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Conscious of the discrepancies existing between the representations of the veil in mainstream Western culture and those in much of contemporary art, this article engages in an examination of the veil in contemporary artistic practice with the aim of articulating the alternative narratives of the veil transpiring from the work. If the stereotype or trope of the veil rooted in the colonial period continues to be reproduced in contemporary visual culture—in print media most particularly—the myriad representations of the veil in contemporary art unequivocally delineate complex views of the sign, both as a garment and as a representational strategy, that have yet to be properly studied, despite the growing scholarship on art related to, or from, the Muslim world.1 In this article, I propose to map, through an analysis of specific works produced by contemporary artists of Muslim descent, three—although there are certainly more—alternative visual narratives of the veil. These narratives, which I refer to as the contextualized veil, the postcolonial veil, and the subjective veil, stem from a wide examination of the now relatively large corpus of works depicting the veil. All three simultaneously deconstruct and rewrite the general inflection of the sign in mainstream Western culture, and interestingly the veil within the various works often comes to provoke a rethinking of the taxonomy of identity or to actually signal a terrain of possible intercultural or transnational communication. Before proceeding, I must stress that the present article is based on a much larger study, and restrictions of length therefore explain the limited number of works brought forth and the broad strokes with which the three trajectories are painted.

If the article is informed by both feminist and postcolonial theory, the methodology it employs is straightforward in that it consists of according primacy to the collaborative event of spectatorship. Stated differently, the protean intersubjective spaces brought into existence by looking at images not only constitute the sites of analysis but equally here provide the principal contextualizing framework of the works, overriding even that of the context and conditions of their production. This phenomenological approach to images and their relationship to one another best serves the overall purpose of the study premised on the capacity of visual texts to shape and therefore potentially transform individual subjects, collective cultural

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1. Although the polysemy of the veil has been articulated in various disciplines such as postcolonial studies, anthropology, Islamic feminism, and even fashion studies, little scholarship exists on the various uses and meanings of the veil in contemporary art. The exhibition catalog Veil: Veiling, Representation, and Contemporary Art, edited by David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, brings together for the first time contemporary works premised on the veil, but the essays in the watershed work, apart from the short introduction, are understandably geared more toward deconstructing the veil trope and proving the veil’s multivalence, than toward providing an in-depth analysis of specific works. See David A. Bailey and Gilane Tawadros, eds., Veil:
perceptions, and even, I argue, transnational encounters. Nonetheless, it is not happenstance that the artists I discuss, Arwa Abouon, Ghazel, and Shekaiba Wakili, were all born in Muslim-majority countries but live, undertook college degrees, and work in the West. All explore the bicultural experience, are cognizant of their status as “other,” and use screen-based media, revealing other points of entry into their work. The fact that three unveiled artists aim at displacing Western perceptions of the veil evinces the postcolonial nature of their practice, firmly situates their work within Western debates on the veil, and underscores the all-encompassing power of the trope. Consequently, before examining visual instances of the contextualized, the postcolonial, and the subject-ive veils, it is imperative to first trace the parameters of the historically entrenched metonymic veil, and its various cultural, political, and psychological subtexts, to provide a measure by which to gage and better grasp the significance, even radicalness, of the alternative narratives.

Representations of the (Neo)colonial Veil

The sign of the veil in mainstream Western culture assumes a historical and geographical continuity to both the form and the meaning of the garment.2 That its constructed fixedness ignores the diversity in the nomenclature, practices, and meanings of veiling both historically and geographically underlines the problematic nature of the veil as a site of analysis. It is in effect only the colonial singling out and decontextualization of the veil and its continued neocolonial reification that both allows for and necessitates any discussion of the veil, as does, one might add, its sometimes reactive, equally metonymic, use as a sign of resistance to the West or Westernization in certain social sectors or polities of the Muslim world, although this issue remains beyond the scope of the present study.

When the French general Thomas-Robert Bugeaud enunciated that “the Arabs elude us because they conceal the women from our gaze,” his declaration both confirmed the veil’s original consideration as an impediment to colonial control and elucidated its construction into a sign of women’s oppression, justifying the West’s infamous mission civilisatrice.3 The veil’s function as a visual shorthand for the victimized Muslim woman, and by extension for the misogyny and backwardness of Islam, thus possesses a long history. Its constant cultural or, more specifically, geopolitical role as a sartorial border between East and West, modernity and backwardness, freedom and totalitarianism, is now so ingrained that it may be considered an inherent part of the Western collective gaze, or what Kaja Silverman calls the “cultural screen.”4 That the trope of the veil undeniably forms a mediative filter, and hence an integral, even constitutive part of the viewing subject, underscores the power of mediation in the act of looking at, and thus producing, images, as well as the power of images in shaping and consolidating the cultural screen.

A cartoon from Le Monde, if it relates to the specific context of the French affaire du foulard and to the legislation brought about to ban the veil in French public schools, nonetheless simply reproduces colonial discourse (fig. 1). In
the cartoon, a white man with a tricolore seemingly growing out of the top of his bald head clearly represents France. He is reading the text of the projected antiveil law, while the long paper scroll wraps around the body of a turbaned “evil-looking” Arab who, paying no heed, is forcing a hijab on a young schoolgirl. The image that equally demarcates the figures through skin color reveals the racial assumptions implicit to the trope from its very inception in the colonial period. Indeed, the cartoon visually enacts the colonial narrative of Western self-professed superiority often disguised as benevolence and pithily summed up by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as “white men saving brown women from brown men.”

Portraying the veiled Muslim female as inexorably a victim of the violence of Muslim men and Islam obdurately refuses the possibility that the decision of wearing a hijab may in fact constitute an individual choice for some Muslim women and obviously precludes any notion of agency to the veiled female subject. The idea that the sign of the veil is positioned as antinomic to subjectivity or subjecthood is also expressed by Myra Macdonald: “Expressions of surprise, even in the twenty-first century, that veiled Muslim women can appear as Olympic athletes, ‘suicide bombers,’ feminists, politicians, musicians or even comedians, underline the tenacity of beliefs that Islamic veiling is intrinsically incompatible with women’s agency in the construction of their identities.”

Portraying others as victims by means of the veil therefore not only affords a reinforcement of mainstream Western master narratives and self-identity both premised on the notion of a moral, cultural, philosophical, and even technological ascendancy but also actually serves as a strategy or mechanism of erasure preventing the access of Muslim women—veiled or not—to the status of subject or self.

The covert tyranny of victimization inherent to the metonymic veil unquestionably underwrites the cartoon by Plantu, the pen name

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for Jean Plantureux. However, it is more clearly perceptible in a June 2008 cartoon from the populist newspaper *Le Journal de Montréal* that openly admits and enacts how the veil is used to silence, rather than represent or empathize with the silenced, although in this case the erasure is aimed at Québécois feminist women’s voices. The image shows three women dressed in black burkas, replete with mesh, seated at a table covered in a red tablecloth, on which is placed a small placard reading, “Conseil du Statut de la Femme Québec,” thereby identifying the covered women’s identities. What the cartoonist found offensive and wanted to repress or mark as abject via the burka was the Quebec Council on the Status of Women’s report on the hyper-sexualization of young girls, treating issues such as the influence of peer pressure and the media on teenage girls’ sexual practices and dress codes. If the cartoonist’s use of veiling obviously draws on the constant juxtaposition of the uncovered female body and the covered as sites of competing ideologies, and the synonymy of unveiling with freedom and sexual liberation, the image clearly makes manifest how the veil can silence and censor subjects, confirming how the use of the sign often relates more to the agency or intent of an image’s producer, than to the assumed passivity of the veiled women portrayed.

The posited antinomy between the veil and agency, as well as the concealed censoring function inherent to mainstream representations of veiled women, explains why in both Europe and North America, it is the veil of active educated and articulate *muhaajabat*—students and employees—that is perceived as most disruptive to the point that several countries have legally limited and forbidden its appearance in various public arenas, mostly in educational and governmental institutions. Other scholars have noted the phenomenon. For example, in an article on the French “headscarf affair,” Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun puts forth, “A sign of foreignness and exoticism, the French were not disturbed whilst the headscarves covered silent and discreet heads,” and sociologist Homa Hoodfar, also in a text on the veil, quotes a Montreal university professor who, discussing a student possessing “feminist ideas . . . critical views on Orientalism, and [a] love of learning,” plainly blurs out, “She does not at all act like a veiled woman.” The perceived disruption caused by the veil, which, according to John Bowen, ex-president Jacques Chirac actually once described as “a kind of aggression,” or more specifically by “veiled subjectivity,” corroborates Slavoj Žižek’s postulate that the victimization of the other or others forms in reality a strategy of subjugation and repression.\(^8\) His observation that an alleged victim who accedes to, or is granted, subject status automatically transforms into a “threat” explains the upsurge in images in recent years in which the veil is unmistakably framed as a menace to Western democratic societies and “way of life” and as a sign of their allegedly inevitable Islamization and hence demise.\(^9\)

However, the fact that the veil, a symbol of visible religious, cultural, and usually ethnic difference, is construed as a threat to and by European and North American society transcends history and geopolitics. It possesses in addition a more complex psychological dimension because, as authors since Edward Said have put forth, modern Western self-identity is produced, at least in part, by its distinction from the East — “Islam” in particular—and therefore the nonagentic other is constitutive, albeit

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9. Žižek articulates the idea in a discussion that, although pertaining to Western military intervention in Kosovo, is equally applicable to the representation of the veil and the Muslim female visible other in general: “What we encounter here is again the paradox of victimization: the Other to be protected is good insofar as it remains victim (which is why we are bombarded with pictures of helpless Kosovo mothers, children and old people . . .); the moment it no longer behaves like a victim, but wants to strike back on its own, it magically turns all of a sudden into a terrorist/ fundamentalist/drug-trafficking Other.” Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute* (London: Verso, 2000), 60. The mechanism noted by Žižek is clearly illustrated by an incident that occurred recently in Holland. A large department store, HEMA, advertised a sale on sweaters by depicting a woman in a headscarf wearing the sale item, leading a Rotterdam city council member to react adversely and post on the Nieuw Rechts website: “You’re trying to get customers this way, but you are also pushing customers away. It’s a big leap in the wrong direction when the Dutch should adapt to the Turkish and the Moroccans in the Netherlands. This islamisation has gone way too far and should be stopped. It won’t be long before we have halal sausages. Stop this madness!” Quoted in Linda Duits and Liesbet van Zoonen, “Headscarves and Porno-Chic: Disciplining Girls’ Bodies in the European Multicultural Society,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 13, no. 2 (2006): 110. The authors do not provide the web address of the ultranationalist New Right blog, nor do they say whether the ad was pulled or remained in place.
contradistinctively, of the Western self. From this perspective the self-assertion of the veiled Muslim other cannot be tolerated because it unravels the narrative of the Western self, a notion articulated in clear simple terms by Meyda Yeğenoglu in *Colonial Fantasies*: “They should remain different, because I should remain the same: they are/should not be a possibility within my own world, which will thus be different.”

In short, the Enlightenment-based Western universal subject is premised on the exclusion or denial of others as fully constituted subjects. Until a new relationship with alterity emerges, one more compatible with the demographic reality of Western societies, and the increasing deterritorialization and transnationalization of identities, the master/victim binary will be endlessly reinscribed through the sign of the veil, the master losing identity when the victim no longer plays by his or her rules.

The portrait painted above of the trope of the veil and its principal underpinnings in mainstream visual culture evinces its artificial nature, its inbuilt binarism, but more significantly, its enshrinement in the cultural screen described by Silverman as “the culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age and nationality.” In effect, it is because the veil is integral to both the gaze and the production of Western identity that it remains a caveat for—or at least a reality that must be addressed in—any inquiry examining visual representations of the veil. The emphasis thus far on the tenacity of the veil trope as a meditative lens through which to view Muslims and Islam confirms the necessity of its displacement and, more significantly the tremendous power of representations, which, if capable of visually constructing and reproducing the sign/gaze, must also be able to effect its/their deconstruction. The following sections concisely articulate three of these displacing alternative narratives evident in contemporary artistic practice.

### The Contextualized Veil

Contrary to the metonymic veil constructed by the garment’s decontextualization and transformation into an all-encompassing site of Muslim otherness, the contextualized veil reorients the gaze by recontextualizing or repositioning the veil within its cultural environment(s), shifting the discourse from the veil to the broader notion of veiling situated in fact at the very heart of Islamic art and aesthetics. Using the Ka’ba as a starting point and aesthetic phenomenology as the premise allowing the comparison between very different artifacts, contexts, and epochs, I articulate three dimensions of veiling often encountered in contemporary practice, although I must adamantly insist that the aim here is not to reclaim a theology of art or of the image but to view and understand some of the ways that veiling operates through an Islam-based cultural screen. Artists of Muslim heritage who appropriate the metaphor and aesthetics of veiling, consciously or not, generally do so to address contemporary issues such as gender, the realities and travails of biculturalism, the nature and limits of representation, or, still yet, the possibility or impossibility of cross-cultural communication.

Muslims consider the Ka’ba the holiest site in Islam. The modest-sized simple brick structure, empty except for a meteorite lodged in one of its corners, is draped in a monumental black veil known as the *kiswa*, decorated with bands of ornate gold- and silver-embroidered text and pattern. The fact that veiling is enshrined in Islam’s most important symbolic structure would mean little for the study if it did not portend and share the nature and characteristics of Islamic art and embody the three aspects of veiling that I want to bring forth. First is the unique prominence of and references to textiles and veiling in Islamic art and culture. Textiles formed the economic backbone of the Islamic world for centuries; textile artifacts were highly prized and avidly collected, served as diplomatic gifts, and also, in tribal and village settings, constituted

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a household’s main and often sole furnishings in the form of rugs, bags, and cushions. This proclivity is still apparent in much of the Muslim world. Second, the richly embroidered kiswa clearly illustrates the primacy of the act and aesthetics of veiling, that tendency to beautify, to bestow meaning upon, and to signify the sanctity of essentially humble structures and material by draping them, literally or figuratively, in cloth. If the 2,270-kilogram kiswa is certainly a sartorial veil, its ornamentation points to the metaphorical draping of monuments and artifacts in infinite pattern and profuse text so distinctive of Islamic art that the latter can be said to refer less to actual objects than to a process of adorning and inscribing surfaces. Art historians use in effect sets of terms like “textile metaphor” or “textile mentality” to both describe and explain Islamic art and aesthetics. Veiling as act and aesthetic implies a disjunction between surface and structure or ground, and this space created by and implicit to veiling leads to its third and most interesting dimension, revealing how it simultaneously informs and defines the cultural codification of vision and representation.

The kiswa is the only visible sign of the structure’s and the site’s spiritual significance; it represents, as Tim Winter suggests, “the black veil . . . we must lift if we are to come to al-haqq, the Real,” denoted here, because of its unrepresentability, simply by empty space. One can consequently infer from the Ka’ba’s anatomy that veiling in representation, rather than denoting concealment and marking the end of vision, forms in nexus with the void an aesthetic strategy to signify the unrepresentable. The void in Islamic art, as in the case of the Ka’ba, carries content, and one that inevitably, because it is imprecise, acknowledges subjective mediation. This idea that vision and visual expression are structured by and serve as metaphors for the unrepresentable originate in the Islamic worldview that perceives, as Malise Ruthven notes, “the phenomena of the natural world, not as things-in-themselves but as ‘signs’ or symbols (ayas),” suggesting that “the realm of appearance (al-shahada)” hints at “an unseen world (al-ghaib) whose ultimate reality is unknowable.”

The unrepresentable in much contemporary practice, however, generally references the void more as a space of mediation and intersubjectivity than as one of noumenal presence.

Untitled from The Generation Series (Mother, Daughter, 2004, 2006) (fig. 2) is a black-and-white photographic diptych by a young and very talented Montreal-based artist of Libyan origin, Arwa Abouon. The two larger-than-life portraits—one of Arwa and one of her mother—are mirror images of each other. Each woman is kneeling, her body facing the camera, while her head, turned looking toward the other, is seen in profile. Each is dressed in a one-piece veil covering the head and whole body; only the face and hands are visible. The veils are cut of the same cloth, whose white background is strewn with a repetitive allover modern floral design. The same cloth again, however, covers, or in fact constitutes, the whole background of both images, testifying to how the piece is visually structured and produced through veiling. Because Abouon’s work encompasses the three aspects of veiling delineated above, it is discussed in light of the contextualized veil; yet it could, in light of its autobiographical content and its depiction of veiled subjectivity, equally be read through the lens of the subjective veil, thus highlighting the coteriorous nature of the alternative veil narratives and substantiating the veil’s polysemia in the visual realm.

The diptych clearly repositions the veil within the wider context of veiling and posits their interrelationship in unmistakable visual terms, while concurrently, and contrary to custom, linking both, and by extension Islamic aesthetics, to the female domain. Untitled equally evinces how veiling constitutes not just a female garment but a representational strategy related to a particular conception of vision and the image. With the exception of the sitters’ faces and hands, veiling makes up the whole image; even the tiny bit of ground visible around the women’s knees consists of white cloth laid on the floor. The sartorial and metaphorical intersect in Untitled as veiling is equally enhanced...
and signified by the cloth’s continuous design. As in Islamic aesthetics, the strategy of veiling in repetitive pattern blurs the distinction between surface and ground and dematerializes materiality to claim the ascendancy of mediation over ocularity in vision and representation. The visuality of veiling, a constellationary interconnected visual field continuing beyond the images’ frame, contrasts with that of the women’s faces and hands. The viewer’s gaze is torn and oscillates between what is visible of the figures and the boundless pattern, between the perspectival and the planar, and between the finite and infinite continuity. However, the tension produced by the juxtaposition of two modalities of vision inscribed within the same frame is productive. By undoing the viewer’s sense of mastery over space or the idea of its rationality, the veil of pattern multiplies the viewpoints, obverts the image, and highlights what cannot be seen or represented. Visually signifying that which escapes vision or the subjective mediations that compose it, veiling heightens viewer awareness of the reality and readability of the women’s faces, hands, and interaction and therefore submits both the gift and the inscrutability of vision and being.

The iconic quality of the portraits obviously relates to the theme of matrilineal genealogy Abouon set out to present, adding another inflection to the veil and rejoining, as mentioned above, the subject-ive veil. One can infer from the fact that the women are wearing the type of garment often slipped on at home for Muslim daily prayer and are seated in one of the positions of prayer that the woman’s veils denote the mother-daughter filiation and clearly position it within its cultural and religious dimensions. If the sameness of cloth serves to better frame the phenomenally visible, and to distinguish between the beauty of youth and the very subtle harshness or realism of middle-age maturity carved on the separate faces, its continuity asserts the positive nature of the filial relationship and transmission. Stated differently, the diptych speaks of generational translation and not mis-translation. If one accepts Luce Irigaray’s call for the proliferation of constructive images of mothers and daughters as a strategy to combat patriarchy, it thus might be said to possess a potent feminist component. For the French philosopher, patriarchy disrupted matrilineal relationships in order to thwart the full subject-hood of women, and hence the reclaiming of these relationships and their representation constitute an “essential condition for the constitution of female identity.”

Figure 2. Arwa Abouon, Untitled, The Generation Series (Mother, Daughter) 2004, 2006, photographic prints, 182.9 x 81.3 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.

Although here, Abouon is claiming not only matrilineage and gender but also her Libyan and Muslim roots as constitutive of her identity. *Untitled* brings into the Western gallery space the doubly or triply marginalized veiled Arab Muslim woman usually excluded from such a context and, more significantly, rewrites her as subject. For those who know that the artist does not veil in everyday life, the veil, in addition to its other roles, takes on an important mnemonic one, subtracting the veil from reality or the politics of representation and placing it in the equally constitutive territory of the subject’s imaginary.

The veil of pattern encompasses and links the two women, visibly enacting the nature and content of the mother-daughter relationship and again attesting to how veiling visually denotes the invisible and unrepresentable realms of both experience and intersubjectivity. In light of the continuity of pattern and the overall visual beauty of the images, the space existing between the two photographs, rather than signal a generational or even physical gap, further ascertains the significant yet unsignified void intrinsic to veiling or, stated more simply, the spaces of intersubjectivity composing in effect the real arena of transmission and perhaps of the self. The multiple layers of image, void, and veil both admit and attempt to transcend the limitations of representation by claiming mediation as the space of its production. The numerous uses of veiling (and void) at work in Untitled point to its contemporary relevance and demonstrate how veiling mediated through another cultural screen does not, unlike in cultures based on the “triumph of the eye,” denote the end of vision, representation, and knowledge, thereby revealing yet another reason the veil is considered anathema in oculocentric societies.

The narrative of the contextualized veil underlying Abouon’s piece elucidates, at least in part, works by artists whose use of textiles is rooted in Muslim cultural traditions, such as Samta Benyahia and Rachid Koraïchi; by those artists invoking the veiling metaphor through pattern and script, such as Susan Hefuna, Shirin Neshat, and Shirazeh Houshiary; and, finally, by those who showcase veiling to convey in visible terms the unrepresentability of self, intersubjectivity, or the world, such as Iranian photographers Shokoufeh Alidousti and Kourush Adim. If the contextualized veil unmistakably posits the veil’s links to a culturally inflected gaze, it equally confirms the polysemy and significance of the veiling metaphor in the context of contemporary practice, underscoring the continued possibility of a perennial aesthetic to inform or reflect the visual and theoretical concerns of contemporary artists.

the other two forth with great succinctness for the sake of abetting the readability of contemporary representations of the veil, of underscoring the heteroglossia of the alternative narratives, and, still more vital, of emphasizing both the urgency and possibility of cross-cultural or transnational literacy. While the different means adopted to challenge Western cultural and discursive hegemony and the externally imposed definitions of the Muslim female self compete at the theoretical level and claim precedence over one another, I maintain, in light of the present-day post–September 11 context, that a number of deconstructive strategies are not only beneficial but also necessary.

Engaging in straightforward deconstruction constitutes a widespread strategy adopted by contemporary artists marginalized not only by the sign of the metonymic veil but also by colonially rooted dominant discourses more generally. This strategy was best described by Said, who, in *Culture and Imperialism*, prescribes “contrapuntal reading” as a method of deconstructing the “cultural archive,” by which he means a critical rereading of Western “aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, and philological texts” that makes their latent entrenchment in colonialism and imperialism manifest. Premised on the possibility of individual agency to unpack, and therefore somehow remediate master narratives, contrapuntal reading can therefore involve both counterdiscourse and deconstructive reinscription. For example, Iranian artist Khosrow Hassanzadeh’s *Terrorist: Nadjibeh* (2004), a monumental portrait of his elderly veiled mother, operates, through the discrepancy between image and text, both a displacement of the term *terrorist*, and its synonymy with Muslim men, and a significant rewriting of the trope of the veiled Muslim woman.

Hybridity is another prevalent characteristic or method encountered in postcolonial art, as many contemporary artists are territorially, historically, or discursively bi- or polycultural subjects. Bhabha puts forth the notion of cultural hybridity as a strategy for the historically marginalized subject to access voice and representation, because by privileging cross-fertilization, it collapses the artificial divisions propped up among cultures, enabling difference to operate, unlike in colonial and neocolonial discourse, nonhierarchically. The critic emphasizes in particular what he calls the “in-between” or “third space,” claiming the space(s) opened up in the contact zone, at the meeting points of different traditions and cultural affiliations, as the site of enunciation, meaning, intersubjectivity, and, most significant, transcultural communication. The hybrid, poetic, and very personal depictions of the veil by Pakistani painters Shahzia Sikander and Aisha Khalid, both of whose work, albeit very different, draws on Islamic, Hindu, and Western artistic idioms, indeed effectively unpack the trope of the veil and confirm how the spaces opened up by hybridity can, akin to the veiling metaphor, by remaining unsignified, facilitate a certain transculturality.

The method by which artists deconstruct the veil of interest here corresponds to Spivak’s idea of “resistant mimicry,” which entails altering master narratives from within. For Spivak, mimicry concurrently moves beyond the binarism of counterdiscourse and obviates what she perceives as the colonial underpinnings of the humanist “universal” self. It is the distance inherent to mimicry between the person who mimics and that which is mimicked that provides a space in which deconstruction takes place and the “subaltern” subject can emerge. The strength of this strategy with regard to

19. Said also speaks of “the voyage in,” which he describes as a deliberate attempt to “enter into the discourse of Europe and the West . . . to make it acknowledge marginalized or suppressed or forgotten histories” (*Culture and Imperialism*, 261).
20. In order to represent the “disenfranchised female in decolonized space”—or for her to represent herself—while avoiding either erasure or cooptation, Spivak proposes the strategy of speaking “from within the emancipator master narratives even while taking a distance from them.” Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Who Claims Alterity?” in *Art in Theory 1900–1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 1121.
the veil is that it allows artists to undertake a critique of both Eastern and Western representations of, and discourses on, the veil and the Muslim woman. The double critique permits criticism of the veil, Muslim norms, or polities without reinforcing the Western trope of the veil and the bipolar geopolitical map it traces. Rather, by deconstructing binarism, it opens up a possible space for inter- and intracultural relationships to take place. Many works by artists such as Zineb Sedira and Shadifarin Ghadirian (fig. 3) could be cited as visual enactments of Spivak’s concept, but I will limit the discussion to Ghazel’s humorous “home movies” to probe the relationship between mimicry and the veil.

Ghazel’s Me series (1997–) is a succession of very short filmed self-portraits showing the France-based Iranian-born artist wearing a black chador engaged in a variety of activities from household chores to waterskiing, mowing the lawn, mountain climbing, and lifting weights. The mostly black-and-white autobiographical vignettes purposely exhibit an amateur, almost nostalgic, aesthetic of home-type movies and are further enhanced in the gallery setting by being shown on several small television screens in a row. Each self-filmed performance, shot in real time, lasts from one second to two minutes and carries a short text, a personal narrative referring to childhood memories, personal

Figure 3. Shadifarin Ghadirian, Untitled, Qajar series, 1988, Silver Bromide Print, 75 cm x 50 cm. Reproduced with the kind permission of the artist.
I try being a feminist

Every woman dreams of being a ‘Botticelli Venus’

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aspirations, politics, or, specifically, gender, as the two stills reproduced here show. The first film still is a grainy image showing the artist, or rather the semifictional character she becomes, lifting a barbell over her head in a seemingly empty flat, the bright light from the large window transforming her into a dark silhouette (fig. 4). The text beneath reads, “I try being a feminist.” In the second, the chador-wearing character emerges out of the water, while the caption reads, “Every woman dreams of being a ‘Botticelli Venus’” (fig. 5).

The veil Ghazel dons throughout is a plain black chador, obviously associated in the Western imagination with the 1979 Iranian revolution, her home country of Iran, and “Islamic” politics.21 The black veil, if reified in Iranian revolutionary discourse and art, has certainly equally been overused in the West to communicate Islamic misogyny, the totalitarian nature of Islam, and the threat Iran cum Islam is presumed to pose to the world. The artist, who moved to France at the age of nineteen, has therefore knowingly adopted a sign of cross-cultural mistranslation and a continuing linchpin in competing ideologies, battling it out on the territory of the woman’s body or visibility, only to unpack and resist them. She is thus altering from within, in this case both literally and figuratively, opposing master narratives of the veil. The short films produced through the performance of mimicry possess, despite their anti-aesthetic and seeming spontaneity and simplicity, several layers of meaning brought about essentially through uncanny juxtapositions.

The obsessive films are funny in a tongue-and-cheek way because of the incongruous combination of the chador-clad Muslim woman and

21. Viewers who have been to Iran are aware that in Iran the black chador, except for certain segments of the population for whom it remains the traditional dress, is no longer de rigueur and that Iranian, especially urban, women manage to dress stylishly and colorfully while still complying with the imposed dress code. See, e.g., Alexandru Balasescu, “Tehran Chic: Islamic Headscarves, Fashion Designers, and New Geographies of Modernity,” Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture 7, no. 1 (2003): 39–55.
the modern and/or physical activities she undertakes, and therefore, at first sight, the films appear to be a critique of Iran and a reinforcement of the trope of the oppressive veil—and they undeniably possess this dimension. However, the Me series is overtly a parody and performance; viewers are cognizant that the artist is playing a role, and the distance or space implicit to the ironic mimicry between the mimicking subject and the mimicked representation allows for, as Spivak suggests, the former’s resistance and the latter’s transformation. Stated differently, Ghazel’s autofictive chador-clad protagonist manages to realize or accomplish her actions despite of, or unhindered by, the garment and thus unpacks and rewrites the trope of the passive veiled woman into a possible self-asserting agent or subject whose active resistance evokes sympathy in the viewer. The comic and self-derisive nature of the films enabled by this distancing mechanism inherent to mimicry paradoxically brings about or heightens viewer identification with its “star,” because, as Jo Anna Isaak pointedly notes, the viewer “in order to laugh . . . must recognize that he [or she] shares the same repressions” or, in other words, recognizes him or herself in those generally cast as other.22 Transported temporarily beyond the binary politics of the veil, the viewer looks forward to the next “episodes,” the agency of the character over-riding the trope of the veil, no small feat in the case of the chador and in light of the fact that the character, never truly looking at the viewer, seems to completely ignore him or her.

The text obviously also imparts humor to the work, as the examples here evince, but it equally facilitates identification linguistically—for many Western viewers at least—because the texts are in English or French and not Farsi and sometimes provide Western cultural references such as “feminist” or “Botticelli.” However, the text and its incongruous relationship with the image, often equally plotting that of two cultures, only serve to dissolve or transcend their assumed opposition. I am proposing that the text constitutes in fact the site both of cross-cultural translation and of Muslim female agency. For example, figure 5 alludes to the globally shared concern of women over their looks, whether internally or externally induced, but articulates it, as mentioned above, in English and in terms of Western cultural references. If the jarring contrast or contradiction with the image and its cultural, even colonial, implications are self-evident, the text by giving voice and thus subjective agency to the veiled Muslim woman allows the viewer to recognize sameness in difference and thus to view the veiled character both as a subject and as a virtual possibility of self. The fact that the viewer cannot here fully see the woman certainly also challenges assumptions regarding gender and its representation.

The voice/text emerging from the interstice opened up between the physical performance of a resistant subjectivity and the here masquerade of the veil ultimately situates the resisting subject outside of the image (but in this case, in the still visual domain of text) and thereby challenges the seemingly stable codes of representation more generally. Considering as Lindsey Moore does that a feminist work is one that “self-reflexively problematizes the act of representing (other) women,” I am putting forth that Me possesses an inherent feminist dimension.25 However, in the case of Ghazel, an artist of Iranian Muslim descent living in Europe, it is the doubly displaced position of the bicultural female subject that explains, as Fereshteh Daftari observes, how “gender . . . creates a space of observation equally unsparing to those Islamic cultures with a narrow vision of women, as to the myopic Western perception of the veil.”24 Because the homelessness of the feminist bicultural position—the character in Me is always at odds with her situation—affords a critique of two regimes of producing and representing Muslim women, it also contributes to collapsing the geopolitical binarism undergirding the veil through, in the case of Me at least, the subversion of humor rather than confrontation. The films dissolve boundaries by affirming, as Reina Lewis notes, “the banality of difference,” but the banality is radical in light of the tremendous implications of both remapping the world and

laughing with, rather than at, the veiled Muslim woman, although I must put forth that Ghazel is not claiming to speak for all veiled woman, nor is the artist replacing the stereotype(s) with a cohesive centered self, as she remains consciously a semifictional, even Brechtian character.25 One must nonetheless concede that it is the agency of the artist’s autofictive persona that operates the veil’s subversion.

Artists affected by the trope or mediating filter of the veil have devised many strategies to debunk and rewrite it. If none can fully claim infallibility in decolonizing the viewer’s gaze—Me is often read as a straightforward critique of Iran—which is certainly a dialogical process, I nonetheless submit the transformative potential not just of the image as, to use Silverman’s words, “a privileged domain . . . for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by the dominant fiction” but also of the subject, and in this particular case the veiled subject, bringing us to the final alternative narrative, that of the subject-ive veil.26

The Subject-ive Veil
Premised on the notion that the subject possesses the capacity to deconstruct ideologically constructed discourses and representations, the subject-ive veil refers to depictions of the veil that displace mainstream perceptions of the sign by portraying veiled Muslim women as subjects or agents. Because, as previously put forth, the veil is generally synonymous with erasure and serves to erase veiled Muslim female subjectivity, I maintain that representations of veiled subjects or veiled subjectivity can dislocate dominant discourse on the veil by engaging the viewer in a subject-to-subject relationship and consequently prompting his or her identification with a marginalized figure. If the subject-ive veil relates to the preceding discussions in that it implicitly involves both a contextualization of the veil and a disarticulation of its metonymy, it nonetheless differs in that it neither depends on the aesthetics of veiling nor addresses the stereotype of the veil and the veiled woman directly, as well as the concomitant issues of representation and translation. Rather, by framing the veil as an aspect or item of dress that neither adds to nor subtracts from a woman’s status as subject, depictions of the subject-ive veil offer a re-presentation of the veiled woman that foregoes the Western construction of the sign, yet speaks in a pictorial language not alien to the West. They therefore accentuate Muslim women’s individual, as opposed to collective, identity and thus by extension their, and the veil’s, diversity.

If I posit that an increase in representations of the subject-ive veil is inevitable owing to new technologies, globalization, and Western demographic realities, and this type of image has in fact begun, albeit extremely slowly and rarely, to surface in the Western media, I equally contend that these will meet much opposition because of the recognized tremendous power of images in forging political positions and shaping the collective I/eye.27 Culture, and this obviously includes visual culture, is used as and constitutes a form of power defining which texts, narratives, and subjects a culture puts forth as normative or, on the contrary, as abject. The penetration of representations of the subject-ive veil into Western visual culture, by referencing a new signified, contemporary veiled Muslim—sometimes even articulate and active—female self, unintentionally exposes and displaces the presumed normative “I/we,” whose identity characterized by ethnic, religious, linguistic, or national boundaries is hinged on distinction from, among other things, the (visibly) Muslim other. The incessant diatribe against the veil and the regular reproduction of the metonymic veil in North America and Europe are evidence of the great resistance toward rewriting the sign.

27. An example of the subject-ive veil in the Western media appears in Ms. Magazine in a one-page article, “Sharla’s City of Hope,” discussing an American woman, Sharla Musabih, who opened up the first woman’s shelter in the United Arab Emirates, where she now lives. The accompanying photograph shows Musabih talking on a cell phone, wearing the traditional Emirati black ‘abaya and hijab. The point is that the image contradicts the veil’s posited opposition to modernity, female agency, and feminist positions on conjugal violence, even if the same issue carries an article on the “Talibization” of Iraq illustrated with a group of chador-clad women (see Alasdair Soussi, “Sharla’s City of Hope,” Ms., spring 2007, 29).
the collective self, and the cultural screen. Yet I
remain optimistic, because if stereotypical im-
ages continue unhindered in the media, more
complex and less one-dimensional represen-
tations of the veil and the veiled Muslim woman
are now regularly on exhibit in the Western and
global art worlds.28
I have identified three contexts or charac-
teristics of artistic practice in which representa-
tions of female veiled subjectivity appear, while
recognizing that the borders between them are
somewhat indistinct. First, geographical loca-
tion can remediate the veil; depictions of veiled
Muslim subjects emerging from other culture-
scapes can straightforwardly frame the veil as
a quotidian or normal aspect of an artist’s en-
vironment. The continued relationship among
place, culture, and perception manifestly relates
to the ideas sketched out in the discussion of
the contextualized veil and is clearly palpable
in very different works, for example, Khosrow
Hassanzadeh’s painted portrait of his veiled
mother, Mother (1988); Kourush Adim’s Re
evations (n.d.), a personal and poetic series
of photographs of idealized veiled women; and Hi-
cham Benohoud’s La salle de classe (1994–2001),
a photographic social critique of Moroccan soci-
ety enacted by his grade school students within,
as the title indicates, the classroom space. Sec-
ond, autobiographical narrative, itself constitut-
ing a type of location, may also reinscribe the
veil by making the viewer cognizant of the veil’s
different evocations for those for whom it forms
part of their lived experience or personal nar-
rative. Abouon’s Untitled figures here, as does
Sedira’s photographic triptych, Mother, Daugh-
ter, and I (2003). Rooted in autobiography and
privileging intersubjectivity, the two works, by
portraying close family members who veil, are
not only presenting their relatives as veiled in-
dividual subjects or agents but are also affirm-
ing the veil’s mnemic and hence constitutive
role in the artists’ own subjectivities. And third,
the inflection of the subject-ive veil that is of
interest here is the documentary image. Often
produced with the specific intent of recording
modern Muslim subjects and exhibited in the
gallery or museum context, it also provides new
readings of the veiled Muslim woman, and of
modernity, by clearly “deworlding” or “rework-
ding” what Spivak famously calls the “worlding”
of the world.29 The documentary approach to re-
ensigning Muslims has informed the curatorial
practice of major institutions and exhibitions
such as the seminal 2004 Parisian exhibit at the
Musée de La Villette, Musulmanes, musulmans,
au Caire, à Téhéran, Istanbul, Paris, Dakar, organ-
ized by Olivier Roy and Valérie Amiraux, and
whose specific objective was, by documenting
the urban life of Muslims in five major urban
centers, to dismantle stereotypes of Muslims,
Islam, and the Muslim world, in an attempt to
better acquaint the viewer with all three.30 It of-
fers numerous, and often graphically pleasing,
instances of the subject-ive veil in the classical
photodocumentary genre. However, I will here
limit myself to a discussion of an image forming
part of an individual artist’s endeavor to spe-
cifically document present-day veiled Muslim
women, Afghan American Shekaiba Wakili’s
Muslim Women in London (1998) series, because
both its Western setting and its snapshot, al-
most banal aesthetic actually magnify the rad-
ical subtexts underwriting the image of a veiled
“Western” subject (fig. 6). Confirming the ethi-
cal dimension of documentary photography in
its capacity to show, as Ine Gevers declares,
“that which exists beyond the stereotype or the
already known,” the black-and-white unobtru-
sive image rewrites not only the veiled Muslim
woman but also Western identity, modernity,
and its “ontology of representation.”31

28. Representations of what I am calling the subject-
ive veil, like those identified as the contextualized or
postcolonial veils, are intimately linked to the phe-
nomenon of globalization in that their recent visibil-
ity in the West is due both to artists looking and work-
ning through another gaze or cultural screen and to a
shift in the Western art apparatus that now exhibits
their work, although some may submit, and perhaps
rightly so, that the latter’s fascination for images of
Muslim women may relate more to a continued (neo)
colonial fascination than to an emergent transna-
tional consciousness.
29. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur:
An Essay in Reading the Archives,” History and Theory
30. A much smaller but equally intelligent exhibit
mounted in Germany is worth noting: See Women
by Women: Eight Women Photographers from the
Arab World (Frankfurt: Fotografie Forum Interna-
tional, 2004).
31. Ine Gevers, “Images that Demand Consummation:
Postdocumentary, Photography, Art and Ethics,” in
Documentary Now! Contemporary Strategies in Pho-
tography, Film, and the Visual Arts, ed. Frits Gierst-
berg, Maartje Van den Heuvel, Hans Scholten, and
Martijn Verhoeven (Rotterdam: NAI, 2005), 83; Timo-
thy Mitchell, Colonising Egypt (Berkeley: University of
The photograph shows the front of a café; on the left a sign announcing the type of food stuffs found therein is affixed to the external wall, and on the right sits a table whose checkered tablecloth echoes those on the tables seen inside. A young woman is exiting the café, as an older woman, a relative one presumes, because of her proximity, follows behind her. The central figure’s attire, a longish light-colored and well-cut jacket; her interiorized demeanor; the large bags she is holding, testifying to school, work, or shopping; and the snapshot aesthetic of the image all convey the normalcy of the scene captured on a London street. The young woman, like any other citizen, is simply performing the tasks of, and experiencing, daily life. It is only the two women’s hijabs that make the photograph accented, to use Hamid Naficy’s term. Although there are no other Londoners present in this particular image, its title, the English script, and even the bits of the café’s décor transmit to the viewer that this is a scene of Western urban life. The prevalent theme of the woman shopper or consumer, the young woman’s clothing and manner, and the setting allow viewers to identify with, and recognize, the image as “home,” while the hijab, maintaining and asserting the woman’s alterity, asks viewers to redefine what constitutes the normative Western subject or British citizen.

In Wakili’s photograph, the woman’s status as subject is conveyed not, as is often the case, through the (return of the) gaze but through the woman’s reflective even melancholic expression, her familiar context, and perhaps especially her implied movement and the various bags witness to some kind of activity and hence agency, in short through her everydayness, as well as that of the image. The unassuming image that could have been taken in any Western capital is no less radical as it brings into the realm of visual representation a new cultural text, the figure of the veiled Muslim woman as simultaneously subject, modern, and part of the Western urban landscape. The viewer may nonetheless perceive the photograph, in particular the young veiled woman’s obvious comfort and familiarity with her environment, through the trope of the metonymic veil, the lens of anti-Muslim sentiment, or the fear of the alleged Islamization of the West. Helen Watson, remarking that the “global spread of migration and cross-cultural mobility has resulted in the presence of veiled women in the streets of Western cities,” nonetheless cautions against assuming that “a sensitive, pluralist conception of the veil has developed in

popular Western imagination.” However, I am arguing that the unremarkable normalcy of the scene depicting daily life, the central figure’s denoted if understated agency, and her essentially visual conformity—except for the hijab—with the visual expectations of modernity allow the Western viewer to identify with the veiled Londoner, thereby displacing mainstream dominant discourse(s) and acknowledging the Muslim other as a subject/self. Wakili’s act of documenting “what is” evinces and substantiates the possible moral dimension of the real. Silverman maintains that it is an “ethical duty to struggle with the snares of the self to see the world as it is and less as a pre-given spectacle,” and the British muhajjabat captured by the photographer certainly does not confirm or reproduce the “pre-given spectacle” of the veil.

The image from Muslim Women in London is of distinctive import because it relates to the questions surrounding Muslims’ citizenship in, and sense of belonging to, Europe and the West more generally. Its European setting provides and provokes the opportunity to stretch and remap the presumptions undergirding “we” and thus to rethink the religiously, ethnically, or territorially circumscribed bases of its self-identity and definitions of normativeness. Representations of the veiled subject, like those of other marginalized subjects, by destabilizing and/or reconfiguring the notion of the individual and collective modern Western self, suggest in place of the latter’s assumed exclusivity and fixedness their plurality and unboundedness. Peter Stupples, underscoring the transformation of memory alterity produces, speaks of the capacity of images “to open up our ego to transformation by the ‘not me,’ to transform our own visual residues, and hopefully those of Others, to attempt acts of heteropathic reconstruction.”

Wakili’s photograph, despite the title in which “Muslim” and “London” remain somewhat antinomic, redefines in heteropathic terms what constitutes the modern normative woman, Londoner, or Westerner more generally. The last point I want to raise again concerns the woman’s dress. That it could be identified and associated with teenagers and young adults in many locations, and largely fulfills the criteria of Western modernity, contradicts the widely held notion that veiling is antithetical to modernity. The photograph, by dissipating the idea that the set of terms modern Muslim is an oxymoron visually, asserts, as does much recent scholarship, the existence of alternative modernities. The image also probes the idea held by most states defining themselves as liberal democracies that the modern subject is necessarily secular. While the decision to veil may be due to a variety of factors, and hence the viewer cannot know in all certainty why the woman in Wakili’s photograph is wearing a headscarf, the type of veil she is wearing is nonetheless culturally or religiously related to Islam. Moreover, that the subject’s dress evinces cross-fertilization reveals the mutable and multiple meanings of the veil. Lewis, in an article on veiled British retail workers, accurately notes that the garment must often be positioned within both local and transnational contexts of dress and fashion: “In postcolonial Britain women who veil (for any reason) operate within overlapping spatialities and competing but mutually constituting dress systems, including international tesettür [Islamic fashion, although the term refers to a specific middle-class trend in Turkey], UK diaspora dress conventions, and the ‘mainstream’ fashion system.”

The point is that modern demographics and the realities of globalization have given rise to new plural identities and modes of dress that are not encompassed by, and therefore test the precepts of, Western modernity and its political counterpart, the nation-state, leading us instead to the recent political theorizations of transnational democracy that attempt to integrate the messy reality of transborder allegiances. The young woman’s hybrid, simple, but nonetheless attractive dress also raises the issue of Islamic fashion in which the forces of consumption, transnationalism, and neoliberalism meet. If

34. Silverman, Threshold, 19.
the topic remains outside the traced parameters of the study, its examination would indubitably offer visions of the veil divergent from Western mainstream perspectives.

Representations of the subject-ive veil, by revealing the existence of a number of modern modes of subjectivity, and thus of speaking—and hence “dressing”—locations, inevitably deconstruct the trope of the veil and its underlying (neo)colonial binarism. Indeed, instead of the mainstream perceptions of veiled Muslim women as backward, oppressed, or fanatical, they set forth portraits of modern subjects in a variety of contexts, and engaged in a variety of activities, providing much needed visual counterparts to recent feminist scholarship now acknowledging that Middle Eastern and Muslim women are, as Saba Mahmood states, “active agents whose lives are far richer and more complex than past narratives had suggested.” However, visual articulations of veiled subjectivity and agency, because of the influence, directness, and accessibility of the image, expose, with even greater clarity and force, the deconstructive capacity of the subject and subjectivity and both the subversive and ethical dimensions of the image elucidating why, like Silverman, I am arguing for the increased production and circulation of “aesthetic works” that encourage us “to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate.”

Conclusion
Professing the possibility of images to shift fixed attitudes presumes the existence and capacity of individual agency (of both producer and viewer) and underscores the ethical function of both art and the subject. The three alternative narratives of the veil that I have brought forth are all equally premised on such an agency, as they simultaneously encourage, and require being able to move beyond the “I,” and to see other-wise, through another cultural screen. The contextualized veil revealed the centrality of veiling as metaphor, and as a culturally different paradigm of vision and representation, the postcolonial veil exposed and subverted the censoring effect of the veil’s reification and its inherent geopolitical map, while the subject-ive veil corroborated the radical implications of a Western conferral of selfhood onto the visibly marked Muslim female other. If the focus has been on the veil, my intent is not to provide an apology for the garment, which can sometimes constitute a tool of female oppression. Rather, informed by both a healthy idealism and pragmatism, I set out to assist the heteroglossia necessary for enabling transnational literacy and to underscore the concomitant hope offered by the possibility of both intercultural and intersubjective translation or communication. Stated differently, I am proposing, through the articulation of the diverse narratives of the veil, that the proximity of difference—cultural, ethnic, and religious—brought about in the West by the very tangible realities of international migration and globalization, rather than constitute a threat to its identity, provides the opportunity for a positive shift from being defined by to being transformed by alterity.

38. Silverman, Threshold, 2.