (1988), executed in pastel on sheets of paper pieced together, is a portrait of the artist’s mother rendered in a (neo)modernist painterly style evident in the composition, flatness, emphasis on surface, and the little concern for perspective. While the piece can be considered autobiographical, it is discussed in relationship to location because its focus (and that of the entire series) appears to be the representation of Hassanzadeh’s world and reality, which includes family, rather than on genealogy and filiation.

The large drawing (now in the British Museum) shows the artist’s mother seated frontally from the hips up. Her black dress bears a simplified repetitive motif, as does the wallpaper in the background, while her hijab is a monochrome bluish white. The late middle-aged mother is shown without artifice, the effects of time visible on her face and body. She looks out at the viewer with a sad expression, which curator Venetia Porter links to the tragedy of the long and bloody Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988), in which Hassanzadeh served for a short while as a volunteer. The image asserts the

7. Oddly enough, many works from this series were bought by Western rather than Iranian institutions, leading to the artist’s exposure to and success within the Western art world. Many of Hassanzadeh’s subsequent series, including Chador (2000), Asbura (2000), and Terrorist (2004), directly confront Western stereotypes about Iran and Iranians, buttressing the idea that “all artists working in non-Western countries have to position themselves in relation to this gaze” (Mahdavi 2007, 124).

8. Venetia Porter describes most of the sitters of these early paintings as sad. “They are
global reach and relevance of neo-modernist painting. More significantly, it constitutes a portrait of a Muslim veiled subject, a mother, and not one of the veil sign. The hijab remains unrelated, positively or negatively, to the woman’s status as subject, revealing how the veil can form part of a different system of signification, and can be a freely chosen, everyday item of dress, even in contexts where it is legally required. The artist’s mother could have opted to pose without a headscarf, or her son not to depict it.

That the veil forms a common element of the visual landscape and daily contemporary life in certain locations is equally evident in a very different kind of work: Hicham Benohoud’s Untitled (Figure 1, opposite), from his series of black and white photographs La salle de classe (1994–2001). Benohoud, a former art teacher in Marrakech, would provide his young students with free time in which he would ask one or two of them to do something original, using as props only objects found inside the classroom, and then document the improvised results. Many of the images are troubling, evoking oppression, even internment (students inventing cardboard prostheses, prisons of paper), leading the viewer to question the extent of Benohoud’s role in directing the interventions. Untitled is, however, more playful than strange. Students have undermined the order of the classroom by reorganizing the furniture in a manner that imparts to the photograph an absurd or surrealistic dimension. It shows a typical public school classroom furnished with a metal supply cabinet with large rolls of paper lying atop and old wooden table type desks for two, with attached benches. Male and female pupils, all around twelve years old, are leaning over them and seemingly concentrating on their assignment. However, a large table has been mounted onto the desks in the foreground and serves as a support for the desk placed above, at which two boys sit, apparently studying, although a very subtle facial expression seems to betray their joy with the situation and the joint act of resistance.

Mazmouz (2006, 263), who has written about the prominence and tendencies of contemporary photography in the Arab world, aptly situates Benohoud’s work with those artists contesting the social and political order of their respective societies. She reads La salle de classe as a commentary on the repressive nature of, and the lack of freedom of expression in, Moroccan society, noting its existential, metaphorical and contestatory dimensions. Similarly, the photographic agency Vu describes the series’ posed, unsmiling, their faces—particularly that of his mother—lined and etched with pain.” Khosrow-hassanzadeh.com/articles.php?id=3.

9. The series was also published as a book: see Benohoud and Caujolle (2001).
aim as being “to show that one can come to new insights which break through established patterns,” equating those “established patterns” with “the religious dogmas in his [Benohoud’s] country” (Agence Vu 2004). Benohoud is certainly expressing his own dissatisfaction, through the students’ interventions which figuratively enact the subversion of order or status quo represented microcosmically by the class. The clamour for freedom and freedom of expression, most explicit in the images evoking confinement, appears less pronounced in *Untitled*, because of its light-hearted rather than menacing character. Consequently, the photograph brings to the fore another important social facet of the series. The juxtaposition of order and disorder and of reality and fiction induces the viewer to scrutinize the image more than he/she normally would; the injection of the uncanny into the real effectively heightens awareness of the latter. While the “real” that is referred to can be understood as being social hierarchies and religious mores, the system of education, and/or the strictures of mod-
ern working life, its playful subversion accentuates the socio-economics of the scene. The plain nature of the classroom and furnishings and the children’s clothes do not resemble those of an elite Moroccan school; the politics of disruption here, then, seems to highlight the economic difficulties of certain sectors of Moroccan society, including schoolteachers.

The image is poignant because its actors are so young. Even if viewers are unaware of the fact that students actually produced the image (and the series more generally), it illustrates their required complicity, therefore asserting their agency, and adding a supplementary social dimension to the piece, as neither classrooms nor students form common themes in contemporary art. Benohoud exercised his authority in his former classroom to encourage his students to exercise theirs, and adduces, by photographing the results, the possibility both of human agency and of image to effect change. The artist’s critical views on Islam are well known, and yet the four muhajjabat appear, like all the other students, subjects, because of the piece’s democratic and inclusionary nature. If the veiled girls in the class locate the image for the viewer, culturally and geographically, the photograph nonetheless contextualizes them, by elucidating their link to place. They neither play a significant role in, nor constitute the target of, the projected message. They are simply subjects amongst other subjects. The image, reconnecting the veil and selfhood and art and life, confirms, as feminists and other minoritized groups have long argued, that the notion of the political need not be considered in diametrical opposition to either lived experience or aesthetic concerns. Benohoud’s photograph demonstrates how the personal, the political and art can intersect. Its absurdity, moving subject matter, and style, confer upon the image a poetic dimension. The work re-presents daily life to highlight problems therein, but has done so by poeticizing the social rather than politicizing the poetic.

The motif of the veil and the veiled woman runs through the work of Iranian photographer Kourosh Adim. In his work, in which the poetic trumps the real, veils and veiled women appear both as figures of his imagination and yet as integral parts of both urban and natural landscapes. The type of veil featured is characteristically Iranian, but location here transcends geography and cultural artefacts; rather, the garment’s symbolic representations confirm the entwinement of place and vision with the imaginary. The photograph reproduced here, from the Dreamy Woman series (1999–2000), in addition to exposing so unambiguously how location can enable the representation of visibly Muslim women as subjects, equally provides the opportunity to examine, in contradistinction to West-
ern mainstream perceptions, the image of the veiled woman as an idealized artistic subject.

The black and white photograph shows a veiled woman in a lush forest (Figure 2). The trees’ dense foliage composing the top half of the image shades the whole underbush, except for an illuminated longish irregularly shaped patch of grass in the foreground, whose stark contrast with the shade makes it seemingly glow. A slight woman wearing a white chador stands in its centre, her back facing the viewer. The intense light renders the veil translucent, adding to the ethereal character that the luminosity bestows upon the entire scene. The overall impression created is one of quietude, stillness and even otherworldliness, heightened by the hieratic quality and formal beauty of the image. While the veiled figure is evidently a real person, the photograph is unequivocally communicating a subjective vision, and therefore the (veiled) subjectivity or agency expressed may be construed as essentially being that of the artist and/or viewer.

The idyllic setting, the chiaroscuro and, more critically, the very partial visibility of the woman (the viewer sees nothing of her person) leave much
to the imagination, and impart to the image a poetic, even spiritual dimension. The long, all-encompassing white veil poses in clear visual terms the intrinsic relationship of the veil to the aesthetics of veiling, which has historically constituted in Islamic visual culture a means to denote that which defies representation, and which continues to inform the work of numerous contemporary Muslim artists today, further establishing vision as a cultural phenomenon. The veil traces the fine boundary between the exterior and the interior and/or the physical and the spiritual. In stark contrast to mainstream media representations, Adim's image reveals that the veil, envisioned through another gaze, can possess spiritual connotations (that of the spiritual feminine).10 Interestingly, the visual ambiguity of the image and the freedom it provides to viewers, coupled with the absence of explicit denominational references, open up the sign to cross-cultural translation, all the more so as the theme of the veiled woman is also ensconced in Judeo-Christian historical, religious and iconographic traditions.

The feeling of interiority expressed by the veil equally echoes many (veiled) Muslim women’s perspectives on the veil and those of orthodox Islam more generally. The woman in the photograph constitutes the enshrined object of the gaze. She makes her presence felt, although veiling prevents any scopic appropriation of her. Islamic scholarship, including Islamic feminism, effectively describes the veil as freeing the woman from the sexualized gaze, thus reversing the visual economy structuring many societies, and (from a Muslim perspective) empowering the woman by rendering her the subject as opposed to the object of the gaze. The objective here is not to defend the veil, but to foreground that discussions surrounding it in the West generally omit that some women may choose to veil, as Trinh Minh-ha (1988, 3–4) suggests, “to reappropriate their space.”11

Similarly, Grace, who ultimately concludes in her work on the veil that the garment is more repressive than emancipatory, nonetheless proposes (drawing upon Irigaray’s concept of the lost state of female spirituality *la mystérieuse*) that it may provide a “female space not only empowering but also strategic in the renegotiating of women’s identity in terms of feminine spirituality” (Grace 2004, 209).12 The idea that the garment can facilitate women’s access to a “core

10. For elaborations on the feminine aspects of Islam and Islamic spirituality, see, for example Schimmel (1997), Chisti (1987), or Elias (1988).

11. She adds, “…or to claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centred standardization.” (Minh-ha 1988, 73).

12. Irigaray’s *la mystérieuse* is a specifically female and non-rational spiritual reality, a place in which “the source of light that has been logically repressed” emerges, and woman’s
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self’ that is not defined by appearance—such as an inner sense of consciousness itself” (209), echoes, and perhaps relies on, Islamic ideas and traditions.

The spiritual dimension of the veil is mentioned by many present-day mubajjabat, and not only by those claiming a space of modernity for themselves in the West and/or those associated with Islamic feminism. For example, Iranian author, professor, and ardent defender of the Iranian Revolution, Zahra Rahnavard, describes the effects of the hijab as purdah, in spiritual rather than in the state’s ideological and patriarchal terms; calling the veil a “prologue to gnosis,” she compares it to the plain gate of a beautiful garden (Rahnavard 1990, 18). Her words attest to how women’s own diverse experiences of the veil have been and often remain occluded, not only in the West, but equally and more surprisingly in the Muslim world, even by regimes that impose the garment. They equally accentuate the oft-ignored reality, that women who veil do not necessarily see it as marking their inferiority to men, or as broadcasting their religious identity in public, but rather as a means of assisting spiritual development. The obdurate global campaign against the veil can therefore be construed, because steeped in (neo-)colonial binarism (the West versus the East), as not necessarily advocating female empowerment (as it claims). Instead, it may be deemed as part of an overarching patriarchal (and/or capitalist) system (the same one that has co-opted Western feminism), leading women unfortunately further and further away from la mystérieque.

The view of the veil as oppressive and therefore as divorced from any spiritual significance it might possess for its wearers, is, however, so entrenched, that Kristeva, who suggests in Les nouvelles maladies de l’âme (1993, 329) that spirituality may indeed constitute the natural outcome of both feminism and sexual liberation, in what she perceives to be a desexualized world, signed one of the many petitions in France calling for the

lost sense of unity of being is experienced. See Irigaray (1985, 191–202). Grace (2004, 24–25) also offers a feminist interpretation of the veil, premised on Showalter’s idea of an all-women’s space, the “wild zone,” based on an affirmative collectivity and emphasizing the interpersonal: “If we view the location of veiled women (outside male space) as equivalent to a ‘wild zone,’ then through veiling women may gain access to an area of inner experience that is a psychological life force for women, a prerequisite for regaining rather than losing self-identity.”

13. Rahnavard concludes that, “A woman who accepts purdah and surrenders her heart to its hidden laws succeeds gradually in exploring the spiritual garden, and becomes so much habituated to it that whenever she is away from that garden her heart starts singing sad songs like a nightingale (away from its flower)” (1990, 18). Grace has read Rahnavard: she lists the work in her bibliography.
legal banning of the hijab in French public institutions.\textsuperscript{14}

Adim’s idealization of the veiled woman, in addition to offering up an interesting counter-text, also abets the image’s intelligibility. While visual articulations of the ideal are not necessarily universal, the ideal can function as a meta-narrative facilitating cross-cultural literacy, an idea of particular importance regarding the representation of marginalized figures and the power of representation more generally. Idealization in representation provokes viewer identification, although whether this inevitably translates into a subject-to-subject relationship remains open to debate. What is important here is that veiling is correlative to idealization in Dreamy Woman, and that it has rewritten the veil, supporting Silverman who, decrying the condemnation of the ideal that she describes as “psychic activity at the heart of love” in the scholarship on difference, advocates “imagining the new uses to which it might be put” (1995, 2). Recognizing the power of idealization in restricting “ideality to certain subjects, while rendering others unworthy of love” (37), she calls for “visual texts which activate in us the capacity to idealize bodies which diverge as widely as possible from ourselves and from the cultural norm,” but without creating a new set of “reified ideals” (37). Because idealization can involve appropriation rather than recognition of alterity, Silverman sets out measures to ensure that images allowing for identification with devalued bodies and beings also uphold their agency.

In a discussion on film, grounded in Walter Benjamin’s concept of “distance,” she proposes three conditions for art works to enable identification “at a distance from the self,” or what she terms “heteropathic identification”: a work must maintain the viewer’s cognisance of the “representational frame,” privilege the particular over the general, and frustrate subjective possessive appropriation of the image “at the level of image, sound, narrative” (103). None of the characteristics appear present in Adim’s black and white photograph. On the contrary, it accepts, and even stresses, the artifice and illusion of representation, favours the general, and in certain ways encourages a symbiotic relationship with the viewer. However, the visual strategy of veiling persistently sends the viewer beyond the image (there

\textsuperscript{14.} Kristeva voices an idea central to many spiritual traditions, and of course to modern psychoanalytic theory, namely that alterity is a phenomenon internal to the self: “Désormais, l’autre n’est pas un mal étranger à moi, bouc émissaire extérieur: autre sexe, autre classe, autre race, autre nation. Je suis victime-et-bourreau, même et autre, identique et étranger. Il ne me reste qu’à analyser indéfiniment la séparation fondatrice de ma propre et intenable identité” (Kristeva 1993, 329).
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is nothing to see) and into him/herself, emphasizing the space of interpretation over representation. Plotting the different registers of being and image, it maintains the distance between viewer and viewed, and hence affords selfhood to the represented subject.

Female genealogy and the veil

Autobiography is deemed an important genre for minoritized artists and a powerful strategy for resolving, if only in part, their exclusion from art and art history and their lack of status as subjects in Western history and culture more generally. The idea is that narrations of lived experience allow, as Smith and Watson submit, “the coming to voice of previously silenced subjects” (1998, 27). While autobiography now holds a prominent position in feminist and postcolonial theory and art, as a tool of empowerment and a way to circumvent patriarchal and/or ethnocentric systems of representation, it is not without its critics. Suleri, for instance, scathingly scorns the emphasis on lived experience in feminist postcolonial discourse. Claiming that it neither replaces theory nor constitutes “an alternative mode of radical subjectivity,” she condemns the notion that “personal narrative is the only salve to the rude abrasions that Western feminist theory has inflicted on the body of ethnicity” (1998, 119). However, personal narrative need not stand in opposition to theory and autobiographical texts must be examined individually, as autobiography forms a heterogeneous category. Moreover, the work by London-based Franco-Algerian artist Zineb Sedira, discussed here, proposes alternative conceptions of self, corroborating Smith and Watson who, in contrast to Suleri, postulate that if recent scholarship on difference has led to redefinitions of subjectivity, “autobiographical discourse” has formed “a central site” of its reformulation (Smith and Watson 1998, 27). In fact, Sedira’s piece grants the status of subject to the veiled Muslim woman depicted, precisely because it is rooted in lived experience and, more specifically, matrilineal descent.

The triptych, *Mother, Daughter and I* (2003) (Figure 3, next page), consists of three pairs of colour photographs set against a white neutral background, showing, from left to right, the artist with her mother, the artist’s daughter with her grandmother, and Sedira with her own daughter. Each pair of images represents one scene, the upper and major part of which bears a standard square format, and portrays the women’s upper torsos and faces but, more importantly, their interactions through the gaze.

15. If scholars such as Suleri warn against terms like “the postcolonial woman,” it is because they erase historical, political, and personal contexts.

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The elongated oval-shaped lower images frame those of their hands. The exchanges between the subjects differ from frame to frame. Sedira and her mother are looking at each other, although Sedira appears to be offering herself through her gaze and smiles at her mother, who returns the gaze with some hesitancy and reticence. In the central image, the late middle-aged woman is smiling openly at her granddaughter, who responds, although with a slight timidity or self-consciousness that the viewer might ascribe to youth or the generation gap. In the photograph on the viewer’s right, the artist’s daughter is looking at her mother with a faintly pleading expression. Sedira however is not looking back at her. Rather she is looking down at the young girl’s hand that she is holding with both hands and contemplating. The reflective mood she conveys suggests the artist is not refusing contact but rather engaging in a different mode of communication, although the fact that she answers “sight” with “touch,” coupled with the teenager’s look of pained expectation, may evoke the challenges of intersubjective interaction.

The portrait that *Mother, Daughter and I* paints of the matrilineal relationships is not over-idealized, as it simultaneously communicates

16. Sedira produced a video on the same theme, that focuses on the effects of displacement on language. *Mother Tongue* (2002) shows the artist and her mother speaking Arabic, and then she and her daughter speaking French. If the problem of language is already apparent in these scenes, it is most evident in the screen showing the artist’s daughter with her grandmother; the one speaking English, the other Arabic, with neither understanding each other’s “mother tongue.”

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the interactions between the women and yet acknowledges the gaps therein. The facial expressions convey both proximity and distance, while the visual effects of colour and dress highlight continuity and change. The artist’s Algerian-born mother, who moved to France after the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962), is wearing a traditional style housedress, made up of white material strewn with red flowers, bearing a three tiered lace yoke over which she wears a white sweater. The scarf tied around her head shows hints of her freshly, brightly hennaed hair.17 Sedira is wearing a blue Indian-embroidered top and skirt, the kind of apparel popular in the 1960s and 1970s, that has recently resurfaced globally in everyday fashion wear. The blue outfit that she describes as “pseudo-Oriental” indicates how filiation, because it involves a passage through time and here also place, encompasses an aspect of translation. Sedira does not wear a veil and yet, if her dress can be linked to clothing trends in Britain, where she now lives, it can also be read as related to tastes shaped by her familial North African culture. The daughter is wearing the globally ubiquitous t-shirt and casual pants/trousers. Her clothes, like her grandmother’s, are essentially white with a touch of red; the pants are white, as is the tee shirt, with the exception of a branch of red blooms printed down the front. Dress provides visual symmetry to the photographs, while also suggesting the simultaneity of constancy and variability often observed in genealogical descent.

Mother, Daughter and I evokes the unstructured realism of the everyday, through its autobiographical subject matter and documentary aspect. However, the images, poses and background also clearly recall the tradition of portraiture. These have been carefully composed and the clothing carefully chosen. But Sedira transforms the tradition of portraiture visually and conceptually. The title indicates the piece is a portrait of the three women, but the fact that the artist has not simply produced one photograph portraying them together is significant. By multiplying the images, and showing the sitters in pairs looking at each other rather than at the viewer, the work foregrounds the interaction between rather than the image of subjects, revealing a conception of subjectivity that counters the notion of an ego-based sovereign “I.” Mother, Daughter and I enacts the idea, circulating in feminist studies since the 1980s, that a woman’s identity evolves “as a relational rather than individuating process” (Smith and Watson 1998, 9).

Mother, Daughter and I

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17. This type of veil, tied around the head only and leaving the neck exposed, is different from what is generally evoked by the term hijab. This style of wearing the veil, often adopted even indoors, is linked to North Africa and closely associated with cultural tradition.
If some feminists have criticized the notion for being presumptive of a homogeneous subject “woman,” Sedira’s piece demonstrates that challenging the assumed self-sufficiency of self, by emphasizing instead its aspects of interdependence and plurality, does not necessarily translate into essentialism. The representation and self-representation of women, in particular those of non-European descent living in the West, is particularly fraught with difficulty, and one way of healing the disjuncture between being and representation, and between self and the projected image as other, is to visually reinscribe the body by highlighting the subject’s intangibility. By redefining portraiture as relational, *Mother, Daughter and I* escapes such historically entrenched projections. Stressing the invisible spaces of intersubjectivity and the unrepresentability of subjects, it reinvests the body as a site of being/subjectivity rather than representation/image.

Irigaray argues that one of the means by which patriarchy established itself, retains it hold on power and reproduces itself, was/is to disrupt the vital mother-daughter relationships, thereby preventing woman from both fully being and becoming (Hoffman Baruch, Serrano, and Irigaray 1988, 156). The woman/mother, alienated from herself, goes on to reproduce “the oppression to which she is subject” (156). The French scholar however maintains that if the mother can nonetheless manage to “find her identity as a woman,” she will enable or “give an identity to her daughter” (157). The strategies of empowerment she proposes are stark in their simplicity: the establishment of loving relationships between women and, recognizing the power of representation, the production and circulation of positive images of mothers and daughters in public space. The latter call is not naïve, as Irigaray is keenly aware of the need to find or develop a new female/feminist language and system of representation, as she considers woman to be a subject still in the making, or, as Robinson notes, “a space of potentiality rather than a pre-existing ontological category” (Robinson 2006, 191).

Sedira has clearly stated the centrality of matrilineal lineage in her work (Sedira 2003, 58). *Mother, Daughter and I* effectively constitutes a visual *mise en scène* of Irigaray’s claim that mother-daughter relationships and their representation form “an essential condition for the constitution of female identity,” as well as an antidote to patriarchal and here neo-colonial erasure (Irigaray 1990, 180). That the women look at each other and ignore the viewer, and that the white backgrounds of the larger images are in essence borderless and without referent, render the notion of lineage and transmission almost palpable. If the top row uses the void and whiteness to evoke the spaces of inter-subjectivity, the bottom one emphasizes the role...
of the body and touch. Framing the women’s holding hands as separate portraits, Sedira challenges ocularcentrism (modernity’s overemphasis on sight) and proposes (again akin to Irigaray) an alternative mode of specularity. While Suleri refutes the idea that “‘life’ remains the ultimate answer to ‘discourse’” (Suleri 1999, 120), Mother, Daughter and I demonstrates the problematic presumption of their opposition. Additionally, it corroborates the capacity of lived experience to provide new relational definitions of selfhood that do not fall, as Suleri (119) contends, into “a low-grade romanticism.” Sedira represents not only herself as subject but also her daughter and mother. The elderly woman is the only one who wears a veil, which might seem to imply that the veil is linked only to tradition and hence the past. Mother, Daughter and I rewrites the image of the veiled Muslim woman by casting the artist’s mother in the role of subject (and subject of art). The viewer perceives the veil as mediated through Sedira’s experience and comes to understand that the veil and the veiled subject form part of the artist’s familial reality and are thus intertwined with fact, affect, and memory. As the artist once said regarding the representation of the veil in her video, Silent Sight (2000), “What I am trying to say is that the veil, for me, is part of my parents’ tradition” (McGonagle 2006, 624). More significantly, the conception of self in Mother, Daughter and I points to the role of the mother in the production of the artist’s self and identity, and therefore underlines how the image of the veiled Muslim woman is equally constitutive of Sedira’s own unveiled subjectivity.

Veils in the urban landscape

The previous section centred on images from two photographic projects, both of whose precise objective was to inform Western publics and provide them with representations of Muslims differing from those of mainstream media and popular culture. Women by Women: 8 Women Photographers from the Arab World (Fotografie Forum international, 2004) and Musulmanes, musulmans, au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar (Roy and Amiraux 2004), both took place in 2004. The former was held in Frankfurt at the Fotografie Forum international and the latter in Paris at the Musée de La Villette. The two exhibitions were institutional projects, although one also finds individual artists who have photographed contemporary Muslims as a strategy to counter stereotypes. Both involve a documentary and even pedagogical dimension, an interest in Muslim self-representation, and an art exhibition in a European city. They can therefore be deemed intentionally postcolonial, although, as in the previous two sections, the challenge to dominant dis-
course does not occur through deconstructive critique but through affirmation. In this section, this means the presentation of urban landscapes that propose a more realistic and nuanced vision of veiled Muslim women.

The theoretical debate surrounding the documentary genre remains beyond the scope of the study. However, the essentially photojournalistic images discussed in this section can and should be contextualized within the increasing tendency to erase the boundaries between documentation and art. Documentary images have in fact since the late 1980s or early 1990s circulated freely in the art world. This phenomenon is of particular interest to this study because Western publics tend to view all works with “Muslim” content sociologically (Dakhlia 2005, 39). Gevers argues that documentary photography possesses the capacity to show “that which exists beyond the stereotype or the already known,” which therefore provides a site in which “aesthetics and ethics meet each other again” (Gevers 2005, 83). This idea echoes this section’s very premise: that documentary images, showing modern veiled subjects in a variety of contexts and engaged in a variety of activities, constitute visual counterparts to recent scholarship also depicting Muslim women as “active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested” (Mahmood 2005, 6).

Negative perceptions of the veil are rooted in the ideology of modernity, which opposes religion to progress, science and intellectual enlightenment, and claims Western subjects as normative and universal. The photographs analyzed below, by illustrating the existence of and obvious interrelationship between Muslim modernity/ies and Muslim subjectivities, challenge modernity’s exclusionism. Cooper (2001, 94) expresses the same idea in a compelling article on Hausa women’s song:

It seems inadequate to see Muslim subjectivities of the contemporary moment as being primarily or initially emanations of or reactions to the Western secular subject—we must break free of the solipsism that reduces all

18. Giersberg pithily sums up the debate: “Not only was the alleged objectivity of the photographic image being undermined, but the tradition of documenting itself was attacked, being seen as culturally determined, politically biased and principally serving the Western, colonial, male gaze. What’s more, reality itself had become definitively fragmented in the postmodern condition, every image and every picture referred mainly to other images and no longer to a ‘reality’ beyond them…” (Giersberg 2005, 125). See also Gevers (2005, 83).

19. Giersberg, noting that in the 1990s, the “interest in documentary photography grows enormously in the international art circuit,” distinguishes two types of work: that “rooted in theory” and that of “traditional’ documentary photographers.” The projects here belong to the latter category (Giersberg 2005, 127 and 128).
discourses to the response to the West…. We must ask ourselves whether there are modernities outside the reflexive/reactive “alternatives” to the West, modernities that emerge out of global phenomena and postcolonial histories but that engage different kinds of understanding of wealth, personhood, and the public sphere that are commonly taken for granted in much work on modernity and globalization.

Balasescu (2003, 53), discussing the veil specifically, explains why the assumed opposition of the veil to modernity and hence subjectivity, and the classification of women along the lines of dress—as veiled/non-modern or unveiled/modern—are not benign:

By simply pointing out the exterior appearance of clothing, one may, and does, deny the freedom of others, or create a comfortable mirror of the self. This mirror reflects images in a simplified binomial manner, in which the veil is equated with the religion and thus with the negation of what constitutes the modern subject. It thus creates a loop in which any veiling practice marks unfreedom, and any use of fashion in a certain location is nothing but mimetic reflex. A difference in genus (modern versus non-modern) is established, and justifies sometimes brutal interventions in the name of freedom. A more profound analysis will point out to differences in kind, the kind of fashion that people use, and the kind of modernity they inhabit.

Both authors understand modernity as neither monolithic nor Western or secular. Instead, they claim a plurality of modern modes of subjectivity and therefore of speaking—and hence “dressing”—locations. Balasescu’s specific caution against the veil’s reification and the ensuing dangers of the de-subjectification/dehumanization of Muslims only further underscores the critical nature of the seemingly simple images that follow.

The show Women by Women: 8 Women Photographers from the Arab World, curated by Michket Krifa, brought together art and documentary photography, thereby rendering their distinction redundant. All the work, with the exception of Al-Ani’s, possessed a documentary element.20 For reasons of length, I will discuss only one image: Algerian Women (1997) (Figure 4). The image was taken by award-winning Reuter’s photojournalist Zohra Bensemra, who has spent much time documenting the diversity, various social roles and conditions of contemporary Algerian women, and those of the Muslim world more generally.

The colour photograph portraying young veiled women must therefore be contextualized as the image is placed alongside images of women who have adopted other “regimes of dress,” thereby showing the heterogeneity of dress that exists in most Muslim-majority countries. It depicts two *muhajjabat* against a backdrop of a rather arid looking area of trees set before a large white institutional building such as a library or university. Both women appear to be in their early twenties. The woman on the right is seated sideways on the top of a stone wall reading the newspaper open on her lap. She is wearing a white headscarf, and a long black and white tunic top bearing carpet-like interlace motifs over a black skirt or trousers. Her expression denotes that she is concentrating and does not want to be disturbed, although its slightly hardened quality may indicate impatience with the woman on her left. This second woman, taking up over a third of the photograph, is wearing a plain, muted blue *jilbab* and a long mauve scarf, the outfit from which new veiling emerged, and one that is still seen on Western and especially Middle Eastern streets. She is standing facing the viewer, leaning against the wall, but her head is turned sideways towards the other woman, indicating that she is waiting or trying to speak to her. The image clearly communicates the difference in mood and perhaps temperament of the two women, the tension it creates constituting the photograph’s very subject.

![Figure 4. Zohra Bensemra, *Algerian Women*, 1997, digital print, 30 x 40 cm. © Reuters.](image)

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Bensemra has captured a moment of the human drama composing daily life. It is the universal human narrative of desire, exchange, expectation and rejection, that simultaneously conveys the subjecthood of the sitters and permits viewers to identify with the scene, regardless of the women’s apparel. In addition, the flowing garments including the headscarves, and the overall composition of the image, are reminiscent of the European painting tradition, further engaging the Western viewer and creating a rich meeting of Western aesthetics and Middle Eastern geography. Adding to the image’s beauty, it does not, however, obfuscate the sitters’ obvious contemporaneity, communicated through the image’s medium and the women’s physical attitudes, and even clothing.

Algerian Women validates how representations of the real (“what is”) and real subjects can initiate viewer identification, and therefore shift and transform the gaze: the hijabs neither erase the women’s status as subjects but nor do they eclipse their alterity. Bensemra’s image is especially remarkable in this regard. Not only because the viewer knows from the title that the setting is Algeria, a country associated until very recently with terrible strife and violence, framed by the media in religious terms, but also because the outfit worn by the woman on the left is less global or Westernized than the dress of many present-day covered Muslim women and is often associated with orthodoxy, and sometimes, rightly or wrongly, with political Islam. Bensemra has managed to rewrite the image of veiled women. Their normality and humanity, conveyed by the representation of daily life, is only magnified by the photograph’s aesthetic composition and beauty.

Musulmanes, musulmans, au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar was a larger project than Women by Women. While it included an exhibit on contemporary art, its main component was an exhibit of documentary photographs of Muslims in the five cities listed in the title. I have opted to discuss two images depicting women in Teheran, because Iran remains particularly vilified in the current political climate and because the country’s legal enforcement of the veil generally facilitates its continued metonymy in the West.

Reza Moattarian has captured a moment of modern urban Iranian life. Téhran (2002) depicts an informal soccer game in what appears to be a city parking lot. Although it is unclear whether all five people portrayed are involved in the game, the black and white photograph makes evident that at least the two women and the young boy kicking the ball are all playing. The former are wearing Adidas tracksuits topped with Iranian-style loose headscarves showing the front part of the hair; the central figure is jump-
ing with arms and legs extended in an attempt to take hold of the ball from the boy or prevent it from passing. The scene of veiled Muslim women engaged in sports dissipates the synonymy of the veil with disembodiment and the lack of mobility: its leisure-time fun stands in stark contrast to preconceptions and representations of the hapless lives of Iranian women. The women’s quasi-universal activity and cross-cultural clothing denote their modernity and substitute, in lieu of the idea of the Iranian woman, a representation of two individual women.

If, highlighting spatial and physical mobility, Moattarian adds considerable nuance to the Western stereotype of Iranian women (usually defined solely by the restrictions placed upon them by the state), Hasan Sarbakshian addresses and unpacks, not their assumed lack of freedom of movement, but rather that of freedom of expression. His *Student Demonstrations* (1999), depicting the 1999 demonstrations in Tehran, zooms in on a group of four women. The two in the front are each carrying the same newspaper and are both wearing tape over their mouths, to protest the government’s silencing and censorship of citizens. Although many Tehrani women have now developed quite a fashion sense and scene within the limits of the decreed dress codes, the protesters are not wearing colourful branded scarves and fashionably cut jackets, but black scarves and black overcoats, associated with traditional families and/or the Islamic Revolution. Only one of the women is fully visible, her scarf covering her hair and neck. She looks indomitably into the camera, her young face and resolute expression conveying a strong sense of self to the viewer. Mirroring a strategy used by feminist and postcolonial artists, here it is the gaze, that unique visible locus of subjectivity, which affirms self and successfully challenges stereotypes about the Muslim woman. As in *Tehran*, the women’s agency and modernity is suggested by their activity; and, as with sport, the act of collective anti-government contestation facilitates the cross-culturality of the image. By discussing Sarbakshian’s image, I am not suggesting that the demonstrations took place without the intervention of Iranian police. The objective here is not to endorse the politics and practices of either the Iranian government, or opposition. Instead, the aim is to underscore how and why certain cultural texts are chosen above others and to demystify the stereotypes that such ideological choices engender and consolidate.

The two photographs draw attention to the difference between subjects and their governments, as well as accentuate the fact that the Western media criticizes non-Western regimes and societies with more liberality than it does Western culture, using the faults of other societies to hide its own. Moattari-
an’s and Sarbakshian’s pieces further establish the power of photojournalism. It is effectively an ethical stance to document reality and acknowledge the individuality of Iranian women, regardless not only of the veil but of its legal enforcement. If viewers cannot know whether these same women would veil if given the choice, they have been presented with images of Muslim women that transcend and rewrite the veil sign, even in this particular context.

Conclusion

Images matter. They construct social narratives. As Mitchell emphasizes, visual culture is “the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision” (2002, 237). They also “establish what will and will not be human” (Butler 2004, 146). Mainstream images of veiled Muslim women have historically echoed what Butler calls the “media’s evacuation of the human through the image” (2004, 146). However, it follows that images can also “re-humanize” unintelligible and dehumanized subjects. The representations of the veil analyzed here all document the real (with the exception of Adim’s idealized image) and depict veiled Muslim women as modern subjects using various strategies. The visual efficacy (sometimes beauty), directness, and accessibility of the images confirm the agency of both images and subjects, and the three postulates laid out in the introduction more generally.

The recasting of the veil as a heterogeneous sign and of Muslim women as selves, forces a reconsideration of mainstream Western identity. It possesses social, philosophical, political and also concrete implications and applications. For example, had the French government been capable of such rethinking, it would have understood that the veils worn by the French muhajjabat demonstrators, wrapped in French flags and demanding their right to claim their bicultural French-Muslim identity, were manifesting signs of integration, and not of rejection of French values and society. The demonstrators obviously felt comfortable enough in France and in themselves to accept their plural identities, and hoped that non-Muslim French citizens would equally embrace theirs. However, as Marranci observes, “Letting the ‘other’ express himself/herself through culture means every time challenging our cultural position and asking ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why am I so?’” (Marranci 2004, 115). Acknowledging the subjecthood of cultural others, although inevitable in the long run, is not painless, precisely because the move towards “heteropathic identification,” requires “a psychic and cultural displacement, an estrangement from one’s self, and from national coordinates” (Silverman 1995, 192). In short, it necessitates letting go of who we thought we were, and admitting our similarity with diaspora subjects: we
too are self and other, or, as Ricoeur once wrote, simply others among others. It is a practical, and inescapable, but also (more significantly), an ethical move. In a world experienced as increasingly diverse because of new proximities, images can facilitate it. Those discussed here underline what is to be gained as they also reflect the present sad state of affairs, whereby racialized others still have to struggle for the recognition of their humanity.

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